
Soundwalks: An experiential path to new sonic art

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The diverse practice of soundwalking is approached through its constituent parts (walking and listening) as an ideal ‘way in’ to the appreciation of new sonic art. It is argued that, because it engages the subject in a manner that encourages an aural perception of the environment not only as a physical space but also as a space of social and political tensions, divisions and flows, it can act as an experiential foundation for understanding how sound inflects our thoughts about and our relationships to agencies, human or not, that we interact with. This in turn renders possible modes of listening that are particularly adapted to contemporary forms of sonic art. Furthermore, soundwalking ties in to important contemporary discussions about participation, its potential for radical engagement of audiences and also the various forms of mediation it involves.

1. BREAKING THROUGH BARRIERS WITH SOUND

The desire to bring new music to new communities comes up against many barriers. Some have to do with finding ways in which to make the experience relevant for all involved and not just an exercise in audience development, while others follow from the perceived complexity ‘inherent’ to the music itself. New music (or new sonic art in general), so the argument goes, deliberately sets itself apart from the codes and sonorities that constitute most people’s musical universes, requiring a level of experience and knowledge that reproduces the educational and experiential divisions of our societies. Furthermore, for many people, wherever they may be situated in relation to these divisions, music is part of an overall ensemble of cultural choices and the notion that it (and not just any words that it includes) may have a critical content and be a form of sonically formed thought is not part of the listening experience.

This paper is a revised and extended version of a talk given at the conference *Space, Sound and the Improvisatory* at the Onassis Cultural Centre, Athens, in October 2018 (www.sgt.gr/eng/SPG2172/). The conference was co-curated by Prof. Eric Lewis (McGill) and myself as the third in a series produced in collaboration with the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation. I would like to thank Eric Lewis for the inspiring experience of working with him on these projects.

A main contention of this article is that involving people in discussions, demonstrations or more hands-on activities that involve sound (ambient or synthesised) and treating these sounds as elements for composition and/or improvisation is a very promising way to render intelligible the dimensions through which sound is in its own way eloquent. For anyone with experience of sharing creative processes based on sounds that are not note-based (and therefore do not require any background in music theory) with people who have never approached or thought about sound in this way, it is evident that one relatively quickly crosses a threshold that connects this type of listening to a broader appreciation of ‘challenging’ musical content in an almost intuitive manner and opens a new perspective on our life in sound. That not everyone subsequently decides to pursue this path is neither here nor there; a crack has opened up in the wall of rejection.

Arguably, learning to listen to sounds in a reflective manner is an optimal way to enter the world of the sonic art of recent decades. Though most non-specialists would unhesitatingly say that a Haydn sonata is more ‘understandable’ than almost any example of late twentieth-century Western composition, a case could be made that an understanding of the former is predicated on an understanding of sonata form, not just as a generative principle but, primarily, as a socially shared framework of sense. In the case of most contemporary work, the underlying formal and generative principles are neither apparent nor part of a socially shared experience. The approach of the listener is of necessity grounded in an experience of time, texture, dynamics, space, context and possibly references to other musical or extra-musical cultural elements. Since the irruption of sirens and the inharmonic sounds of percussion into musical discourse in Edgard Varèse’s *Ionisation* (1933),¹ Pierre Schaeffer’s series of *Cinq études de bruits* (1948) and definitively since John Cage’s *Imaginary Landscape*

¹Arguably since Arseny Avraamov’s *Symphony of Sirens* (1922), though this work’s public propaganda context perhaps weakens its significance as music, but not as a conceptually radical approach to organised sound.

IV (1951) the compositionally and/or performatively organised sonic universe has known no bounds. A consequence of this expansion and of the correlative fragmentation of musical discourse into compositional idiolects is that the listener, counter-intuitively perhaps, has less need than ever before of prior musicological knowledge and a greater need of a heightened auditory sensitivity in order to partake of a meaningful musical experience.² This new context of composition has been well expressed by one who, it could be argued, represents the end-point of the (European at least) post-Second World War compositional world, Helmut Lachenmann: 'The experience of art and not least that of beauty is intimately tied to the refusal of blind aesthetic habits, a refusal that draws its legitimacy from what it offers, namely the offer of a transformed, if you wish liberated, perception' (Lachenmann and Häusler 1996: 113).

In this overall context, the practice of soundwalking seems to me to represent an extremely fertile terrain both of practice and of theoretical work.³ Its premises are two activities – movement through space and auditory awareness – that are in some form accessible to most people, and indeed practised on a daily basis.⁴ Beyond these basic presuppositions for the instantiation of a soundwalk, the practice links to a very broad range of theoretical concerns, a fact that in itself represents an opportunity to tie a listening experience to wider political, environmental and philosophical questions and in this sense is possibly a paradigm for ingraining these dimensions of sonic art in experience. For reasons that I shall make clear further on, in this article I shall be focusing on soundwalks in an urban environment.

Soundwalking raises issues of our understanding of space and even more so of the reality of its segmentation and of the unequal access to all segments. In an urban context it therefore pushes us to reflect upon the right to the city but also upon the ways in which sonic practices can themselves write the city; it ties into questions of 'everyday life' and the potential for subversive or liberating practices that this affords; it is clearly connected to the important discussion around

the modalities and implications of participatory art-forms; it obliges us to critically reflect upon the mediations of our experience and their implications. Finally, and importantly for the theme of this issue, involvement in soundwalks as either participant or content-creator is a powerful way of engaging previously inexperienced people with the discipline of listening, without which the world of new sonic art in general remains hermetically closed and seemingly irrelevant. After touching upon a series of more theoretical concerns, I shall conclude with some examples that I hope will illustrate how these concerns play out in practice.

