

Manual for the construction of a  
sound as a device to elaborate  
social connection /  
Manual for konstruksjon av en lyd  
som et middel for å utvikle  
sosial kontakt

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Errant Bodies Press: Surface Tension Supplement #4 / Atelier Nord, Oslo  
ISBN: 978-0-9772594-8-9 / 2010



MODES OF ATTENTION –  
A CONVERSATION ON SOUND – PUBLIC – SPACE  
between Tao G. Vrhovec Sambolec  
and Samuel Vriezen

Considering the text I would contribute to the Manual publication, I thought about the many conversations I have had with Samuel Vriezen since we met in 1997 in The Hague, where we were studying together at the Royal Conservatory's composition department. The conversations we had were always inspiring, a bit philosophical and unfinished. Sometimes there were breaks between them lasting for a year or two, but after meeting again by accident on a street we would immediately get entangled in a topic that we could talk about for a long time.

I invited Samuel for a written conversation that would as a starting point take the projects I presented as part of the Manual event held in Oslo in 2009, to serve as a kind of catalyst to discuss the themes of public, publicness, space and sound. We started the conversation without a strict direction in mind and as usual didn't finish it with any real sense of closure. The conversation instead became a vehicle for meditations on possible articulations of and relations between sound, space, public and publicness in urban environments.

SAMUEL: Tao, as I was thinking about the works you're presenting in this project, I remembered some phrases from a few notes that I had scribbled down some time ago in relation to a project of my own. I'd be interested to hear what you think of these observations. The first phrase is "Sound is a great medium for understanding time and motion and simultaneity, for understanding co-existing with each other and with the world." And the second bit: "Of course, the visual is a good medium for understanding co-existence, too – the difference with sound being that no two bodies can occupy the same

space but two sounds can occupy the same space. So the visual is always about relative position, it's by itself a domain of strategy and drama."

I'm sending you these quotes because I'd be interested in your views about sound and space. Much of your work involves looking at the structure of space, so that you've become almost more of a performance or installation artist than a musician in the old-fashioned sense, being concerned with social and architectural issues. I wonder however if being a sound-man by origin (and it's something you have never quite stopped being) has perhaps influenced the way you think about space?

TAO: I don't know if this is turning your question around, but I can firmly say that the way I am understanding space is exactly through being a musician, or coming from a practice which is evolving in time. Music performance has a ritualistic nature, and because of that it requires a certain setup. Western art music practice inherited church setup for performing and communicating music, where the musicians and audience are clearly divided. Musicians are kind of messengers or mediums on the altar, while the listeners are fixed to the chairs, separated from each other, directed and safely guided through the musical drama. This is one example of a setup of listening to music. When I went to music school and when I went to concerts, nobody was ever talking about these setups, they were taken for granted, and we were supposed to operate inside.

What I became aware of, is that the setup is not given but constructed, and that it influences and defines all the aspects of music, from its creation to its consumption, even though it is not considered to be a part of musical thought and therefore considered meaningless. After realizing this, I thought of the space as a part of the vocabulary of expression. Even if it is a given space, it is always already in relation to sound and thus contributes to its meaning. I became aware of this relation between sound and space and I wanted to highlight it.

(About your quote – I would like to continue and stretch it a bit more, and say that two sounds can occupy the same space at the same time, but even more – one who listens can also occupy that same space at the same time. I think what you are getting at is the immersive nature of sound – one can drown in sound.)

SAMUEL: Well, it's not necessarily the immersive nature of sound that I'm thinking about, much rather the immersive nature of space itself. Both physical and social space – and the ways sound has of articulating that nature.

Space itself is immersive. But sound does have many ways of relating to space and not all of them are immersive, I feel. For example, in very quiet music, say in certain pieces by, say, Morton Feldman or Antoine Beuger, sound is so soft that it seems to retreat. Physically it doesn't of course – it still travels – but we do not feel immersed, rather it arouses a desire: the desire to reach out towards the sound. The sound is very directional, coming from one source. Space is under-articulated, and you get sucked towards the source – there can even be something coercive about it, it's a pull.

The immersive experience I rather associate with omni-directionality, and often with extremely loud music. The interesting thing is that a truly loud sound is often very generous, making less demands, it comes to you from all sides; at the same time, it's like an invisible wall, making communication even with people who are close impossible. Space becomes "thick." We still see each other, but we're in our own little worlds. I feel that can be an important part of the experience at dance parties where everybody is together in this loud environment, becoming a collection of uniformly separated individuals through space being over-articulated.

