



Article

Drawing Urban Complexity and Simultaneity

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Abstract

The complex and overwhelming nature of impressions that continuously affect the urban dweller and the simultaneity of possible events that unfold in each single moment in any given city, seem to pose a challenge for urban studies, especially when applying traditional textual forms of inquiry. In this article, sketching was used as a research method to capture events and impressions during a weekend in the French city of Bordeaux. Instead of recounting experiences in a textual, hence structured and mostly linear fashion, a 'stream of consciousness'-sketch was chosen as mode of inquiry, in order to intuitively and accessibly depict memories of the city of Bordeaux. The result is one large Procreate canvas that captures fragments of memories, scenes, sceneries, and experiences, documenting and exploring a stay in the French region of Nouvelle-Aquitaine. Drawing and sketching appear to be apt tools for documenting and addressing urban complexity and simultaneity, allowing for a multiplicity of connections to be established between drawn elements. Also, they offer an intuitive and easily applicable tool for depicting and analyzing city life, while at the same time serving as a means for reflection and meditation for the researcher. Combined with traditional, textual forms of representation, sketching and drawing can add to a multimodal perspective on urban surroundings that can more accurately capture the immediate experience of contemporary urban spaces.

Keywords

Urban studies, arts-based research, simultaneity, complexity, stream of consciousness, drawing, sketching

1. Introduction – Addressing Urban Complexity and Simultaneity

As Jens Martin Gurr (2021) has shown in his book 'Charting Literary Urban Studies - Texts as Models of and for the City', one of the primary challenges in the field of urban studies lies in talking about or depicting complexity and above all simultaneity of events unfolding in urban contexts. He mentions the problem of inherent linearity of textual descriptions, which he identifies as one of the primary constraints of texts documenting urban experiences, and lists several works of literature, philosophy

and science that help develop his point and try to tackle this issue in creative ways (De Certeau, 1988; Dos Passos, 2000; Döblin, 1965). In his seminal book 'The Image of the City' Kevin Lynch (1960, p. 1) put it this way:

[a]t every instant, there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored. Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences [...] Nearly every sense is in operation and the image [we form

of the city] is the composite of them all. (Lynch, 1960, p. 1)

In a similar way, Georg Simmel (2004) discussed in his 1903 essay „The Metropolis and Mental Life“, how the senses can be overwhelmed and challenged in the ever-changing, raging and raving environs of urban settlements, thus being affected and altered by city life. In his famous ‘Passagen-Werk’ Walter Benjamin (1999) also tried to capture the overwhelming impressions that the city offers to the urban dweller, who is forced to decipher, evaluate, and choose among a multiplicity of options that can be read against a multiplicity of logics and contexts of sense-making. Authors of non-representational and more-than-representational theory have shown, how the various influences on body and mind in urban settings amount to a constant exchange of forces that drive bodies and minds through the city, while impacting on human senses and constantly altering spatial perception (Barron, 2019; Robertson 2013; Thrift, 2004a, 2004b, 2007). The city itself can be seen as a machine producing affective environments that themselves result in actions, movements, and social exchange. Describing post-modern cities as ‘Cyborg Urbanization[s]’, Gandy (2005, p. 26) sketches the urban environment as a living, breathing entity made up of living and inanimate elements to ensure the survival of the system and its parts.

The city can thus be framed as an ‘imaginary matrix’ (Schnell and Spiegelfeld, 2020, p. 64) that offers multiple perspectives for reasoning, multiple vantage points, from which to understand life, the world, and urban surroundings. A multiplicity of itineraries and histories converge in urban spaces at any given moment (Massey, 2005) turning them into an expression of instantaneity resulting from the interaction and culmination of an urban social collective. Urban spaces, so to speak, are the expression of an infinity of lived multiplicities culminating in every single moment.

