

Aspects on duration: the vulnerability of permanence in site-specific sound art in public space

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Point of departure

The urban soundscape emanates from an incalculable number of ephemeral and spatial acoustic overlays carrying both local and global characteristics. Sound spreads out, streaming and leaking in a continuously changing process constantly producing new meanings and connections. Through this mixing, sound changes its semantic and affective meanings and the soundscape of a site or place is regularly recreated in ever-new variations. As part of this ongoing series of transformations, the formal qualities of a site are continuously reflected while simultaneously being produced. The aural energies of a soundscape thus offer means for apprehending the dynamic qualities of a place and its flows of activities. In *For Space*, the cultural geographer Doreen Massey writes that

“Places [should be understood] not as points or areas on maps, but as integrations of space and time; as *spatio-temporal events*. This is an understanding of place – as open ... as woven together out of ongoing stories, as a moment within power-geometries, as a particular constellation within the wider topographies of space, and as in process, as unfinished business...”¹

Thus places can be more or less stable, and further, consist of a series of greater or lesser instabilities, including: variably dense streams of information passing

¹ Massey, D. *For Space*, London, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2005, p. 130-131

by, the probability of unexpected events and occurrences, and multitudes of different (social) spheres crashing into each other. Some take place in our daily life and are recognizable - for example, someone crossing the street. Other instabilities unfold over greater lengths of time. These are often spatio-temporal events that cannot be grasped or even noticed as instabilities, since their transformation proceeds over such long periods of time that changes become nearly impossible to perceive.

In what follows, I will consider and address site-specific sound works in public spaces, and look at how these works relate to spatio-temporal events that unfold over extended durations. How does a permanent site-specific sonic artwork connect to the transformation of a place over time? Can a permanent sound installation become truly “durable”?

What I mean is that longer standing works must undergo long-term processes of transformation that not only interfere with the identity of their sited place but also with how the work itself may be interpreted and understood when the site of its location undergoes its own changes over time. In using the term site-specific practices, I am referring to sound works that in one way or another relate to – in its most open sense – the identity of a particular site, that is (as I aim to show) strongly connected to the territoriality of the place, which could also be described as how the place is *coded*.

Architecture theorist Mattias Kärrholm writes in his *The Territoriality of Architecture – Contributions to a Discussion on Territoriality and Architectural Design within the Public Spaces of the City* having philosopher-duo Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in mind, that relatively, (spatial) territoriality can be regarded as a form of coding and institutionalizing of space, where an actor – a person, a group, an administration or a use – establishes certain meanings connected to that certain area. A particular place is connected with a certain person, use, praxis, identity or culture. Territoriality signifies in this case a

process where, a place is fed or coded with ongoing events and phenomena that are both tangible and dominant to such an extent that the association of place and events through time becomes closely interconnected and interwoven, establishing a common experience where events are fundamental to the forming of both the identity and notion of the place.

It should be emphasized that according to Deleuze and Guattari's use of the term, territoriality is not merely associated with spatial issues (as in comparison to Bruno Latour's explicitly socio-spatial investigations embedded in the Actor Network Theory) but is instead open and modifiable, where purposes vary and where the territory is approached in a very open and general way as a coded phenomenon. It could be a lullaby as well as a space, and the shape of the territory can be switched/exchanged depending on the area of investigation.

However, in this presentation I find a spatial application particularly useful since the point of departure for all site-specific artistic practices is a knowledge based on an investigative approach of precisely those pre-conditions (visible and non-visible) that transform, shape and establish the identity of a place, as well as on the elaboration of artistic strategies that relate to the specificities of the place linked to modes of coding and territorialization.

With this in mind, as a site-specific artistic practice, sound installation arises in the intersection of sound and space, where socio-spatial properties in the broadest sense of the word are investigated through sound. In considering two very well known permanent public sound installations, my intention is to examine and expose two different scenarios where time, spatial (de-)stabilization, coding and artistic appropriation of a certain place all play an important role for the reception of the artwork over time.

