



Municipal gallery, Backnang, Germany

Heard through the Wall: Places of the Sonic Sphere

by Kristof Georgen

People often ask me why a sculptor would decide to work with sound and noise. Which relationships exist between auditory materials and those more traditionally associated with sculpture? What connects the notion of sculptural space with the sonic sphere? In order to examine these topics, I will primarily reference my own works, and will merely touch upon historical aspects of more general nature.

In general, my installations and projects address the auditory perception of our everyday reality. Created either for a site-specific or temporary exhibition context, my projects are realized through auditory diffusion, built constructions or objects. This text covers the following themes: The notion of place and the process of work, place and the perception of the body, place and experience. As illustrations I shall present primarily installations from the period 2006 to 2008, among them *Circulation (Childhood Dream)*, *No. 26.* and *alone.*

The notion of place and the process of work

In autumn 2007, I was invited to develop a sound installation for the municipal gallery at Backnang, Germany. The foreseen exhibition space was the choir and apse of the remains of a former church now architecturally integrated into the municipal gallery. My immediate reaction was especially positive because the site was a place with a history of its own, and had been part of people's everyday lives. Like in churches everywhere, the choir had been used for religious purposes, for preaching and for praying. In architectural and spiritual terms alike,

the apse of the choir represents a point of intersection connecting interior with exterior, the present with the anticipated future. Today, this function is “assimilated”: the site has been assigned a new cultural purpose, yet the old function still plays a role. The white cube and the church, it seems, both accept the necessity of sharing the limelight!

As is almost always the case when I start work on-site, I began by recording the sonic sphere at different times of the day: in the choir itself, but also on the street outside the church and at the top of the tower above the choir. These recordings revealed an overlap of the same sound occurrences at locations opposite each other, varying in clarity and impact. The highly unusual architecture of the site (church, tower, museum), assembled over the centuries, made it possible to listen both vertically and horizontally. The everyday sonic sphere is perceivable through the change of direction from interior to exterior, and from top to bottom.

The installation *Circulation (Childhood Dream)* in the ‘Chorraum’ of Backnang municipal gallery brings the historical site together with my own memories. Working analogously with the architecture of the site and a recurrent dream from my youth, I placed various autobiographical objects on the floor. These included a table-tennis top, a dual-turntable record player with automatic repeat mechanism, a number of rostrums arranged in a semi-circle, a megaphone mounted on wooden poles, LPs, and a blanket. The dream alluded to in the title is the one acoustic dream I can remember ever having. The main characteristic was a soaring, continuous high-frequency tone. The diffusion is introduced over six channels. Five loudspeakers are concealed inside a shaft running round the walls of the choir. One additional mono-channel, the sixth loudspeaker, is concealed under the record player. The circulating sound played over the five external loudspeakers orbits the listener and the central point of the building. This sound interferes with elements of the sonic sphere on-site (wind, bells, steps, speech). Real-time noises such as that of the record player switching on and off, or the crackling of a specially produced dubplate, are likewise played, with a time lag, over the external speakers. The use of various media such as record player, loudspeaker and megaphone addresses different listening habits and the process of medialization by sound.

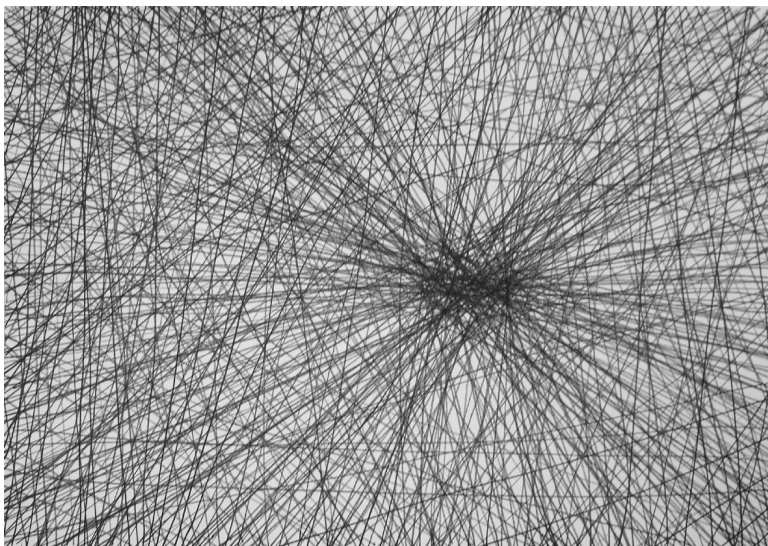


Circulation (Childhood Dream), installation view,
Municipal gallery, Backnang,

The example shows how the cultural meanings of a place are related to the audible, and the way I use this connection in my process of work. In the course of my everyday observations, my attention is drawn to potential analogies between visual and auditory elements. The ephemeral acoustic material of the place undergoes re-organization in such a way that noise already present is made present over again, and the listener's location is re-focused.

