

# The Narrative of Walking – Artistically Exploring Cities through Audio Walks

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## Abstract

This article will discuss artistic audio walks as a contemporary approach to exploring cities and their history from a different perspective. It will compare three different approaches in three projects dealing with audio walks, distinguishing between artistic audio walks and touristic audio guides in museums and cities. Audio guides introduce listeners to a place through story telling. At the same time, other approaches towards making cities more visible artistically are gaining prominence. Walking through places with an audio guide is nothing new. This article shows that audio walks are not only guiding people through urban spaces but are artistically approaching listeners by making them (re-)act. It also demonstrates that walks like Johanna Mayrhofer's "Working Borders", the walking tours of Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, and the experience of Janet Cardiff's audio walks all send a message to the listener, while giving them the chance to act and to perform in a spatial context mediated through the audio walks. The experience of an artistic audio walk itself educates the listener—either on a specific topic or about themselves.

## Keywords

audio walk; performance; city; urban space; walk.

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore artistic aspects of audio walks while connecting listening and acting. First, it will explain the city as a human construct and the human urge for walking. Second, it will compare three different types of artistic audio walks prepared by different artists in urban spaces. These include an educational audio walk created in Salzburg in 2023 by Johanna Mayrhofer, a walking tour by two American artists, Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, and a cinematic audio-walk experience created by Janet Cardiff. This article highlights the different aspects of artistic audio walks and demonstrates how different topics can be approached through different methods in creating an audible experience.

The three stated examples are adding an artistic side to the exploration of a city and share stories that are hidden and normally not told when on a regular walking tour. But what if audio walks are not only telling stories to listeners but are leading to a broader discussion about the meaning behind a specific topic? What if audio walks not only involve a human speaking but also the sounds of an urban place, and what if

they let you interact with a place? I will try to answer those and more questions in the following lines.

### 1.1 The City and the People

Cities are a complex urban mesh—human-made and reflecting a profound human need of having a space to feel safe in. According to Harold Carter (1972), there are four theories on the founding of cities: 1) settling around water as a matter of survival, 2) unions of trade, 3) unions of religion with people settling around a holy place and 4) protection against external influences.

Coming together in a city meant that people were able to rely on each other and to share and protect each other in ways that were not possible before. Today, people still increasingly join cities and their outskirts, which leads to the growth of cities worldwide (Bell and de-Shalit, 2011). But how do people commute and get around such a huge place? Nowadays, public transport, cars, and bicycles help people to get from one side of the city to the other. Nevertheless, people still choose another very traditional way: walking.

## 1.2. Walking or How to Experience a City

Everyone has experienced it: Getting to know a new city by foot is exciting, providing a great overview of how a city is built and lived in. This idea of getting to know a city by walking has already been brought up in the 20th century by Walter Benjamin, walking through urban spaces and creating the term *flâneur* (Benjamin, 2002). This idea is repeatedly presented throughout the 20th century and has been continued by authors in the 21st century, who explored cities and even wrote guides on moving through them (for example Bell and de-Shalit, 2011; Maak and Shapton, 2017). From the perspective of a *flâneur*—somebody wandering through a place and acknowledging the space around them—the idea of helping people to get to know places faster and even better is not far-reaching. Therefore, bringing in new media to explore urban spaces is something that makes sense regarding the urge to get to know a city in the 21st century. In cities as rapidly evolving systems with multiple changes and twists, new media (e.g., audio walks) help us not to get lost without a context to refer to or to experience more of urban spaces than we would when walking on our own.

## 2. Audio Walks and Their Way of Telling the ‘Truth’

Audio walks offer the listener information on demand without the requirement of taking part in an in-person walking tour. Museums have been offering audio guides for years to explain their collections, their art, and to provide information about the artists.

Apart from museums, there is a large variety of audio walks that will guide people through cities who wish to explore them in a more informal way: Historical audio walks that tell the history of a place, or narrative audio walks, which tell the listener a story or anecdote about a place and the people living there. There are audio walks that will guide listeners from one place to the other by foot and inform them about the connection between these places. There are walks that will tell a story about a specific topic in a city and inform listeners where to find places that fit that topic. There are different platforms and apps that offer audio tours (e.g., guidemate.com, voicemap.me and many more), either narrated by professionals or by people that just want to tell stories and provide information about a place.

