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# Balloons to Talk about: Exploring Conversational Potential of an Art Intervention

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Relational approaches to urban development have gained ground in academic literature, highlighting diverse perspectives, such as experience, participation, aesthetics, performativity and affection. However, these practices neglect conversation as a connection between local everyday life and urban development. We argue that as art generally provokes discussion, material art acquires potential to question urban development and thus, act as a conversation mediator in public space. To test the hypothesis, we organised an explorative action research study: a data art installation within the annual 'Oulu Night of the Arts' in August 2017. The installation illustrated spatiotemporal analysis of everyday life in Åström Park, Oulu, Northern Finland. The art intervention succeeded in engaging diverse social groups online and on-site, although it proved challenging to evoke focused conversations. The induced discussions bore relevance to everyday realities in the locality. If public discourse on urban environment concentrates solely on municipal urban planning projects and visible new constructions, we risk creating a misconception of them being superior to mundane everyday life. The study suggests that even tentative information without specific objectives, when presented in a public data installation, could prove valuable for urban development discourse.

**Keywords:** Everyday life, art interventions in urban development, action research, spatio-temporal design, performative urbanism, new urban aesthetics

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### Introduction

In recent decades, scholars have turned towards relational concepts in urban development to correspond to the current urban complexity, and have found new focuses upon processes, actors and dynamics (Tornaghi, 2015; Wohl, 2017). These are in line with de Certeau's (1984) notion of everyday life unfolding through practices and performances instead of systems or structures and Lefebvre's (Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith, 1991) idea of urbanity as lived reality and socially produced entity. The more recent scholarly discussions include 'affective turn' in social sciences (Clough, 2007) and non-representational approaches to the city (Thrift, 2007; Buser, 2014). The new developed relational approaches touch upon – in varying mixes and emphases – actor-orientation, contextuality, eventuality, ephemerality, experiments, participation, open processes and temporary uses (Lehtovuori & Ruoppila, 2017). A distinguished literature strand discusses art and culture as key to actor-oriented urban development (Sacco et al., 2014). Art bonds people with places and underlines local qualities (Hall & Robertson, 2001); it creates a local identity and enables empowerment (Miles, 1997).

We argue that art could act as a mediator between diverse stakeholders in urban development. Art generates a sense of place (Marques & Richards, 2014), which predicts arts' potential to become an urban conversation opener. Despite the growing interest of art in urban regeneration (Anderson & Holden, 2008; Miles, 2005) and urban development (Evans, 2002; Garcia, 2004), there are few to no studies on conversation provoked by art in urban development. Cultural interventions in public space have proved to be important incentives for civic debate (Altrock & Huning, 2015). The action research study presented in this paper proposes a data art installation as a mediating piece for urban conversations. We apply art to enliven public space and question urban issues. In this paper, the concept of 'art' defines urban material or immaterial interventions. Our hypothesis is that disrupting materiality of a public space provides a basis for conversation. Choosing art as our means for our spatio-temporal design piece enables both material and temporal disruptions, and questions local urban rhythms. We rely on the research on performative urbanism (Altrock & Huning, 2015; Kremer, 2011; Samson, 2015) in our case study design, while borrowing elements from new urban aesthetics (Viderman & Knierbein, 2018; Wunderlich, 2013) and experiential urbanism (Lehtovuori, 2016; Lehtovuori & Ruoppila, 2017). Performative planning has roots in art practices of the 1940s (Kremer, 2011). Performative practices cover a range activities, acts, performances and temporary installations having in common that they work in the urban realm through processes of engagement (Samson, 2015). Performative planning eases the integration of marginalised groups to planning processes outside of public representation (Kremer, 2011). We seek to map this ground of provoking new ways to act through the materiality of the case study installation.

We focus on the dimensions of outreach, conversation and inclusion through a data art installation. While performative practices by definition avoid public representation (Kremer, 2011), in the pilot project, we apply simplified, everyday life information. Massey (2005) and van Holstein (2018) remind that communication on urban development should encourage subjective experiences rather than municipal expectations. A substantial participation requires a variety of everyday life activities, including both informal contributions and official roundtables (Thorpe, 2017). The case study art installation presented in this paper attempts to present data collected from its location as a conversational starting point. Whereas conventional information visualization emphasizes the effective understanding of data, in our study visualization serves as enhancement of data, which supposedly supports the acquisition of knowledge (Li, 2018). Data can be seen as evidence, which, in an ideal case, offers a basis for urban development (Davoudi, 2006).

