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Antenna, laboratory, archive: sound explorations at Radio Utopia

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ABSTRACT

As part of the French pavilion at the XVIII Venice Architecture Biennale 2023, muoto architects with Georgi Stanishev designed the Ball Theater, associating the idea of sound creation with the architectural project from the outset. Radio Utopia occupied the Ball Theater for five days in August as part of the Pavilion's vision of architecture as a receptacle for life. Designed as a sound laboratory and radio antenna, Radio Utopia provided a platform for receiving and broadcasting discussions, testimonies, sounds and installations. The medium of the radio made it possible to question the socio-cultural conditions of an event such as the Biennale, of a restricted circle of visitors. Radio broadcasting serves as both a parable and a tangible means of connecting with distant places and alterities using sound recordings. It also offers the possibility of extending an event beyond its physical location and ephemeral temporality. Radio Utopia has left an audio trace in a corner of the Web.

From the experimental perspective in the tradition of soundscape studies, this paper will look at three main aspects of the project: 1) a pavilion as a radio antenna, 2) a space of creation, a sound laboratory, and 3) a sound archiving platform.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Radio Utopia occupied the Ball Theater for five days in August 2023, as part of the French Pavilion's vision of architecture as a receptacle for life [1]. The Ball Theater by Muoto architects and Georgi Stanishev was originally conceived as a structure and a scene, a half sphere that could host a variety of programmed occupations by artists and researchers, but also the passage at the Biennale of individual flaneurs. This lively dimension has been implemented by a permanent sound installation conceived by Piloosky (Cédric Marszewski) in which proto language signals were broadcasted through a technical infrastructure of spatialized sound, distorted and combined with the interaction of the public. However discreet, the sound installation filled the pavilion space. Neither exhibition nor discourse on architecture, the visit to the French pavilion produced at any time the possibility of an interactive perceptual experience.



Figure 1: Georgi Stanishev's studio
and historical architectural references for the Ball Theater

The Ball Theater can be seen as part of a tradition of electroacoustic pavilions, from the Philips (World's Fair, Brussels 1958) to the Pepsi and the German (The Japan World Exhibition, Osaka 1970), which have contributed to the exploration of the relationship between expressive architectural shapes and spatialized moving sound. However, following the curatorial principle of a theater hosting a variety of artists, researchers, dancers and singers, the sound installation of the Ball Theater could be temporarily turned off at the time of new occupation. Temporary guests have then been able to use the acoustic technical infrastructure for broadcasting other contents and effects.



Figure 2: The Ball Theater © Photo Schnepf Renou

Conceived as a sound laboratory and radio antenna, Radio Utopia [2], its actors and equipment, arrived at the Giardini by boat, through the lagoon's canals. Radio Utopia provided a platform for receiving and broadcasting discussions, testimonies, sounds, music, and installations. Choosing the medium of the radio made it possible to question the socio-cultural conditions of an event such as the Architecture Biennale, a restricted circle of visitors to Venice, during the month of August. Radio broadcasting has served as both a parable and a tangible means for connecting with distant places and alterities by using sound recordings. It has also offered the possibility of extending an event beyond its physical location and ephemeral temporality. Radio Utopia has also left an audio track in a corner of the World Wide Web, for an indeterminate length of time.

From the experimental perspective, this paper will look at three main aspects of the project: 1) a pavilion as a radio antenna, 2) a space of creation, a sound laboratory, and 3) a sound archiving platform.

2. A PAVILION AS A RADIO ANTENNA

Among the variety of architectural references conveyed by the spherical geometry, the 1960s NASA Echo project—the first passive communication satellite – was certainly central to the Radio Utopia project, aiming to transform the whole pavilion into a transmitting and receiving antenna. A silver ball, a round, as its radiating function, illustrating a classical interpretation of the phenomenon of sound as physical concentric waves going through material milieu. Like a stone on a lake, as Vitruvius has described a long time ago. However, the final shape of the pavilion, the semi-concave sphere, also conveyed the image of the parabola, a sound receiving cradle, as representatively

embodied by the British acoustic mirrors of the 1930s: parabolic discs in concrete located on the south shore of the island to detect approaching enemy aircraft, in other words, the ancestors of radar.

