

The individual experience of everyday city life is essentially an everyday improvisation among other people. It is in urban settings where socially structured formations of daily life meet purely individual situated experience in myriads of spontaneously created and shaped assemblages of everyday life. The visual perception of space, sonic orientation in a given place and olfactory plus tactile experience of the environment are the basic aesthetic performances in cultivating a common urban reality.

The author discusses specificities of anthropological knowledge derived from first-hand experience of the life of other people in the field. To cope with the complexity of everyday urban improvisation, the author employs two ancient Greek terms to define the space of human interaction: *aisthēsis*, i.e., sensory perception, and the complex meaning of the Latin verb *colere*, from which the term culture is derived. The triangulation of everyday improvisation through the sensorial essence of everyday life complements the employment of two other ancient Greek terms, *praxis* and *poiesis*.

The basic empirical materials used to discuss everyday improvisation in an urban environment are collected narrations of sensory perception and individual lives from sensobiographic walks in Ljubljana, Turku and Brighton. Historically, in the West, the dominance of the senses has shifted from sound, touch and smell, orienting people in orally designed cultural domains, to sight.

Smelling is specific embeddedness in place. Its paradoxical position of sensing outside air deeply inside, integrated in breathing, but not always sensing anything special. At the crossroads of distant and close, inner and outer, olfactory experience is simultaneously existentially idiosyncratic and collectively shaped.

The paper's main point is that there are no clear limits between the experienced past and the present. However, both are aesthetically and culturally inscribed in specific registers of individual, social, cultural and embodied memories. The same stands for an ethnographic practice.

Everyday life is a continuum of living, weaved together from many discontinuous contingencies. It consists of incongruent, incomplete and chaotic shifts. Repetitive social activities bring order into this everyday mess: rituals and work. For this reason, repetitive music is inevitable for establishing a common ground of the everyday.

If ethnography ever touches reality, it is a continuous improvisation in everyday life, shared, collective, and peculiar individual improvisation.

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**Keywords:** aisthēsis, colere, improvisation, social memory, sensorial aesthetics

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# Between *Aisthēsis* and *Colere*: Sensoria, Everyday Improvisation and Ethnographic Reality

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“The Present Epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space.”  
(Foucault 22)

## Introduction: Sensorial aesthetics

The individual experience of everyday city life is essentially an everyday improvisation among other citizens. It is in urban settings where socially structured formations of daily life meet purely individual situated experience in myriads of spontaneously created and shaped assemblages of everyday life. The visual perception of space, sonic orientation in a given place and olfactory plus tactile experience of the environment are the basic aesthetic performances in cultivating a common urban reality.

Communication with other people typically involves the sounds of speaking, tactile communication and the exchange of odours and scents. However, human communication involves participation, activities and various practices, that is, human bodies, as well as feelings, emotions and affects. This mixture is the starting point of anthropological knowledge derived from first-hand experience of the life of other people in the field. The human voice and various sounds, music and dance, are essential parts of any ethnographic experience. In its continuous performance, everyday life – and any possible human existence – involves continuous tactile perception and tasting food, water and other drinks. It is essentially a sensual experience, so Paul Stoller’s warning came surprisingly late: “If anthropologists are to produce knowledge, how can they ignore how their own sensorial biases affect the information they produce?” (7).

To cope with the complexity of everyday urban improvisation, I will employ two ancient Greek terms to define the space of human interaction: *aisthēsis*, i.e., sensory perception, and the complex meaning of the Latin verb *colere*, from which the term culture is derived (i.e., to cultivate, to breed, to inhabit, to honour with worship, and to protect; see Williams 43). The triangulation of everyday improvisation through

the sensorial essence of everyday life will be accomplished by employing two other ancient Greek terms, *praxis* and *poiesis*.

