

A matter of displacement

*The listening section of Augmented Spatiality
Beyond sound recordings and urban spaces.*

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When referring to displacement different meanings can be pointed. If the focus is in the sound, the space and in the act of transferring emotional feelings from an original place to a new one, displacement might refer to the recognition of the common and the specific in the urban context and in the social space.

This essay is a cogitation of what happened in the listening section of the project *Augmented Spatiality*, where a group of sound pieces were displaced from their original contexts to be heard in a suburb of Stockholm.

Augmented Spatiality was a project specifically designed for Hökarängen, one of the suburbs of the fancy city of Stockholm. The project dealing with the topics of sound creation, social space and public art brought together both existing and newly conceived works and events by a group of international artists. The meaning of the term 'Spatiality' - as the sociologist Edward Soja postulated it, guided the whole process of working with a specific context where different practices were deployed.

"The dominance of a physicalist view of space has so permeated the analysis of human spatiality that it tends to distort our vocabulary. Thus, while such adjectives as 'social', 'political', 'economic', and even 'historical' generally suggest, unless otherwise specified a link to human action and motivation, the term 'spatial' typically evokes a physical or geometrical image, something external to the social context and to social action, a part of the 'environment', a part of the setting for society - its naively given container - rather than a formative structure created by society. We really do not have a widely used an accepted expression in English to convey the inherently social quality of organized space, especially since the terms 'social space' and 'human geography' have become so murky with multiple and often incompatible meanings. For these and other reasons, I have chosen to use the term 'spatiality' to specify this socially-produced space.¹

¹ Soja, Edward. *Postmodern Geographies*. London & New York: Verso, 1989, p.80

In this regard, installations and events proposed different approaches to the different facets of the neighbourhood, and a listening section was presented gathering the work of 17 artists working in the field of phonography, sound recording and social space. In the research for the selection of the artists in the listening section different questions aroused on how to integrate this part of the project in the ideas of 'spatiality' that implied working with the specific space of Hökarängen. The notion of 'displacement' emerged also when thinking these issues.

Trying to avoid bringing something external to the neighbourhood -but on the contrary looking forward to establish a contact with the suburb- two different strategies appear at first glance very clearly: to look for very specific pieces or, by contrast, to gather proposals not necessarily connected to the specific space that showed the ideas discussed in the project. In working by contrast, the pieces, when heard in Hökarängen, might somehow enhance the properties and the social context in this particular place. Furthermore, a wider idea of social life and urban context could then be connected through sound, after the hearing of the pieces.

The first decision taken was to displace the role of an individual curator and to organize the listening section as a collaborative work of curating. With this approach, some of the networks operating between the artists in this field were activated to display the social space that is created between people working in a similar field. Thereby were visualized networks where social and spatial issues were running at the same time.

Three artists (Acoustic Mirror, Anna Raimondo and Edu Comelles) were invited to start a lineal process. Each of them was requested to contribute a piece for the listening section and in turn invite another artist, which should contribute another piece and invite a third party to do the same till reaching the fifth contributor. Thus, three processes (or columns) of 5 contributors each, were created as a result of this collaborative process. Working that way implied as well opening the process to unexpected paths for the selection of the pieces that would be shown in this section. No one of the participants could control the growing of the process beyond the connection with the following artist they invited to participate.

These were the 3 columns that resulted following this process:

1. Kamen Nedev / Pablo Sanz / Katrinem / O+A / Peter Cusack
2. Anna Raimondo / Younes Baba-Ali / Simohamed Fetakka / Mohamed Laouli / Mustapha Akrim

3. Edu Comelles – Juanjo Palacios – Chinowsky Garachana – Camilo Cantor
Edu Comelles – Albert Murillo – Raúl Hinojosa ²

The act of displacing

The 16 pieces that each artist decided to contribute knowing the ideas underlying the whole project, were on display in Konstapoteket, a small art space of Hökarängen with a big window shop which led to setup inside three places of listening – one per column, facing the window and thus facing the street. During the exhibition, the listening section could be heard with headphones and the last day of the event it was organized a public listening where all the pieces were broadcasted in a stereo system.

The resulting group of pieces in the listening section showed urban sound recordings, as well as soundscapes and pieces made whether from urban recordings or from references to different aspects of urban social spaces. It was remarkable how the columns overcame geographical limits and artistic styles in phonography and sound creation and still kept a common essence in which it didn't matter the specific place in which they were recorded, but the specific sounds that could be recognized or suggested when listening to them. The pieces mixed with the events happening simultaneously and alien to them in the public space, so that new narratives for them appeared depending on the precise moment they were being listened. The events that happened in the street enriched the listening of the pieces at the same time the perception of the street was enriched by the added sounds that were listened in the pieces and the new meanings they introduced.

