Bringing forth the unseen:
sonic windows in urban spaces

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Abstract

This text aims to fullfil a brief overview of sound interventions which emerge not-so-noticed elements of space, many times related to its history, flux or significance. Thus, having as an example these interventions, the use of sound mediated by sound interfaces as a mean of expression that gathers another meaning to the space is discussed. The text is part of a research funded by São Paulo State Agency for Research Funding.

Keywords: sound interfaces; digital media; sound; public art.

If the sound of urban daily life may be considered as a sound wall, in which the acoustic sound environment's elements accumulate intensely in quantity and volume, leading to the detriment of the sound perspective, the sound interfaces can create windows. These windows cause the emerging of aspects which could not be so noticeable before, allowing the listener to see through this wall. Whether through an individualized listening, by headphones in order to hear determined music, or through collective listening, these windows enable another views on the environment where one is. Sound interfaces enable a certain sound not to be restrained in a

given space-time, it can transcend the acoustic sound environment, non-mediated. Also, sound interfaces enables creation, generation and synthesis of sound that does not belong to a determined concrete, physical space.

Creation, simulation, synthesis, edition, mixing, among other processes, allow to originate virtual sound spaces, a virtual instance which connects intrinsically to the concrete space. From this point of view, conditions are created to emerge other ways of listening, communication, as well as different sound expressions and practices.

The use of digital media associated to the context of diverse sound arts, which are difficult to determinate among the many existing categories, strenghten the possibilities of urban space sound interventions. Whether through mobile devices, interaction systems or even sound relocations made by reproduction, these kinds of intervention aggregate informations or attach new manners of musical and artistic expression. Sound interventions here are considered those that change the preexisting daily sound environment, or stimulate the change. It makes cultural expressions emerge, either from the group or artist, or through providing and creating means for audience expression.

Building on characteristics of the urban space itself, there is also the possibility of these works be made available to a larger audience, who are not necessarily searching for artistic fruition because they are not in a locality destined to an art installation, but in a crossing path. Regarding this aspect, the urban interventions are not restricted to the closed space of an art installation, providing new ways of awareness of urban space and its added value: in our matter, the sound.

Regarding to these aspects, a brief overview is made about five urban sound interventions: Evoke; Le chant des Sirènes (The Mermaids Melody); Mayo, Los sonidos de la plaza (May, The sounds of the square); Transition Soundings and Voz Alta (Loud Voice).

Evoke*;* Usman Haque. 2007.[1]

Figure 01: *York's Cathedral illuminated by light projection during Evoke*. Source:
<http://www.haque.co.uk/evoke/source/dsc_2299.html>

Evoke was an audiovisual intervention which took place in York, England. In this intervention, the York's Cathedral is illumined by a projection which in turn is susceptible to the around sounds. It is noticeable through the miked voices the possibility of alter the projected images. Encouraged by this visual output, people start to shout and sing in order to alter the cathedral facade by the projection[2]. Thus, what was once considered static, the constructed building, is changed by the passing elements, i. e. light and sound, resulting in dialogues between static and ephemeral. It can be observed in this system an interdependence relationship among visual and sonic instances and the audience, in which the audience is encouraged to actively participate through sound by the image, establishing a cycle. There is a responsive aspect between the sound and the image: if the projection does not correspond to the expectations, the audience would not be singing or shouting in front of the cathedral.

The difficulty in representing a sound space is given by being so tied to the vision, and in Evoke's intervention the visual output brings out the importance of the sound environment, especially the created by ourselves.

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[1] Available at <http://www.haque.co.uk/evoke.php> [Accessed 20 January 2012].

[2] Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=ZooZYrs28CE> [Accessed 20 January 2012].

This reconfiguration promoted by digital media also is presented in Usman Haque's argument that "technology is used to provoke interactions between people, and between people and their spaces" (Haque, 2004, pp.1).

Le chant des Sirènes; Cláudio Bueno. 2011.[3] [4]

Figure 02: *singers essay for Le chant des Sirènes, at Québec port. Source*: Cláudio Bueno's website <http://invisibleplaces.tumblr.com/post/11319763106/second-essay-port-of-quebec>.