So sound can shape space in a way that's different from how objects shape space. Objects outline space (mainly by hiding other objects: that's exactly what a wall does, how walls create "outside" and

"inside"), but sounds have to do with porousness of space (open windows through which you hear what you can't see, etc), with flows of communication within a space (directionality), with distance, with interactions between zones.

So physical space as such is the immersive phenomenon – it's around us everywhere – and sound can articulate that in many ways. Let me venture a very abstract speculation and say that sound is the means through which the possibilities of [a] space can be articulated; that could be a very rough definition of musical experience. To a certain extent then it would be space itself, as it is articulated by sound, that becomes the subject, the material, of the music.

Now, similarly, social space is an immersive phenomenon. We're always within social relations. You write very clearly about the social space set-up in classical music, for example. Of course, if physical space has to do with directions and porousness and zones and limits, then social space is structured through "roles."

All of this is to frame a question for you: do you think it's possible that a piece of art could articulate the immersive nature of social space in an analogous way? Use social space – that which always exists between people as a function of their respective roles – as the material itself for a piece, to be articulated by sounds? Could there be relations between how sound articulates physical space and how it articulates social space? I realize these questions are perhaps a bit broad or abstract – I'm just curious about your thoughts here.

TAO: I agree with your claim that not all sound is immersive. What I was wanting to say is that sound is specific in its immersiveness, unlike objects.

When you mention quiet music of Feldman and Beuger on the one hand, and a club situation on the other hand, I start thinking about the author William H. McNeill and his book *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History*, especially

in relation to club music situation – what McNeill is claiming is that loud, immersive rhythmical music and synchronized muscular body activity evoked by it, creates a "muscular bond" between individuals – a kind of experience through drill and dancing which creates a social group with very strong bonds between individuals within the group. Examples are military formations, tribal fighter communities and ritualistic dance. To paraphrase McNeill, he claims that humans are the only creatures that can keep together in time in a rhythmical and metric way, and that this ability to physically synchronize is a necessary precondition for language to occur.

I agree that the club situation and the loud immersive music can be a numbing experience and that it can create isolation, but on the other hand, I believe that it opens temporary channels of communication on a very different level, which is not literary and reflexive, but something very physical and temporary, so I wouldn't really say that this filling up the space and making it thick creates only small individual universes, but it does create some kind of communication, if only through synchronization. Hence the power and inherent danger of marching music.

On another level, very quiet and directional music does make us more attentive, and it sensibilizes us in completely different manner. I think in these kind of extremely quiet situations the isolation and individual experience is also present to a great extent, but in a different way. We might be each by ourselves in relation to a space and the sound within that space, but not really in relation to each other, and since the music is quiet and slow it allows and encourages reflection, so it becomes philosophical.

The desire to reach out towards the sound is aroused, and the space is audible – we can hear its emptiness. I could say that in relation to physical space, the quiet sounds we are talking about somehow mark the space (like dots), and bring to foreground our attention to the qualities of that space.

So, the "emptiness" between the walls becomes material of expression.

I must say I am equally drawn to both principles of articulating the space with sound – filling it up on the one hand and marking it almost imperceptibly on the other.

It was interesting for me to find out that the two projects I did in Oslo for the Manual project, to some extent embody the two principles. *Reality Soundtrack* is a very extrovert and soundwise violent action, where we spread the sound from 25 radios throughout the city center – we fill up the space with this unknown, ambiguously pleasant sound. A very active and extrovert approach towards rearticulating the public space. On the other hand, *Virtual Mirror – Sound* – the sound intervention where participants are asked to listen to the most quiet of unintentional ambient sounds and then rearticulate them with their own voices back into the space of origin, not making them louder than they already are, is mostly about listening to the space – a very passive activity. The idea of the intervention is that the participant becomes a prosthetic ear of the architecture, and it enables the architecture to hear and articulate its own ambient sound.

In both cases public space is addressed, disrupted and rearticulated; in the case of *Reality Soundtrack* from within, pushing the sound to the hard edges of architecture, and in the case of *Virtual Mirror* from without – from the point of the reflective surfaces of the architecture itself.

