Sound Art as Public Art

**Prelude**

A sonic slice of the world

In the acoustic environment we are unavoidably and inexhaustibly with sound: here it is and here we are, as in a virtual embrace. We are in its midst, not necessarily at its center, but nevertheless embedded in its ephemeral materiality from where we hear a transient world and grasp ourselves as transitory selves. The acoustic environment is the world in sound and makes a sonic world built continually from fleeting material and formless forms. It is invisible, mobile and unable to produce the solidity of the visible while supporting the impression of visual permanence from its own formlessness.

Listening we are continually made aware of this impermanence and our own fleeting subjectivity, and we are reminded also that the world is not only in front of us, the aim of our action, but that we inhabit it as a 360° environment, which sounds the result and consequence of our actions too. In this sense, listening affords us a different relationship to time and space, objects and subjects and the way we live among them. It is this alternative sonic sense of the world and of ourselves in the world, that makes sound art so very interesting as a public art, not only in relation to aesthetic conventions and artistic ideas, but also in relation to how we know the world and how we live in it and how we intervene, challenge and critique the political, social and cultural norms that the visual presents us with.

The invisible mobility of sound, its continuous presence and formless form prises open a different vista, and lends itself to explore, intervene and interrogate visual givens. It is a cultural visuality, rather than a physiological mechanism I am referring to here: not how we look but what we see. Listening confronts this cultural sense of a visual actuality with invisible possibilities, showing us how else things could be. Sound presents us with another slice of the world, and offers us alternative interpretations: disrupting normative conceptions of reality, actuality, truth, and knowledge and opening up a more plural conception and imagination of the world.

This focus on the sonic slice of the world does not have to set up an essentialist position, opposed to or apart from a visual actuality. The aim is not to listen to understand, judge, categorize, or preserve the acoustic against a visual reality, but to illuminate and generate the plural possibilities of an audio-visual world. Sound illuminates, from beneath the surface of the seen, the complex plurality of actuality and clarifies how the visual too is only one slice of the world, which by accident, ignorance, or ideology at times we take for the whole. Sound art as public art enters the everyday and plays with and disrupts our habits and preconceptions to challenge the singularity of actuality and to offer to perception a habitat that involves everything that it is and everything that it could be, producing site as plural possibilities.

**Introduction**

Going to Mülheim

I am an observer, I have come to see and hear, to listen, consider and respond to what sounds before the artists arrival, and what sounds with and because of her. Key to this observation is the question what a public art does: how it remembers what was there before, a historical past, how it responds to what presents itself at this moment, a contemporary identity, and how it participates in the creation of what will be there, an imagined future. In this sense, all public art confronts not only a public space but a public time, a public sense of chronology, necessity and causality. It deals with the socio-political timespace of its location: the time and space of the public producing themselves with and through each other as a generative sphere, that does not exist within stable architecture and town planning but in how that is used, misused, taken care of or neglected.

Sound plays a particular role in this public timespace generated between past and future: its invisible mobility insists on a continuous present that realises the past not as a necessity of its history but in a present narration that enables its future. While soundmarks[[1]](#footnote--1) and sonic signifiers might reveal references to a historical past that produce pockets of nostalgia and lend themselves to a causal interpretation, listening to Mülheim’s sounds not for their source or visual origin but for their concrete and present sonicality gives us a continuous now and leads to the imagination of a science fiction of the town: a view on its possible transformation from a present sound.

Sound also plays a very particular role in the production and interactivity of this public sphere. Its ephemeral and passing nature, its invisible mobility, makes it apparent that the streets, the houses, shops, courts, schools, trams and buses, are not the public. Rather it is the way we interact within and through those institutions and infrastructures, that the public is generated and manifest.

To consider Mülheim through sound is not to look at and observe buildings, streets and shops, its visible infrastructure, but to engage in what sound I can hear and make in them. It is essentially participatory and thus vaguely belongs to the notion of public art as activism and engagement rather than as monument and aesthetic manifestation. This differentiation, however crude, is useful not to set up opposites but to prepare for my role in the work and its investigation: what I can demand of it and what it demands of me. It is also useful in terms of the contribution this work can make beyond art, to socio-political frameworks and identities and to critical discourse and research.

