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*Sonic Infrastructure as Enframing*

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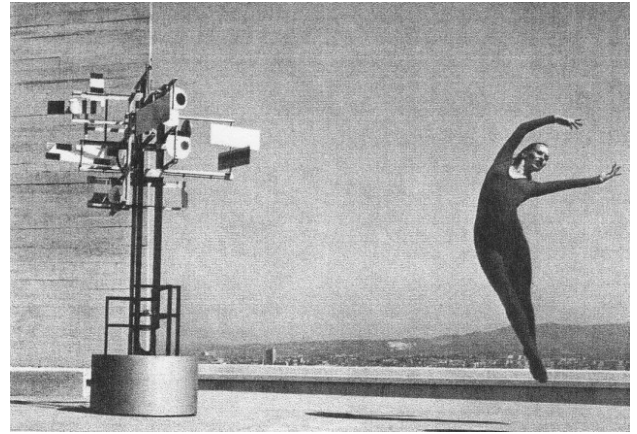
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# Spatio-dynamics, Aural Topographies and Underwritings

Morten Søndergaard



*"Valse à 120 volts", Nicolas Schöffer (paru dans le magazine mensuel TOUT SAVOIR, septembre 1956)*

## **Spatio-dynamics, aural topographies and underwritings**

### *Sonic Infrastructure as Enframing*

The space of the event, as defined by Slavoj Žižek, is that which separates an effect from its causes. As such, the event points towards a gradually widening gap in the basic epistemological framing of (our concept and use of) "reality", which could be paraphrased in this way: either an event is a change in the way reality appears to us, or it is a shattering transformation of reality itself. He sees the event as a destruction of the (conventional cognitive and social) frame through which we perceive the world and engage in it. In its most radical configuration, the event may even be a destruction of that frame, in the sense that it stages "the surprising emergence of something new which undermines every stable scheme" (Žižek, 2014, 6). This destruction of the symbolic order Žižek calls "enframing" (inspired by Heidegger's concept of *Gestell* — which is the notion that technology designates an attitude towards reality which we assume when we are engaged in such activities). On the one hand, enframing poses a danger of the "total enframing", where technological manipulation reduces the human to an object devoid of being aesthetically open to social reality. On the other hand, it promises the possibility of approaching "concrete universality", which according to Žižek sees events not just as empty containers of specific content, but as "an engendering of that content through the deployment of its immanent antagonisms, deadlocks and inconsistencies" (Žižek, 2014, 9).

It is specifically this notion of events as an engendering of that which a symbolic order is hiding which points towards the idea of a sonic infrastructure. Here, the space of the event is enframing an existing speaker installation or public communication technology. The emergence of new meaning undermines every stable schemes connected to the existing speaker system.

In what follows, I will be looking further into the (curatorial and techno-material) genealogies of sonic infrastructures: from early artistic pioneers like Nicolas Schöffer and Max Neuhaus<sup>[1]</sup> to more curatorial experiments and contextual considerations in the exhibition *Under Cover - Sound/art in Social Spaces* project (The Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde DK, 2003).

### *Event and Infrastructure*

In many ways, event and infrastructure could be perceived as opposites: Whereas the event separates effect and cause, an infrastructure stabilizes their connection and relation. And where an event might be said to forefront a sensuality, the infrastructure is all about conceptuality; in fact, infrastructure might be said to be harbinger of the very symbolic order that the event is re- or enframing (if Žižek is our guide).

This opposition is interesting because it points towards a central dynamics (or paradox) that exists in Sound Art, which consequently should always be part of any curatorial considerations: the dynamics of the sensual and the conceptual.

This is very basic to all artistic expression, it could be argued, Certainly, sound art does have a peculiar oppositional relationship which is unique in comparison with other artistic practices in that it (may) exist and be understood without (primary) textual or visual references. It constitutes a situation of representation which may be called 'open' (in the sense of Umberto Eco: it is up to the audience to 'finish' the interpretation based on an interplay between perception and contextual framings).

