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Soundwalking in the City: a socio-spatio-temporal sound practice

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ABSTRACT

The spatial-temporal pedestrian practice of soundwalking in its classic form involves a group focusing on listening whilst being lead in silence through an everyday environment, a model developed by the World Soundscape Project in the early 1970s, under the rubric of acoustic ecology. Today the discipline of soundwalking inhabits artistic/ music composition territory, and as such engenders themes of participation, social context, aesthetic listening, environmental sensitization, interpretation, pedagogy, awareness raising, psychogeographic musings and even catharsis. In addition, it is being employed more and more as an active form of social science fieldwork: a method of *in-situ* soundscape surveying/ data gathering. On occasion there is a purposeful ambiguity in its motivation, leading to a catalytic convergence of arts and science, resulting in interplay between the study of tacit behavior and complicity in the transformation of said behavior. This complex is manifest when participants are invited to verbalize their experience at the summative discussion, at the end of a walk when the silence is broken. This paper reflects on the author's soundwalking strategies and feedback from participants' experiences.

1. INTRODUCTION

Acousticians have industriously devised and refined criteria for measuring and predicting human perception of and response to environmental noise – sons, phons, noys, L_{eq} , L_{dn} , NC, NR, dB(A), *etc.* – but they all fall short when it comes to charting the vicissitudes of everyday listening. The ostensibly unempirical method of soundwalking, in contrast can elicit something of the human (inter)relationship with everyday soundscapes, be that affective, evaluative, strategic, habitual, semantic or aesthetic. Soundwalking can be practiced at an unspecified time by anyone that is unhindered by access and mobility issues, and like any discipline it can be developed and harnessed. This paper will focus on structured group soundwalking within a given timeframe and planned route within an urban situation.

The evolutionally honed procedure of footfall, stride and gait is a feature of almost everyone's daily life. Even motorized trips involve walking at one end [1]. For many it is an immediate and primary mode of transport. Walking can be a highly social, healthy, pleasurable and ostensibly carbon neutral activity. Robert Macfarlane waxing lyrical on the peripatetic artist Richard Long, emphasizes the sensitivity of the foot: "they mark, measure, taste and interpret the world" [4] Feet also form a variable transmission path for vibration between ground and body.

Despite the ubiquity and universality of walking, for the pedestrian the affect of the urban situation can be overwhelmingly hostile and alienating. *Civilised Streets* (2008), a report by

CABE written in response to the UK Government's *Manual for Streets* (2007), which emphasized the value of streets in prioritizing urban design from car to pedestrian, reiterates:

“The fact remains that most of our streets are not civilised, enjoyable places to be. They are mainly noisy, polluted, hazardous and unpleasant – with serious social and environmental problems the result.” [2]

Such is the context for the urban soundwalk, and it is on the human scale of the pedestrian on the street, cemetery, recreation grounds, urban square, allotments, shopping mall, etc.. adopting a heightened perspective of listening, that the soundwalk enters and engages.

2. THE PROCEDURES

Taking into account practical issues that tend to influence a walk (timescale, starting and end points, abilities of the walkers, participants' agendas, weather, etc.) there remains abiding effective protocol that were established by the World Soundscape Project led by R. Murray Schafer in the early 1970s (for a detailed historical account of soundwalking see Drever 2009 [3]). Once the group has assembled the walk leader sets the scene and prepares the walkers. This could include a discussion on listening methods, anticipation of what will be encountered considering the geography and timing, and a reminder of health and safety issues in particular related to traffic (the walkers are encouraged to reflect on tacit sensory behavior but this can in turn make them vulnerable to the dangers of the street). It is important to establish a trustworthy contract between the group and the leader. Next, the group is invited to adopt a number of rules: no talking for the duration of the walk; mobile phone turned off; no recording of the walk (audio or visual); walk in a single line following the leader. Whilst the first three rules are common practice for a classical music concert going audience, the final rule impedes the individual walker from adverse crowding effects. Schafer explains:

“... a good rule is to spread out the participants so that each is just out of earshot of the footsteps of the person in front. By listening constantly for the footsteps of the person ahead, the ears are kept alert; but at the same time a privacy for reflection is afforded.” [6]

There can be moments of crowding at street crossings, but the group can quickly spread out again, concertina-like. Every time I lead a group I am acutely aware of the walker immediately behind me – footsteps can provide an eloquent reference tool akin to a geologist's rock hammer. Walking is kept at an unusually (for most) slow pace. For example if a walk travels on an escalator, the group would travel at the given speed. The slow pace appears to help shift habitual listening practices, and allows people to simply take their time. Slow walking and contemplation come hand in hand, and the walkers must remind themselves if there are becoming too introspective in their listening.

