

IL SUONO COME ARTE

Txt: Marco Mancuso

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Marco Mancuso - *The book of Tuned City conference was just published. The title is "Tuned City, between sound and space speculation". I would like to start from this point: what do you mean with "speculation" of the space. Do you think that the space is an urgent problem within our cities, in terms of public space for urban free processes, in terms of a lack of space for independent city-making dynamics? Do you think that the "sound" could be considered as an artistic practice that could be used to empower the processes of city making and living?*

Carsten Stabenow "Between sound and space speculation" was meant as a polemic sub-title reminding you of real estate speculation first which has a primarily negative connotation. But going into the etymology of the word as now commonly used, it describes someone who observes an object, event, or situation and takes some form of action with regard to the observed, all the while aware he may not know all the facts or factors regarding or affecting that which he observes. This comes closer to our intention, especially as the topic of sound in architecture and city planning and their potentials was kind of vague terrain for us. Nevertheless it's playing with the double meaning to give it a taste of critical perspective of our view on actual city development, gentrification processes, commercialisation and constriction of public (and cultural) spaces.

Sound is, before being an "artistic practice", first of all a space constituent factor and a highly relevant parameter to describe (and make) space. This has been known for ages and Barry Blesser or the people from Cresson Institute make this very clear and plastic in their contributions to our reader. So for that it's very obvious to me, that if an artist, planner, designer or activist thinks about expounding the problems of city/space developments, he should not miss to include these acoustic parameters. In practice that's not common. Tuned City was the attempt to give good examples why this should be reconsidered.

Marco Mancuso - *From the experience of Tuned City conference, do you agree with me the "sound" must be probably used mixed and merged with other artistic and design practices, maybe more linked to the media architecture projects, on the ICT social practices, on the interactive design theories, maybe also on the use of locative&mobile media, to create a deep value inside our cities? In other words, did you perceive from artists invited, the aim to go a step further the concept of "sound landscape", using the mix between analogue and digital media?*

Carsten Stabenow Of course you can never isolate certain media aspects from an overall impression. But in fact we tried to do so by focussing on the acoustic aspects in order to create an awareness for the problematic. Very often this topic is discussed very one-dimensionally as the problem of "acoustic noise pollution" for instance - bad noise vs. good silence - proposing solutions to isolate or to cut away the noise. Declaring something as noise is a product of cultural conditioning, that noise might have a function is not relevant. You might be able to cut the noise of a highway with a noise cancellation wall, but you will not cut the CO2 emission with this wall. And as the sound art pioneer Max Neuhaus said "... silencing our public environment is the acoustic equivalent of painting it black ...", which makes it even more clear; the complex interaction of our perceptual apparatus, the connection between eye and ear in constant adjustment with saved knowledge is the result of a learned logic. In every day life we are surrounded by the sounds of diverse nature and various origins. Language, sounds of nature and civilisation – sound as a carrier of information or as a factor of disturbance create a dense acousmatic carpet that permanently encircles our consciousness being processed and unconsciously filtered in the perceptual process.

The space constituent and communicative character of sound under aspects of perceptual psychology and psychoacoustics hold a considerable creational potential, which is often neglected in our visually dominated perception. If sound is understood not only as a phenomenological instrument but also as a communicative tool, the concrete integration of the acoustic in the urban development can be as interesting as the capability of sound to explicitly point out certain situations and conditions, to expand or to manipulate perceptual spaces. Sound is a socially open system, it is analysable, reproducible, can be multiplied, saved and recalled. It can be technically and architecturally amplified, multidirectionally distributed, but can also be focussed and controlled.

There is a broad scope of possibilities to use sound in this spectrum interdisciplinary, mediated, digitalised, mobile or simply by using certain construction material or by building spaces with the knowledge of wavelength, diffusion and reflection. Solving a problem does not start with choosing a technique or medium. It starts with awareness. "Media facades" or "mobile technologies" are often to end in themselves, used as buzz topics to generate modernity and progress, I would not mind if some of those would "be painted black", there is no content anyway.

Marco Mancuso - *You were founder and director of one of the most interesting and experimental sound&music festival in Europe, the Garage festival. Would you like to tell us why it stopped as a festival, in which form is going on now, if you will re-launch in the future and how was important that experience for Tuned City directorship?*

Carsten Stabenow garage stopped 2005 after 9 festival years for several reasons. When we started 1997 in an old and empty industrial side at the port of Stralsund it was already an extension of the Berlin situation of the early 90ies with vacant space as almost unlimited resource. We knew that this would in Stralsund also be only a question of time before the situation would change. We tried from the beginning not getting too much used to the luxury of having space. But we experimented with this vague in-between-situation, trying how deep we could possibly interact with the city and the cultural developments. We used the circumstances to create a flexible laboratory-like situation, with no fixed parameters and without the goal to found our own irremovable structure. We had to reinvent the setup every year. This kept it kind of interesting for ourselves. But the area we used to use was finally developed and we did not want to chasten ourselves as poor cultural workers always kicked out by (the self-catalysed) gentrification processes and stopped on our own decision.

A second reason was that the festival was growing a bit too big making it difficult to proceed in the way we were trying to do, as a rather intense and small meeting place. It became too busy and certain routines and mechanisms developed out of this changing the character of the place. We had to decide to either let it grow bigger and to found a proper institution or to cut it. I'm happy we did the latter.

