



Performative Sound Art as a Method of Research

Sound Art in City Spaces, Verona Risuona and other projects

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Introduction

Working in public spaces and using them as arenas for artistic expression is a way of exploring venues and stages that are distinct from those that are traditional and clearly defined as such. What we call public space should be seen as a place for freedom of speech and free expression, based on the idea of the city as the citizens' own veranda or patio, the square as the public stage and space for manifestation and demonstrations, or quite simply, free speech.

Society becomes visible in public space. It is a venue where political, social and economic power structures operate together. By focusing on the existing social and sonic structures in these environments, the observer and listener can create concentrations of these ongoing processes. The decoding and analysis involved awaken a consciousness of the difficulties and possibilities encompassed by public space. There is a complexity here that is in itself the precondition for creating a venue for artistic expression.

This paper presents sound art projects, workshops such as *Verona Risuona* and *Sound art in city spaces, Interdisciplinary Involvement and Community Spaces*, where students from different artistic domains work with sound art in public spaces.

The questions reflected upon in the paper are:

How can sound art support a public space to be a democratic space, a place where an open university

and its investigations meet the city's inhabitants? How can sound art contribute, so that a public square become the place where the city's inhabitants can participate in artistic endeavours? How can uninitiated and unknown citizens be invited to take part in a project and be able to influence the final result of an artistic operation in one of the city squares or shopping centres? How can art boost freedom of expression and the idea of free speech?

1.1

As a sound and performance artist with long experience of working in public space, there is one question which has been the essential driving force of my explorative interactions:

What does it mean, artistically, to recognise and respect the democratic rights of people to have access to, and influence, public space?

Taking sound as our starting point, we can establish the fact that the performance of all the sounds we cooperate in creating in our shared space is very democratic. These sounds are created by each one of us and they constitute a whole, in the spirit of democracy, in an environment where all sounds are permitted and all have the same value.

Every attempt to superimpose additions on an existent soundscape is in some sense an invasion, a statement, a position that has to make its own space.

Occupying a shared soundscape is a democratic right but simultaneously also a responsibility.

I must be prepared to defend my position when it comes to why I am doing this and why I consider that I have the right to do this in a public place?

In my concerts and events in public places, I often use objects, things that are recognisable to the audience. I have found that this works well from the point of view of communication, as a door-opener to the audience's listening and desire for attention.

If I choose not to place a minimalistic black cube armed with loudspeakers in the city square, but rather 24 ice cream vans, *OZON II*, with their characteristic melody or motorcycles with the sounds of their engines, then there is no abstract object for the audience to identify but what they see instead is something belonging to their own daily life.

1.2

When for example I conduct my concert *WROOM* -for 100 Harley-Davidson motorbikes or my concert *IRON* in which bodybuilders walk dragging iron bars along the street, and in which the sounds of motors and iron respectively are used as language, I have seen that this type of performance opens the door for an interest in the sounds made, via the visual and performative element of the concert.

In a certain sense one could say that this is a way to "hoodwink" the audience into listening to sound/noise that in itself would not have been interesting and that would have felt strange to listen to without the visual performance.

Yet another important part of reaching out to new listeners via these events is that I work most often with participants in concerts who are not artists. The actors/musicians are road-workers with their machines in *Good vibrations*; they are bikers and their motorbikes in *WROOM*, they are train-drivers and their trains in "*Diesel*" and so on. This implies that all the participants' own networks and

friends, who are often to be found outside the restricted space of the art world, are now involved in a natural way.

An event like this is an act of creation in cooperation with the actors and audience, out of which arise a sense of community and communication of a type that no demonstration or public meeting can bring about.

Art can “open up” a place by presenting and performing something the message of which is not immediately plain to all. It is one of many possible happenings that people experience together, where the performers and the audience meet and a conversation can begin.

