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An elucidation of public sound art through non-sonorous tradition

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Abstract

The origins of sound art are usually traced to previous sonorous artistic manifestations such as futurism or fluxus (see Labelle, 2006; Kahn, 1999). However, in non-sonorous manifestations it is also possible to appreciate some features of sound art that go beyond the dominant role that sound plays. By adding to the topic of sound art essential notions of temporality, spatial construction and social recognition, the emergence of a sonorous artistic practice which goes beyond the mere use of sound is revealed.

In this sense, research in public sound art, which is the primary topic of this paper, provides three issues to which it is important to pay attention in order to pose new sound art theories and ideas: First, the viewer-listener, considered simply as a citizen; second, the city, understood as a sculptural space and a social space, and finally, derived from the previous two, the transformation of the concept of 'space' in the practices concerning the public sphere of art. The implementation of these concepts, which took place naturally in different artistic domains, represented the beginning of the creative use of sound and, specifically, the awakening of public sound art. For this reason, based on sound art studies, as mentioned above, the projection of the article goes beyond these writings in an attempt to connect sound art with the public space. Literature on sound art has described its origins through music, poetry, architecture and other disciplines. However, this article addresses its origin in connection with the specific area of the city. The sound installation's pioneer, Max Neuhaus, will act as a guide towards this aim. This process allows a rereading of some of the most evocative examples of sound art and, at the same time, provides other references that will be valuable for assessing the growing interest in the creation of sound interventions in public space.

The prolific career of Max Neuhaus, which covered a broad range of topics, will establish a connection between public sound art and artists and thinkers who are rarely linked to this medium. These connections will, however, offer new perspectives onto the most widely discussed topics of the discipline: temporality and spatiality. This inquiry into the roots of sound art is an attempt to make a contribution to its history, not only by way of evidence, but also through suggestions provided by works of art that are far removed from the medium of sound and by other contributions from different fields of studies.¹

Introduction

Public sound art arose in the mid-1960s from the very conditions the city-space provided. In the middle of the 20th century there was a tendency among some artists and musicians to participate with their works in the global social context. This idea propelled them to perform in public space. In many occasions they made use of sound and temporality which evolved into new forms of creation and particularly into 'public sound art', where an additional new role emerged for the traditional

viewer and/or listener. The analysis of the specific topic of public sound art reveals a set of transformations that different artistic manifestations underwent in the years prior to its appearance and also the effect certain social, economic and political factors had on this process. Music, art and theatre became a kind of action in real time which also took place in unexpected spaces in the cities. These actions were aimed at getting attention and represented a reaction to different aspects of capitalism, and they changed the idea of what an artwork could be, where it might happen and who it was intended for.

In addition, the technological breakthrough provided artists with the opportunity to break away from their usual work spaces and materials – the formal aspects of art that they had traditionally relied on. Technology was used in more creative ways by the artists, and it propitiated innovative uses of sound in art and also in the public sphere of the cities. The career of the North American sound artist and composer Max Neuhaus is an example of this disposition. He worked closely with spaces and technologies in his work. He was creative, not only in his production of art, but also in his use of technologies in art. For example, he was the first to use live telephone calls on the radio in his radio piece *Public Supply* (1967). He implemented a system that enabled him to make live telephone calls to radio. He wanted to recover ‘the original impulse for music in man: not making a musical product to be listened to, but forming a dialogue, a dialogue without language, a sound dialogue’ (Neuhaus, 1994e, p. 7). With this idea in mind, ten telephones were installed in the radio studio. Neuhaus acted as a moderator in the piece; he used the radio (as a media) as the interface for real communication between people. He designed a form of answering machine that was later controlled by the ‘finger mixer’. This finger mixer was:

[A] flat plate with four photocells for each finger arranged in the shape of my hand. Each caller was assigned two of these photocells with which I could control his gain and stereo position; this meant that just by moving my hand very slightly and letting more or less light fall on different photocells I could shape gain and position of all ten callers simultaneously. (Neuhaus, 1994e, p. 8)

So, people participating in *Public Supply* in the 1960s could react in real time to the sounds made by other participants thanks to the designed devices and their creative use.

Remarkable are also some of his other contributions as a sound designer, in which he worked with silence in particular. In 1979 he designed the prototype for a ‘silent alarm clock’, a mechanism for waking people up with a system which functioned by the sudden absence of sound. The method basically consisted of a continuous tone that very slowly increased in volume, until it suddenly stopped at the appointed time. He later used this method in public works under the title *Time pieces*. ‘The basic idea of these works, though, is to form the sound signal with a silence rather than a

sound' (Neuhaus, n.d.). Neuhaus changed the traditional form of communication in the city, which relied on bells, by using the suppression of sound and its recognition by the citizen as an acoustic signal. In his entire work (whether in sound installations, radio pieces or sound designs) there is always a rich conceptual approach that connects the artistic to the social sphere and, moreover, a development of the possibilities offered by technology. His work is for this reason representative of sound creations linked to the social space and its everyday activities. Furthermore, his work was also consciously connected to other spheres in public space such as urbanism, architecture or sociology.