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Within the theoretical background, we develop our argument by distinguishing both productive and obstructive conversational characteristics of intervening with a data art installation in contemporary urban setting. Subsequently, we explore the hypothesis with an action research study that was conducted as a data art installation in 'Oulu Night of Arts', August 2017 (Figure 1). The case study was implemented following a three-phased Field Action Research method. Based on the preliminary findings of our case study, we discuss the abilities and limitations of art installations as conversational devices. Our research inquires the potential of a material, artistic object to connect the space and the process, align urban dwellers and their embodied experiences with the representational, meta-level urban processes that planners conduct. Finally, we propose art as a yet unexplored means of urban conversation opener.



**Figure 1.** Art installation in the annual event Oulu Night of Arts in August 2017. Installation of 3600 balloons acts as a case study in this paper, providing an empirical case to discuss the development of a new, conversational planning tool. Source: © 2017 Authors.

### Conversational Dimensions of Performative Practices

Rational-comprehensive planning applies its instrumental rationality to control and regulate the city; to reach rigid, hierarchical and mono-functional patterns (Wohl, 2017). It addresses urban issues through master plans and blueprints, reducing the urban to a flat geometry within the Euclidean conception of space (Graham & Healey, 1999) and linear understanding of time (Miles, 1997). In order to tackle these deficiencies, the relational focuses in recent academic discourse have ranged from process and role of urban planner to reception by users of space (Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith, 1991; Massey, 2005; Healey, 1997; 2003; 2007; Latour, 2005; Tornaghi & Knierbein, 2015 ; Silva, 2016).

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The communicative turn in urban planning (Innes, 1995; Healey, 1997; 2003; 2006), pursued inclusion of diverse stakeholder interests, reframing urban planning practice into a 'soft' process of mutual learning, interaction between multitude actors (Faludi, 2000). In Finland, this is still the paradigm that official planning processes most often follow: the communal administrations need to arrange common participation in urban planning by law, but the preparations differ depending on cases (Tulkki & Vehmas, 2007). Despite the processual inclusion, communication-oriented process is often insufficient, although planners acknowledge its necessity (Thorpe, 2017). Despite their differences regarding the stakeholders' role, rational-comprehensive and communicative planning are both representational processes. Intervening with a data art installation in contemporary urban setting relies on reception through non-representational experience, but we argue that interventions still possess representational, more specifically conversational potential.

### ***Conversation through temporal disruption***

By definition, performative planning uses disruption as a tool. It sets stage for stakeholders themselves, raises attention, interrupts everyday uses, and initiates civic involvement in redefining places (Altrock & Huning, 2015) – often in a concrete, physical interventions (i.e. Kremer, 2011). It introduces design as an artistic object of unstable meanings and seeks potentials rather than functions (Samson, 2015). Therefore, temporary practices bring up a type of spatio-temporal production that is different from linear rational-comprehensive planning. Municipalities have started to apply temporary events, scenic arrangements and cultural interventions to achieve public participation within urban development processes, self-promote their localities via place-branding with decreasing public investment (Citroni & Kärrholm, 2019), or activate underused properties (Lehtovuori & Ruoppila, 2017; Webb, 2018). Through culture, municipalities wish to reach a variety of objectives, combining economic benefits, increased extern investment, tourism and employment to social profits while contributing to place distinctiveness, eventfulness and reduced vandalism (Hall & Robertson, 2001; Evans, 2002; Garcia, 2004). In the furthest sense, this can lead to completely evolutive urbanism, where urban dwellers are the sole stakeholders: tactical urbanism (Wohl, 2017), also known as guerilla urbanism, pop-up urbanism, city repair, or DIY urbanism, although these are not exact synonyms (Talen, 2015; Wortham-Galvin, 2013). Tactical urbanism reacts opportunistically to immediate needs as bottom-up processes (Silva, 2016). Temporary interventions act as urban catalysts, developing the place via ruptures in time; for example, through impulses for future uses, subversions of existing uses or pioneering new types of urban use in evolving areas (Lehtovuori et al., 2003; Oswald et al., 2013). This widens the sphere of public engagement, tests aspects of urban plans and expedites implementation (Lydon & Garcia, 2015).

