

Ce qui précède voir

-- Inge van den Kroonenberg --

Notes on my work 'Ce qui précède voir', a site-specific installation that I made at the site of an old lavoir. A meditation on sound and silence in relation to time and place. An exploration of acoustic ecology and Deep Listening, while reflecting on my relationship with the environment, its nature and culture, and mediated through sound.

Silence

On the edge of the southern French village of La Romieu a winding road descends into the countryside where a rural landscape of rolling hills, dry grass, and open fields shimmers quietly in the heat of late August. A few times a day I walk down this road, wearing shorts, a worn-out T-shirt, and sandals. The only people I cross along the way are a man walking his dog early in the morning and a lady performing the same duties in the evening, always pretty much at the same moment in time. There are never any cars, though I do hear some in the distance now and then. After a sharp turn in the road, up pops an almost invisible track that bends along an overgrown hillside and descends towards an archaic site concealed in the shadow of high trees. It's a bit of a hidden place that strikes me by its simplicity and charm. Embedded in the landscape a stone, rectangular reservoir filled with clear water catches the eye. Above it, a roof of thick wooden beams with antique roof tiles provides shade and shelter. From a source in a cavity down the slope, fresh water streams gently into the reservoir. This is La Romieu's lavoir, the place where back in the days women used to wash their laundry. It was built in the nineteenth century, together with many other public lavoirs that were then being founded in communities all over France. Later, with the development of waterworks and sewage systems, lavoirs

were no longer used for washing and with their demise, their social function of serving as a gathering place for women went lost as well. Deprived from its position within the community, the La Romieu lavoir fell into decay and was slowly reclaimed by nature. The city of La Romieu, however, has by now restored the lavoir and has registered it as cultural heritage. Today, the serene and romantic nature of its picturesque location attracts hikers and tourists.

Walking around the site, taking in the environment, I imagine the women of the village coming here to wash, chat and sing. It must have been a busy gathering place, with all kinds of issues discussed and personal thoughts shared, all for women's ears only. Today, I am the only woman here, gazing at reflections on the water and listening to the sound of dry leaves rustling gently in the wind. In the corner of the lavoir, a few bumpy stone steps lead to a platform near the waterside. It's a perfect spot to sit down and enjoy the scenery, so I pull off my sandals and lower my dusty feet into the cold water. I close my eyes and open my ears. The subtle sounds of floating water, rustling trees, birdsong and buzzing insects make a delicate soundscape that evokes a certain experience of silence. But what is silence?

In her autobiographical *A Book of Silence*, British writer and academic Sara Maitland underpins the subtle differences in the experience and meaning of silence.

Beyond the purely auditory experience there is an even greater range; there are emotionally different silences and intellectually different silences too. I have come to believe that while sound may be predominantly a brain phenomenon, silence is a mind event. The experience of silence is more tightly bound up with culture, cultural expectation and, oddly enough, with language than the experience of sound is. (187)

Much of the book is an exploration of different kinds and uses of silence, and different silent places like deserts and islands. The silence of the lavoir, its landscape and soundscape, triggers me to think of an environmental composition that would invite the listener to explore their own experience of silence and engage with the sonic environment of the lavoir.

Listening

I became familiar with listening as a practice through the work of experimental composer and electronic music pioneer Pauline Oliveros, who coined the term “Deep Listening”, an approach she described as “[a] way of listening in every possible way to everything possible to hear no matter what you are doing” (*The center of deep listening* 2020). Deep Listening is a practice of radical attentiveness. It’s about being alert and profoundly open to your auditory perception. In her work, Oliveros explores the difference between the involuntary nature of hearing and the voluntary, selective nature of listening. I was very fortunate to be able to attend one of her Deep Listening workshops two years before she passed away in 2016. I remember the “Slow Song” exercise, in which the participants had to move as slowly as possible through a big room while singing a song as slowly as possible. The result was an enthralling drone of delayed songs through which I experienced an intense physical and spiritual connection to sound.

Deep Listening is more than just actively listening: it powerfully engages memory in what Pauline Oliveros calls “memorial/associational” listening, as well as the imagination, in what she has termed “imaginal” listening. Both join the listener and the “listened” in a complete embodied practice. (Coulombe 116)

Deep Listening evolved from minimal music with a long, durational character, often performed in spaces with resonant and reverberant acoustics. Its practice, however, is now applied to non-musical events as well. When I consciously listen to my surroundings, I give my attention to sound, and sound is signified through my listening. My listening is subjective. Each sound that I hear gets a meaning that stems from my personal experience and memories; a personal lexicon that I have built throughout the years. Listening attentively to the environment of the *lavoir* evokes memories, feelings and images. While listening, I always arrive at this point where the actual sounds that I hear and the sounds from my memory start to resonate with each other. It’s a slow and transformational process in which I gradually get immersed by sound. It’s also a letting go of my expectations and opening up to new aural experiences. Just listening to the nature of the sounds at the *lavoir* liberates me from prejudice

and connects me with the present. Although I might have listened to the sound of murmuring water a thousand times before, in this moment it is the first time I listen to it at the lavoir and when I come back tomorrow, I will listen to it for the first time again.