1.3

We human beings create sounds from the moment we are born until we die, but paradoxically we have very little awareness of doing so and of the fact that sounds are actually and physically so strongly linked to our lives. We are generally unaware of the sounds that we “compose”. Our shared sound environment consists of our physical movements and everyday activities, indirectly together with the machines that we have constructed, e.g. ventilation plants. Thus we create all these sonic activities, like architects, with sound as our material, and together we construct the soundspace that we call the noise of the city. Without us, the people in it, the city would just be empty and abandoned, and only nature would remain with its soundscape.

The conditions described in this paper relating to political, social and economic power structures in public space awaken the question of the kinds of complication, negotiation and problem-solving on the human and social level that may arise during artistic projects in public space.

Performances connected to specific places challenge the artist not only to investigate and reflect over the plurality of codes and significations borne by such a place, but also to interact with, assess, analyse and communicate them to those people working and living there or just passing through.

The artist must relate to what is defined and what is not defined and also to who has the right of interpretation in the case of this particular space. By moving her/his practice to a new, charged context, the artist must use reflection to clarify and question both her/his own artistic role and its possible function of the artistic work in a space owned and used by the inhabitants of the city.

The question that must be asked is, can art contribute to the transformation of social and cultural infrastructures, by means of artistic performance in public space? And, how can the artistic awareness of students be raised by working with sound art projects in public spaces?

In Utopian democratic space, there are no owners or people with greater rights of decision than anybody else. By working in this environment, in a new and unknown space, a space without walls for protection, a space full of signals and statements, the artist is compelled to be open, permissive, empathetic and decisive.

MODEL DEVELOPMENT

Methodology

How can we use streets and squares for artistic activities?

Can we locate artistic activity and tuition in public places and work exploratively in the direct context of the city instead of working from a socially and sonically secure environment like for example a black box or a sound studio?

One method and form of expression that I want to introduce in this text is a form that is under development, and which I call performative sound art.

This terminology is intended to indicate a form and a platform that seek a dialogue with public space. Work is carried out in an environment that is site-specific and it occurs via an exploration and mapping-out of the site's unique soundscape.

2.1

The aim is to create a survey of the sound canvas that has already been set up and that is waiting there as the basis for artistic activities. To add sound to this surface and its texture, in this spatiality, demands a practiced sense of values and precision. This "canvas" is not blank, it is already covered with patterns and movements, in many layers. Furthermore these patterns, movements and layers are not fixed, they are constantly changing, and there is no possibility of gaining control over their progression or sequence.

It is not just a matter of fixed, deployed sound sources like for example loudspeakers.

There must also be the possibility of discovering forms for working in a mobile, changeable and physical way when it comes to sound sources, in order (as I have just mentioned) to be able to approach the sound environment which is changeable and unpredictable over time, as is always the case with public space.

For example the soundscape here is made up of passing cars and walking, talking people.

Mechanically moving functions like lifts, escalators and doors live their own lives and enrich the sound environment with signals and mechanics. Taken together, these create aspects of the sound mosaic which generate an environment that is living though artificial and made by human beings. It lives its own life and is in some form a man-made variant of what we usually call nature, and it is in some sense a "self-generating organism" in a state of continuous development. We find that the sounds and their new combinations can never be foreseen. We cannot anticipate if, when or how they will combine to create what we call "the sounds of the city".

In this case we may speak of places that are in a state of continuous motion of change. As a place and soundscape in which to stage and introduce sound art, this "sound forest" is thus the opposite of working with sound and artistic expression in a concert hall or an indoor exhibition space. In such spaces with physical walls and acoustically designed rooms, the environment is not supposed to contribute the slightest sound impression, but only to highlight and reinforce the sounds that are added and staged. One thing that I have found artistically very important and interesting when

working in public space is to highlight hidden and latent sounds. That is, sounds that tend to disappear and are hidden in the often complex web of various noises and dins (all the components that create the overlaying of the sound to a state of high complexity). Taken together these sounds create what we may call a soundspace, and these sounds are in themselves the preconditions for the “concert hall” that we will then be able to work with. The walls are invisible and constantly unpredictable and in a continuous state of movement and change. This is a space that sounds different from hour to hour during the course of the day, and a space that makes a sound installation or a sound performance give a very different impression if it is delivered in rush hour traffic or during the quiet hours of dawn.