Urban development via evolution introduces stakeholder experiences as meaningful. This is often the case for temporary urbanism (Madanipour, 2017) and experimental urbanism (Lehtovuori, 2016). However, when aiming for change – as conversation does – some disruption is necessary. In this, we rely on Ernwein and Matthey (2018), who show how disruptive encounters offer citizens 'new material affordances aimed to enhance and transform the modalities of their attention from the perspective of influencing their intimate, embodied ways of knowing the city' (ibid, p. 296). This forms one of the premises of our art intervention: in order to gain momentum, short-term interventions have the potential to act as disruptive force. This has also been noted within culture-led regeneration: ephemerality of urban events eventually poses no contradiction to long-term, administrative urban planning either, but rather, it represents an essential part of urban development processes, especially where

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culture is involved (Garcia, 2004). When urban interventions are intended temporary, they perish from the locality and provide space for continuous urban activities (Madanipour, 2017).

### ***Material and situated conversation***

The interest in experience of urban spaces has aroused specific discussion on the characteristics of urban life, where space and time are intertwined – resulting in new urban aesthetics. Wunderlich (2013) describes the ideal urban experience as smooth and flowing experience, where persons actions are in accordance with the mood and tempo of the place itself. For Wunderlich, experiencing the space-temporality as a meaningful phenomenological experience requires unity between the person and the surroundings. Experienced urban life becomes ‘a work of art’ in itself when there is unity.

Through offering a clear distinction from the unified everyday experience, interventions demand new bodily routines and new ways to act. Seen from the experiential viewpoint, bodily encounters, tactility and the promise of immediacy – not only verbal narratives and representational discourses promoted by communicative planning practices – are key issues in urban transformations, be they short-term or permanent (Viderman & Knierbein, 2018). Physical public spaces are the ideal media for reaching the local community. Urban materiality is more-than-representational in itself, making it an experiential subject (Citroni & Kärrholm, 2019).

The need of material and temporal disruption in order to be able to question urban rhythms serves us as a background for choosing art as our means. As art relies on affect, emotion, gaze and experience (Pløger, 2015), it provides for a sense of place (Marques & Richards, 2014). At the same time, art projects are laden with educational value and potential for discussion. Art practices with their material dimension within a local situation become performative spaces themselves. Site-specific installation art and architecture are spatial by definition and therefore similar (Liekens, 2009). However, art installation de-stabilises the meaning of architecture, traditionally focusing on formal appearance and functional problem solving. Architecture has more potential at its edges: it should ‘facilitate and provoke multiple readings, uses, events and thoughts’ (Liekens, 2009, p. 611) instead of postulating determined answers.

### ***Mediated conversation***

Whereas the body has the capacity to affect and to be affected by the urban environment, the effect can be increased or diminished through technologies and media (Samson & Juhlin, 2017). Data is one medium, but the experience itself is another. Through visualisation, information becomes more understandable (Li, 2018) and the social context offers new dimension of knowledge. Differing from the in-situ experience, the contemporary conversations are multi-located, glocal, which further justifies a disruption in the flow of urban space through the installation. This is exemplified through social media research. Social media entices to share highlights of everyday life – thus pleasant disruptions in the everyday flow are shared. The content of social media has recently provided a new, still developing method to map urban experiences and opinions (Cerrone et al., 2018). Following the logic of social media, a disruptive element in urban space has potential to circulate beyond its physical location.

Representational, communicative practice is increasingly distanced from the everyday life dealing with the glocal phenomena, namely global-local transactions (Horelli, 2013).

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Communication within urban development processes needs to meet the current preferences, including social media (Ertiö, 2015; Nummi et al., 2018) yet participatory e-planning is still outside the mainstream urban development (Horelli, 2013). Meaningful participation would necessitate both informal and official formats of communication (Thorpe, 2017)

### Method

Authors of this paper conducted a pilot intervention within the Oulu municipality event network and University of Oulu, School of Architecture academic curriculum. This pilot project unfolded as a 12-hour art installation, constructed of white air balloons, in 'Oulu Night of the Arts' 2017. The summer course at Oulu School of Architecture applied pedagogic action research (Tornaghi, 2015), starting as a spatio-temporal analysis of Åström Park in June 2017 and resulting in art installation in August 2017. Ten master and bachelor students identified ways of collecting data and presenting it in public space via a data sculpture.

We followed Field Action Research (FAR) method (Katoppo & Sudradjat 2015). The model includes a preliminary Field Research phase, the actual Field Action Research (FAR) with a prototype, and finally, measurement and evaluation of the intervention. All phases are conducted in the social context. (Katoppo & Sudradjat 2015) The model described above proposes a method for architectural research, and although our pilot project represents a temporary construct, we regard it as an architectural edifice. The summer course students attended all three phases under supervision of the authors within the pedagogic action research (Tornaghi, 2015). The preliminary Field Research period took place in July 2017 as a spatiotemporal analysis of Åström Park. The students of the summer course observed the life in the park for 12 hours, working in shifts and pairs. Ethnographic, quantitative and qualitative observations were noted down on log sheets, photographed, video-graphed and voice-recorded (Gehl & Svarre, 2013). This analysis resulted in a data basis for the art installation.

