

# “DO YOU SPEAK MY NEIGHBOURHOOD?” LANGUAGE, TECHNOLOGY, AND PROXIMITY

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## ABSTRACT

The increasing emphasis on participation in both contemporary art and media practices implies that ethnography becomes an important framework to explore changing notions of place and interaction. This article analyses notions of participation, publicness, and proximity in the participatory artistic research projects *Parlez-vous Saint-Gillois?* and *De Schaarbeekse Taal*. It is explored how these projects deploy technology and language as means to create proximity, and what the issues are in creating art projects within a complex urban context. The notion of “co-presence” is introduced as a concept that moves beyond mere co-location in ethnographic research and participatory art practices. The argument is that the concept of co-presence opens new perspectives for artists and researchers to develop practices that examine space and locality, community and communication, proximity and interaction. At the same time, co-presence also raises issues about what can be considered as “public” or “public space” and what proximity entails, specifically in relation to media and technology. This article explores these issues by confronting theoretical perspectives with concrete examples from participatory artistic research projects.

**Keywords:** art; ethnography; co-presence; publicness; proximity; technology



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## INTRODUCTION

From an ethnographic perspective, several authors have introduced the notion of “co-presence” as a concept that moves beyond mere co-location in site-specific participatory practices (Beaulieu 2010; Hjorth and Sharp 2014; Horst and Hjorth 2014). Co-presence is about repositioning participation and the relationship between maker, technology, and audience that has increasingly been challenged by contemporary (digital) media culture. Instead of taking shared space as a primary or necessary condition for participation, artists and researchers can emphasise mediated interaction as constitutive of co-presence (Beaulieu 2010).

This perspective enables (artistic) research to examine technological mediation as a feature of social relations rather than a barrier to them. As such, technology is not an obstacle to networked sociality but specific modes of mediation become crucial for meaningful practices (Beaulieu 2010). Therefore, because contemporary media culture is characterised by participation, interaction, immersion, and collaboration, art is also challenged to move beyond a “mere” adoption of new technologies. There is a need to focus on how technologies are also changing our experience of place and our conceptions of interaction and intimacy, and to generate new understandings of participation and collaboration (Hjorth and Sharp 2014; Horst and Hjorth 2014).

Shifting perspective from co-location—being in the same geographical location—to having a presence in a technological space also leads one to question what can be considered as “public” or “public space” and what proximity/intimacy entails, specifically in relation to technology. In this article, we explore the notion of co-presence based on a discussion of two participatory artistic research projects that explicitly explore issues of publicness, proximity, and technology.

## DO YOU SPEAK MY NEIGHBOURHOOD?

Between 2009 and 2015, the Brussels-based association for arts and media Constant initiated two artistic research projects: *La Langue Schaerbeekoise/De Schaarbeekse Taal*<sup>1</sup> and *Spreekt U Sint-Gillis?/Parlez-vous Saint-Gillois?*<sup>2</sup> The projects—in this article also referred to as “the language projects”—can be described as portraits of neighbourhoods using speech and spoken words as artistic material, delimited in space and time. The projects studied and problematised linguistic diversity by collecting words with meanings and applications that are not found in official dictionaries and that are used by various cultural communities within two designated perimeters in Brussels: the area around Place Verboekhoven/Verboekhovenplein in Schaerbeek and the area around Rue de Bosnie/Bosniëstraat in Sint-Gillis. Central to *Parlez-vous* and *Schaarbeekse Taal* are two sound databases with recordings of multilingual neologisms provided by

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1 See <http://www.lalangueschaeerbeekoise.be> or <http://www.deschaerbeeksetaal.be>.

2 See <http://www.spreektu1060.be> or <http://www.parlezvous1060.be>.

citizens in a long-running series of conversations and interviews. These repositories reflect playful language hybridisations that typically occur in neighbourhoods with populations of mixed-language backgrounds.