1. *Times Square* by Max Neuhaus

Times Square by Max Neuhaus is perhaps the best known and referenced sound installation within the still emergent discourse of sound art. Initially erected in 1977, taken down in 1992, and installed again in 2002, it is said to be the first permanent sound installation in public space. As indicated by its title, the sound installation is located at Times Square in the heart of New York City. Placed within a ventilation chamber connected to the city's subway system, it can be found at the northern end of a pedestrian island surrounded by Broadway, Seventh Avenue, 45th Street, and 46th Street. Neuhaus placed (at least) one giant speaker horn distributing a low register sound that resonates within the underground chamber, and can be experienced from above through the large metal grid covering the chamber.



Documentation photo of Max Neuhaus' *Times Square*. Photographer: Åsa Stjerna. (2010)

The work is audible around the clock. The synthetically generated sound material used – inspired by Neuhaus' explorations of the ventilation chamber's natural resonant frequencies – has been described as a drone-like, low-voiced, harmonically rich sound texture. In one of the busiest areas of Manhattan, with innumerable and differently scaled public activities occurring day and night, the sound installation addresses the site through an aesthetics rooted in exploring the edges of perception. *Times Square* becomes sonorous to a listener as one approaches the traffic island that it is embedded in. It sensitizes the perceptual faculties and activates the hearing of the flâneur who *might* happen to be curious and have an interest in passing through the work's sound, and thereby having the potential of reaching an understanding of not only the sound texture emanating from the gridded traffic island, but also to suddenly experience the whole (sonic) world around.

2. *Sound Space* by Bernhard Leitner

Sound Space (in German: *Ton Raum*) is a permanent, twenty four-channel sound installation. Though not as well known as Neuhaus' *Times Square*, it is nevertheless regarded as another pioneer work within the genre of public sited sound installations. The work was the winning contribution to a competition initiated by the Technical University Berlin in 1981, and has been running since 1984. Located in one of the older buildings of the Technical University, the installation is in a small room connecting three different corridors where a stream of students and employees pass through daily, travelling across the space and thus the sound installation on their way to daily activities.



Documentation photos of Bernhard Leitner's *Sound Space*. Photographer: Åsa Stjerna (2010)

Measuring 7.5 meters x 7.5 meters wide and 4 meters high, the original ceiling was lowered and (along with the walls) acoustically isolated, covered with white perforated metal plates hiding an embedded custom designed multi speaker system. Taken together, the space's design is a stylistic clash between the sparse, machined surfaces of the perforated metal plates and the classical nineteenth century architecture of the surrounding building. Leitner - who prefers to call himself a "sound architect" - created around thirty five different Sound Space compositions for the installation. In each, the sound moves in different "choreographies" through both the space and the twentyfour speakers that comprise the installation.

The installation's sounds circulate horizontally and vertically, and in fast and sometimes interwoven movements that produce tranquil and dense textures.

Leitner's installation and its *Sound Space* compositions - with architecturally evocative names like "Soft Walls," "Rhythm Space," and "Breathing Space" - indicate his intent to use sound as a building material to create invisible yet memorably perceptible acoustic spaces.

The pieces are composed of sometimes electronically generated sounds, and sometimes originating from concrete materials. The sounds in themselves, however, are subordinate to the central aim: the creation of spatial experience. Leitner claims that "The idea is to use sound as a structural material, a building material [...] a plastic sculptural material, like stone, glass or steel."²

Site and artistic appropriation

Although both of these works are permanent pieces in active public spaces, Neuhaus' *Times Square* and Leitner's *Sound Space* connect to, interfere with, and appropriate their respective sites in completely different ways. In the case of *Times Square*, the work is carefully integrated in its environment in accordance with Neuhaus' artistic intentions. Invisible from the street, imperceptible, and intimate, *Times Square* creates an illusion that the visitor is like an isolated figure in space that has discovered the acoustic heart of the city, and uncovered the site's secret location. This is in contradistinction to *Sound Space*'s acoustic and visual territorialization of the hallway-like room at the Technical University Berlin. Even though the monolithic, drone-like sound texture of *Times Square* contrasts with the urban sound terrain of its surrounding area, the artistic appropriation of the site or the "counter territoriality" it establishes is minimal. It interacts carefully with the site, both visually (through its invisibility) as well as acoustically – the sound material references the site, is conceptually linked to the frequencies of the ventilation chamber, and transforms the ventilation chamber into more of a functional architecture as well. It should also be mentioned that Neuhaus chose not to add a plaque or sign to the installation site, leaving *Times Square* both buried and hidden in plain sight.

