

Using a Complex Soundworld For a Participative Dismantling and Redefinition of The Collective Appropriation of Industrial Landscapes

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Abstract

How can the complex soundworld of electronic musicians inspire the development of a new vocabulary and tools for describing and exploring the post- industrial transformation of urban sound environments? Through participation in two artistic projects, 'Parckdesign 2014' and 'Het Geluid van Hasselt en Genk', research is conducted into a new evaluation of the transformation of two urban areas which are physically and socially marked by their industrial past. The avant- garde output and experimental collaborations of independent electronic record labels provides the conceptual and methodological basis for a participative dismantling and redefinition of the collective appropriation of acoustic territories of former industrial zones in the centrally located canal zones of two urban areas.

Keywords: Post Industrial Transformation, Experimental Electronic music, Sonic Experience, Acoustic Territories

1. Introduction

While making sound and space with beats, tones, and chords, UK experimental electronic musicians like Actress and Copeland interpret the physical and social conditions of their city into new sonic territories. Both musicians are inspired by early Detroit techno. They use similar conceptual and methodological techniques to evoke unknown urban spatialities in which listeners are allowed to roam. The sonic perception and its ability to invoke astonishment and wonder within music or visual media, is used by Jean- François Augoyard and Henri Torgue for an auditory analysis of urban environments. After an introduction to the composition of sonic spatiality in Detroit techno and UK Avant Garde Electronic Music and the sonic ecology of Augoyard and Torgue, I explain how these insights contribute to the development of a method for sonic exploration of a post-industrial urban transition in two belgian canal zones.

2. Techno Spatiality

2.1. Early Detroit Techno

At the end of the eighties the Detroit techno group Cybotron, formed by Richard Davies and Juan Atkins, made the single 'Techno City'. The song was intended to reflect the post- industrial transformation of their city by using new sound technology. To interpret the dying auto- industry Cybotron used subliminal funk pulsing amidst their crisp-and-dry programmed beats to reflect the shift in atmosphere in Detroit (Reynolds, S. 1998). With their work Davies and Atkins showed the world how musicians, by using new sound technologies, can create new 'sonic' spatialities in which listeners can detach themselves from the physical city. According to Derrick May, techno pioneers were not looking for the soul or identity of the Detroit, but rather for a distinct flavor as an auditory response to the people's blindness for the changing city. In 'Mediapolis' De Jong and Schuilenburg (2006) explain how a lack of sensory

input can be complemented by a mental apparatus or mental assumptions, executing computations following musical rules.

Techniques like sound collage and sampling provide a basis for subtly designed semi-acoustic environments or soundscapes with particular spatial effects. Following De Jong and Schuilenburg (2006) sonic spatiality is not abstract nor neutral. The two authors define it as space for social relations in which specific stories, symbols and knowledge are shared, a spatiality which is different than the spatialities which appear to people in the physical city. Concepts such as distance or opposite are less relevant in the sonic spatiality. Surrounded by a 360 degree sound sphere, the listener always stands in the middle of a sonic spatiality. The center is not a static but a dynamic place. Everything moves and resonates through the simultaneity of different sounds. Pulses, tones, tapping noise, melodies and beats form a periphery which keeps the listener in its grip. Sound opens doors and passes through walls to make people move. The acoustic space of a sonic spatiality therefore has no rigid but soft boundaries. It is an ongoing becoming, or intensity where only extremes seem to be playing.

2.2. London-based Electronic Music

Early Detroit techno continues to inspire electronic musicians in search for new sonic territories. The music has a major influence on London-based electronic musicians like Darren J. Cunningham, best known under the pseudonym Actress and Inga Copeland, formerly half of the duo Hype Williams with Dean Blunt.

