
SPRAWL - STRUCTURES / FEEDBACK / DISRUPTIONS

A reflection on the Sprawl Festival, a festival for art in public space in Tyrol

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REALITY SOUNDTRACK

An interview with Tao G. Vrhovec Sambolec

You have once described Reality Soundtrack as “a very extrovert and sound wise violent action, filling up the space...with this unknown, ambiguously pleasant sound” Can you explain why you were composing this sound, and not e.g. using some punk guitar riffs? Why do think your intervention is a violent action? Is sound-art in public space perhaps in general a violent action?

While composing electronic sound for the Reality Soundtrack intervention I wanted the sound to be semantically as empty and as abstract as possible. I didn't want the sound to represent a single sub-cultural or social movement or to suggest a preconceived attitude towards the places and situations the sound would inhabit or pass through.

I was searching for a sound which would inhabit public spaces in an ambiguous way, leaving a passerby uncertain of what the sound represents or what attitude one should take towards it. It was very important for me that the sound has as little connotations as possible and that it is somehow seducing, familiar and strange in the context of open urban public spaces at the same time.

The mixture of seductiveness, strangeness and familiarity is important because it complicates the character of the intervention – the intervention itself is invasive in scale and presence of the sound, yet the sound does not radiate an exclusive attitude. It is unfamiliar and strange, but inviting, too. The sound catches the unprepared passerby and creates strange situations in public space. Not being identified as representing any social, political or commercial statement, the sound is open in its proposition.

Regarding the notion of violence, I would say that pervasiveness of sound in public spaces can be violent and formally speaking, Reality Soundtrack can be considered a violent action. However I would paraphrase my statement from some years ago and say that Reality Soundtrack is rather invasive than violent. The intervention is temporary claiming public spaces in the manner of Poetic Terrorism, a term coined by Hakim Bey in his book *The Temporary Autonomous Zone (T.A.Z.)* - it is invasively offering a poetic moment.

How important is the transmission of the composition via radio for you?

FM radio frequencies are part of public space, so it is important for me that Reality Soundtrack is transmitted through FM radio frequency. In this way the sound is spreading through another public domain, and can be heard and played by anyone with a radio receiver, who unknowingly becomes part of the intervention.

*You write that you understand the "everyday public situation as a material and locus for an event," This is very interesting as David Toop writes in his book *Sinister Resonance*: "... the only way to explain sounds is to regard them as events, rather than things, or objects" What interests you when interacting with public spaces in the form of "events"? And why do you think sound is an interesting medium to interact with?*

The intervention fictionalizes an everyday situation in order to reflect on it. The altered everyday situation becomes a metaphor of itself. The passersby and the active participants of the intervention inhabit both dimensions – the concrete everyday reality and the metaphorical dimension of that moment. This is what I consider an 'event' – a rupture that enables transformation of an everyday concrete situation into another dimension, gaining double existence.

This is a mental event, and it is not to be confused with the notion of event as an action in time, opposite to static things or objects as referred to by David Toop. However, Reality Soundtrack is based on introducing sound as a temporal event into public space in order to achieve the transformation described above. The lightness, transitory evasiveness and the immersive qualities of sound offer specific articulations of and interactions with(in) the realm of public spaces. The immateriality of sound is a powerful tool for occupying and leaving behind spaces momentarily without making any prior agreements with (municipal) authorities, while the omnidirectionality, the immediate response humans have on sound and the presence sound can evoke are significant.

What is more important for the perception of Reality Soundtrack - foregrounding the sonic identity of spaces, exploring, augmenting or transforming the soundscape, or interacting with a social reality?

The goal of the intervention is to transpose a real situation in public space onto a plane of fiction by means of sound intervention. The sound intervention alters urban soundscapes, but this alteration is not the goal in itself. By transforming the perception of reality in such an obvious way, the intervention points to ongoing fictionalization of reality as the Situationist movement articulates in their paradigm of Society of Spectacle. Uncovering this process offers an opportunity for rethinking the whole urban setup and ones position in it, opening different ways of sensing, relating to and understanding the city.

*As Jean-Paul Thibau writes in *The Sonic Composition of the City*: "Using a walkman in public places is part of an urban tactic which consists in decomposing the territorial structure of the city and recomposing it through spatio-phonoc behaviours." In what way differs Reality Soundtrack from the mentioned "walkman experience" and where do you see similarities?*

The idea of a soundtrack relates closely to the walkman experience – we are familiar with the effect the music has on our perception of reality when we listen to it on mobile devices. The music in such situations has the ability to suggest moods, emotions and narratives, which are based on sound more than on visual information. This is what Michael Bull articulates in his surveys on mobile listening. The walkman experience results in the appropriation of space by setting a soundtrack for it, which gives the listener a (fake) feeling of being in control of the situation.

Reality Soundtrack is different from walkman experience in its extrovert approach – when listening to a walkman, one makes his/her own soundtrack for the situation, and is also the only listener of that soundtrack. Reality Soundtrack radiates the sound outwards by means of 20 or more radio receivers with loudspeakers, creating a transitory public soundtrack for a situation in a public space. It is impossible to change it or to switch it off – the cloud of sound slowly approaches and fades out into the din of residual noise, performing the shift of perception manipulated by the sound alone.