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Art that Arranges You

An ambiental consideration of sound art works and their potential to support urban listening practices

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Abstract. *The paper considers the nexus of sound art theory and ambiance or atmosphere studies. It seeks to articulate how concepts of ambiance support the critical aesthetics of sound art, especially participatory works in urban space, as well as how this field may in turn be productive for addressing future ambiances. Focussing on the reception of specific sound art works in urban space that activate listening – Akio Suzuki's *Oto-date* (2014), O+A's *urban space – urban sound* (2013) and Katrinem's *SchuhzuGehör* (2015) – the paper will frame their aesthetics through notions of atmosphere (G. Böhme)/ambiance (JP Thibaud) with reference to their conditioning of particular sonic effects (F. Augoyard and H. Torgue), and framing of listening practices.*

Keywords: *sound art, listening practice, atmosphere*

Urban Sound Art Practices

Sound art works frequently use the city as their material, subject and site at the same time. A given urban atmosphere might be not only *integrated* into, but serve as the intended sound of a work, which is itself situated specifically in the city environment. This is the case with Akio Suzuki's *Oto-date* as well as O+A's resonance works such as *urban space – urban sound* (2013), and katrinem's *SchuhzuGehör*. They are characterised by how they are embedded in their respective urban site and how they guide a listener to interact with this space: i.e. how they arrange them.

After describing each work based on a first hand reception of them, the paper will illustrate their relation to concepts of ambiance and atmosphere as well as relating their reception to particular sonic effects. The paper will then briefly sketch how understanding the production and reception of these works may support further research into the experience of ambiance, as well as ways of shaping atmosphere through a framing of listening practices for urban space.

Akio Suzuki's Oto-Date (Echo Points)

Akio Suzuki's series of *Oto-date* works, 'echo points' have been realised in various cities since 1996. Suzuki investigates an urban area finding aurally interesting sites and marks the ground with an icon that resembles both footprints and elongated ears, meant to encourage a potential listener to stand there and listen, as well which

way to face. As a silent or signage piece this exemplifies a strain of sound art whose sonic content comes from reframing the acoustic character or atmosphere in situ. In theory, it can function simply through the visual prompt: seeing the circles that mark the echo points, causing an interruption in the everyday movement through an urban space.

A recent version in Bonn (2014), however, also included a map of the points, as well as descriptions for each one, allowing a participating listener to hunt for the points in order to hear, see, and read, for themselves.¹ While removing the aspect of 'stumbling upon' the work, it added a layer of phonography, i.e. sound writing, as well as an instruction aspect: a listener could stand at a point, read the description and compare their own sensation of sonic and visual qualities with the text offered by the artist. This can also be thought of as a social aspect of the piece; a dialogue between the artist as listener, and the listener currently performing the work. With map, points, and descriptions, the piece directly intervenes in one's navigation of the city; changing not only auditory attention but bodily behaviour, e.g. a stance at a specific spot. The piece is not only claiming the urban atmosphere as its own aesthetic, particularly aural, content, but in guiding an embodied listener, makes it evident that they are constitutive of the work.

O+A's urban space – urban sound

Pieces that do in fact play sound into urban space include resonance works of O+A (Sam Auinger and Bruce Odland). They have created numerous site-specific installations for cities using real-time transformations of atmosphere. For these they capture urban background noise (e.g. traffic) using microphones positioned inside large tubes which act as resonators, filtering the sound and 'tuning' it in a particular spectrum. In some pieces the tuned ambiance is sent as a live feed to a loudspeaker, hidden inside a cube installed nearby in a public space where passers-by might linger, attending to the tuned city sound emerging from the cube, as well as its live, unadulterated source.

These tuning tubes were also used in *urban space – urban sound (2013)*, a one-day installation and performance work, composed for a peculiar urban architecture: a subway tunnel, still under construction in Cologne.² The physical site included two underground station platforms and two parallel tunnels between them. Visitors entered and exited at one station, were guided through the first tunnel to the far station, where they could walk around, and then returned to the beginning through the second tunnel in a lengthy circuit.

The first station atrium, the respective tunnels and the far station area were all played using recordings that lent them distinct sonic characters. The first (and final) atrium used sounds from a water harp; the tunnels resounded with filtered street sound from above (using the tuning tube process, with the real-time ambient noise played into large scale concrete tunnels: a spatial architecture mirroring the tuning

1. Website of Bonn Hoeren Festival: http://www.bonnhoeren.de/_2014/festival-bonn-hoeren-2014/installationen/oto-date-bonn/ [05.05.2016]. The map is available here as a pdf.