2.2.

Under the conditions described above, I have tested works within the project, *Verona Risuona*, 2007-2012 (ongoing) in the city of Verona (Italy), and *Sound Art in City Spaces*” 2009-11 in the cities of Verona, Porto (Portugal), and Vilnius (Lithuania). In addition to these works, an exploration will be started in the spring of 2012 via the project *Interdisciplinary Involvement and Community Spaces* during the period 2012-2014 in the cities of Gothenburg (Sweden), Cork (Ireland) and Izmir (Turkey).



Sound Art in City Spaces, Verona, Italy 2009

These works span the years 2007-2014 and were brought into being by students and teachers from various Universities from 10 countries in Europe, with the participants coming from a variety of fields of art such as sound, music, visual arts, dance, architecture and design. The students work together in smaller, mixed groups from different countries with differing artistic expressions but share the same goal, to develop site-specific sound creations.

Apart from these projects, there are experiences from 5 years of concentrated work with the *Urban*

Sound Institute, a research group whose focus is on working in public space in order to explore the noise and sounds existing in the immediate environment. Research has focused on considering these sounds as possible co-players or co-musicians, as a sound material that is not a problem and that will therefore not be muted, but rather be utilised and seen as part of the whole sound composition.



Urban Sound Institute, Paris, France 2006

To recognise artistic activities and education and their investigations in public space is to create an open forum, an urban laboratory for a shared democratic and social process. In my opinion, this is a way to bridge over animosity against culture and misunderstandings about what art stands for. It is a way of opening and reinforcing the statement about the city as a place for freedom of speech. And to some degree it is also an attempt to curb commercial interests.

2.3

I want to provide two examples of students working in a public place with performative orientation.

During the project *Sound Art in City Spaces* in Verona, Italy in 2009, a group of students created an installation consisting of the sounds from various bells. They were working in a place where one could hear a number of church bells from different parts of the city. One part of the work was to record the various church bells in order to create a composition afterwards, a soundscape of the city's bells.

After this, the recordings were played on the sound systems of different shops close to the place where the students themselves played on many kinds of bell-sounding objects and instruments. The students moved around in a smallish place like a public square, spread out so as to create an acoustic soundscape. This created an experience of hearing the city's church bells when one entered a shop, and afterwards encountering the acoustic bell sounds played by the students outside the shop, blended with sound compositions from the shops and also from loudspeakers situated around the

square.

I consider that this is a very interesting way of creating a sound environment that is integrated into the existent sound environment and created as an artistic expression. It is also where the shop environment and street environment meet each other and where the borders between them are partially erased. It is one example of performative sound art in which the movement of the performer as well as the listener is part of the composition itself. This is a composition that listeners/audience/passersby can largely create on their own, based on where and how their listening takes place.

One further example took place during the *Interdisciplinary Involvement and Community Spaces* in Gothenburg, Sweden in 2012.

A group of students worked on this project with four different kinds of shop on one and the same street.

They recorded interviews with the employees in the different shops, in order to use the interviews in the composition that was later to create a soundscape in each respective shop. Each composition was specific to the functions of each shop.

As part of the composed soundscape, sounds and activities in the shops were recorded and added to be heard in real time which was thus blended with previously recorded sound elements.

There was also a loudspeaker outside each shop so that they combined to create a shared soundscape in that entire stretch of the street environment. This provided a sense that unique places and workplaces (a restaurant, a barber's shop, a flower shop and an Italian espresso bar) each with its own soundscape profile, now blended to create a new sound world, together creating a composition, and achieving this in cooperation with the city's own sounds.

It is my conviction that it is interesting to create a new sound profile in a street.

To extract different sound profiles from the various shops and invite the employees to be creative along with the students.