Italian, Spanish, Arabic, Turkish, Berber, Dutch, Swahili, and Polish are just a small, random selection of the variety of languages that make up the linguistic wealth of Brussels, along with French, the dominant language of communication in the city. The database of words aimed to validate this diversity, to give place to difference, and to give voice to the cultural richness by proposing an open, flexible, and organic dictionary model. During four years, the artists coordinating the projects (An Mertens, Clémentine Delahaut, and Peter Westenberg) organised meetings among local residents to collect data—or to “harvest words” as it was referred to in the project—that were subsequently added to the sound and word dictionary. Each of these meetings formed the basis for a radio broadcast in which the words were discussed. External artists were invited to transform the words from the dictionary into artistic activities organised in the neighbourhoods. These ranged from interactive walks to performances, poems, sound-collages, and exhibitions. Both projects concluded with a publication collecting the words, documentation, and reflections.<sup>3</sup>

Both *La Langue Schaerbeekoise* and *Spreekt U Sint-Gillis?* instigated situated, artistic, long-term participatory trajectories. By focusing on speech by individual people, the projects aimed to deploy a small-scale, personal approach, making it possible to investigate the intimacy of sounds, pronunciations, accents, imperfections, or spontaneities that comes with speech. Because the databases are accessible online, the collection of words communicates the intimate aspects that are an intrinsic part of speech, not only locally but also to those far away. We refer to this as “distributed proximity”, because it offers intimate insights into how individuals communicate, framing personal speech within a dynamic of cultural heritage and multiculturalism in globalising societies.

We argue that these projects offer a rich perspective for exploring notions of co-presence in art and ethnography, which we will discuss in relation to specific sub-parts of both projects. We will first problematise the notion of publicness by discussing the context of “neighbourhood contracts” in Brussels. More specifically, we will focus on the role that artistic action (and activism) can play in opening new notions of what can count as “public” in specific urban contexts. Secondly, we will look at the functions of the technological devices that were used in the project, based on their capacity to stimulate or obstruct proximity and co-presence. We will explore how various interpretations of presence and proximity were integrated at specific points throughout the project and how they oriented the projects’ methodologies.

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3 Parlez-vous Saint-Gillois?/Spreekt U Sint-Gillis? 2015. Brussels: Constant Verlag, Woorden uit de Berenkuil/Mots de la cage. 2012. Brussels: Constant Verlag.

## PROBLEMATISING PUBLICNESS

The language projects were supported through two so-called neighbourhood contracts. These are large-scale urban renewal programmes in the Brussels Region, designed to invest in urban infrastructure such as social housing, green spaces, traffic networks, and socioeconomic revitalisation programmes. Partners (governments, companies, and social organisations) agree to a multi-year plan for a specific area and for a determined duration. The projects that Constant organised within that framework were considered to promote social cohesion and could thus be seen as part of an improvement scheme. Through a series of participatory instruments—open committee meetings, project calls, assemblies, and so on—these contracts entail the promise of participation and aim to bring citizens closer to city policy.

The linguistic diversity of super-diverse neighbourhoods in Brussels is not restricted to the official French and Dutch bilingualism, but also consists of a very strong grassroots multilingualism constituted by numerous minority language communities in the city. We argue that such language communities can be considered as counter-publics: “Counter-publics are, by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment, and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion. Mass publics and counter-publics, in other words, are both damaged forms of publicness” (Warner 2002, 63). Public communication in Brussels takes place predominantly in French, but the majority of inhabitants in these neighbourhoods do not have French as mother tongue. Having said that, we must add an important note: while the official French language register is dominated by “hexagon” French—or “French-French”, as it is referred to in Brussels—informal “mother tongue” and varieties of French that are spoken in Belgium exhibit specific Belgian lingual characteristics. Hence, Belgian native French speakers do not cohere completely with the monolith of the official register.