A singing which source is invisible, but acessible by mobile phone. As a sonic invisible monument, it is possible to hear a melodious song that invites the listener to plunge himself into the Saint Laurent river, Québec, through a mobile phone app with GPS. The song is inspired by women who had their husband killed in war as well as, especially, the history of eight women who died in a vessel going to war. Le chant des Sirènes enables different looks about the river, besides being a poetic manner to tell stories using digital media, on a particular way of locative media. The sound cannot be found physically at any space, but it still brings a kind of sound monument that add values and shows other perspectives that can be brought by digital media.

The time contrast in Le chant des Sirènes is given not only by the project and historical inspiration, which is not obvious to the listener who is not familiar with the project. There is a contrast between the digital media and the "mermaid's" singing: the mermaids are present

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[3] Available at <http://invisibleplaces.tumblr.com/archive>. [Accessed 25 May 2012].
[4] Available at <http://vimeo.com/30913146>. [Accessed 25 May 2012].

only by sound, through the mobile phone. It is also possible to find atemporal and atopic characteristics by this kind of use of mobile phone which breaks connections between the original sound source and its reference. The singing related to the spatial reference of the riverside indicates a relationship between these two elements, making a partnership. And the melody that cannot be found in any space is brought to the river again by the listener through his cell phone.
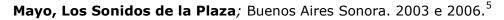
Mayo, Los Sonidos de la Plaza; Buenos Aires Sonora. 2003 e 2006.[5]

Figure 03: *Plaza de Mayo while the Mayo, los sonidos de la Plaza was happening. Source: Buenosairessonora, <http://www.buenosairessonora.com.ar/performances-mayo.html>.*

The Plaza de Mayo is located in front of the Casa Rosada, home of the executive branch of the federal government of Argentina. The square is filled with historical and political meanings, which are not apparent immediately at a glance. Bombs, marchs, protests: many historical events of a several periods mark the square. The Buenos Aires Sonora group promoted a sound intervention which enabled a retrieval of the memory contained in the square, with sound effects, screams, readings, radio broadcasts that had before made part of a historical period, and also the people. With a time frame from 1945 to 2001, the sound composition did not had only the documental or pedagogical aspects, but mainly artistic. The voices without bodies sent in the square enables an acousmatic listening, which do not have visual correspondence directly, to the listener. Besides the historical sound records, it was also included eletroacoustic music elements in the composition.

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[5] Available at <http://www.buenosairessonora.com.ar/making-plaza.html> [Accessed 24 May 2012].

Figure 04: *Sound system at Plaza de Mayo. Source: Buenosairessonora, Blogspot,
<http://buenosairessonora.blogspot.com.br/2006/04/fotos-de-mayo-los-sonidos-de-la-plaza.html>.*

By recording, editing and sound reproduction techniques, "Mayo, Los Sonidos de la Plaza" did a space-time frame through sound, demonstrating history in a artistical manner by sounds. The reproduction provides a *sound rellocation*, where the composition's audio is juxtaposed, a virtual sound space, with the acoustic sound environment. As the composition dialogues with specific happenings of May's Square, beyond being composed and acoustically planned to address the local physical characteristics, the intervention may be considered as site specific. Supported by the sound channels spread around the square there was an immersion, a sonic window overlooking the past. A composition's passage can be heared in Buenos Aires Sonora blog[6].

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[6] Available at <http://buenosairessonora.blogspot.com.br/2005/02/sobre-mayo-los-sonidos-de-la-plaza.html> [Accessed 24 May 2012].

Transition Soundings; David Birchfield, David Lorig, Kelly Phillips, Assegid Kidané. 2005.[7]
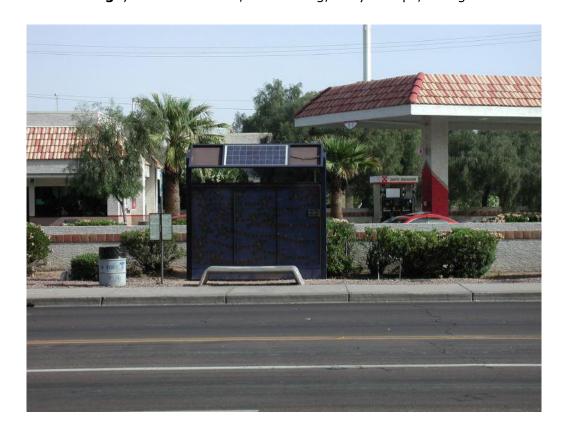

Figure 05: Transition Soundings at Tempe, Arizona, USA. Source: Transition Soundings databank,
<http://ame2.asu.edu/faculty/dab/portfolio/installations/transoundings/images/onsite_gallery/pages/page_4.html>.