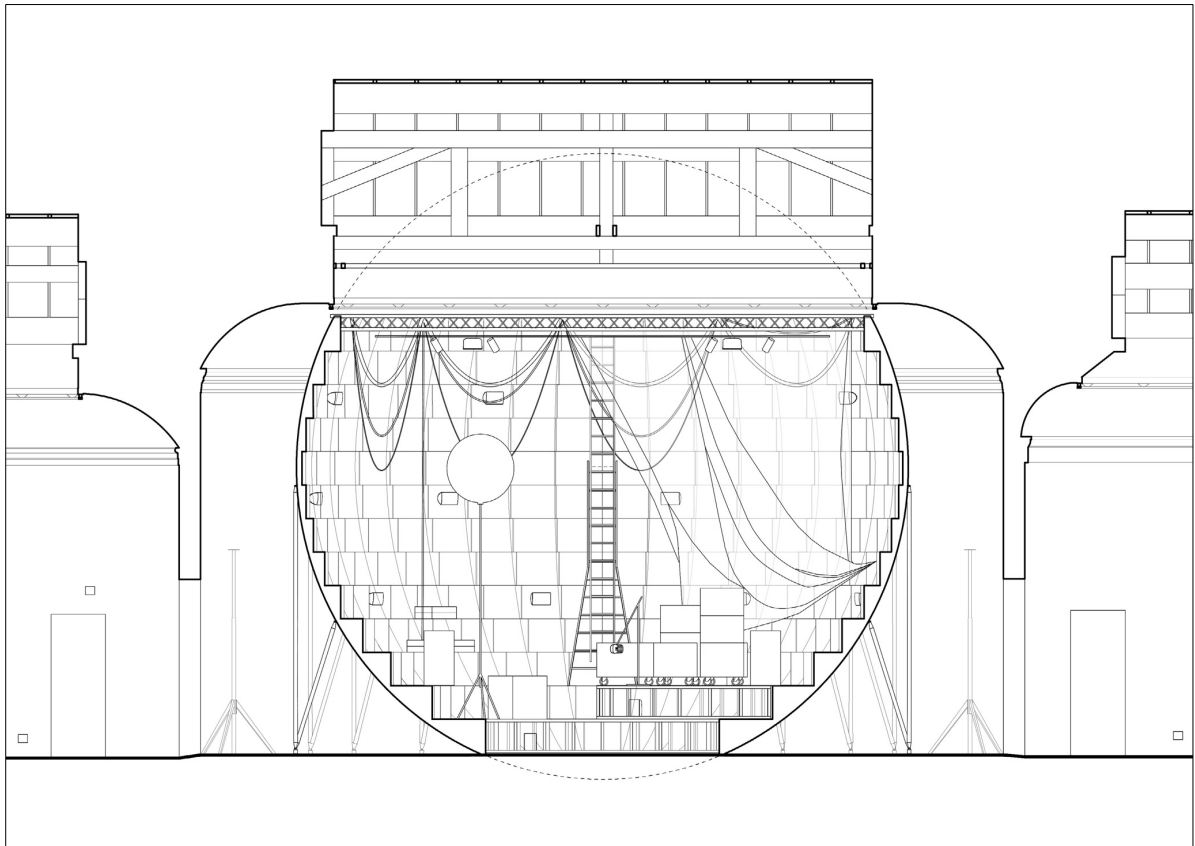


Figure 3: The Ball Theater section © muoto and Georgi Stanishev

In this rich panoply of visual references, Radio Utopia truly transformed the pavilion's abstract shape into a broadcast studio, adding technical stuff, people on stage and a series of mini radio broadcasters allowing visitors to wander around, while listening to the programs. This transformation was not just auditory but multisensory, encouraging visitors to experience the space through both sound and movement, observing and feeling the interaction between sound and space. Every day, from 3pm to 5pm, Nicolas Tixier and the Cresson team, along with Carlotta Darò, hosted radio programs on a variety of subjects, exploring sound as memory, fiction, research object and architectural matter. A montage of oral recordings, podcasts and sonic fragments was punctually introduced to animate the live discussion.

