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Site-specific Sounds - How context intensifies expression

Concert Music

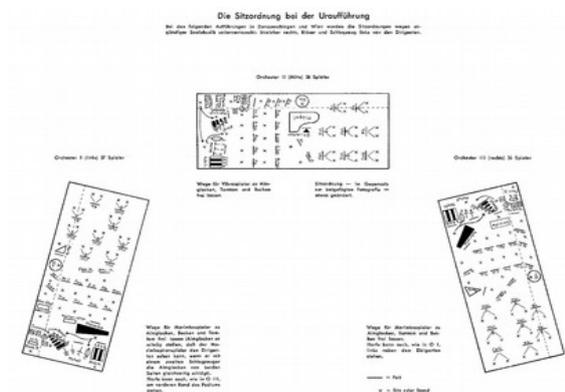
In concert music, space is usually defined as an empty, neutral space, where music can be played and heard in an ideal way. Acoustic engineers are working a lot to equip concert halls with ideal reverberation times and best listening sites.

But since the mid-twentieth century artists started to discover space in another way for the perception of music and sound. I'm not referring to spatialization concepts like in electroacoustic studios with 8 or more channel surround sound, and also not to compositions concepts spreading musicians in different directions in the space like in Stockhausen' "Gruppen" (1957). Here, space was understood primarily as an abstract concept, however.

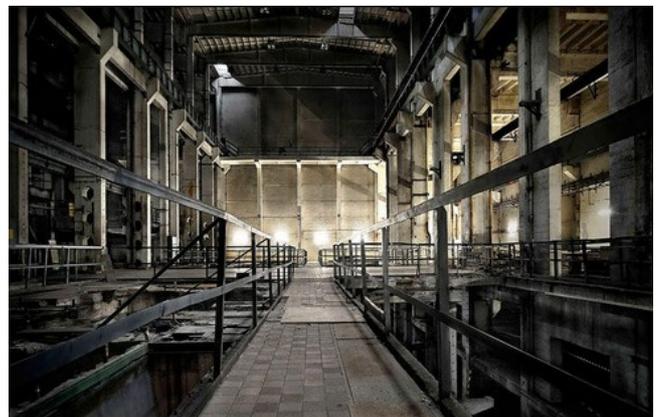
I'm referring to contextualization - means that space was discovered in a concrete way, explored and performed in, developing its own specificity. It's a difference if you play a piece in an usual concert space or in a Techno-club like several ensembles did in the Berghain, or in the ruins of a steel plant, or in front of a prison.



Philharmonie Concert Hall, Berlin



Orchestra groups in „Gruppen“, Stockhausen 1957



Berghain Techno Club, Berlin

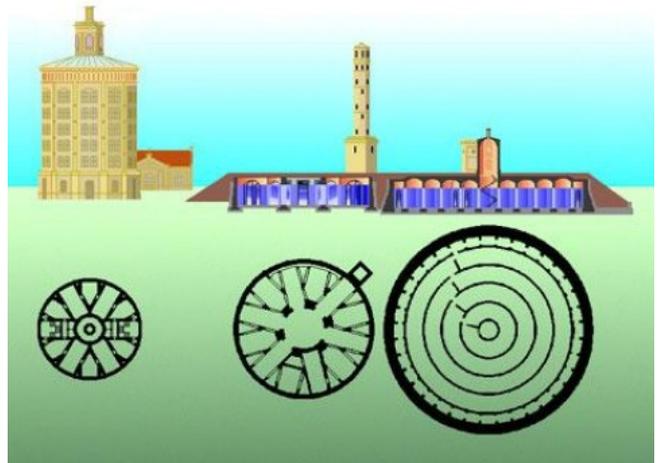


By choosing a specific site, where you want to play a piece, you can choose a specific context which creates a **second level** in *perception* and in the *meaning* or interpretation of your piece. A nonpolitical piece of music can turn into a very political if you choose the right context. But it doesn't have to be always a political dimension. It's first of all a certain *atmosphere* you achieve by choosing a certain site for a performance.

Of course, you can't play every kind of music in any place. For example: we are planning a festival next year in the old water cisterns in Berlin, Prenzlauer Berg. Therefore we are asking composers and sound artists for creating new pieces for this special room with long reverberation time and we will ask two Ensembles for rehearsing these pieces in the space. This kind of production - not to place an existing piece at a specific location, but *to start the creation process* in contact with the space - is quite common in *sound installation art*.