Tuned City and other activities (see last question) are in direct row with the garage ideas and result of the experiences, networks and collaborations we built up during that time.

Marco Mancuso - *I remember, there was an edition of Garage festival (maybe 2004), in which the focus were more deep inside the concept of description-use-misuse-play of an instrument or an interface. You cared of social aspects of art projects on one side, and how social/urban dynamics could influence an art project on the other side. How are changed these dynamic in the last years, with new generation of young kinds that prefer the Social Networking dynamics and Virtual Platforms instead of living a urban space in a new way thanks to the "sound". Which is also the artist approach to these phenomena?*

Carsten Stabenow The topic that year was "interface", but the topic can be translated in more than one way. It means the man-machine interface that allows us access to the binary data of the computer world. It also specifies the medium, i.e. the user interface. In the most basic sense, interfaces form transitions and enable the communication between various systems. The interface works as a translator that mediates between the two parties and helps to make both comprehensible to each other. It's easy to extend the digital analogy to a more general level: user and content, individual and society, public and artist. Between all fields interfaces are used to enable flow of information and communication. Major interest of garage was always to question these transition fields: What are the limits of classical models of mediation? How is the interface concept in regard to the audience being further developed? How can the white cube be opened? What is the appeal of technical interfaces? What demands are thereby placed on them; how consciously do we deal with interfaces; how easily do we let ourselves be manipulated by surfaces ...? How should interfaces be created in order to generate communication and interaction, without falling into flat participatory kitsch or stereotypes of interaction? As you might notice, I'm quoting from the 2004 project text - the technology gadgets might be a bit more sophisticated and the so-called social online networks a bit more advanced - but still, the questions are the same.

Marco Mancuso - *That attitude of 2004 edition of Garage was conceptually linked to hacking theories. Use and misuse of instruments, interfaces, dynamics, technologies. Someone that knows your story can well understand this, especially about your experience at Staalplaat Soundystem. In the same time, it seems to me that there's a growing gap between hackers, media activists, programmers, technicians on one side and musicians, sound artists and creatives on the other side. In other words, it seems that the potentialities of pervasive/mobile/locative/opensource new technologies are dark codes that belong more to the technicians than to the artists, more focused on the creative process losing the potentialities of their work for urban and space living processes. Do you agree with me? Do you think, it would be important a merging of backgrounds and professionalists, like is happening in the design world?*

Carsten Stabenow If you understand "hacking" in a broader sense as a synonym for analysing and reworking a system you could say garage tried to hack in the cultural field. But I don't like to use these fancy terms and labels. But dealing with these theories like above and also even more 2001 for instance when we questioned the open source idea as a potentially interesting model for cultural practice, is mainly motivated by social interests. (I would not mix staalplaat soundsystem within this.) I can't say if there is a "growing" gap as you announced, nor if these worlds were ever closer, I simply don't know. Sure specialization is growing when it comes to details and almost nothing up from a certain project scale is possible without interdisciplinary collaboration anyway, but I would not argue that potentialities are divided that way. Right, very often art (and especially media art) stays obviously in the nice, decorative and entertaining but extraneous corner, but on the other hand in the land of theory and science a lot of potential is getting lost because of the lack of translation into reality. I agree with you by saying that it can be only interesting to encourage more friendly takeovers.

Marco Mancuso - *What are you working on as curator at the moment? Which are your plan for future editions of Tuned City? Which are the topics on which are you focused at the moment? And, how your background as communication designer is still important in your work?*

Carsten Stabenow Right now I'm working together with Tim Tetzner and Jan Rohlf on a conference, exhibition and workshop programme for the 10th edition of club transmediale in January 2009 in Berlin. This programme under the title "Structures - Backing-up Independent Audio-visual Cultures" is questioning how the constant transformations by progressive digitalisation and subsequent crises in the music industry affect today's diverse and independent music and media art scenes.

We're looking back in history of independent (music) culture, trying to reflect the different strategies, artistic practices, forms of organisation, models of keeping independence, their cultural and social impacts and relevance and transformations today.

Together with Carsten Seiffarth I'm working at the same time on a follow up for TESLA (the former Berlin media art center) - a new production place and backbone for media art in Berlin. The concept proposes a much more flexible organisation form - cross linking with already existing structures and resources instead of building and running an institutional apparatus. This should enable to concentrate on the production of the single projects, to adjust more quickly to the needs and rapid developments in this field than big and heavy institutional bodies are able to.

These are in fact also the topics and questions I'm interested in now (and always have been), conditions and circumstances of cultural/content production, potential and relevance of artistic practice in society, questions of access and methods of intermediation. This it where everything comes back to communication design, you can see it as a constant search for tools and methods to generate exchange and communication in society (and making good projects possible).

Tuned City is not going to be developed as an annual event and was never thought like this. We wanted to start a dialog

between people from different backgrounds and professions and of course it would be nice to spin this further, but it would be boring to try to subscribe ourselves to this topic. What we can imagine is to develop other Tuned City events on special occasions, in different local, social or cultural settings where other aspects of the topic could be researched in practice. What we learned out of Tuned City is that there is already a lot of academic discourse around this topic, but there is a need for more descriptive practical examples making people aware of the important role and function of sound in our lives.

www.tunedcity.de/

www.staalplaat.org/site/about/

www.garage-g.de/