

DIRTY EAR REPORT #3

sound, multiplicity, and radical listening

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MANIFESTATION:

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LOCATION:

Palácio Pancas Palha, hosted by Companhia Olga Roriz,
and Boavista Municipal Gallery, Lisbon

ground as surface __ ground as point of contact __ ground as ter-
ritory __ ground as margin of visibility __ ground as condition
__ ground as possibility __ ground as resistance __ ground as lim-
itation __ ground as stage __ ground as vibrant matter __ open
ground __ ground as medium __ ground as construction __ ground as
membrane __ ground as point of reference __ ground that gives way
__ that refuses __ ground as texture __ ground as beginning __ as
the basis for __ ground as shelter __ ground as text __ ground as
parchment __ across which __ ground as humming __ ground as persis-
tence __ ground as inevitability __ ground as pull __ always less than
a step away __ a rest in between __ ground as source __ ground as memory
__ ground as cover __



POINTS OF LISTENING

TAO G. VRHOVEC SAMBOLEC

Notes on:

- synchronicity of the unheard
- ambiance
- ground
- silent volumes
- underground

**Listening in the intersection between the unheard audible
and the heard inaudible**

(a body is formed)

Synchronicity of the Unheard

A human body is moved by the sound waves just like everything else that surrounds it – the ground, the dust on the ground, the wall, the house, the fly buzzing around, the piece of garbage on the floor, the chair, the table, the device, the book, the stone, the fruit, the pen, your hair.

Weak yet persistent sonic vibrations are setting into synchronous motion the molecules of everything they reach. For a short-lived moment these minuscule vibrations indiscriminately perform an involuntary dance of molecules in the air, in gases, in liquids and in solid matters. Yet, with our ears we perceive only a portion of these vibrations, their reflections and the resonances they activate.

What we hear we call sound.

Ambiance

Ambiance engulfs us. We are immersed in it, sensing it continuously with all our senses. Ambiance evolves in an empty space between the solid structures of built environment, ground, sky and the activities taking place. It is ephemeral, airy, transparent, immaterial and transitory. It is “imperceptibly in the foreground”, affecting us without being noticed. We are always a part of an ambiance. Our individual movements, attitudes, appearances, voices and mental states radiate through atmosphere, fusing into an overall ambiance of the space. Therefore we are active agents of the ambiance that engulfs us. Being a result of countless human and non-human activities in a place, ambiance makes us behave in a certain way. Our behavior in turn reinforces the mood of that ambiance. Where does the initial mood originate? Is it communal, is it subjective, is it imposed or is it self propagated?

In his paper *A Sonic Paradigm Of Urban Ambiances* Jean-Paul Thibaud describes ambiance as follows:

“[Ambiance] questions the idea of a clear distinction between the perceiver and the perceived, the subject and the object, the inside and the outside, the individual and the world. [...] ambiance enable us to emphasize the ‘in-between’ and the ‘in-the-middle’, and through them a relational thought can develop.”

Perhaps this “in-between” is a relation that ambiance has with itself. A moment or a duration, an event or a constellation between one or many, living or not, active or passive. Not being fixed to a place or time, this relation can occur between any of the elements at any moment, noticed or not.

Perhaps this “in-between” is the moment when the ambiance hears itself.

Perhaps this “in-between” is another way of saying that the ambiance hears itself.

Ground

Ground as surface
Ground as point of contact
Ground as territory
Ground as margin of visibility
Ground as condition
Ground as possibility
Ground as resistance
Ground as limitation
Ground as stage
Ground as vibrant matter
Open ground
Ground as medium
Ground as construction
Ground as membrane

What is taking place above and on the ground is sending weak shockwaves through the solid matter down below. Inaudible to our naked ears, these shockwaves are vibrating the earth, exciting molecules in stone and asphalt or resonating in built caverns, chambers, parking lots or canalization tunnels below the surface. Always in touch or less than a step away, this space remains inaudible, invisible and inaccessible to us.

Silent Volumes

Listening to the sound of the ground recordings I have just made in front of the Boavista Municipal Gallery by placing two contact microphones on the asphalt and weighing them down with two cobblestones, you said:

“It is a good concept, ...”

In the silent pause, after the word “concept” I heard your silence speaking:

“But it is too loud, I can not think while it is playing. Can you please stop it?”

Even though the sound of the speaking silence was not propagating through the air, (and the molecules were not performing the dance of these words) I heard the unspoken words sounding with the same loudness and intensity as the sound of the ground recording that was coming out of the loudspeakers.

When I try to recall the loudness of the ground recording I can not remember it. On the other hand, whenever your unspoken words come back to my mind they sound in my inner hearing with the same loudness and intensity as they did when I heard them for the first time – as if this memory transforms me into the volume of the sound of your unspoken words that only I can hear.

Underground

In the Aljube Museum which is dedicated to the resistance and freedom movement during the military dictatorship in Portugal, a regime that was in power from 1933 – 1974, there is a curious installation on display: a desk on top of which there is a typewriter in a half opened wooden box. In front of the table there is a chair with a real size sculpture of a sitting person that is “using” the typewriter.

The box of the size of a small suitcase has two holes on one side that are big enough for the hands to pass through and reach the keyboard of the typewriter. On the topside of the box there is a rectangular glass window making the keyboard and the inserted paper visible when the box is closed. The inside of the box is carefully cushioned with a thick layer of felt. The design of the box allows using the typewriter even when the box is closed, which drastically reduces the loudness of the sound that is produced when the typebar hits the ink tape, pressing it against the surface of the paper with great velocity which is required to produce an imprint of the letter on the paper.

It was explained to me that such typewriters in boxes were used by the resistance movement in order to write letters, pamphlets and communication materials, fearing that the sound of the typewriter will propagate through the walls where it might be heard by the neighbors, who could, if questioned by the police, indicate that they have heard the sound of the typewriter behind the wall. Such indication would be enough to raise suspicion, which would certainly lead the police to search the apartment on the other side of the wall.

What were they afraid of?

Concentration, articulation, contemplation, questioning, reasoning, imagination, doubt, poetry?

Suspicion and fear are recognizing the activity of writing in itself as signaling presence of potential disobedience, turmoil and danger.

Danger of writing as an act of stepping out of time, out of the causal reasoning, out of the transparency of the obvious and the expected, out of the physical determinacies, out of the prescribed outcomes of power relations and operations.

Danger of writing as a silent pause, as a halt that is at the same time a leap and a transgression.

Danger of writing as a creative act that is forming volume to be shared by many (no matter what this volume is expressing), trespassing from the intimacy and privacy of the inaudible inner thought into the public sphere of the heard.

The volume that can be silently amplified to excite powerful resonances in the reading bodies and setting them in motion. The volume that is oscillating between the heard inaudible and the unheard audible, between potentiality and activity, between the underground, the ambiance and the ground, between presence and absence – elusive and irrepressible in its weak power.