2. <http://samauinger.de/timeline/urban-space-urban-sound/> [05.05.2016]

tubes); the far station used several different sounds and recordings including one of NY's Grand Central Station thus sonically embedding an active train station into the non-functional shell. The performance part took place in the second tunnel, using electronic instruments and real-time manipulations of recordings, as well as the live feed of tuned ambiance, to actively 'play' the space of the tunnel.

Again, the work was structured by the listener physically descending from street level and progressing through the various sonically-altered spaces along the route. Thus a listener might get the impression of inhabiting a succession of atmospheres, their aural character further contoured by the different architectural structures, e.g. from narrow steps into a spacious atrium, into a constricted cylinder, and so on. The piece occupies an urban architecture normally defined through its infrastructural use and claims it as a site of, and for, aesthetic experience.

Katrinem's SchuhzuGehör – Path of Awareness

Katrinem's series of *SchuhzuGehör* works feature a different aesthetic occupation of everyday space. In each version of the work katrinem creates a 'path of awareness' within an urban area which she performs in guided walks, activating the built environment with the sound of her footsteps. The series is part of a body of work, titled *Go Your Gait!*, exploring walking rhythms in cities. Katrinem investigates the area by walking and observing traffic and pedestrian patterns, using research to develop a unique route for each city. After a path is composed, the work takes three forms: performances of the work as a guided group walk; an audiovisual documentation of the walked path using binaural recording and a front view camera taking intermittent pictures; a map or pictographic notation of the path so it can be walked by individual listeners.³

Katrinem's routes weave through diverse sound spaces, traversing different urban forms and architectures. The path composed for Midtown Manhattan (2015) is characterised by its use of numerous public access walkways there, even threading through a subway station. Using both inside and outside public and semi public spaces emphasises their contrasting ambiances and how built space conditions thresholds between them. The difference was not only auditory but in contrasts of light, temperature, floor materials etc. Clear differences of social space were also evident, especially between streets and walkways. Some of these conditions are legible through the graphic score as well, which notates, for instance, whether a walkway is entered via a revolving door, or includes a piano.

Situated listening, ambiance and atmosphere

These pieces emphasise a situated listening, i.e. one integrating all senses, the agency to move around and through the work, as well as conceptual and social understanding, for example, in terms of behavioural conventions in public space. The works can be framed through concepts of ambiance and atmosphere in that they play with possible sensorial and conceptual experiences of city space by arranging a listener's way of engaging with it.

3. The work's description, audio-visual documentation, and graphic score can be found here : http://www.katrinem.de/schuhzugehoer-path-of-awareness_midtown-ny-2015/ [05.05.2016].

Here, ambiance can be understood 'as a space-time qualified from a sensory point of view' and involving 'a specific mood expressed in the material presence of things and embodied in the way of being of city dwellers. Thus ambiance is both subjective and objective: it involves the lived experience of people as well as the built environment of the place' (J.P. Thibaud 2011a). Similarly, the nature of *atmosphere* is described by Gernot Böhme as belonging both to subject and object – existing externally but also necessitating the experiencing subject. Moreover, this in-between aspect renders it a valuable concept for a new aesthetics by bridging production and reception aesthetics (Böhme 2001 40). The above pieces also exist in this in-between, functioning in an aesthetic realm between built environment, and a subject's sensation in it and comprehension of it. They collapse distinctions between composer, performer and audience: their listener is not a passive observer, but must perform – and thus constitute – the work through active exploration of the site.

In works such as *SchuhzuGehör* the sequence of auditory spaces can be understood as part of the temporal dramaturgy of the piece – which can only be experienced in navigating their transitions. This further relates to notions of ambiance as a dynamic process: one that is not static, but rather has a developing character accessible through movement (Thibaud 2011b 207). In addition, the tangible thresholds of *SchuhzuGehör* as well as *urban space – urban sound*, can be framed as means of understanding atmospheres which are 'best experienced when their characteristics stand out' i.e. 'through contrast, when one is in atmospheres which cut across one's own mood, or upon entering them, through the switch from one atmosphere to another' (Böhme 2007 49). Thus, thresholds play a critical role in shaping urban sound space and atmosphere; they can be utilised to help grasp the characteristic ambiance of the respective space. In *katrinem's* works, such thresholds were pronounced in entering and exiting public access walkways with perceptual and physical barriers delimiting one space from another.