2. WALKING

The fact that soundwalks are dependent on so mundane an activity as movement through space at a slow pace and in a fashion that allows the senses to engage with the surroundings is important. The experience of embodied, located presence; the autonomy of movement and direction, the slowness and closeness to the field and the zooming in on detail that it permits; the liberation of associations and images in the thought process as the body moves through an ever-changing environment; the implications of being exposed to that environment for one's understanding of humans' effects on it; the realisation that space is not smooth and that apart from geographical and physical obstacles, the distribution of access and freedom of passage are conditioned by powerful forces of ownership, segregation and repression; the feeling of 'liberation' in relation to work and consumption that a walk can inspire – all these and other aspects indicate why the practice of walking (that most basic human practice) has been imbued with new meaning in our machinistic and now also digital world. These aspects of walking are part and parcel of the experience of a soundwalk.

Writing in 1833, in the period of early modernity, at the time when the status of walking was evolving from a utilitarian chore for most people to an activity of leisure for growing segments of society involving socialising and observation of the newly emerging consumerist urban environment, Balzac asked himself why no one had made a reflection on walking central to the understanding of philosophical, psychological and political systems (Balzac and Tortonesi 2015). Observing people's gait, Balzac found that he could discern myriad elements related to character and social class for example. To remain within the context of nineteenth-century France, Baudelaire famously brought to the fore the personage of the *flâneur*, who in turn became an emblematic figure of Walter Benjamin's monumental *Arcades* project, left

²To avoid any misunderstanding: I am not suggesting that there is no interest or use in the study of music, or that thinking about one's musical experience is a waste of time, merely that the feeling that most casual listeners have to the effect that without prior knowledge of musical systems it is impossible to appreciate new sonic art is a 'barrier to entry' that one should try to deconstruct.

³I find the simplicity of Hildegard Westerkamp's definition of a soundwalk perfectly satisfying: 'A soundwalk is any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment' (Westerkamp n.d.).

⁴During the conference at which the first version of this article was presented, John Drever underlined the necessity to integrate an understanding of different realities of mobility and hearing into our thinking about soundwalking, a dimension that is not reflected sufficiently in most work on the subject, including the present text.

unfinished at his death in 1940 (Benjamin and Lacoste 2002).

Since then, the bibliography on walking has been extensive: historical surveys such as Joseph Amato's *On Foot* (Amato 2004), the compendium on *Walking and the Aesthetics of Modernity* (Benesch and Specq 2016) or Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust* (Solnit 2001); literary works such as W.G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* (Sebald 2007) or more popular texts such as Will Self's *Psychogeography* (Self 2007) for example. Here is not the place, and I am not qualified to attempt a review of the way walking has been embraced by theory as a particularly rich form of human activity. However, it is relevant to the discussion on soundwalking as a creative practice to underline that many of these theoretical approaches identify an emancipatory, perhaps even subversive, potential in this everyday practice.

An oft-cited locus of such thinking is the writing of Guy Debord on psychogeography and the *dérive* (drift). As Debord affirms: 'the concept of *dérive* is indissolubly linked to the recognition of psychogeographic effects and to the affirmation of a playful-constructive behaviour, which opposes it on all counts to the classic notions of voyage and walk' (*Internationale Situationniste* (2) 1958: 19).⁵ Psychogeography in turn is defined as 'the study of the precise effects of the geographical milieu, whether consciously arranged or not, acting directly on the affective behaviour of individuals' (*Internationale Situationniste* (1) 1958: 13). The *dérive*, when practised correctly (Debord provides extensive instructions and suggestions), transforms the perception of cities, replacing a cartographic representation and division of space by one that is determined by 'ambiance' and reveals their 'principle axes of passage, their exits and their defences' and primarily leads to the 'constant shrinking of [the] frontier margins, up to their complete dissolution' (*Internationale Situationniste* (2) 1958: 23). This process can therefore weaken the grid that administration and authority places on our understanding of space and its politics.

Writing three decades later, Michel de Certeau in the work translated as *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Certeau 1984: 93) devotes a chapter to 'Walking in the City'. Walking appears in his writing as one of the surprisingly powerful ways in which people manage to create minor spaces of emancipation within the structures of power that tend to homogenise and control. Inciting us to elaborate further on the capacity of the 'practice of space' that is walking to dissolve functional barriers that instrumentally fix the urban space, de Certeau suggests that 'amigrational, or

metaphorical, city [thus] slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city' (Certeau 1984: 93).

The idea that walking enables a potentially radical re-interpretation of the city and, as de Certeau writes, conceiving of walking as a 'space of enunciation' can to my mind be productively related to the sonic dimension of urban space, creating a conceptual framework that suggests that the practice of soundwalking contains the potential to experientially understand sound in a way that intimately links it to critical thinking.

3. A SONIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE URBAN

In *Le Grain de la Voix*, Roland Barthes reflects upon the difficulty of speaking about music, of interpreting music in words. Rather than try to avoid the 'predicative fatality', the unavoidability of having recourse to adjectives, he proposes to displace the margin of contact between music and language (Barthes 1992: 237), to work through language on a different plane of our perception of music. Famously, he does this with regard to a particular type of vocal music, one in which a language meets a voice, a point of contact that he names 'grain'; 'the grain of the voice, when the latter is in a double posture, a double production: of language and of music' (ibid.: 237). He goes on, taking a lead from Julia Kristeva, to differentiate the *phéno-chant* (that which in the performance of the vocal music is in the service of communication, representation and expression) from the *géo-chant* which is 'the volume of the singing and saying voice, the space in which meanings germinate 'from within language and in its very materiality' (ibid.: 239), which he condenses in the notion of *diction*.

I wonder: do cities, in their sonority, manifest diction?

