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► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Paul Thibaud. Listening to atmospheres. Guerra, Silvia; Illouz, Audrey; Fiévet Laurent. The light hours. Haroon Mirza? Villa Savoye, Lab'Bel; Suresnes, pp.27-34, 2016, 978-2-9537180-4-1. hal-03244547

HAL Id: hal-03244547

<https://hal.science/hal-03244547>

Submitted on 1 Jun 2021

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Listening to atmospheres

Jean-Paul Thibaud

Atmospheric

More and more, the world of art is becoming an attentive listener, as if a terra incognita remained to be explored, another state of the world to be discovered, and an unheard-of experience to be tried. A salutary revelation in which places resonate, and we are inhabited by sounds. This sensitivity to the auditory world applies both to recognized architectural works, as well as to ordinary urban environments, to a building that is considered remarkable, as it is to a square that is regarded as nondescript. In any case, it is a question of paying attention to our ways of living, of auscultating our forms of life, of listening to atmospheres. By listening, we are immersed in a moment of life, a point of existence, a climatic situation, an ambient landscape. We belong to the atmosphere of a place by experiencing its unique tonalities and imperceptible modulations. Thus, a whole world of nuances opens up to us, inviting discovery, with its intensities, variations and dynamics. Sound anchors us in the here and now of the experience, just as it transports us to a world of feelings and memories. In this regard, three principal features characterize ambient sound: resonance, performance, and consistency. *Resonance* reinforces or emphasizes the faculty of vibrating in unison with the ambience. This means getting oneself in tune with the surrounding world, entering into a kind of sympathy or harmony with it, putting ourselves on the same wavelength. As Jean-Luc Nancy¹ so beautifully says: ‘Strike from the outside, clamour from within, this sound body, body of sound, begins simultaneously to listen to a “self” and a “world” which are both in resonance.’ *Performance* refers to the generative and dynamic component of the sound world. Sound is thus presented as the effect of an activity and the deployment of a movement, as the result of doing and time in the process of configuring itself. When we listen to a place, we inevitably feel the marks of time, not an abstract time, the time measured by clocks, but indeed a qualified time, in so doing. In his rhythmanalysis project, Henri Lefebvre² rightly highlighted sound’s crucial role in capturing ambient dynamics. Finally, *consistency* reveals sound’s sensitivity to situations and its ability to hold together the different variables of a particular context. In the same situation, one may hear at once a crowd walking, the rain as it beats on the footpath, the reverberation of a mineral space, a friendly discussion in progress, or the noise of traffic off in the distance, etc. All of these voices intertwine and combine, creating for the listener a unique diffuse quality, an unusual emotional tonality, representative of the ambient situation. Victor Zuckerkandl³ spoke in this regard of ‘tonal coalescence’ in order to refer to the tendency of the sound world to integrate the diverse. What then of this capacity of sound to permeate us and affect us? How does sound invite us to experience a space? What of the atmospheric power of the sound world? Haroon Mirza’s artistic intervention at the Villa Savoye generates such queries and raises anew the question of just how we experience an atmosphere.

¹ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *A l'écoute*. Paris: Galilée, 2002.

² Lefebvre, Henri. *Eléments de rythmanalyse*. Paris: Editions Syllepse, 1992.

³ Zuckerkandl, Victor. *Sound and Symbol*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.

Immersion

Wherever we may find ourselves, we are bathed in a universe of sound. Architectural edifices are responsible somewhat for this sound immersion: they possess their own acoustics and propagate sound in a thousand different ways, depending on forms, volumes and materials. With Paul Valéry, Peter Sloterdijk talks even of a veritable art of immersion in order to refer to both architecture and music.⁴ The architectural stone and musical air are inextricably linked in the creation of sensitive envelopes or walls. In both cases, the issue consists of composing immersive spaces, singular environments which condition our experiences, affect our ways of being and constitute the continuous bass line of our lives. Thus, architecture comprises the construction of situations and sensitive environments in which we are inevitably immersed. With the increase of work on the sensitive—what some refer to as the sensorial turn—we are now giving way to the fragile and transient entities that are atmospheres, ambiances, climates. It is as if we should hereafter listen to the atmospheric existence of the world, consider the sensitive environments that surround us on a daily basis. In other words, contemporary ecology increasingly relies on explicit strategies for the sensitization of lived-in spaces. Air, sound, light, smell, heat and other sensory flux therefore become the material for creation and experimentation, reflection and theorization. The aesthetics of the immaterial, the ephemeral and the formless tends to be a substitute for an ontology of the thing and the substance. Man is in the process of becoming a ‘designer of atmospheres’.⁵ What then may be said of the Villa Savoye—an iconic architectural work if ever there was one—as soon as we approach its interior and accept to be permeated by it? The intention concerns less its formal qualities or the purity of its lines, but focuses instead on understanding how it succeeds in creating a unique atmosphere, capable of soliciting our sensitivity and stimulating our imagination. It depends on our ability to allow ourselves to be ‘permeable’ and to become attuned to the sounds of a place. This fine-tuning of ambiances occurs through the exploration of the sensations that the Villa Savoye provides to the visitor.

