

The Cloudspeakers

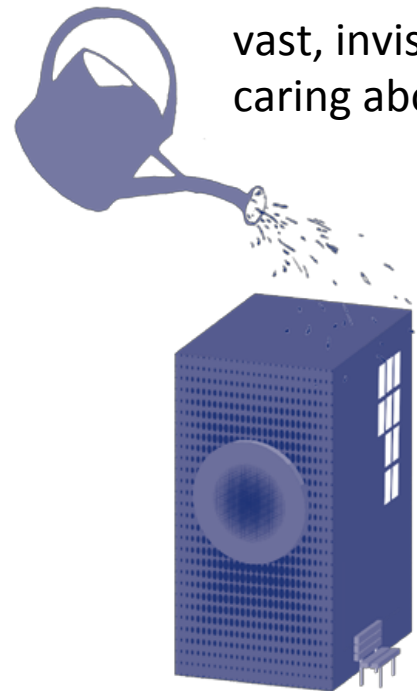
(Le Son qui vient du Ciel)



Gardening the soundscape

Michel Risse - Cie Décor Sonore

- Most of the time when we pay attention to the urban soundscape, we have almost unconsciously aesthetic preferences: such car horn in the distance blends well with such previous one, but such truck intrudes in an inappropriate manner, etc.
- The notion of “soundscape” is an acoustic metaphor of the notion of “landscape”, itself an idealised or romanticised vision of “nature”: first idealised by painters and architect-gardeners, this botanical notion of the audible environment is fairly easy to admit when you make a soundwalk in the country for instance, but when you use it in the context of the big city, you may wonder if you are in a garden, a wasteland, a dump, or a wilderness... Rather a vast, invisible but tangible space, where everybody throws its sounds without caring about what they become after they are emitted.



But if you extend the metaphor a little further, you could also consider that the city background noise forms a kind of humus or compost, in which germinate and bloom all kind of varieties, an apparently chaotic but amazingly lively ecosystem, where nothing is there by accident ; a wasteland that one could try, not to weed by silence, but garden it instead, just enough to reveal it as listenable, even enjoyable

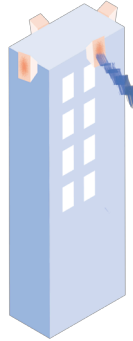
The *déjà-là*

- During those last years with the Décor Sonore company we have imagined various strategies so that aesthetic emotions arise in public spaces through sound and music. An essential notion, without which we could not work today anymore, appeared clearly: the *déjà-là*.
- One knew already the *déjà-vu*, the *je ne sais quoi* and even the *Presque-rien*; basically the *Déjà-là* is everything that exists before you arrived, which you should not fight but on the contrary compose with – in every sense of the word. In fact the *déjà-là* is always more legitimate, more rich, more complex and interesting than anything you could claim bringing. It is useless to pretend that it doesn't exist, since it *is* there, whatever you do.
- The concept of *déjà-là* is more tangible than the idea of context (which refers to what surrounds the artistic object) or of ecologic milieu (which, again, is distinguishable from the subject of study). As we were experimenting, this *déjà-là* first appeared as the indispensable partner of our artistic adventures, then as the main character. To extend again the botanic metaphor of the sonic landscape, instead of considering the average noise as “weed”, we could on the opposite reveal it and highlight it.

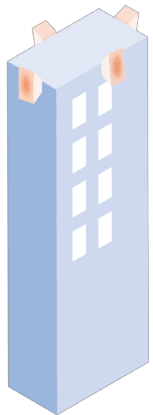
This reminds of course the “*ready made*” (in Fr: “*déjà fait*”) of Marcel Duchamp, but particularly some contemporary gardens such as those by the gardener-philosopher Gilles Clément, who states that there are no such things as weed. The sound artist leaves then the composer's position and takes the one of an “acoustic gardener”, whose mission is definitely to reveal, through the relevance of her or his intervention, what until then was just an “*unheard landscape*”.