2. ‘Stream of Consciousness’-Sketches as an Arts-Based Research Tool

In order to address the issue of inherent simultaneity and complexity of urban experience and to offer a space

for methodological experimentation, the here-presented article explores the possibilities of drawing and sketching for documenting and researching urban multiplicities, depicting and making sense of the multiple stories that converge in urban spaces and finding ways to express, what Simmel called ‘the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli’ (Simmel, 2004, p. 12). In the context of Gurr’s (2021) explorations it will be asked, how urban complexities and urban simultaneity can be addressed, while avoiding linear, textual accounts of urban life and upholding the intuitive nature of urban exploration, exhibited, e.g., by Benjamin’s flaneur (1999). In order to address these issues, I have used a visit to a marriage in Bordeaux and the tools of arts-based research to produce a graphic account of urban complexity and simultaneity in the form of an extended sketch-board that captures multiple scenes from a three day stay in the region of Nouvelle-Aquitaine to process impressions, interactions and experiences in the form of a ‘stream of consciousness’-sketch (Graham, 2015; James, 1890/1931).

William James (1890/1932, p. 224) famously stated, “[c]onsciousness, from our natal day, is of a teeming multiplicity of objects and relations, and what we call simple sensations are results of discriminative attention, pushed often to a very high degree.” He further explains:

- 1) Every thought tends to be part of a personal consciousness.
- 2) Within each personal consciousness thought is always changing.
- 3) Within each personal consciousness thought is sensibly continuous.
- 4) It always appears to deal with objects independent of itself.
- 5) It is interested in some parts of these objects to the exclusion of others, and welcomes or rejects – chooses from among them, in a word – all the while. (James, 1890/1931, p. 225)

Hence, personal consciousness is *personal* in so far, as it is conscious of everything that appears within the mind, while *continuously* mirroring our encounters with the world and its beings. In the words of Graham (2015, p. 11), who used the concept for analyzing forms and structures of phenomenological becoming in drawing: 'It [the stream of consciousness] remains however, in reference to the first-person experience the subject has of their own seeming 'flow' of consciousness, which includes literally everything they are conscious of: thoughts, perceptions, memories, sensations, bodily feelings etc.' Consequently, the 'stream of consciousness' also includes memories, emotions, images, and thoughts, as exemplified in Jack Kerouac's (2000) vivid descriptions of life 'On the Road'. In this sense the 'stream of consciousness' serves as a constant source of personal, introspective data that can be expressed in different media.

For the purposes of this research article, drawing is used as an arts-based research tool to capture graphic accounts of lived experience in the city of Bordeaux (van Manen 1990). Pioneers Barone and Eisner (2012) stated that arts-based research methods can add new, exciting tools to the canon of traditional research methods and can produce fresh, inspiring viewpoints on a wide range of topics. With arts-based research methods researchers can try to express information that exceeds the extent conveyed by traditional textual representation and inquiry: '[...] science states meaning, art expresses it. [...] The meanings of poetry transcend, what literal language provides. [...] The range of emotional responses is enormous. [...] Through art we come to feel, very often, what we cannot see directly.' (Barone and Eisner, 2012, p. 13) Arts-based approaches may therefore produce inspiring and innovative accounts of events that cannot or at least not in their entirety be captured by written words alone. This makes them especially apt for researching more-than-representational contexts of urban studies, where a multiplicity of perceptions, perspectives and emotions need to be processed. This is the reason, why drawing has been chosen as a research tool for this project: It opens possibilities for a spontaneous, intuitive, and swift documentation of the 'stream of consciousness', while providing the potential for expressing emotional and aesthetic aspects of encounters with urban spaces.

3. Exploring the City of Bordeaux in Drawing

Upon arrival to the city of Bordeaux from my hometown Vienna, I was immediately overwhelmed by a wealth of impressions that were caused by the new surroundings, the change in language, the unusual heat in the month of September and multiple challenges that were tied to the fact that I had organized part of my travels on short notice, arrived scarcely prepared and slightly disoriented. Before the marriage, I had planned to visit the next day, I had a full 24 hours to spend on my own in a city, I did not know and had barely read into. So what better than to enter the old city from my cheap hotel in an urban transformation area on Bordeaux' rive droite on an afternoon stroll and take it in all at once. Whoever has visited Bordeaux will know that, after starting in a former industrial zone on the rive droite and walking towards the center, I was in for a very pleasant surprise that included not only the old town and its cafes, but also its beautiful churches, impressive squares, the various old city gates, and of course magnificent architecture, little city streets as well as adorable restaurants and bars. Of course, a few glasses of wine, a nice dinner, and the company of Frenchwomen and -men added to the overall extraordinary and overwhelming impression.