Disorientation

By visiting the Villa Savoye with his eyes blindfolded, Haroon Mirza puts himself in a position to experience the climatic or atmospheric import to which it is subjected. His action is less of a classical architectural promenade than a stroll under certain constraints. The very fact of depriving himself of the sense of sight causes a certain sense of disorientation, which fosters a new space of perception and reveals a highly-sensitive architecture. Undoubtedly, we are close here to the process of ‘estrangement’, of defamiliarization, such as Victor Shklovsky⁶ described it in terms of art. The intention is to emancipate oneself from perceptive routines—from the already known and ‘sedimented’—in order to allow oneself to be caught up in another experience, on the lookout for new ways of being and feeling. What might be seen as a limitation of the experience—the absence of vision—is in fact a way of intensifying the disruption or disturbance of the senses.

⁴ Sloterdijk, Peter. ‘Architecture As an Art of Immersion’. *Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts*. Vol. 12, 2011, p. 105-109.

⁵ Desroches, Dominic. ‘L’homme comme designer d’atmosphère. Sloterdijk et la critique des milieux métaphysiques’. *Transverse*. No. 1, 2010, p. 35-47.

⁶ Shklovsky, Victor. *L’art comme procédé*. Paris: Allia, 2008

Once the visual cues are lacking and the very fact of being in this space is troubled, the sense of immersion is thus revealed and reflected. The sense of disorientation that results from this momentary loss of vision is accompanied by a relative cognitive detachment vis-à-vis the surrounding environment. However, this detachment is offset by an augmented attention to the immediate sensations and sensory qualities of the site. Visual habits and reflexes give way to an uncertain corporal experience, on the lookout for signs and clues, in search of new traces or imprints, marks and phenomenality. Every sensation, as imperceptible as it may be, thus becomes relevant and worthy of attention. Understandably, it is by agreeing or accepting to put himself in a vulnerable position that Haroon Mirza is able to discover the atmospheric power of the Villa Savoye. It is as if he had to learn how to 'confront' such an architecture, to acclimatize himself to it, to incorporate it, to become progressively familiar with it through the repetition of gestures and an attention to detail.

De-focalization

In such conditions, the intention is not to discern objects clearly, nor to identify forms precisely, but rather to experience the sensibilities of the materials. Certainly, we are close here to the spatiality without things described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, apropos of the nocturnal experience: 'When, for example, the world of clear and articulated objects is abolished, our perceptual self, amputated from its world, draws or imagines a spatiality without things. This is what happens at night. The night is not an object before me, it surrounds me, it soaks through me by all of my senses, it stifles my memories, effacing almost my personal identity. I am no longer entrenched in my perceptual position from which I can watch, from a distance, the outlines of objects as they pass by. The night is devoid of outlines (...).⁷ There is no frontality here, no vis-à-vis or sense of distancing: instead there is a wave of sensations coming from all directions, of varying intensity and degrees of import. Thus, we are dealing with an attempt at de-focalization, giving place to a floating perception and peripheral attention. The margins and fringes of the experience rise to the surface. The background of the Villa Savoye's intended sensations moves to the fore. In a way, we leave the Cartesian space, homogeneous and isotropic, in order to soak up an ambient space that is dark, thymic, endowed with qualities and strengths that challenge various 'styles of existence.'⁸ Neither is the intention to situate oneself in terms of the functional space of everyday life, i.e. the space of our perceptions and our finalized actions, and related objects and practices. The intention is more about our ability to be affected by the environment that surrounds us. This also holds true for our sensitivity to emotional tonalities, the way we feel in the world and the way in which we experience it. In short, we are well and truly immersed in a sensitive environment, surrounded by auditory, olfactory, thermal, tactile, luminous, proprioceptive, and kinaesthetic events, in a position to experience the

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard, 1945.

⁸ Maldiney, Henri. *Regard, Parole, Espace*. Paris : L'Âge d'Homme, 1973.

full range of immersive phenomena. And not only the sovereign and all-encompassing aesthetic appreciation of a monumental work of architecture, but the delicate and contextual sensations that occur one after the other, combining and merging together in a dialogue. In a certain way, the Villa Savoye may be said to assess itself in light of the immersive experience it elicits and the sensitive atmospheres it generates.

