

Site-specific Elsewhere - Evocative Places on View

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The casting of roles between sound and image is mostly crafted by specialists in the film industry to enhance our visual and cognitive perception. Sound is typically defined as the "soundtrack" to a motion picture, a supporting role to the main character of moving images. In the acoustic realm of sound art, however, sound is an autonomous thing or a medium specific practice. When this pure focus on one medium is expanded to include a film or digital projection, could we call the use of visuals to accompany a sound the "filmtrack?" Would this simply reverse the hierarchy or could there be a different sense of leading and supporting role when a sound artist includes moving images in his work? These questions come to mind ever since 2009 when, in a surprising turn of events, sound sculptor Bill Fontana added digital films and projections to his artistic tool-set after having successfully built a career in pure sound art for almost four decades. I will look at this relationship and the motivation behind this development in light of a body of work that addresses notions of place in different ways. Sounding places like a location scout in search of interesting sounds has suddenly become a double inquiry: What is the image that this sound makes? What is the sound that this image makes?

Objects make specific sounds and thus there is an inherent link between say the image of the sea and the sound of waves. Images though don't make sound, although we'd associate a variety of sounds with an image, say the blue sky with wind or a passing airplane. The image of an instrument would obviously let us remember a very specific sound, a clear correlation stored in our memory. But this indexical quality of some images is so well established that an artist works with these assumptions not in an affirmative way but in a move that either disassociates this link or even points to a staged conflict. In art, what's "on view" is not necessarily what one hears.

While objects come with a set of stored and remembered sounds, a cityscape is one of those highly detailed and constructed aggregations of audiovisual information. It embodies urban sounds such as cars, sirens, passing voices, and even occasional natural sounds such as birds, rain, or a gust of wind. Almost everything can be

mentally associated with an urban acoustic environment, specifically when it's not literally on view but evoked as an "off-camera" space. This was precisely the premise of what one might call the first sounds that made a film: Walter Ruttmann's radio play *Weekend* from 1929.¹ I'm referencing this seminal pioneer of sound art precisely because he was also one of the leading experimental filmmakers of his time. Ruttmann sharpened the public's ears and eyes to the energies and generative qualities of acoustic and visual "patterns" in order to move beyond the simple indexical recording of reality. Neither Ruttmann nor Fontana believe in the realism of a document, but in the evocative quality of a condensed abstraction providing a complex audiovisual experience situated between an object and a place.

Bill Fontana is not the storyteller who pursued the art of the narrative radio play following the soundtracks laid out by Ruttmann. But his interest in patterns and acoustic field recordings let him rejoice when someone asks him: So how does this place sound like? One of his earliest works, *Total Eclipse, SE Australia* from 1976, was literally an assignment to capture the sound of Australia. Driving around in a big broadcasting truck with support from the national Australian Broadcasting Company, Fontana ended up in the rain forest south of Sydney. But it was not just the choice of the natural landscape to find an answer to this seemingly impossible question, it was also the choice of a unique and for most of us almost singular moment in our life: the experience of a total eclipse of the sun. Listening to the richness of a rain forest ecology with its multitude of birds and unknown noises is a fascinating thing in itself. Add to that the viewer's detached experience decades later in an exhibition somewhere else in the world. On top of these two shifts in perception, it is our knowledge and anticipation of the moment of eclipse that finally lends the choreography of the sounds a sense of climax and a heightened sense of reality. This realness and materiality of a unique moment is at the core of Fontana's field recordings that, in the decades to follow, would lead him to explore the notion of sound sculpture across the globe. But I'm referring to this work not because of its acoustic qualities. Let us rather understand better its evocative visual quality. Hearing these crystal-clear and sharp individual voices in a spatialized stereophonic way conjures up a still image of tall trees, entangled branches and leaves, twisted vines

¹ Golo Föllmer in Rudolf Frieling/Dieter Daniels (eds.), *Media Art Net* (2004): Ruttmann, Walter: *Weekend*, 1930, <http://www.mediaartnet.org/works/weekend/>. accessed. 2014-01-14; see this online source also for a sound sample of the play.

and an occasional quick movement in the upper regions of this almost monochrome visual feat in green. Then it gradually fades to black as the sun is eclipsed and back to green as normal life continues. At least that was my "film." It's pure cinema, only we all see a different film. My rainforest might have different trees and yours is possibly a darker shade of green. It still works with that level of abstraction that we can find again and again in art history. A kind of prototype of rain forest plays out in front of our eyes. We could even call it an acoustic evocation of stock footage of an abstracted archive.

