

Soundscape in the Arts

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Sound envelops us, it invades our personal space; it *becomes* our personal space. Nearly everything that happens results in or has a sound component, and soundscapes are normally overflowing with all types of information about what is taking place around the listener, be it salient or less important.

This invasive character of sound makes the crafting of soundscapes into a powerful means of artistic expression, and in recent years, there has been a marked upswing in the use of recorded sound in the arts, most notably among artists whose activity is seen in galleries and new performance arenas. One can easily ascertain that electroacoustic techniques, once accessible to, and used by, relatively few artists, have become useful for a broader range of artist groups. Advanced equipment has made sound recording of professional quality available at a low cost, and new recording tools have facilitated these practices in all sonic arts. It is difficult to see how the current wave of interest in soundscape work could be sustained without this equipment.

The availability of tools, however, cannot fully explain the current surge of interest.

The ease of use is certainly another factor, as well as supporting technologies such as cheap portable computers and high quality and affordable sound processing and playback equipment. Interconnection of all these tools is simple and has supported the strong shift towards the digital domain that is found in the creation and distribution of nearly all arts.

This shift in itself has provided cross-disciplinary opportunities, and the results are showing. Material and data can be migrated easily between domains, and the possibilities for interconnection facilitate experimentation and new development in all genres. In parallel with this technologically supported optimism, new social issues come to the fore, problematizing the impact technology has on a small and large scale.

Another contributor to the expansion of soundscape interest is the general concern about environmental issues, and specifically the direct and dramatic changes in human soundscapes that

follow from, for example, urban development, cell phone ring tones in nearly all social contexts, arbitrarily designed digital sounds in droves of products, and so on. There is significantly more sound and higher signal density in modern human life than there was only a generation ago. Here, we can perhaps also find part of the explanation for why the firewall of personal mp3-players has become so common as a tool for controlling one's own sonic environment by blocking out the less attractive general soundscape.

But the arguably most important contribution to this surge in interest comes from within art itself, from the artists' desire to work with new material that has not been fully explored. And when opportunities arise, artists are quick to exploit them.

Intentions and references

Art stems from intention, in other words that someone claims something to be art, that listeners want to experience something as art, or simply that participation in a meaning-making process constitutes art in itself. Listeners can be said to stage their auditory experiences for aesthetic consideration, giving attention to auditory events and streams through deliberate listening, rather than through the normal conscious or unconscious registering of events that hearing provides. When soundscapes are given this type of attention, they become results of human interpretation on one or several levels – they are in a sense *constructed*. Music and art seem technically and aesthetically to be in a perpetual state of expansion, and artistic concerns and development of new arenas for presentation follow each other closely; the constructions are made from a growing number of materials.

Naturally, soundscapes are aesthetical in the broad, original meaning of the term *aesthesis* – graspable through the senses – but the perception of soundscapes as art reflects an expansion of what is to be considered relevant as artistic material, similar to the inclusion of recorded sound in its time, or the even earlier inclusion of noise as art, which was strongly proposed by the Futurists at the time. Considering soundscapes as artistic material should be thought of as placing attention on a more comprehensive, even holistic, way of listening to the sounding environment, as a way of emphasizing the importance of auditory information. Any auditory information is recast as artistic material, and functions for the listener much in the same way as sounds from tested and tried musical instruments.

Soundscape perspectives have long since been established in genres such as film and music, and more recently in sonic work anchored in the visual arts. Within the sonic end of the visual arts-based spectrum of expression, there is a swing towards social perspectives, where sounds do not exist only as pure formal language, as has been the principal tendency in art music, but give meaning in contexts and through references that go well beyond the traditional arenas for aesthetic enjoyment. Symbolic values are emphasized. Soundscape expressions in the visual arts share this dependency on referentiality with the more established sound art genre, where the topics are often more focused on specific events, acoustic phenomena, use of space, or other themes with clear delimitation.

Authenticity – touched or untouched?