During my stay in the city, I immediately started to think, how I could 'make sense' of these multiple and lasting impressions in the context of urban studies, especially capturing and distilling the complexity and simultaneity of a wealth of sensory perceptions, while expressing my personal perspective and documenting the imaginary assemblage of images, I had remembered. This is why, I decided on day three, to turn to drawing to capture the images that ran through my mind on one large Procreate canvas in a single two-hour drawing session in the form of a 'stream of consciousness'-sketch, which is included in the next section. The aim of the drawing session has, hence, not been to give a comprehensive account of my urban experience or to document certain scenes in a most detailed fashion, but to reproduce in an immediate and direct manner what came into my mind, when thinking about my experiences in the city. The sketch is thus an imaginary account of my personal experience of Bordeaux, based on real events, and documented with the tools of drawing to capture the

complexity of city life as experienced, while alluding to the idea of simultaneity, as all the elements of the drawing can be perceived at the same time. It is, thus, the inherent quality of graphic media, such as drawing, to resolve the problem of simultaneity, because multiple graphic elements can be depicted on the same page, creating a new time-space that, in theory, breaks the temporal linearity of traditional textual description (Dittmer 2010; Groensteen 2007).

The result of the drawing session was one large Procreate canvas (here split into four parts for enhanced reading) that includes events, impressions, memories and city views that are not grouped in temporary or thematic order but have been sketched out 'as they came to mind', which is the closest I could personally come to drawing my personal 'stream of consciousness', when thinking about a dazzling weekend in Bordeaux. Also, the sketches remained rudimentary, in order to depict a wealth of impressions and not to interrupt the flow of drawing. They, therefore, try to capture the immediacy of the workings of the mind, when applied to the topic of urban complexity, and try to express the wealth of impressions in urban spaces, while also creating a new time-space on the drawing page, which can, at least graphically, resolve the issue of depicting the simultaneity of possible events taking place in the city. In short, the images depict a personal 'imaginary matrix' (Schnell and Spiegelfeld, 2020, p. 64) of the city of Bordeaux, based on real events and experiences. The resulting drawn elements are therefore highly personal, emotional, complex, and connected without pre-defined relations between them, while they enter a shared time-space on the drawing page and form part of multiple possible narrative assemblages, which can be constructed by the reader (Peterle 2021). In addition, the 'stream of consciousness'-sketch is obviously guided by the mercurial workings of the mind, which, as we all know, all too often proceed in a non-linear fashion.

4. Discussion

As Florian Purkarthofer (2019) has described in his article about the Shimokitazawa Curry Festival in Tokyo, it is difficult, if not impossible, to catch the various, overwhelming sensory perceptions that go hand in hand with expe-

riencing urban life. Smell, taste, touch, visual images, and sounds are incredibly hard to describe in text, and always vital information will have to be left out from the sea of sensory information. Similarly, in the present project the taste of red wine and tarte au citron in a French Bistro in the rain will never fully be captured in textual form, nor the sight of Porte Cailhau by night or the sound of birds chirping in the evening sky. But this text finally is not only about sensory perception, but about capturing the multiple scenes and sceneries of the city that are continuously filled with life and therefore constitute a living example of urban multiplicity that can (again) hardly fully be captured. To circumvent this problem, I chose to make use of a form of representation that allows for multiplicity and simultaneity to happen and that exemplifies the myriad possibilities of relations between otherwise seemingly unrelated contexts, encased in everyday city life.