Interestingly, what could arguably be seen as a first attempt of operationalizing a sonic infrastructure in an art practice, Nicolas Schöffer's 'Türme' (1954, Paris), is rooted in 'kinetic art' (which was one of

the sources for Umberto Eco's original *The Poetics of the Open Work*): it is an attempt to re-functionalize art beyond the confines of the gallery spaces and use the public sphere instead. The result is a sculptural sonic object, which Schöffer describes as 'spatio-dynamic'. The idea was to make or compose a sonic background that is directed at the people living and moving around in a city. Schöffer supplied the infrastructure for this, whereas it was Pierre Henry who supplied the sonic material — based on a cybernetic feedback system of 12 tapes, the tower was intersected by a infrastructural generator of everyday noises.

Two things are clear already from this: the matter of sound art is trans-aesthetic and not bound to the norms of one specific artistic genre. Rather, it is genre-dynamic and constantly experimenting with new ways of presenting and representing artistic expression. And, secondly, sound art is infrastructurally complex as it is open to feedback from audience and science. This tendency to intentionally leave behind the control and simplicity of an autonomous work of art, and instead seeking out the indeterminacy of an audience interpreting and experiencing materialities and textualities are key elements of the early examples of sonic infrastructures: it is enframing socio-economical infrastructures in order to create alternative ways of engaging a perceiving audience.

Some 10 years later, Max Neuhaus pushed this further into making, what he termed as, 'audience instruments'. *Drive In Music* from 1967 was aiming at people in their cars, or rather: their car radio and speakers. As a location, Neuhaus chose Lincoln Parkway with a starting point at the Albrigh-Knox Art Gallery. Along half a mile of the Parkway he installed a number of antennas in such a way that each antenna transmitted one sound for only a shorter distance — each sound occupying its own 'area'. In this way, Neuhaus built up a piece which you could only experience while driving through the entire array of antennas with the car radio tuned in to the transmitters placed along the section of Lincoln Parkway<sup>[2]</sup>.

Eventually, Neuhaus would call these kind of works 'passages', creating an aural topography by 'setting a static sound structure into motion for themselves by passing through them'<sup>[3]</sup>.

"Enframing as the setting-something-static-into-

motion, and making an everyday situation dynamic, is implied in the curatorial concept of the sonic infrastructure; another thing implied is an active audience:

The Passage works are situated in spaces where the physical movement of the listener through the space to reach a destination is inherent. They imply an active role on the part of listeners, who set a static sound structure into motion for themselves by passing through it. My first work with an aural topography, *Drive In Music* in 1967, falls within this vector."

Neuhaus makes a number of 'Passages' throughout his career (*Drive In Music* was the first in a long series, which is not possible here to go deeper into in any detail) and what is significant to notice, in the context of this short paper, is that he does not consider them as a form of music. Rather, as he writes, "... we have blocks of constant sound texture, sound continuums which are unchanging. It is the listener who puts them into his own time". And, furthermore:

"The other difference between these works and music is that here the sound is not the work. Here sound is the material with which I transform the perception of the space"<sup>[4]</sup>.

It is rather relevant to compare this to the question of what *work* infrastructures do? This question is posed by Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star and, even though they pose it in the context of a book about classification standards, it does point towards the domain of the sonic infrastructure in a number of significant ways.

- What work do classifications and standards do? ... what goes into making things work like magic: making them fit together so that we can buy a radio built by someone we have never met in Japan, plug it into a wall in Champaign, Illinois and hear the world news from the BBC.
- Who does that work? ... there is a lot of hard labor in effortless ease... We will discuss where all the 'missing work' that makes things look magical goes.
- What happens to the cases that don't fit? We want to draw attention to cases that

don't fit easily into our magical created world of standards and classifications.