Dialogue

Another approach to listening consciously to your environment is by soundwalking. During a soundwalk I open my ears to my direct environment to gain deeper knowledge of its acoustic qualities. This starts with listening to the sounds of my own body. They are closest to me and establish the first dialogue between me and my environment. Becoming aware of my own sounds – my breath, the rustling of my clothes, my footsteps, ... – is essential to relate to the environment on a human scale. The sounds that I make interact with the sonic environment of the lavoir, which in response gives my sounds a specific acoustic quality. By paying close attention to my own sounds, I become part of the soundscape I'm listening to. Heading over to the lavoir becomes a daily practice through which I get to know its sonic environment, into which I want to immerse my own sound.

I got to know soundwalking through the work of composer, radio artist, and sound ecologist Hildegard Westerkamp. The majority of her compositional output and research on acoustic ecology deals with aspects of the sonic environment. Through her work I realised that conscious listening is a way of taking care of your surroundings. Her unpretentious approach to listening and soundmaking inspired me to include soundwalking in my workshops, which led to remarkable insights in how people listen differently to the same environment. Walking “by ear” initiates an intimate dialogue between me and my environment. It deepens my relationship with places and makes me read the soundscape of the lavoir, for example, as a possible score.

Soundwalking reveals the environment to the listener and opens inner space for noticing. It is precisely this that creates a sense of inspiration, excitement and new energy. Not only does a soundwalk raise general consciousness towards the acoustic environment, it also creates a living connection between listener and place. (Westerkamp 2006)

Sounds

At the lavoir, I expand my listening from the sound of my breath to the rustling leaves and the wind blowing through the trees. They are continuous sounds that form a subtle background noise in which the other sounds get absorbed. Say, for instance, the sound of rustling grass in the fields nearby. I can see the grass moving but I can't hear it because the sound of the wind through the trees is much more prominent. When I'm walking slowly from the trees towards the fields, the balance changes gradually and the grass becomes audible. Once in a while, I hear a high-pitched crackling sound coming from the brushwood behind me. It's a very abrupt sound which immediately grabs my attention. When it's there I'm always surprised by it and very eager to hear it again. The occasional burst of clipped wing-beats emanated by a couple of collared doves nearby is joy to my ears. I spot these birds every time I walk to the lavoir. The typical flapping sounds of their wings rise from the background like a short solo passage. A relatively loud sound compared to the rest of the environment, is the humming of a big black carpenter bee as it buzzes underneath the roof above the reservoir. This sound intimidates me a bit and it's hard to keep my eyes closed while listening. Its resonance fills the whole space. After the bee has flown away, the lavoir sounds even more silent than before and I realise how my attention got absorbed by her noisy presence. A very quiet sound is the murmuring of water streaming into the reservoir. Its waves and pitches remind of the phonetics of language. It's like someone whispering in my ear, and on the edge of the inaudible. So what is it that I hear?

When sound balances on the border of what is discernible, the mind is a willing prompter. I observed this a few years ago during the performance *Dead Plants and Living Objects* by Japanese artist Rie Nakajima and Belgian musician, composer, and sound artist Pierre Berthet. By putting all kinds of sound objects in a space, Nakajima and Berthet create poetic, playful compositions. In this performance, they set up an installation on a hillside, with sound objects dispersed in tall grass, running down to a stream. I remember watching a large white balloon that was slowly deflating while rocking gently in the early autumn breeze. The attached aerophones made no perceptible sound, or maybe they did, but I wasn't able to hear it.

With the sounds from the environment blending in, I wasn't sure if what I heard was part of the performance or part of the surrounding nature. But maybe this didn't really matter, it just made me want to get closer and listen.

“A way to get closer to things' inherent spirits is to listen to them” (Nakajima 2019).

Besides the continuous and occasional sounds of and around the lavoir, I notice a quiet tapping sound, adding an unsteady rhythm to the place. Somehow an empty plastic bottle has ended up in the stream, and it now whirls around in the reservoir, bumping against the border. When I remove the bottle, the rhythm is gone. With this small gesture I made a subtle change in the acoustic environment of the lavoir. This was to become the starting point of my site-specific composition.