As Dittmer (2010, p. 222) has stated for the comics page and its drawings: '[C]omics literacy is understood to work via micro-geographies of the page, highlighting aspects distinct to the form such as plurivectorial narration and simultaneity'. Other authors from this field, especially Groensteen (2007) and Sousanis (2015), have shown that comics, beyond the orthodoxy of the frame, afford connections to be drawn between distinct narrative elements that can enter unexpected and multifaceted relations to each other, just because they are shown on the same page. This, in turn, affords a multiplicity of readings and understandings, that can be expressed in drawings and graphic representation. As multiple interrelations can be spun between drawn elements, which can be read in multiple directions exhibiting a wealth of inherent meanings, the page of drawings or comics opens a shared time-space, which draws its inherent qualities from its basic characteristics as an artistic medium, or simply put: Co-presence on the drawing page affords the possibility to depict multiple narrative contexts side by side in a state of implicit simultaneity, thereby introducing narrative complexity along with the aesthetic qualities of the drawing itself. These characteristics of drawings for depicting narrative elements simultaneously on one page and putting them in multiple potential relations to each other, dismantles orthodox principles of the linear narrative, by re-framing human perception in newly created time-spaces, which



Figure 1: Sketch board part 1 – upper left corner. Source: own work.

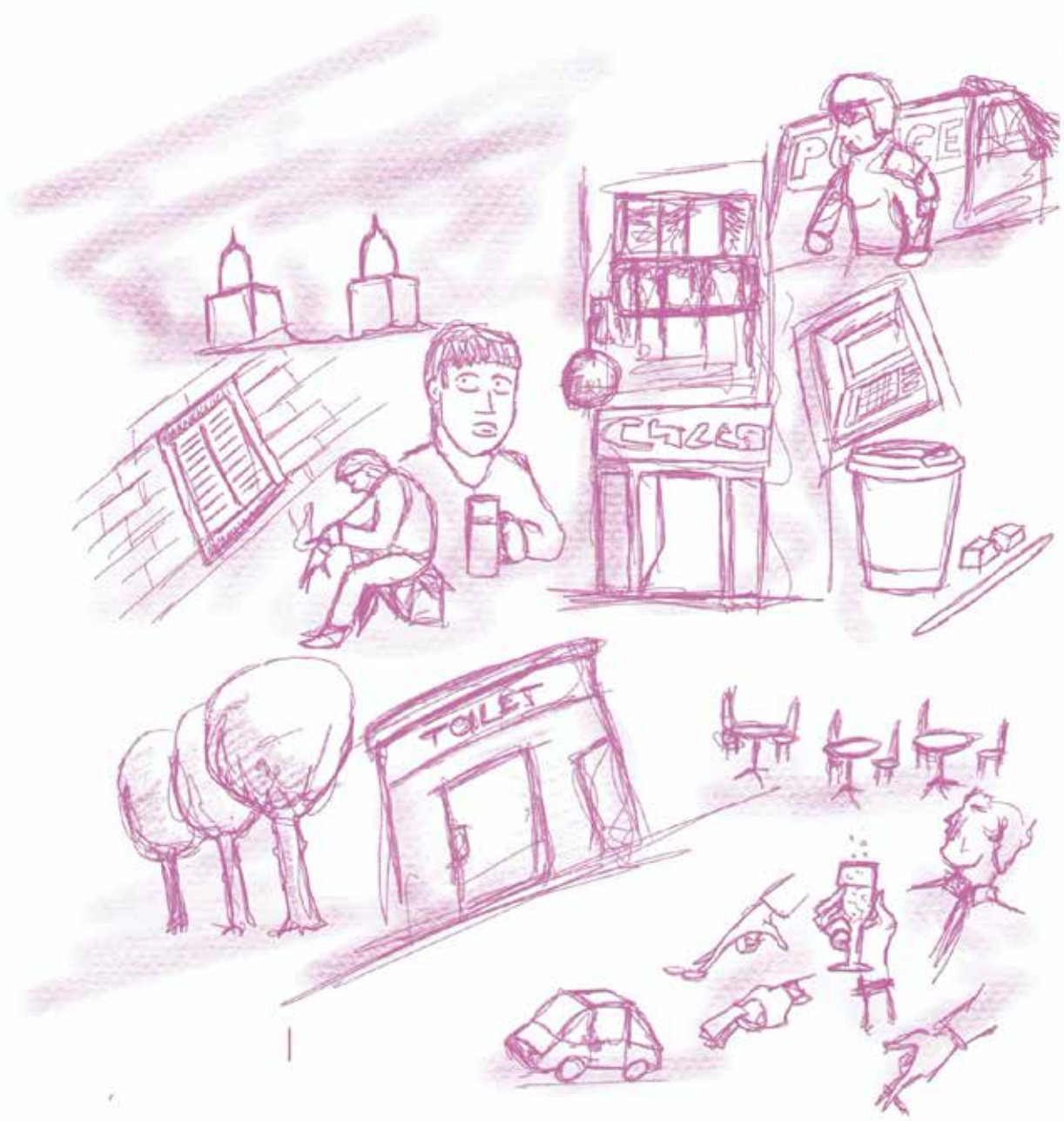


Figure 2: Sketch board part 2 – upper right corner. Source: own work.



Figure 3: Sketch board part 3 – lower left corner. Source: own work.



Figure 4: Sketch board part 4 – lower right corner. Source: own work.