It needs to be emphasised that “a counter-public maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one” (Warner 2002, 63). The notion of “publicness” thus offers an interesting lens for discussing the language projects. From a sociological perspective, the public realm can be approached precisely as “a regime of interaction and an arena of visibility and inter visibility of actors” (Brighenti 2010, 7). Sociologists thus study the specificities and practicalities of public space through the apparently mundane details of public interaction. Indeed, the public domain is eminently relational: “To an important degree, it is not the subject who engages in or refrains from relationships, but the relationships that constitute the subject” (Brighenti 2010, 37). This implies that the public is also a territory of affection. This also implies that public communication does not simply occur, but that it *takes place* (Brighenti 2010). Furthermore, it needs to be emphasised that the public sphere is inherently mediated, and that it is therefore necessary to closely scrutinise how this media space is *materially, technologically, and socially* constituted (Brighenti 2010).

This is precisely what the language projects set out to do. Language is considered as the essential instrument through which public communication and interaction take place.

From a related perspective, Sherry Simon very aptly argues that "[d]espite the sensory evidence of multilingualism in today's cities, the proliferation of scripts on store-fronts, the shouted conversations on cellphones, there has been little more than casual reference to language as a vehicle of urban cultural memory, or of translation as a key in the creation of meaningful spaces of contact and civic participation" (2012, 7). Therefore, there is a need for more emphasis on how linguistic interactions are a feature of a city's identity. This is indeed particularly striking when cities grapple with the challenge of promoting translational practices with the aim of ensuring urban cohesion, as the language projects attempted to do: "Translation is the key to citizenship, to the incorporation of languages into the public sphere. This means seeing multilingual, multi-ethnic urban spaces as a translation space where the focus is not on multiplicity but on interaction" (Simon 2012, 7). The language projects indeed function as a translational practice, rendering visible the interaction between different languages as a feature of a city or a specific neighbourhood. In what follows, we discuss two examples of how the language projects problematise the notion of publicness from the perspective of linguistic interactions being a prominent feature of a city's identity.

### Example: "From Bosnia to the world and back"

A first example is the project "From Bosnia to the world and back". It was developed to problematise the perception of public space through the act of cartography.<sup>4</sup> Urbanist Rafaella Houlstan-Hasearts interviewed people living within the Bosnia perimeter about words that had travelled with them from other parts of the world, to inhabit new contexts in Brussels. "From Bosnia" approaches vocabulary as a personal space that relates directly to the lives and travels of the speakers. These words move, migrate, and change form and meaning. The very use of the word "Bosnia" in the title is emblematic of the existing trans-global connections that the project tried to bring forward: Rue de Bosnie or Bosniëstraat is the name of the main street running through the neighbourhood. Although the street is named after a foreign country, it is familiar to residents as a central element of their neighbourhood. Appropriating the alienating effect of a simultaneous nearness and remoteness in the project title creates a reflective distancing, which allows one to perceive the environment in new ways. This project explored how words make translational bridges between the nearby and faraway cultures in which the speaker might be implicated. These words are proof of a "globalization from below" (Portes 1996, 151) that have been taking place over decades through networks of family, work, and migration.

"From Bosnia to the world and back" illustrates how "elsewheres" are present in the here and now of our daily surroundings. The conversations were transcribed and

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4 See <http://spreektu1060.be/media/frombosnia/>.

then mapped to geographical locations with the use of the Open Street Maps toolbox. The resulting visualisation of this trans-locally networked vocabulary was exhibited in a shop window in Saint-Gilles. The generated maps show different layers of reality and, as such, “publicness” is discussed. The project questions the place that is offered to the representation of non-normative life trajectories in public space and through language.

