

A new kind of audience: the citizen of the work. But...what does “citizen of the work” mean?ⁱ

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Public Sound Art is a fact in the 21st Century. Different artists, musicians and designers work with sound in the public space to produce different works linked to the enormous palette of effects and topics that cities provide: Max Neuhaus, a pioneer in the field of public sound art, used a wide range of possibilities in the works he installed in several cities. Other artists such as Bernhard Leitner, Georg Klein or Bill Fontana continue to design public sound art in the streets and spaces of different cities around the world. All of this activity has sparked interest not only in the fields of Art or Music, but also in Sociology, Architecture or Anthropology.

Beyond the distinctiveness of each individual artist and each particular work, public sound art raises a question of how the work is received. These questions and answers are extremely valuable in understanding how people perceive things and live in the public space in contemporary cities. Due to the eclectic nature of public sound art the notion of audience should be questioned as much as the role of the people that come into contact with the works on the streets. Can we consider them viewers? Might they be called listeners? These words usually refer to people that go to see a show at a specific place. In the public space - in most cases - the spectators do not attend the show but discover it. A broader question must be posed: How can we refer to people that not only attend and perceive the soundworks but also encounter, discover, criticize and participate in them?

Both terms - viewers and listeners - are controversial in the field of public sound art. One might think they are not viewers since people discover the work with their ears. However, one can easily accept that sound acts as a guide for vision, which, therefore, makes seeing at least as important as hearing in public sound art. If the aim is not to give priority to one sense over the other, or even to focus our attention on the senses alone, we obviously need to find a neutral expression to refer to this. We could look at the other fields that surround public art. Architecture is often at the heart of different works (see for example *IBM field* (1992) by Bernhard Leitner where the artist created a space that seeks to connect the soundscape of Vienna with the inside of the IBM building in that city). Sociology is also a general topic that acts as the conceptual basis of many works (see the work of Andreas Oldorp, *Peep* (2009), a sound installation created behind the advertising hoardings of a car park near the prostitution quarter of Braunschweig that provoked an attitude of *vouyerism* in the people that experience it). As with other forms of Art, public sound art establishes a close tie to the motifs of its

context.

In fact, in most examples of public sound art there is a consciousness of the *relational* model described by Nicolas Borriaud, in which the goal is no longer to form imaginary or utopian realities, but create modes of existence, or models of action within the existing reality.ⁱⁱ The artworks do not therefore operate on their own, but function inevitably within the context in which the citizen is immersed. The perception of a work does not only include its own attributes, but also involves a multiplicity of circumstances that the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre brought together in analysing the "social space" of the cities.ⁱⁱⁱ The idea is a relationship of producers and consumers, with the urban space supported by a material substrate that brings together different realms. This substrate might be the basis for a sound installation in the public space. It determines the perception of the architectural space and provides more information about the social context...

Hence, how can we refer to the people that approach a sound installation in the streets of a city from the above mentioned point of view? The term "citizens" seems to achieve, at least in part, the goal of finding an expression that brings together both the perceptive and cognitive aspects of people's reception process, and also takes into account the context of the works, that is, the cities in their most general definition and representation. However, the word *citizen* alone could cause some confusion in this context. Citizens are members and inhabitants of a place, so using the term in relation to public sound art will represent a very broad spectrum of people. At the same time the word *citizen* brings an extremely interesting idea to the table. *Citizen* presupposes the idea of someone that does not change his or her role when confronting a work of art. Thus, without forgetting what a citizen is, a connection to the artwork is needed to accurately observe the involvement of the citizens in the specific situations proposed by the works. This implies more than just a casual encounter with the artwork, since for a short period they inhabit a specific place of the city that, properly speaking, has been created by the artwork. If the word *citizen* is qualified by using *citizen of the work*, then it explains the physical connection to the place and is linked to the situation created by the soundworks that are inserted in the public space of the cities.

These situations usually cause a feeling of appropriation, produced in part by the absence of visible signals that increases the sensation of being the discoverer of an extraordinary element in an ordinary context. The citizens pass by the soundwork, discover it, process it in that place, and may later think about the piece when remembering the experience they had. This idea is not so far from previous concerns by artists regarding creation in the city and the role of participants in the artwork. The 1950's and 60's opened the door to this phenomenon and the period was prolific in showing different approaches to the topic of public sound art. This is evidenced, for example, by all of the happenings performed by the German artist Wolf Vostell in different cities of Europe (see for example PC Line (1962) in Paris, where he organized a bus trip through a neighbourhood in Paris – Petit Ceinture - to perceive the sounds and noises of the city through the window of the bus) but also other artworks and/or actions developed by other renowned artists such as Vito Acconci, Richard Serra or Lawrence

Weiner that have posed the same question that the article poses now regarding sound art in the public space: Are the participants viewers, listeners or are they simply *citizens of the work*?

i This essay puts forward an idea that I have studied in depth in my Ph.D.D. dissertation, completed in June 2010 at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. *Creación, sonido y ciudad. Un contexto para la instalación sonora en el espacio público* [doctoral thesis]; (dir) Mercedes Replinger González. Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Servicio de Publicaciones: Madrid, 2010 – ISBN 978-84-694-0756-1

ii Cf. Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational aesthetics*. Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002.

iii Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.