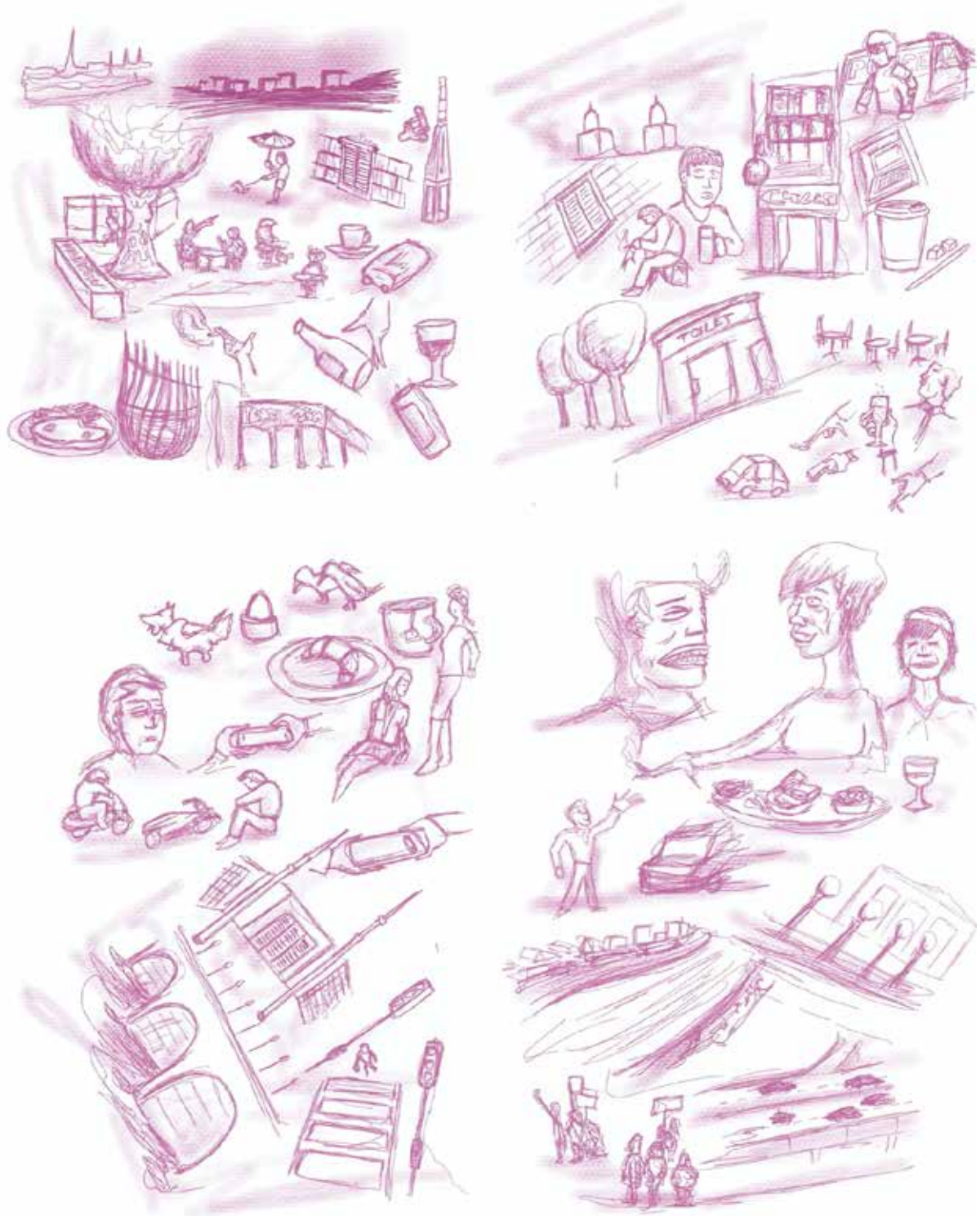


Figure 5: Entire sketch board. Source: own work.

can (in the present case) account for remembered human experience (Peterle 2021). To say it differently with Nigel Thrift (1996, p. 1): '[I]t is neither time nor space that is central to the study of human interactional orders, but time-space'. Consequently, the simultaneity of graphic contexts of reference and the multiplicity of potential meanings inherent to the page of the sketchbook afford an intervention into habitual narrative time-spaces and narrative linearity as a function of the medium's implicit qualities, which are used here to address and re-frame urban multiplicity and simultaneity as particular problems of urban studies.

By exhibiting aesthetic qualities and communicating affective meaning, drawings also appear to be an apt tool for capturing more-than-representational aspects of urban studies. As Barone and Eisner (2012) have stated, arts-based research tools should not only produce fresh insights, new perspectives, and unconventional lines of inquiry, they should also exceed mere textual descriptions and take aesthetic qualities of the medium into account, to give voice to inspiring, affective or poetic expressions of meaning. In other words:

Instead of contributing to the stability of prevailing assumptions about these [social and cultural] phenomena by (either explicitly through statement, argument, portraiture, or implicitly through silence or elision) reinforcing the conventional way of viewing them, the arts based researcher may *persuade* readers or percipients of the work (including the artist herself) to revisit the world from a different direction, seeing it through fresh eyes, and thereby calling into question a singular, orthodox point of view (POV). (Barone and Eisner 2012, p. 16)

In this sense the here-presented drawings should not only be understood as a means to depict urban environments in a new tempo-spatial order, but as a comprehensive tool that can include emotional, aesthetic, personal and poetic aspects and that can therefore inspire researchers to take new perspectives on urban studies into account, by incorporating different forms of art, artistic media, and various forms of thinking and writing about cities.