The Field Action Research (FAR) phase introduced our art-based pilot project in the actual social setting: Åström Park, where the initial field research was conducted. The data installation represents the collected raw data, visualising the everyday life of the park. The art intervention itself endured for one day, August 17, 2017, at annual 'Oulu Night of the Arts'. The authors and/or student assistants were present for the whole 12-hour-period of the art intervention, during which they interacted with participants of 'Oulu Night of the Arts' and collected data on-site. In addition to on-site conversations, we encouraged the participants to discuss online with our own social media hashtags (#datapilvi, #ilmapalloteos) and existing event hashtags (#ouluntaiteidenyö, #ouluartsnight, #oulunjuhlaiviikot).

In this paper, we focus on evaluation and measurement of conversational art intervention instead of the pedagogical methodology (Banerjee, 2015). To map the conversational potential, we applied mixed methods: photography and video documentation (Moore et al., 2008, Caldarola, 1985), log sheets, and participant observation (Bryman, 2012) during the actual event. Further, we analysed the discourse in local media, social media and notes of personal on-site encounters with visitors of the installation as research data. In addition, we applied self-reflection on the action research process (Robertson, 2000). The main media sources were articles in newspaper Kaleva and posts / comments in social media channels (instagram, twitter, facebook) with designated hashtags or groups related to the event.

We applied following ethical procedures in our study: We publish no names of the event on-site participants. We quote public social media comments but include no original social media

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usernames, offering anonymity by generating random names. We use our own photographs for illustration. No delicate information or vulnerable participants, such as children, are included in the social media study (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). For analytic purposes, we divide the social media comments in primary and secondary. Primary users (marked with p: @ig-user-p1) posted a photograph of installation themselves. Secondary users (marked with s: @ig-user-s2) have commented a posted photo. Quotes in this paper are excerpts from original social media postings without connected pictures. Due to technical reasons, we left out emojis from the quotes. All the comments included in this study relate to photos focusing on installation. Pictures with installation on background, such as selfies, are left out of the study.

### Case: Temporary and Conversational Art Project

The municipality of Oulu is Finland's fifth biggest city with its 200.000 inhabitants. The city district Myllytulli, bordering the city center of Oulu, is a mixed-use district with old industrial architecture and large recreational areas. Hupisaaret Park covers almost half of the district. Myllytulli accommodates several cultural facilities, such as Luuppi Museum and Science Centre, Oulu Museum of Arts and Tietomaa Science Centre, as well as several educational facilities and hotels. The buildings surrounding Åström park vary from low wooden constructions dating one century back to a recently constructed 5-storey-high apartment block. A main pedestrian lane crosses the park diagonally, being the key passageway for pedestrians and cyclists between riverside neighbourhoods and city centre of Oulu. Åström park represents a link between built environment and greenery in Myllytulli.

The municipality of Oulu promotes cultural events through their 'Urban Cultural Program' (2013). Within this larger event network, the annual 'Oulu Night of the Arts' represents an umbrella occasion, under which smaller interventions place themselves. Traditionally all performances of 'Oulu Night of the Arts' happen open-air and are free of charge for visitors. Myllytulli, a central location and a hotspot for culture, accommodates several art pieces each year. On August 17, 2017, there were six cultural installations or performances in Åström Park.

The summer school students conducted a spatiotemporal analysis on Åström Park two months before the actual event. This raw data was cultivated into a balloon installation of 3.600 white balloons for 'Oulu Night of the Arts', representing the amount of visitors, passing cyclists and pedestrians in the park during the analysis day. The size and form of the sculpture were based on spatiotemporal analysis of the park. The form indicated the temporal division of users throughout the day (Figure 2). The form of the balloon installation enabled visitors to interact: touch the piece and experience the park through the balloons. The sculpture was accompanied with descriptive texts and graphs on posters attached to a nearby tree, which presented the broader, collected data. We announced the event on 'Oulu Night of the Arts' platform and on a set Facebook page. The regional newspaper Kaleva informed about the installation on three consecutive days: preceding, during and following the event.