This is about seeking a sound identity in the daily life of the employees. As a listener, you move around in the shops or along the street with its variety of sound sources. Here you can create your own mix from the existent sounds; performative sound art is created by the listener her-/himself.

In addition to this, it should be pointed out that you as a listener will experience the city's own sounds more distinctly, since the addition of new sound sources will arouse your attention.

There will now be a social opportunity and an invitation to discussion concerning who owns the city's sounds and how we can cooperate in taking care of the environment for which we all are responsible.

2.4

One example of my own work, *Singers' corner* was staged in the centre of a large shopping centre in the Swedish city of Gothenburg, in 2006. I situated microphones close to a variety of sound sources with sounds from daily work, such as a tobacconist's cash register, some brief conversations with clients, the sounds of an escalator and passersby, and a fish shop with its freezers and the sound of its ventilation.

These sounds taken together, which I live-mixed and balanced in various ways, were then transmitted via a sound system in the middle of the shopping centre, in order to highlight these

different workplaces.

The sounds that were transmitted as it were in concert all came from places that many people pass daily, but where – as we often do – we seldom stop just to listen to what it sounds like in that particular shop, for example in the tobacconist's.

To the accompaniment of this soundscape, the shopping centre's own "music", passersby were invited to sing whatever they liked in microphones situated here and there. All the singing took place to the accompaniment of the soundscape consisting of the shopping centre's own sound life, and simultaneously the singers participated in a live transmission on the national radio. My belief is that in a democracy, everybody has the right to sing on the country's national radio.

2.5

It is now time to reconnect to the sounds in our city. Since it is of course we who are the citizens creating all these sounds that make up the city's soundscape, which we often call noise in the negative sense of the word, then it must follow that we who are living in the city should be the ones to know its sounds better than anyone else. We should also be the ones who can learn to identify and use these mutable sound sources and, like gardeners, learn how to refine, prune and construct this environment.

Generally speaking, we need to learn to orientate ourselves according to the sound map, which (though seldom written down or made explicit) exists in every city space, and consciously learn to orientate ourselves via the sounds. This is of course something that we do unconsciously all the time, a survival instinct, in order to feel secure about where we are and to make sure that the sound of the place we know sounds as we are accustomed to hearing it sound.

The artist can, through performances give form to these sound spaces and thus enhance public interaction, communication of meaning and sense making of the specific places.

Application of Performative sound art as a method of research

3.1

Different forms of sound art and different forms of performative interpretation can be integrated within the sounding city space. A staging in a public spatiality is composed in dialogue, as in an exploration of the existing sounds in that space.

This can occur for example by working with:

- mobile sound sources like mechanical objects, battery-driven loudspeakers, existing objects like chairs, bicycles, etc.
- visual and physical performance focusing on and amplifying sound concentrations and soundscapes with for example video, light, dance, physical performance, site-specific installations.
- urban action and interaction

One example in educational form is the Master's Programme *Contemporary Performative Arts* at the Academy of Music and Drama at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden.

This Programme is going to use shopping centres, streets and squares as laboratory spaces to replace the traditional closed environment of the University. Expressions like dance for screen, physical performance and performative sound art are going to be used on this course to work in unprotected environments.

These different forms of expression together create movement and dislocation in the perception of the listener, as well as a new focus on the soundscape of public space and its existing accents.

The values of different artefacts amplify the expression when they are used as sound sources and sound objects. The objects used are not only seen as sounding instruments and tools for sound but also as objects that express historical, anthropological and social references. One can use ready-mades as sounding objects by wrenching an object or a symbol out of its original context and the normal use of the object, like for example a refuse lorry or a football. These two examples of "sounding object" stand for a number of different links to human life and our everyday lives, which is something we can exploit in artistic interpretation.

Thus whatever values a sounding object may embody in itself in relation to a particular place, the social and political context plays a decisive role in how we really assimilate the sounding results. Therefore, it is very important to see a lot of parallel contexts and artistic dislocations moving together at one and the same time in a public space.