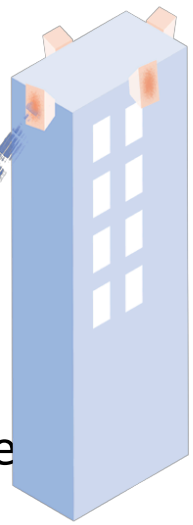
An apparatus-writing



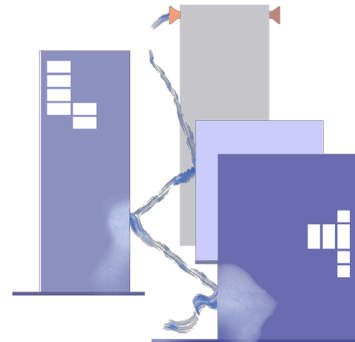
- But anyway, how can you manage to bring someone to a conscious an aesthetic listening of the soundscape ? In Land-Art, contextual arts and generally street arts domains, there is what I would call some “apparatus-writings” (*écriture-dispositif*). There is actually a form of “writing”, but not exclusively textual, literary or musical ; so there is no score to analyse strictly speaking for instance, but an ensemble of rules, objects, sequences, protocols, machineries, situations, etc., which are chosen or designed in order to work and make work the context in a controlled way – although never replicable. This apparatus-writing matches quite well Michel Foucault’s notion of “*dispositif*”: “An heterogeneous ensemble of elements which combine discourses and institutions, knowledge and know-how, said and unsaid, and which focuses the minds”. Focus the minds ? That what it is about.
- For *The Cloudspeakers*, the apparatus at work includes performing characters, musicians, sounds and words gatherers, technicians and sound designers who survey the city in distinctive clothing during one week in order to spot *in situ* any remarkable elements in the environment, meet the *déjà-là* and sample sound objects which will be treated and listed to eventually be played by the sound system from a single place in the city, on a high building towering over the houses around.
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- This peculiar sound system is made up of four stacks of very directional loudspeakers, set up so they diffuse on 360° and always in indirect ways: the waves are reflected and diffracted by the surfaces and objects they collide before reaching the passer-by ears and mix with the other urban sounds. Moreover, each sound is moved by a slow stirring through the speakers so that it seems to be constantly in motion in the public space. These motions have the property to make the audible the acoustic features of the architecture (distances, volumes, surfaces, texture materials...). This arrangement disperses sounds in space as would do the wind, in such a manner that chances of perceiving twice a same sound in the same way are virtually non-existent. So the city plays with those tones and acts as a filter and a “spatializer”.



- Indeed it is imperative to be able to interact in real time with the environment, and thus to control both the program and the acoustic level from the ground. This is achieved from a tablet as a remote control of the system, anywhere in the city. The project is to make hear sounds “in the distance”, and make them play with the *déjà-là* soundscape by selecting them for their qualities of tuning in, fusion or contrast, or even humor.



To do or not to do ?

- Many years ago as we were experimenting in the streets, a lady asked me this very simple question : “There are already so many noises over there, why do you want to add more ?” Which indeed reminded me John Cage’s diary title : *How to Improve the World (You will only make matters worse)*.
- **Some good reasons for not doing it...**
- Wanting to intervene as an artist to reveal the soundscape – be it temporarily – falls under a very presumptuous and equally modest process, with a paradoxical hope that people will be grateful to have been disturbed. As a matter of fact there are numerous good reasons to definitely not want to undertake anything when it comes to art, sound, and public space. Here are a few questions I asked to myself, I hope they will bring some others to your mind:
 - On the contrary of visual perceptions, sound can be very intrusive and invasive (it is useless to walk around the corner or close your windows if you suffer of it)
 - Playing intentionally sound through loudspeakers in the public space can legitimately considered as a pollution
 - Why would you put artificial elements in the soundscape, why would you falsify it, when it is just an indicator of reality ?
 - Is not that a form of colonisation of the landscape ?
 - The soundscape, as is the landscape, is a cultural construction, a way of listening to the environment; should we interfere in the *manner* people listen to things ?

