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## Soundwalking the Museum

### A Sonic Journey through the Visual Display

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#### PROLOGUE

Vienna is a filthy, noisy, city. Is this what happens when the public turns its attention to the concert hall and museum, but forgets about the soundscape and the landscape of everyday life?

—Broomfield in R. Murray Schafer, ed., 1977, p. 31

This opinion, voiced by Howard Broomfield, one of the original members of the World Soundscape Project, bemoans the separation between viewing and listening in the museum, the concert hall, and the perception of the everyday. His statement suggests that building a rarefied space for art and performance causes us to abandon the aesthetics of the everyday and opens a chasm between the ideology of art and the reality of life. While this might lead to a filthy, noisy urban environment, the consequence of this separation must also be a lack of relevance of what is on display inside the museum or performed in the concert hall. The disconnection of inside and outside, actually and metaphorically, takes away the power of reciprocity, and thus it must diminish the works' capacity to illuminate and reconsider the world beyond their walls. It is a question of inside and outside, of architecture, urban planning, education, social relations, and political determination, all rolled into the idea of curation: "showing art."

Broomfield made his forceful observations in 1975; much has changed since, and other things have stayed just the same. The Viennese museums will look more or less the same, from the outside at least; the traffic noise if anything has probably increased, but the people who visit the museums have changed dramatically. It is with less awe and wonder, and with a more equivalent enquiry

that most of us now step into the grand halls of the museum's display. We are more critically aware—touched by discourse, we know to put our own words to what we see and merge art into colloquial discussions.

Crucially, too, computer interfaces have developed our consciousness away from fixed architectural boundaries that create the inside-outside dichotomy, toward more fragile, fluid, and lucent barriers. Digital walls are permeable and connect rather than separate spaces, building a virtual place through association rather than opposition.

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter brings the practice of soundwalking—walking the landscape with a focus on listening to one's environment—to the museum, expanding the roaming pursuit of walking into the locale of its galleries, to use the boundless ephemerality of sound to illuminate museological conventions and traditions and the way we interact with these.

The invisible materiality of sound connects inside and outside, and illuminates unseen relationships between reality, possibility, materiality, and immateriality, inviting a different appreciation of architecture and artifacts as well as encouraging different curatorial concepts and strategies—to build and rebuild the museum from the contingent experience of its soundscape; to ignore and play with actual and ideological confines in the lucent fluidity of sonic possibilities that resemble and predate digital boundlessness.

The museum is not a visual place but an audiovisual environment, unfolding its space in the time of ricocheting footsteps, sincere whispers, loud echoes of children's laughter, security guards' fuzzy walkie-talkies, tour guides' hushed lectures, and a few audiovisual works that remind us that even the work is not as quiet as we might expect. Exploring this environment through listening allows us to experience not what it appears to be in its visual immediacy but hear all it could possibly be in the temporal and ever-changing invisibility of its sound.

Soundwalks stage a journey of exploration, a phonographic expedition, whose aim is to re-experience, question, and expand staid assumptions about the museum, about curatorial practice, and the contemplation of art. The intention of this chapter is part documentation and part debate on the process of soundwalking the museum for the purpose of exploring the way the museum is, and imagining the way it could be. This topic and methodology is born out of a concern about the visual focus of museums' architecture and design, signposting and curatorial approach, and the consequent lack of a more complete sensorial engagement with the museum as an environment for visual,

sonic, and multimodal work. The chapter extends an invitation to curators and visitors to soundwalk the museum, and produces some reflections on the heard that propose other possibilities, other environments and other curatorial strategies, that start not from historical traditions and conventions but from the experience and demands of the place and the work itself.

For the purpose of this exploration I designed ten soundwalks, five to take place at Tate Britain and five at Tate Modern in London. These phonographic expeditions served as the case studies for a discussion of the museum as a sensorial environment. The suggestion is that before any future of the museum that can accommodate multisensory and multimodal work can be proposed, the status quo needs to be explored beyond its visual sphere of influence.

These phonographic expeditions were determined by written instructions and were undertaken by the MA Sound Arts students from the London College of Communication, University of the Arts London, 2012 cohort. They went on their own, or in groups of two, to soundwalk the museum, and were then invited to discuss their experience and ideas through prepared listening questions.

## LISTENING QUESTIONS

How do you listen to the museum?

Does the gallery space invite listening?

Does that listening, or not listening, have an influence on how you perceived the work displayed?

Do you, when looking at artworks in the space, also hear the space?

Was there any sound work?

How does your walking, your footsteps, your talking, your breathing, your own sounds influence what you see?

How do other people's sounds, those with you deliberately or just coincidentally in the gallery at the same time, influence how you view the work?

Where would you have installed a sound work?

How would you work with sound in this museum?

What would the ideal sound museum look and sound like?