Place

I like to work with found materials. They are connected to the place where you find them, and each material, natural or artificial, adds a specific connotation to the environment. The only materials I brought myself are thin rubber tubes. At the end of each tube sticks a little air stone, a small black bulb that is used in aquariums to regulate oxygen flow. For my installation I use them the other way around, to regulate the water flow. Like a sponge, the air stone fills itself with water and when saturated, it releases a drop. I search the area for more plastic bottles, which I fill with water from the reservoir, and I put the tubes in the bottles. When the other end of the tubes are at a lower point, the water starts to flow and the air stones start to drip. With my found materials – sticks, stones, empty cans, dry leaves, rags, feathers, shells, an empty wine glass – I assemble small sculptural objects to direct the course of the water, similar to the way a marble rolls down a marble run. While exploring the different acoustic qualities of each object, a composition of drippings takes shape. Inserting an empty can adds a hollow, metal 'tick-tock'. Drops on dry leaves make crunchy, sizzling sounds. An empty wine glass makes a clear 'ting', which changes into a soft 'plop' as the glass slowly runs full. Drippings on a wet stone make high-pitched splattering sounds. Droplets falling directly on the water surface make

plop-plop-plunk-like sounds depending on the height of the bottle.

The creation of a sound work for a specific place is likely to involve, first of all, a deep consideration of the attributes of that place. Decisions may then follow about what aspect or aspects of it to engage with and whether that engagement will reveal, obscure, or contradict the apparent or hidden features of the place. (Gottschalk 242)

In *Experimental Music Since 1970* composer and writer Jennie Gottschalk puts forward that experimentation is a practice that pushes past that which is known, to discover what lies beyond it. It's a way to reveal sound in its present-day experience and create an openness to the sounding event in which a state of uncertainty is accepted. In working with sound, I found that tension created through uncertainty, caused by the interplay between fixed and unsteady elements, makes one a great listener and enables a work to tell its own story.

I place the drippings around the reservoir in different positions. While playing with the dripping sounds made by the different materials, a subtle composition of various rhythms and pitches originates. Unpretentious in appearance, the installation seems to blend quite naturally with its surroundings. Adjusting a detail in the arrangement of the materials affects the sound of the drippings instantly. As the bottles empty, the intervals between the drops extend, making space for sounds from the environment to enter the silence in between. While listening to the ensemble of drippings, my attention expands further and further to the ambient sounds of the lavoir and beyond. It's a playful composition that tickles the ear and triggers the imagination, a fragile and temporary installation in which physicality, fugacity, and ecology are embodied in the acoustic potential of a single drop.

Time

When I first came upon the site of the lavoir I sensed that, despite its decay, the place still fulfilled an important role within the community of La Romieu. It occurred to me that it would be a delicate task to create a work that would be in sync with its surroundings rather than superimpose itself upon it. With *Ce qui précède voir* I added

non-intrusive elements of sound to the sonorous environment of the *lavoir*. The nature of the materials I used made the installation blend in with its surroundings, much like the sounds it produced. The alterations of the environment were subtle yet substantial. In order to notice the work, one had to be immersed in the environment. The installation required my daily care, filling up the bottles and setting the drippings in motion. Doing so I met other people visiting the site and more than once a conversation unfolded. The drippings created a setting to reflect on the sounds and silences of the *lavoir*, its acoustic ecology and, most interesting, the way people listen.

It's the quality of listening one brings to sound that makes it our own, according to the quality of our attention. If you open your body and your mind to listening with an active attitude, you will draw out very specific things. The condition for listening is obviously different according to the point in time, according to one's state of mind. That's the mirror effect, it's a reflection of one's state of mind in that moment. There exists a means of listening to any sound and making music of it. (Radigue and Eckhardt 47)

Walking to the *lavoir* a few times a day to refill the bottles and listen became a steady ritual. My activities adapted to the rhythm of the installation; the length of my walks got adjusted to the timespan of the drippings. It challenged my experience of time passing by and made me appreciate the repetitive nature of the work. With *Ce qui précède voir* I wanted to create a space in which the listener could find their own time, a moment always in transition, reminiscent of the work of French electronic music pioneer and contemporary composer Éliane Radigue, whose compositions evolve so slowly that the listener experiences past, present, and future as a static, coexistent moment. This I wanted to emphasise by the fragile and tactile character of the drippings, an installation made by materials as temporary as the sounds they produced. I think this was also what made the installation so appreciated in a public space. During the time it was exhibited at the *lavoir*, it was never removed or demolished. Why would one destroy drops, dry leaves and empty bottles anyway? The work resonated its own fugacity and by this, joining the listener and the "listened" in a brief moment in time.

Works Cited

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