In another, less well-known text, *Sémiologie et Urbanisme* (1971), Barthes who 'loves cities and loves signs', proposes that 'the city is a discourse and this discourse is veritably a language'. He further proposes that 'he who moves in a city ... is a kind of reader who, according to his obligations and movements, takes fragments of what has been said to actualise them in secret' (Barthes 1971: 13). These fragments are pieces of what is the essentially rhizomatic structure of the city where 'we find ourselves inside a chain of infinite metaphors where that which is signified is always a step back [en retrait] or becomes a signifier itself' (ibid.). This unfolding of the signifier is what characterises the city as a poem and it is the task of urban semiology to 'grasp it and make it sing'.

Maybe one who displaces herself in a city is not just a reader but also a listener in this sense: an instinctive semiologist who interprets the song of the city 'in its

⁵The publications of the *Internationale Situationniste* can be found at Situationist International Online. (n.d.). <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/situ.html>

very materiality'. And if so, and this listener can hear the *grain* in the city-voice that sings (extending Barthes's use of the notion beyond its initial context of individual bodies), then what she hears is 'the very friction between the music and something else, which is language' (Barthes 1992: 244). This act of hearing in turn implies an acceptance to 'listen to my relationship to the body of he or she who sings or plays and . . . this relationship is erotic, but in no way "subjective" (it is not the psychological subject in me that listens; the ecstasy that it hopes for will not strengthen it – express it – but on the contrary, loose it)' (ibid.). And, again to metaphorically extend the embodied idea of grain to one's relationship with the city, how else to characterise the rhizomatic structure of the signifiers housed in the city's language and our relationship of losing oneself in it if not as, in its turn, erotic? 'The eroticism of the city is the lesson that we can draw from the infinitely metaphorical nature of urban discourse.' This erotic relationship is related to the body, but not to *a* body, certainly not to a familiar body since 'the city, essentially and semantically is the place of meeting the other' (Barthes 1971: 13).

Without any pretence to being consistent with Barthes's thought, the 'germination' that can occur when we read these two texts one through the other seems to me to set us off on a soundwalk through the city. It establishes a field in which we have left behind our instrumental relationship to the urban space and have entered an infinitely rich network of sonic metaphors in which the sounds we hear are the aural traces of so many others (humans and things and their interactions), located each one at a specific point which in turn leads us on in a chain with numerous strands. In this field, through which we move as bodies, we can ask ourselves who these 'others' are, what our relationship with them is, who we are among them and how our experience of sound, mediated by the specific form of the soundwalk, can provoke or enrich this understanding.

4. WALKING – COMPOSING

From sightings of Beethoven walking round the walls of Vienna, to Mahler's mountain hikes and Satie's daily trek from Arcueil to Paris, there are many anecdotal connections between walking and composing. The practices of the post-Second World War avant-garde, however, made much more direct connections between composition and walking, indeed in many cases making walking the means of realisation/interpretation of a conceptual sonic work. This can take several different forms: the composition of a walk as is the case in Michael Parsons's 'Walk' (1969) for the Scratch Orchestra (Parsons 1997); walking that focuses the participants' awareness of their bodies in

space (including acoustic space), such as Pauline Oliveros's *Extreme Slow Walk* (Oliveros 2005); the temporal displacement and superposition of sounds heard during a soundwalk, for example Yolande Harris's *Displaced Sound Walks* (2010–) (Gottschalk 2016: 238); R. Murray Schafer's occasional soundwalks in urban spaces, documented in the *European Sound Diary*, which suggest different ways of interacting with the acoustics of open or enclosed spaces in cities (Schafer 1977); the experimental and participatory 'audio guides' developed by David Helbich (n.d.) for various cities. These practices are well documented and there is no point in cataloguing them here. Rather, I would recommend John Levack Drever's article 'Soundwalking: Aural excursions into the everyday' (Drever 2009)⁶ as an excellent historical review with plentiful references for further reading. The fact that soundwalks are formalised in these varied ways underscores their status as iterations of a formal idea and, therefore, in a manner that is perhaps not always obvious, their status as performances.

What I believe is interesting to touch upon is the way in which Jacques Attali's concept of composition relates to the practice of soundwalking. 'Composition' is the term Attali uses to describe no less than the generative principle of a new world order, 'the emergence of the free act, self-transcendence, pleasure in being instead of having' (Attali 1985: 134). It is based upon an improvisatory stance, one that also resonates with de Certeau's belief in the disruptive potential of the creativity that people exercise by distorting consumerist patterns, though its thrust is much more radical: 'Composition thus leads to a staggering conception of history, a history that is open, unstable, in which labor no longer advances accumulation, in which the object is no longer a stockpiling of lack, in which music effects a re-appropriation of time and space' (Attali 1985: 147). For Attali there are certain precursors of this new, liberated regime of composition, most interestingly the radical black improvisers and composers of the Jazz Composers' Guild and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. He emphasises the significance of their combination of strategies aimed at both freeing collective and individual creative practice and circumventing the barriers erected by a highly racist and venal music industry.

Soundwalking has a relevance to the idea of composition expressed by Attali. First of all, as a practice it is difficult to include within a regime of accumulation. Though there are collections of soundwalks⁷ and although many contemporary walks are dependent

⁶See also Gottschalk (2016: 235–41).

⁷See, for example, Janet Cardiff's *The Walk Book* (Cardiff n.d.).

on media (and consequently on issues of ownership and licensing), the fundamental prerequisites of soundwalking are not fettered by such concerns. Second, soundwalking can attempt a 're-appropriation of time and space'; the former because it does not involve the participation in a kind of ritual time (that of the performance) during which noise is shut out, but rather a composing with the city's real-time sonic life, the latter because it invites the participant to spin an immaterial web of listening traces through the urban space. Third, it engages the participants in an improvisatory process (in many instances) devolving the power to materialise a sonic idea (proposed by the designer of the soundwalk) to them. Finally, I would claim that it reverses people's relationship to recent forms of composition and sound art: through their experience of listening-composing, the barrier of knowledge and authority is fractured, possibly opening up new forms of listening beyond this experience.

