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Toward the Possibilities of Urban Sound Parks

Abstract. This paper, written in an interview format, collects the thoughts of three international curators of outdoor, public sound installation art parks. Questions were posed by Jordan Lacey to Paul Craenen (Klankenbos, Belgium), Raquel Castro (Lisboa Soa festival, Portugal), and Stephan Moore (Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts, New York State). The questions aim to decipher commonalities across the experiences of the three curators, which are summarised into seven key themes at the end of the document. The key themes can be read as a series of propositions for the possible creation of sound parks in urban spaces.

Jordan LACEY¹, Raquel CASTRO²,
Paul CRAENEN³, Stephan MOORE⁴

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Introduction

During 2016, I (Jordan Lacey) completed an international research journey investigating public sound art installations that had attained the status of permanency. My trip included audio-visual documentation and interviews with the creators of most of the works, which is discussed at length in the paper *Sonic Placemaking* (2017). During my trip, I visited two 'sound parks' containing multiple curated sound installations: the Caramoor Center for Music and the Art's *In the Garden for Sonic Delights*⁵ in New York State curated by Stephan Moore, and the Musica, Impulse Centre for Music's *Klankenbos*⁶ in North Belgium curated by Paul Craenen. More recently, I made contact with the curator of a third sound park, *Lisboa Soa*⁷, a yearly sound-art festival located in Lisbon, Portugal curated by Raquel Castro.

I sent eight questions to the curators asking them to reflect on the ambiances experienced within the sound parks they created, and the specific role of sound installations in the creation of these ambiances. The questions culminate in a consideration of how similar ambiances might be situated in cities, and the challenges of creating urban sound parks. The paper can be read in two ways: each curators' answers can be read sequentially, or the three answers from each curator can be read in relation to

1. RMIT University, School of Design, Australia, jordan.lacey@rmit.edu.au

2. CICANT, Universidade Lusófona, Lisboa, Portugal, fonorak@gmail.com

3. University of the Arts, Royal Conservatoire The Hague, The Netherlands, p.craenen@koncon.nl

4. Northwestern University, Department of Radio, Television and Film, United States, stephan@northwestern.edu

5. For further information, see:

www.caramoor.org/music/sonic-innovations/past-exhibitions/in-the-garden-of-sonic-delights/

6. For further information, see: www.klankenbos.be/en/projects?f%5B0%5D=field_interesses%3A258

7. For further information, see: www.lisboasoa.com

each question. I have edited the responses to meet the word count, however, I have tried to keep the text in each curator's original voice. The paper concludes with key themes that act as propositions for the possible creation of urban sound parks.

Can you provide details about the sound park you curated?

Paul Craenen: Klankenbos is a collection of 17 permanent open-air sound installations, next to some virtual and temporary sound art works, located at Neerpelt, Belgium, in a public, semi-natural domain. Klankenbos was founded in 2005 and is an initiative of Musica, Impulse Centre for Music, a Flemish organisation for music education and participation.

Raquel Castro: Lisboa Soa was founded in 2016 as an initiative that aims to enhance artistic creativity by connecting it to social and ecological contexts, as well as promoting direct interventions in public space. The festival is positioned at the interface of science and sound art. Each iteration of the festival shares similar environmental concerns, spatial understandings and artistic exploration.

Stephan Moore: Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts is a 90-acre estate in Westchester County, NY. In 2014, I curated an exhibition called "In the Garden of Sonic Delights", which included ten outdoor sound art installations exhibited at Caramoor, and another five pieces distributed throughout Westchester County. Annual programming continues to this day, under the moniker "Sonic Innovations"⁸.

How would you describe the ambiance that the sound park created?

P. Craenen: The Klankenbos ambiance was typical for a small-scale, semi-natural park with its diversity of trees, charming small river and public character. The sound art works were an integral part of that environment, adding a unique character to its identity. Since most of the art works were objects that don't make much sound unless you approached or entered them, the ambiance created was mainly visual and imaginative, with strange objects in the landscape raising visitor curiosity.

R. Castro: We access special park locations for the festival, with their own specific ambiance. Sites include: an empty greenhouse built with forged iron, with an audible central 'sweet spot' that allows non-amplified performances, and a dirt floor that produces a mysterious scent; a water reservoir with a cold, dark ambiance; and a 'water cathedral' that is extremely reverberant. All the proposals had to consider the existing ambiances.