What is common for many soundscape presentations is the impression they give of a high degree of authenticity, in other words that a soundscape is accurately represented. The listener will ideally get a sense of *being there*, a sensation of *presence*, an experience of what it sounds like at the site where the recordings have been made. This sensation of immersion is arguably the most important aspect of successful soundscape works, and the combination of recorded representation and intentional construction in soundscape works differs from what we typically find in both absolute- and program music, where the music's value either rests in itself, or comes from the successful treatment of a chosen topic. The importance of presence differs also from what we normally associate with sound art, where holistic renderings of complete auditory situations typically yield to representation of more specific artistic ideas through selected sounds.

A good example of a work that provides this sensation of presence is *Mårådalen Walk*¹ by composer Kjell Samkopf, discussed elsewhere in this book. From Samkopf's recording of steps, the listener can get a very good sense of what a particular walk was like – one can hear the sound of clothing, the degree of wetness on the ground, the boots, the pace and effort in the steps, and so on. Any recognition in the listener is based on previous experiences, in this case most likely with similar terrain or movement. Importantly, because the composer has added his own actions audibly into the work one can also hear the composer's presence in the experience. It becomes shared between the listener and the composer.

As in most works that base themselves in recordings, the issue of representation in soundscape works goes hand in hand with the selection of material. At the most basic level, the selection always happens through the choice of microphone type and placement, but more important is the decisions on whether to present the soundscape as it is, or as an idealized version, free from disturbing elements such, as for example, airplane engine noise. In a deeper sense, this relates to the issue of finding sound objects for aesthetic consideration on their own terms, in the Cagean sense, or whether the abstraction of them into aesthetical objects depends on their isolation. In their texts in this book, Samkopf and Vinjar argue for the benefits of accepting sonic environments as they are, and the recordings they describe underpin this perspective – the component of human interference is part of the experience; one can in a sense hear the artist's ear. This approach works well in recordings of sounds with a certain magnitude and amplitude. Very small-scale sounds, where the microphone and studio techniques are used for amplification, will become unclear with this approach; they will be more difficult to recognize and identify. It is reasonable to state that the inclusive approach is fully possible only when recognition and source-bonding is not jeopardized.

Winderen expresses skepticism to the notion of authenticity, and focuses her work on deliberate constructions that are based on her experiences with the soundscapes she records. Her aim is to represent her *experiences* as closely as possible. She explains in her interview that she processes her sounds very sparingly, and her insistence on the personal discovery more than borders on the approaches known from traditional electroacoustic composition, where the composer extracts from a material the aspects that will serve the compositional idea.

In his essay, Vinjar problematizes issues of selection and morals, and presents a number of philosophical points on the nature of art and on whether it is possible to represent something natural without any moral implications. Vinjar's points imply a critique of the approach of field recording works that aim to stimulate environmental awareness, and in this sense include a moral dimension that delimits the artistic experience through its character of a user guide.

Unfamiliar, hidden, exotic

In field recording works, the more common approach is to have the human physical presence be inaudible, so that the composer's interaction with the soundscape only happens in the studio processes.

Good examples of this approach can be found in Monacchi's and Winderen's works, where they, through careful editing, focus the listeners' attention on a huge number of details in the soundscapes they expose. Winderen is fascinated with underwater soundscapes, and pairs this fascination with environmental concerns. This focus on environmental issues is shared with Monacchi, who writes about his involvement with soundscapes in tropical rainforests at several locations on the planet with an expressed eco-political anchoring. Their recordings are often from remote biotopes and appear exotic, since few listeners happen upon these soundscapes during normal days. In addition to superb recordings, Monacchi adds elements from traditional electroacoustic composition to his works, by carefully adding synthetic sounds, reverb and spatialization. In this manner, he augments existing soundscapes in order to better present them as objects for consideration to the listener. He supports his works with highly developed recording techniques, and in his text for this book he has included detailed descriptions of several aspects of that craft, which lie at the bottom of every operationalization of artistic ideas that involves recording. He writes about techniques for the recording of spaces: selective techniques for filtering off unwanted material, inclusive techniques for capturing broader contexts, and conservative techniques for truthful reproductions of total environments. The recording techniques also have bearing on the presentation methods, and these are also described.