Education seems to be the main aspect of audio walks as there is a variety of guides that will accompany walkers through a place while providing information about its history, its culture, and the people living there. They take the same educational viewpoint as, for example, audio guides in museums—they explain what is seen, provide information about people who created or lived in a specific place, and offer additional information on the events and stories told. Audio walks with the educational theme of history and culture can be found in almost every city by now, as they are great tools for cities to enhance their offer for tourists. But educational audio walks also instruct the listener to move and to walk, to venture further into a city and to see what more there is to find out.

## 3. Artistic Audio Walks

In the following part, three different audio walks with artistic aspects will be presented and will then be compared and discussed.

### 3.1. Researching Walking

For her Master’s project in ‘Applied Theatre’ at the Mozarteum Salzburg, Johanna Mayrhofer (2023) created the audio walk “Working Borders” about sex work and sex workers in Salzburg. On 4, 5, and 6 July 2023, people could join the audio walk with the researcher (fräulein flora, 2023; Mozarteum, 2023). It guided listeners through the city with a folder that instructed them where to stop and look for a red umbrella sticker with a QR code to scan to listen to a specific story (see Figure 1, 2). By scanning the QR codes, listeners would hear Mayrhofer’s voice telling a story about interviews she did with sex workers, about a building that was used for sex work, or a song from one of the CDs found in an old brothel. The stickers and markings can now no longer be found in the city as the tour was only planned as a Master’s project.

The audio walk was planned carefully: People would meet at a specific place, were then divided into groups of five, and were given a folder with instructions on how and where to go (see Figure 3). Mayrhofer also explained the route and the instructions in person. There were six red umbrella stickers with QR codes spread throughout the city—on brothels, underneath bridges, and on benches. Other red objects and signs in between the listening stations also pointed to further

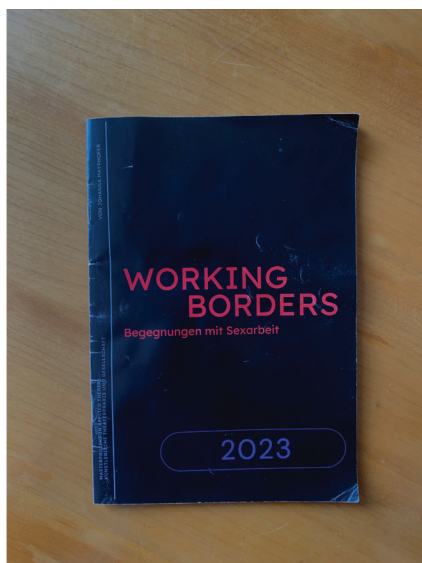


Figure 1: Picture of Johanna Mayrhofer's folder for her audio walk 'Working Borders' in Salzburg (Mayrhofer, 2023).

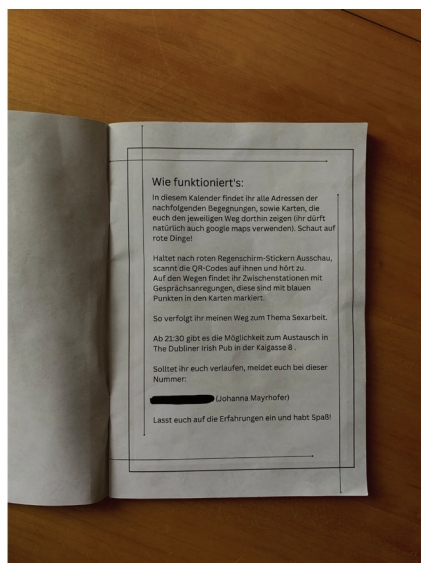


Figure 2: Instructions in the folder for the audio walk (Mayrhofer, 2023).