The basic empirical materials used to discuss everyday improvisation in the urban environment are collected narrations of sensory perception and individual lives from sensobiographic walks in Ljubljana, Turku and Brighton.<sup>1</sup> These narrations were collected between 2017 and 2020, primarily induced with topics of urban sensoria. For the presentation in this article, I exposed testimonies on the sensual perception of the city, especially its odours and sounds, mostly from Ljubljana, where I partly participated in sensobiographic fieldwork. Testimonies were initiated by a situated sensorial experience during a walk or specifically initiated in a dialogue on odours, sounds, visualities and the tactile relationship to the space of walking in the city streets.

The paper's main point is that there are no clear limits between the experienced past and the present. However, both are aesthetically and culturally inscribed in specific registers of individual, social, cultural and embodied memories.

## 1. Concepts and contexts

Anthropological reflection of everyday improvisation as the very fundament of the common social reality should begin with aesthetics in its primary sense and the complex notion of culture.

The very term aesthetic was introduced as a new philosophical concept defining the experience of art and its poetics, i.e., the creative sense, only in modernity, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (see Gilbert and Kuhn 1967). The *Online Etymology Dictionary* defines it, "1798, from German *Ästhetisch* (mid-18c.) or French *esthétique* (which is from German), ultimately from Greek *aisthetikos* 'of or for perception by the senses, perceptive,' of things, 'perceptible,' from *aisthanesthai*, 'to perceive (by the senses or by the mind), to feel'" ("Aesthetic" n. d.). At that time, Kant's epochal criticism of the pure mind took aesthetic categories of space and time as fundamental conditions of the mind and being (Kant 2019).

Human culture as a complex active/passive manipulation of human existence (its cultivation, inhabitation, protection and worshipping; see Williams 43) is basically, and essentially sensuous: "Sensation is not just a matter of physiological response and personal experience. It is the most fundamental domain of cultural expression,

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the medium through which all the values and practices of society are enacted” (Howes, *Sensual* xi).

David Howes would further elaborate the sensory environment of everyday existence in “every domain of sensory experience” as “an arena for structuring social roles and interactions” (Ibid.). This arena is where “we learn social divisions, distinctions of gender, class and race, through our senses” (Ibid.). Historically, in the West, the dominance of senses shifted from sound, touch and smell, orienting people in orally designed cultural domains, to sight that came to the fore with literacy (Ong). For centuries, the Western mind was shaped by the capacity of sight:

All men naturally desire knowledge. An indication of this is our esteem for the senses, for apart from their use, we esteem them for their own sake and, most of all, the sense of sight. Not only with a view to action, but even when no action is contemplated, we prefer sight, generally speaking, to all the other senses. The reason for this is that of all the senses, sight best helps us to know things and reveals many distinctions.

Now animals are by nature born with the power of sensation, and from this, some acquire the faculty of memory, whereas others do not (Aristotel 980a).

Only when again challenged with places far away, suppressed senses reinvigorates. In non-European contexts, European philosophers may again turn their attention to smell:

The traveller approaching the New World is first conscious of it as a scent very different from the one suggested back in Paris by the connotations of the word Brazil, and difficult to describe to anyone who has not experienced it. [...] they were like a forest breeze alternating with hot-house scents, the quintessence of the vegetable kingdom, and held a peculiar freshness so concentrated as to be transmuted into a kind of olfactory intoxication, the last note of a powerful chord, sounded separately as if to isolate and fuse the successive intervals of diversely fruity fragrances (Lévi-Strauss 201).

Why? Is it because the world becomes turned upside down? Or is it because the atmospheric change is so radical? Smelling is specific embeddedness in place. Its paradoxical position of sensing outside air deeply inside, integrated with breathing, but not always sensing anything special. At the crossroad of distant and close, inner and outer, olfactory experience is simultaneously existentially idiosyncratic and collectively shaped. In Ljubljana, a walker can face manifold contrast in small distances.

An ageing participant from the Ljubljana walks mentioned that she still remembers some smells and odours from her childhood. The gasoline exhausts of cars were much stronger in the past than they are today.

Space and time – the basic constituents of being – aesthetically shape places. They are

not neutral, just given. We live in space and time, actively, interfering with humans and non-human beings and things, privately and collectively. The space in which we live, a heterogeneous space, is “a set of relations that delineates sites”, irreducible to each other (Foucault 23). Discontinued encounters in experiential space constantly trigger memories of former experiences, providing the basic continuity of our life in endless improvisation, actively and passively perceiving sights, sounds, shapes, smells and tastes. And this is where ethnographers meet “the other”.