## SOUNDWALKS

I include two of the ten soundwalks here for your information and as an invitation to go to your nearest museum and try them yourself.

**Sound Walk 1: Tate Britain**

Start here (on Millbank):

Stand at the bottom of the steps and listen for approximately two minutes\* to yourself, then listen for another three minutes to yourself in the environment.

Walk up the stairs, listening to the people who come toward you.



**Figure 8.1.**

Enter the museum.

Go through to the second entrance hall, round space.

Close your eyes in the middle of this space and listen for five minutes.

Open your eyes.

Walk all the way in a straight line to the very back of the gallery, all the way while listening to yourself and other visitors inside the space.

Go to the first piece of work you find; listen to it.

Go to the next piece of work you find; look at it.

Roam the gallery on any floor, in any room for twenty minutes.

Go to the bookshop on the ground floor (where you entered); stay there listening and looking at things and people until it's time to meet in the little garden to the left of the museum when you come down the long stairs.

## **Sound Walk 2: Tate Modern**

Start here (ramp entrance on the west side of museum):

From the top of the external ramp, slowly walk all the way down, through the doors and all the way to the other end of the gallery, listening to yourself in your changing space.



**Figure 8.2.**

Go to the staircase, walk up one floor.  
 Stand at the balcony for five minutes\* listening to the space.  
 Look at artworks for five minutes.  
 Walk up another floor.  
 Stand at the balcony for five minutes listening to the space.  
 Look at artworks for five minutes.  
 Walk up one floor.  
 Stand at the balcony for five minutes listening to the space.  
 Look at artworks for five minutes.  
 Walk up one floor.  
 Stand at the balcony for five minutes listening to the space.  
 Look at artworks for five minutes  
 Take lift down to exit level, listen to the lift journey.  
 Go to meeting point: lawn at side entrance of museum.

\*All the time indications are approximate; do not distract yourself by looking at a watch—try to feel the time.

## MEASURING THE MUSEUM IN MY EARS

When R. Murray Schafer and his colleagues from the World Soundscape Project in Vancouver (of which Broomfield, quoted above, was one) took a VW camper van trip around Europe in 1975, they also visited the Louvre. The aim of their trip was to write a European Sound Diary, to document, comment upon, and record the soundscape of Europe at the time. Their visit to the Louvre was documented in five columns noting time, location, sound intensity levels, sound descriptions, and materiality. This neat handwritten table offers an interesting insight not so much into the sound profile of the Louvre in the mid-seventies, but rather into the aims and reasons for noting and recording sounds in a big visual arts gallery at the time. The focus of their documentation is on sound pollution, noise, activity levels, decibels, materialities, and sound sources. It is a measuring of the space by its sound, trying to express the sonic scale and volume of its place. It offers the museum not as a place in space but as a place in time—the swelling and abating of noise, the character of sound depending on surfaces and materials—and hints at rather than articulates the impact this sound might have on our experience of the work and the museum.

I would like to add two more columns to their survey—experience and consequence: the aesthetic knowledge gained from such a detailed sonic scrutiny, and the subsequent discussion of what it might mean for the appreciation and curation of sound within the museum. My added columns would

be different, however; they would not be neat columns drawn with a ruler, juxtaposing in clear corresponding lines material observations with decibels, decibels with time and location, time and location with activity, and so on, relying on the juxtapositions of data to construct a sonic insight into the place. Instead, my columns would be the wriggly lines of personal experience that develops from a contingent listening and produces personal narrations about an equally contingent aesthetic knowledge of the museum that might not coincide with yours at all but finds its authority in the doing, the soundwalking, walking the museum with my ears, and hearing what it looks like.

Such an exploration of the museum is much less obvious. It is not a quantitative gathering of data. Instead, it is through listening and looking and looking and listening that the gallery gets to be known temporarily. This is knowing as a contingent aesthetic impression that has a direct consequence on how I understand the work displayed and how I understand its relationship to space and time, producing the place of the museum as a contingent place for me.

In its lack of an obvious description, such a personal narration uncovers that which is left out of a seemingly transparent and quantitative scheme, and instead points at hidden interpretations: “What comes together through sound is emergent and passing time—a sense of duration, the field of memory, a fullness of space that lies beyond touch and out of sight, hidden from vision” (Toop, 2010, p. xv).

Sound can go into the actual and metaphorical nooks and crannies of a space and explore them aside from the main purpose and signification of the place that hides them. A personal listening journey does not gather data of the museum but produces personal measurements from the niches of the possible museum that I walk through and that holds its own meaning.

It is the invisible sound that generates the space in the time of my passing through it, leaving no residue in the place but only in my memory as an imprint of its experience. The only proof I have of it sounding is on my body, the body that walks on into the next gallery to hear in space that which in time will become the next imprint and currently triggers what I see. This is the body of the curator and of the visitor exploring the apparent visual work in the invisible temporality of its sound.

