



THE SOUND NEVER DIES

SUSAN PHILIPSZ IN CONVERSATION WITH SEBASTIAN CICHOCKI

The sound installation by Susan Philipsz, "You are not alone (Would there be earth without the sun?)", is the first invisible sculpture in Bródnowski Park.

Sebastian Cichocki: Could you tell us about your idea for the Bródno Sculpture Park, when and how did the idea of transmitting radio signals occur to you, while writing a new audio track for the park? How do you imagine the effect of these non-typical radio sounds, to be incorporated into the park landscape, among the concrete blocks of flats?

Susan Philipsz: I immediately noticed that the place was somehow exceptional and the residents of Bródno were proud of it; it is obvious once you start walking there. Talking to you and our long history of emails made me realise that you would most eagerly welcome a piece of work related to the local community, somehow involving the community, especially the people frequenting the park as a place of leisure. I took a look at the buildings and the blocks of flats surrounding the park, I noticed a tangle of antennas on the roofs and started thinking about signals transmitted to all the residential flats from afar. I took interest in the crucial role played by the radio during the Cold War. One day, I came across the answer given by Lech Walesa when asked about the impact of the massive use of radios by the Poles (and thus access to such stations as Radio Free Europe) on the

opposition activities of Solidarity, who answered in surprise: “Would there be Earth without the Sun?”.

This statement struck me, there was something poetic about it, something deep about the nature and the transmission of radio sound; this feeling accompanied me throughout my work on the project. When I got deeper into various data and archival information on the subject of the radio in Poland, I began to realise that the main subject for the Bródnowski Park project should be the radio. I started recording myself playing different radio signals on the vibraphone. The radio signal (interval signal) is something exceptional, it is a brief musical interlude, a sound sequence – usually chimes played between radio programmes, enabling the listener to identify the radio station he has just put on. I chose various radio signals from around the world, for example, radio signals from Radio Faroe Islands, Radio Berlin International or the exotic and the remote Voice of the People of Ho Chi Minh City. The vibraphone has particular, almost ethereal properties; I felt that its sound best suited the nature of the project. In general, the sounds played on the vibraphone are similar to the original radio chimes, but at the same time, they resonate much more, they add something otherworldly to the signals, they suggest floating in infinity, an experience of deep space. I think that the effect of transmitting these sounds in the park space can be twofold – first of all, the sound in such a place makes us more aware of our presence, physicality, relationship to this specific place, whereas the suggestive properties of these melodies can transport you to a completely different place, beyond here and now, outside the inner circle.

I feel that the work proposed by you, in a sense, organises the park life in terms of sound – the events in the park, gestures of passers-by, their movement. A new track has been added to the urban soundtrack, things have been reorganised. I wonder if you analyse your projects in terms of their interactivity, their potential to be used by incidental audiences. Can they be analysed in terms of research on local, collective needs, or on the contrary – are you rather interested in confronting the public with something unexpected and strange?

The work has been programmed in such a way that it goes off at regular intervals – as if an invisible sound clock has been installed in the park, and it chimes every quarter. I think a certain element of surprise cannot be excluded, but most of the time, the sound of chimes is soothing, and rather naturally fits into the park landscape. It may resemble other clocks installed in the public space, in squares or platforms, but whereas real clocks have got a clearly defined social function, my sound interventions rather serve the purpose of preserving and boosting memory. People remember looking for a radio station, getting through the noises and finding the signals of individual stations – which certainly has its own emotional and psychological aspect, searching for a sound from the past and reconstructing events associated with it.

Because of your penchant for the human voice and working with, you are frequently filed under “sound art”, however, the sculpture-like qualities of your projects can be

quite easily seen. Their materiality, weight, capacity are difficult to “overlook”. You are considered to be one of the few artists who truly fills up every cubic centimetre of the gallery with her works. Do you still remember when you decided to take up the invisible material of the human voice and sounds generated by instruments? What was your motivation?

When I studied at the academy of fine arts, I specialised in sculpture. At one point, I began to think about singing as a sort of sculpture experience – what happens when you send your voice into the space and what does it feel like inside your body. The physical experience of singing led me to consider sound as a sculptural form – this seemed to be a natural development in my artistic practice. The idea of sending the sound into the space, and in particular, the fact that the voice, devoid of the body, continues to travel, permeates the surrounding air with something odd, incomprehensible. This presence allows you to experience my works as something equipped with density or capacity. Thinking about absence or lack of something as a sculptural form is quite appealing to me.

