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A field is to play

Enacting a social image of the soundscape

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Abstract. *This paper presents a project at the interface of art intervention, design research and urban studies. Art critics, historians and artists have enlightened since the 1990s a possibility for public art to be intended as localized process design, acting through an engagement with publics. We see such a practice relevant to design research – as it is related to design methods and processes – and to urban studies – as it engages the built environment and the local community. The project, realized by Alessandro Contini, Paolo Patelli, Danila Pellicani with Abigail Napp in Mazama, WA, consisted of a multimedia local interaction that resulted in the creation of an archive of crowd-sourced interviews and sound recordings, and of an interactive ambient installation, expressive of the mental image of the soundscape.*

Keywords: *public art, soundscape, relational aesthetics, digital media, crowd-sourcing*

Introduction

This paper describes a possibility for public art to be intended as localized process design, relevant to design research – as it is related to design methods and processes (Schon, 1984) – and to urban studies – as it engages the built environment and the local community. The artistic intervention is elected as a way of crafting meaningful and intimate relations between people and their environment (Bourriaud, 1998), using digital media and encounter. A situated participatory and relational process also acts as a trigger for productive conjunctions and exchanges between environmental psychology, cognitive studies and urban design (Lynch *et al.*, 1995).

Mental maps are individual and collective mental representations of the geographic world to which inhabitants attach meanings (Lynch, 1960). How do sounds contribute to these polyphonic images? Do sounds help people in navigating time and space, through the everyday and their lifetime? How can sounds and spoken words be collected, shared and communicated locally? How can this activity be meaningful to the local community and to a broader audience?

The project “A field is to play”¹ has been realized during August 2011 by Alessandro Contini, Paolo Patelli, Danila Pellicani with Abigail Napp, in the unusual context of Mazama, a small village, with a population of 230, nestled in the Methow Valley of the Methow River in the eastern part of Washington, USA. “A field is to play” consisted of a process, a multimedia local interaction (McCullough, 2004) that resulted in the creation of a situated interactive archive of user-generated content. Crowd-sourced interviews and recordings shared online documented about 100 among the 230 inhabitants of the village, voluntarily imitating envi-

1. Afieldistoplay.cc

ronmental sounds (e.g. whistling to birds) literally embodying the otherwise intangible soundscape.

An interactive ambient installation, where sounds and memories were orchestrated by weather conditions and people's interactions, merged everything back into the environment.

Perspectives on auditory life and territories

A soundscape is a combination of sounds that forms or arises from an immersive environment and it includes natural sounds and the sounds of ordinary human activities (Schafer, 1977). Murray Schafer started in 1977 that the soundscape of the world was changing; today, new sounds, which differ in quality and intensity from those of the past, are spreading into each and every corner of our lives, at an increasingly high speed. Noise pollution is now a world problem and it would seem that the world soundscape has reached an apex of vulgarity in our time (Schafer, 1977). Nevertheless, every feature of the contemporary vernacular, which finds its own justification in its own very existence, as an element of the environment holds relations with the experience of the inhabitants (Venturi, 1977)².

Sound reroutes the making of identity by creating a greater and more suggestive weave between self and surrounding. Sound operates by forming links, groupings and conjunctions that accentuate individual identity as a relational project. The flow of surrounding sonority can be heard to weave an individual into a larger social fabric. This associative and connective process of sound comes to reconfigure the spatial distinctions of inside and outside, to foster confrontations between one and another, and to infuse language with degrees of immediacy (LaBelle, 2010).

Hence, acoustic space can be seen as a process of acoustic *territorialization*, in which the disintegration and reconfiguration of space becomes a political process (Deleuze, 1972). In this context the everyday plays a fundamental role: the everyday is a generative, open geography shaped by specific relations, where sound provides intimacy, it creates a relational geography that is most often emotional, contentious, fluid and which stimulates a form of knowledge that moves in and out of the body (LaBelle, 2010). Sounds are associated with their original source, while they also become a separate and constantly blending with other sounds, thereby continually moving in and out of focus and clarity. Nevertheless, they contribute to the construction of mental images of one's environment and therefore in way finding strategies (Southworth, 1969).

The project "A field is to play" seeks to examine the exchange between environments and the people within them as registered through aural experience, memory and oral expression. Scanning a mental topography through interviews and active listening, the work offers a rendering of auditory life, and the weave of the private and the public found therein.