This temporal particularity is central to soundwalking since, although the instructions given are universal, the moment of their application is specific and contingent. They are not a map, but an invitation to map, build, trash, and rebuild the museum from its sound. In my ears the museum is built temporarily, again and again, out of the rickety shapes of all that sounds as a formless form, invisible and ephemeral, fragmented and fragmenting, and it is the complexity of this impression into which and out of which

the work comes. The sonic museum is not one stable whole holding inside itself artifacts for our perusal. Rather, the sonic museum holds nothing but is the conglomeration of things building each other reciprocally in complex equivalence: walls and paintings, floors and sculptures, inside and outside, are not separated but merge and produce the complex materiality that is the museum in my ears. The walls are not more stable than the paintings, the staircase not more permanent than the video piece, the floors not separated from the sculptural work.

Sounds have no outline, no visual boundary and distinction, but inexhaustibly diffuse associations. Rather than categorizing works and separating them from the infrastructure and architecture of the museum, sound makes relationships apparent: the relationship between moments—handing in our coat to the clerk and the moment we look at a painting; between people—the people I heard chatting in the lift and that are now looking at the same sculpture as me; and between spaces—the sounds of the footsteps echoing through the entrance hall meet those on the carpets in smaller gallery rooms upstairs. Sound unpacks the visual unity and dissolves it to build a place of invisible connections, experienced differences, real relationships, and imagined associations that is contingent and personal and in which the work is not shown but shows itself and produces the timespace of its encounter.<sup>1</sup> Sonically I become aware of the complexity of the curated space, which is visually (at least seemingly) one unified place but fragments in sound. Listening I dissolve the separation of galleries, works, inside and outside, and produce sonic connections that make the work relevant not only to discourse but to the reality and aesthetics of the everyday. I hear the relationship between the “filthy, noisy” Viennese streets and the museum’s display, and make that connection relevant.

### **READYING THE MUSEUM FOR MULTIMODAL WORK**

Juliane Rebentisch, writing toward an aesthetic of installation art—an art that includes multimodality and multimateriality, fragmented in space and demanding time—bemoans the installation shot that seeks to arrest the timespace complexity of the work into the fixity of material categorization, which is purely visual and of no time (Rebentisch, 2003, p. 18). The catalogue demands the photograph and a generic description, which in turn informs the engagement of the visitor: to see the work as it is represented and described, to understand it through the authority of its reproduction.

Rebentisch associates this problem with the lack of sensorial engagement in contemporary art, a lack which I recognize in the meta-discursive stance

of criticism and curatorial practice, and which results in the distance the audience takes to the work: to try to understand the work in its totality rather than sense it as process.

“This fascination with totalization and transparency, the production of seamless narrative of local, national, or universal history, whether through the display of history and antiquities themselves, or ethnography, art, or nature, continues to remain at the heart of most national and large regional museums” (Shelton, 2006, p. 481).

Sound cannot totalize and cannot be totalized.<sup>2</sup> In listening to the museum I cannot take a meta-position, and I do not synthesize nor sum up different meta-positions in an attempt to achieve one representation, one transparent knowledge about the work. Instead, I practice the fragments and different materials, times, and spaces that produce the work contingently without necessarily reaching one understanding, but rather a serendipitous aesthetic knowing as a sensate sense of the work.

This sensate sense is generated in my engagement with the work in the practice of an actual and a conceptual listening. Listening not only as an activity of hearing sound, but as a conceptual strategy of engaging with any sensorial material, allows me to connect, to network, and to experience the fragmented spatiality and temporality of multimodal work. The fragmented complexity and complex temporality of any work can be accessed via a “conceptual sonic” that practices its material and immaterial relationships through a sonic sensibility—focused on the invisible and fluid relationships that are generated contingently and reciprocally, rather than closing them off into the shape of their immediate appearance.

Sound, conceptual and actual, in the sense of its absence, “hidden from vision,” its invisible ability to conjure things up and broker relationships, intervenes in the desire for totality and transparency. Instead, it opens a multiplicity of pathways and possibilities; a dense heterogeneity that the curator must embrace to be able to deal with the multimodality of contemporary work and also to revisit the complexity of monomodal work in the understanding of the museum as a multimodal environment rather than a monomode display case—a neutral vessel for artifacts.

The soundwalk belies the certainty of the gallery floorplan and the artifact. Sound as material, as metaphor and as concept, invites an engagement that impedes the total vision of the museum as well as the totalization of the work. This sonic sensibility is not antivisual but revives the multidimensionality, temporality, and complexity of the visual, making it ready to receive multimodal work.