My response to the works by Cathy van Eck and Kirsten Reese and Trond Lossius, commissioned and accompanied by Jan Schacher in the context of the practice-based research project ‘sonozones’ develops on this basis and permits me to articulate the notion of a sonic public art: to contextualise and interrogate their work in relation to Mülheim as town and as concept of townness, as social sphere and infrastructure with an economic and political history, a present use and an aesthetic façade that will give way to an unstoppable future.

All three works, and the project as a whole, raise pertinent artistic, scholarly as well as socio-political and ethical questions. What does the artist do in a town that she does not live in - how to relate to the economic and socio-political reality and aesthetics of place without inhabiting it? Is this the artist as ethnographer or as missionary, as translator and instigator encouraging a local audience to re-consider their locale; or is indeed the audience somewhere entirely different, the town but a backdrop, an almost arbitrary stage to perform art whose context is elsewhere.

In the prelude to this text I describe sound, the acoustic environment, as a sonic slice of the world - as an invisible possibility that augments and challenges the singularity and truth of the seen. I promote listening as a means to access this possible slice of the world, to become aware that the notion of reality, as one singular actuality, is a construct, a cultural, political and aesthetic construct that depends on the primacy of the image: on what we see and thus what orders and gives meaning to that perception, in language -the noun- in architecture -the buildings- and in thought -the object. The invisible and participatory nature of sound challenges and questions that singularity and pluralises actuality through its mobile possibilities. A practice-based research project that uses sound and listening as its methodology and materiality prises open the boundaries between the visible and the invisible, between what appears actual and what might be possible. It explores not another world, but reveals the complex plurality of this world.

My exploration of sonozones performs an interrogation of all three projects in relation to the possibilities of Mühlheim they reveal. These moments and modes of revelation are considered in relation to art, art practice and its discourse, its valuations and aims; they are reflected upon in relation to research and what can be found and how it can be talked about and be made use of as modes of knowledge production; and in terms of their agency as intervention, intervening into the everyday rhythms, realities and truths of Mülheim as a habitat and home.

**Sound as Art, as Intervention and as Research**

Cathy van Eck’s work impresses itself visually more than sonically onto my imagination. She walks around Mülheim with big horns made from plastic, cardboard and aluminium sticking out on either side of her head. These bright cones visually amplify her hearing not as a process of audition, but as a location, focussing us on the place and posture of listening rather than on the heard. It is the listener, ears extended through an inversed megaphone, who becomes the subject and object of the work. She becomes a spectacle of hearing that on site, in Mülheim, draws stares and entices conversations as well as questions, but that as document and photographs slides effortlessly into the conventions and expectations of art discourse and practice, triggering a different response.

The first evokes curiosity: what is she doing, what might she be hearing and what could I hear? – “may I try?” the horns prompting an engagement with the inhabitants of Mülheim, inviting them in to its sonic possibilities by lending them her extended ears.

The latter, presents a visual work and triggers references from within art history that frame the image but leave the sound inaudible. Even if played back with the sound heard on location, the image is too powerful, the sound too arbitrary and contingent to resurrect the life performance and locational quality.

The placing of the image within art practice and discourse does not remain mute but produces a conceptual rather than a material sound that triggers access to the sonic as a possibility not however of Mülheim but of art. It comes to reference other sonic artworks such as Luigi Russolo’s futurist ‘intonarumori’, his noise machines from which in the beginning of the 20th century he formed an orchestra to celebrate the possibilities of an industrial revolution; or the Surrealist ballet *Parade*, by Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso and Erik Satie from 1917, whose cubist costumes and backdrops - buildings, megaphones, and machines - recall a new relationship between technology and the human body. Both Russolo’s machine and the Cocteau-Satie-Picasso performance comment on the technological development of the time and bring a different aesthetic imagination to art, its materiality and subject matter. It is within such techno-aesthetic imagination that van Eck’s ears find a context too.

