

ARCHITEXTS 4

(MARGINS OF MUSIC – SLIGHT REPRISE)

Buildings and Sound

A Copenhagen Square has been wired for sound sculpting. Sound artists carve aural environments for people to inhabit, move in and traverse. Awareness of the constant soundscape around us deepens whilst opening architecture to the dimension of acoustic ecology.

photo: Sound Gallery



Salome Vogelín discovers the Sound Gallery and talks with John Wynne, curator of a recent sound-sculpting festival

In November 1996 I went to Copenhagen for the big Electric Under Current Exhibition that featured an international array of video artists and formed part of 'Copenhagen Cultural Capital of Europe'. Another less visible part of this event was the Sound/Gallery project created by Michael Madsen in collaboration with technician and co-ordinator Steen Johannessen in the central Town Hall Square. A complete stranger to Denmark, I found my way to the square but had some difficulty locating the studio, which is hidden behind the high-tech toilets beneath the tourist information centre. In a little room under the square there is a 4-track digital sound studio operated with the ProTools sound editing programme. With the help of an additional programme called 'Max', this system is able to transmit and move sounds through a grid of 25 speakers buried under the pavement of the square covering an area of 900 square meters. The setup constitutes a permanent sound diffusion system that enables guest artists to change the acoustic appearance of the Town Hall Square.

I was very impressed by the originality of the concept and felt that it was certainly a unique approach to art in a public space. Conceived and prepared between 1994-95, the Sound/Gallery attempts to redefine

continuously what is possible, stretching technological as well as artistic boundaries. Initial technical problems and distrust on the part of the sponsoring bodies and the authorities had to be overcome before a full scale test in 1996 exceeded all expectations. The successful launch of the Gallery opened the system to a wide range of experimentation by artists from Denmark and soon also from abroad.

Artists, composers and musicians invited to the Gallery add an invisible layer of sound, creating a sculpture of acoustic material that alters the square's reception by the ear. The public of Copenhagen, moving over the square, aware and unaware of this 'hidden noise' becomes the audience of a new acoustic environment. The experience of this aesthetic transformation influences and changes the perception of this familiar area.

I feel that the acoustic relief of a space plays an important, if sometimes neglected, part in the identification and orientation of this space. Sound can be understood to work as a fourth dimension of an environment, emphasising and redefining its architectural characteristics. In the open area of the Sound/Gallery the sound artist becomes the temporary architect of the square, renovating its aural design. He/she transforms the space invisibly, opening up the possibility of a re-evaluation through sound, acknowledging the potential of acoustic expression in shaping our experience of a place.

Although Copenhagen struck me as a much quieter place than London, the sonic profile of the space of the Town Hall Square is nevertheless dominated by the drone of the traffic that circles relentlessly around it. The low frequency engine hum and the occasional high pitched squeak of brakes form the basis from which the sound artist reworks the acoustic appearance. Key sounds, such as the bells of the Town Hall, the sirens of an ambulance or police vehicle pierce through the new design and merge with it, creating a different, hybrid profile.

Many adjoining streets empty into the Town Hall Square bringing with them a flow of people criss-crossing the space. Just as a 'real' sculpture might re-map the invisible paths people routinely take over the square, the virtual sculpture created by the diffusion

system influences their movements. New paths are found, acknowledging the temporary acoustic presence. Some people seem to be intimidated and avoid the sounding area, whereas others show more curiosity, investigating the square's acoustic topography.

A square is invariably a meeting place; a social cornerstone reflecting the community's peculiarities. Sound describes the square and its functions within a specific society. At the same time it has the power to change its characteristics. Although the Town Hall Square of Copenhagen is not adorned with any remarkable public memorial or other visible focal point I nevertheless felt that people were meeting here, forming their own points of focus and memory. The work commissioned by the Sound/Gallery effectively re-frames the square. The artist takes the actual acoustic presence and thereby the sonic expression of the community and changes its framework. How profound the implications of a sound piece are on the communal realities of Copenhagen depends on the artist's as well as the audience's aural memory and perception: the process of change is not solely determined by the artist but very much invites and stimulates the participation of the audience.

The plans of the Sound/Gallery organisers to create a mobile version of the Gallery promotes the idea that

any space can be redefined through a change in its acoustic components. This notion opens up a vast realm of possibilities by which space can be explored and manipulated. I see such a mobile version expanding the artistic possibilities of acoustic expression, thereby promoting acoustic awareness and public interaction. By transgressing the spatial limitations of a static system the Gallery will aim at making the concept available to artists working within the acoustic realm world wide. Hopefully this should encourage an even more active exchange of ideas between Danish and other sound artists.