Following *Total Eclipse*, *SE Australia* and the related *Kirribilli Wharf* (both 1976), Fontana's sound sculptures have directly or indirectly incorporated a visual field by choosing either a topology accessible and identifiable to the visitors and listeners of the work or by choosing a specific, often evocative public space to place his sound piece. This has included facades of public buildings, from the World Trade Center (*Oscillating Steel Grids along the Brooklyn Bridge*, 1983) to the Arc de Triomphe in Paris (*Sound Island*, 1994) or the War Memorial in San Francisco, which at the time housed the San Francisco Museum of Art (*Sound Sculptures through the Golden Gate*, 1987). In other cases a visual stage was the dramatic backdrop for a sound generated elsewhere as in the ruins of the Anhalter Bahnhof in Berlin where the sounds of the Cologne train station were played back (*Distant Trains*, 1984). More recently, Fontana has also worked on the juxtaposition of exterior and interior, for example when he placed the sonic vibrations of an adjacent bridge inside the vast interior space of the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in London (*Harmonic Bridge*, 2006).

But how can something be "site-specific elsewhere"? Listening to a sound while being in a different place and thus also looking at a different view is in itself an audiovisual experience, defined by a real-time transmission or prerecorded playback which is framed visually by a theatrical set. This visual frame lets us perceive the difference in the acoustic experience. I would thus argue that the experience of a Fontana sound sculpture has always played out as an audiovisual experience in which prerecorded images were absent but evoked by sounds that gave them an almost physical presence. They were inserted into the acoustic experience as a juxtaposition — a musical and visual counterpoint provided by the choice of the visual stage in public space. This experience of a shift can be part of the

characteristic features, even the logic of the place, or it can be perceived as an estranged or possibly forced juxtaposition. In both cases, a reflection on the sound-image relationship takes place.

The theatrical unity of time and place offers a strong framing even for experiences of displacement and conflict. Listening to the sounds of the city inside a museum, for example when SFMOMA exhibited *Sound Sculpture with a Sequence of Level Crossings* (1982), where the industrial noise of approaching and disappearing trains cannot be integrated into the experience of being in a certain place and time, means staging a fundamental rupture. It does make a huge difference whether the overlay of the audio and the visual stage have an affinity or not. Shifts of perception and disruptions of expectations possibly occur, but Bill Fontana is not interested in staging conflicts. His musical and aesthetic choices have typically enhanced our understanding of place rather than alienated us from this experience. His juxtapositions are much more aligned with the *potential* of a place. Only, we hadn't heard it before in quite this way. Equally important is that we hadn't seen the place in quite this way. This is especially felt in a setting where we are physically on the site that generates the sounds (*Sonic Shadows* at SFMOMA, 2010-11).

Bill Fontana identified the beginning of his musical practice as the moment when he disregarded the traditional realm of the concert hall and began to think outside the box. Side-stepping the traditional space for listening to music with its specialized, interested, and educated public, the field of public space is undefined, overdetermined, messy and at times too concrete. Still, Fontana has favored public spaces for his often site-specific interventions into the sound and visual ecology of a place. The public sphere is alluring to him precisely because of its quality of an open field in which unchoreographed events can happen that don't reference music history but the conditions of public space as an event-space, a space of possible narratives and undetermined interactions.

Similarly, we can consider even the museum a part of this public fabric although its main function seems to be to stage an encounter with art history and discourse. Yet, the museum partakes in this emphatic understanding of an institution that addresses the public at large and which is therefore also intrinsically a part of this public sphere.

