

Istanbul Sound Diary

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Günar at the Yerebatan Cistern, Istanbul (April 4, 2003)

This is an account of *Sonic Postcards from Istanbul*, a sound project conducted in Istanbul in April 2003, as part of the *City of Signs* project¹ (<http://www.research.linst.ac.uk/cityofsigns>). The project explores, in an artistic context, the capacity of sound design to intervene at the conceptual fringes where the materiality of sound and semantics meet, and new possibilities of meaning emerge in the form of ambiguous, multi-layered sonic texts. These sonic texts, in turn, become the object of a semiological reflection about language, meanings and their various manifestations, between sound and other media. Working in combination with photography and text, this sound project explores the capacity of sound to mediate between self and self, self and others, people and places: through its own medium specificity (the richness of the human voice and the infinite possibilities of its acoustic and acousmatic re-presentation), its staging as *performance*—in an acoustically rich and significant location [the sound of architecture]—and as an art installation, in which sound remain the primary vehicle for communication and artistic expression.

The project focuses on the issue of *sonic reference*, the capacity of sound to relay meanings outside the codes and conventions of language. The project also examines the role of notation systems (phonographic, typographic, photographic...) and explores the effects of their interaction within the context of a *sound-led artistic practice*.

Part of this research will be presented in the form of an installation, at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medien (ZKM), Karlsruhe, Germany, April 17—August 8, 2004. It will also be discussed at the SoundCircus conference organized by the Sonic Network in England (Leicester June 11—14, 2004) (<http://www.sonicartsnetwork.org/>).

June 2002. From a first brief visit to Istanbul, I bring back sonic memories; among them, the sound of the *narghile*—breathing through water—which unfolds as a *wordless text*, with its own syntax, rhythm and punctuation: evidence of a silent circle of conviviality, in a tea garden, and testimony to the gentle art of spending time in the pursuit of no-thing...²

Against this background, the *City of Sounds* emerges as a possible subject of investigation for the *Reading the City of Signs: Istanbul: revealed or mystified?* project mentioned above and scheduled for April 2003.

A visit to the Yerebatan Sarnici—a monumental cistern of the Byzantine era, situated near Aya Sofya—suggests possible sound *interventions*, working with the discrete physical, acoustic and symbolic attributes of this large underground Hall of Water.

July—September 2002. First idea: to compile a Sound Archive for the city of Istanbul, to preserve a neglected aspect of the City's cultural heritage. Through a survey, I plan to collect nominations from the people I shall meet, to see which sounds emerge from the undifferentiated rumble of the city, and which sounds appear as more present in people's mind, or more significant—in negative and positive terms—to the people of Istanbul.

Second Idea: A project of sonic intervention in the Cistern. There, unknown to visitors, I would use the existing sound system—on which a background of classical Western and Ottoman music is played at low levels, during visiting hours—to mix and play, *on the fringe of audibility*, a selection of sounds from the city, montaged with the music; to subtly bring to consciousness the sounds of the city, by *compositionally unobtrusive means*, in an environment, where, *under the spell of architecture*, the mind becomes more receptive. The architectural space of the Cistern is not just acoustically rich, and historically and culturally significant, but is also relaxing and conducive to self-reflection. It is not surprising, as the architecture of the Cistern resembles that of a gigantic cloister, pushed underground, away from the pandemonium of the streets above.

5—19 April, 2003. Reading Michel Chion's *Guide des Objets Sonores*—in particular the sections which semiologically distinguish different types of “sound objects” and their corresponding modes of listening—leads me to consider which type of “sound objects” would best represent the city, and on what *semiological* basis; and of what the sonic equivalent of a *personalized* postcard might consist. Given my interests in those aspects of discourse which are not notated, either in writing or in print (termed “supra segmental” by linguists; lost to the experience of silent reading, with the standardization of writing brought about by the invention of printing types), and the wish to explore sound for the *City of Signs* project, the concept of “objet sonore” theorized by Pierre Schaeffer and revisited by Michel Chion seems particularly relevant. This cannot happen without some theoretical adjustment, however, as I wish to retain the notion of signification and remain outside the sonic utopia postulated by Schaeffer. Even when aiming for the sound ‘itself’, in what Schaeffer termed “*écoute réduite*”, the listener cannot prevent signification to return and proliferate, via the *relay of connotations*, to adopt a distinction introduced by Saussurean linguistics between signification and communication. For I know in advance that the “objets sonores” I devise or ‘capture’ cannot be treated as *objective entities*. As Chion puts it “sound is a cultural object constituted via an act of attention and a naming.” (Szendy 2000, :55).

As sounds of the City, the sounds to be assembled for this project will necessarily implement a reference to the City—as *indexical signs*—and, through that reference, will open up narrative possibilities and possibilities of readings about the City, beyond the self-referential sonic ghetto of the “objet sonore” theorized by Schaeffer. To conclude: the referent cannot be left out of the equation, as it is inscribed in the modality of the (indexical) sign.

The first idea of compiling a sound archive for the city develops into the more manageable *Sonic Postcard* project, more suitable for experimentation.