Schöffner (with Pierre Henry) and Neuhaus were interested in separating the situation of being immersed and surrounded by everyday processes and spaces from the perception and representations of those processes and spaces; they shared a philosophy, one might argue, running behind their sonic activities (and their artistic differences), which states that what moves us is hidden (in symbolic infrastructures framing our daily use and understanding of them), and we (artists, audiences — who are all citizens, after all) need to move as well in order to 'uncover' those infrastructures. Sound is a way to make that movement 'go'. And this goes for art as well as audiences: there are patterns of expectations framing the way we look at, or listen to, art and music — as genres moving them outside of the domain of everyday life (and into institutions). What Schöffner and Neuhaus are pointing out is that we need to move art out of the infrastructural classifications of institutions and into the socio-infrastructural settings of everyday life. Hereby, they are enframing, on the one hand, art as a practice carried out only by artists; and on the other, the audience and the representational system they themselves represent. In their 'philosophy', artists and audiences are no longer artists and audiences, but they are all citizens, implying that they produce the relations needed for us to operate truly ethically and aesthetically, standing outside representation of the public spaces while being inside the artistic presentation that they themselves are carriers of.

In other words, artists as well as audiences, are immersed in cultural classifications and standards. Bowker and Star ask what lies behind the hype of the simulations we are surrounded by — showing that even though we cannot in theory separate simulations from nature (as Baudrillard argued), then they want to pay "attention to the work of constructing the simulations, or the infrastructural considerations that underwrite the images/events..." (Bowker and Star, 1999, 3) Because, as they point out, there is more at stake — epistemologically, politically and ethically — in the day to day work of building classification systems and producing and maintaining standards than in abstract arguments about representation. Their pyrotechnics may hold our fascinated gaze, yet

they cannot provide any path to answering our moral questions.

Infrastructures and events, after all, are not opposites. Infrastructures underwrite events, or to use the words of Žižek: they are framing them. Events, on the other hand, seek the destruction of the habitual cognitive structures through which we perceive the world (Žižek, 2014, p. 32). It seems possible to argue that it is in the dialogue and dynamic relationship of the production and destruction of habitual framings that the sonic infrastructures of Schöffler and Neuhaus are operating.

### *Under Cover*

Slavoj Žižek notes, in what I read as an analysis of the same general cultural and social (and political) situation as Jerome Lanier and Bernhard Stiegler both are pointing out (however framing it in a different philosophical discourse), how the citizen (in the capacity of being a human) risks losing the very feature of being aesthetically open to reality<sup>[5]</sup>. I will refer to this situation as the 'social listening deficit', or more cogently in terms of my case-example, as the 'under cover' condition of sound/art in social spaces.



(Screen grab of the Flash-site from 2003.)

The physical framing of *Under Cover* was the main square in the centre of the old Danish city of Roskilde, Stændertorvet (the Estate Square). With a name and function going back to the 8th century, it

has always been a place for commerce and gatherings. Both national and private events take place here. In the formation of the Democratic state of Denmark it also played an essential role, since the Stændertorv was connected to the local stænderforsamling (estate assembly), which were (pre-democratic) regional representations of national power and also the coordinating centres of the proposal for a democratic constitution to the King in 1848. In fact, it was from the Estate Square in Roskilde the procession (we would perhaps today call it a demonstration) set off to the King, demanding a democratic constitution. So, the name should perhaps more rightly be "Constitution Square", but even this historic reference and function is operating "under cover": it is only a passive part of the political unconscious of the modern citizen passing the square today<sup>[6]</sup>.

The first purpose of the curated project *Under Cover* was to make that basic political archaeology active and present. To reframe the meaning of the square and the citizens using it, as it were, through the deployment of sound art into the (many) social spaces and functions of the square.

The idea was to transform it into a 'constitutive' square of new political meaning, adding other unconscious framings to it. One additional unconscious framing of the square, which is largely ignored, is the fact that the process of building a national democratic public sphere almost instantly triggered a war (which technically was a civil war) with Schleswig-Holstein (now part of Germany). Thus, the square in Roskilde constituted both a positive and negative in the (democratic) political unconscious of Denmark (and, I would claim, civil democratic constructions in general): national legal representation (liberté, égalité et fraternité) and war. Ideally, *Under Cover* would reframe this political unconscious of the square and connect it to the contemporary public square and citizen sphere. Thus, *Under Cover* was curated as an eventual reframing operationalizing the hidden or unheard (undercover) political references of the square.



(Stændertorvet in Roskilde with the Cathedral in the background.)

