

Public space as acoustic territory.

This paper is a slightly edited version of a lecture presented at the Media Art Histories 2019 conference Re:sound, in Aalborg, Denmark. It looks at sound work in urban space by myself and others, focussing on one of my favourite forms - that of the audio walk, my current doubts about this form, and contrasts this form with other approaches.

It was during a recent residency at Overtoon ¹ in Brussels, that I started to regard the city as a series of shifting and overlapping acoustic territories.

I became interested in bio-acoustics and in particular the concept of the Acoustic Niche - Bernie Krause's hypothesis ² that animal species occupy and contest different parts of the acoustic spectrum. More recent research ³ shows how birds react to urban anthropogenic noise by pitching or choosing their songs differently. This shows how the acoustic realm is an integral part of ecological systems and I was interested in applying this concept to urban spaces.

In Brussels there are already territories defined by human language. Although you can usually speak French everywhere there are districts where one can almost only hear Flemish or English, Arabic or Turkish and many areas where multiple languages (from eastern Europe, the Indian sub-continent, central Africa) exist side-by-side on the street. Music coming from open windows, a passing car or carried on a portable speaker is also used to claim and define territory. I also listened for territories defined by the sounds of transport, animals and birds, the weather and the acoustic properties of urban spaces.

As an experiment I decided to make acoustic filters to focus my listening. The filters, mostly made from found materials, emphasise certain areas of the sonic spectrum but also add harmonic resonances, encouraging a musical mode of listening to the city.

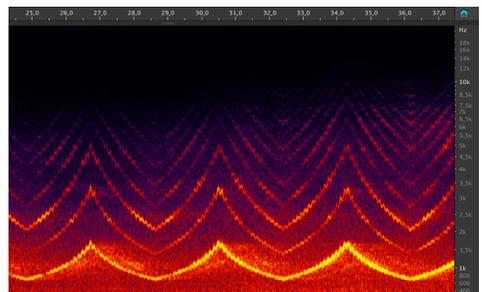
A collection of recordings made during this research by placing miniature microphones inside these filters is available on Bandcamp. ⁴

To intervene or not to intervene?



While listening and recording through the filters I realised that the most recurring recognizable sounds, perhaps because my filters couldn't filter them out, were the sirens of emergency vehicles.

Like the calls of a bird or other territorial animal the sirens sing: I am here. This street is mine. And of course it is - the emergency services claim their right to use the roadway over everybody else. In claiming the street though, they perform a double territorialization by also dominating a large portion of the sonic spectrum.



The sirens, particularly those that sweep up and down in frequency, cover a large part of our functional hearing range, from 500 to 8000 Hz. This is exactly the range to which we are the most sensitive, because we need it to understand speech. The acoustic niche that we use to communicate with one another is being colonised by the siren, the apex predator of the Brussels sonic eco-system.

The siren, though, is not an abstract sound, it's a call sign, signifying a crime, an accident, a danger - it sings of a wounded city. For the fearful, the sirens create a soundscape full of fear.⁵

But the sirens also echo the acoustician's technique of the sweeping sine wave - revealing the acoustic properties of a space by capturing its impulse response.

In my recent audio walk "Multiplicity - a spectral analysis of Brussels", I use this technique a lot, and make the connection with the sirens that can still be heard almost permanently. If we play this sweeping sound outwards, into the city, it calls for a response - the buildings talk back to us with their echoes. It's a kind of exorcism of the space: on it's way upward the soundsweep shakes loose spectral artefacts, sonic wraiths. Brussels has many spectres hidden out of earshot - the EU, colonial histories or the fractured political situation and playing with this idea of "spectral analysis" allows me to link the soundscape and architecture with some of these issues.



The audio-walk, presented on headphones, is a form balancing between the private and the public. It allows very direct, personal communication between artist and audience within a public setting. It makes for a very rich multi-sensorial experience where the city is both protagonist and film-set. I can weave sound from my acoustic filters with binaural recordings of sirens, acoustic experiments and spoken texts together with the existing live soundscape. I love the medium of the audio-walk with its intimacy, its possibilities for story-telling, but at the same time, I

see that there's a problem. I'm using a technology that we mostly use to create our own private sound-world, to shield us from the oversaturated information content of the world. A technology which, like so called "social" media gives us a pretence not to engage with others.