### Example: “Play Babel”

Another example is the sound walk “Play Babel”,<sup>5</sup> which takes the visitor through the Bosnia area while he/she listens to a range of different stories about language. In this project, artist Anna Raimondo recorded interviews with residents from Greek, Italian, Arab, and Spanish backgrounds about their encounters with the French language. All the words that are used during the walk discuss non-normative French in one way or another. By moving language variations from margin to centre, the walk proposed space for negotiation and play. In multilingual Brussels, languages are never separated; they meet and interact with each other. “Play Babel” celebrated being “lost in translation” as a transitional space in which one can discover the cultural constructions and oddities of a new language. By de-familiarising common socio-lingual elements in a staged and artificial “play”, it unveils a layer of reality that normally stays hidden from public sight. During the walk, participants listened to the interviews through headphones. Listening to someone’s voice speaking in your ears while walking through a public space constitutes a very intimate experience in a surrounding that usually is anything but intimate.

By introducing an artistic event into a public space, and by giving voice to the people who live there, work in the corner shop or go to school there, the *Play Babel* project reconfigures perceptions of the neighbourhood and its social fabric. It confronts participants, both co-creators and audience, with questions about the degree of publicness of our shared outdoor urban spaces. The participatory work of creating this walk can be described as a socio-political act in that it emphasises the friction of languages in public spaces as a potential space for contact. This can be “a good thing”, as Doris Sommer argues, because “acts of communication that slow down communication are democracy’s most effective speech acts” (quoted in Simon 2012, 1). The walk creates both co-location and co-presence: we walk through the daily environment of the main collaborators of the piece and we might even meet some of them along the way, but while physically being in the same space, we are listening to another space. In our headphones, they speak to us from a near past, through the medium of the recorded sound file, from a mediated space. As such, co-presence enhances our individual experience of locality as a multi-layered space.

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5 See <http://parlezvous1060.be/p/creations/#s20>.

## TECHNOLOGY, PROXIMITY, CO-PRESENCE

During the language projects, many events of various natures were organised, ranging from simple meetings between people to performances, interventions in public spaces (such as the examples given above), exhibitions, and radio shows. The aims of the activities were, on the one hand, to gather new words and, on the other hand, to show the progress of the projects to the neighbourhood. Often these two activities would both be showing and generating new material at the same time. Below we will nevertheless distinguish three phases in the projects: data gathering, processing of the gathered materials, and presenting the project. For each of these phases we will look at a specific example and discuss the role played by technological devices as agencies that mediate proximities and co-presence.

### Gathering data: Harvesting words

Many words were obtained through street interviews. Interviews were done in various ways—sometimes just as conversations that provided information. However, since the aim was to collect audio, a common method was for the interviewer to use a microphone to talk to the interviewee. The presence or absence of a recording device had a major influence on the interviewee's type of intervention and the content of the words spoken. Typical reactions to the visibility of a microphone included, on the one hand, people shying away from talking or giving brief or superficial answers and then quickly moving on. On the other hand, however, some people were drawn to the impression of temporary media exposure that the professional appearance of an interviewer with a microphone seemed to imply, and jumped at the chance to give extensive accounts, even seeking a disproportional amount of attention from the interviewer.

### Example: The compass recorder

In order to steer away from this typical situation and experiment with a more fun and engaging type of conversation, a different kind of device was developed. Project collaborator Michael Murtaugh devised a recorder that was hidden from sight in a backpack and operated by a game controller with a joystick and an audio interface. The controller also contained the microphone. The device, named the compass recorder, allowed the interviewer to store recordings in a place of his/her choice in the database using the arrows and wheel of the controller. In addition, the fragments could be combined with fragments already in the database, and could be played back instantaneously, even while they were still being recorded. Doing this "live", in the context of the place and moment in which the interview took place, created spatial feedback loops of real and recorded sounds. It turned what could have been a standard question-and-answer situation into a special experience shared by the people involved.

The recording device itself became a topic of interest because of its extraordinary appearance and this unusual way of conducting an interview. Even though it was not immediately obvious that the compass recorder contained a microphone, the presence of the device still influenced the conversation. Its "conversation piece" quality was a real asset, as it created a shared field of interest between interviewer and interviewee. The compass recorder device turned the artist from an interviewer into a DJ mixing spoken words in a public space. In the process, the artist's role shifted, from being a data-gatherer and an observer who is a relative outsider, to being the instigator of a collective sound work in which he/she engages with the interviewee to produce a shared reflection on public space and its representational functions.