The art installation embodied local everyday life in a data piece. We emphasised the place-based-ness by presenting the daily usage patterns on-site in an artistic form. Our aim was to create a place-based discussion and interaction between everyday usage patterns and park users. The installation reconsidered temporality of the park through an illustration of daily rhythms. We reflected contemporary rhythms of Åström Park. The project celebrated the small and mundane everyday details that long-term schedules of municipal administrations tend to neglect. We reframed the daily movements of running errands, meeting friends, conducting leisure activities and traveling to school or work to an aesthetic data art piece, and intended

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to raise appreciation of the mundane. We wanted to encourage a discussion, or simply participation in a shared experience.



**Figure 2.** The graph represents the amount of passers-by from 10 AM to 10 PM, categorized according to the mode of transportation and the size of the party the passers-by were with. The streams are arranged from biggest to smallest group (= the total number of passers-by within the group). Source: © 2017 Authors.

During 'Oulu Night of the Arts', the participants were invited to reflect the place through the presented data. The presence of organisers during the 12-hour timeframe enabled visitors to discuss the information and exchange about the pilot project. The visitor profile shifted depending on the time. During the day, there were organised visitor groups from local stakeholders, such as kindergarten classes or Finnish language classes for immigrants. Older people, mostly residents of the neighbourhood, would visit the installation in the daytime. They were eager to share their opinion on the locality. Families would visit with their children after work. In the evening, visitors were mostly young adults, scholars or students, who would have a drink and spend time in the park. The weather was pleasant and warm, so we enjoyed exceptionally many visitors for a weekday event in Oulu.

### Results: Art Event as a Place-specific Conversation

In the following section, we discuss the art installation through three viewpoints of importance to the conversational potential: materiality, temporariness, and social impact. These viewpoints also draw on theoretical perspectives from chapters 2.1, 2.2. and 2.3: temporary art installations as performative practices, materiality as new urban aesthetic and communication on urban development in social media.



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### **Materiality**

The material art piece evoked much attention and interest. The aesthetic visuals enticed visitors to touch – thus, the material object acted as a mediator, also enabling contact between people. The installation gained much attention in traditional and social media as well as within ‘Oulu Night of the Arts’ visitors. The physical piece managed to draw attention to the presented information, although the local and social media tended to talk about artistic aspects of the installation rather than the chosen topic. The instagram comments tended to remain descriptive @ig-user-p4: *Feet on the ground, head in the clouds. 3600 balloons in Åström park. #datapilvi #datacloud #ilmapalloteos.* @ig-user-s9: *How fine! At the first sight they reminded me of grapes.*)

Engagement with the material sculpture provided an unambiguous place-making element. It activated the park in micro scale and formed a unique experience consisting of data, knowledge on urban life, concrete small-scale experience and spatial activation, which was noted and praised some days later by a regional newspaper Kaleva. The location in the middle of a green park enabled an experience through the place, and emphasised the place-basedness. Through its white colour, the piece was simultaneously overly visible, like an alien form in the park, and simultaneously, a neutral tabula rasa. The installation represented a background, like everyday life itself, happening around us.



**Figure 3.** Our art installation of white balloons offered a beautiful backdrop for photography.  
Source: © 2017 Reetta Lehtiranta.

We selected balloons for their compact size and ability to represent quantitative information easily, while the visitor associated them with positive connotation. Data

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became secondary for many. The balloons fascinated children, who squeezed them, ran and played around the sculpture. (Figure 4) As a childcare group visited the installation, the kindergarten teacher introduced the piece: “Look, this is *art*”, whereas the children would engage themselves with the materiality. Although the balloons remained without deeper information content for the children, the playful looks enticed even the youngest participants into play. For adults, balloons became a selfie backdrop or social media opener. Timing within the annual art event aided relaxed discussions.

The varying sculptural form in plain white conformed social media aesthetics. Through introducing the everyday life of the park as visually pleasant art installation, we wished to enhance the stakeholders’ affection with the place. Our pilot project pursued regaining the hope (Anderson & Holden, 2008). As the piece wept silently in wind, it enabled visitors settle down, or fill the absence of sound themselves. The neutral object offered visual peace. Our pilot project demonstrated the potential of white balloons to enable difficult topics. Visitors of all ages seemed to love balloons. The interest in the enticing visual features of the installation and the secondary nature of data raise questions on the “economy of attention”: the main way to read the installation seemed to be visual. Since social media encourages visual as main capital, art interventions necessitate “Instagram-worthy” characteristics to receive attention. Thus, sole materiality might prove insufficient to stir on-site or social media conversations.