## 2. Ethnography as *aisthēsis*: Improvising the poiesis of human life

Ethnography itself should not and cannot essentially differentiate from everyday life, with all its planned routines and unpredictable twists. In its most basic essence, ethnography is an everyday experience. But it is more than just following people’s actual behaviour and practices. Its aim is very complex multi-layered knowledge, contextual, spatial and historical, and not existing before the very fieldwork endeavour. It is a life experience transformed, or translated, into text. Ethnographic knowledge is essentially dialogical and experiential, constantly turning experience into text, imagination into reality, social reality into narratives, and, of course, vice versa. It is simultaneously embedded into social settings, the deeply abstract social reality, connecting experiential emplacements and chronologies with collective memories and creativity. This embeddedness is why ethnography’s social and historical contextualisation as *praxis*, *poiesis* and text inevitably meets the political. And much more: ethnography is itself at the same time theoretical as it provides new knowledge, either from itself, based on expert knowledge of singular cases, or the accumulation of knowledge in general. As any knowledge rests on pre-existing and already accumulated knowledge, it also spontaneously generates knowledge, essentially improvisational and unpremeditated.

Despite various understandings of the “field”, fieldwork is where and how ethnographic improvisation takes place. Anthropological knowledge is primarily derived from actual experience, beginning with active and passive sensation and perception. Fieldwork, even if done online, is work, it is active engagement with other people, living or long deceased, in full or limited sensual connectivity. It means that participant observation includes sight, i.e., actively looking, watching, recognising, seeing and observing various colours and shapes. We surely have to take into account the strength of participant observation, which means that a researcher becomes “the instrument for both data collection and analysis through your own experience” (Bernard 144–145).

While doing ethnographic fieldwork, an ethnographer's everyday life radically changes and daily routines are left far away. However, this new fieldwork experience merges everyday life in a new environment and the everydayness of the participating people. That means that ethnographic fieldwork not only synchronises the lives of previously distant people but, in a sense, establishes a new common reality. Taken from the primary living experience, it is the paramount reality (Schutz 253) for all the people included.

As much as ethnographic experience is embedded in everyday life, there is a contradiction between the vague arbitrariness of everyday life and its regularities. The essential experience of everyday life crisscrosses micro-social formations (kinship-based households, working units, coalitions and voluntary networks) and various arbitrary assembled groupings in a myriad of accidentally emerging situations. Exactly these arbitrarinesses and randomnesses are the essential frame for/of improvisation. The ethnographic endeavour is not finished with the recognition and understanding of formal social formations – it expands into the arbitrary and defines the general of the social: “Everyday life is defined by ‘what is left over’ after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by analysis” (Henri Lefebvre quoted in Highmore 3).

The opposite of the everyday are festivities. The carnival, the most typical example of carnivalesque, turning the everyday, with all its solid relations, upside down (Bakhtin), behind the mask, with faces “enlivened by the sensorial exuberance surrounding them”, with some “uncanny, silent face covers” change into “live, intimate and beloved persons”, warmed up “by movement and enveloped in the defeating sound of the feast”, brings forward “the senses of the carnival body” with specific carnival synaesthesia, creating “a collectively vibrating social body” (Panopoulos 44).

Putting together the antinomy of playfulness and rituality, we have to conceptualise ephemeral, seemingly trivial, issues like entertainment and amusement. On the other hand, the paramount reality is obviously something the stage does not give. The staging of phantasm on the theatre stage may easily become more real than the everyday reality. Play and immersion are not limited only to the actors on stage. Still, the very staging provides Aristotelian catharsis for and of those who have no other choice to play their manifold roles in everyday life, without any capacity to intervene into “the script”, other than negative feedback to correct false promises. The illusion of the stage reality is the main aim of a theatre play. However, is everyday paramount reality indeed less illusional?