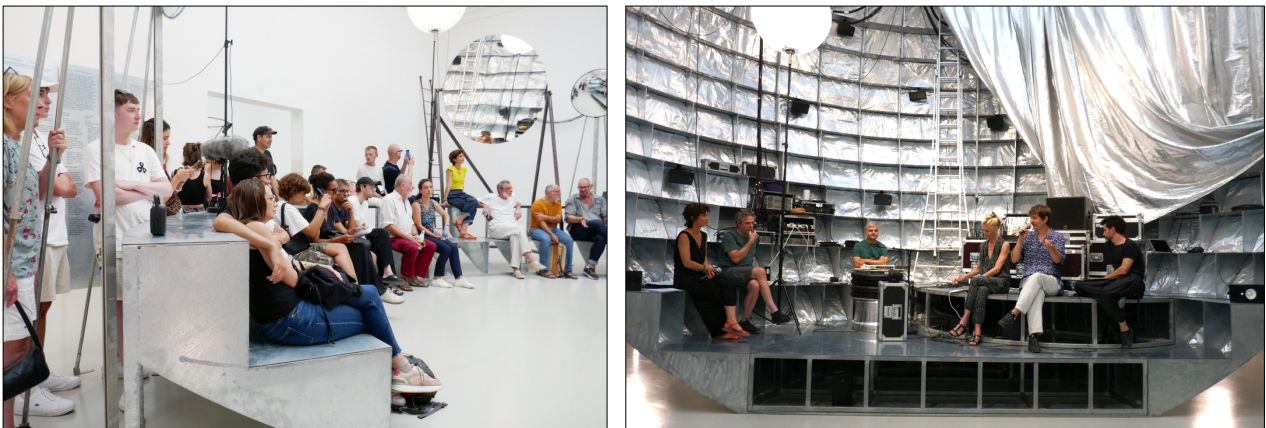


Figure 4: Radio Utopia © Manon Genet

The public could listen and see in real time what was happening inside the pavilion, like being part of a backstage, or being connected from far through a direct (in Paris and Mulhouse) or streaming diffusion on Π -node, an experimental platform for the development of a hybrid web/FM radio format.

3. A SPACE OF CREATION, A SOUND LABORATORY

While the broadcasting stage occupied the core of the pavilion, within the iconic sphere, the adjacent rooms and the frontal porch also hosted different sets of loudspeakers and enigmatic playful metallic objects inspiring a series of sound installations by artists and researchers. During the residency of Radio Utopia, a series of sound explorations revealed the particular reverberant properties of the pavilion and activated its acoustics in different ways. This encouraged visitors to move through these different acoustics, interacting with the installations as much as with the spaces and their sensitive specificities. They experienced them not only through sound, but also through touch and movement, bridging the auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic dimensions of the experience. This multisensory approach enriched the auditory experience and deepened the spatial and physical engagement, allowing each visitor to explore a personal and unique path through the sonic landscape.

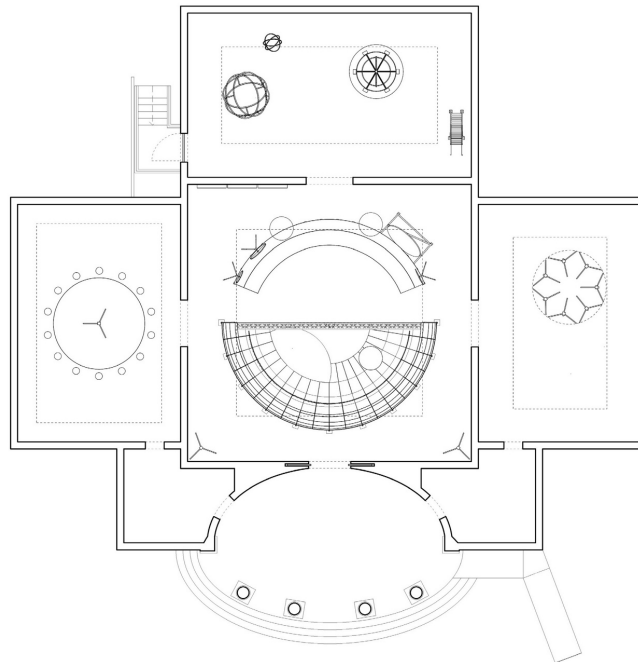


Figure 5: The Ball Theater plan © muoto and Georgi Stanishev

- In the South-east Hall of the pavilion, this auditory immersion started from the permanent whispering of Radio Wega, an installation by Giuseppe Gavazza and Alessandro De Cecco which proposed a modified analog-digital hybrid radio: instead of scrolling through radio wave frequencies, the tuning knob controls a scan between recordings of radio broadcasts of different periods, collected in a playlist arranged chronologically following a palimpsest. The Losonnante, conceived by Sébastien De Pertat and Thomas Bonnenfant, was a listening device using the capacity of bone to conduct sound. Listeners had to cover their ears and rest their elbows on the vibrating surface of the device. It was an invitation to listen differently directly through one's own body.
- In the North-East Hall, a series of 8 loudspeakers broadcasted spatialized sound, and its calligraphic notation, "ETOILES" by Nicolas Frize, "Les Sirène du Drac" (Sirens of the Drac river) installation by the Cresson, spoken radio testimonies by Monica Fantini ("Par Coeur, le son qui

reste”), photosynthetic beats by Ludwig Berger, and an acoustic program simulator by Achilleas Xydis.