Tempe, Arizona, USA. A bus stop begins receiving public transport users, who notice that a slab starts a sonorous response to their movements. The slab stylized as a map actually has movement sensors, powered by solar energy cells. Transition Soundings is part of the project "Artist Adorned Transit Stops", and it is inspired by the transit networks form and function, also elaborated in site-specific circumstances (Birchfield et al., 2006). The sound, as an unusual aspect in the bus stop, becomes a cause for interaction between people and the slab. Concerns about vandalism, weather conditions and maintenance were taken, which influenced the design and the choice of the solar energy as a power source. Transition Soundings allows its use by more than one person, besides allowing certain variety of sounds to be reproduced, responding in quality and intensity to the gestures. The consideration of ambiental sound levels is an interesting aspect in this work, in order that the sounds emitted by the slab would not be considered a discomfiture or a sound pollution source. In other words, the sound was designed for not act like an intrusion.

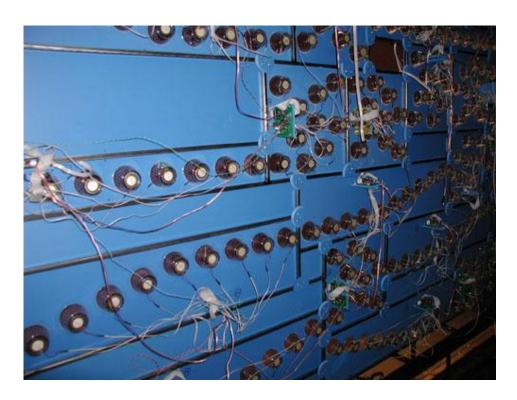[7] Available at <http://ame2.asu.edu/faculty/dab/transitionsoundings.php> [Accessed 12 May 2012].

Figure 06: sensors and speakers network. Source: Transition Soundings databank, <http://ame2.asu.edu/faculty/dab/transitionsoundings.php>.

Voz Alta; Rafael Lozano-Hemmer[8]

Figure 07*: Voz Alta, 2008. Photo by Antimodular Research*. Source: <http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/voz_alta.php>.

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[8] Available at <http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/voz_alta.php> [Accessed 27 April. 2012].

At Tlatelolco, Mexico, many students were killed in a massacre on October 2nd 1968. In order to remind this tragedy forty years after, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, in a partnership with UNAM (Autonomous University of Mexico), installed at Three Cultures Square a modified megaphone for the public. According to the author's video[9], there were protests speeches, remembering, objections, besides poetry recitation and marriage proposals. The sharing of ideas was strengthened by the increased range of voice, placing the square as a meeting place for discussion. In the intervention the audience participates not only in this way: the voices are transmitted by radio broadcast, at the UNAM channel, and the voices are reflected visually by potent streaks of light, pointed to different city spots, reverberating that point of ideas confluence to the city. The lights also refer to the shooting that took place in the 1968 massacre. The radio broadcast offers an onipresent feature to the voices, not letting them geographically limited. When megaphones were not used by audience, the UNAM radio channel broadcasted audio records of 1968 such as speeches, musics, and also interviews. Thus, the memory contained in sound registre meets immediacy and the live, showed in the events simultaneity.

The point of convergence among these five sound interventions is in their relationships with their spaces. Open space interventions provide a reconfiguration of sound elements and the listener can take ownership of this reconfiguration and may create another relationships with what many times was only a crossing path before. These interventions not only add value to the space, they also can induce reflections about it.

As opposed to the apathy and people's passage, the unusual character of these modes of recreation and sound appropriations opens a window, in which listeners can sonically see other landscapes.

References

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[9] Available at <http://vimeo.com/17292454> [Accessed 27 abr. 2012].