## Processing materials: Intimate data

A typical feature of the language projects was that "making sense" of the material gathered was done in as public a way as possible. Dialoguing with the inhabitants of the neighbourhood about a word proved an excellent way to stretch that word's meaning. It presented a way to gather new material while showing the projects' progress. For those who were interested in lending their voices, or who wanted to listen or participate, the activities offered ways to "get close" to the data.

## Example: Radio Bosnia

Regular radio broadcasts in which the recorded words were publicly discussed were organised under the name "Radio Bosnia". The shows were broadcast live from the studio of Radio Alma, an independent station located in the Bosnia area and which broadcasts in several minority languages such as Spanish, Italian, and Greek. Show host Clémentine Delahaut received the guests and talked with them about their words of choice. In a central position in-between the interlocutors in the studio was a set of microphones connected with the studio's technical booth, in which an engineer mastered the sound before it was broadcast. The microphones symbolised the connection between the parties producing the show, who literally had to move very close to the device in order to have their voices heard properly.

The broadcasts gave agency to non-professional voices that are not often heard in the role of specialists, and to their local and trans-local communities. The content of the shows foregrounded intriguing facets that come with the complexity of the linguistic situations in which many of the listeners find themselves. This occurred in the context of a migrant radio station whose mission is, among other things, to stimulate a "sense of belonging together, and sense of distinctiveness of trans-local communities" (Hepp and Hitzler 2016, 144), which is an act of empowerment. Instead of reconfirming static cultural imaginations, Radio Bosnia portrayed counter-public speech acts as contemporary forms of expression. In the understanding that "also local communications that constitute communities are to some degree or other mediated" (Hepp and Hitzler

2016, 133), the choice to broadcast through the Alma radio station can be considered as an artistic strategy to come as close as possible to the daily experience of the targeted audiences.

Artists and guests invited to the broadcasts took part in a collaborative process of creating meaning. The collaborative nature of arts-based research offers the opportunity to explore the complexities in the process of knowledge creation, and the affective qualities of the situation provide an opportunity for creating empathy among all who take part in it: "[A]rt making has the potential of becoming the means by which the participants, and the artist, and researcher can become aware of their views and understanding of each other" (Degarrod 2013, 410). This relates to the argument of Hjorth and Sharp, who state that in relational aesthetics, "the audience is a community to be collaborated with to create intersubjective encounters" (2014, 128).



**Figure 1:** Radio Bosnia # 16, live broadcast from Bethlehem square, March 2015

### Example: Online databases

From the start of the projects, the database with recordings of spoken words, the radio broadcasts, and event information have been accessible through the websites.<sup>6</sup> They were conceived as a publicly visible workplace through which the projects' development could be followed, locally as well as from afar. The online database was designed using

<sup>6</sup> See <http://lalangueschaerbeekoise.be>, <http://deschaarbeeksetaal.be>, <http://spreektu1060.be>, and <http://parlezvous1060.be>.

Free/Libre and Open Source Software (F/LOSS). This allows for developing intimate relationships with the code that determines the software’s functioning. All materials in the project are published under a Free Art License,<sup>7</sup> which allows third parties to adopt it in new artworks. Although discussing the impacts of the application of open content licensing and F/LOSS within the cultural field is beyond the scope of this article, we mention it here because it is an important indicator of the fact that the methodologies were consistently carried through also on a technical and legal level.