Composers Barrett and López make deliberate and large changes in the material they employ and focus on sonic detail as well as comprehensive re-structuring of events along the timeline. They use data from their recordings in very structured manners, Barrett with an expressed attention to recognition and source-bonding, López in direct opposition to it. They both work with deliberately abstracted material, drawing on the heritage from musique concrete; Barrett often according to principles extracted from scientific approaches to nature, López with a powerful immersion in surrounding sound. Spatialization is of crucial importance in the works of both, and where Barrett fields a perspective where the composer, through the scientific approach to spatial representation through ambisonics, relies less on artistically motivated mimesis of space and spatial movement than on the accurate rendering of it, López characterizes his approach as a desire for an abstracted, personal, complete

immersion, always with a large component of live performance. Barrett's text in this book also takes a look at Pierre Schaeffer's relevance for soundscape composition through a discussion of the Schaefferian paradox, and, briefly, of his listening modes. By the changes and combinations of material, Barrett and López create unfamiliar soundscapes from familiar fabrics, and draw on the abstracted extracts of concrete material.

Creating place, creating context

Human hearing is excellent at recognizing sounds, where they physically come from, and how their sources move. This process is always at work, around the clock, and when something out of the ordinary takes place, day or night, we pay attention.

Western culture, however, is clearly visually driven, and we navigate our environment mainly from what we see of it. Context and atmosphere, on the other hand, to use a term from Gernot Böhme,² is much defined by sound, which informs us about aspects of our surroundings that we can't see. Sound envelops us and defines our space.

Bill Fontana plays with both sound's invasive character and our recognition in his re-sounding works, where he migrates sound from one environment into another. A good example is *Entfernte Züge*, where sound from Germany's largest rail station in Cologne was played back in the ruins of Anhalter Bahnhof in Berlin, Europe's largest rail hub before WWII. He recreated the sound environment in a ruin, and precisely the fact that it was this ruin alters the significance of the sound that was piped in. An insightful analysis of Fontana's work is written for this book by Camille Norment, who reads Fontana's works as science fiction, which as a genre often departs from the current situation in its descriptions of a possible future. The introduction to her article brings to mind the famous quote from Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*,³ where he envisions a brighter future society than that of his contemporary England. This future became a developing reality in the 1970s.

Fontana normally uses well-known, everyday sounds, and most often listens from a perspective that we normally use, although his work *Harmonic Bridge* is an example of the opposite. Here, structural vibrations were amplified and displayed at the nearby Tate Modern Museum, and the task for the listener was more in discovering the music than in recognizing its deliberate source or construction. By moving sound from its original location to a new location,

Fontana makes us look and listen differently, and by combining associations from both environments, a new sense of place is created in the listener. Fontana carefully leaves as much as possible up to the listener, not forcing any particular agendas. In a sense, this is a refusal of the idea that a work can be complete and finished, and that it can have a definable identity.

Sculptor Kristof Georgen approaches the site-defining characteristics of sound in a different way. He records sounds and includes them in installations, and his focus is often on small, everyday sounds that normally go unnoticed. His approach increases awareness of the everyday, and in his re-soundings listeners are helped in their rediscovery of their everyday by the gallery- or exhibition contexts where the works are staged; the context of a dedicated art space culturally qualifies the content as art and as material for reflection. His text in this book describes his careful construction and selection of sounding material, a few of his recent works, and how he works with the gallery context in order to help align the visitors for an experience of intimacy and self-reflection.

The art genre that most explicitly constructs entire soundscapes through the combination of sounds bit by bit, is film. In film, there is a huge emphasis on sound's ability to create place and perspective, oscillating between realism and an emphasis of the artistic undercurrents of the images. A rather extreme example of this type of soundscape construction is described in Gisle Tveito's interview with Owe Svensson. Owe Svensson designed and recorded all the material for Andrei Tarkovsky's film *The Sacrifice*, a film that was released to the public in 1986. In the interview, Tveito and Svensson discuss the work process and design issues in making this particular soundscape. All the sound in the film was re-recorded, after-synced, mixed and post-produced after the images were taken, and Svensson explains the different sensitivities needed to make the sound fit the images, and where he deliberately constructed sounds to draw the attention away from the visual content. He further describes his extremely detailed approach in re-creating sounds that would fit the images.