5. LISTENING

Listening (in various ways), like walking, is one of our most fundamental modes of being in the world and, as with walking, recent thinking has sought to focus on what this universal 'background' activity tells us about ourselves and the world when we actually reflect upon it. To quote Salomé Voegelin in *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound*: 'A sonic sensibility reveals the invisible mobility below the surface of a visual world and challenges its certain position, not to show a better place but to reveal what this world is made of, to question its singular actuality and to hear other possibilities that are probable too, but which, for reasons of ideology, power and coincidence do not take equal part in the production of knowledge, reality, value and truth' (Voegelin 2014: 3).

But, of course, the value of listening does not lie primarily in its complementarity to seeing. Brandon LaBelle has written extensively on the intrinsic relationality of sound and the relevance of this dimension to space, since sound reveals that space is much more than its apparent materiality (LaBelle 2015). One of the areas of questioning that is opened up by the practice of soundwalking is to try to understand how it problematises our normal interactions with space and sound and suggests new configurations of social interactions, of political relations. Referring to a broader ensemble of sonic practices than soundwalking, but to my mind with relevance to this practice as well, LaBelle suggests that 'sound art, in seeking out peripheral zones of contact, and by bringing our attention toward the territories between human and non-human, bodies and things, energies and

expenditures, incites the formation of publics at the periphery' (LaBelle 2015: 237).

It may be that, in and of itself, listening has a certain subversive quality to it. Listening inevitably decentres you, relating you to a source beyond your body that affects you in a physical way, through vibration, in a sense making you part of it. Sound is pervasive; it fills all the space within its range, and as it does so, it unites those who listen in a kind of community that is physical and sensual. Sound can also be construed as subaltern, only (relatively) recently having made itself heard in academia and liberated itself from the restrictive formats of musical practice and reception. It is hard to control, prone to accident and fundamentally impure, since it coalesces into a complex whole. As Voegelin suggests, it also goes against the grain of our dominant visual culture, shifting our perceptual centre of gravity, thus displacing our awareness and heightening our sensitivity to the environment we are in.

Approached from this angle, one could suggest that this prioritisation of listening as a mode of apprehending the sonic exchanges that one experiences in an urban environment subverts a given order: of the ways in which we conceive and feel ourselves to be a part of a network of people, institutions and infrastructures; of a hierarchy of the senses and of sense; of a state of separation, compartmentalisation and privatisation.

The disruptive and critical effectiveness of sonic practices in the public space may well be situated at this level: they are experiential and impact the way in which we imagine our world, and at the same time, through this shift in perspective open up the possibility of imagining that it could be otherwise.

I think it is worth mentioning that thinking about sound and listening in the context of soundwalking overlaps in fascinating ways with recent research on agency and agents, from forms of actor network theory to more radical conceptions of agency such as Jane Bennett's inspiring conception of vibrant matter (Bennett 2010) and Karen Barad's work on posthumanist performativity (Barad 2003). It is as though sound, precisely because of its relationality, because of the materiality of its origin but the immateriality of its pervasiveness, is particularly important in reflecting on how what we term the 'social' is constituted.

6. PARTICIPATION

Soundwalks are realised through the active involvement of people in a sense that is not trivially true, as with all art works, but in virtue of the ways in which the choices and actions of those engaged in a soundwalk have a determining effect on the very form and

content of the walk's instantiation. Indeed, the reason why soundwalks are so relevant for the introduction of new sonic art to new communities is because they provide an experiential inroad into modes of listening that are particularly adapted to contemporary forms of sonic art. Participation in sound works therefore represents a crucial issue and one that connects, once again, with a host of theoretical but also ideological and political concerns.

Taking a step back, one can see a filiation between artistic work from the 1960s onwards that emphasises artistic process not final artistic result, and manifests an ambition to create dynamics that are directly transformative of society and many participatory sound art practices of today. A classic locus for the expression of this ambition is Joseph Beuys's articulation of the idea of a 'social sculpture' as a vital component in the drive towards a new social order: 'Self-determination and participation in the cultural sphere (freedom); in the structuring of laws (democracy); and in the sphere of economics (socialism). Self-administration and decentralization (three-fold structure) occurs: FREE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM' (Beuys 1974).

The three main agendas of participatory art, as summarised by Claire Bishop, are: Activation (the creation of an active subject who 'will be empowered by the experience of physical or symbolic participation'); Authorship (the gesture of ceding authorial control and encouraging 'collaborative creativity ... understood both to emerge from, and to produce, a more positive and non-hierarchical social model'); Community (the 'restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning') (Bishop 2006). It is important to note that participatory art is not the same thing as art that just involves some kind of interaction on the part of the spectator; the three 'agenda items' mentioned above imply a far more radical political ambition. The distinction between interactivity and participation obliges us to reflect upon the role of mediating technologies in our experience of contemporary soundwalks, an issue I shall return to below.

Could it be, then, that soundwalking, as a form of participatory art, is not only a way of engaging new communities with new sonic art, but also in some way potentially constitutive of communities, or even possibly publics (to use Michael Warner's concept) (Warner 2002)? This is an issue (more generally) that has been hotly debated over recent decades: what is the political potential of art forms that seem to model themselves, to a degree at least, on political processes? The social activation, distributed authorship and collective elaboration of meaning might seem to have relational affinities with any number of progressive formulations of possible political relations, from those elaborated within anarchist theory to others close to

conceptions of deliberative democracy. This debate is intense and extensive and justice cannot be done to it in the context of the current article. Nonetheless, I believe that it is not useful to seek the critical content of soundwalking as a practice in its ability to model some form of relations of power that are more desirable than those we live within today, for two reasons at least.