There were a total of 12 art projects exhibited, out of which 5 were commissioned specifically for *Under Cover*. All projects were chosen in dialogue with an artist and/or designer (often this was one and the same person) with the purpose of addressing, directly, the question of art going 'under cover' in a social city space.

### *Out of Line*

The possibilities of going undercover as an artist are limited by the detour of the political unconscious. The artist is always involved in an unconscious political discourse to some extent, but the ability of the citizen to recognize that, and to map into the political discourse, is transformative. However, neither the hierarchy of the arts nor the traditional framework of the political unconscious are untouched by the cultural change triggered by media culture and information technology. Thus, Friedrich Kittler famously claimed that the boundary between media and life are blurring — and that we face a(n) (un)sound culture dominated by effects on the surface:

"The general digitalization of information [...] erases the difference between individual media. Sound and image, voice and text have become mere effects on the surface [...] Sense and the senses have become mere glitter." (Kittler, 1987, 102)

If we accept Kittler's point of view, the citizens of

the distributed public sphere are facing a situation that is radically different from that of the traditional (and, in Kittler's sense, superficial) framing of aesthetic experience.

Voicing a similar skepticism, Jacques Attali questioned the sense of ubiquitously mediated sound, and the effect it might have on the citizen. Digital media, according to Attali, creates a kind of "survival space": "Equivalent to the articulation of a space, [sound] indicates the limits of a territory and the way to make oneself heard within it, how-to survive by drawing one's sustenance from it" (Attali, 20).

It seems to me that the most important point in relation to the role of *Under Cover* is not THAT art as "art" is dissolving or that art becomes "something else", but how this situation is being acted out. In other words, how it is being reframed? And what this means, among other things, is that art is looking to reframe the public sphere in an eventual way.

In *In Line*, Carl Michael von Hausswolff enframes art's direct references to sustenance (and the transformation and transportation of money) in the daily lives of the citizens. As live event, it served as the most direct and concrete way to make the public sphere connect to a universality in the *Under Cover* project. By redesigning a bank's waiting-line ticket system and exchanging the very dull (and irritating) calling-sounds with newly composed variations of 'pleasant' sounds, *In-Line* balanced hazardingly on the edge of the un-political and the unconscious. The audience is nudged out of line.

*Flagging food: What national flag do you want in your sausage?*

Nudging audiences is also the aim of another of the essential pieces of *Under Cover*, which was placed in the centre of the Square, and worked with the political unconscious directly from the premises of the everyday life at the square: the sausage-stand — *A Social Meeting Place* by Rune Fjord. Selling sausages to people, Fjord was also asking them which national flag they wanted on their sausage. When they responded, he asked them why they wanted that particular flag, spurring a discussion about cultural contexts, democracy and war. The exhibition opened on the very week it

was announced that Denmark had entered into the war in Iraq on the side of the US-led coalition. The first time Denmark would be at war since 1940, and the first time ever outside its own territory. The sausage-stand, then, was reframing the habitual event of buying a fast lunch, and not reflecting about much more than food and work, into a different cognitive situation where unconscious (and unpleasant) political patterns emerge — symbolized by the national flags and the ensuing conversations. It is sound art as eventual reframing at its most basic, since the material of the piece was the voices of the people buying the sausages and entering into the conversation. The sausage-stand, moreover, became a symbolic container and “stage” for the interviewing of the sound citizen.



*(Soldiers at Stændertorvet. Date unknown.)*

### *Gadgets, people, listeners*

Listening is an essential feature in any democratic society. Other people’s arguments and ideas only become political through us attentively listening to them. Musical expressions may also bear witness to this, as it has been the case historically for instance during the French Revolution and, in more recent times, during the ‘youth rebellion(s)’ of the 1960s and until the 1990s. There is, however, a tendency which is growing towards that which Jaron Lanier calls ‘stone-faced’ listening:

“There are undoubtedly musical marvels hidden around the world, but this is the first time since electrification that mainstream youth culture in the industrialized world has cloaked itself primarily in nostalgic styles” (1,130).