The websites became places where stories, experiences, and expressions crossed paths. Through their specific phonetic characteristics, the spoken words in the database create a sense of closeness and proximity. The collection focuses on code switching, hybridisation, dialects, accents, embodied speech, invented words, and neologisms as a daily, commonly occurring lingual practice. The database thus becomes a tool to discuss verbal communication in diverse cultures. It is an instrument to foreground non-normative speech acts as active ways to build the city from the bottom up. Speakers contributed specific words to the databases and explained what they mean to them. Both projects deliberately did not add explanations to the contributed words, even when, as sometimes happened, a contributed meaning did not correspond with the general understanding of what the word “means”, because “the meaning of words is created by the inter-comprehension of the users, not by reference books” (Beaudoin-Bégin 2015, 16).

It is important to mention two editorial decisions that had to be made in order to organise the website. The website is bilingual and features French and Dutch. In Dutch, the database is named *woordenboek* (dictionary). Whereas *woordenboek* quite literally means “words book”, and is a tongue-in-cheek, playful undermining of the authority that comes with such reference works, a similar playful approach in French seemed not possible, or was not found by the editors. To avoid false expectations that might have arisen from the use of the word *dictionnaire*, the header *mots* was preferred. A second choice was to opt for diverse forms of transcription for parts of the recordings that were pronounced differently from standard French. Using phonetic transcription was often considered, but voted against, as this would introduce hierarchies between non-phonetically transcribed, “properly” spoken words and “incorrectly” spoken forms that would be transcribed. Such an asymmetric method would not have corresponded with the aim of the projects, namely to foreground diversity. Instead, brackets with points (...) were used to indicate parts that were difficult to understand. Parts that made sense auditorily but were incomprehensible as written text were slightly adapted to bring them within the realm of comprehensibility, while trying to preserve their unorthodox characteristics.

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7 See <http://www.artlibre.org>

If we understand proximity as “nearness in place, time, order, occurrence, or relation”,<sup>8</sup> then we can distinguish various ways in which the databases create proximities. Besides the nearness that is generated between speaker and listener, an intimate relation between listener and the act of speaking is also created. The intimate experience of listening is enhanced by the fact that the people speaking are recorded in recognisable surroundings. The imperfections in the sound files help generate intimacy between speaker and listener. Two types prevail: firstly, there are imperfections related to the speaker, such as stutters, hesitations, movements of the mouth, intonations, and so forth; secondly, audible elements from the surroundings slipped through. These imperfections indeed allow for listening “in-between the lines”. They bring the listener closer to the specific interaction of bodily and environmental elements that co-shaped the pronunciation. Furthermore, the collection establishes the identification of the listener in relation to the identity of place, community, and surroundings. And by extension it can be said that the listener approaches the identity of a speaker. The online collection creates a sense of immediacy because of the direct contact in place and time with the remote account. By choosing sequences of words to listen to, each visitor establishes a different chain of contiguous word terrains.

Between adjacent, neighbouring words, co-existing in the database and gaining new meaning through each new *voisinage*, unexpected proximities arise. By adding keywords to database entries, words are linked in new thematic groupings. The Somalian word *Hebta* and Portuguese word *Pretoguês* are not related in themselves, but are connected because they reside under the keyword “Africa”. With these groupings, the voices of their speakers also start to coincide, even when speakers have never met in real life.

## PROJECT PRESENTATIONS: CRITICAL DISTANCE

The projects were presented inside and outside the neighbourhood, through exhibitions, panel presentations, lectures, and by other means. In the neighbourhood, exposure was given to the projects as a means to attract new participants, to increase interest in the topic of local speech in relation to issues of globalisation, and to reflect on the progress of the projects with people who were either formerly unaware of their existence or simply not able to follow them day by day. Translating findings and documentation into a physical setting meant that the projects quite literally became part of the neighbourhoods. They occupied space and made tangible an ephemeral working process.

The first example discusses a permanent audio presentation that took place during the project period, in the immediate surroundings where it was recorded. The work has

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8 Dictionary.com. proximity. Accessed on December 19, 2016. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/proximity>

been presented in several countries, including Spain, the Netherlands, and Germany. In non-French-speaking countries the projects need intensive mediation to bring across their purpose and results and, although the work has been part of exhibitions (*Terrain of Threshold Voices*, District, Kunst- und Kulturförderung Makzfabrik, Berlin, 2013), presenting it in person is for this reason a more obvious choice. The second example discusses some effects of presenting the work abroad.

