

External Dissertation Evaluation: *Principles of Dialogue (Principy dialogu)*

Academy of Fine Arts in Prague

Studio: Intermedia 2

Author/Artist: MgA. Šárka Zahálková

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Opponent: MgA. et Mgr. Jennifer Helia DeFelice, Ph.D.

Šárka Zahálková describes her dissertation as *an examination of practical and theoretical aspects of public space as a social substance and the role of art as an active mediator of potential positive transformations within it*. To this end she presents us with her methodology inspired by, among others, the practices of acoustic ecology pioneer R. Murray Schafer and Deep Listening activist and advocate, Pauline Oliveros.

The dissertation *Principles of Dialogue (Principy dialogu)* is presented on the *Research Catalogue* non-commercial, collaboration, and publishing platform provided by the Society for Artistic Research. The author's *exposition* offers a splash page with animated illustrations that lead to links to the individual sections that detail the author's theoretical approach to her endeavours to perpetuate societal and political transformation primarily through the employment of public and site-specific art and its experience by and presentation to the public.

I perceive the endeavour to anchor the author's practice and methodology through the development of her doctoral thesis as an important contribution to the cultural landscape that lives both within and without its institutional confines in the Czech Republic to which the author has contributed greatly. In addition to being a manner in which to present the author's personal artistic approach, the work is intended as a multifaceted guide for the public at large: in this particular instance aimed primarily at the artistic and academic community.

Key concepts in the work are presented in a form that blends essay with storytelling and instruction, evolving into a manifesto in which the cultivation and promotion of an artistic practice and methodology as a tool for proactive change — that can be applied in both rural and urban spaces — emerges. The syntax, stylization, and terminology employed in the written and narrated parts of the work are appropriately academic and professional.

The introductory text to the dissertation includes numerous hover over pop-up windows with slideshows of exhibitions and events including “*Tvárnost paměti, activities realized under the motto Umění pro veřejný prostor Pardubic, or the community-art project Ztratit se realized within the program Umění pro město v Satalicích u Prahy*”, to name but a few. There are also links to projects that are on external servers which could make it difficult to keep the work together as a holistic entity if these outside links were to go dark.

The practical component of the work — from what I could ascertain — consists of audio recordings that are part of the online *exposition*, as well as links to a stand alone website with a series of works called *Aimless Walks* (*Bezcilné procházky*). These audio pieces can be characterized as being real time recordings with little to no post production. The tonal quality of the author's voice is reminiscent of a narrative audio guide or podcast host with an ASMR quality. Šarka Zahálková's admirable work with the Research Catalogue online platform, which includes her drawings and animations which are evidently both inspired by and an outcome of her practice, is in itself an artwork — or at least I have considered it as such for the purpose of this evaluation.

It is clear that through Šarka's myriad activities — artistic, curatorial and activist — various areas of application are addressed which can all make use of the artistic methodology as a toolbox for positive societal and, one would hope presently, political change. Exhibitions, events, and communal meetings, all take place in congenial spaces that can be characterized as having the commonality of voluntariness or even a willingness towards participation, being nested in organizations, institutions, and platforms such as GAMPA Gallery, the Offcity collective, the CENSE – Central European Network for Sonic Ecologies and Spolku Skutek.

The author has also had significant success in developing and presenting her work in international contexts where over the last decade significant attention has been given to the community of practitioners — to which Šarka Zahálková belongs — of sonic ecology and ecofeminist approaches to art making and its power to bring about much needed change and to create societal impact.

The breadth of Šarka Zahálková's initiatives specifically, is vast, systematic, and inspiring. To grasp its intention and meaning requires a particular sensitivity, which the offer of an attentive listening strategy — principles of acoustic ecology, conscious listening, and walking, as tools to enhance sensitivity to the surrounding environment — certainly prepares the reader/audience for.

The artist's presentation of her practice and methodology is extraordinarily approachable. There is an optimism and openness that permeates the work which lends itself particularly well to community-based projects, both in public and site-specific spaces; however it does make it more difficult to categorize aesthetically. Given the large number of applications of the author's described methodology, this is an area where a focus on outcomes of the applied practices and her theoretical reflections would have proven advantageous to include in order to provide a more cohesive overview. All the more, given the unique and clear interdisciplinary focus in her oeuvre.

Having created opportunities and contextualization for a range of artists and their artistic practices — which one could assume have been inspiring to the author in terms of the development of the thesis — referencing these other artistic practices in the theoretical part of the work would knit the dissertation elements together. I would say that this is also true of the

various references to concepts and terminologies by artists and theoreticians included in the work. Of course one could look these up through the available referenced literature but offering more of an elaboration as part of the work would also aid in fleshing out the authors own ideas for the reader. The documentation available on the Research Catalogue platform itself is minimal and although the events are described, experiences and outcomes would be a welcomed appendix. Who are the (listed) artists included in these curatorial projects, and what has been discovered through the interactions? Without this addition, despite the many indications of practical application of the methodology, the reader is left in the speculative zone of the dissertation. The artist's own artistic and curatorial decision making based on her methodology is understated.

I believe that Šarka Zahálková and the community of acoustic ecology practitioners in both the local and international community will continue to foster their efforts toward meaningful change, toward the re-sensitizing of individuals and communities — an aim we see well detailed in the work *Principles of Dialogue*.

Discussion questions:

1. In the dissertation the term *ecotone* is borrowed from the natural sciences to describe the transitional zone between different communities and to reflect on permeability, resilience, hierarchy, empathy, and, importantly, the artistic gesture unfolding over time. The term *ecotone* in its etymology implies interaction but also tension between two adjacent areas, how can areas of tension be addressed through the given methodology? How are these approaches applicable in situations where there are relationships and microcosms that include contentious, conflicting, or contradicting positions?
2. Given that the work, ideas, and practices of R. Murray Schaffer and Pauline Oliveros have been disseminated for many decades, the author's focus on the localization and explorations of the *ecotone*, as well as her application of ecofeminist principles of participation and attunement to the more than human world and modes of knowing represents the author's contribution to the field of acoustic ecology. What are some examples of tangible outcomes of the projects that are represented in the dissertation that apply these principles? For example: What are some outcomes from the walk that was conceived for the environs of AVU, with respect to the given context/*ecotone*?

The close reading of the online presentation and the related exploration of the linked projects and sites that I've conducted leads me to believe that the path laid out in *Principles of Dialogue* with its accompanying design and illustrations is an inspiring and feasible methodology and an important document that could also serve as the foundation for a successful print publication.

I recommend granting Šárka Zahálková the academic title of Ph.D.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jennifer DeFelice', written in a cursive style.

MgA. et Mgr. Jennifer Helia DeFelice, Ph.D.

Brno, 12. 04. 2025