

## the ghost and the shadow

### Reflections on a Venetian sound sculpture text by Philip Waterworth

1

*[the shadow is that which is cast, an event that is unfolding in time. it is now, it is the moment. a sound is made.*

*the ghost is pure semblance. an event is captured when alive and kept for future use. this simulation has undergone a process whereby certain elements are lost.*

*a sound is made and that sound is made into something else.]*

When I hear the word "city", I am immediately overwhelmed and belittled by the energy that such a ( tiny ) word can summon. The city is a hub that all roads lead to, a place of heightened activity, pleasure and displeasure. If the city and the village skipped along to the psychologist, the city would be diagnosed, as schizophrenic while the village would have fallen asleep in the waiting room.

The modern city is crowded in every sense. This crowdedness makes for a powerful combination of sensory stimuli that is seductive and abhorrent at the same time.

The aspect of the city that holds the most interest for me is the sounds that are produced there, be it car engines, workers on a building site or a baby crying, all of these sounds have their own unique signature that when collectively combined, form into a single hum. It could be said that the bigger a city is the more powerful it is. It could also be said that the more powerful a city is the louder it is. Noise = Power.

"The association of noise and power has never really been broken in the human imagination. It descends from God, to the priest, to the industrialist, and more recently to the broadcaster and the aviator".

R. Murray Schafer

If we could encapsulate this noise, this "hum", and break it down into its disparate elements, we would find that a lot of its power would reside in the sound of traffic. The ubiquitous drone of the car engine forms the keynote sound of most of our cities. This incessant din runs like a backbone through the contemporary urban soundscape. It has become so embedded in our environment that we hardly notice it, we know it is there and we accept its presence as an inevitable symptom of the age we live in. I am not saying that the automobile should be banished from existence, I am merely dreaming of an ideal, a place where the diverse richness of sounds can be heard without having to wade through the growling swamp of engine noise that forms a quilt around our senses.

This "ideal" can be said to exist in certain parts of the world. These places are somewhat singular in their geographical set up and in turn these singularities have a direct impact on the resulting sounds that are produced there. In the context of this article I refer to cities and their specific soundscapes and the prominence of automobile noise, yet there are modern cities that lack this presence. One of these is Venice (another is Amsterdam, but that's another story).

The prominence of the visual over the acoustical is no more apparent than in the city of Venice. Visitors are drawn here, or perhaps a better word is 'seduced' here, for the promise of the romantic decadence that is inherent in the labyrinthine network of narrow streets and canals that the city possesses. On entering the bay of Venice, one is struck by the eeriness of the cityscape that seems to have risen from the swampy waters like some newly discovered arabesque jewels. An hallucinatory mist surrounds the place giving a sense of haunting unreality to this buoyant maze.

Although the visual splendor may enchant on a consciously retinal level, it is the acoustical that causes ripples on the subconscious plane.

The fact that Venice is made up of 117 islands speaks volumes about its acoustical clarity. Unlike other cities where the main method of transport is the automobile, in Venice the main way to travel is by boat (vaporetto) or to simply walk, therefore the sounds of car engines is absent, an absence which is at once curious and

otherworldly.

When considering the soundscape of certain places it can be useful to adopt a terminology to explain and understand better the elements that contribute to the overall composition. The terms that are used in visual perception when we are say, studying a landscape can also apply to when we are studying a soundscape. In this context, the words "figure" and "ground" have their roots in psychology, the "figure" is the focus of our gaze while the "ground" serves to give the figure definition.

The composer and sound theorist, R. Murray Schafer uses these terms but injects them with musical qualities. For example, the ground in the soundscape is referred to as the keynote, the IJgUre as the signal. The keynote sound of Venice is water, we may not always be conscious of it but it has an unchanging constancy to it, it still moves when foreground sounds have ceased. From this solid bed, sound signals can be heard bouncing up and down. Sounds of footsteps in alleyways, intermittent radio blasts, dogs barking, gondoliers singing, the bells of the basilica tolling, the sound of water fluctuating through time and space.