The music of Derrick May, Juan Atkins, Carl Craig, Kevin Saunderson, Terrence Dixon and Theo Parrish forms a benchmark for Cunningham's music. In a review for Pitchfork Magazine Andrew Gaerig (2014) described Cunningham's most recent album *Ghettoville* (2014; Werkdiscs / Ninja Tune) as a scorched hard drive, a dour drone record that takes his fascinations— Detroit techno, Chicago ghetto house, rap —and repeatedly kicks them in the ribs. On *Ghettoville* Cunningham suggests crosscutting tensions and overlapping, narratives, just like the city itself. Sounds of the city from his walks, both real and imagined, form the backbone of this album. He doesn't seem to experience the city as 'inner' or 'outer' but rather as a continuum. "Ghettoville is me walking around East London, trying to get my own moment of peace and being in a mood basically," Cunningham tells in an interview with Derek Walmsley (2014) for the *Wire* magazine, "In a mood of all sort of emotions that needed to be controlled." He refers to his experiences when smoking too much drugs, being disconnected from the world and looking for structure and cues by walking through the city, to get his thoughts bent into some kind of shape. "The only thing that is keeping you moving, are your surroundings," he explains to Walmsley (2014). "Walking in London from one end of a street

to another can be a journey between completely different modes of existence with poverty hidden behind curtains.”

Cunningham composes his music by sketching stuff, drawing different images, and writing different stuff. Field recordings are used either very or relatively recognizable and even almost in an abstract way. On *Ghettoville* he tried to eliminate structure in his compositions, or the idea of how structure should play a part in music. Unlike other experimental electronic dance music, Cunningham is not shifting rhythms rather he is fiddling between the beats. In a review for *Dazed Magazine* Mark Fisher (2014) describes the album as a dark journey to a dystopian capital. *Ghettoville* can be interpreted as a lecture. It refuses to commune with anything but itself, including the broken and disadvantaged world it purports to represent. “We live in a brittle, addicted world, and this is what a brittle, addicted world sounds like,” Cunningham explains in an interview with Larry Fitzmaurice (2014).

Recently Cunningham contributed to the debut of singer/producer Inga Copeland. On ‘Because I’m Worth It’ (2014; Self-released), Copeland addresses the heartbreak and urban ennui against a backdrop of forward, phantasmic dub and electronic production by herself and Cunningham. On ‘Because I’m Worth it’ she explores the theme of urban life, both lyrically and through electronic music. According to Beth Tolmach (2014) her choice of stark, mechanical electronics make the listener imagine the skeletal frames seen in exposed skyscrapers. This coldness is sometimes counterbalanced by a pop sensibility. Copeland chooses for monotony in the rhythms and repetition via numbing loops. In a review for *Dummy Magazine* Tolmach (2014) compares the work of Copeland with Detroit Techno. On ‘Because I’m worth it’ Copeland is taking bits and pieces, mixing machine-made grooves with her soft and imperfect vocals to build a bigger picture.

2.3. Conclusion Techno Spatiality

The complex sound worlds of the musicians discussed above illustrate how the city is imaginable and conceivable through electronic compositions. Their music deals with alienation, immobility and movement. It holds truths about ethnicity, gender and socio-economic identity. Their compositions touch on how they see themselves mirrored or alienated musically and aesthetically as well as economically, socially and politically in the actualities of city life.

The process of breaking up and rebuilding auditory entities is a core feature of this urban electronic music. The strategy is based on simple, sometimes even familiar sounds whose perceived units get undermined by ambiguous stream formation, both sequentially and spectrally. The musicians make use of instrumental sounds like sinusoids, noise and additive synthesis, usually without loudness contours other than sharp on- and offsets. Cunningham

and Copeland use sounds from daily life contiguous with their imagination. Abstract musical sounds are woven into the realistic fabric, creating distances and depths of field. Complexity is often created as musical textures. The London-based musicians use representational symbols like the for Detroit techno typical chord progressions or rhythmical patterns. Distortion becomes a subject in itself. They are experimenting with rhythm, with steady or skipping beats. By creating discontinuity or distortion they play with the perception of opposites, with time, place and psychology. It's like they're taking hold of time, generating permanence or deviation through an exploration of the dynamics of rhythm.