Drawing therefore serves as an easy-to-use and widely available tool that can be used for autoethnographic accounts of personal experience or for experimenting with non-linear graphic assemblages attempting to capture the intensity and multiplicity of life in the city (Peterle 2021). Also, drawing and sketching represent intuitive ways for accessing urban imaginaries and describing urban experiences beyond the textual, in order to present comprehensive and diverse perspectives on contemporary urbanity (Lindner and Meissner 2019). In this research project and in line with Barone and Eisner's (2012) arguments, drawing and sketching have proven to be apt tools for creating new insights into a known topic, for uncovering new potentials for research into urban spaces and for addressing aesthetic and emotional aspects of research on city life.

Similar to Jack Kerouac's (2000) classic "On the Road", which famously documents the writer's 'stream of consciousness', while travelling through America, the here-shown sketches provide insight into the mental sphere of a potential onlooker, who naturally cannot experience all the depicted scenes simultaneously, but who, in this case, drew them from memory to give an account of an imaginary perspective on urban life that is grounded in real-life perception. Moreover, the multifaceted sketches are also inspired by a wealth of overwhelming impressions that pour down on every visitor, every inhabitant, and every onlooker alike (Simmel, 2004), attempting to give a more-than-representational account of personal impressions of city life. In this respect drawing shows great potential to express the affective qualities of urban experience and to communicate them to readers. In memory and in representation, finally, we need to choose, albeit partly unconsciously, which elements to show, how to depict them and in which degree of detail (Peterle 2021). Thus, the here-included drawings aim at representing the 'stream of consciousness' of the author, reproduced via Procreate after three days in the region around Bordeaux. They therefore provide a non-linear, intuitive, unstructured representation of impressions and experiences gathered in these three days that can enter multiple possible narrative assemblages on the drawing page (Anderson and McFarlane 2011). Multiple graphic elements are reunited on the Procreate canvas and can spark various non-linear narrative relations that visually express