Retro and unfocused nostalgic listening is the sign of the times, according to Lanier. The proclaimed innovative and pioneering ‘open culture’ of the Internet (if it ever, truly existed beyond the nerdy openness of technological exchange) is transforming into something else; it is even transforming our habitual roles of citizenship as well as the bio-psycho-social context of human agency, Lanier claims.

The main argument of Lanier is that we do not use the real possibilities that the technologies are offering us to our own advantage. The new cultural dynamics that the Internet once promised simply did not happen.

In the 1960s, Habermas defined the modern public sphere as a “citizen sphere” constituted by a literary awareness — laws, newspapers, textualizations of thought (Habermas, 1961, 52-70). Moreover, the public space was metaphorized as a “physical and open” citizen space facilitating dialogue and clash of opinions. However, the very constitution of this citizen space, and the very notion of “the citizen”, has been changing rapidly since the 60s, undergoing several transformations. The literary awareness is partly and increasingly being replaced by a “media awareness” during the 70s and 80s, which, in the digital age, has transgressed even further towards a “distributed awareness” (being mediated on several platforms at the same time changing the configuration of the physical public space and the very notion of the city as the place for citizens and one of complexity).

As the previous examples have shown, the situation of the citizen is always framed by infrastructural underwritings (to use the words of Bowker and Star) to some degree. With ubiquitous information technology everywhere, today the relationality between infrastructures and the space of the public is arguably even more pre-produced with blurring boundaries between private and public and heavy attention deficits. The citizen today is challenged by this fight for their attention in almost all matters and contexts, but also by the ever-decreasing time when real attention to detail and human matters actually occurs or is possible. It is still very much a matter of finding ways to short-circuit the ‘simulated environments’ and their undercover politics: how to reclaim the possibility to produce new spaces for aesthetic experience is still the

challenge for art.

Two distinct situations of listening may be detected coming out of this more intense challenge, both negotiating the 'human condition' of a distributed public sphere. Since we (as citizens of the distributed public sphere), as Bernhard Stiegler claims, are suffering from a disorder of 'global attention deficit', and since capitalism has seized the Internet and transformed what promised to be an open and social space of relational experiment and exchange into a marked place (of mostly hidden transactions — through the services provided by 'cookies' or other 'tracking'-technologies), then listening would appear to be situated either as 1) a techno-deterministic nostalgia; or 2) a cultural agency — what Bernard Stiegler, the way I read him, refers to as 'the struggle for the Mind in Contemporary Capitalism' [2].

Thus, it could be claimed that listening is deeply involved in a deep struggle of the mind and the emergence of alternative ways of creating political awareness in the distributed public sphere; new roles and patterns are emerging. The struggle of the mind is indeed a struggle of the ear. Artistic production is a way to stage the struggle of the ear in the (distributed) public sphere, and investigate matters further. It is exhibiting investigations and questions, without necessarily offering any answers. What sound infrastructures still do offer, from Schöffers to von Hausswolff, is an eventual setting for asking essential and moral questions about our society.

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[1] Many could be mentioned here: Edward Bellamy, Thaddeus Cahill, Arsenij Avraamov, Satie, Brecht, Maricio Kagel, Michael Jüllich, Klaus Schöning, Brian Eno, Piers Headley, Espace Nouveaux, Alvin Curran, Llorenç Barber, Robert Minard.

[2] A diagram of the positions of antennas and transmitters can be seen here: <http://www.max-neuhaus.info/soundworks/vectors/passage/DriveInMusic.jpg>

[3] Max Neuhaus. 1990. "Modus Operandi. Quoted from <http://www.max-neuhaus.info>.

[4] Tarantino, Michael. 1998. "Two Passages. Conversation with Max Neuhaus". Quoted from <http://www.max-neuhaus.info>.

[5] Zizek, 2014, 31.

[6] The curatorial inspiration for *Under Cover* came from a reading of Frederic Jameson's 1982 book *The Political Unconscious*, especially the following passage:

"In .. a society, saturated with messages and with "aesthetic" experiences of all kinds, the issues of an older philosophical aesthetics themselves need to be radically historicized, and can be expected to be transformed beyond recognition in the process."