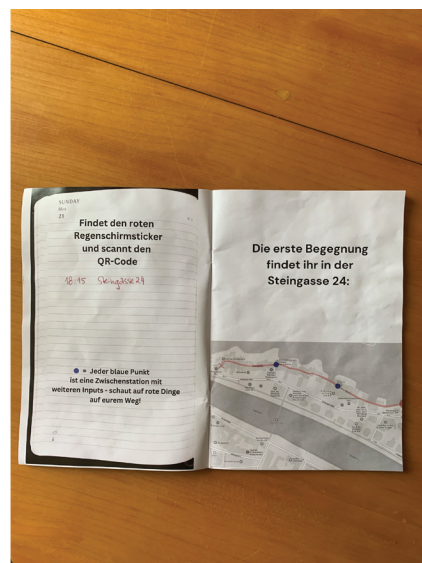


Figure 3: Instructions in the folder on where to move to find the QR codes (Mayrhofer, 2023).

information on the topics of sex work and sex workers in Salzburg.

This audio walk, along with its curated folder, offered listeners a group walk through the city centre of Salzburg and provided information about something that was invisible at first sight. It then followed up with input for further discussion of the topic. After the audio walking tour, Mayrhofer invited participants to discuss the experience in a larger group.

An audio walk such as this offers people a new way of exploring urban space based on a specific theme that leads listeners not only through the city but that also points to information lying underneath a city's spatial mesh. Sex work was and still is a sensitive topic in Austria because of issues of people trafficking, although it is still allowed to be pursued (Bundeskanzleramt, 2019). It largely is a taboo topic, although sex work should be seen as a regular type of work if done voluntarily.

### 3.2. Performance and Walking

In addition to audio walks on listening devices, artists sometimes lead audio walks through the city to explore an urban space from an artistic perspective. Artists mostly see walks

like this as a performance and will also show something of their work, similar to a performance artist who interacts with the audience—keeping in mind that walking itself is a performative act. Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, an eco-sexual artist duo, offered such tours, for example at the Bundesgartenschau 2023 or at documenta 14 2017 (Bundesgartenschau, 2023; Preciado, 2017).

Both engage in filmmaking, eco-sexual art, feminism, and education, and both deal with the topic of sex work (Williams and Meek, 2019), Annie Sprinkle being a former sex worker herself. Both are well-known figures on the eco-sexual scene in the US and worldwide. Their walking tours only take place in real time, mostly at events where they take people through an outdoor urban space with green places and fountains. They mostly talk about their (romantic) interactions with planet earth, their experience together as partners, and their expression of love and gratitude towards the planet. As their tours are only available live, videos (Kunst und Film, 2017) are the only available source of information about their work in a different medium. The videos give a comprehensive impression of their work, mostly related to sex workers, ballroom dancers, drag queens, and other artists (Vason, 2023;

Kunst und Film, 2017) that perform while Annie and Beth are talking about their experience as eco-sexual artists.

This form of audio walk—better called walking tour—opens multiple exciting perspectives: it is not available on demand but can only be experienced at one particular moment. If these walks are not documented and uploaded online, they can only be witnessed once.

The walks offered by Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens are not site-specific and therefore do not refer to a specific place. Only the artists decide where they want to make a tour and what they wish to present at the performance. Their topics of eco-sexuality and responsible living on earth, also dealing with climate change and climate protection, inspire people to continue thinking about the walk and reflect upon the topics brought up.

The walks by Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens differ quite clearly from the audio walk by Johanna Mayrhofer (2023) mentioned above, because they are neither site-specific nor audio-recorded but are more about performance as Sprinkle and Stephens themselves walk with the listeners (while walking is a performative act) and they have artists surrounding them who perform and interact with the surroundings. Nevertheless, even if their walking tours do not provide the 'classic' feeling of an audio walk (recorded voices for the listeners to follow), theirs can also be considered a special variety of an audio walk.

### 3.3. Audible Walking

Another interesting type of audio walk has been created by Janet Cardiff. Her work started in the early 1990s. It includes audio and video walks that follow her around real places that she is talking about. Both formats, video & audio walks, symbolise her diverse ways of guiding people through places.