- **...So I felt I needed to find some other good reasons to do it anyway:**
- The industrialised world has far less scruples than artists when it comes to daily occupy the public acoustic space, intentionally or not :
 - Not intentionally first, in building constructions and public works, aerial and road transportations, air conditioners and ventilations, factories, mechanic hobby and gardening tools etc.
 - But also intentionally : alarms, sirens, car horns, bells as well as sonic repellent (anti-birds and various animals, anti-youth), “sports” vehicles, audio-displays, etc.
- (So... why not come out to play with them ?)
- The soundscape is a common good, as such we must not let it be privatised. (Artists might be disturbing, but they don't work for their exclusive profit)
- It is necessary to bring some abnormality in the urban landscape and some healthy subversion in the minds (that is, put some art in culture)
- We should not give up in advance all projects of “embellishment” : they are sometimes shocking, or comical, or simply ugly and ridiculous ; they are always constructive and often happen to be magnificent in other contexts (see Eiffel, Le Corbusier etc.)

- **A few observed effects of these experiences**
- Although it is a recent and still in progress project, we already noted some interesting recurring effects:
- It activates listening, curiosity, consciousness of the soundscape of the passer-by.
- It stimulates also a creative listening during soundwalks, for instance
- Nevertheless it can also generate anxiety or even anguish to some people. Some “pattern disruptions” (a hypnosis technique) were also reported by people who could not find out the origins of the sounds
- We were told that some cats had been stressed or scared (which proves that this project affects also animals)
- It makes people stand up, look up and get off their nose out of the screens
- It does modify noticeably the “keynote” and more generally the overall ambience of the area
- It seems to help people considering the soundscape as a “common good”, and feeling that they belong to a same ecology
- It helps perceptibly some apparitions of the “Sharawadgi effect”
- It makes hear the spaces, volumes, materials, surfaces, textures, in short the architecture or, in fact, what is between
- *“What makes the city is not the houses, it is what is between the houses” (Paul Chemetov)*

• What sounds?

- When I am asked “what sounds” I am about to spread in the landscape, I feel very reticent about answering and above all I feel helpless to describe them. Of course I could tell you that there are birds, real and imaginary, local and exotic, then you could say “I see, it’s like you populate the landscape with virtual birds”. But I could also tell that there are gates, brakes, and even flute squeaks, and that they often contain troubling similarities (even with birds).
- I could also tell that I assemble a whole vocabulary of tones that have each their own properties and which play ambiguity games with the existing landscape : some are even some kinds of suggested “Sharawadgi” effects : gradual metamorphosis between totally heterogeneous sounds but offering analogies in sound colour, envelope, tone, pitch etc. that help confusion with the *déjà-là* sounds.
- But – and there we are as close to architecture as to music – naming or even describing a sound as no meaning out of the context, no more than the first D of *Au clair de la lune* without the C’s before and the E which will follow, or the window without the façade that it opens, the train station without the rails that pass.
- In fact the very first parameter of contextual relevance is both the simplest, the most mundane, the most random and the most interdependent of all the other (the classic pitch/duration/timbre with the addition of space, direction, movements, etc.) : it is the sensation of volume or intensity that determines the coming up or the disappearance, the pregnancy or salience, ignorance or insistence, in short all the gradations in the perception, from unnoticed to unbearably intrusive. Because on the contrary of the traditional concert, in which all the noises that are not coming out of the score are excluded from the listening (the neighbour coughing, the rattling of the chair, the fall of the bow...), the sonic environment is collaborating and is even the reason and the basis of the acoustic gardening.

- In his seminal article mentioning the Sharawadgi gardens – which inspired the mysterious “Sharawadji effect” to the CRESSON authors of the famous *Sonic Experience, the Guide of Everyday Sounds* – the philosopher Louis Marin concluded by recommending to architects and landscape gardeners :
- “You who make gardens, do not make parks, green spaces: make margins”
- I will end by saying that for me the real duty of the acoustic gardener is, more than grow sounds, and above all, to sow seeds of doubt...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2JUtgqz8Lg&t=74s>