### Example: Local listening post

During the full duration of *Parlez-vous Saint-Gillois?* a wooden support structure in the shape of the project logo was permanently stationed in the Dutch-speaking library that is centrally located within the Bosnia perimeter. The structure carried four headphones, on which a choice of four words and their explanations from the database could be listened to. The words changed every two months: they were annotated and contextualised on text panels mentioning their place of origin, the speaker speaking the words, and how the words can be interpreted.



**Figure 2:** Listening post, Nederlandstalige Bibliotheek, Saint-Gilles, April 2015

Although language interaction is common in Brussels, it hardly ever features in an official language setting such as a library. The context of a Dutch language library is especially interesting because of the extraordinary way culture is organised in Belgium. Culture is the governmental responsibility of the separate official language communities. Therefore libraries, being cultural infrastructures, are either Dutch- or French-speaking,

but never mixed, not even in the officially bilingual region of Brussels. A library’s mission is to promote the “correct” use of language, meaning they develop an approach to language in which normativity and homogeneity prevails. As this presentation took place in a Dutch-speaking environment, all the words that were presented had to be translated into Dutch, because they were originally collected and transcribed in French. For many listeners from Brussels, even in a Dutch-speaking library, Dutch is a second or third language. Many of the children who visit the library attend Dutch-speaking schools, but their daily communication language in the city is French, and their mother tongue, the language which they speak at home, might very well be yet another.

The idea of a permanent set-up was to create a continuous feedback between the output of the project and the place and people that contributed to it. The fact that the listening post was a physical object appeared to be important: the object materialised the words it was foregrounding and became an effective beacon that could be referred to. Many times, words that had been exhibited on the listening posts re-appeared in the streets, having been heard in the library, repeated to friends and family, and amplified through the “grapevine” of the neighbourhood.

The choice of location for the listening post was motivated by the project’s aim of achieving significance in conjunction with daily city life, for “it is in the everyday events which constitute ‘experience’ that meanings can be uncovered ” (Tacchi 2009, 174). It was therefore a logical choice to output results as an everyday service to the neighbourhood, reconnecting the words to their “conditions of origin and operation in experience” (John Dewey, as quoted in Tacchi 2009, 174). The speakers of the audio fragments were credited by name and, where possible, with a portrait photo. In this way, the listening post amplified the presence of people whose voices and stories were not commonly heard through institutional representation. Doreen Massey argues that place can be considered as “a collection of stories, articulations that are set within the wider power-geometries of space, and the specificity of place derives from the intersections of these stories, of what is made of them, of the non-meetings-up, the disconnections and the exclusions and relations that are not established” (2005: 130).

## Example: Foreign presentations

In the case of the listening post, a local audience is likely to recognise, for example, the speaker Mohammed a.k.a. the “Tortu Ninja” as a local jewellery maker who works in the streets and derives his nickname from the hard-case backpack he is usually equipped with. However, outside the context of Saint-Gilles his database contribution “L’Union fait la farce”, in which he combines allusions to the local bar and football club L’Union, the noun *farce* (joke, stuffing), and the Belgium motto “*L’union fait la force*” into a humorous amalgamate, needs major contextualisation. Explaining wordplays of course risks destroying some (if not all) of the intended nuances. The projects’ approach to language as a non-instructive, open, predominantly verbal system with roots in a

specific place has carved an aesthetic that is easy to grasp while in that place. However, not knowing the locality, its customs, routines, its “savoir faire”, and protagonists makes it very difficult to indulge in the playfulness of a piece of verbal communication such as the one mentioned above.