### 3. The integration of senses in everyday urban environments: Hearing, touching and smelling

Living and moving in our living environment makes a difference: at the level of life, senses are integrated. The body itself demands its own sense for sensing it. Oliver Sacks would have it: "... Our body ego, our sense of self, is formed from the coordination of senses – not just touch and vision but proprioception and perhaps vestibular sensation, too" (212).

Moving in space is a self-understandable part of our daily improvisation. Not only does our body move through space: we as well imagine movement in space and time. Movement through space and time is practical. Praxis, another ancient Greek term, is the nexus of everyday improvisation. It is interrupted by repetitive moves and activities: rhythms of everyday life provide stability in circular time. There is no orientation in space/time without repetitive bodily movement. This is where music becomes inevitable.

Furthermore, exactly due to its repetitive "movement", music is actually the most distinctive from the improvisational flow of everyday life. It transcends sensorial aesthetics of paramount reality. More than that: the realm of music is essentially social, more precisely, social-poetical, in the sense of ancient Greek term *poiesis*, meaning creativity. Therefore, repetitive movement, the practice of walking in ethnographic settings (more on the walking methods in Springgay and Truman; O'Neill and Roberts; Laplante, et al.), typically did not invoke memories of music.

During sensobiographic walks, walkers did not speak of music if they were not directly provoked. Even when music became a topic of discussion, it was mostly induced by the researchers. A typical example is as follows:

R1: Do you listen to music?

YW1: No, that not. It bothers me when people are listening to music out loud. I get it when it's on the headphones, but when you see someone on the bus or when walking and the music is out loud ... it's just, "please don't".

R2: Do you ever listen to music on this route?

YW1: No, I'm rather listening to birds or something. It's calmer, I feel calmer. Cause it's also like that, I go with her on the walk and then ... I'm also calmer and all. I also don't like to talk during the walk ... I don't like to chat with other people during the walk.

Or perhaps in the context of the atmosphere and social life:

R1: I would like to ask you about the atmosphere, right, which you mentioned earlier. You said, well, part of it is the company, the people you're with, and then there's the cold beer that just goes with it.

Y3: Mhm [affirmative].

R1: What else is there? What kind of ... Music? What?

Y3: Yes, yes.

Y3: Music makes all the difference. A place like this, for me, is Gajo (jazz club). Maybe it's too much in ... How would you call it? On a higher level, right. Sometimes you don't feel like going for a beer there, right, but more for a glass of wine, right.

Music is thus either self-understandable scenery of everyday environment or related to specific venues where one encounters it by their choice. It is an integral part of the sound environment, a constant background of existence, thus non-specific. Music is in sharp contrast with odours, scents and perfumes: they are not considered as insensible background – if they are, they are sensitive to other people, not to people who design their personal environment with scents. Perfumes serve as a rather typical example:

A6: You asked me why I remember this scent. It was related to that aunt. My Aunt Ana was ...

Y6: I met her, too.

A6: She was very beautiful, and she has always smelled so nice. And that is what I remember. No matter what I went through, this scent stayed with me. And it still stays. I still feel her, even today.

R2: Could you, please, describe how you feel her, what was the beauty of her smell?

A6: Yes. As a matter of fact, I don't know the beauty, but I know it was; it was unintrusive, mild, related to a kind of calm, restful life. It was related to, I don't know, serenity. It was a very, very soothing scent.

Mentioning places to go out in the summer, Metelkova would easily become the topic of conversation among the younger walkers. In conversation with a younger violin player, it is again the researcher who initiates a longer dialogue on music:

R1: So, what is it about Metelkova, let's say, which are the sensual things that attract you there. I believe that it's the others. Your company, right?

Y3: Yes, but not really that much, you know? I mean, Metelkova stayed in my memory mostly due to Stripburger.

R1: Mhm [affirmative].

Y3: Because we would practice there with Salonski, in that building. And this was a weekly event, right. Maybe we would sometimes grab a beer afterwards. In Celica or someplace else. Then there are all these concerts too. Mostly because of this, yes. Or due to the concerts themselves. It was never "Let's go hang out at Metelkova".

R1: Mhm [affirmative].