Sound (installation) Art

Sound artists work with the atmosphere of a particular space, its acoustic conditions and its visual and architectonic characteristics, which they carefully give a new timbre or present dramatically through the medium of sound. The sound of a space is no longer one of several compositional



Wasserspeicher / Water Cistern, Berlin



Teufelsberg, old Radar Station, Berlin



dimensions, but moves to the centre of perception as *sound space*, as space that is made to resound, which is reflected in the behaviour of the recipient. If the visual focus of a performing musician or ensemble is removed and listeners are no longer compelled to sit in fixed seats but can move around freely within the space, a much stronger spatial perception is possible. "*Seeing and hearing complement each other to become a holistic spatial experience that is intensified, supplemented and completed by the other senses and realised through the movement of the body in the space.*"¹

This specific work with space involves a *contextualisation* that is more likely to be found in the visual arts. The performance or installation site itself becomes part of the artistic statement and can even become the point of departure of the artistic concept. When the spatial orientation of the music goes beyond the spatial characteristics in the narrower sense (acoustic, architectonic, sculptural, perspectival) and defines the site specificity of the space, I refer to a *site sound* [german: *Ortsklang*]. I am not concerned with (more or less finished) works which are installed at a particular site but works that grow out of the site, both conceptually and in their execution.

A site sound develops from an analysis and investigation of the situation on site - and I want to describe that in a list of questions:

How does the site present itself acoustically, visually and architectonically? What materials and objects dominate the site? What role does the site play in social life, how do people move on the site, what meanings are attached to it? What is the perception situation, what encounters take place there? What memory does the site have, what stories are associated with it? What socio-political references does the site have, what social relationship to nature defines the site? What conflicts are there in the site, concealed or conspicuous?

Through this *site research* – not unlike the psychogeography of the situationists in the 1960s – a thematic focus, a concept is developed with which the site is altered through sound art, i.e. the situation on the site is influenced and aesthetically intensified.

¹ R  th, U. 2006. *Die Vermittlung von Klangkunst. Pr  sentation als Raumerfahrung [The Communication of Sound Art. Presentation as Spatial Experience]*. In Weckwerth, G., Osterwold, *catalogue sonambiente*, p. 237. Heidelberg, 2006.

Examples: „Site Sound Marl Midtown“ [„Ortsklang Marl Mitte“] 2002

My first example is the sound-light-installation „Site Sound Marl Midtown. Blue Brat. Much Art. Little Work.“ from 2002 at a little train station in the german biggest industry area, the „Ruhrgebiet“. The train station „Marl Centre“ is covered by a concrete hall which has no function: it does not serve as a waiting room since the waiting are all standing on the station platform below. No train tickets are sold here, there is no information service; the hall opens in a gaping void to the south-west and consequently provides no shelter from rain, sun, wind or snow.

The sound material was won entirely from this location, the train station itself. For the first part, the sound of the bars in the side walls, of two lengths, hence two pitches which formed the sound background in the concrete hall by means of four loudspeakers and 2 subwoofers distributed in the space. The other sound material consists of graffiti inscriptions from the waiting room on the train platform where the

conflicts of the locale are laconically and bluntly expressed: Conflicts between the right and left, foreigners and Germans, adults and youth; between declarations of love and of despair, „no future“ and sunny optimism. „Suakraz, you're the best.“ „Sick kids. Live in their own filth. Pigs.“ „Dear Geli, dear Vanni, I hope you forgive me! I'm really crazy about you!“ „Life is hard + unjust“ „Turks! White Power is the best of Marl!“ Here, you can see the fights between different groups. „Love is a name. Sex is a game. Forget the name and play the game.“ „Embellish the city gates with Nazi heads“ „I hate you right-wing pigs!!! – and I hate you, you left-wing wimp!“□



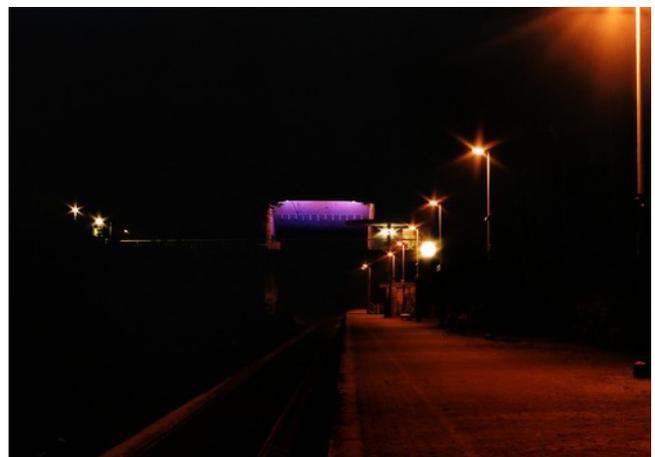
„Turks! White Power is the best of Marl!“

□

These sayings were collected and then spoken to tape by young people from Marl. The recordings were arranged into a voice choir which sounded out of twelve loudspeakers hanging from the ceiling of the hall. What previously adorned the walls unnoticed now became an unmediated acoustic presence for the passers-by. Therewith, by means of three CD players playing at different time intervals, a constantly changing Voice-Bar arrangement was created. At night, the inner space of the hall was lit by a utopian blue such that the transformation of the hall could be recognised from far away. I didn't censored any of the sentences. Thus the conflicts of the city of Marl were present in an audible way.