The first is that there is a real risk of what Claire Bishop (in more recent work), among others, has identified as an instrumentalisation of participatory art. Today, in the European context at least, there is hardly any public money available for culture if it is not possible to demonstrate the social utility, in some form, of one's proposal. Art is loaded with the responsibility to heal social wounds that are in the first place created by systemic contradictions, violence and oppression that it clearly cannot affect. Of course, it is essential that access to culture should be broadened, that diversity should be promoted and that communities should congregate around participation in an art experience. Indeed, some of the most gratifying experiences of my own work have been related to such projects. But we must retain a critical awareness of the fact that neoliberalism thrives on creating bubbles of freedom and equality; indeed, these are probably good for the market. As long as the overall structures of constriction and inequality remain in place: do what you like, but don't touch the bottom line. Soundwalking, seen as a generic practice, independently of the specific aesthetic or political content of any particular walk, can provide just such a bubble.

The second, following a similar line, adopts the perspective of the producers. The art worker is more and more often obliged to don the clothes of the social worker, educator, entrepreneur, innovator. Now, just as it is definitely not a bad thing to open up access to art, the emergence of the 'hybrid' artist cannot be condemned out of hand. Nonetheless, it is essential to retain a critical clarity of the uncanny similarities between this new role of the artist with traits of what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello analysed as the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). What may be stimulating forms of interdisciplinarity, attitudes that appear to aim for a closer interaction of 'art' and 'life', a progressive focus on project and process rather than immediately marketable product, may at the same time be completely compatible with what contemporary forms of productive work require of us. Again, soundwalking, unless particular walks are developed in ways that somehow integrate an understanding of this overall context, might end up entrenching it further.

If soundwalking practice is not a vehicle of progressive, critical content *in virtue* of the participatory dimension that it to some degree always entails, then

on the basis of what conceptual framework might we evaluate the forcefulness of particular instances? And by extension, the potential forcefulness of particular instances of new sonic art? To quote Claire Bishop: ‘there is an urgent need to restore attention to the modes of conceptual and affective complexity generated by socially oriented art projects’ (Bishop 2012: 8), rather than fixate on the fact of their participatory nature. For many writers and researchers (including Bishop), the work of Jacques Rancière has provided a matrix for conceptualising the political impact of artistic practices: ‘Politics invents new forms of collective enunciation; it reframes the given by inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time – in short, new bodily capacities’ (Rancière 2010: 139). This ‘newness’, and the corresponding friction it generates, is what Rancière terms *dissensus*, and as he affirms ‘If there exists a connection between art and politics, it should be cast in terms of dissensus, the very kernel of the aesthetic regime’ (Rancière 2010: 140).

Many ideas that are fundamental to the themes developed in this article resonate with the passage from *Dissensus* quoted above: walking as creating a space of enunciation (de Certeau); the rhizomatic structure of the city (Barthes); active listening practices rendering audible what was not so beforehand; the deconstruction of given spatial divisions; the essential ‘embodiment’ of soundwalking practice. So, we might argue that participation can derive its destabilising force under certain circumstances, for instance when it enables us to critically perceive and understand how we are engaged in complex relationships, such as ones established by aesthetic theories or urban planning, and how binary oppositions such as activity and passivity, engagement and theory do not do justice to the situations we strive to comprehend (Jackson 2011). In such a conception, the participatory and the conceptual are levels of engagement with the work in its context that reinforce each other rather than act as mutually exclusive sources of critical value.

7. CITIES

The question of context is essential and I shall now touch upon why it seems to me that soundwalks in an urban context are particularly rich in the opportunities they afford for critical experience. All the more so in our times when the segregation and privatisation of urban space is increasingly pronounced, and when the notion of public space is far from being unequivocally understood. As David Pinder notes: ‘To intervene through creative practice in public space today ... is to enter into a crucial struggle over the

meanings, values and potentialities of that space at a time when its democracy is highly contested’ (Pinder 2005: 398).

Cities occupy an emblematic position in contemporary thought as crucibles of tensions both collectivising and segregating, of overarching structures whose atomic complexity defies fixed generalisations. As attention shifted (for better and for worse) from approaches based on class to ones concerned with identities and their significance for denouncing inequality and repression, the aggregating function of large urban centres and the vast patchwork of varied demographics that they represent have made them be seen as fertile ground for political thought that moves within a rhizomatic cartography such as the one described by Barthes.

In an influential text, Ruth Fincher and Jane Jacobs characterised cities as the stage of ‘located politics of difference’, seeing in the discontinuities of the urban fabric a manifestation of the unequal distribution of power but also a fundamental challenge to top-down control and policies that obliterate the specific identities, needs and desires of those who inhabit them. For Fincher and Jacobs, being alert to this striated texture of cities means ‘attending to the various ways that specificity – both social and spatial – can transform structures of power and privilege; the ways oppressed groups can, through a politics of identity and a politics of space, reclaim rights, resist and subvert’ (Fincher and Jacobs 1998: 2).

In more recent scholarship, the operative idea of identity has become even more ‘granular’, as the type of descriptors that can be engaged in thinking about the ways in which people are assembled into groups for purposes of analysis and planning becomes more sensitive. Steven Vertovec has argued for breaking down perceptions of homogenous groups and for a ‘diversification of diversity’, encapsulated in the notion of ‘super-diversity’. In such an approach, one needs to understand ‘the interaction of variables such as country of origin, ethnicity, language, immigration status (and its concomitant rights, benefits and restrictions), age, gender, education, occupation and locality’ (Vertovec 2007: 1044). In subsequent research, it has been proposed to adopt an even more granular approach that would be sensitive to what has been termed ‘hyper-diversity’, which ‘refers to an intense diversification of the population in socio-economic, social and ethnic terms, but also with respect to lifestyles, attitudes and activities’ and takes into account not only a greater number of variables but also the potential for complex interaction between them (Tasan-Kok, Kempen, Raco and Bolt 2013: 6).