Last summer, seven UK-based artists under the curatorship of sound artist and composer John Wynne presented the show 'Out of Nowhere' at the Sound/Gallery in Copenhagen. The group of artists and composers addressed the square with pieces specifically designed for the grid of speakers in the diffusion system. I spoke to John about his contribution to the Sound/Gallery, and about his work in sound art in general.

Salome: The name Sound/Gallery suggests a closed space, white walls and soon even an entrance fee. How does the Danish Sound/Gallery evaluate or respond to these preconceptions?

John: It's interesting because it is obviously not any of those things: there are no walls and the idea was always to use a public space with open access. It seems to me that what they are trying to do by appropriating the cultural baggage of the word 'gallery' is to bring about a recognition of sound as an autonomous art form. It is operated as a gallery in that they invite artists to work in the studio and the public space but in practice the presentation is much more open-ended than what is usually thought of as a gallery.

Salome: What do you see as the limits of this sonic gallery in terms of technology, space, site etc., and how can they be overcome?

John: The funding for the gallery is quite good by British standards but there are aspects of the setup which could use upgrading, such as the studio monitoring – at the moment it's nearly impossible to tell what anything will sound like until you actually hear it on the square itself, which means that you spend a lot of time running up to the square, communicating with the studio via walkie-talkie.

The technology is such that it does force you to work in certain ways: for those of us accustomed to stuffy sound studios and the struggle to make computers do what you want, rather than what they want, this was not a problem, but for someone like Paul Burwell, whose work is usually live and improvisational, there were some unwelcome restrictions. But in the end his piece was an interesting example of high-tech meets

low-tech, with sounds like the piercing difference tones produced by simultaneously blowing two bosun's whistles moving around the square via the computer.

There are also certain limitations inherent in the site itself being so open and with traffic all around, but all the pieces in OUT OF NOWHERE were site-specific and so took these restrictions into account from their inception.

We are working on bringing a mobile version of the system to the UK, with speakers that could be placed in any kind of pattern, not necessarily a square grid flat on the ground, so the possibilities for exploring other spaces – indoors and out – with moving sound and a moving audience are much greater.

Right now I'm looking for funding and venues or sites.

Salome: What was your piece 'The Sound of Sirens' about?

John: I designed 100 different warning sounds from scratch: I've always had a love-hate relationship with alarms and wanted to use this opportunity to manipulate these public sounds in a public space. The title is a pun on the Simon and Garfunkel song 'The Sounds of Silence', and through that a reference to Cage's ideas on silence and its non-existence.

Salome: And how did the public react?

John: During the testing and 'choreography' of my piece, a representative of Copenhagen City council came to the gallery saying that people were frightened and confused, and as a result they were imposing an official ban. I hadn't set out to be deliberately confrontational, and in fact rejected another idea for a piece which involved ricocheting gunshots partly on the grounds that it might upset the authorities or the public – I guess you never know when you're going to hit a nerve.

The majority of people on the square had very positive reactions to my piece, whether or not they were aware of the Sound/Gallery's existence. Several people commented that listening to the sirens whizzing around you and bouncing back and forth across the square was like being under attack, but added that being aware that there was no real danger allowed you to enjoy the experience, which was very much in line with my intention to explore the extent to which it is possible to divorce warning sounds from the anxiety that usually accompanies them.

One group of bemused school children came to the conclusion that the sirens were a way of telling which drains were blocked and that I must have been relaying that information via walkie-talkie to someone who could clear them.

Perhaps I'm the first sound artist to have been mistaken for a drain inspector: it gives new meaning to the term 'multimedia'.

Salome: Compared to London, Copenhagen is very quiet. Here we are so used to alarms and sirens, we don't really react anymore. They have lost the original signification of warning which they seem to still carry very strongly in Copenhagen. Given that the aural sensitivity of people is relative to where they live, perhaps your piece might even go unnoticed in London.

John: I don't think I would do the same piece in London, certainly not in the same way. It might not be immediately apparent, but part of the point was to encourage people to listen to their environment differently. I was aware that I was interfering with the soundscape in a very direct way, but warning sounds are inextricably tied to the urban environment – more so to larger cities like London and New York, but because Copenhagen is a quieter place my piece could be seen as a warning to the people of Copenhagen of things to come. In fact, someone overheard a group of people jokingly debating whether it was the sound of the year 2010 or 2011. I wanted to draw attention to the plethora of electronic alarms and reminders but also to suggest that they can be appreciated in an abstract or aesthetic way.



Salome: Were you concerned about adding sounds to an already acoustically overpopulated environment?