Space to place

In terms of its approach, this development is analogous to methods that are more familiar in the visual arts – from *objet trouvé* to opposite poles such as *land art* and *social sculpture* to current strategies like artistic *field research* and *intervention*. It is a *material* confrontation with reality, which in the musical tradition has thus far only taken place in *musique concrète* and with several Fluxus artists during the 1960s. The *dual material orientation to the world* – through the site as a performance venue and the aesthetic and thematic conversion of the site – achieves and demands a much deeper penetration and integration with reality, thus enabling another form of political confrontation.



mirror songs (2010)

The old prison of Sinop („*Sinop Kale Cezaevi*“) was one of the most famous in Turkey, with political prisoners, also many writers and artists. Since end of 20th century it's a museum and location for film sets. At the facade of one building in the huge complex, the house for young, non-adult prisoners ("*Çocuk Islah Evi*") a site-specific sound installation was developed, working with turkish songs.

A song is a kind of an emotional social memory: personal and individual and at the same time with a general public dimension. For the Sinopale project young people

from Sinop were asked which song they would send a friend who is in prison. I wanted them to sing this song in a personal way, recorded it and transformed it afterwards for the installation "mirror-songs" in the prison of Sinop. There, at one facade of the young prisoners building ("*Çocuk Islah Evi*"), mirrors are installed into the frames of the windows, each with a single loudspeaker. The voices of the different singers appear in this facade.

The clean and blank surfaces of the mirrors make a big contrast to the rough, old surface of the building, hiding what's going on inside and reflecting the outside. Standing in front of the facade a visitor sees what a prisoner's eye could see through the iron bars: the blue sky, the sea, the town of Sinop - somehow an utopian image the prison facade is converted.

Through the little black wholes the songs coming out, but only in some pieces, like blown by the wind, and sometimes just as tiny, abstract sound pieces. The



songs, chosen by the singers, are written by famous turkish poets like Sabahattin Ali, who himself was a prisoner in this jail.

Both, the mirrors and the speakers, are reflecting tools, one visually, the other acoustically, transforming the whole facade into a sounding sculpture, producing a melancholic atmosphere at this windy, deserted place, which is full of bad and cruel memories, but also of aspiration and hope.

Der gelbe Klang² / The yellow sound² (2012)

100 years ago, in 1912, Wassily Kandinsky published in the almanac "The Blue Rider" a text which seems to be a manifest on founding sound art - at least a foreshadowing of sound art. His writing "Über Bühnenkomposition" (On stage composition) is a theoretical preface on a planned stage piece called "Der gelbe Klang" (The yellow sound) and in this text he postulated a new connection between the arts, an "inner" connection of "sound, color, words" and movement. His piece was never realised in his lifetime.

The installation *Der gelbe Klang² (The yellow sound²)* as a homage to Kandinsky takes his conceptual ideas and makes a transfer into a contemporary sound art piece. I