Indeed, it seems that, from our contemporary perspective, this fundamental non-identity is essential

to the understanding of what a city is.⁸ Iris Marion Young proposed to ‘construct a normative ideal of city life as an alternative to both the ideal of community and the liberal individualism it criticizes as asocial’ (Young 1990: 237); by ‘city life’ she means a form of social relationship that she defines as ‘the being together of strangers’. The emphasis here must be on ‘being together’, or to put it another way, following Richard Sennett, on ‘a system which is open socially to different voices who attend to one another, rather [than] who each do their own thing in isolation’ (Sennett n.d.).

Attending to one another has to start with paying attention to one another and to the ‘other’, perceiving aural traces through one’s own presence on the stage of a ‘located politics of difference’, including voices but also musics permeating the air, mechanical noise, traces of natural sound, passages through aural thresholds, sonically controlled spaces and sonically chaotic ones, sonic manifestations of antagonisms and the effects of one’s own position in this magma of sound. One could claim that soundwalks, apart from attuning the participant to a reflective relationship with sound and particularly to the sound of the other (human of course, but also other entities in a potentially expanded conception of agency), also put this form of attentiveness into practice and engrains it in experience.

The soundwalk, in distinction to the practice of the *dérive* to which it is genealogically and conceptually related, has a form: it has been designed. Despite the fundamental unpredictability of the content of each instantiation, it is (or should be, I would suggest) the result of an artistic decision, one that is of course dependent (both for its impetus and its outcome) on its participatory realisation. It brings into play both the abstraction of form and the embodiment of the participant herself, both critical distance and physical immersion. In an urban context it structures a path through a hyper-diverse environment, marking both the specificity of that path and the fluidity of the connections that establish themselves through the listening experience, both the porosity of urban space and the powers that work to impose hard borderlines. That which can, ideally, become apparent through the form of the soundwalk that destabilises our received aural wisdom is the often-suppressed promise of community.

8. MEDIATION

Precisely because the soundwalk is composed as a form, it of necessity involves forms of mediation. At

⁸It could be argued that the emphasis on this social granularity, though possibly doing justice to its object, also leads us to forget the commonalities on the basis of which social movements can be formed.

the very least the choices made but ever more frequently the use of technological interfaces of various kinds, more often than not digital, imply forms of mediation that may or may not be explicit. It is therefore important to address questions concerning the cultural specificity of the use of digital tools in this area.

In this context of technological mediation, the first thing we should note is the lack of a clear distinction between the public and the private, even as we try to grasp the constitution of an agonistic public sphere. Though not functioning in isolation, one of the primary vectors of the effacement of the distinction between the private and the public is the pervasive media that we all to some degree are immersed in. Thomas Mathiesen, writing in 1997 before the age of social media, had already made some powerful points about the parallel development of panoptical and what he terms synoptical control. This latter situation in which the many see the few, based on media systems, is a core element in ‘the creation of human beings who control themselves through self-control and thus fit neatly into a so-called democratic capitalist society’ (Mathiesen 2013: 215). Today, this reciprocal flow of data used for influence and control has become clearly visible, thanks to the public discussion following cases such as Cambridge Analytica. We, as users, willingly provide the information needed to influence our decisions and acts in exchange for the convenience of using web-based services. At an even more direct and violent level, state security apparatuses are equally, if not more, adept at using social media networks in order to track and repress movements even as they form and organise themselves, as the members of those movements themselves (Morozov 2011). In fact, it is almost impossible to go about one’s life, assuming it involves transactions, communications and movement, without exposing oneself to the systems that for a variety of reasons track us constantly. As Bernard Harcourt writes of what he has called ‘the expository society’: ‘A new expository power constantly tracks and pieces together our digital selves. It renders us legible to others, open, accessible, subject to everyone’s idiosyncratic projects – whether governmental, commercial, personal, or intimate’ (Harcourt 2015: 15).

The tools we use to create a media work are therefore not neutral; they are based on the same kind of interfaces and functionalities that are familiar to us from a whole range of applications that enable the pervasiveness of social media and other systems that enable our interaction with the contemporary world, a pervasiveness that has become a kind of ‘second nature’ akin to what Antonio Gramsci called ‘common sense’ (Crehan 2016). Clearly, this contemporary common sense (as it emerges and evolves) is very different to that

of Gramsci's pre-Second World War Italy, but it still functions as that fragmentary and received framework of reference that allows people to navigate the world around them. In order to understand today's forms of common sense we need to scrutinise the contemporary pervasive and interactive media (Crehan 2016: 186), and the new forms of exclusion (often masquerading as inclusion) call for a different conception of the subaltern to that developed by Gramsci. But it is a task that is central to any kind of critical theory and practice.

So, in my opinion, a crucial issue is the degree to which the soundwalks perceive and react to the need to problematise this process. As Katia Arfara and her co-authors note in the introduction to the recent collection of essays, *Intermedial Performance and Politics in the Public Sphere*: 'The intermedial self-reflexivity stimulates a critical understanding of the functions of liveness and mediatization, as well as the growing role of digital media in contemporary culture' (Arfara, Mancewicz and Remshardt 2018: 8). Might it be the case that as practitioners concerned with sound and listening, we have underestimated the importance of how this medium and activity is staged? Have we sufficiently reflected on the implications of the interfaces we use, on whether they reinforce or on the contrary fracture the integrity of common sense? Or the fact that the systems we use in various geo-referencing applications also (perhaps primarily) serve military purposes? Have we taken on board the full implications of the multi-modal perception that intermediality can bring when we design these environments and works? Have we managed to find ways, working as we do in a medium that is fundamentally non-discursive, with all the liberation this brings, to nonetheless confront the political dimensions of the spaces through which we move as listeners, or are these flattened through their medial representation?