So, trying to answer your question, I would say yes, it is possible to articulate the immersive nature of physical and social space by the act of disrupting it with sound. From my experience, the social space is disrupted once you inject an "empty" role (gesture?) into it – a sound without obvious purpose, a semantically silent sound that is not recognized as a function of some obvious social agent such as danger, advertising, security, etc. Simply an unknown element. And I think sound is a really good medium for such disruption, exactly because of its

immersive potential – it can kind of creep into our consciousness from behind. It is difficult to locate it, and it doesn't establish itself as a symbol, it doesn't need a physical space to occupy, and it is relational, it exists in-between.

All that enables sound to act directly onto consciousness, and to bypass the reflective and protective perception mechanisms. The sound can catch us off-guard, and once that happens in the public space, where that kind of sound is not expected, it creates a brief moment of what I call a "direct experience." What I mean by that is that there is no context prepared for that sound to occur – no instructions of what it should be or what it should represent, as is the case in the situation of going to an art or music space to specifically listen to art-sound. So one hears that sound without any prejudice, at least for a moment, before one somehow categorizes that sound into "unknown" or "other" or "annoying" or "interesting" label (category?).

I witnessed that moment while doing the *Reality Soundtrack* intervention many times – the moment articulates itself as a very special expression on the face of a random passer-by, for a split second, before it disappears in the safe waters of categorization. Maybe I am overly fascinated by this moment, but I think it is a really powerful and specific moment, which goes beyond the discourse of sound and art. I think this moment creates a unique rupture, which enables direct experience in the over-labeled and over-manufactured reality we are living in. This moment is very precious since I think direct experience is on the brink of extinction. Almost everything that exists in this urban world is a derivative of something else. We live in the world of constant references which give way to cynicism much too often. How to break that?

SAMUEL: Your notion of direct experience is wonderful. It's also quite romantic, if you will allow me. I do have a question about it: do you ever have a spontaneous direct experience yourself? Here, by

spontaneous I mean outside of art.

I'm asking because you talk, of course, from the point of view of an artist – you think about the roles that people have in the situation of your art project. And the "direct experience" you want to produce I could paraphrase as: the precise moment when somebody is on the threshold between having the role of "random passer-by" and "audience." It's the moment when his or her role is undefined. That, indeed, is a sublime moment – it's a sublime of forms of attention. However, the two sides of the threshold have been defined – in this case, by you, the artist, or more generally, by Art as an idea in itself. So I wonder whether you think direct experience can also exist outside of such structures. That question is a bit too general, though; but perhaps you have had direct experience yourself, in situations that you were not able to reduce to "art" or other categories that you, as an artist, know how to handle?

TAO: I don't know if I would like to go so broad on the question of direct experience, and would rather focus on the context we are involved in and relating to – namely the context of social situations, communication and relations to sound. However, I can say that I had direct experience also outside music, art and philosophy contexts. Usually in quite banal everyday situations.

I think exactly because of those everyday banal situations through which I gained these direct experiences, I am drawn to conceive projects which work with and within those situations. I understand the everyday public situation as a material and locus for an event. I see it as an enormous potential for (poetic) discourse. It is like exploring to a certain extent uncharted territory. Of course, there are the traditions of Fluxus, Situationism, performance art of the sixties, John Cage, and so on, but I still think this space is quite unsaturated and uncharted and it offers a lot of potential for articulating the present condition. It is a kind of working with the subject matter directly and in real time, but then

also transposing it to a metaphorical level. When I say directly, I think “intervention” – there is no representation of public space, the work or the temporary gesture intervenes in the public space itself, and transforms it into a place of fiction. So a concrete place becomes a metaphorical place as well, but a metaphor of itself, with us inhabiting this metaphor and as such being a part of it. That is why this self-reference isn't hermetic, but on the other hand, very telling, and that is why it enables the “direct experience.”

To answer your question shortly, I think art and music can be good vehicles for achieving the direct experience, but not the only ones. However, a way of thinking, a sensibility to the surroundings and active observing on the behalf of anybody is definitely necessary to achieve that direct experience. It is up to us to offer and articulate situations, which enhance these individual sensibilities.

SAMUEL: I like that idea of public space as material. It's as if the performance effects a transformation on social reality as such. I wonder if there's a relation here perhaps to your series of “Undoing Architecture” projects, in which you have found ways to let outside conditions (rain, wind) pass through walls; if we might read *Reality Soundtrack* as “Undoing Public Space.” Can you comment on that?