The nature of the attentive group (i.e. more than one) experience again links back to a ritualistic music performance experience, which can engender a heightened listening experience. The group also provides support for one another, helping maintain the discipline of focused listening. The role of the leader here is fundamental, taking on all the daily concerns of timekeeping and navigation, leaving the walkers the erstwhile unprecedented luxury of focusing on listening – a faculty that is on tap, but due to everyday pressures is

seldom exercised for any significant duration. There is of course a strong performance aspect to a group of silent people walking down a street slowly in a crocodile pattern, which can be regarded as advantageous or problematic – a transparent soundwalk is likely to transform its surroundings. Moreover in many inner-city zones there are legal restrictions for group activities.

At carefully chosen points the group may stop momentarily to regroup and to listening statically. The silence is broken at the end of the walk, whilst the group is still *in situ*, and participants are encouraged to openly share their experiences, thoughts and concerns.

3. THE ROUTE

The route, planned in advance, forms a veritable open musical score, and may encompass public, domestic and privatized space (i.e. shopping mall) accessible and traversable by pedestrians without compromising the safety of the participants, and adversely encroaching on residents' privacy.

Through movement the vicissitudes of the spatial-temporal urban acoustic can be played with. A sound source such as a building, initially encountered as a plane source can be experienced from different locations, shifting from plane to line to point source and back again. A discrete point source such as an alarm can be augmented as it rebounds throughout the canyons of the city to produce a feeling of envelopment. Erstwhile overlooked uncanny antiphonal moments of auditory serendipity are brought to our consciousness, through the convergence of spatially differentiated points, lines and planes, cohering simultaneous and successive relationships of rhythm, melody and harmony. Transitions from narrow reverberant streets, enclosed by parallel glass façades to free field open space, may provide relative moments of tranquility and respite.

The route may seek out “sound-conscious urban design” [5], most infamously articulated by the mandatory water feature. Equally, to be literally exposed to the imposition of governmental standards on noise control, or stimulated by the cognitively manipulative world of the corporate soundscape. The walk may even probe at the role of sound in the make up and dovetailing of *genius loci* – provoking issues of identity and rootedness, as the group traverses neighboring zones of otherness: ethnicity, class, religion, and so on.

4. SOME RESPONSES

The concluding discussions demonstrate the detailed listening that has been practice. When participants have known the territory, they have often found the walk has provided a new sense of discovery and surprise:

- A euphoric participant talked from an hedonic perspective of the perfect cinematic-like surround-sound composition that had been opened up to him.
- Another bemoaned the onslaught of the noise of the city, as the exercise had engendered a process of sensitization even hyperacusis. The city had got louder and louder as the walk had progressed.

- A visually impaired walker felt excluded to some extent from the aesthetic musings of the rest of the group. For him the habitual task-in-hand was dedicated to navigation- orientated information gathering.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Soundwalking is a subtle, transformative, personal, sensitive practice, whilst simultaneously being a highly social analytical sound audit and ritualistic auditory experience. It is a process that is best not rushed and participants should be encouraged to have some time-out following the walk. For the non-specialist in sound, soundwalking acts as an ear-opener to the sonic dimension of the city, and helps re-prioritize the auditory within the rich mix of urban design and the evolving paradigm of ecological urbanism. To sum up its virtue in the in the words of Schafer:

“...these are the root of the acoustic design program. Yet they require no expensive equipment and they do not camouflage simple acoustic facts with pictures or statistical displays which, being silent, are *not acoustic information*.” [6]

5. REFERENCES

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