On site, van Eck’s performance of analogue ears is a public artwork as activism and intervention that engages a local imagination. It is directed towards the inhabitants of Mülheim, addressing their presence and listening habits, and while as documentation it becomes an artistic performance, directed towards an art audience that reads the work within that context and history, this parallel context enriches rather than diminishes the life act: opening the possibility of a surrealist performance of Mülheim by its own populace.

The cubist and futurist references to technology also contextualise and offer an interpretation to van Eck’s further developments of her analogue ears. While her mechanical extensions offer a reflection on a mechanical age, implying the need for physical presence, liveness and the inability to repeat the heard; her subsequent work with microphonic ears ring in an electronic listening that permits recording and thus playback and repetition, breaking the continuity of sound and creating a different presence; and her virtual extensions, working with apps to manipulate the sound recorded, reflect on digital technology and the relationship between the recorded and reality in a digital world.

Her electrical ears still offer a visual: as quasi binaural microphones two recording devices are fastened on a carefully balanced metal construction about a foot away on either side of her head to record the environment she moves through. However this visuality appears far less theatrical and more scientific, enticing less engagement and triggering remote stares rather than questions. Her virtual ears are visually even less remarkable: as she walks through the streets with an MP3 recorder and headphones she becomes almost indistinguishable from any ipod listener in the city, suggesting maybe that a cyborg is not the visual spectacle predicted by science-fictions, but a far more invisible transformation and amalgamation of the body with the machine.

While the mechanical ears perform the public sphere in a public act, communicating with and for a live audience, increasingly the electric and digital extensions become inaccessible to the public in Mülheim and come to play as research rather than as artwork. Mülheim as a particular place vanishes into the background and becomes a test scenario rather than the site of work. What is made accessible instead are the different spaces that constitute a town - mechanical, electric and digital - and how their actuality and possibility influences and shapes our ‘posture’, our location and identity within place: how we relate to site and to each other; how we are part of its generation or simply its recipients. In this sense the work contributes to knowledge production not by giving us knowledge about Mülheim, but about ourselves in any place.

Kirsten Reese’s work also produces plural contexts of appreciation and interpretation, but the invisible materiality of her work defies the consolidating pull of the image. It is as textual documentations that her work finds an artistic and aesthetic narrative beyond Mülheim, otherwise it remains a site specific work, bound up intricately with its place and demanding its time.

Reese places speakers in various locations around Mülheim, responding to the soundscape by amplifying, overriding and pluralising its acoustic appearance. Some of the speakers are quite obviously visible, others are concealed or go otherwise unnoticed due to the ubiquity of loudspeakers in the urban environment. On the one hand such work continues the impetus of the world soundscape project[[2]](#footnote-0) to create awareness of our sonic environment, to add a sonic literacy and care to our visual focus, on the other hand it opens a fissure between the seen and the heard questioning their correspondence and our prejudice in what it is we see.

Much urban planning focuses on what happens between buildings, how humans use and live in the interstices of the city. They often forget about the acoustic environment and how buildings enable or disable our sound making and thus our sense of self. The ‘between’ of urban planning remains a visual in-between, which is not an experience of simultaneity, but the consecutive use of things apart. Sound by contrast *is* the between, it is not my voice against the building, differentiating the voice and the building, but is the voice with the building creating the between itself.

The visual building is always apart from me, and although I use it and may misuse it, deviating from its planned purpose and function, it remains physically at a distance and unchangeable in terms of its material and built. I can make marks on it as in Graffiti its surface, litter it, damage it or ignore it, but I cannot redesign its shape and location. The sonic building by contrast includes me and is generated with and through me: my voice sounds its space in the time of my listening and shouting. Acoustic timespace is reciprocal and phenomenological: I hear the sensory-motor action of my listening in the sounding space.