S. Moore: I would say that each piece generated a different ambiance, in a manner that was specific to the materials used, the environment chosen, and the intention of the work. Further, each work's ambiance was not completely consistent, but relied upon the changing environmental factors. Some of the pieces had a strong physical/sculptural presence that lent a visual focus to the sonic experience, while others were completely ephemeral with no visible speakers or apparatus of any kind.

When commissioning artists, what sorts of experiences were you hoping to generate?

P. Craenen: I expected artists to be in dialogue with their surroundings, with an awareness of the possibilities and limitations of a specific location. The fact that Musica did

8. See: <https://www.caramoor.org/music/sonic-innovations/>

not own the domain/park, and that the domain/park was also used for other purposes, was always something to take into consideration. A (sonically) too invasive work of art was never an option.

R. Castro: I have an environmental theme every year, that is informed by the location. Examples include: geophonic sounds, biodiversity, water, plant/animal migration. Sound installations are core to the festival, because our intention is to create a sonic experience that visitors can discover when walking and exploring the sites on foot.

S. Moore: I select artists who are interested in site-specific response, are capable of meeting the various challenges posed by outdoor sound works and have an exploratory approach to their art. My role as curator is to clear any obstacles between them and the realization of their vision.

Is the sound park you curated in a rural area? Why?

P. Craenen: Klankenbos is located on the domain where Musica has its offices, so there is a pragmatic reason. There is also the tranquillity that makes room for more subtle sounds or works of art (although there always was a background of traffic noise). It is also a relatively safe environment - I can't imagine the same collection being maintained under the same conditions in a large city.

R. Castro: Lisboa Soa happens in an urban context. Nevertheless, most of our locations are in parks. You cannot fully understand a sound installation in a short amount of time, the same way you can with a visual work. If you want the audience to have enough time to experience a sound art piece, then it should organically integrate into a surrounding space that is pleasant for the audience to be in.

S. Moore: An urban space is, from the outset, more restricted. Rural space is frequently a blanker canvas; it is less full of noise, light, motion, and generally distracting activities that an artwork would need to compete with. Also, in rural spaces, there are more large sites with a single owner. Urban sites usually come loaded with constituents making it invariably more complicated than sites with a single constituent.

Can you discuss issues around maintenance and vandalism?

P. Craenen: Vandalism happened, though rarely. But when it happened, it had serious consequences, not just financial. You can't just 'repair' a work of art, it often needs the cooperation and expertise of the artist, which was sometimes problematic. A major problem is that insurance companies refuse to insure vulnerable art works in public spaces, or at a high cost.

R. Castro: Most of the places we used are closed during the night so the issue of maintenance is not a huge problem for us. We had other constraints such as having to disconnect an automatic irrigation system for the duration of the festival. The only time we used a non-secure location we had to arrange a budget to support 24-hour security, which was costly.

S. Moore: As Caramoor is only open during certain hours, and has only two entrances guarded by locked gates, we have managed to avoid any significant vandalism. Regarding maintenance, when a piece is new, we must go through a period of learning during which the piece is periodically retuned, calibrated, and/or replaced.

How do visitors respond to the ambiances of the sound park?

P. Craenen: We have to make a distinction between people who came for the collection or local people who were there for other purposes. People who visited the collection, often with children or their families, made an effort to get to the place bringing curiosity and expectation. Others were there for sports or other (sometimes noisy) activities. I do think the collection contributed to the general atmosphere and identity of the place.

R. Castro: I think we generate a collective mood, with visitors often mentioning a sonic oasis within the city. Our intention is to create an awareness of sound as a resource to better understand ourselves and the environment we live in. I remember an old lady was listening to the plants and branches amplified by an artist (Juan Sorrentino) by putting her ear close to them, each time the artist moved to another place. I think this idea of a sonic playground is very effective in creating an awareness of ambiances.

S. Moore: In art galleries, I observe visitors slowly walking down a row of paintings, never quite pausing or stopping. A sound-based artwork either slows us down to its speed, or forces us to reject it if we don't have the attention to listen. The artists who have created or adapted work for Caramoor have made use of this quality of sound art. I witnessed people slowing down, processing their perceptions, and later energized and eager to speak about their experiences.

Can you speculate about what it would mean to curate a sound park in an urban space?

P. Craenen: If considered in relation to an acoustic awareness in urban design, we could think of rather implicit elements of sonic design that contribute to an 'ambiance' that isn't necessarily noticed consciously. I would rather think of spread-out 'listening spots' which offer interesting listening angles to urban life and make people aware of the surrounding sounds. Unless you would like to create a completely autonomous area, a dialogue and interaction with the immediate environment is a requirement. A challenge would be to defend a place devoted to sound (art) in the city's cultural fabric.