I was lucky enough to visit Venice and to experience these sounds and to also experience them in such a way that they took on a different meaning. Divorced from their original context ; and placed in another, they became in a word, musical.

*"If one feels protective about the word "music", protect it and find another word for all the rest that enters through the ears. It's a waste of time to trouble oneself with words, noises. What it is, is theatre, and we are in it and like it, making it".*

### *John Cage*

In 1917, a common urinal infiltrated the art-world. Stripped of its sanitary function for urination, placed on its back and renamed 'Fountain', it single-handedly deconstructed the notion of artist as maker. Produced en masse in a New York factory, it was elected by Marcel Duchamp as an artwork, chosen by him and made by someone else.

Years later, the composer John Cage did the same. No toilets where involved this time, just the natural sounds of the immediate environment listened to in a concert hall, listened to as music. Cage's piece, "4' 33" instructed that any sound that occurred within the time scale set forth by the composer (in this case, four minutes and 33 seconds) shall be considered as music. The audience, in a traditional concert setting, expecting a musical performance from a definable author, find themselves as the essential components to the composition. Cage then, acts as an instigator, existing to set a situation in motion whereby the audience are listening to the random noise around them.

Both are examples of the found object, one was a visual experience while the other was acoustical. Duchamp's 'Fountain' still exists, or should I say a replica exists, the original was misplaced by Walter Arensberg, a close friend of Mr Duchamp. The same can be said for Cage's '4,33'. I hear sound all day, every day. When I close my eyes every night for eight hours or so, my ears keep on hearing, getting sharper, protective. H I choose to listen rather than just hear, my immediate environment is transformed, noise ceases to annoy.

*"Music is continuous, it's listening that is intermittent". Henry David Thoreau*

By a process of displacement, the perception of an object is radically altered. The commonplace is isolated and is held up for closer inspection. It is on this closer inspection that the object's ordinary beauty is revealed.

Although being aware of what Duchamp and Cage achieved through their experiments and of the overall concept of the found object, I had never actually realised how powerful this method could be when put into practice.

This realization came to me whilst walking through the corridors of Venice, the sound of my footsteps and a thousand others sent like a letter to an architectural vantage point where one could relax, soak up the sun and listen.

For the duration of the Venice Biennale it was possible to stand at a fixed point in the city and simultaneously listen to sounds that would not normally be audible because of our limited hearing range. This listening post was the Punta Della Dogana, the old Customs Point and is situated in the ancient administrative district of Dorsoduro. At the tip of Dorsoduro stands the Dogana di Mare. a low and eternally long building that attracts

visitors for the panoramic views that can be gained of St Mark's Basin. At the head of the civic building is a modest porticoed tower that serves as an arrival point for incoming traffic to the Grand Canal. On this occasion the arrival was made by foot and was greeted by loudspeakers that flanked the outer shell and met at the columned porch.

The speakers were hidden within the crevices of the higher ranks of the masonry, though not totally obscured as to be invisible. From these speakers emanated sounds collected from around Venice and used as the raw material for a temporal sound sculpture by the American artist Bill Fontana. The artist had installed remote microphones at 12 historical sites within the city. The ambient noise from these places was then transmitted in real time to the Punta Della Dogana, a space that temporarily played the part of gallery cum concert hall albeit without the walls.

The exterior space of the Dogana di Mare exudes a neutral calm that is ideal for a work which is purely sound based. The architecture is elegant but discreetly so. It seems to be redundant, sleeping. Acoustic memories seeping like scent from every pore. This chosen location gave me the feeling of being slightly adrift from the city, of balancing on a wire that was neither within or without.

By relocating distant sound sources to this point I had the opportunity to hear them in a fresh context and because of this, have a unique sensory experience, that of hearing farther than I could see. I was equipped with a new luxury supplied by the artist, these being binoculars. They were quite peculiar as I couldn't see through them only hear.