Reese’s works have some of the light touch of Graffiti, making slight marks that do not redesign the city but subtly alter how we perceive it, and yet the demand of sound, its reciprocity and immersivity means her works do not simply make visible marks on a surface, but invisibly pluralises the possibility of experience. The influence is subtle and subliminal, a slight change only, but enough to make us aware that something is different and reminding us of the bias of our perception.

Reese’s work at once interacts with the infrastructure and use of the urban environment but also incorporates the inhabitant as habitform: as a user of this infrastructure, whose habits and needs guide his appreciation of the place. Her slight changes and additions interfere with this habitform, causing curiosity but also unease and possibly even resentment.

Adding noise to escalators, sounding shop entrances and installing sound in public gathering places suspends habits and triggers doubt in the seen. More attentive passersby might notice the playback device, and especially children, who are not as yet deformed into the habits, deadlines and goals that orientate a cityscape, but formlessly live in the environment, notice and respond playfully to the work as installation and as sound. For many adults however, it goes unnoticed or remains actively ignored.

Reese’s work needs time to embed itself as a possibility in the local landscape. In the absence of local time the work has to live on as a narrative that triggers the imagination about my own surroundings and elaborates itself in correspondence with other site-specific works: Bill Fontana’s *Pigeon Soundings*, Max Neuhaus’ *Times Square* or Christina Kubische’s *Electrical Walks*. These references however do not consolidate the work, but proliferate its possibilities to make us hear our own town differently.

While van Eck’s work produces a performative space in Mülheim and in artistic practice, Reese intervenes in the flow of things to suspend the habits of a local population and the imagination of my own location. In the meantime Trond Lossius’ work engages in the space between the visual and the sonic and distorts them both by extending their duration. His field recordings seek to produce concrete sounds and engage in a reduced listening. Both are strategies of Pierre Schaeffer’s musique concrète that seeks to perform a bracketing of the sonic away from a visual source, to experience sound rather than its origin. What Schaeffer achieved through the cutting and splicing of tape, Lossius tries to reach technologically and through an engagement over time.

He charts Mülheim and surroundings with a microphone to produce an invisible map of its location and activities. On site his work does not produce a representation however but interacts with the locale of Mülheim by drawing attention to the recording technology and by staying in place over a long period of time. In many ways he performs a microphonic meditation on the landscape, that mediates and meditates between the real and the perceived through technology and time. His presence with a furry boom microphone evokes interest and questions from passersby curious as to what is going on. Like van Eck’s extended ears, his equipment attracts and triggers conversations.

The difficulty lies in how this work translates into another setting and what it says then about Mülheim, about listening, about recording and about technology. For me the intrigue lies in the duration, and in Lossius’ own presence on the scene rather than the recordings produced. His listening rather than what I might hear in his recordings reflects interestingly on the origin and traditions of field recording: the naturalists, Ludwig Koch and Albert Brand, who at the beginning of the last century worked as sonic butterfly catchers, capturing sound for categorisation, naming and pinning it down in collections and archives.

Lossius’ sounds are more fleeting. His processes and recordings do not inspire taxonomy but promote listening, maybe not to his recordings but to the world. As a recordist he seems acutely aware of his own presence, which generates the field. This is in great contrast to the assumed self-evidence of the first field recordists who understood themselves naturally absent in the presence of recording technology. Lossius does not represent the field but inhabits the field with a microphone. His recordings are as much about him, his interests, than they are about the field. The geography he produces is a psycho-geography, narrating his own relationship to space and time, and holds an interest as a sonic fiction rather than as fact. It invites us to record our own field rather than listening to his - to perform our own microphonic meditations and reconsider how this maps onto the visual scheme of geography and film, whose visual focus it challenges.

All three projects frame and reframe the everyday, art and technology, and propose a different engagement with knowledge: aesthetic knowledge, technological knowledge or knowledge of Mülheim as town and as concept of publicness. Lossius does this through the extended duration of his recording, pushing a different demand on our time as listeners and viewers and comparing the time of sound with the time of the visual, producing frictions that open the work, open technology and open perception to reveal its biases and invite us to consider what we might do with them.