TAO: What interests me in the *Virtual Holes and Virtual Mirrors* series, is how aware we are of the immediate atmosphere we breathe, we are immersed in, and what all we do in order to make ourselves unaffected and independent of it.

The installations are sensing the immaterial, transitory weather phenomena and correspondingly synthesizing them indoors in their original forms (water, light, wind); I call this process *undoing architecture*, but it is at the same time a process of *framing* the phenomena indoors, which heightens our awareness of all these flows, pressures and particles constantly surrounding us. This is a

gesture that considers the immaterial and the transitory phenomena as a material and locus for poetic discourse. In that sense, it relates to the *Reality Soundtrack* principle – addressing the space and at the same time using it as a material – this self-referentiality, as well as a desire to sensitize the visitors (audience).

SAMUEL: “Visitor” is definitely a different mode than “audience”: it's more primary, just as “sensitize” seems to work on a more primary level than the level of “performing” and “listening.” Possibly the concept of “audience” itself is not a necessary one. In *Virtual Mirror – Sound* it's the space itself that you equip with ears – the participants become, as you write, a prosthetic ear of the architecture. (As if the real “audience” should be the space itself!) In a similar way, when I was participating in an Amsterdam version of *Reality Soundtrack*, I had the feeling that the piece in which I seemed to be performing might actually have been more about my own changing perception of urban reality. By performing, I was doing unexpected listening to the urban space (and its social logic) myself, whereas I imagine that the passers-by were doing unexpected listening to our electronic music and the social logic of a performing body. To what extent can your work be said to address the participants in the project itself?

TAO: When conceiving *Virtual Mirror – Sound* I was trying to find a way of how to think the ambient sound – what is its origin, how to relate to it?

I started by thinking of it as something external, like discrete vibrations in space and time, reaching my ears. I would then listen to that sound and emit the imitated sound back in the direction it came from. That could be one way of doing it. After a while I changed perspective, and tried to think of ambient sound from the perspective of a space. In order to gain that perspective, I have to think about a space as an entity, which is listening to itself to hear what is going on inside.

Thinking from this position, space produces it's own ambient sound, which is a mix of natural processes, human actions, machine activities, electronic and electromagnetic vibrations – intentional and unintentional, meaningful and meaningless. However, the space as an entity is not conscious of the ambient sound it produces. Not unlike how we humans are unaware of some sounds our bodies are producing (bowel movement, digestion, nervous system, blood circulation...).

The gesture of the intervention *Virtual Mirror – Sound* is a philosophical one; by listening to the ambient sound of a space, and then consciously rearticulating it, the intervention is providing to that space a sound-consciousness, or as the subtitle of the intervention says, it is *giving space a voice*.

I think that in such a situation there are conceptually no audience or performers – even the space itself is not “the real audience,” but rather, it becomes a self-aware entity by hearing and “consciously” rearticulating it's own ambient sound, which it already produces all the time. The discourse of the performer and the audience liquifies in this situation, since the participants as well as non-participants are considered to be a part of the space as an entity, and they both participate in creating the ambient sound, consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally.

I say conceptually, because there are participants or machines that listen and emit sounds, and one can hear that, but the action is in service of enabling a space to gain a level of self-consciousness through sound. The people who happen to be there are conceptually witnessing the process of “giving space a voice.”

I would say that, what defines the individuals in a situation like that on the level of experience, is whether they are listening or not, and how and what they are listening to. That is what defines their role on a spectrum from witness, visitor, audience or performer. This is how I think about *Virtual Mirror – Sound*. This particular intervention is conceptually

much more complicated than the ones dealing with weather phenomena, since ambient sound is manifold and inherent to the space.

In the case of *Reality Soundtrack* the address goes in two directions: one to the random audience, and one to the participants' group. The participants have a different perspective of the whole event, since they know what is going on, they are in the group, emitting sound throughout the city, but they also experience the effect of the intervention, as you yourself have experienced.

I would say that questioning, redefining and dynamically changing the conceptions of the roles of visitors, audience, witnesses and performers is actually more interesting and pregnant than trying to firmly define these roles. I would say that the moment when one's role is not clear is the moment to emphasize, and to focus on. I consider that moment to be the actual event of the intervention in the sense that something really happens then.