In this way, a performative staged event can be created in which the sound in the staging is central and in which sound is highlighted via the interpretation. Everything is in concurrence with the space and the visual elements. This functions as a method to illuminate complex sound structures and the sonic matrix prevailing at a chosen time and place.

3.2

For many of the students participating in the project *Sound Art in City Spaces*, it was the first time that they tested acting and working in a public place with a site-specific problem as a way of regarding sound as a central form of expression in their work. Many students also came from different artistic fields like architecture, design, visual arts and music, in which sound was not a familiar form of expression. The students also represented a good cross-section of citizens in Europe, with regard to gender, culture and social and artistic frames of reference. Studying their works and results gives a glimpse of how this method could be developed over time.

Working in public space in this project meant that the students had to observe the reactions of the immediate surroundings of the people living there or passing by. After all, the sounds and acoustic occurrences in those places were defined and formed by the people in those places. The students could not stage anything or add anything physical or sonic without being scrutinised, questioned and perhaps criticised by the people in a particular place. All this was in agreement with the fact that a democratic space is there for everyone, a space where nobody has more rights than anybody else, a space where everyone must be allowed to participate in the current process.

CONCLUSIONS

4.1

My conviction is that the artist has an important role to play in open, public space, because I believe that art possesses tools for communication and tools that can make dialogue and openness possible in such a complex and composite environment as public space. The artist can make statements, point out things and encircle a physical place as a means of framing questions or statements that may trigger possible conversations or discussions in the public place, crossing cultural and economic barriers. This is something that is impossible to achieve if work is being carried out in a closed room at a department or in a clearly coded space for art or music, in which group-related rules often govern, such as dress and behaviour codes.

To this may be added that in public space everything is free. You do not have to pay for tickets for admittance to a concert or a performance in the street. This means that audience and bystanders can feel completely free to stay or leave if they do not like what they see and hear.

No dress or status-marking language codes exist, but only plurality.

4.2

In the projects *Verona Risuona* and *Sound Art in City Space*, students could seek or create the instruments or tools and skills they thought they needed to work in a public place and to reach out to the imagined audience. Whether it was an artistic tool for generating sound or another visual or physical artistic tool of communication was not crucial. The aim was to surprise, to open up a place and to show that the street is a venue where there is the possibility, as a citizen in the town, of being able to meet artistically expressed performances.

Dealing with art and music is associated with great risks and must be so. And a student should realise this from the very beginning. Art is about shifting limits and daring to take risks. *Verona Risuona* and *Sound Art in City Spaces* should be seen as platforms for experiment and exploration, for making mistakes and achieving new forms of expression and experience.

4.3

When working with sound as a tool and investigating the links between the various sonic activities in a public space and our social patterns and everyday activities, one approach and method is to utilise an open concept of art and the cultural values that we share together in a democratic society.

The projects described in this text should be seen as an exploration to find new ways of finding channels of communication (through auditory expressions of different kinds) to reach people who have no active relationship with art. My conviction is that a new platform can be created via an open form of communication and an invitation to our fellow human beings to share in collaboration and an open dialogue concerning participation in artistic expression. By this means we can cooperate in creating active operations through which public space will be formed by all the inhabitants of the city together.

If we use as our starting point all the activities, sound formations and signals that already exist all around us today and that we live with, then we already have a wealth of material if we learn to appreciate and see the values inherent in what we call noise and disturbance. With a well developed method, this rich environment will be able to bring us human beings living in the city closer to our shared environments.

Together we can demonstrate that every citizen has a strong inborn power that can be developed and trained; that it is necessary to encourage all people to use their talents, take their place in society and to put their ideas into practice as a way of counteracting society's highlighting of normality and the pressure to stand in line and view moderation as a virtue.

Artistic expression can be used to encourage every human being to nourish her/his individuality, cultivate her/his strength and understand the importance of not conforming to the hierarchies that often prevail in our society.

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Speakers' Corner
OZON II
Iron
WROOM
Good Vibrations