She created audio walks recording her own voice and the sounds of an urban place, guiding the listener (e.g. Cardiff, 1999). The surroundings, her steps, and her breathing can be heard, and this creates a cinematic space for the listeners (Batista and Lesky, 2015) that gives them the feeling of experiencing Cardiff's walk themselves.

Cardiff herself uses a special technique for making these audio recordings, called 'binaural audio', creating a 3D-like listening experience by using small microphones, the effect of which is only audible to its full potential with earphones or a headset (Schaub, 2005). When putting on headphones and listening closely, the listener can get completely submerged into the world that Cardiff herself has experienced but also created. By listening to her footsteps and her breathing while she is walking and talking about a specific place, listeners seem to experience something intimate—something they think they should not hear—while Cardiff sometimes directly addresses the listener in her walks (Schaub, 2005). Nevertheless, Cardiff creates a place of privacy and even meditation (Kin Gagnon, 2007). Listeners might feel like a *voyeur*—even though they are listening on their own in private to an audio recorded for the purpose of listening, while strolling through a public setting. This contrast makes the Audio Walks by Janet Cardiff an interesting and very strong experience and gives the listener—who follows the script and narration of Cardiff's voice like an actor (Batista and Lesky, 2015)—a feeling of guidance while walking.

In addition to her audio walks, Janet Cardiff also did video walks together with George Bures Miller, in which they used the same binaural audio technique of recording sound while walking a place and also recording a video (Cardiff and Miller, 2023). Viewers can follow the same path that was taken by Cardiff and Miller in the video (2023) and will still see most of the sights and houses along the way. An interesting fact about those video works is that viewers peek into the place the artist walked years ago—it might have looked different or the paths even do not exist anymore in the way they have recorded it, but nevertheless an imaginary relation is drawn to a place and a feeling which once existed.

## 4. Conclusions

The three different forms of audio walks cited here all share one element: they present ways of exploring urban spaces in an artistic way while creating a new possibility for listeners to experience a specific place. Even though an audio walk is something people would expect to be low-threshold and easy to follow, the shown examples point out the complexity of how an audio walk can be composed and executed.

Whether people walk with an audio guide on their own—for example in Janet Cardiff's case—or in a group—as in Johanna Mayrhofer's audio walk or Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens' walking tours—, artistic audio walks offer a new and different experience of getting to know more about a place or even a topic. The mentioned educational aspect, common for most audio walks, is not necessary for an artistic audio walk as the experience of walking, listening, and acting educates the listener.

On Mayrhofer's, Sprinkle and Stephen's, and Cardiff's walks the listener and observer becomes part of the walk and gets drawn into the topic while witnessing the mediatic guide. Mayrhofer's audio walk shows that educational walks can also be realised in an artistic way involving music, a folder, and self-made objects that give the listener a hint of where to go next and how to move from one place to another.

The discussed audio walks furthermore prove that auditive elements can be performative and involve the listeners in witnessing and engaging with their surroundings. The listeners are essential for the walk itself—without them, the walks would not be complete. Listeners must act to get the full experience and they need to walk in order to see what happens next. The performative aspect of walking lies in itself: Getting from one place to another implies an active performance. When paired with audio tracks, which tell you where to move and where to go, the act of walking embodies the essence of 'the performative', defined by J. L. Austin (1962). Listeners (re-)enact spoken words as an individual performance. The audio tracks have already been performed (or recorded) by the artist. Hence, the narrative of walking includes a twofold performance both through audio recordings and physical action.

Audio walks create a new type of *flâneur*—somebody that walks, witnesses, and engages with their surroundings. The combination of walking and listening to an audio track can be quite thrilling and may contribute a new dimension to the exploration of new places. It provides a glimpse into the past and the future of places and urban surroundings, while motivating listeners to engage with their environment more deeply. The future might also bring an entirely new form of

(audio) walk and maybe even a post-*flâneur*— somebody who does not only witness and perform, but also creates new urban space while going for a walk.

### Conflict of Interests and Ethics

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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