Unlike the electronically manipulated Sonic Postcards published by the Sonic Art Network in 2001 (SAN CD/1) [Go to the website: <http://www.sonicartnetwork.org>], I want to make a sonic postcard without manipulating my recorded material in any way, except for eliminating accidental noise, and adding a fade-in and out.

My first impulse had been to start looking for and record the picturesque or significant sounds identified by my informants; but I resist.

Sound 1: The first recording I make is of silence; in the Mevlana Temple (off *Istiklal Caddesi*); during that part of the ceremony when the musicians stop and the dervishes continue to whirl, in a rustle of robes and friction of slippers on the parquet floor—an echo of John Cage's 4'33", and an opportunity to share with strangers the poetic experience of silence, in the architecture of another faith.

Sound 2: The sound of the call to prayers, carried by the wind, in irregular drifts, along the *Bosphorus*, at night—poetic and picturesque, and dear to the people of Istanbul.

The survey I carry out among the people I meet reveals that the most noticed sonic feature of the city is the obtrusive “noise” of traffic. By contrast, the fluid space of the Bosphorus—which divides and unites the Eastern and Western parts of the city—carries positive associations. “Corridor” for tankers transiting between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, and bridge for ferry boats between East and West, the Bosphorus is a “place that links and binds the multiple identities of the city and its inhabitants” and a “locus for social, cultural and natural transformations.” (G. Cepoglu, *Bosphorus*).

Other sounds identified by the survey include: the call to prayer; the cry of seagulls; the calls of street sellers: scrap metal collector, *boza* drink, the bell of the yoghurt seller; the recorded jingle of the Aygaz gas cylinders delivery van; the ringing bell of the tram; the horn at 9:05 am every November 10 (to commemorate the exact time of Atatürk's death); dogs barking; water running underground; a knock on the door, etc.

An agnostic film-maker confides that she misses the sound of the call to prayer, whenever she travels abroad.

Postponing the archive project, I consider alternatives manageable within the two weeks available.

Sounds 3 & 4: I record fragments of conversations, to find out how spoken words behave and hang about in urban-acoustic spaces and how they relate and coexist with other sounds: indoor (on the top floor of the headquarters of the Ottoman Bank, overlooking the Golden Horn) and outside (in Aya Sofya gardens). Characteristically, on both occasions, the ubiquitous call to prayers irrupts into our conversations, drowning them at times, re-writing/fusing them into the *polylogue* of the City.

In the ensuing exhibitions of the *City of Signs* project, in Bristol, Nottingham and London, these recordings are played back on wall mounted mono Muji CD players, to facilitate visitors access to the material. The sound quality of the equipment keeps the audio experience on the level of a low resolution (grainy) “postcard”. This is the expression of an artistic compromise, based on the acceptance of the limited technological resources available. However, as with all compromises, I learn from the experience and capitalize on those limitations by planning alternative versions.

Sunday, April 4, 2003. I meet Günar, aged six—daughter of a Turkish colleague—who has agreed to perform a sound improvisation, using laughter as the sole means of expression. The performance takes place in the Yerebatan Cistern, as soon as the volume of the piped music recedes, and Günar overcomes her shyness.

Günar sustains the performance for 3'17", spontaneously introducing, after 2'30" of subtly modulated bursts of laughter, the Turkish word for laughter, *kahkaha*, repeating with different inflections till the end of the piece. The recording is made in one take, with no prior rehearsal and no subsequent check. This preserves for the piece the quality of an *event*.

To bring out the acoustic properties of the architecture, we run around and keep moving. I try to keep the mike at an appropriate distance from Günar, moving it around, to pick up other sounds and to spatialize her voice in relation to the reflecting surfaces: columns, walls, water... and to pick up other sounds: bird wings flapping, water dripping, human steps, etc. The only form of controlling the recording is produced, collage-like, by orienting the mike to spatialize the voice in the echoing architectural setting. As we walk out of the building, I take a photograph of Günar and her mother, with no idea whether the recording will be usable. By combining a human voice from Istanbul and a significant example of Byzantine architecture, *Laughter* defines the criteria for my sonic postcard from Istanbul.

Alongside other recordings of the human voice during personal conversations (Conversation 1 and 2), *Laughter* provides material for a typographic reflection about the existence of *texts* into *space*, i.e text is projected from the two-dimensional space of the printed page onto the four dimensional sonic space of the performance—where does the text dwell? This reflection highlights the filtering processes at work in conversations, as the mind boosts certain signals, filtering down others, according to criteria of appropriateness and relevance. Here, the accidental *sonic layering* of our dialogue with other voices, street sounds and the call to prayer manifests the complex, dynamic and anarchic *topo-graphy of discourse in performance*, before order is restored through the process of purposeful listening.