**Conclusion: what do I hear now**

Sound has no hindsight, it is always now and here. Its forcefull presence makes it hard to detach my experience of the work in Mülheim from my experience of it in my current location. The most lasting impact of all three works is thus not what I heard there but how it makes me consider my present surroundings now. It is the sonic concepts and materials worked with, activated and problematised on site, that as a sonic sensibility reconfigures my habitat now, forcing me to consider my habitform and to suspend the known to rethink not only its content but how it was achieved in the first place: the visual bias of language, architecture and thought that got me to appreciate the actuality of my environment as the only possibility rather than opening up to all that could be.

All three projects share an interventionist methodology, producing a renegotiation of the known, the settled sense and signification of Mülheim, through performative, installative or technological strategies, thus opening and reframing its public sphere. They also all pursue aesthetic and artistic objectives that find another location and another audience in the context of the discourse and practice of art, field recording, musique concrète and their philosophies. Besides producing art, they also use the cover of art to produce research, ideas, sensate sense and opinions about the public, how we function, use and generate its space and time, and how we contribute to its articulation. All three works do not just add a layer of perception, augmenting a visual sphere with a sonic beat, but prise open a space between sound, place, time and image, accessing the audible as the possible, what might be, and the inaudible, what exists also but which for reasons of habit, ideology, cultural prejudice and ignorance we do not yet hear.

The unreliable and uncontrollable nature of sound provides a different sense of knowledge - aesthetic, technological or scientific - that might not fit into a contemporary scheme of quantification but adds a sensory quality to thinking that reconsiders the primacy of reflection and generates a more equivalent relationship between perception and thought.

Van Eck, Reese and Lossius’ work with sound does not just produce a different knowledge but questions the knowledge making process, its distance, its quantification, its use and valuation. It implicates us the listeners not as readers of grand narratives of scientific facts and undisputable data, but as producers of little narrations that foreground the passing, the ephemeral and anecdotal of a private perception, and thus produce a plurality of ‘knowledges’, giving rise to a bodily-cerebrality and a sensate knowing. This does not make such knowing a lesser knowledge. Instead it produces a forcefull questioning of existing methodologies, challenging the humanist project of rationality to provide instead a post-humanist focus that comprehends our own fragility and doubt. Sound leads us away from an anthropocentric vista into a field of equivalence and self-reflection, where biases are illuminated and norms expelled.

The sonic knowledge about Mülheim produced through sonozones is thus not a quantifiable knowledge, created from a distance, providing a set of data, but is the knowledge of Reese, Van Eck and Lossius’ inhabiting its locale, and consequently it is the knowledge of ourselves inhabiting the locale of their work, which thus becomes our listening habitat that we know physically in listening rather than as thought. This knowledge remains anecdotal, conversational and ambiguous but worthy of consideration nevertheless.

All three projects do more and other things than what I refer to in this short text. There are a multitude of different interpretations that can be created and a variety of different emphasis that can be elaborated. My aim was not to consolidate and close off the efforts of the artists, but to articulate and think through my experience of their work to reflect on our relationship to space, place and time in sound. What becomes apparent in a project like this is that the respondent, the visitor to the work, in this case myself, does not remain a distant observer, reading the work as text to produce a meta-text, but builds an other narrative, an additional story from the non-sense, as in the sensate sense, triggered by the artistic material and the town visited:

I am invited to take up a horn myself and walk through the town, exploring not only what I hear differently but also how I am seen in the light of my extended ears. I become a participant at once visible and hearing a different town about which I write hoping that in moments of coincidence you hear it too.

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1. According to R. Murray Schafer glossary of soundscape terminology, soundmarks are sounds that possess qualities, which make them especially noticed. R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*. New York: Knopf, 1977, pp. 9–10. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. The World Soundscape Project (WSP), established in the 1960s by R. Murray Schafer at Simon Fraser University in Canada, concerned itself with the research and education of sound in the environment. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)