The notion of place

All the visual, auditory, but also haptic, impressions and information emanated by a place collide with experiences we carry inside us, and enable us to perceive a place situatively at any given time. The simultaneity of meanings derived from different times is not a static occurrence, but is temporal and site-specific in form. Temporality is fuelled equally by the history of a place, by personal recollection and the present perception of the visitor. In this respect, places are constantly expanding “spaces of reflection” – a kind of archive of accumulated history.



Drawings by students of cultural design, University of Applied Science, Schwaebisch Hall, Germany, 2006

From the geographical perspective, places deliver precise co-ordinates. Places are characterized by the unambiguous identification of meanings. The latter are objects and architecture, and the activities attributed to them (churches, swimming halls, market places). We can image a place as a “point” that represents one specific action in everyday life. The difference between places becomes experientable only over the distance from one place to another, or in the movement in between several places. The result is space, and dimensional expanse can be imagined as a spatio-temporal structure. Viewed in graphical terms, a single point thus produces a scattering, or a concentration, of points. We can think of the distances between them as trajectories of movement, as the interaction of place within space. The notation of music, too, represents such a motional trajectory of tones and acoustic matter. The following sketches, which in this example can be read as the notation of intentional, noise-bearing lines, serve to illustrate an event structure of this type:

My short explanation demonstrates that place, when compared with space, can be defined as a very “small” unit that conveys cultural information. On-site activity is always acoustic movement. Via solid bodies, materials, and the human ear, acoustic information as an identifier of place refers, in cyclical form, to the everyday reality of these places.

The aestheticization of urban life-spaces since the Renaissance is addressed in the book *Die ausgestellte Stadt* by Michael Müller and Franz Dröge. By the example of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco *Buon Governo*, the authors show the altered aesthetic perception of place to be a shifting of place into space. In Lorenzetti's frescoes, which were produced in the fourteenth century at the beginning of the Italian city-states, it becomes clear that "people are interested not only in each individual place but in that which interconnects the buildings, squares, streets, demarcations and surroundings and in that which produces, but also obstructs, these connections."¹ The fresco shows a view of life within the city walls, and extends beyond this confinement into the countryside with the associated agricultural activities.

In the sonic sphere, too, we can observe the historical process whereby places and their acoustic changes undergo spatialization. Murray Schafer, for instance, in 1977 analyzed the acoustic sphere influenced by movement and globalization as an acoustic shift from "high to low fidelity".² Schafer is referring less to the altered perception of self than the background noise transformed by engines in the course of industrial progress from the eighteenth century onward. The overcrowding with redundant signals is due to the combustion engine itself but equally to its movement through space as testimony to the acoustic reality of a mobile world.

Further on-site installations

The following sites exemplify how my work interconnects place, everyday situations, and sonic awareness.

The given situation provides an important impetus for realizing my installations: all situations are interconnected with everyday life. In contrast to the white cube or concert hall, art and music is not a separated event but opens to outside influences. Thus, composition becomes part of wide-range listening and an outreaching form of performance practice on bases of sound-installation. Especially by using documentary recorded sound from the place itself and playing it back in a organized form of composition, listening is nothing absolute but a shared process. Day-for-day auditory perception of on-site sound relationships, often perceived only secondarily, plays a role throughout the work process, and becomes a thematic focus.

My first visit to a site is followed by further research, by recordings of the site's sonic sphere, by the archiving of noises according to theme. I then analyze the recording in terms of sound attributes and fields of meaning, select and edit the recordings, assign the channels and configure the distribution of sound. After that comes the installation, the on-site experience and documentation.



singing 49.03° / 8.24°, 2003, installation view,
sidewalk in town centre, Ettlinger-Tor-Platz, Karlsruhe, Germany



Site of *Passage*, 2007, Muehlenstrasse 5 / bus stop at Municipal Court, Donaueschingen



Site of *Vacancy*, 2007, former kitchen of Donauhallen restaurant, Donaueschingen



