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“City Noise”: Sound (Art) and Disaster

Frans Ari Prasetyo

Introduction

My sonic work “City Noise” proposes both an artistic and a theoretical approach to the city-sound relationship. The default assumption about this relationship is that sounds reflect a one-to-one relationship between soundscape and landscape, both drawing upon and revealing the physical and social landscapes from which they originate. However, the question can be posed regarding whether there actually is a direct relationship between sound and place in our increasingly globalized world. Due to this globalization, the relation between the local and the global has become more fluid, and the relation between sounds and scapes has begun to blur.

Three short remarks about sound need to be made here:

- Sound is an inherently spatial phenomenon. No matter what its point of origin, sound must navigate space before reaching our ears. Simultaneously, recent innovations in communication and digital technologies have created virtual networks, thus redefining the conception of space and presenting new possibilities for sound studies and sound art.
- Sound is also a constitutive element in the formation of public life: in virtual spaces, the sharing of sound files are a structuring factor of public life, framed by and revealing shared tastes and ideologies. In “real” spaces, sound contributes to the policing of relative inclusion and exclusion, or constituting citizenship along axes of race, class, gender, and nationality.
- One of the traditional assumptions about sonic art derived from field recordings is that it should be developed from an “authentic” or local sense of place, identity, community, or way of life. Contradictorily, sometimes the assumption is that the relationship between sound and city is fundamentally arbitrary. This makes clear that recorded sounds enter into a complex relational dynamic with the environment from which they are taken: they may be subjected to a multitude of transformations, e.g. amplification, distortion, reverberation, dissipation, etc.

“City Noise” affirms the need for aesthetic reflection that takes into consideration the profound transformations of city sounds occurring in the wake of a natural disaster; it thus attempts to present sound marks and sound signs that make a city more identifiable and historically grounded. The rationale is that sounds help us to understand specific public situations as lived, imagined, and sensed – “public” understood here as expansive, encompassing feelings, rituals, spaces and spheres, the networked, the transient, and the mediated. As such, “City Noise” joins the already rich discourse on sound and public life while amplifying issues of affect, sense, and materiality.
A further objective of “City Noise” is to underscore the significance of sound on memory recall in the city, how evocations of city spaces are achieved through sound, where memory and sound coalesce in the (recomposed) experience of the city; it emphasizes the capacity and role of sounds in creating, enhancing, complicating, or disintegrating the public sphere.

“City Noise” presents city spaces, in both a physical and social sense, as layers of natural and human-made sounds that together create a sonic network. The structure of the city resonates in the distant reverberations of passing trains, transmitted through the ground, woven with other sources of environmental and ambient sounds and including voices in a chaotic and disrupted urban environment. It presents not only the natural sounds of disasters in general (earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, and volcanic eruptions) but also the sounds of those affected (especially humans), responding directly and indirectly to and immersed within the atmosphere of a disaster.

To hear this Sound, please click the following link:
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/369776/369777

The soundfile, compiled between 2005 and 2007, was first displayed at the sound art exhibition Good Morning “City Noise”, in the Soemardja Gallery in Bandung (Indonesia) in the beginning of 2007.

The goal was to (re)present the (sonic) atmosphere of the tsunami disaster in Aceh in 2004 and the 2006 earthquake in Yogjakarta, concurrently offering a sonic impression of the 1998 street demonstrations of the Indonesian Reformasi. Questions that became pertinent were: which sounds can be considered as elemental characteristics, as constituent of a landscape or event’s acoustic atmosphere? And how does listening to a city and to a society in general influence our memories, our knowledge, our experiences?

The compilation was an attempt to sonically demonstrate how an (urban) environment undergoes physical disasters and how this translates into psychological disasters for its inhabitants.
In the work, first of all the morphological and narrative properties of a background sound derived from a natural disaster is (re)presented. Second, sound is considered as a texture and proposed to pinpoint, specify, and prototype urban sounds often heard in the cities of Indonesia. One example is the Muslim call to prayer, adzan, emanating as many as five times per day from all mosques in almost every city in Indonesia. The adzan sonically represents the Indonesian Muslim majority and the Islamic character of the city of Aceh. Finally, the sound of shouting and distortion noise from wind, thunder, and rain convey the atmosphere of chaos and human fear. Through this disaster one hears the tentative hope that has been crushed in the fading echoes of the victims’ songs.

This composed memory is dedicated to friends and relatives – and their communities – whose lives have been irrevocably altered through the above mentioned disasters. It is a sonic message filled with spirt, inspiration, and hope to persevere and to realize a better future.

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