None of the pieces were produced in Hökarängen or in Sweden. So, while the majority of the pieces were recognized as something displaced from its original context, the feeling of an augmented perception of the urban space was created.

Let's think for example in the piece by Younes Baba-Ali, titled 'Tout le monde s'appelle Mohammed' where a male voice is calling with more or less emphasis but without rest to Mohammed. In the recording, the name Mohamed could be listened with silences in between and accidentally some clicks and whistles. Mohamed, as the artist explains, is the name that receives any man whose name is unknown by the other.

² This column branched. Edu Comelles invited Juanjo Palacios and Albert Murillo. In this case, the two branches resulted in completely different approaches to the topic of the listening section.

Listened indoors facing the window, where the street looks like a big screen movie, the intensity of the male voice calling Mohammed put the audience in the mood of the man trying to attract the attention of the other. An 'other' that took on presence in the unknown citizens passing by the street in that precise moment. An 'other' that is completely alien to the experience of the audience unless by their sights, that concentrate on him or her and indicated a kind of relationship. An 'other' that through their lack of awareness somehow epitomize the solitary confinement of citizens in the public sphere and the characteristic lack of communication in the cities among the citizens.

Remarkable of listening the pieces in Hökarängen was precisely the displacement or the dislocation that put the audience in a situation different from the one they were in – inside the gallery space and also, in many cases, different from the situations they were used to experience in this suburb. The audience was virtually displaced through the listening from the inside to the outside, to the public space: sometimes as actors, sometimes as producers of the sounds, sometimes as simply audience of the soundscapes. In the majority of this kind of pieces, what happened is that the pieces request and interpretation while looking for the meaning of each. A meaning that again disguises their real nature by being displaced and finds the specific words to be described it in the particularities of the space surrounding them when listened to Hökarängen.

The transferring of perceptions

Each listening piece propitiated transference of perceptions, emotions and facts where different contexts and situations were recognized. An enhanced perception of the spatial place, a political approach to issues of the social context, an abstract representation of the urban events... all of them together built at the same time a broader sense of the public space in the urban sphere. This impression was amplified when listening a piece after the other. In that progression of pieces, sounds and narratives, was created an extra notion that wasn't connected to a specific piece but to the accumulation of information provided by the column.

Let's analyse a column, made up of the contributions by Acoustic Mirror, Pablo Sanz, Katrinem, O+A and Peter Cusack. The various pieces that comprised this column exemplify the idea of transferring information and its accumulation for an interpretation of the urban context.

The artist invited to start this column was Kamen Nedev who under his moniker Acoustic Mirror is developing a research on phonography and sound creation specifically focused in the notion of social space. His contribution for Augmented Spatiality was *Madrid #GlobalNoise #130* a composition based on field recordings taken on October 13th 2012 in Madrid, Spain, at the event #GlobalNOISE, a worldwide call presented as a casserolade. In his piece the individual sound of

hitting a pot becomes the noise of thousands of pots hit and recorded in the GlobalNoise protest in Madrid. The piece expresses the temporal appropriation and the collective noisy occupation of the space for a critical re-signification of the public sphere that is socially produced.

This piece started strongly the column. In the piece *Madrid #GlobalNoise #130* the intensity of the sound transferred the common project of thousands of people through the individual sign of hitting a pot. His piece it's inscribed in the phonography works that has been made in the social protests around the world to document and show them in civil platforms such as 'Yes we Klang', the map of the Spanish revolution.

Acoustic Mirror, after providing for the column *Madrid #GlobalNoise #130* decided to invite Pablo Sanz to take part in the listening section of the project. Pablo Sanz is an artist whose works are very much connected as well to the public space, although he usually works with sound installations. In this case Kamen Nedev chose to invite someone working as well in the public sphere and in the urban context, but doing it from a very different approach of how he does it.

After this political piece whose sonority and emotional intensity was recognized by everybody independently from the specific context, the piece *52°4'35"N 4°19'52"E* by Pablo Sanz departed from the contrast. Contrary to the literal sounds of the previous piece, where an accurate work of phonography was present, in this piece the pile of abstract sounds were coming from the recordings of an installation he made in the public space in The Hague (Netherlands). In this case the piece transfers the audience to a nonconcrete place. The attention and perception is not directed to the specific sounds of the city, nor to the specific space and context. It is however transferred to the openness, variety and ambiguity of the spatial properties of the city as modified by the incorporation of new sounds. In this piece, the intention is not to create an image of the city, but to create an abstraction thereon. The audience is reclaimed then to look for the connotations but not to understand the specificity of the sonorities.