"when the public space allows us not to meet others but to ignore them or pass them by" writes Pascal Gielen, "it simply ceases to exist. Politics then withdraw from daily life and the public space becomes depoliticised."⁶

Although listeners report a strong connection with the environment and a heightened sense of listening after experiencing an audio walk, I can't help feeling that I'm copping out. Am I not enclosing the commons of public space? - using the space between the headphones as a privatised territory, a "safe place" for preaching to the already converted? Does encouraging a musical listening to the city allow us to ignore its realities?

So now, in my moment of doubt, I'm searching for other forms and approaches.

A true, open-air sonic intervention in the city is something completely different. In the worst case the artist making sound in public space re-territorialises what should be open and public by imposing their ego. In the best case it can lead to contention, discussion or participation.



The artist Davide Tidoni⁷ creates listening situations that interfere with normal social processes and expectations. An amplified microphone is thrown against a window until it breaks the glass and completes a feedback

loop. Metal plates are taped to the shoes of a performer-listener to extend their acoustic space and activate their surroundings. His work involves audiences and often passers-by in sometimes violent, sometimes incredibly fragile and sensitive acts where our perception of public space is constantly called into question and played with.

A sonic intervention doesn't have to be fleeting or performative though. Artists can intervene in the public, social space in different ways.



Sonic West is an ongoing project of Soundtrackcity that I am involved with which focusses on the acoustic territories of the Oud West district of Amsterdam.

We invite artists to work together with locals on a research project that can result in a performance, a composition or something else. All projects and raw materials are collected into an online archive that is open for anyone to add to, via an app. As well as field recordings, people can upload texts and photos.⁸

I want to briefly mention two projects within Sonic West that deal with acoustic territories.



Donia Jourabchi and Taufan ter Weel have backgrounds in dance, sonology, architecture and underground music. Their multi-disciplinary project was titled Gentrifricion:

They ran field recording and listening workshops, interviewed local activists and did archive research. The project culminated in a live radio show in the local library about the history of popular protest in the neighbourhood and housing issues, which included a debate with the audience.

The current artists are Fani Konstantinidou & Mayke Haringhuizen. The visitor to Amsterdam sees the canals, the streets, the facades, but there is a large area of almost all neighbourhoods taken up by gardens and courtyards.



Sometimes they're private but often they are common areas shared by the surrounding neighbours. Through recordings, interviews and sound composition, Konstantinidou & Haringhuizen let us hear how, on the one hand, these gardens are oases of calm within the busy city but on the other hand are themselves contested acoustic territories.

The quiet commonality made possible by the absence of traffic noise suddenly makes it possible to hear the neighbours, or even to get annoyed by the blackbird in the tree. They've presented some of their research as an audio walk (on World Listening day this summer) and they're working on a multi-channel composition.



The space that these artists engage with is public space in an expanded sense - physical urban space, the space of debate, local radio, on-line media and the social space of neighbourly contact.

Sound becomes a research tool, a way of addressing everyday life in Oud West. Their engagement with inhabitants and stakeholders brings disparate groups of people together and encourages listening - to the acoustic territories of the city and to each other. Giving people tools and language to talk about both sound and social issues.

In his recent article "Performing the Common City" ⁹ Pascal Gielen describes how in the "creative city", artists are used as solvers for social problems caused by neoliberalism. Artists, he suggests, have to "grow up" - they can't hide in their institutional ghetto or simply react like situationist adolescents but need to lay the ground for themselves - collectively creating fora which form a base for the commons - the common city. The artist's quest needs to be artistic and ecological and economic and political and social.

But the most powerful experiences in public space I've had recently have not been artistic. Demonstrations, particularly those of the Youth for Climate movement suddenly filled the city with previously unheard voices, voices of young people who some say "should not be politicised" are claiming their own acoustic, political territory. I think I should throw my headphones away and join them.

Justin Bennett 2019.

Notes

1 www.overtone.org

2 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260037729_Bioacoustics_Habitat_Ambience_Ecological_Balance

3 Slabbekorn & Peet 2003 <https://www.nature.com/articles/424267a>

4 <https://justinbennett.bandcamp.com/album/bxl-flt>

5 quoted from a longer text on the sirens included in the Q-02 publication "The Middle Matter: sound as interstice" <http://www.q-02.be/en/>

6 Performing the Common City Pascal Gielen 2015 in Interrupting the City. Artistic Constitutions of the Public Sphere. Bax, Gielen, Ieven. Valiz

7 <http://www.davidetidoni.name/>

8 <https://sonicwest.soundtrackcity.nl/>

9 Gielen 2015