9. ATHENS WALKS: THREE EXAMPLES

In this concluding section, I will briefly present three examples of walks involving sound in various ways that have been produced and/or presented by the Onassis Cultural Centre in Athens where I work, as illustrations of the ways in which some of the issues discussed above materialise in practice.

9.1. Viv Corringham: Athens shadow walk

Viv Corringham has performed and presented over 20 shadow walks, including one in Athens in 2016.⁹ These walks are both strangely intimate and very public and the process of their creation involves multiple layers of

experience, listening, interpreting, improvising and remembering.

In the Shadow-walks project I go to places and ask local people to take me on walks that are special for them in some way. I record our conversations as we walk together. Later I retrace the person's walk on my own and attempt to 'sing the walk' through vocal improvisations. These recordings are edited together to make the final sound piece. I also collect any objects I find on the person's route. (Corringham n.d.)¹⁰

The walks can be performed in situ, as was the case in Athens, or they can become sound installations in a gallery setting. They are in all instances centred on 'the person in the place' as the artist says. This insistence on embodiment, indeed on multiple embodiments (the guide, Corringham herself, the participants) resonates with Gascia Ouzounian's affirmation that 'in reviving the corporeal with respect to sonic experience, we cross the boundary from the impartial to the very personal, reclaiming that marginalized space as a space of significance' (Ouzounian 2006: 71).

Corringham traces certain aspects of her practice to specific traditional cultures, for example, the Songlines or Dreaming Tracks of the Australian Aborigines or the Song Paths that Stephen Feld documented in Papua: aural singing maps of geography, cultural identity and history. In the Shadow Walks, these are maps of the everyday urban world (Corringham n.d.).

The type of mediality at play in the Shadow Walks is intriguing. The listeners/participants do not use any kind of technologically delivered media. However, in a very real sense Corringham herself becomes a form of medium (in the technical and the shamanic sense) between them and the initial guide. Just as she improvisationally interprets the walk she mapped with the guide, the listeners in turn in effect re-translate this interpretation into their understanding of the initial intention, but in a manner that is now mediated by Corringham and enveloped by the soundscape of that moment.

This kind of Chinese whisper reminds me of Brandon LaBelle's sonic agency of the overheard: 'The overheard requires us to hear differently: to find meaning in the incoherent fragments and noises that interrupt and that trouble and excite the borders between oneself and another' (LaBelle 2018: 66). Corringham refers to a marginal note by James Joyce in the manuscript of *Ulysses*: 'places remember events'. This idea brings us back to the conceptions of extended agency that I mentioned earlier as something listening can attune us to, and if so perhaps onwards to what Emily Orley has called an ethics of encounter

⁹Part of Borderline Festival 2016, 10 April 2016, www.sgt.gr/eng/SPG1510/.

¹⁰See also the interview with Corringham in Lane and Carlyle (2014).

(Orley 2012). Although the shadow walk only engages the participants to the degree of requiring their physical movement through the environment and their attentiveness to the layering of ambient and improvised sound and does not afford them any space to affect the outcome, it is a valuable experience in what interpreting an urban text through sound might involve.

9.2. Akio Suzuki: *oto date*

Of the examples presented here, this is the least mediated of all: an *oto date*¹¹ is an exercise in listening, but one whose power is diametrically opposed to its simplicity. ‘In Japanese, *nodate* is a tea ceremony held in the open air. [On the basis of] that elegant concept, I suggested that the process of listening to the sounds of an urban environment could be called *oto-date*, incorporating the Japanese word for sound, *oto*’ (Suzuki n.d.).

Though the *Oto Date* are primarily urban pieces, the roots of Suzuki’s practice are in the minimal conditions of listening in nature: the lessons learned from echoes heard on long walks in the mountains (‘the past present future of sound’), to the stones, rocks and twigs that form a good part of his instrumentarium in performance. Akio Suzuki painstakingly builds his *Oto Date* soundwalks. Indeed, this process of long duration composing is characteristic, as in the case of one of his best-known projects, the now sadly demolished *Place in the Sun*, a ‘place for the privilege to listen’ (Suzuki n.d.) in nature that he built alone from bricks he had made himself. Likewise, each *Oto Date* requires a protracted phase of walking and listening, before the process of participation can begin.

The listening spots Suzuki retains are marked with his trademark ear-feet (apparently Cage’s ears, sketched by Suzuki) and one is invited to stand there and listen. As ways into this process, Suzuki provides deceptively simple instructions that lead you to a form of expanded aural awareness:

At this spot you can face a large eucalyptus tree that stands on the west side of Akadimia Platonos (Plato’s Academy) and ‘listen like a tree.’

In this town, you can find many buildings that have been abandoned halfway through construction. The effects on our hearing when you face the abandoned building to the left and then the empty lot to the right ... (Vasiliou Makedonos Street).

This point on Liosion Street is a typical site in this town. Try to imagine how it will change with time and imagine the sounds of the future.

¹¹Part of the Borderline Festival 2015, 8 March 2015, www.sgt.gr/eng/SPG1268/.