Interestingly, the sequence of these two pieces already introduced an issue that pervaded the whole listening section. Listening to a piece after another involved the act of placing the mind in a space that belongs neither to the place of origin of the pieces nor to the place in which the listeners were physically located. In that new and abstract space, constructed by a mix of references, listeners in turn occupied different positions. Sometimes they were spectators of the action (as happened in *Madrid #GlobalNoise #130*), others were immersed in oneiric situations with nonconcrete spatial references. Occasionally the audience was placed inside the action acting in turn quasi as producers of the soundscapes with

the impression augmented of the spatial properties where both the physical space and social life were present.

That is the case of the next piece in this column, “Path of awareness. Braunschweig” by Katrinem recorded in the city of Braunschweig in Germany. In this piece, the unique sound of walking with heels in the street could be heard as in the background in the foreground, while the sounds of the city are registered in the background. Here the most evident perception is the recognition of the physical properties of the different spaces traversed by the resonance of steps. The closeness of the sound -and its clearness and brightness- places the audience in the scene, if not as main characters at least very close to the main sound source, the hitting of the heels in the asphalt. Once this feeling is created, it is possible to listen the background where all the sounds look familiar for someone living in a city. The traffic hum, the engines, the sounds of distant voices... everything is accompanying the sound drift of the listeners in a place completely separated of their original sources, although similar to them. Only when the closer voices reveal in the piece a different language, the sound locates the recording to its original site, and displaces the audience again to the particularities of the room in which he or she were confined while listening.

In line with her piece, although with a very different point of departure, Katrinem decided to invite O+A (Bruce Odland and Sam Auinger) whose work in the public space is determined by the technical implementation of the ‘tuning tubes’ and the resonant spaces. They usually create installations for the public space where the soundscape is real-time processed and heard in the specific place. For the listening section O+A decided to contribute “Rotterdam (Erasmusbrige)” that re-presents the soundscape of an area as heard by a microphone inside a tube of a particular length placed in a bridge next to the traffic. The resulting soundscape, although recognizable is processed by the ‘tuning tube’ (as they call it) that acts as a filter for the sound, emphasizing harmonic intervals while softening the background noises.

While in Katrinem’s piece the emphasis was in the first person that walks the city and perceives it while being part of its context, here the emphasis is on the technologies to improve the resulting sounds produced in the city. Both of them are talking about acoustic ecology, but O+A work through the power of transformation that provides the media and the suggestive result that this produce when listening to it inviting to look for these sounds in the streets.

The last artist in this column that received the invitation by O+A was Peter Cusack, one of the leading artists in the field of phonography and environmental sound. *Symphony of Groans, Abandoned Ferris wheel, Spreepark* departs from recordings made in the abandoned fun fair of former East Berlin. In the composition different sound of the groans and squeals coming from the big wheel create an

extraordinary ambience that shows the unexpected sounding body of abandoned machinery. Departing from the concrete sonorities of the wheel, the duration of the composition creates the perception of a dense mass of movements where the listener is immersed. Only the distant bark of a dog reveals in his piece the depth of the deserted landscape where the sounds were recorded. Now, again, the audience is displaced from the noise cluster and restored to the place they occupy in the gallery room in front of the window.

Displacement

is the act of transferring emotional feelings from an original place to a new one. In the listening section displacement referred as well to the recognition of the common issues in the urban contexts and the specific social spaces sound may denote.

In the whole event *Augmented Spatiality* art pieces were setup to encourage a further engagement of citizens and visitors to a specific place. However, the listening section gathered pieces of sound artists, which hadn't anything to do with the specific place. The mechanism of displacement allowed them to engage listeners to an abstract notion of social space and spatiality, thanks to the intertwining of listening, viewing –through the window of the gallery space- and remembering.

This listening section could be then understood, afterwards, as a room where to experience a displacement situation. This displaced situation might be a fundamental and defining one when we look at the networks where field recordings with a social base are exchanged. Due to the particular organization of the listening section, where 3 columns showed 5 pieces each as in a chain, an augmented perception of what means the urban and public context was created: a place that - as explained by the collective Ultra-red, *is constituted by people*³ and thus a multifaceted space where different interpretations and approaches might be considered.

This section was curated through a process that allowed global networks of sound creation to be visualized. These networks gather together creators and listeners in an abstract space that is pure spatiality: a space characterized by social attributes; in this case citizenship, recognition of the other and collaborative attitude. The resulting group of pieces in the listening section of *Augmented Spatiality* transferred this networked sensibility to the listeners in the local context of Hokarangen.

³ Ultra-Red. *Constitutive Utopias: sound, public space and urban ambience*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ultrared.org/lm.html> (september, 2013)