The data art installation demonstrates the educational potential of public art (Hall & Robertson, 2001) as the visitors shared our preliminary research data on their instagram accounts. @ig-user-p2: *This illustrates the passers-by of Åström Park #ouluntaiteidenyo.* @ig-user-p25: *Night of the Arts in the afternoon. 3600 balloons #ouluntaiteidenyo.* Some users commented our method of presenting the data. @ig-user-s17: *That's such a cool way to show how data is connected nowadays! I should show it to my grandma to explain :D* To be able to see and touch the ‘data’ seemed to be also a revealing experience, providing a way of approaching place-specific meta-information, a multi-layered ‘local knowledge’.

Materiality and tactility acted as discussion openers. In previous research material, eventual affordances have been observed to increase social acceptance of urban transformations and influence citizens’ intimate, embodied knowledge on localities (Ernwein & Matthey, 2018). Our objective to raise concern about the unused potential of the park detained from future-related questions, embracing the momentary and augmenting it with additional information. We have no means of following long-term effects of the installation. As Ernwein and Matthey (2018) state, ‘each of the bodies subjugated to the pleasure of the experience becomes a potential vector of transmission of the “new” urban values’ (p. 297). Experience itself is viable to work as a means of communication.

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*Figure 4. Children were especially fond of the materiality. Source: © 2017 Reetta Lehtiranta.*

### **Temporariness**

Through its short-term appearance, the installation created local media visibility. Thus, the temporariness helped us gain visitors. It is difficult to estimate whether such a short intervention will have longer-term effects - the social media discourse faded in several days. Our installation engaged visitors and increased their awareness of the place. Art facilitated the discourse and became topic of following social media discussions. The installation provided a means of engagement in an unofficial setting. Within an art event, where traditional hierarchy is re-organised (Marques & Richards, 2014), planners and their decisions become closer to public and their daily life: the data was distinguished from the linear planning process and approached equally and reciprocally.

An older lady approached us with questions concerning the intervention. “What is this work about? Why did you build it here in Åström Park?” Our answers about architecture as place-making, visualisation the park usage and activating the place provoked further questions: “But what do you plan to do about it after today? What will happen to Åström Park?” For her, temporary installations are insufficient as urban interventions, and present no alternative for long-term visions of urban development. The piece remained abstract, and including her in the conversation would require elaboration of the participatory aspect. Conversely, several middle-aged participants found our intervention both necessary and suitable for the location. “It is such a fine idea to activate Åström Park. Hopefully there are no plans for housing development here.” The conversation offered profound discussion on local potential.

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The short time frame seemed a perfect fit with fast-paced social media. @ig-user-p7: *An art installation #datapilvi is in process! You can see the finished installation in Oulu Arts' Night (@ouluntaiteidenyo) tomorrow; @ig-user-p3: These balloons were part of the Oulu Arts night last week and called the "Data cloud" #travelart #ouluartsnight; @ig-user-p1: Architecture students' data cloud in Åström Park #ouluntaiteidenyo.* Although some users both online and on-site seemed disappointed with the duration. @ig-user-s5: *Apparently this was exposed only today :(*

On site, a middle-aged woman asked us “will this art piece be here tomorrow as well? Not anymore? That is too bad, we are looking for locations for wedding photography, and the balloons would have offered such a beautiful background!” Although an art intervention has potential to provoke stakeholder identification with the locality and bond people with the places, the short-term nature opposes problems, as not everyone is able to attend on the specific date. Regarding a conversation we wished to evoke, it is crucial to have a clear message, as otherwise public art is no conversation opener but a mere backdrop for (wedding) photography.

Our temporary installation created no opposition, rather a warm welcome, compared to long-term constructions or permanent art. For the visitors, temporariness enabled experiments through photography, playing, spending time on-site. Like tactical urbanism and experiential urbanism which experiment with urban possibilities prior to final execution (Lehtovuori & Ruoppila, 2017; Lydon & Garcia, 2015), our pilot project explored the potential of the place. As aiming at potentially durable solutions is not a necessary goal, ephemerality represents an integral part of the quality (Lehtovuori & Ruoppila, 2017). Thus, our pilot project concretely distinguished from tactical urbanism, as our intention is a discussion rather than alteration of place.