Away from obvious clichés and stereotypes, for me *Laughter* more than any of my other recordings, crystallizes my experience of the sounds of Istanbul. The vulnerable and hesitant expression of a child—oscillating between joy, curiosity, puzzlement, anxiety...—set in a vast underground architectural space of great beauty and simplicity, highlights the aforementioned capacity of sound to mediate between self and self; self and others; people and places. In the now quasi-empty Cistern, stone, water, colour and darkness combine to create a sense of place. The historic shift of function, from water reserve for the ancient city of Byzantium to ‘*espace de recueillement*’ for the inhabitants of contemporary Istanbul, highlights the ‘*ecosonic*’³ capacity of architecture to reveal the subtle palette of ambient sounds, which surround us, on the threshold/fringe of our consciousness. It is *not* just by echoing or amplifying sounds that architecture contributes to our sonic environment—as a *resonator*—but also by making us more attentive and engaged “to make audible, make possible, make conscious; in brief, to extend our listening experience instead of satisfying our aural expectations” as Helmut Lachenman wrote of music (Szendy 2000, 116).

During an interview on National Turkish Radio, a journalist remarks, off air, that she does not see any connection between *Laughter* and the “sounds of the city” she knows. I point out that my intention was not to reproduce existing sounds—as a sound archive would and my survey revealed—but to present an abstraction which would also work as a *synthesis* of my experience



Gaïng at the Viva Face Café, Istanbul, (October, 2003)

as an outsider/visitor, and, in so doing, enable *new* sounds of the city to be heard.

In this context, the title of the project *Sounds of the City* needs to be interpreted as “*adding* a sound to the soundscape of the City” or, better still, through the paradox of making the gift of a (new) sound to the City; with sonic material (the voice of a child, the ‘voice’ of architecture) which already *belongs* to the City.

By combining the voice of a child with the “voice” of architecture, *Laughter* inscribes a poetic reference, via the detour of a metonym. Implicit but not immediately audible, a third presence is also inscribed in the piece, manifesting itself in sign language, physical movements and facial expressions. This third (silent) voice—which spoke and mimed in improvised signs and body language (below recording levels) crucial cues during the improvisation—is the third (deliberately inaudible) protagonist in the performance; which by no means should be treated as a monologue, but, indeed, as a *study for three voices*: one laughing, the second silent and listening, attentive to the Other, helping and witnessing her coming out of herself...as she attempts—and succeeds—to manifest herself *through* a new form of sonic identity. The third voice—that of architecture—does not solely provide an echo or background for the other two, but the *potential space* in which they can ex-ist and manifest themselves as “machines de voix”, as one says “machines de vision”. (Virilio 1988)

Sunday, December 7, 2003. The unsophisticated playback equipment I used in our shows in Bristol (July) and Nottingham (September) had flattened the sound, reducing it to pale shorthand of the original.

Today, in Birmingham, England, the opportunity to *perform* some of these recordings, on the new M2 Diffusion System, developed by David Moore and James Mooney at the University of Sheffield—during a workshop organized by Birmingham Electro-acoustic Sound Theatre (BEAST)—*trans-forms* these recordings back into the dynamic, monumental *sonic architecture* from which they come, *transfigured* and with different emphases.

The sound image, which, up to now, had only existed as low-tech domestic play-back, now assumes a different dimension as *sonic performance* which brings us back to the original event. This acoustic transposition of an experimental typographic idea, projected into architectural space, is unfortunately too costly to be repeated for future exhibitions.

Meanwhile, the typographic experiment continues, in acoustic space: *typophonics*? At the ZKM exhibition, in Karlsruhe (April 17—August 8, 2004), the voice of the child will be staged

as acousmatic presence: concealed in the ceiling, triggered by visitors, as they cross an invisible beam, to view a postcard-size photograph and read three short texts, all of which evokes, from different perspectives, the circumstances of the original event.

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Footnotes

¹ The *City of Signs* project is an Action Research project led by Gérard Mermoz, at the London College of Communications (ex London College of Printing). The project, ironically titled *Reading the City of Signs: Istanbul: revealed or mystified?* redefines Art and Design Practice as Research, and uses form and media to make *propositions* about the urban environment. The project is structured around the concept of the Lab, a flexible space/structure/framework in which to set up and carry out fieldwork and dialogues across disciplines, in the spirit of a *relational aesthetics*. (Bourriaud 2002)

² I owe my initiation to the ritual of the narghile to Dr. Sebnem Timur's paper *The Eastern Way of Time-Keeping: The Object and Ritual of Narghile*, presented at the ‘Mind the Map’ conference (Istanbul, June 2002) [to be published in the proceedings]. ‘Unlike the Western conception of time, the narghile acts like a physical object that materializes a different sense of reality; against the rush of the mechanical clock’ (S. Timur). Performed in tea-houses, the ritual of narghile smoking brings together people, in an experience of serene conviviality, in which time and the mind are purposefully emptied of all preoccupations and worries.

³ Unlike ecology which refers to the discourse (logos) about living organisms in relation to their natural habitat, the neologism ‘ecosonic’—formed with ‘eco’ [from Gr. ‘oikos’ (house)] and ‘sonic’—refers to the potential of interaction, through sound, between organisms and their ‘milieu’. Thus, in the context of the sonic work discussed, ‘ecosonic’ refers to the capacity of architecture to mediate, by its direct action on sounds and people, and to inflect the quality of the resulting experience.

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