- At the South-West of the pavilion, Telluric transduced signals by Raviv Ganchrow were broadcasted on the elliptical porch (“Lightning Ellipse”), alternatively replaced by urban and industrial site-specific creations by Nadine Schütz (“Espaces Matières : Horizon”, “Point d’Orgue”, “Plage de la défense #2”).



Figure 6: The North-East Hall – *Sirens of the Drac* © Manon Genet

A second category of experiences, *The Nouvelles du monde (News from the world)* occupied the North-West Hall of the pavilion during the whole duration of the week. This piece was a collective sound installation, the result of an international call. 48 mini portable-colored-loudspeakers broadcasted over 150 extracts of less than 7 minutes created by people from all around the world. These ranged from narrative oral tales, interviews, fictional connections with other planets, montages of cities’ soundscapes, picked sounds from melting glaciers, croaking frogs, musical compositions. Producing different types of acoustic situations, from individual moving listening to a more indeterminate hubbub when played simultaneously, the *Nouvelles du monde* was both a free space for expression through sound and an overall creative work of spatialized sound sources. *News from the world* offered first and foremost a discovery experience through sound.



Figure 7: The North-West Hall – *News from the world* © Nicolas Tixier



Figure 8: Listening modes © Manon Genet & AAU_Cresson

A third category of experiences included site-specific performances in which artists played with and within the pavilion. Thus, the artist Julian Clauss with “Scanographic soundscape” performed a concert as a source of rotating objects on vinyl turntables. The objects were scanned by laser cells, producing a signal that modulated a synthesizer: elementary polygons, abstract architectures and flexible materials directly sculpted sound. Claus additionally improvised a site specific experience by making the half-concave sphere of the theater vibrate through the projection of its resonant frequency. Students from the Cuneo Conservatory (with their professor Giuseppe Gavazza) performed their interactive piece based on tarots cards and samples of sound taken out from the 150 news of the world. This performance also sought to move away from the frontal duality of traditional concerts, conversely surrounding the audience and involving the spectators in a musical game of tarot cards.

4. A SOUND ARCHIVING PLATFORM

One of the main aims of the Radio Utopia project was to capture and preserve a recording of all the investigations carried out in this experimental sound laboratory. Although a recording does not reflect the original sensorial experience itself, it was important that all the content and cultural meanings associated with the different events were not lost once the broadcasts were over. For this purpose, the Cresson team designed a web page containing sound extracts and recordings made during the week [2]. These samples can be consulted online, extending the Biennale’s exhibition beyond its temporary physical entity. Spoken words, ambient recordings and composed sounds testify to the profusion of Radio Utopia’s output. Following in the tradition of the World Soundscape Project of the 1970s, which aimed to compile soundscapes from all over the world, the Radio Utopia online platform preserves a memory, an archived catalogue of sounds linked to original sites, moments and specific sound experiences.

This sound archives also aims to leave a print, a trace of our questionings. What sounds witness of the world as it is, in its enchantments as much as in its dramas? How does sound influence our empathy with the world? And how does it affect and shape our ordinary practices? How does the world sound? And how would it sound tomorrow?

Approaching space through sound, and therefore through listening, calls for a different relationship to research and creation. This requires us to find a medium that reflects both the sensitive parts of the world, and the debates that drive our research, projects and creations. This was in part the role of Radio Utopia and its radio programs, pursuing now via the web sound archive. These compositions are as much part of the "Chose publique" as they act on it with their own performative dimensions. "Chose publique" or common matter is understood here not as something defined once and for all, "but as a composition, a theater of action as much as a society" [3]. The aim of these sound compositions is to accept and put into dialogue this public thing which, by its very nature, is made up of a plurality of points of view.

5. FINAL COMMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The sound approach to the world challenges the supposed distinction between perceiver and perceived, subject and object, inside and outside, individual and collectivity. Instead of focusing on a dualistic and substantialist way of thinking, this approach opens up an alternative to an ontology of things through the attention to the medium and flows involved in and through the sensory experience. These perspectives enable us to reveal some of its key characteristics: the emphasis on perception rather than meaning; the crucial role of resonance and affective tonality; the importance of internal dynamics, everyday gestures and forms of social life; the phenomenon of coalescence that unifies the various components of a situation; the articulation between the spatial, the social and the physical. A world of ambiances and atmospheres.

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