² Stjerna, Å. *Ton Raum, A one hour documentary about Bernhard Leitner's sound installation Sound Space* Swedish Radio P2, 2010

With Leitner's *Sound Space*, the original architecture was exchanged for a new visual and sonic spatiality that establishes a so to speak "counter territoriality" within its nineteenth century architectural interior. Neither the sound material nor the visual design of the work connects to any aspects of the location. Together, they constitute a solipsistic, detached acoustic and poetic space that clearly contrasts with the building's design and ambience. To some degree, *Sound Space* can be linked to a modernist, electroacoustic, experimental music tradition, including music-focused architectures such as the German Pavilion built in Osaka for Expo '70 closely associated with Karlheinz Stockhausen. Despite the incongruity between the sound work and its site, I would argue that *Sound Space* is a site-specific work in that it - in an *absolutely conscious way* - intervenes in and contrasts with the building. Everything about the work contrast with its preexisting surroundings, establishing a *Verfremdungseffekt* (*defamiliarization effect*) in its appropriation of the site that feeds it with a new identity.

Spatial (de-)stabilization over time

As previously mentioned, the establishment of a territory implies linking certain uses or functions to a phenomenon, object or area – in this case, to architectural or urban space – and that a territory gathers and organizes functions, while a function constituted by the territory can become important enough to establish autonomy, and develop the capability of deterritorializing its original territory. Establishments, demolishing, and reestablishments are part of an inseparable and continuously ongoing process. Deterritorialization is thus inseparable from the process of transforming identities, while reterritorialization constitutes the final stage of such processes, including that of *coding*, which is always followed by new territorializing processes. Consequently, the transformation of the coding of a phenomenon is embedded in territorial practices. Or, as Deleuze and Guattari claim "The territory is just as inseparable from deterritorialization as the code

from decoding.”³ “Every milieu is coded, a code being defined by periodic repetition; but each code is in a perpetual state of transcoding or transduction.”⁴

It is precisely this constantly ongoing transformative process of coding and transcoding, and thus the transformation of the identity of a place, that is of fundamental importance concerning the experience, understanding and interpretation of artworks intended to be permanent. This becomes evident in the case of the sound installation *Times Square*. In recent years, as a result of the restructuring of city traffic routes in Manhattan, the car traffic around the pedestrian island used by Max Neuhaus’ *Times Square* has been significantly altered as parts of Broadway have been closed to cars, and transformed into a pedestrian plaza. When I visited the area around *Times Square* in January 2010, the grid of the installation was partly covered with coffee tables, and it appeared that it was being used as a storage area.