### **Social impact**

Our event was aimed at all local social groups and we pursued best possible inclusivity. Through the integration of our project to the wider Oulu event network, we gained visitors who would possibly be absent on an ordinary weekday. We had no prior assumptions on visitor profile, nor did we invite special groups. The social mix ended up quite balanced, regarding age and gender. The 12-hour shift on a summer day represented the user mixture of the park quite well: ‘Oulu Night of the Arts’ starts at noon (12am) and ends at midnight (12pm) on a weekday Thursday. The flexible visiting hours of our installation and the ‘fun aspect’ of the ‘Night of the Arts’ encourages certain visitor groups that are often missing in municipal urban development, like scholars and working parents with their children, to participate.

As for the social media participants, we are unable to estimate age, gender nor geographical distribution. Social media users are characteristically younger than median age. People approaching us on-site tended to be older. The contents of the discussion on-site and in social media varied drastically. Whereas social media discourse concentrated on the aesthetics and looks by short comments and emojis, the on-site discussion included elaboration on existing urban development plans. Our art installation evoked countless ‘likes’ (facebook) and ‘hearts’ (instagram) in social media, but comments or opinions in literal form remained scarce. It takes time and effort to devise a publishable comment in textual form.

Public space proved an ideal media for open discourse. The data art piece enabled participation via several means: photographing, sharing, playing, meeting neighbours -

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relaxing alone and together, discussing on-site and on-line, commenting on various media platforms. It pursued ways of involving groups outside of administrative participation processes, especially illiterate, such as small children or novel immigrants. Although we encountered these groups on-site, the lack of verbal communication complicated understanding their experience. The work was abstract and interpretable in various ways. Material presentation and visual presence of balloons in amount of visitors aroused surprised reactions.



**Figure 5.** Engagement with the sculpture. Source: © 2017 Reetta Lehtiranta.

Oulu-related hashtags were popular, reinforcing the local aspect of discourse. Our installation doubled as advertisement picture for the area: @ig-user-p6 *The night of the Arts is still sunny. Let's enjoy the events. See you! #ouluntaiteidenyö.* The social media discourse underlined the hype and the fun aspect, remaining shallow. Comments included humor and admiration. @ig-user-p10 *#balloons, balloons everywhere! #datapilvi #taiteidenyö.* @ig-user-p8 *#geeks this is #datacloud! by #architectstudents of #oulu.* @ig-user-s11 *Wow stunning !!* @ig-user-s12

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*That's very cool! So unusual. @ig-user-s19 So beautiful. @ig-user-s20 How interesting and beautiful. @ig-user-s22 Woooow. @ig-user-p24 Beautiful balloons. This was my allocation of culture today, and I'm heading to my rural cottage now. #datapilvi #ouluntaiteidenyo.* Many published photographs only included hashtags and/or emojis, lacking any verbal comments.

Our focus in the small and the mundane underlines its relational aspect. Oulu's regional leading newspaper mentioned our pilot project in its Sunday number, three days after the actual event (Kaleva 20.8.2017) with a title 'Beauty lies in small things'. 'Architecture students counted that appr. 3600 people pass through Åström park in a day. The observations were transformed into an art installation Datapilvi for Oulu Night of the Arts. 3 600 balloons told about life in the park. In this small-scale urban event, information and visitor experience were combined. There are many small urban events taking place in Oulu, covering just a street or a neighbourhood. A successful event is not measured in the number of visitors or expensive performers.'



**Figure 6.** *The white aesthetics attracted young people. Source: © 2017 Reetta Lehtiranta.*

Finding the conversations proved challenging, both on-site and internet. The comments with designated hashtags and public social media profiles were accessible. The on-site discourse represents a similar division of private and public, where we are unable to access visitors' personal experiences. Further, a considerable amount of comments in instagram, twitter etc. consisted of solely hashtags or emoji's. Despite the legitimacy of this conversation type, it is incomparable with verbal expressions.

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### Discussion

In this article, we analyse the action research case study and its conversational potential through the material, temporal and social dimensions. These characteristics derive from the art piece itself. However, research could aim similar objectives with different methods and analysis framework. There is a considerable amount of writing on effects of permanent public art (Miles, 2000, Sharp et al., 2005). Similarly, non-material art, such as electronic or luminary installations, might evoke place-specific conversations, despite the different interaction.

As a place-making object, our installation was a success, as it raised attention over the place in local and social media. Based on the pilot project, we argue that future urban planning and its communication should connect with everyday life of the citizens. Rather than creating substitute urban planning instruments, we pursued combining the spatial and temporal aspects of urban everyday into a material conversation piece. The pilot project suggests an experiential approach to celebrate everyday life in public space. On urban micro scale, these aspects depict successful qualitative communication. Both official and unofficial means of discussion are still necessary for information exchange. The conversational potential of data art installation is linked to contemporary multi-locational experiences: what kind of qualities are required to engage users, for example, in social media? If the intervention is intended for discussing a specific urban development question, the clarity of the message itself needs to be thought carefully in order to reach the aim.