Although it is challenging to present the projects to an audience that does not understand French, those publics do have a potential advantage. The inability to understand what is said creates attentiveness to how things are said, and it makes listening to the verbal soundscape as a whole actually easier: “Sound is often underestimated as sensorial input that delivers knowledge about who we share our cities with. Taking the linguistic soundscape as base for an artist project that is contextualised in the public



sphere of a multilingual city revalidates its capacities to introduce the observer into layers of social, economic and cultural complexity” (Simon 2012, 1)

**Figure 3:** A randomly generated “sentence” from words in the database on the homepage

## CONCLUSION

In the preceding paragraphs we have discussed the implications of the choices that were made in these artistic research projects to develop the structure of the project based on proximities and presences. We explored possible meanings and applications of the notion of co-presence in the context of these projects by discussing concrete examples. We focused on the recursive relationship between technological capacities of reforming geographical distance and the notion of place as a social, relational, historical, and political locus. By problematising the notion of location, art situated in the ethnographic turn indeed also needs to take into account the important role that (digital) technology plays in the production, mediation, and consumption of “culture”.

The intersection of art, ethnography, and creative practice is fuelled by media-ecology discourse on technological tools being "post instrumental apparatuses" (Fuller 2005, 55). The capture device, be it a camera, audio recorder, or database, does not only allow humans to gather and store data, but in its turn "many apparatuses require the human being as a player and functionary" (Flusser 2000, 28) to engage with the interweaving of a complexity of programmes that synthesise the device. Therefore, we need to focus on how technologies "are also reshaping our experiences of place, notions of co-present intimacies as well as new perceptions of scale and dynamics" (Horst and Hjorth 2014, 125).

The notion of co-presence can be related to Sarah Pink's (2009) discussion of ethnographic place-making, in which she explores new approaches to ethnographic knowledge by adapting and developing new methods and technologies. She stresses the importance of reflexivity about the nature of the kind of knowledge that is being produced: "This approach neither replaces long-term immersion in a society or culture, nor aims to produce 'classic' ethnographic knowledge but, rather, creates deep, contextual and contingent understandings produced through intensive and collaborative sensory, embodied engagements often involving digital technologies in co-producing knowledge" (Postill and Pink 2012, 4). For Hjorth and Sharp, "[t]his movement from understanding place as a location to a space for various forms of presence (co, net, tele, absent, ambient) is essential to both contemporary art and ethnographic practices" (2014, 129; Rutten 2016). This is specifically important, they argue, because "[i]t is at the site of interrogating multiple modes of presence and the overlays of place that art ethnographies are most successful: moving beyond a mere aestheticisation and becoming an embodied part of creative, social practice" (Hjorth and Sharp 2014, 129).

Artistic projects such as the ones discussed in this article broaden the practice of research. The artists develop an investigative approach departing from the basic premise that languages spoken in multilingual cities interact and grow as a living entity. The open methodology that is developed allows for ad hoc re-orientation of the project and permits the project to situate itself in a social context. In relation to another project by Constant, Liesbeth Huybrechts remarks: "Constant turns its communication tools into an 'uncertain place': a subject of reflection and negotiation. By opening up the tools in such a way to stimulate reflection by the participants, unexpected and uncertain outcomes may arise from the project" (2014, 72). By questioning the authority of the lexicon, and developing activities through which participants can take part in documenting and creating vocabulary, this artistic verbal graphology leaves its marks on "how the city is spoken".

The language projects exemplify that being located in the same place and being co-present in a media space are two forms of community that are to be placed "on a continuum between these two extremes 'community of place' and 'community of spirit'; just as are the six forms of community that Max Weber distinguished (1972)—

house community, local community, tribe, ethnic, religious and political communities” (Hepp and Hitzler 2016, 139). The projects’ main strategy to portray a community can be described as an artistic “proximation machine” that proposes subjective and intuitive processes of bringing together, connecting, and compiling, both in the sense of assembling and editing an artwork and in the sense of creating the conditions for people to meet and interact.

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