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Sound Stakes of the Atmosphere

Session 14 – Introduction

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For many years, sound has been a vector of analysis and prospective on the environment around us. Because of its dual capacity to summon different dimensions of the sensitive through both qualitative and quantitative perspectives, it allows this singular hybridization of disciplines and approaches. Sound can be used as a medium of analysis and “design” at all scales. It then provides a perspective on issues of various kinds, from the most obvious to the most confidential, and a specific granularity that contributes to its vast field of application.

Sound as a Fundamental Component

Considering sound as a fundamental dimension of the perception issues associated to ambiances and atmospheres also means thinking of it as a vector for questioning and making spaces and lifestyles of today and tomorrow. As a component and fundamental contribution to ambiances and atmospheres, we can affirm that sound is a main “vector” of these due to its invasive and almost unconscious dimension that inhabits the body and society in the everyday ambiances.

By unifying space³ and structuring time, it is both a sensitive and social dimension of everyday relationships and social life whether urban or domestic, and from architectural scale to territorial scale. Sound has spread both in space and time in the inhabited world, and the technologies of production / reproduction have made it a special way of raising awareness as well as a particular “marker”⁴ for investigating this theme. It is well admitted now that sounds contribute to forming our sense of space and places, but it is also essential to consider the temporal dimension that sound can mobilize in its very essence, since it exists only through time and at all scales of temporality. Looking at the publishing activity around sound in a broad variety of topics in the last few years, it seems necessary to constantly update the evolutions and perspectives in a field that has developed relatively well since the time when hearing was known as the great “forgotten” of our ordinary sensitive universe and of the built and inhabited places.

1. AAU Laboratory, CRESSON Team.

2. AAU Laboratory, CRESSON Team.

3. Erwin Strauss attributes this space homogenizing capacity to sound.

4. It should be remembered that Jean François Augoyard was one of the very first sociologists to invest this dimension of inhabiting it from a qualitative point of view.

This evolution has notably allowed sound to take its place as a “material” ; whether around the issues of manufacturing and creation or around the issues of discussion and mediation. Nevertheless, its place is still very minor and contemporary issues that pay attention to our environment in its broadest meaning are still struggling to mobilize it as a real vector of transformation and/or information.

Sound as an Interrogation Tool

By focusing on this leverage or instrumental quality of sound and listening, we are thus questioning the sensitive phenomenon for its very nature : the phonic qualities and textures of places, objects and time. We also investigate modalities of appearance and modes of production of those sounds asking how they are capable of modifying and generating regarding our relations with objects, things and situations, as well as their conception in the spaces and time of our everyday lives and habits. In this way, it is also as a vector of “unframing” in comparison or in relation to the dominant senses -such as sight- and major preoccupations - like today’s environmental issues - that the hearing can provide constructive and reframed elements. Taking sound as the a priori starting point for dealing with inhabited ambiances and atmospheres interferes with other issues and other sensitive dimensions. This does not therefore mean closing in on itself. Instead, it leads us to seize the questioning and creative power that sound can contain as a specific sensitive phenomenon, listening as an attitude of attention and phonic production as a particular mode of presence. Indeed, it is also this active, dynamic dimension that we must approach beyond the purely receptive aspects that are often assigned to the auditory dimension.

It is in this perspective that we wish to continue and privilege this particular way of entering the world of ambiances. It is then a tool for their knowledge and their transformability at all steps of realization or comprehension.

Pluridisciplinarity of Approaches, Transmission and Experiences, Alternatives and Resistance

Scientific and technical approaches, artistic, urban and architectural practices, philosophical thought and social sciences are all summoned here to construct these insights as well as to specify what sound and listening tell us but also what they make us do. Thus the question of what can be transmitted or shared through listening and auditory exploration - such as the creation of tools, forms of experimentation and study protocols - takes on meaning within a pedagogy of environments and ambiances guided by listening. This sharing and exchange could increase curiosity and attention towards a weakened environment and allow to renew the interest towards elements considered irrelevant or tiny, when they could play a significant role in our relationship with the world.

The question is all the more emerging in a time when various “crises” are increasingly urgent and serious in the contemporary world and affect its ambiances. The covid pandemic experienced this year has shown many consequences, particularly in terms of the sound experience during containment. The experience of a participative process through simultaneous sound recordings “4’33” from our windows and balconies” that we launched⁵ through the ambiance network in March and April 2020 has allowed us to gather original investigation material on this exceptional moment. The coordination of the action in different parts of the world is contributing to an international observatory while creating a database on living conditions.

5. The text of this call for recordings of 4’33” can be found at <https://lambiophil.hypotheses.org>.

Listening and phonic practices can make sound a leverage in bringing or inducing other perspectives of analysis, allowing us to question different situations in new ways, but also inviting us to propose new possibilities and new procedures or methods of research and creation. This project needs to be kept in motion and invites renewals and innovations of various kinds while participating in a certain resistance to the forces of a strictly utilitarian and resource-consuming thinking (space being one of them) as well as human relations.

How Does Our World Sound and How to Make Our World Sounds ?

With the advent of analog and then digital recording, the ability to collect and preserve sounds has indeed allowed the sedimentation of elements that make up an auditory memory. The appearance of numerous sound maps or collection sites attests to this. The sound dimension has become a vector of reading of the territory and built spaces or a simple testimony. For many of us, listening to a place and recording certain facets of it becomes a way of understanding them and revealing some sensitive, territorial and social specificities.

In a perspective of systematization, using research recordings, we created in 2008 the website *Cartophonies.fr*. It has become a compilation of approximately 1000 recordings made during research on cities by our team CRESSON at the Grenoble School of Architecture and now incorporating contributions from different people around the world. The website is not intended to be a sound map that simply exhibits raw recordings. Instead, the files are provided with metadata (documents, visuals, photographs, testimonials) detailing the recording at hand. The recordings are meant to be “noteworthy,” telling us something about the ways cities change. The site also includes precise information about the context in which the sounds were recorded, their built environments and the sound effects that characterise each fragment.

These aspects could be of interest to residents who are curious about their city and their world, but also to specialists who consider sound important in building the environments of the future. These fragmentary recordings are often short. They speak to ordinary history transcribed through tangible material means, fragments of experiences that disappear over time, traces of which are preserved here to highlight some of the circumstances in which they were created.

The future of sounds

This session seeks to present and discuss this particular thread by taking stock of advances and new perspectives:

- What does sound tell us about current and future developments in the world ?
- What perspectives emerge when listening is taken as a privileged and relevant posture for analysis as well as for the design of inhabited environments ?

In other words : what does sound make us do ? While “sound design” seems to be developing and becoming more professional, touching on everyday objects such as trade, commerce and communication, should we believe that this form of development is fully satisfactory ? Can we not hope for other perspectives opening up a finer æsthetic and involving both uses and a less alienated imagination ?

This question concerns all the dimensions of ambiances, and the world of sound does not escape it, it is on the contrary in the front line by its importance in the background of everyday life and by its driving power.

The purpose is, in particular, to question how different “listening” or “hearings” could

invite us to understand, to design and to produce atmospheres ; especially when they intersect with societal and environmental matters and are confronted with other sensitive modalities.

Contributions were expected to be about prospective postures, specific or various studies as well as fundamental and/or methodological questions. The field of action thus extends from experimentation to situation analysis, through the proposal of tools, methodologies or case studies, or artistic practices, all of which in their own way make us more aware of the way our world sounds and how to make it sound as a window on current sound practices and prospectives.

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