Our case study suggested some methodological challenges. Action research method requires a large amount of personnel. Working together with the students proved rewarding, however, data collection necessitated more supervision than we expected. For further action research interventions, we would plan the data collection more carefully in order to ensure corresponding data sets for both on-site and social media material. For a pilot project, we consider the case study a success. On the field of culture-led urban development, research results often end up qualitative and subtle. In order to conduct a quantitative social media analysis (Cerrone et al., 2018), a research strategy for reaching more users and posts would be necessary.

Although our pilot project succeeded evoking conversation generally, we recognised difficulties in generating discourse on specific topics. Regarding the contents of the conversations, social media discourse remained shallow. There was talking about and around the art installation, the data content, the locality and our pilot project, but no profound exchange on any of them. The art installation should point the information content clearer when the objective is to generate a specific discussion on local urban development or site-specific problems. Directing a conversation via questions proved more effective than presenting specific data in a public art piece. Yet the art installation represented potential that could be further developed in the next case studies.

We believe that the proposed approach provides reciprocal interaction, strengthening the nature of the place. Visually pleasant material art could invoke discussion on more sensitive or troublesome topics. In the proposed approach, participation is seen as 'giving back to the community' through representing and exposing collected data for discussion, which overcomes certain critiques on rational-comprehensive urban planning. This would hypothetically lead to people being more responsive to planning practitioners. We see the potential of the proposed approach in its materiality and place-basedness. Although culture-led urban development is generally difficult to measure as their effects are rather sophisticated (Evans & Shaw, 2004), our approach indicated imminent discourse in local and social media.

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After all, the key point of cultural engagement overwhelms economic value and focuses on empowerment on the community (Sacco & Tavano Blessi, 2009). The process overtakes the product, goes 'beyond object making and puts the maker inside the place rather than removed from it' (Wortham-Galvin, 2013, p. 36). Thus, the two, place and process, become inseparably intertwined.



**Figure 7.** On the following day, we announced dismantling our installation in social media, sharing its physical pieces on-site. Locals expressed notable interest in the balloons and parts of the work travelled to nearby cafés, schools and private homes. Source: © 2017 Reetta Lehtiranta.

According to the pilot project, we argue that consciousness of everyday urban activities (in our case via the installation) helps stakeholders reconsider their environment. The media discourse following the event strengthened this perspective. If public discourse on urban environment concentrates solely on municipal urban planning projects and visible new constructions, we risk creating a misconception of them being superior to mundane everyday life. Our installation illustrates how everyone's action contributes to the livability and appeal of urban public space. Art interventions endure the potential to challenge linear urban development and its conception of space as a unitary object or activity container – thus positioning itself as relational. Planners and artists who also act as communicators, or activists as Miles (2005) suggests, do not cease to be planners and artists but rather it gives a deeper layer to their expertise: they are thus both 'professionals in their fields and dwellers on dwelling' (Miles, 2005, p. 907). The communicative, art-based practices question and interfere the customary city-image rhetoric (Miles, 2005). New modalities of communication about urban projects deal rather with building expectations than 'correcting reality after its actualisation'



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(Ernwein & Matthey 2018, p. 296), suggesting that even tentative data without specific aim could be useful in long-time perspective.

Art has become a meaningful aspect of urban development, not only due to its place-making capacities (Miles, 2005), but also due to the informative enhancement. The huge amount of information available on localities, such as GIS data, is scattered around the web. Our installation offers the local information directly on-site, augmenting the physical locality with data dimension. In the pilot project, the data consisted solely of the pedagogically produced visitor count (Tornaghi, 2015) but the potential proved much wider. We concede that municipal urban blueprints are optimal for presenting spatial information, such as heights, dimensions, and usage dedication. However, we argue that they are less suitable for discussing everyday life, and thus, our art-based approach offers novel perspectives.

Focus on data in the context of culture-led urban development situates our approach within *preceding* design interventions rather than unfolding the relationality *by means* of design (Wohl, 2017) and thus differs from the aims of tactical urbanism. However, we see this as a potential direction to be developed within the current emergence of big data, governance with data and evidence-informed decision making. When data on urban environment, its dissemination and the feedback are brought together and exposed in a data art installation, we could reach open processes, critiques and co-production of urban development.

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