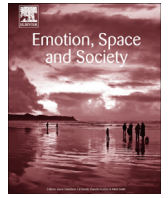




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Emotion, Space and Society

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/emospa](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/emospa)

## A field is to play. Enacting mental images of the soundscape

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 29 January 2015

Received in revised form

21 July 2016

Accepted 10 November 2016

Available online xxx

## Keywords:

Public art

Soundscape

Relational aesthetics

Interactive installation

Digital media

Participatory methods

## ABSTRACT

The article mainly focuses on the presentation of “A field is to play”, a collaborative and interactive installation dedicated to the recording and the reenacting of the relationship between the inhabitants of Mazama, WA – a small community in the USA – and their sonic environment. Through multimedia local interactions, enaction and emplacement, the project aimed to give expression to the many, individual and socially constructed, mental images of the local soundscape. A physical, interactive audio installation presented excerpts from individual interviews, emplacing and activating such mental representations, to merge them back into the environment. The artistic intervention was conceived as a localised process, acting through an engagement with publics. The soundscape itself, and its mental representations, were manipulated both as relational media, and subject matter. The presentation is preceded by three sections that introduce the theoretical context at the origin of the installation starting from urban theory in architecture, to the role of public art up to the discussion around the topic of soundscape, in a path from the most general issues to those more related to the specific character of the installation. The conclusion pulls together the theoretical and the applied sections and offers some response to the questions raised in the introduction. Through a theoretical engagement with the installation, it asks the reader to rethink the relationship between sound, memory and mental images.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper presents “A field is to play”—a project at the interface of art intervention, design research and urban studies. The study deals with public space, sound, and public participation, and tries to investigate relationship between the inhabitants and their environment through engagement of the public. The project describes a possibility for public art to be intended as a designed and localised process, as a way of crafting meaningful and intimate relations between people and their environment (Bourriaud, 1998), including its auditory aspects. It is relevant to design research, as it prototypes design methods and processes, and to urban studies, as it engages the built environment and the local community. The project investigates and plays with the concepts of soundscape, and of mental image. Mental images—also called mental maps—are individual and collective mental representations of the geographic world to which inhabitants attach meanings, cognitive structures that support both a subject's orientation and their empowerment within a given environment (Lynch, 1960). For every environment,

multiple images exist in the mind of each and every inhabitant. The sum total of such personal interpretations could be said to give shape to an ungraspable, kaleidoscopic mental topography. Sight and sound are equally crucial to our understanding of the world, yet the visual has dominated discussions of cultural experience (Bull and Back, 2015). How do non-material and non-visual aspects of an environment contribute to the mental images a community builds of its territory? Do sounds help local inhabitants in navigating time and space? If so, at what timescales, through the everyday and their lifetime? How can mental representations be collected, shared and communicated? How can this activity be meaningful to the local community and to a broader audience? The project presented in this article tries to answer these questions, through design strategies and an artistic intervention.

In the first three sections, I will outline the context of the intervention, framing the project within three perspectives. The first references concepts and tools from city theory; the second addresses recent turns in the understanding of public art; the third introduces the potentials of atmospheres and auditory life. A thorough description of the project follows in the fourth section.

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## 2. 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 argued by Henri Lefebvre, 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 could offer new interdisciplinary modes of thinking to contemporary questions of inhabitation, identity and relation.

Kevin Lynch, through empirical research on individual perception and navigation of the urban landscape, provided seminal contributions to the field of city planning (Lynch, 1960). Although still mostly focused on the visual dimension of public space, his studies will be later adapted, to include acoustic and further qualities of the built environment by his followers. His book “The Image of the City”, published in 1960, is the result of a study on how users perceive and organise 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 an environment can be envisaged, and “way-finding”, the consistent use and organisation 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 – a reaction in architecture breaking with the modern movement by emphasising “character” and significant differentiation –, also embraced a perceptive and human-centred 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). Michel de Certeau pushed this understanding of the urban further, arguing that a bird’s eye view on the city would only offer an illusion of control, while the reality of the urban experience lies in the immersed sight of the pedestrian (Certeau, 1980). Michael Southworth, once a student of Kevin Lynch, included sound in its accountings, and created experience maps of 1960 Boston’s sonic environment (Southworth, 1969). 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 (Southworth, 1969). Michael Southworth’s exploration of “imageability” links back to Lynch’s original work; it extends Lynch’s analysis of the processes through which an urban environment can form a concise mental image, by shifting the emphasis from opticality to other senses, and in particular to hearing.

## 3. Public art as a situated process of engagement

Art affects its publics and contexts through the sensible, by redistributing it (Rancière, 2004); it help question the demarcation between the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible. 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 the locations of socialisation (Miles, 1997). Well-known critics, historians and artists – among them Suzanne Lacy, Lucy Lippard, Nicolas Bourriaud – explored 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 (Lacy 1994;

Lippard 1998; Bourriaud, 1998). 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 (Lacy 1994). They create imaginative spaces, through process-based interventions, frequently ephemeral, often related to local rather than global narratives. Lacy argues that a key factor in the visibility of this more ephemeral, community-based work is the transition from a model of public art that stresses individual authorship to one that emphasises collectivity and interaction with the audience (Lacy, 1994). Suzi Gablik also proposes a paradigm shift away from the dualism and splitting off of art from life towards a more participatory ethos; projects can relate to social health, cultural diversity and environmental awareness (Gablik, 1992). In particular, 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 homogenisation, courtesy of look-alike strip malls and housing developments, and thanks as well to hybrid cultural styles that see heterogeneous elements from disparate cultures recombine as commodities or branded experiences (Lippard, 1998). Although globalisation debates argue that this homogenisation originates specifically in North American culture, in fact, the same process has transformed its very own territorial model, that we would never have been able to perceive as a homogeneous experience otherwise.

In the context of such theoretical articulations, *ambience* becomes operational, in environmental, social, aesthetic and political terms. *Ambiances* – atmospheres – contribute to the coding and recoding of the built environment. They affect everyday life, hosting the mutual transformation of space, time and habitation. As we enter into relation with one another, atmospheres are perpetually forming and deforming, appearing and disappearing. They are never finished, static or at rest, showing an unfinished quality (Anderson, 2009). “A field is to play” aims to query the social and cultural processes at work in the constitution and sharing of a sensory world, to explore an *ambience’s* ability to trigger sensory, bodily and affective experiences, and its affordances as a relational medium.

## 4. 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 observed already in 1977 how quickly the soundscape of the Western world was changing (Schafer, 1977); since then, new sounds, which differ in quality and intensity from those of the past, have spread into each and every corner of our lives, at an increasingly high speed. Noise pollution is ubiquitous and it would seem that the world soundscape has reached an apex of contamination. Nonetheless, and however trivial, every feature of the contemporary vernacular, as an element of the environment justified by its very own existence, holds relations with the experience of the inhabitants (Venturi et al., 1972). Any sound seems to contribute in rerouting the making of identities, by weaving self and surrounding. Sound operates by forming links, groupings and conjunctions that accentuate individual identity as relational. The flow of surrounding sonority weaves an individual into a larger social fabric. This associative and connective process comes to reconfigure the

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