Site of *refrain I (stage)*, 2008, a former assembly hall now used for municipal council sessions, Friedrichbau Buehl

Place and experience of the body

I will now use two examples to illustrate how the body's own movement through space can generate noises. In regard to the place-space relationship described previously, the body represents a temporal-spatial structure. The work *alone* was created in 2007, and is based on an evening jog through the forest. *No. 26*, which dates from 2006, by contrast focuses on the sonic sphere of the private home. In both cases, the work processes led to clear separation of the auditory material from the often muddled sonic sphere of the urban environment. Both *No. 26* and *alone* refer to a specific sonic object, they make use of a reduced variety of noises, and place high value on the noises made by one's own body. They are also characterized by a high proportion of self-determined noises.



No. 26, photograph of the building

No. 26

On the basis of analyses of lengthy recording cycles in my private environment, *Nr. 26*, directed the attention to the body as the source and engine of a self-determined sonic sphere within the “privacy of the home”. When shaving, dressing, moving about, peeling onions and sleeping, our constant companions are not so much colourful, figurative noises as rubbing, scratching and rattling sounds. Their low volume amounts to a finely stranded web of sounds and noises. The acoustic space demarcated by the architecture might be termed “close-range acoustics”.

At this close range, the everyday shows itself to be a microcosm, an autobiographical micro-history of self-determined actions and motions of the hand executed consecutively and recurrently. Accordingly, I inserted into the composition a loop consisting of the following sequence of noises:

Basic pattern “quiet material / ego”(file_1 / 28.06.06, Wednesday morning):

- 0) In bathroom, clacking object / body noises, 3”
- 1) At the clothes-drier in bathroom / body noises, 17”
- 2) Kitchen-table rattling while sandwiches are being made / body noises, 8”
- 3) Breakfast in company, shoe / body noises, 21”
- 4) Breakfast alone, lid of jam jar, rattling kitchen-table, 11”
- 5) Cleaning of surfaces, groans of exertion, 8”
- 6) Kitchen work-surface rattling while newspaper being read, 15”

7) With laptop at desk in office / body noises, 40”
Total: 02’:03”

In acoustic terms, it is very much the same thing as listening to a neighbour through a wall! The presence of the acting person constitutes the place within the space. Unlike the voyeuristic and loud “outdoor” space, the private space is a protected zone. The autobiographical elements of the work also show how European culture has come to associate the notion of dwelling with a place of withdrawal and seclusion.³ With regard to a self-determined sonic sphere within a larger scale, Murray Schafer pointed to the possibility of self-accountably “orchestrated surroundings as an improved environmental condition”⁴. In this respect, the private home could serve as an example.

alone

The compositional element of repetition and the reference to the body can also be found in *alone*. In this case, however, the framework is provided by the motional sequence of a jogger’s laps in the wood – in the public sonic sphere, in other words.



alone, Photography, 2006 / Jogger’s lap

Within the installation, the noises made by the jogger’s body are rotating. The recorded noises, such as the breathing, the friction of garments, the impact of shoes on the ground, and the vibrating mass of the body give form to the core of the composition. These noises stand out in the sonic sphere of the natural space: the original location is a wooded slope running the length a valley. This specific geographical situation contains a high proportion of echo. In the otherwise secluded silence of the forest, the far-off sounds of dogs barking, as well as shooting practice, contrast with the noises made by the jogger’s body, recorded at close range.

The basic sequence obtained from these body-sounds is a permanently circulating rhythm, which is diffused over multiple channels. The circulating motional track (basic sequence) is intersected, in the form of directional changes, by other running-related acoustic tracks. The resulting concentration and overlapping produce effects such as the abrupt escalation that turns the lone runner into a crowd. The work process resulted in an 18-minute loop. Although no duration was stipulated in advance, it corresponds rather precisely with the time needed to run through these woods.

Neither *alone* nor *No. 26* was realized at the site of the original recordings. Both works were conceived for an institutional context in conjunction with appropriate architectural elements.

The original site was compositionally “transferred” to a different location. For *Nr. 26*, I used wooden panels to build a rectangular room inside the museum space. The muffled noises made by the visitors inside the room blended with the “acoustic body-biography” being played, and the situation inside the physical space situation could give rise to acoustic overlapping that wholly cancelled out the recorded material. Such occurrences might, in turn, lead people to ask what the artistic work actually was. And this question was appropriate with reference to the traditional form of musical performance, and the notion of a work that presents itself to the surrounding space as closed and complete.