The personal discovery

While most music builds on familiar sounds, instruments, tones and timbral development, much of the modern development of sonic art makes use of unusual sounds, new methods for the control of sound,

and the sounds' references to the underlying dynamics of events and contexts. Hearing and merely registering events is replaced by a deliberate effort in finding the music in them. This type of holistic listening draws on the listeners' awareness of their own response, of the material that is presented, and of the presentation context, in addition to the more conventional parameters that music builds on. The listener's relationship to these situations becomes important – without the listener's active participation, these works collapse into noise, where identification is impossible or uninteresting.

In his essay, Hellstenius questions whether we listen differently when listening to music than when listening to soundscapes, and also whether we use the same cognitive concepts. He further asks what degree of intentionality is needed in composer and audience when creating and listening to soundscape compositions.

Several of the authors in this book focus more on the intentionality of the listener than on the composer's intention, and it seems logical to see soundscape works as a direction in the development of sonic art that questions its own core identity – object or process, credible construct or individualized perception. To some degree, the same can be said about electroacoustic music's insistence that any sound can be part of a composition, and about the Cagean position that any sound can be musical.

We find related thoughts expressed in several texts throughout this book. Samkopf, for example, has recorded people listening, and by making the listening action explicit, he has inserted an extra layer of significance; he has inserted a human presence in his work. In his text he describes how his composition methods for the most part are based on interaction with the sounding objects, placed in, and balanced with, a context. Samkopf and his long-time collaborator Floris van Manen explain that listening takes time, that experience takes time; that time is necessary for things to unfold, and for the memory and reflections to catch up with the pure sensory experience of sound. The same attention to patience is also clearly seen in the interview with Bill Fontana, and he goes even further in his attention to the context, where his resoundings force contrast and reflection. The expanded listening that all authors propose takes into account referential and non-referential relationships, as well as the complex metaphorical relationships that in various guises permeate all sonic arts.

The political overtones that are often assigned to soundscape art seem unrelated to the genre as such, despite the attitudes expressed

by several artists. However, the type of awareness to the sonic environment as a tool for expanded listening seems common for artists that can be related to soundscape art, and expanded listening means that new material is staged for aesthetic consideration. The inclusion of new material is a familiar process in several art domains: music, film, visual and spatial arts. And the inclusion of recorded sounds in a holistic perspective points towards the deep links between sound and action in the real world. Soundscape art does not just exist in the world, it is rather that the world becomes art if the listeners let it – and that requires consideration and respect, not the least for the listeners' own ability to grasp and make use of the opportunities that surround us every moment of the day.

1. Samkopf, K. (1994). *Mårådalen Walk* Oslo, Hemera HCD 2097.
2. Böhme, G. (2000). Acoustic Atmospheres. In *Soundscape – The Journal of Acoustic Ecology*, Vol. 1, no. 1. p. 14 – 18. Vancouver, World Forum for Acoustic Ecology.
3. Bacon, F. (1626). *The New Atlantis*. P.F. Collier & Son, New York.
We have also sound houses, where we practice and demonstrate all sounds and their generation. We have harmonies which you have not, of quarter sounds and lesser slides of sounds. Divers instruments of music likewise to you unknown, some sweeter than any you have; together with bells and rings that are dainty and sweet. We represent small sounds as great and deep; likewise divers trembling and warblings of sounds, which in their original are entire. We represent and imitate all articulate sounds and letters, and the voices of beasts and birds. We have certain helps which set to the ear to do further the hearing greatly. We have also divers strange and artificial echoes, reflecting the voice many times, and as if it were tossing it; and some that give back the voice louder than it came, some shriller and some deeper; yea, some rendering the voice, differing in the letters or articulate sound from that they receive. We have also means to convey sounds in tubes and pipes, in strange lines and distances...