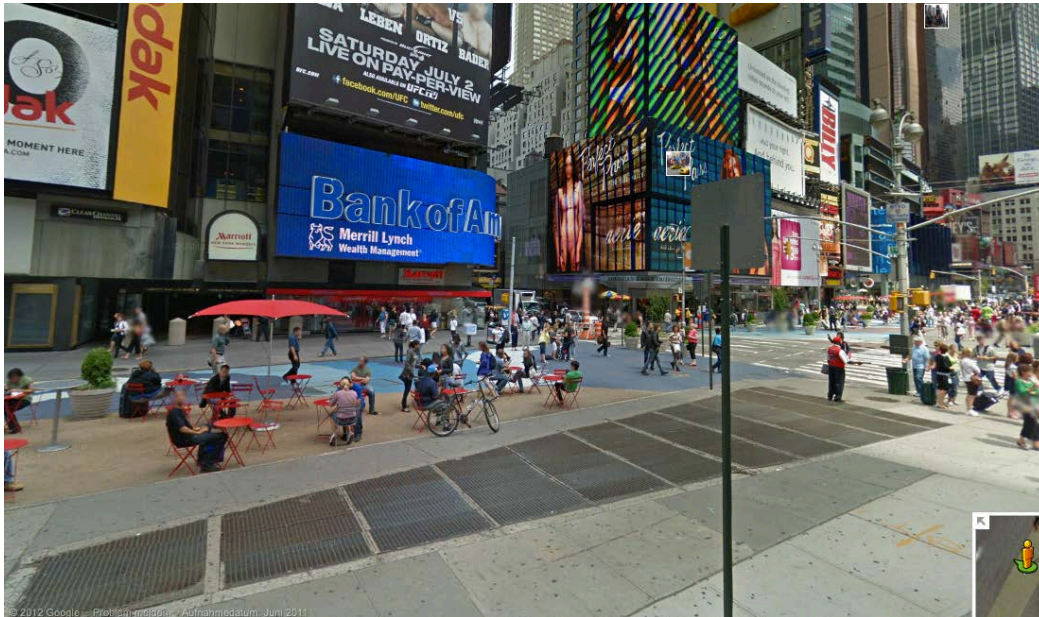
³ Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. *A thousand Plateaus – Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London, Minnesota, Minnesota Press, 2009 (1987), p. 505.

⁴ Ibid p.313.



Documentation photos of Max Neuhaus' *Times Square*. (2010) Photographer: Åsa Stjerna

It seemed as a whole cafeteria had been added, weather permitting, ready to be placed out in the area around the invisible installation, which in fact is the case during the summer season.



Screen shot, Google Maps 2013-01-10

Aside from the fact that one of the best known works in the history of sound art is sometimes used as a storage area for a pedestrian plaza, this might seem like uninteresting information in and of itself. Yet it marks a substantial shift in the stability of the urban topography of the immediate area, and this shift directly affects how the work sounds in space. From having once been a temporary island placed in the middle of an urban void, the artwork has been strangely transformed into a continuous *background noise* for people sitting down on the plaza's furniture.

This altered landscape fundamentally changes the modality of the work. *Times Square* is *not* intended to be perceived in a sitting (or standing) position over time, but instead, it ought to be experienced while one is on the move – crossing the street, suddenly struck by the unexpected appearance of something in

contrast to the sounds of daily life, which then disappears the moment one reaches the other side of the intersection. Now, the brief yet tremendously important element of surprise is gone, because the subtle and critically important spatial separation that made *Times Square* an isolated island surrounded by a steady flow of automotive traffic has been removed. This transformation of the site, which bestows and encapsulates the place with a new identity, not only changes the functionality of the area but also feeds into the sound installation. *Times Square* the sound artwork, then, also has a new identity that is interwoven with new codes and meanings. This change in the work is partly caused by its modest appropriating qualities, which make it too susceptible to interpretations far removed from what Neuhaus had in mind. It transforms the artist's original intentions of the sound installation into something else.

In comparison to *Times Square*, Leitner's *Sound Space* has remained unchanged. First, over time, the stability of the site remains fundamentally important for the work. The possibility that the functionality of the area housing *Sound Space* will be significantly altered is very low. More important, the impact of the work's clear territorial demarcation (i.e. the way in which space has been appropriated for exhibiting the work) should not be underestimated. Unlike *Times Square*'s invisibility (owing to a mixture of spatial amorphousness and lack of signage), you can't miss Leitner's work under any circumstances, and this supports its status as a proper kind of landmark. It forms part of the identity of its location – not only from an auditory perspective but also from a physical one. In order to change the presentation of the work in a manner similar to that of *Times Square* today, coarser processes of deterritorialization – such as physical demolition – would be necessary.

This indicates that a visionary architectural approach, that of claiming public space through situated sound (as Bernhard Leitner's *Sound Space* does), might actually strengthen the possibility to manage an identity transformation over time caused by processes of deterritorialization. This is particularly interesting since

the common idea of permanent sound art in public space is dominated by an image of a field of artistic activities that, by necessity, has become more or less synonymous with modes of quietness and strategies of invisibility, in order to avoid disturbing an already acoustically overloaded environment.