The act of exhibiting sound within a museum is then an act of addressing a larger public that is often untrained in the art of listening. The sound that the art work makes is constantly in dialogue with the sounds that the public and the museum itself make. Similarly, the intervention into a museum with a sound installation is effective because of its huge palette of visuals that act as counterparts. This context is always “on view “

This is where we can circle back to the expanded field of contemporary art that has seen a growing body of hybrid works, addressing the qualities of the performing arts within the museum, as well as formulating an artistic practice as research.

Specifically the analogy to field work plays a role in this approach to Fontana's art: archeology with its notion of lost times in lost places that can be captured and evoked through found objects, anthropology with its notion of other voices that are telling a different story but ultimately enrich our fuller understanding of humanity through the diversity of voices made accessible, and even within the subjective realm of psychoanalysis we are confronted with a notion of the lost as belonging to the unconscious or repressed that can be activated or liberated. From archeology Fontana has learned a way of evoking a lost or inaccessible aura with all its connotations of lived life and rituals. This, ultimately, leads to the concept of an original site as something that can be "exhibited." The assumption that we have indeed lost something which can be unearthed and thus saved, is translated in his works into the act of paying close attention to the disregarded, the fleeting and ephemeral, possibly to a reality that has been repressed from the public surface.. Today in the age of coded and programmed objects, his sounds and images remind us of the materiality of sites. A bridge, in this close-up, is a string of cables that vibrate and hold a tension.

But how does this relate to the image that makes a sound? One of his most recent site-specific interventions was, once again, focused on the most iconic of all bridges – the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Exhibiting his *Acoustical Visions of the Golden Gate Bridge* in 2012 inside Fort Point, which sits right underneath the actual bridge and which accommodated a series of contemporary commissions by the FOR-SITE foundation to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge, one could see and hear the bridge from a hidden structural level. Pointing a video camera

upwards towards the street level with a section of steel grids which form the joints between the bridge and the land, Fontana offered a real-time audiovisual experience of patterns of light and shadow – passing cars – and intervals of enhanced vibrating noises. Depicting a place by enlarging a detail and cinematographically zooming into the granularity of a place, avoids the obvious iconic references and clichés while managing to show an icon in such a way never seen before.

It has become clear that Bill Fontana is not concerned with an image and its corresponding or not-corresponding soundtrack. In fact, as much as his practice has tested time and again the relationship to the "iconic," his interest is rather how event patterns intersect in a complex interaction between foreground and background. All viewers are trained in discerning these parameters of the visual field. But with Fontana, it is an audiovisual field recording, enhanced and abstracted in real time or in post-production. We know that the cables set in motion horizontally or vertically as in *Studies for Acoustical Visions of the Eiffel Tower* (2012) correspond to one of the most iconic places of the Western hemisphere. We have seen this too many times, whether in real life or on postcards. What needs to be shown is the way that these icons are based on the vibrancy of the microscopic view, matter, granularity, or detail set in motion and related to the macroscopic totality, whether it is a mechanical construction or a natural configuration as in *Desert Soundings* (2014), where the grain of sand alone evokes the image of the shifting dune. This charged relationship between concreteness and abstraction is nowhere more visible than in his most recent work for Linz, *Linear Visions* (2014), where the dramatically concrete is temporarily dissolved in a composition of pure colors of moving matter. The camera and the microphone allow a close-up and attention to the material events which would be impossible to achieve with the human eye and ear simply because of the exposure to the heat and noise of steel manufacturing: it is the recording media that allow a new experience. This is the sound that makes the image AND it is the image that makes the sound. Sound and visuals support each other, no leading or supporting role can be identified in this interaction. Fontana's audiovisual art is, I would conclude, not a surrealist art of collage but a materialist art of abstraction. It is the grain of sand that evokes the desert, it is the pattern of sand shifting that evokes a place as the very foundation of the works on view in this exhibition.

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ⁱ This text, originally published as “Evocative Places on View” in Bill Fontana, *Acoustical Visions and Desert Soundings*, Abu Dhabi Festival: Abu Dhabi, 2014, has been slightly abridged and modified for the present publication.