R. Castro: Lisboa Soa's location in a city poses ongoing challenges that require us to silence the surrounding soundscape. For instance, once, I wasn't advised there would be an outdoor festival 100 meters away from our site. Such uncontrolled and undesirable loud events can compete with the magical atmosphere we try to create. We have to think about the way we communicate artworks in relation to the competing sounds of the city. I have to say meeting this challenge is one of my biggest satisfactions as a curator.

S. Moore: In my mind, there is no reason that this could not be done successfully. It would be very difficult to do with the level of resources I have access to at Caramoor, given the budgetary and logistical burden of obtaining permissions and permits, vandal-proofing artworks, and dealing with bureaucracies. A larger team with more dedicated resources would no doubt be required.

Thinking through your experiences as a sound park curator, how might an ambiance approach change the way we think about designing our cities?

P. Craenen: Firstly, I believe any approach of sonic ambiance in urban design will need to take into account changing expectations of sound interactions on a personal, media-enhanced level. A more hybrid answer to these developments and expectations would be to integrate environmental sound experience with virtual sound events or enhancements. Secondly, I have learned by observing people of all ages and different backgrounds in Klankenbos that the sonic atmosphere of an environment hardly ever works in a purely auditory way. It is in connecting sound with other dimensions including the visual, architectural, conceptual and imaginary that sound design can become very powerful, and I think this can also be the case at the level of city design. This awareness of complex dependence and multilayered interaction is something that the curator can bring to the table.

R. Castro: Sound permeates the experience we have in a city. It attributes a tone and brings an emotional value to the place. Sound art practices are valuable tools for the development of this consciousness, by encouraging auditory awareness and provoking the audience about their own attitude as listeners. I believe the listening education experiences offered by festivals like Lisboa Soa can help making people more aware of the ambiance they experience around them. This reveals how cities could sound, and provides moments for reflecting about the ways in which we can listen. This shift may contribute to the development of stronger concepts and conversations about the possibilities of future city spaces.

S. Moore: Our cities currently suffer from a clash of competing imperatives, as driven by our industrial-consumer societies. Approaches to sound design are typically limited to achieving silence. One reason for this lack of imagination is that there is no approach that unifies the varying aesthetics of a city's competing imperatives. If a consideration of ambiance (and its design) were added to the discussion, this presents the possibility of a co-ordinated approach. What would this look like? I hope it would be varied and nuanced; that the identity of selected sites within cities - their history, citizens and constituents, material and spiritual entanglements - would find expression through the existing workings of the city, while at the same time, making these functional aspects of the city indistinguishable from "art".

Key themes

After reading through the responses above I have identified the following seven key themes, which I have connected to relevant theory. It should be noted that the curators raised many more interesting points than could be included. The following themes are surmised from the edited text only. These shouldn't be considered conclusive; but rather, as propositions that contribute to thinking about how sound parks might be integrated into urban spaces.

1. **Site-specific** approaches are crucial if works are to successfully integrate with the complex and competing imperatives of urban environments.
2. An awareness of the **temporality** of sound art is crucial. Embedding sound works in spaces where people want to linger, may encourage listening appreciation. This is consistent with Jean-Paul Thibaud's (2012) position of sonic experience being a uniquely temporal expression of ambiances.
3. Ambiance is **multisensorial**. Sound should be created in relation to other perceptual criteria, including the possibilities afforded by virtual environments.

Sarah Pink (2011) has written extensively on the role of multisensoriality when considering relationships between the senses and the environment.

4. Urban sound parks could provide sonic **oases** allowing visitors to access positive listening experiences. See Lacey et al. (2019) for an example of a sound design intervention creating a sonic oasis along a motorway environment.
5. The **curator acts as mediator** by assisting the artist to respond effectively to the challenges of public space. The urban designer should embody the role of curator, when considering the introduction of sounds into cities. See Anderson (2016) for a similar discussion.
6. Every site already has a **pre-existing ambiance**. Artworks should simultaneously integrate with, and transform, existing conditions. This is consistent with Thibaud's (2012) position that ambiance is particular to its situation, and Sumartojo and Pink's (2018) claim that an atmosphere cannot be staged given an atmosphere always already exists.
7. Provisions for **security and maintenance** are costly, and would need to be integrated into the design and financial considerations of the establishment of an urban sound park.

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