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.....*"The most elemental characteristic of any sound is duration. Sounds that repeat, that are continuous and that have long duration defy the natural acoustic mortality of becoming silent".....*

*Bill Fontana*

The composer Erik Satie likened his most celebrated piano piece, *Trois Gymnopédies* to a sculptural entity. The three *Gymnopédies* that make up the piece are essentially the same only with subtle changes, on first listening it is difficult to ascertain what the difference between them is. The music stands as a curious and minimalistic sound object that allows us to walk around and view from three different angles. Of course this is done imaginatively, within our mind's eye, but it also points to the sculptural and spatial qualities that sound possesses within an environment, inside or outside.

The idea of a sculpture that uses sound as its primary material seems contradictory given that what is normally considered to be sculpture tends towards the permanent and tactile. The work by Bill Fontana that took temporary residence at the Biennale is an example of a sculptural work that will not sit still preferring instead to move around and morph into new shapes. Fontana refers to this state as an "automatic self-performance". Amorphous and fluctuating, the sculpture has an heartbeat fed by the 24 hour theatre of existence.

'Acoustical Visions of Venice' was the title of this piece, a title that hints at the ethereality that was created when the ambient noise of Venice was cast like a dense shadow over the Dogana. The experience of listening to these relocated sounds was one of deep immersion and in a strange way, forgetfulness. Rooted in the here and now, forgetful of the past and of the future, a sense of 'real time' was exerted by the punctual ringing of bells from San Marco, the metallic chimes distorted in a morass of white noise.

The sounds recorded from the chosen twelve sites were normal enough, well, normal if one lived in Venice. The prominent, underlying sound was water which was interesting, as it seemed that all street noise was submerged within its cavernous depths. It gave the impression of being recorded underwater, a sound sensitive vessel prowling the Grand Canal, sending signals to the surface. From my dry and extremely hot position, the current took set to drown me. Gondolas swayed against the dock letting out disjointed creaks as they rocked back and forth, the chromatic sound of a radio broadcast pierced through the wave along with the tap...tap...tap of hammers as they hit their targets in unison. The sound of a sea breeze dispersed as it hit the two lighthouses at San Giorgio, carrying in its smothery grip the aquatic calls of several Gulls, their chatter seemingly conversant with the wailing of an infant rolling along in her pram, the babble of different tongues whoop and swirl all around her. Like smoke, the voices form beautiful but fragile shapes that once defined, collapse and disappear into the aether.

For me, the sculpture's power lay largely within its use of live sound, this being a defining factor of Fontana's

sculptural work. By allowing the work to, in a way, "make itself", Fontana gets away from the role of a studio boffin who gently moulds a texture and then presents it to the listener. This is all the more exciting because it means that the creative process is not a hidden force that reveals itself through a finished item, but rather a process that reveals itself as you stand in front of it. Active participation is possible just by dint of being there.

The 'shadow' in the title of this text refers to this sense of something that is alive and susceptible to change depending on environmental factors. The shadow of sound that was cast upon the facade of the Punta Della Dogana pulsed and shifted position according to the day's events, the everyday sound containing a poetic beauty that was illuminating. I felt as though my ears had been cleansed, aware of my previous deafness to the subtle aesthetics of the natural soundscape.

I took a mid afternoon walk around Venice armed with a cheap dictaphone, trying to capture some elements of what I had heard as a sort of audio diary. The 90 minute tape isn't exactly hi-fidelity but certain parts are fascinating, particularly the perfectly timed crossing of a footbridge when a Gondolier is approaching, his song captured as it resonated beneath my feet. Emerging from the shadow cast by the bridge, the sound floated away into a network of lines.

I listen back to the tape now, the ghostly murmurs of coincidence sieve through the mesh of the speakers. People I've never met enter and leave while a gust of wind distorts and hides their voices. Rewind.

Philip Waterworth. 2001