## A SONIC SENSIBILITY FOR CURATION

The museum is a timespace, an environment configured in my walking through it, built in my imagination from all that is there and all that is hinted at through what sounds invisibly and looks inconspicuously. What is needed is the sensibility to reach beyond the obvious to those layers of discreet visibility and invisibility that are the museum with the work, not the work in the museum; to expand and challenge its knowledge and totality of what appears to be there as expected, and instead propose the aesthetic production of what might be there and insist on the generative engagement of the viewer as listener.

Whatever the architectural shape of the museum, it is the task of the curator to make the visible and the invisible accessible; to offer the visitors not the detached contemplation of a display but to seduce them into the environment of the work. When the museum ceases to be a hall of reverence and quiet contemplation of what is, by sheer dint of being inside it, granted authority and transparency, and becomes another landscape, another place, just like the street outside, then our experience of the work becomes one of active exploration, finding paths rather than following them, and hearing relationships rather than muting them to distill the art.

The building of the museum might be there, but the experience of this building is produced in the activity of walking around it and through it. My soundwalk is generative: I invent and build the place through the invisible connections my listening makes. It is the curator's responsibility to do soundwalks as part of his/her curatorial practice, and it is his/her task to produce an environment of work that I can walk through with the same sonic sensibility—invited to explore the multidimensionality, temporality, and complexity of the place, enabling my engagement and generative interaction with the multimodality of the work.

It is through walking the galleries with her/his ears, from the midst of things, that the curator can revisit the museum and subsequently the visitor can join in to produce spaces that do not hold and represent multimodal and sonic works but that encourage and facilitate a multimodal engagement that is mobile and fluid, all-encompassing, whose criticality comes from this engagement rather than from "totalization transparency," and whose exchange produces the wiggly lines of a personal narration rather than "the production of seamless narrative of local, national or universal history . . ." (Shelton, 2006, p. 481).

The curator has to remember that he/she curates time as well as space, the time of walking through—curating environments and zones that are activated by my walking through and whose boundaries are less certain than its

architecture might have us believe. They are more like those of a computer game: membranes made up of hidden code; invisible and permeable, swiftly crossed, moving with ease into real spaces adjacent as well as into imaginary spaces that exist in “the field of memory” that forms our present perception.

It is, then, not about the actual modulation of a place but the modality of what is possible in our engagement with work, with the space and the time it takes. The actual walls do not have to be mobile to produce a space that in its own fragmentation and multimodality can embrace and facilitate the unfolding complexity of multimodal work, but the ideological, curatorial, and discursive walls have to be moveable.

Any architectural space can offer the platform for such curation. It is a matter of listening and understanding that the impact of the heard on our experience of the museum as an environment is important. This redeems the conventional museum, as it can prevail in its current architectural shape so long as it listens to the shapes its sounds make. At the same time, it also liberates new museums, not yet built, in that they do not have to follow conventions and traditions, as it is the invisible sphere of sound that will produce a contingent narration out of conspicuous and inconspicuous visuals that are things rather than objects, aesthetic sensations rather than artifacts.

This brings curation close to the political and the social, but also embraces pedagogy on its way. We need to learn to do soundwalks to listen in order to expand the way we look at work. Maybe we need soundwalks for every museum, to let the invisible ghost of sound into the gallery, celebrating its impact on the work and ourselves, and letting it unfold the material relationships between works, spaces, times, and viewers, rather than allowing the work to distill itself into an installation shot. Taking off doors, laying down heavy carpets, asking visitors to wear big woolly socks, or heavy wooden shoes, to sing, to talk loud, to whisper . . . and to hear themselves in the environment built of invisible connections and visible material, fragmenting each other to produce the museum as a multisensorial environment with work unfolding and refolding its space in the time of our engagement.

## EPILOGUE

### **Tate Britain**

sounds voices reverberating deferential halls. The whirr of humankind staring at reflections of their own making. Every hush escalates and spreads out into its space, confirming its authority and rendering it a hallowed hall. My sonic body shrinks into itself, self-consciously aware of the space I take; children’s

voices confidently fire up the echo, expanding themselves happily into the architecture, practicing loud footsteps, squeals and laughter.

## NOTES

1. The relationship between time and space in sound challenges the possibility of a dialectic definition that purports their autonomous discussion and pretends them as stable absolutes: time exclusive of space, and space exclusive of time. The notion of time in sound is neither time as opposed to space nor is it time plus space. At the same time, the sonic idea of space is not opposed to that time nor is it space plus time. Time and space extend each other and produce each other without dialectical conflict, creating place from the critical equivalence between temporal and spatial processes: timespace.

2. Sound can be totalized only in its visual or linguistic guise: as the score, or the description of its source. Only when we take on the meta-position of musical discourse, or semiotic readings, do we encounter a total sound. When listening, however, we are faced with the fragmented complexity and infinite possibilities of sound that are realized as contingent actualities in my temporal engagement and which are never exhausted and finalized but perpetually take on new shapes—formless and invisible.

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