City sense and urban theory

Traditionally, architecture and planning had put little accent on the "tactile" aspects of the environment and yielded to an emphasis on opticality, often relying on the notion of the "visible" and "readable" (LaBelle, 2010); as Henri Lefebvre argued opticality essentially supports an understanding of space as inherently "abstract" thereby alienating the more organic intensities of everyday life from the sites of their occurrence. Lefebvre describes a perspective in which space *occurs*, in a sensual relation to materiality that ultimately supplement ocular dominance (Lefebvre, 1974). Everyday acoustic life, then, offers new inter-

2. A few voluntary participants to the project "A field is to play" mentioned the sound of bacon frying as pleasing in the morning; other participants mentioned the ringtone of their iPhone as a "great way to start the[ir] day".

disciplinary modes of thinking to contemporary questions of inhabitation, identity and relation.

Several contributions from the fields of urban theory and design, though, are extremely relevant. Kevin Lynch provided seminal contributions to the field of city planning through empirical research on individual perception and navigation of the urban landscape. "The Image of the City", published in 1960, is the result of a study on how users perceive and organize spatial information as they navigate through cities. Lynch reported that users understood their surroundings in consistent and predictable ways, forming mental maps. Relevant terms are "imageability", meaning how clearly the essential architecture of a system – of an environment – can be envisaged, and "wayfinding", the consistent use and organization of definite sensory cues from the external environment" (Lynch, 1960).

Gordon Cullen, an influential English architect and urban designer who was a key motivator in the Townscape movement, also embraced a perceptive and human-centered approach to city design, taking into consideration each and every aspect with a role in creating an environment, from buildings to traffic jams and advertisements (Cullen, 1961).

Christopher Alexander, reasoning that users know more about the buildings they need than any architect could, produced and validated a "pattern language" designed to empower anyone to design and build at any scale (Alexander, 1977).

Michael Southworth created experience maps of 1960 Boston's sonic environment. Unlike Schafer, Southworth did not try to describe characteristic sounds for an urban place, but was mainly interested in the strength of the relationship between soundscape and place. Michael Southworth's exploration of the imageability through other senses links back to Lynch's idea of imageability, the extent to which an urban environment can form a concise mental image.

Public art as a situated process of engagement

Conventionally, public art tends to be defined by its relation as aesthetic object to a physical site; in contrast practices in public art that emerged starting from the 1990s constitute interventions in a public realm which includes the processes as well as locations of socialization (Miles, 1997). Well-known critics, historians and artists – among them Suzanne Lacy, Lucy Lippard, Nicolas Bourriaud – are exploring what happens when artists directly engage and address "real-world" audiences in various public sites and use public art as an instrument of public transformation.

Bourriaud defines Relational Aesthetics as a set of artistic practices, which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space. He describes the posing of artist-constructed social experiences as art making (Bourriaud, 1998).

Suzanne Lacy terms these emerging practices "new genre public art" and describes them as refusing art's commodity status, prompting at the development of strategies to initiate a continuing process and to engage defined publics. They create imaginative spaces in which to construct, or enable others to construct, diverse possible futures, through process-based interventions, frequently ephemeral, often related to local rather than global narratives, and politicized. Lacy argues that a key factor in the new visibility of this more ephemeral, community-based work is the transition from a model of public art that stresses individual authorship to one that emphasizes collectivity and interaction with the audience (Lacy, 1995).

Suzi Gablik also proposes a paradigm shift away from the dualism and splitting off of art from life towards a more participatory ethos: projects are related to social health, cultural diversity and environmental awareness (Gablik, 1995). Looking at the ongoing transformations of the American Landscape, Lucy Lippard posits that Americans are rapidly losing their sense of place and their local loyalties as a result of the country's fin-de-siècle homogenization, courtesy of look-alike Walmarts and McDonald's, strip malls and housing devel-

opments, and thanks as well to hybrid cultural styles that see heterogeneous elements from disparate cultures recombine as commodities or branded experiences, as for example in luxury hotels worldwide (Lippard, 1997).

In the theoretical articulation above, *ambience* becomes operational, in environmental, social, aesthetic and political terms. *Ambiances* contribute to transforming the built environment acting on the bodies and memories of its inhabitants, individually and grouped in communities. One of the purposes of “A field is to play” is to query the social and cultural processes at work in the constitution and sharing of a common sensory world, to explore *ambience’s* ability to trigger sensory, bodily and affective experiences.

Notes on Web 2.0 technologies and dynamics

Regarding the ecological issues that are rising in political and art agendas, particularly relevant within the practice of “new genre public art” and “relational aesthetics” is the implicit question “Who shapes the ecological discourse and why?” (Heartney, 1995).