Some final remarks

In this paper, I have attempted to address issues that concern site-specific sound works in public space and their relation to spatio-temporal events over durable time. By juxtaposing two classic, permanent public sound installations, the intention has been to identify two different ways of showing how time, spatial (de-)stability, and artistic appropriation of a site all can play important roles in the reception of an artwork over time.

Firstly, appropriating a space artistically over time with sound could – as Leitner’s *Sound Space* and Neuhaus’ *Times Square* indicate – take very different directions, in the first case very distinct and in the second rather modest. Leitner was without bigger restrictions, allowed to “claim space”, establishing a clear territoriality in the passage stable over time through an installation over time has become a landmark of the Technical University, a place that is not normally very associated with permanent site-specific sonic practices.

Secondly, the stability of site appears to be of great importance for a permanent site-specific artwork in order for it to keep its initial relevance over time. As shown by Neuhaus’s installation *Times Square*, the work is threatened by processes of destabilization. One might argue that these two sites, Times Square in New York City and Technical University in Berlin, are dramatically different and thus incomparable; both in terms of their institutional character and their extent of being open to the public. Due to its central outdoor location in the business district, Times Square is considerably more ‘public’ than the stairway of Technical

University, given the fact that it is accessible twenty-four hours pro day, which would presumably intensify destabilization. My point here, however, is that the processes of deterritorialization that have altered the experience of Neuhaus' *Times Square* are not necessarily connected to the everyday, i.e. the dynamics and instabilities inherent to "public space", but are more closely interlaced with transformative processes occurring over longer time-spans. Such large-scale restructuring processes might well occur in the stairway system of the Technical University as well, which as an institutional space is neither more, nor less, 'protected' than a more urban setting.

Thirdly, to conclude I wish to point out an eventual connection between the degree of artistic appropriation and the spatial destabilization over time. Works relying on an "on the border of perception aesthetics" *might* be more sensitive for processes of destabilization, in that one does not take them into account (i.e. simply ignore them or don't care about them). Since they cause no disturbance to the new circumstances they unintentionally risk becoming integrated in a new context through processes of de- and re-territorialization which occur without any regard to the artist's intention. (They haven't got a shell to protect them, so to speak.)

One can only speculate on how the context around the sound installation *Times Square* would have been designed in restructuring city traffic routes and establishing the pedestrian plaza if there had been a clear demarcation of the artwork and it's environment, from the beginning, as in *Sound Space*. That is, if there had been a greater concern to care for the integrity of the artwork.

The by necessity ongoing flow of processes of transformation implies that, over time, not only is the particular site or place in question transformed but the permanent art work is likely to adopt new meanings as well which might be in conflict with the artist's intention and the role of the art work. This leaves open (at

least) two parallel interpretations of the situation, and two different positions. One is to defend the artist's integrity whenever the role of the artwork and the artistic intention are at stake. Or, conversely, to accept the territorialization, deterritorialization and re-territorialization processes as all-embracing facts, processes from which even art is not spared. That is to say that site-specific art, through its engagement with site, becomes an element of that site and must change along with its other elements – regardless of the artist's intentions.

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(All information about *Sound Space* in this text is based on interviews with Bernhard Leitner in Berlin 2009)

Biography Åsa Stjerna

Åsa Stjerna is a Swedish artist whose practice and research centres on sound and listening as artistic media for exploring the conditions and affects of public space. In a series of site-specific projects, she has worked with sound as a means for artistic negotiation, exploring the various modes of “perceiving, experiencing and acting site/space” thus generated. She is currently involved with several permanent public art projects dealing with the design and articulation of urban spaces through sound and listening. Stjerna has written extensively on sound as an artistic medium and is a regular contributor to the Swedish contemporary music journal *Nutida Musik* where she is also a member of the board. Her recent contributions to exhibitions and festivals include Transmediale media festival, Berlin (2013); Nordic Music Days, Stockholm (2012); Ultima Contemporary Music festival, Oslo (2011) and Akademie der Künste, Berlin (2009). Since 2010, She is pursuing a Ph D in artistic research at the Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts, University of Gothenburg (Sweden).