To create their sounds and effects the Detroit pioneers used sequencers, samplers, and synths. Cunningham and Copeland combine working in a studio with field recording. Equipment is used rather in an anarchistic way. Distortion, hiss and crosstalk are fundamental elements in the music and settings for equalizers and compressors never shied away from excess. Techno music is well known for the creative use of step sequencers. In contrast to playing a sequence on the keyboard, using a step sequencer demands a much more analytical approach and usually results in a non-gestural successions of notes. Differences between parameter settings of individual steps are typically developed while the device is running in a loop. Frequency is a fundamental parameter in techno music. It is important for segregation. Segregation does not only take place within the boundaries of one sequence but also in combination with other sounds of the piece. Other parameters like brightness, articulation and accentuation are also subject of variation, and they allow subtly change in a sequence's perception, also in relation to other parts of the piece.

The electronic music has the power to unsettle aesthetic boundaries and to pull listeners in unknown auditory territories. Without the necessity to see the city, the music of these avant garde artists evokes real and imaginative urban spaces. Via the use of topographic references this effect is reinforced. In between the sounds and rhythms of their music another urban experience is woven. Contours of the city are no longer marked by physical walls or boundaries. They show not so much the landscape as the position of the listener within it. Their music offers the listener an imprint of the movement of one's body through an imaginative landscape, like a trace of an inhabited possibility, rather than a reportage of an assumed actuality.

3. Sonic effects

Comprehending the sonic spatiality as another urban spatiality, the movements and spatiality generated by musicians like Copeland and Cunningham are interpreted as creative, transgressive, or simply representative traces of urban design and everyday urban experience. For defining and analysing the interaction between the physical sound environment, the sound milieu of a social-cultural community, and the 'internal soundscape' of every individual, the concept 'sonic effect' will be used. Contrasting earlier sonic models of analysis, such as R. Murray Schafer's soundscape or Pierre Schaeffer's *objets sonores*, which dealt respectively with large sound environments and very small sonic utterances, sonic effects describe a set of experiential features (Augoyard & Torgue, 2005). Rather than defining things in a closed way, the concept opens the field to a new class of phenomena by giving some indication of their nature and their status. It characterizes the modal or instrumental dimensions of sound. Augoyard and Torgue immerse the sonic event in an ecology of vibrational effects, out of which, the subject and object appear. They write that "the sonic effect", sometimes measurable and generally linked to the physical characteristics of a specific context, was not reducible either objectively or subjectively. The result is the revision of the notion of the sonic city "as instrument" as merely possessing "passive acoustic properties," replacing it instead with a "sonic instrumentarium of urban environments"— an idea of playing the city via its design, and thereby modulating its vibrational effects. Sonic Experience provides a glossary of effects, including resonance, echo, rumble, and reverberation, analyzed in terms of their relevance across the scales from acoustic physics, socio-psycho-physiology to aesthetic, architectural, and urban design. Augoyard and Torgue's theory explains how musical terminology can be used for describing and analysing individual and collective everyday experience of sound in an urban environment.

4. Methodology & techniques

Field recording is used as a primary method for exploring everyday listening experience, producing a plurality of fields rather than recording the field. It is interpreted as a participative practice of social and cultural interaction combining both the immersive experience of the place or route investigated with the reflexive and artistic possibilities of amplified listening. The use of a microphone, recorded sound, and headphones provides participants with an enhanced version of their sound environment. Every day use of public places forms the basis for the sonic exploration of the area. Together with existing daily routes and routines, the experience of paths and places conceived in future urban development programs will be explored. Every field recording is accompanied by reworking, processing or interpreting the place or route in the future. Participants are invited to work with their observations and recordings, to respond to it, to understand it as one imprint in the landscape made through walking, biking, skating or driving. Finally they are challenged to collectively imagine a future sonic experience via a composition and choreography based on the results of the field recording walks.

The music and compositional practices of avant garde electronic musicians like Cunningham and Copeland together with the theory of Augoyard and Torgue inspired the methodology and techniques. The exploration of everyday listening today and in the future in the urban areas relies on the sonic experience that is made possible by the music discussed above. Sonic exploration is conceived as an integrative process that can bring together distinct cultural sound experiences. This reasoning is based on two assumptions as acknowledged by Augoyard and Torgue (2005). The first assumption is generic: perceptive organisation is fundamentally the same in everyday and specialised listening. The second assumption is anagogical: the unification of sound phenomena must happen through a rediscovery of the pre- categorical approach to listening. Augoyard and Torgue (2005) argued that listening to sonic effects and developing the capacity to identify them are part of a rehabilitation of general auditory sensitivity.