“A field is to play” starts from these assumptions and adds to the discussion questions regarding the role of the media and new technologies in intersecting the spaces of public events and domesticity, where they produce a blurring of spatial boundaries.

In particular, the phenomenon of Web 2.0 is marked by the rapidly evolving domains of social media, and social networking, which have affected all aspects of our daily life, reshaping how we form communities and cultures, forge social structures, utilize resources, and engage in politics (O’Reilly, 2007). These developments offer new platforms for social engagement and political action whose environmental implications are still matters of speculation.

“A field is to play” unfolds as a situated process, using both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a diversified public, although geographically confined. With the idea of engagement being central, a new model of the artist – or in this case designers – and of the audience arises: the designers become the reporters, in that they are gathering information to convey to others, the analysts and the activist, wanting to be a catalyst for a novel awareness. Crowd sourcing, social networks and mobile devices are deployed for the acquisition of sound through the collective production of content, further shifting definitions of author and public.

Modes and means of engagement

The image of an environment exists in the mind of each of its inhabitants. These images are individual and collective mental representations of the geographic world to which we attach meanings. The sum total of these personal interpretations gives shape to a kaleidoscope of images. How do non-material and non-visual aspects of an environment appear in the polyphonic mental image a community builds of its territory? How can sounds and spoken words be collected, organized, stored, shared and communicated locally? How can we make this activity meaningful to the community in the valley and to a broader audience? And then: is it possible to create aesthetic values from a process while accepting to lose control over the content?

“A field is to play” was realized in August 2011 in the unusual context of Mazama, a small village, with a population of 230, nestled in the Methow Valley of the Methow River in the eastern part of Washington, USA by Alessandro Contini, an interaction designer; Paolo Patelli, an architect and urban designer; Danila Pellicani, a product designer; and Abigail Napp, a historian and independent curator. The project describes a possibility for public art to be intended as localized process design, relevant to design research and to urban studies, as it engages the built environment and the local community. The artistic intervention is elected

as a way of crafting meaningful and intimate relations between people and their environment (Bourriaud, 1998), using digital media and encounter.

Moving from a craft-based perspective of urban design and architecture, agile software methodologies, game design and vernacular design, they built a local, site-specific multimedia interaction, where the whole of human relations and their social context were to be involved. Expected results were to be open-ended, as the designers were looking for interactivity and DIY (do-it-yourself) practice; the most valued outcomes being new relationships within and around the community, its heritage and future, its places, atmosphere, collective and individual memories. The context has been intended as a fabric and a playground, made of emancipated spectators, an adaptive design, a webby environment, a multidisciplinary group of designers: it communicates through sensors and actuators, but also through gestures and encounters; natural and artificial overlap, as action is originated from multiple points and travels through the field.

“A field is to play” consisted of a process that resulted in a situated interactive installation and in an archive of user-generated content. Over 100 crowd-sourced interviews and recordings were shared over the Internet by the community, making use of SoundCloud, an online audio distribution platform that allows collaboration, promotion and distribution of audio recordings³. About 100 among the 230 inhabitants of the village voluntarily recollected and described of uttered vocal imitations of environmental sounds (e.g. whistles meant to imitate peculiar local birds, or humming like the motorway) literally embodying the otherwise intangible soundscape.

The local outdoor installation consisted of a large number of weathervanes, built with voluntary participants from the community of the Methow Valley, arranged evenly on a plain within the choreographic Big Ranch Valley, along a pedestrian trail. Each of the weathervanes was instrumented with sensors and custom made electronic devices: an Arduino micro-controller, a couple of potentiometers, an audio shield, an SD card and two speakers. Hundreds of audio clips, recorded by the community or extracted from interviews taken at local public events, were loaded on the memory cards and were continuously selected, processed, filtered, reproduced and mixed dynamically, orchestrated by weather conditions and people’s interactions. The environment is the interactive setting for a vast stream of signals, messages and noise that emerges and merges back into it.



Figures 1 & 2. The weathervanes in Mazama (photo of the author)

3. <http://soundcloud.com>

Acknowledgments

"A field is to play" has been developed by Alessandro Contini, Paolo Patelli and Danila Pellucani with Abigail Napp during a two weeks residency, where emerging artists, architects and researchers were invited to come together in Mazama, at the foothills of the Cascade Mountains of Washington State, to take part in the formulation of an international, discursive platform. The Mazama Residency/2011⁴ is a project by Valerio Borghonovo, Silvia Franceschini and Abigail Napp.

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4. www.mazamaresidency.org