Y3: I never experienced that, as there was always a purpose. "Let's go to the concert, and

maybe somewhere else afterwards.”

R1: Mhm [affirmative]. Grab a beer or something.

Y3: Yes ...

R1: Which were your top three concerts?

Y3: The first top concert was by the Kultur Shock at the Gala Hala.

R1: Aha.

Y3: This was some concert, yeah. Again, right, [laughter] I got completely wasted. That was with Bear's Blood.

R1: [laughter] Where?

Y3: In Yalla, yes. And then we drank beer over it. This was with my classmates from college, and on the following day, we had an exam. And I came home at 4.00 a.m. I didn't, I mean. During the exam, I could barely hold my pen, but I passed it. That, that was a pretty good concert. [laughter]

R1: [laughter]

Y3: Another good concert ...

R1: One interjection, sorry.

Y3: Go ahead!

R1: Something I noticed with Kultur Shock. The first time I listened to them, they were TOTALLY awesome. Like, so much. The best that I have seen.

Y3: But then it starts repeating.

R1: Then it repeats itself! Every next concert. Now I just feel towards them.

Y3: [laughter] Yes.

Y3: No, you need to go when you feel like dancing or when you're already slightly wasted. It's more of an experience then. But, yes, I know; I know what you mean.

R1: Yea, yea.

Y3: I have, Like, I have three of their albums in my car, and when I play one of them, I'm like, "OK, I have heard everything."

R1, Y3: [laughter]

R1: No, because. Because many people have told me that was their impression. That their first concert was excellent.

Y3: Yes.

R1: Then, with each concert, they would get worse to the state of meh.

Y3: Yes. So far, I've been to two of their concerts.

R1: Aha.

Y3: That's actually enough for me [laughter]

R1: Aha, yes. I can believe that.

Y3: So, I know what this is all about [laughter].

R1: Yea, yea. OK, next one.

Y3: Well, the next one.

Y3: The next concert was by Vasko.

R1: Aha.

Y3: This one was also in Gala Hala, also good. The third was a concert by a group whose name I have forgotten. That was in Menza.

R1: Mhm [affirmative].

Y3: A! Bad Propaganda.

R1: Mhm [affirmative].

Y3: Yes, yes, yes. It was them. That was also a good concert.

R1: Cool. Do you listen to this music in private, too?

Y3: Yes.

R1: In the car, on headphones, on your phone?

Y3: No. OK. On my SD card, in the car. And that.

R1: Aha. Okay.

Y3: Yes.

R1: On, on, on mobile devices, you don't have it.

Y3: No. I don't even listen to music on my mobile phone.

R1: Aha.

Y3: I stopped using an mp3 player years ago. [laughter]

R1: Okay.

Y3: I don't know. I simply had no more need for these artificial noise producers.

R1: Mhm [affirmative].

Y3: I mean, the artificial noise in the form of music on the iPod.

R1: Mhm [affirmative].

Y3: But I don't know. Now, I simply don't need it anymore. I just need silence.

R1: Mhm [affirmative].

Y3: Sometimes, I don't even have the radio on while driving. It often happens that I come home, and it's just silence. Nothing but silence.

In sensobiographic walks, tactility brought walkers into embarrassment. The following was a bit untypical situation induced by a sculptor:

R3: May I ask something? I noticed you touched this willow.

A3: The weeping willow, yes. I have good memories of the weeping willow.

R3: Indeed?

A3: Well, they seem similar to me. And it is such a beautiful tree.

R3: You always do it, or was it now, because you were left alone, a bit bored?

A3: No, it stood on my path. It was in the range of my arm. Why shouldn't I have caressed it?

R3: Aha. Good [smiling]

A3: Yes.

R3: Interesting.

A3: Clearly, it is related to my profession that I like to touch things. I have to touch them. Sculpturing is an art of touching. Otherwise, the weeping willow is actually such a lyrical tree, isn't it? The most lyrical tree of them all.

R3: You know, I have a very similar impression?

A3: Aha.

RM: [laughing]

A3: How not to? People experience things similarly.