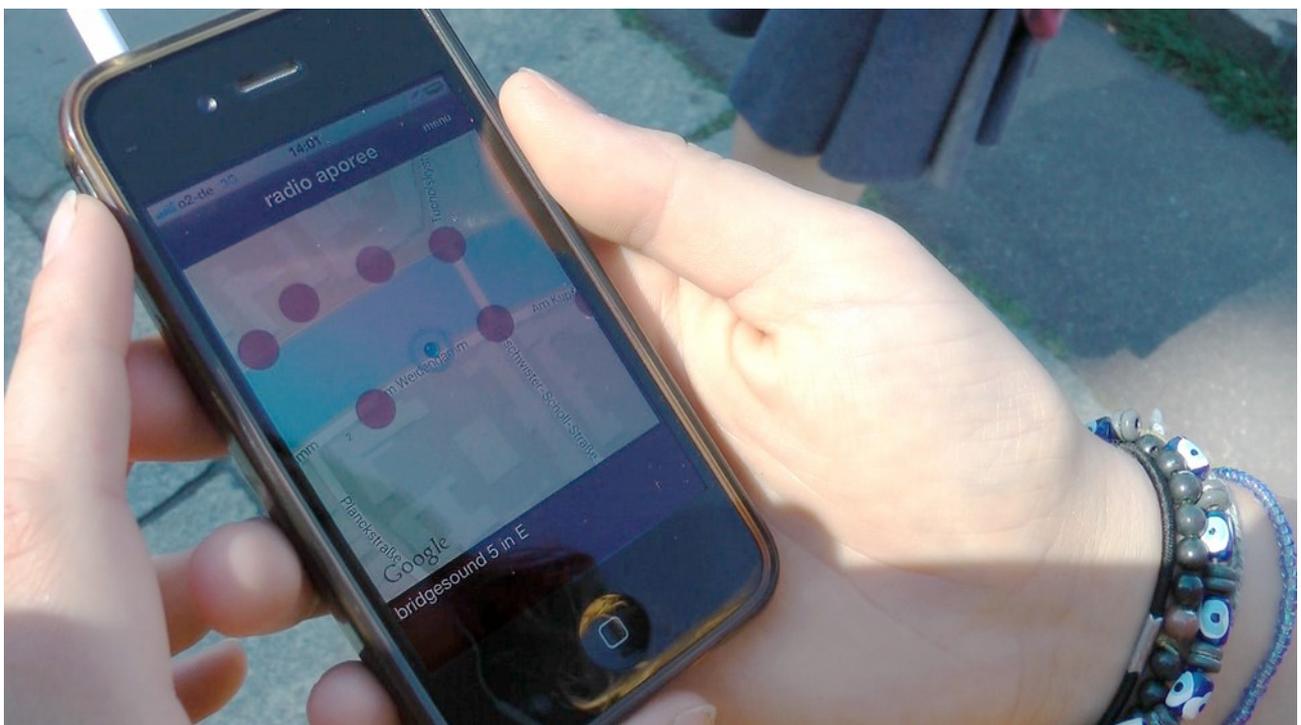


often work in sound art installations with a certain color which defines together with a basic sound a fundamental atmosphere of a specific site, preparing a field in which more material - sounds, words, video - can appear.

In the installation in the royal park of Karlsruhe there are two pure, "yellow" sounds, which come out of two places and mix in the space between. These places are 2 entrances of a basement garage under the park, which strangely contrast with the baroque castle. The entrance stairs seem to lead into a dark nothing. The basic sound material was derived from a site-specific acoustic research and transformed the concrete sounds into abstract sounds. Together with "yellow noise" and a sentence out of Kandinsky's text (spoken by Sergej Newsky in russian and german) this material is worked out in two 6-channel compositions building an acoustic space. Visually the two stairways are colored by yellow light and a special Kandinsky-yellow created by FEMA as an extract of his picture "*Improvisation 10*" from 1910. "Sound, color, words" come here together in a site-specific way, perceptible by movements in-between the two spaces.

toposonie::spree (2013)

The project is a sound walk with a smartphone application (app), with which sounds are played back depending on the position within the urban space and can be listened to with headphones. In contrast to an audio guide with a fixed route and duration, it is



possible for the listener to move about freely within the area at his own pace. By means of GPS, sounds are precisely attuned to the location of the listener. Thus, it is also possible to start at any point within the area of the sound course on the banks of the Spree.



The visible and audible surroundings are overlaid with a second (audible) layer with the sounds in the ear. Sounds are superimposed over the events, they colour the world around the listener and disconcertingly reveal **another reality** with layers and narratives behind the outwardly perceptible surface. The interiors of the buildings in the museum and government district, which are only visible from the outside, become audible as artistically intensified atmospheres, sounds and voices. These voices do not appear by chance – they are the invisible voices on the political scene, the lobbyists, who approach the sound walk participants suddenly and unexpectedly.

The sound course takes the listener through the lobby jungle in 14 scenes, with disruptive actions in the Reichstag, past a session of the Bundespressekonferenz [Federal Press Conference], over a blogger's disclosures about the classified information office of the Bundestag to the Career Center at Humboldt University, where "public affairs" and "political consulting" agencies introduce themselves.

Between the scenes, which are similar to radio plays, real and unreal sounds continually appear that colour and transform the environment on site, such as at the six bridges, each of which has been "tuned" to a particular resonant frequency.

The sound walk thus becomes a personal game with reality that affords the listener an acoustic glimpse behind the post-card views along the banks of the Spree. The moment of reality is greatly intensified as a result of the special recording technology, thus creating disconcerting perceptual perspectives.