The phenomenon of the presence of an invisible body, materialising itself through recorded sound, leads us to more ghostly, paranormal areas. As an artist previously working for places like, e.g. the municipal cemetery in Auguststrasse in Berlin, do you think there are places you would rather avoid working in, for reasons which cannot be reasonably explained?

Probably not. As a rule, I simply try to avoid places which seem too theatrical, overwhelmed with history. I enjoyed working in Auguststrasse, at the old military cemetery, and I think, alike Berliners, I treated it more like a park than a cemetery.

Undoubtedly, there is something disturbingly dark in the “soundtracks” that you use to edit the landscape of places chosen by you. Does it stem from the need to dramatise the banal, the usual and often neglected areas of modern cities, and to turn them into more “audible” through your interventions?

Yes, it is true. Some of these works based on the songs which attracted my attention, are quite dark – some of them are traditional old ballads about murderers. But what I find especially fascinating about them is the fact that they passed the test of time, and their grim aura is passed down the generations. The lyrics of these songs are quite important, but once they become my installations, their meaning is not entirely clear. What you hear are just scraps of individual verses, words overlap and blur into an incomprehensible whole – it is a more holistic experience of communing with a sound structure which is based on a known song.

I know exactly what you mean by “dramatising” the place, when you suggest that I am involved in conducting human emotions. But when I sing, I try to do it in a non-dramatic way, devoid of superfluous emotions, even unintentionally reducing the

sinister aspect of these songs. First of all, I would like to pay attention to specific places, in a way which is still known and recognisable to the audience.

I am deeply fascinated by the way you work with popular music in its most mundane incarnation, the way you use the pop trash – suddenly, all these trivial, sentimental, old-fashioned tricks, lyrics and melodies become “true” and important. I wonder about your criteria when looking for the source material for your vocal installations.

A lot of my inspiration comes from popular films, literature, the whole world of pop culture. Often, a material I come across lingers on in my head and I cannot get rid of it any more. When developing a project, the key thing is to decide about its subject, afterwards, everything goes much more easily. For example, I am currently working on a major project for the London City, commissioned by Artangel, with the focus on the silence of the place during the weekend and the role of the human voice at the early stages of development of a modern city.

These two aspects led me to the exploration of the Renaissance music in England, the street noises and shouts and the purely vocal form of madrigal as my source materials. These areas are new to me, but once I found the proper subject, I have been following it and exploring it in detail. So far, the recordings for the London project have been going pretty well.

In your installation *Lost Reflection*, developed for Münster, you referred to *The Tales of Hoffman* – an opera by Jacques Offenbach about the tragic love affairs of the poet who falls in love, e.g. with a mechanical doll, looking at it through the magic glasses. Is the story of Hoffman whose reflection is stolen by the courtesan Giulietta to be interpreted as a footnote to your art? Can you risk the hypothesis that your work is based on temptation and seduction?

Yes, Sebastian, you are right. Have you seen your reflection today? Yet another seduced young soul! But seriously, I never intended to deceive with my female voice. Of course, we realise that a voice which is not accompanied by music tends to be tempting, especially, if you sing in a more intimate manner. I was very careful about the way I sang the Barcarolle from the *Tales of Hoffman*, trying not to sound tempting, but singing it to myself – that is unlike a professional opera singer would normally do. Through my work, I try to encourage people to re-imagine their own surroundings, in a manner based on self-awareness, rather than temptation or seduction.

You have recently taken to more “abstract” material in your projects. The human voice is present in your work less and less often. For instance, the installation for the Radcliffe observatory, or the reason for our meeting today, i.e. the Bródnowski Park installation. Do you think this is another stage in the natural evolution of your practice? First, you get rid of tangible sculptural materials, then you leave the voice out, the last trace of the human body present in sound installations...

I have recently begun to work with instruments – the piano, the horn, I recorded compositions by rubbing my fingers against the wet edges of glasses. However, I do not treat it as a departure from my previous work. Regardless of the instrument I use – the human voice or anything else, determined by the concept of the project, the main theme is invariably carnality. What matters to me is the human presence in the recording of the sound material. I think it can always be discovered in my works, even if the human voice is absent from them.

I have already mentioned your project on the Radcliffe observatory. When you talked about it, you quoted the Italian physicist Guglielmo Marconi who suggested that a sound once made never dies – it fades away into infinity as a sound wave travelling through the Universe. How do you think this thought relates to your own artistic practice?

I think that the idea of ghosts lingering as long as we remember about them is extremely interesting. The same goes to songs. As long as people remember the songs and are able to sing them, they cannot die away.

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