Mobilization

The artist's entire body is put in a state of alertness, beginning with the way of walking, which becomes more careful, a continuous groping, step after step: in other words, he moves forward in slow motion. The Villa Savoye is no longer experienced as a free and assured promenade, but instead as a kind of attentive and overly-careful shuffling. The feet become the organs of perception: feeling the soil and experiencing the slope, maintaining balance and modulating one's effort, just as the hands are taken aback by the coldness of the door handles and the elegance of the switches. Moreover, one's arms cannot help but sweep the air around them in search of a nearby wall; as if locating the proximity of a material surface were of an absolute necessity. Vague sensations, but ones that are nonetheless real, appear, inducing a somaesthetic experience.⁹ Although infra-conscious most of the time, these bodily sensations, and tactile, kinaesthetic, proprioceptive and vestibular impressions find their place here. Moreover, the atmosphere of the place well and truly calls upon motor patterns, unique ways of moving and of being in motion. After all, can architecture not be experienced with the feet? However, before entering the threshold of the house, it is the fragrant scent of the linden trees which mainly attracts attention. Here, smell asserts itself and marks its territory. And as soon as we enter the building, the exterior sounds fade—the singing of birds and the hum of distant traffic—giving way to a new sound environment... Inside the Villa, the intensity of light in the rooms is such that it permeates, despite one's masked vision. Varying degrees of brightness make themselves felt even through shrouded eyelids. A whole sequence of impressions therefore take place over the course of a visit, calling upon a wide range of senses and movements. The artist visiting the site tends to become one with the ambient effects of the Villa. His approach and his gait, his spurts and his pauses, may be said to be a kind of extension of the micro-climates encountered *in situ*.

Respiration

Strange sounds can be heard in the Villa Savoye, which contrast with the apparent calm and formal beauty of an architectural structure such as this. What may be said of these electronic sounds broadcast through loudspeakers, and echoing in the empty rooms? Crackling, rumbling, static, buzzing, intermittency, interference, sputtering, cadences that take off or are interrupted, sequences that are repeated, combine and overlap. A noisy experience, as it were. Sounds that sometimes struggle to make themselves heard, as if their very existence could be endangered at any time. It is as if one could hear this 'machine for living' breathe, with its pauses or shortness of breath, extinctions, suspensions, and palpitations. Or else the steady rhythm of a heartbeat that

continually repeats itself through a series of imperceptible adjustments. Listening to such auditory stimuli or

⁹ Shustermann, Richard. *Soma-esthétique et architecture: une alternative critique*. Geneva: Haute école d'art et de design, 2010.

flux, one could imagine oneself in a hospital, in an intensive care unit amongst a whole battery of equipment, monitoring in real time, the progress of a weak heart or a defective brain. But beyond this medical metaphor—or perhaps because of it—it is the breath of life that seems to manifest itself here in all its precariousness and fragility. As artificial as they are, such sound pulses allow us to feel a vital energy or rush, like an anonymous life force that cannot but persevere. In response to the act of defamiliarizing one's visit to the site, through the use of a blindfold, comes the experimentation of a strange sound space. A second perceptual gap is generated: after listening without sight, comes the experience of listening to unexpected noises. The act is not so much about contemplating a beautiful building, but of soaking up surprising sounds. The destabilization of a horizon of aspiration. A dichotomy between sound and image. The enigma of an amazing and unusual experience which results in a concertinaing between what is offered or presented to be seen and heard. What may be said of such ambient sounds in an architectural structure such as this one? May it be said that Haroon Mirza's intervention allows us to hear the discreet breathing of the Villa Savoye?

Atmosphonic

We should not forget that light is an essential component of the Villa Savoye. By converting the light into sound pulses via solar panels, Haroon Mirza offers a new inter-sensory experience that transports us into the realm of an *atmosphonic* creation. Sound, air and light come together and intertwine. This translation of the luminous air into sound air thus renders audible the miniscule solar fluctuations that inhabit the Villa Savoye. A cloudy sky or a sudden sunny spell, the passing of a cloud or the presence of a visitor are enough to change or affect the distribution of the light, thus providing the Villa with another voice. The sun here is the vector of this audible breathing and the Villa Savoye the resonator of these atmospheric variations. In bringing about such a transduction, Haroon Mirza conveys the energy flows that modulate and combine with the rhythms and intensities which set the tone for the spaces, open to the public. One cannot help but think here of the vitality affects¹⁰ that extend across our daily experiences on a permanent basis, instilling sensations of tension and release in our states of being, and discreetly yet continuously influencing our emotional state. Such an experience invites us to a veritable art of inflections. A micro-energy occurs, making tangible those impulses that are traditionally imperceptible and too fine to be noticed. Like other artistic creations that continue to explore the manifest future of contemporary atmospheres,¹¹ the physical climate here combines with the emotional climate. The atmosphere becomes a sensory material. Everything seems to be about the air in this installation, imperceptible currents come into existence, resonating with the site.

The atmosphere begins to sing, the rays of light make themselves heard, and the Villa seems to find its voice.

¹⁰ Stern, Daniel. *Les formes de vitalité*. Paris: Odile Jacob, 2010.

¹¹ Knebusch, Julien. 'Art and climate (change) perception: Outline of a phenomenology of climate'. In Sacha Kagan & Volker Kirchberg (eds.) *Sustainability: a new frontier for the arts and cultures*. Frankfurt a. Main: Verlag für Akademische Schriften, 2008, p. 242-261