Nonetheless, the space for improvisation is substantial. Suzuki says: ‘My score is this big field where people come and stop and then they listen and compose music by themselves with the surroundings. Each person hears something different and there are many various ways of listening’.¹²

So although the whole experience involves just walking and listening, the specific spots Suzuki chooses and the instructions he writes create a whole nexus of sonic relationships, temporal, spatial, ontological. He at the same time composes and provides a form within which the walker-listener moves and, through this form, opens up a space for her to create her own aural relations with the urban environment. Moreover, and I believe this is significant, he also frames these instructions in a concrete social and political context, which reminds me of the form of participation and experience alluded to above by Shannon Jackson.

9.3. Medea Electronique: Soundscapes Landscapes/ *Rhizome III*/Kerameikos/Metaxourgeio

*Rhizome II*¹³ is an interactive soundwalk, built around a geo-referencing application. The walker is free to choose her own path through a specific urban zone and as she moves audio files are triggered, playing content that ranges from interviews, to field recordings, to electroacoustic compositions that have been created based on field recordings.¹⁴

In the booklet accompanying his Athens *Oto Date*, Akio Suzuki recounts the parable of the blind men ‘describing what they feel of different parts of an elephant to each other. Each man’s subjective description is true to what they feel but they are all very different from each other and inherently do not represent the whole’. In *Rhizome II*, it seems as though Medea Electronique (ME) have tried to get together enough blind men to actually recompose the whole. Not that volume is the objective, but multiplying the content that one can encounter in one order or another whilst passing through thresholds in the city is certainly an important part of the production. These elements of content are varied in form and texture; some purely sonic, some verbal, some mixed. Of course, one also sees and hears the urban environment in a direct manner, but this remains a highly curated experience nonetheless. Therefore, providing the greatest possible

¹²Ibid. The map of the listening spots can be downloaded from the link in note 11 and some of the stencils are still visible (2018).

¹³Produced by the Onassis Cultural Centre, www.sgt.gr/eng/SPG1741/.

¹⁴The MyCityMySounds2 application is available as a free download from the App Store. This instance was developed by the ZKM, the Onassis Cultural Centre and ME based on previous iterations by the ZKM and was co-funded through the Creative Europe programme of the EU.

diversity of perspectives (interviews, for example, range from property developers to pimps *via* the president of the rag pickers' association) is an honest attempt to mitigate the inevitable shortfall that any selection implies in relation to 'the chain of infinite metaphors' described by Barthes. Likewise, the inclusion of unmodified field recordings and of composed sections of audio is a strategy that has the ambition of focusing the listener's attention on the urban sonic texture *per se* and at the same time preserving the status of the artwork as an authored interpretation of that sonic world.

It is interesting to note that ME conceived of a 'mirror' action to *Rhizome II*, converting an exhibition gallery into an extended reality environment that maps the physical area covered by the application in a free-form manner and projects the audio (and VR) content onto points in this replicated space. What might it mean to transpose the content in this way? Is it an inherent modality of the media work that its ties to a physical space can be abstracted? If it is the case that the physical location can be media-mapped and simulated elsewhere in this way, then could one say that the mediated content has some kind of experiential fungibility?

The mediation of the walking experience in *Rhizome II* (from which mediation we are at no point critically distanced) raises interesting questions as to what exactly it is we are doing and how it relates on the one hand to the 'located politics of difference' that Fincher and Jacobs theorised, and on the other to our status as listening walkers. *Rhizome II* has the configuration of an open work, in the sense that the participant is allowed the opportunity to experience different sequences and layering of the media content. It operates within the margins of participant creativity that are typical of contemporary applications that incite one to elaborate new narratives with pre-existing content, but do not devolve authorial power to the participants, although it could be argued that each instance of *Rhizome II* completed by a participant does manifest some degree of authorship.

Nonetheless, *Rhizome II* is deeply rooted in its location, making available an impressive depth of media content, and it does implicate the participants in an aesthetic experience that is profoundly marked by physical presence in the urban space. It seems to me that the soundwalk as developed by Medea Electronique is related neither to the *flâneur* so productively analysed by Benjamin nor to the practice of the *dérive* promoted by the Situationists (both of which were discussed during the creative process), precisely because of the dominant role of media-borne content. The practice of the media walk, as implemented by ME, seems to me to be better approached in terms of the concept of assemblage

elaborated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari 1980). Assemblage thinking does not represent a fully structured theory as such, but rather an approach that aims to break through received analytical categories. In discussion with Claire Parnet, Deleuze says:

It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them across ages, sexes and reigns – different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy'. It is never filiations which are important but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind. (Deleuze and Parnet 1987: 69)

The concept of assemblage provides a framework for thinking about power and space, informing a kind of critical political geography (Müller 2015) that I would suggest underlies the form and content of *Rhizome II*, most notably because of the proliferation of content and the multiple possibilities of sequentially hearing this content in multiple and non-repetitive ways. This is made clear by its focus on the voice and the emotions and affects that resonate through these voices, in our mediated hearing as we physically sense our passage through the striated space of the city.

10. CONCLUSION

The practice of composing and organising soundwalks has, over several decades, developed into a varied and fascinating field of sonic work. It integrates the physicality of the walker-listener's activity into the multiple and complex layers of agency brought into play when moving through an environment, even more complex, I would contend, when this environment is an urban terrain in which frontiers and modes of inclusion and exclusion are constantly being renegotiated in manners that render audible (and visible) the unequal distribution of power. Thinking about them leads in many directions and brings together many areas of enquiry. My contention has been that starting from within, as a participant in soundwalks, can also lead to similar paths of enquiry and that the experience of sound that they cultivate is potentially an ideal way to approach contemporary aesthetic categories that are relevant to much new sonic art. At the same time, the questions that soundwalking as a practice raises can help us understand how these categories are also relevant to a more general understanding of our contemporary world. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that we must be aware of the specific manner in which each soundwalk engages its participants in the environment, since both participation and the inevitable mediation that the form of the walk implies need to be critically assessed.

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