Y3: M-m. [affirmative]

Music is social, but its effects are as well individual and relational. In the spatial and temporal sense, sounds "exist in fields of prior and contiguous sounds" (Feld 78). In relation to sound, the other senses are less relational.

Although olfactory experience is as social as any other sensoria, scent and odours are situational and deeply individual, much closer to individual proprioception than collective sight or hearing. However, the closest sense to define individual realities at the continuum of human sensoria is touch. Touching things relates human beings to material reality, i.e., paramount reality. In *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*, Alfred Schutz would define and develop the concept of the most basic experienced reality as the most fundamental reality human beings share: the very common-sense reality, the objective reality of everyday life, always, and variously taken as granted is exactly the reality where tactile and proprioceptive peculiarities of individual life meet social, even abstract and accumulated social realities people share with other people. Ethnographers should take this reality, or realities in ontological diversity, as truly important.

Following Vincent Crapanzano and his writing about the scenes, in Schutz's phenomenological terms, it is "not only physical objects, facts, and events within our actual and potential reach perceived as such in the mere aperceptual scheme, but also presentational references of a lower order by which the physical objects of nature are transformed into socio-cultural objects" (Crapanzano 389):

Within our ordinary empirical, or, if you prefer, pragmatic assumption, paramount reality is shorn of the fanciful, the temporally, indeed the spatially, capricious – those shiftings of attention that we relate to feelings, emotions, and moods, all of which we

identify with the subjective. They are mere decoration, epiphenomena, or, as some would have it, epiphenomena of epiphenomena. It is to precisely this decoration, these epiphenomena, that I want to draw attention, for, they are, in their own special way, a significant and effective dimension of the world in which we live, think, and act (Ibid.).

To make it clear: exactly the vaguest, most fragile, peculiar, situational, particular, partly accidental, structured, and transitory ever-changing scenes of everyday life improvisations, to some extent as well generalisable Turner's "social drama", or Deleuzian assemblage (*agencement*) becomes the most important entrance into general "human reality", an entrance into anthropological knowledge and wisdom. "Machinic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passion", as well as "a collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements" (Deleuze and Guattari 88) comprises all possible spaces of human encounter, territorial, reterritorial and deterritorial. Everyday improvisation is a phenomenologically irreducible scene we cannot escape: transient, ever-changing, fragile and temporary. Walking, as conducted improvisation, induces specific memories, specific sceneries.

### 3. Conclusion: A continuum of sensations and improvisations, individual and collective

Everyday life is a continuum of living, weaved together from many discontinuous contingencies. It consists of incongruent, incomplete and chaotic shifts. Repetitive social activities bring order into this everyday mess: rituals and work. For this reason, repetitive music is inevitable for establishing a common ground of the everyday.

Sounds and music are thus such self-understandable social grounds and backgrounds of our everyday existence that they do not need – or deserve – many words to talk about them. Human socialness is literally woven from layers of sounds. Only intentionally, they become lifted up and over sounding. Steven Feld brought the Kaluli term *dulugu ganalan* into international scholarship terminology:

The Kaluli term *dulugu ganalan*, "lift-up-over sounding", is a spatial-acoustic metaphor, a visual image set in sonic form and a sonic form set in visual imagery. [...] "Lift-up-over sounding" is always interactive and relational. By calling attention to both the spatial ("lift-up-over") and temporal ("sounding") axes of experience, the term and process explicitly presuppose each sound to exist in fields of prior and contiguous sounds (78–79).

Human everyday improvisation is basically the shared reality of participants in research and researchers. If ethnography ever touches reality, it is a continuous improvisation in everyday life, shared, collective, and peculiar individual improvisation. Ethnography itself, considering at least partly as improvisational practice, is, like learning and

doing, e.g., hunting or weaving, as much mental as bodily (Ingold 324). Therefore, we have to take improvisation much more seriously, both phenomenologically and epistemologically. There is not “any one correct way for anthropologists to approach the study of perception” (Howes, “Reply” 331). And there is no possible improvisation without employing many facets of sensual perception and engagement with the world and other people.

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