Massey's (2005) idea of space as an intersection of diverse but interrelated, possible histories. However, tentative narratives are not fixed, but have to be (re-)imagined and (re-) established by the reader, who is actively engaged in the enactment of the potential story at hand (Groensteen 2007). Furthermore, the drawings also serve as an inspiration to the recipient and as an experiment in imaginary spacing as a research practice. The sketches can therefore not only be understood as an experimental approach to documenting Bordeaux, but form a multifaceted canvas for tentatively capturing imaginations of city life that address the inherent multiplicity and simultaneity of urban spaces and express them openly on the drawing page (Lindner and Meissner 2019).

Multiple cross-connections can be drawn between the depicted scenes that could unfold in a similar fashion every day. The multiplicity of potential interrelations between drawn elements and the graphic simultaneity of events captured on the page of the sketchbook provide a rich source of inspiration and allow the reader to imagine various aspects of city life unfolding. Thus, the narrative touch of this text and the sketch as an artistic form of expression have been chosen, to make the immediate impression of French city life accessible, without solely using words, but fragments of visual memory put together in a non-linear, simultaneous, and imaginary account of Bordeaux' urban scene. Memory seems to work in fragments, and the urban flaneur accesses remembered scenes and sceneries always partially and incompletely. The art of drawing or sketching can take account of this uncertainty and turn it into a strength, producing a multifaceted imagery of urban spaces in a short time, therefore serving as an ideal documentation and exploration device, which includes not only real events, but also imaginary, potential perspectives. In this respect, drawing can help flesh out ideas and perspectives on space that are inherent to the inner workings of the mind and the thoughts and feelings of the researcher, thus also serving as a tool for self-reflection and visual meditation.

5. Conclusion

This article has explored the potentials of drawing and sketching as improvisational and intuitive visual forms

of representation that are easily accessible to the reader, can potentially depict contexts of urban complexity and simultaneity, and allow for numerous, potential narrative structures to be established between drawn elements, in multiple contexts of sense-making. Drawing and sketching therefore appear ideal for swiftly depicting complex urban settings in an easy-to-access fashion and presenting them to the reader, while providing pathways for deeper forms of analysis. Also, the simultaneous co-presence of graphic elements on the page, allows for a multidirectional reading of depicted scenes, which can support a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of urban experience. Additionally, aesthetic and emotional aspects can be communicated via drawing and sketching, contributing to a more-than-representational perspective on life in the city. Finally, the tools of sketching and drawing afford the creation of new time-spaces, which can render a multiplicity of potential narrative assemblages accessible, originating from the myriad inherent interrelations between drawn elements on the page. A multiplicity of possible narratives and tempo-spatial relations between depicted elements can in turn provide a way to access and transform urban imaginaries, which could otherwise remain hidden. In other words, multiple imaginary matrices to make sense of urban multiplicities can be applied to the drawn pictures and it is up to the reader to draw connections and enter the drawn realm of the potential contexts of city life. Drawings and text, thus, work in tandem to create a multimodal account of urban events and experiences, serving as a source of inspiration. 'Stream of consciousness'-drawings, as a research tool, can form a welcome addition to the toolkit of arts-based researchers that create new imaginary, immediately accessible and affective representations of urban complexity, simultaneity and multiplicity in an intuitive account of impressions of city life. Also, drawing and sketching as research tools can serve as devices for reflecting and meditating about a researcher's own perspectives and create imaginary, innovative insights for further consideration. In addition to the scientific and artistic potential that might lie in such research strategies, they may also serve as an inspiration to actively and attentively dive into city life at home or abroad.

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