John: It wasn't just relentless noise: in some parts of my piece I used sounds which blended seamlessly with the ambient sound of the square and the surrounding streets. People on the square would be checking to see if their watch alarm was going off or peering far off down the street to see if there was a police chase under way. By using sounds which are difficult to pinpoint (which paradoxically includes most common siren types) and moving them around the square, it was possible to encourage visual exploration of the architectural space of the square. At other times I used a chorus of competing alarms to push the resident sounds out of the square and fill the entire space, only to cut them off abruptly and allow the ambient sounds to re-establish themselves in people's minds.

What doesn't interest me in a lot of the discourse about acoustic ecology is the unspoken rule that if a sound work is about the sonic environment it has to be quiet and subtle. I think a piece can be brash and still bring about awareness. I wouldn't have done a siren piece in that situation which went on for hours: it was a short piece and meant to be very contained.

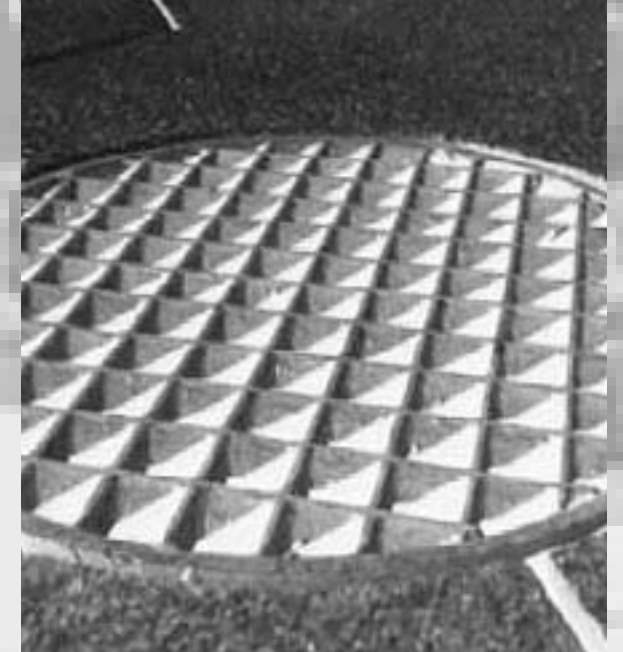
Salome: So you see the redefinition of a public space made possible by the Sound/ Gallery as a possible element in the sensitisation of the public to its environment?

John: Sound is an aspect of the environment which is often ignored. The gallery provides a very open system for artists in that it doesn't impose a particular way of sensitising people to their sound environment. Within our show the two most different pieces were probably mine and David Cunningham's.

With 'Open Square' David determined not to impose any sounds which weren't already there: he simply amplified the ambient sound from one part of the square and diffused it in the area defined by the speaker grid with a gentle pulsing motion, causing the nature and volume of the ambient sound to change slightly. It was a very subtle work which existed on that fine line between not listening to your environment and noticing that something different is happening and thereby becoming sensitised to what is going on around you.

With my piece there was little danger that anyone would walk through the square without noticing it, but it shows the conceptual flexibility of the Sound/Gallery that such opposite approaches could each cause people to perceive differently.

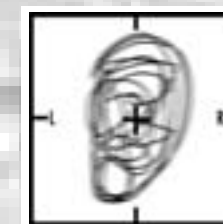
Each piece in OUT OF NOWHERE tried to re-direct or re-tune the listener's perception in a unique way. Jem Finer, who was one of the founder members of the Pogues, turned the square into a huge virtual



video game, with crazy Nintendo-style tunes zipping around the square, often resulting in spontaneous dancing by unsuspecting children. His piece, TILT, brought that head-spinning sonic atmosphere of the games arcade out into the open, as though the walls had suddenly disappeared. Jem transferred sounds from one part of the urban environment to another; Kaffe Matthews borrowed sounds from one urban environment, Trafalgar Square, and superimposed them onto another in a kind of symbolic linking of the two cities. Comedian Tim Hope and artist Sarah Cole worked on a more intimate level, interacting remotely with people on the square by sending noises or specific phrases like insults or compliments from the studio to the speaker nearest to where they were standing and following them as they moved across the square, acting as a kind of Big Brother with a sense of humour.

Salome: Do you feel this creation of awareness to be one of the concerns of the Sound/ Gallery, or is that a by-product of playing with sounds?

John: Yes, this was part of the original concept, though as David points out in his interview on the 'van Gogh' CD-Rom produced by the gallery, a lot of what has been played on the system is 'fairly conventional post-Stockhausen avant-garde'. Nevertheless, it's clear that a lot of the value of the project lies in its potential to bring up issues of how people hear and the quality of the sound environment.*



* van Gogh is a quarterly hybrid audio CD/CD-Rom which aims to promote, document and provide historical context for sound art.

Details through:

<<http://vip.cybercity.dk/~cis2202/index.htm>>

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