Sonic effects

A helpful reference for describing receptive experiences of the above works is through sonic effects, such as that of resonance, or of *cut-out*, i.e. 'a sudden drop in intensity associated with an abrupt change in the spectral envelope of a sound or a modification of reverberation' and functioning in 'an important process of articulation between spaces and locations; it punctuates movement from one ambiance to another.' (Augoyard and Torgue 2006 29). These were recurrent along the path of *SchuhzuGehör* as it shifted between inside-outside. Atmospheric differences, including social conditions, were emphasised through juxtaposing public and semi-public space, the public access walkways being somewhere between a fully accessible and a private arena, with publicness defined not only spatially but temporally, through their specific closing times.

Sonic effects such as cut-outs, drone, or resonance were frequent aspects of *echo points* as well. For example, among the Bonn points, one situates you such that you are facing in the direction of a fountain in a small green space, but positioned just in front of a tree whose trunk obstructs much of the view and distinctly cutting off the fountain's white noise.

Meanwhile, *urban space – urban sound*, offered a good reminder of how atmospheres are conditioned not only through structural, physical, and acoustic characteristics but also social, personal significance: The sounds of Grand Central Station played into a future station’s architectural skeleton created an experience of *anamnesis*. This ‘effect of reminiscence in which a past situation or atmosphere is brought back to the listener’s consciousness...’ (Augoyard and Torgue, 2006 21) was evoked by the recorded ambiance of Grand Central, a place familiar to me, despite simultaneously standing in a distant, raw construction site. While many sonic effects can be found easily in cities, these works accentuate them through arranging the listener.

Listening practices for urban spaces

Besides affording ways of situating and accessing ambiance, these pieces mark city sites as places one could or *should* listen to, reframing everyday urban spaces as worthy of aesthetic attention. They motivate reflection on what sites and atmospheres should be promoted, altered, conserved or (re) created. They also play with mismatches between how places are designed to be used and experienced, and how they might be. Such participatory urban sound art works and practices may provide a shared experience on which to develop discussion of atmosphere concepts, affording materials for imagined ambiances, e.g. by piloting particular sonic conditions using recordings, or suggesting patterns of engagement by using scores.

The composition and reception of sound art works, both in the terms of artist actions that condition a listener’s experience as well as performative action by the listener, can be framed as combinations of processes, e.g. soundwalking, phonography and mapping. In the works mentioned, the use of soundwalking, i.e. walking and attending to sound and acoustic properties of surroundings, is clearly evident and correlates with approaches already implemented in ambiance studies as means investigating urban spaces (see, e.g. Paquette and McCartney 2012). Phonography is prevalent as well, in terms of the technical capturing of sound, e.g. through tuning tubes in *urban space – urban sound*, as well as the text-based descriptions of *Otodate* or the graphic notation of *SchuhzuGehör*. Additionally, the works involve cartographic strategies, seeking to map or chart a sonic experience within an urban geography.

When framed in terms of strategies of listening or *listening practices*, the formats of sound art works may give inspiration to other strategies for investigating urban sound space. These in turn may contribute to developing an ‘experience-based model of the urban environment’ (Thibaud 2011b 212) by shaping conditions for situations that urban listeners may engage in, and suggesting numerous ways of doing so, for example, using guided walking accompanied by graphic notation, forms of phonography or even the use of *translocated*, i.e. re-situated, sonic atmospheres.

Conclusion

Sound art works activate and arrange their listeners in various ways utilising combined strategies, as well as the urban situation itself, as a compositional means.

The concept of sonic effects can aid in parsing the aesthetic experience of the works, referencing the material phenomenon conditioned by a work while still acknowledging conceptual and social components. Study of the works themselves highlight thematic concerns pertinent both to their critical aesthetics and to ambiance studies, e.g. the agency of a perceiving subject; use of public vs. private space; ecological changes; the status of listening as an epistemological tool for accessing ambiance, etc. drawing clear connections between the disciplines. Furthermore, the influence may work in both directions: not only can the concept of ambiance or atmosphere be helpful for framing these artworks, but approaches and methods used in sonic arts practice, may support the investigation and design of urban atmospheres.

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