During the sonic exploration sonic event- objects are perceived as contiguous with the imagination rather than perceived as existing in the outer world. The imagination of participants is triggered with an introduction of future plans and an intro to the sonic spatiality in urban electronic music. From a heightened state of imaginative awareness, the sonic explorations could open up to new sonic experiences and narratives inspired by future plans. What is heard in real life and in the imagination will be translated into a composition and

a choreography visualized on a map. By introducing the terminology, principles and sound elements of the discussed electronic music a specific way of reworking the material recorded in the field together with instrumental sounds is suggested. An anarchistic use of the recording and editing material is allowed. The results are not expected to be easy to listen to. Enabling a tentatively appropriation by the listener is encouraged.

5. RESEARCH PROJECTS

5.1. Artistic Projects

Through participation in two artistic projects, 'Parckdesign 2014' and 'Het Geluid van Hasselt en Genk', research is conducted into the transition of urban sound environments in two urban areas which are physically and socially marked by their industrial past.

Parck Design (May – September 2014)

The aim of Parck Design initiated by the Brussels Environment is to reflect on ways to invent new public spaces in the city. The first three editions of Parckdesign in 2006, 2007 and 2008 questioned the approach of design through urban furniture in the city's parks and gardens. Parckdesign 2012 named GARDEN was dedicated to installations by international and Belgian artists in the wastelands of the Anderlecht canal area. Parckdesign 2014 privileges design as process of engagement with local and regional actors to co-produce and maintain the PARCKFARM, first chapter of the park Tour & Taxi that is considered as a test. In case of success the project may develop its own dynamic beyond the temporary or the site. During the festival, I will develop a project on the sound environment of the former industrial site. I use the regional plan for the development of a Brussels green socio-recreative network as starting point for an artistic research on the post-industrial change of the sound environment. The festival ends with a conference in september '14 where the results of my research will be presented.

Atelier de Stad (June – October 2014)

“Atelier de Stad” is a project initiated by the Belgian television channel, Canvas where creative talent was sought to work on five city projects in Flanders. “Het Geluid van Hasselt en Genk” is also part of the bigger art project ‘De Unie Hasselt – Genk’, a project that is related to the regional development around the Albert Canal. Together with five other young sound artists I will work on the identity of the two cities and the similarities between the two. I use the Regional Implementation Plan for the delimitation of the Regional Urban Area Hasselt – Genk as a starting point for a participatory study on the transition of the urban sound environments in the area. Through collaboration with other artists a multidisciplinary approach is encouraged. In September ‘14 the artistic research will end with a sound expo at C-Mine Cultural Centre and a mass performance of the cable bridge, a symbolic place between the two central cities of Limburg.

5.2. Approach

Each project starts with an exploration of how young people use public space in the area. Both the studied canal zones are in a stage of post- industrial transition. I will work with youngsters, age 15 – 27 from different backgrounds and growing up in the area. Since they are still young they can interpret their city from the point of view of here and now. The young people are found from the locations I want to work in. The collaboration with the participants will start with interviews and discussions on their relation with the urban environment and the future plans for the area. Based on these dialogues as well as my own observations and research, I define different paths through the area. From these paths I will organize different field recording workshops.

I will use field recording as a method to learn more about the sonic experience of people living and working in the areas. Through different field recording workshops we’ll try to renegotiate with local youth their appropriation of acoustic territories of the former industrial canal zones in Brussels and the region Hasselt/ Genk. Through walks and rides along existing and future paths we will explore the sonic instrumentarium of their surroundings today and in the future. Field recordings will be accompanied by a reworking, a processing or an interpretation that imagines the sonic experience in the future city. Through a variety of media– audio, graphics and a cartography – and a choreography, the spatial, physical, temporal, social and psychological qualities of the actual and imagined sound environment will be presented to a larger public.

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