The auditory-architectural installation *alone* was likewise conceived for a museum context (10th Triennale Fellbach, 2007).⁵ The work is built, analogously with the jogging route, in the form of a rotunda (300 cm high, 50 cm thick). Five loudspeakers are mounted at regular intervals inside a perforated interior wall, and the sound flows into the space through the perforation matrix of holes. Integrated in the exhibition design of Triennale Fellbach, the rotunda acted as the head of the figure formed by the exhibition panels – a schematic “line figure” alluding to the exhibition title of *bodycheck*.

Unless visitors were inside the rotunda, they did not realize that it was “occupied” even if it offered no visual stimuli. At times, heavy-metal music drifted over from a documentary about the group AC/DC showing in a far-flung corner of the vast exhibition venue; these additions turned out to be integrative rather than disruptive, potentially additional components of the jogging soundtrack.

Place and experience

Taking as point of departure my deliberations about place and space, and their status in my process of making art, I would like to touch on the theme of everyday experience and aesthetic situation before coming to a close. I repeatedly face the question of which differences and structural similarities exist between my work and everyday life. The answers I come up with encompass basically two areas.

Firstly, reality is subject to an organized-disorganized flow of events that determines the everyday situations. Based on our everyday experiences, the temporal-spatial web of interrelated events is defined by fixed and “unpredictable” parameters that we must identify according to the context. The sonic sphere, too, represents an interrelated web of complex sound-and-noise relationships of this kind.

As a basic rule, the manner in which we find orientation in everyday life, and develop the capability to act, is determined by our conditioning and previous knowledge. When entering a shop, for example, we expect a certain temperature, a defined spatial demarcation, an acoustic field of incidental noise, or a specific form of communication. We anticipate an organization of noises allocated to the place and the spatial directions. Thanks to conditioning and knowledge, this expectation can be functionally identified.

Irritation caused by coincidence and unexpected events represents the opposite pole of such identifiable experiences: the habitual is confronted by the alien. Correctness and incorrectness, regularity and irregularity, stability and instability, causality and disruption are terms which can be used to paraphrase this everyday relationship. They amount to a web of interrelated planes of occurrence that rouses our curiosity but explain, at the same time, why reality is experienced so variously.

Secondly, everyday materials and the experience of everyday situations amount to a conceptual point of departure for the practice of art and the subsequent experience of

aesthetic situations. The described interplay of everyday life and art is one that the spectator, or listener, is obliged to identify according to context.

In art-historical terms, this reciprocity has been evolving since the advent of Modernism: Duchamp, Futurism and the Russian Avant-Garde, subsequent developments from the 1950s onward, such as Performance or Time- and Process-based art, which negated the closed form of the traditional notion of the work of art, the contingent noise as a component of performative practice by John Cage or Max Neuhaus' early pieces using radio networks. Aesthetically motivated experiences emerged as art in the wide-open landscape or the built-up urban space.

Sound works are likewise characterized by reception, defined over all the sensory organs, as a "model of reflected life-reality". Artistic methods and concepts derived from everyday life often differ only subtly from everyday situations. The differentiation of everyday and aesthetic experience is to be found in the analysis of its intention and the impetus of the work of art is fuelled less by provocation than by ephemeral irritation and the contextualization of the aesthetic situation. These relationships are centred round the listener and the viewer. Their physical presence makes them part of the aesthetic situation, just as the sounds made when moving around become part of the composition.

The aspects of determinable and non-organized units and the interplay of everyday and aesthetic experience represent a fundamental potential for on-site installation. Place can be the periphery or the centre, private surroundings or public marketplace, the focus of attention or an ephemeral sideline. Analysis of the sonic sphere leads out of the macro-perspective and into the micro-perspective, and actually, it amounts to merely two things: the biography of people or the natural world.

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Translated from German by Tom Morrison

¹ Müller, M. and Dröge, F. (2004), *Die ausgestellte Stadt: Zur Differenz von Ort und Raum*, Gütersloh and Berlin, Birkhäuser Basel, p. 34.

² Schafer. M. R. (1977). *The Tuning of the World*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, p. 59.

³ Arabian dwelling culture, for instance, contrasts with that of Europe in that the inner courtyard is a public space for the use of the occupiers of all the adjacent buildings.

⁴ Schafer. M. R. (1977). *The Tuning of the World*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, pp. 8 and 10.

⁵ *bodycheck*, 10. Triennale Kleinplastik Fellbach, 2007. Curated by Mathias Winzen and Nicole Fritz.