Deep Difference Unit (2016)

What you can see on this picture is not an art work. It's a real military device, huge loudspeaker units installed at the South/North Korean border by both states to manipulate the other side with propaganda and music.



My loudspeaker sculpture **Deep Difference Unit** is a small replication of these loudspeakers at the border, one representing the North and the other representing the South - but very close together. The visitors can pass through - in real life that's not possible because the border zone is totally blocked on two kilometers on every side.



Deep Difference Unit, loudspeaker sculpture installed in Daegu, South-Korea

But here they are standing extremely close together, producing a melody of difference tones, only audible for visitors in the zone in between. The "*difference tone*" is a psychoacoustic phenomenon of an additional tone that is artificially perceived when two pure tones are sounding at the same time. Two real frequencies f_1 and f_2 can produce a virtual third tone f_D , the difference tone which is kind of "unity frequency". The produces 4 special difference tones developed for Korea: 4 states of a virtual, invisible unity of two different but close wave motions, an ambivalent unity of two different but closely related sides.

The deepest Korean difference tone produced in this constellation is the most ambivalent one, with 38Hz (which reminds on the cut at 38° after the Korean war), others seem to be more peaceful. Anyway, it's hard to hear - and may be not everyone can hear these "unification tones".

In the real in-between-zone, the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), nature resurrects to full life. Wild animals feel safe because man is not disturbing them: for humans it's a forbidden zone, for animals it's paradise - a touching contradiction in terms, depicting our human condition.

Thus, sometimes the voices of three birds out of that zone appear among the deep difference tones: the *crane*, the *magpie* and the *golden oriol*. For birds borders don't exist, and it is an old Korean song of the "Blue Bird" ("*Saeya, saeya, parang saeya*") which tells a sad story from the "*Donghak Rebellion*" in 1894 when the Korean people fought against the own corrupt rulers and the growing Japanese dominance. The four tones of this melody appear transposed as deep different tone frequencies.

The *Deep Difference Unit* condenses different layers of the Korean history: the past, the present and - however - the future, producing a unique experience for every visitor passing through.

Grün Hören / Listening Green (2017)

The 'Listening Green' sound installation plays with our acoustic perception of landscape. Interactive 'sound trees' surprise visitors crossing a bridge ('Tälchenbrücke') with unexpected tone sequences. At the end of the bridge, people can then actively listen to the green space using the 'sound telescope'.



The installation topic is the way we deal with **alien species in nature**, the so-called 'neobiota' or 'invasive species'. In this way, twelve exotic bird voices appear around the bridge, imitated by the instrumentalists of the state opera, who are played in 12 bird duets. And in the sound telescope, the migratory stories of native and non-local animals, which are visually mirrored in the real picture, can be heard in a wagnerian natural mood. A similar question arises as in the social debate about the immigration society: Who is allowed to live here?



The six '**Sound Trees**' (Hörbäume) stand around the bridge in a circle, so that a further, acoustic room with six listening directions is created. The sounds are randomly triggered by the passers-by walking on the bridge through one of the three light barriers. The 12 "bird duets" of the installation are compositions from the original bird voices with an imitation by an instrument (flute, oboe, clarinet, horn) by musicians of the Staatskapelle Berlin. Both voices were processed electronically, interwoven with each other and placed in a 6-channel, acoustic spatial structure. Before every bird duet, the original voice of the bird is to be heard first. All birds are non-European species, which have not lived here or have migrated to Europe (like a long time ago the oriole or recently the rose-ringed parakeet from India).



The **'Sound Telescope'** is based on a telescope with a visual and acoustic extension. One can see the real environment in which animal and tree drawings are mirrored inside and their migratory stories can be heard. An angle sensor detects the viewing direction, and depending on which direction you look, you hear another text-music-piece, especially "invasive species": where does the animal or plant come from? When did it migrate to Europe? Are dangers going out of him and what are the criteria for this? And who decides whether an animal or plant species can live here?



As a counterpoint to the factual stories of migrations, natural moods emerge from German operas of Romanticism, a time when nature was not only romanticized, but also nationalistically interpreted ("German Forest"). The music pieces of Wagner and Weber, however, turn around in the course of the spoken text and sound backwards. In contrast to this, an old paradise fantasy appears, which appears in the sound telescope in four utopian-blue patches in the landscape: *'The Golden Age'* from the *'Metamorphoses of Ovid'* - spoken by the famous German Actress Angela Winkler in the style of a reading test. A text which speaks in almost revolutionary terms of a way of life in which people are in harmony in their relationship to themselves and to nature - "unconstrained, without avenger, without law".



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