In 1967, when Max Neuhaus was still a famed percussionist, he planned and carried out *Drive-in Music*, a performance conceived for an avenue in Buffalo, New York.² As a talented percussionist and enterprising musician, Neuhaus rejected performances in concert halls. In the preceding decades other composers, such as Luigi Russolo, Edgar Varese and John Cage, had introduced into the concert hall sounds that had been recorded outdoors and then processed in the studio. Neuhaus – in his own words – ‘saw these activities as a way of giving aesthetic credence to these sounds’, but once it achieved the credit these composers were looking for, it was necessary ‘to question the effectiveness of the method’ (Neuhaus, 1988, p. 1). Thus, in 1966 Neuhaus decided to move all his activities to the public space, where these sounds occurred. This performance was called *Listen*, and it was carried out at different occasions with small variations until 1976. This move from the inside to the outside of the concert hall, as will be explained through *Drive-in Music*, drew sound studies and time-based art towards new performative and conceptual modes of creative expression linked to the public sphere of Europe and North America in the 1960s. *Drive-in Music* consisted of placing a system of radio transmitters along Lincoln Avenue in Buffalo city. Emulating the system of wireless microphones used by some singers, he created a short distance radio station by setting up several transmitters in the trees on both sides of the avenue. They were connected to individual antenna wires that ‘shaped’ the sound of its corresponding transmitter by marking off an area of the avenue (see Neuhaus, 1994a, p. 18). Each of seven transmitters broadcasted a different continuous sound. Once all the transmitters were installed in the trees, the space of the avenue comprised a temporal organisation that could only be perceived by those who drove along Lincoln Parkway with their car radios tuned to a specific station.

As they moved through the space, the drivers that tuned in their radios heard sound generated in real time. These sounds were the result of the interferences of the different frequencies broadcasted by each transmitter in the space and received by the cars’ radio system. The radios received the seven overlapping sound zones created by Neuhaus and, depending on the path, the speed and the direction of any moving car, the sound would change. There were no musicians, no specific perform-

ers and no orchestra pit in this show. The participating drivers of this ‘concert’ – if it could be called a concert – led to an infinite number of compositions whose variations depended on the multiple paths through the space. In the artist’s drawing of the piece (see Neuhaus, 1994d, p. 17) it is possible to appreciate how the area of each frequency was arranged. It also allows curious people to imagine the sounds created by the piece, as no recording is available.

Different relevant concepts appear in relation to the analysis of *Drive-in Music*. The first is included in the title of the piece: the music was intended for the drivers – and not specifically the listeners. This was a first step in the search for a new audience whose perception was linked to a specific site. Thus, it was not only connected to the sphere of music, but also to spaces and actions outside the music hall and, conversely, inside the large sonorous and sculptural space that the city had thus become. Second, the city space, modulated through the immateriality of sound and its reception by the citizens-drivers, took on new dimensions – social, temporal, sensory and territorial – but there was also an aesthetic element which transformed it into public art: a public art that was the city itself. Finally *Drive-in Music* was a call to the citizens to experience their urban environment with renewed perception, in a public space, and not in a gallery or museum. This work, which revitalised the presence of the citizens in this space, disclosed a complex system of relationships between media, everyday attitudes and cultural behaviour.

The viewer and listener as ‘citizens of the work’

The expression ‘citizen of the work’ is proposed to identify a very particular attitude in the reception of sound art in public space. It is not exclusively linked to the field of sound art. It can be widely used in time-based installations in public space, which do not search for specific viewers (understood in the traditional meaning), but are instead designed specifically to be received by citizens. Neuhaus brought an accidental citizen – that may have encountered the work by chance – into the work and the urban environment. This individual, in addition, is not necessarily aware of the artistic purpose of the sounds produced in each particular space. The same idea is central in another sound installation set up by Neuhaus in the city: *Suspended Sound Line* (1999). This installation was installed permanently on a pedestrian bridge in Bern, Switzerland. The work produces two subtle sounds– although they are surprisingly noticeable in that specific place. As you walk along the pedestrian bridge the sounds, coming from different hidden sources, alternate in a series: A, B, A, B (...). The sound installation fashions for the citizens a kind of game that Neuhaus tried out some years before in the installation at the Magasin de Grenoble, *Sound Line*, in 1988 (see Kaiser, 1994, pp. 90-91). In both cases the main idea was to create a sound that was perceived more clearly from a distance than when the citizens were

near the source. This created astonishment and it made the individual search the space while he or she moved along it, in the case of *Suspended Sound Line*, while the citizen crossed the pedestrian bridge.

From the particular case study of Neuhaus' *Drive-in Music* to the general cases of many other sound installations, such as *Suspended Sound Line*, it is possible to appreciate the intention to fit the sound layer into the urban environment in a very 'organic' manner, without being too shocking, but, rather, as a way of colouring the place that subtly punctuates the context.³ It is somehow as if the sound organisation⁴ of the piece had a biometric proportion in which the individual is immersed without losing his or her contact with the surrounding context. That is the reason why the citizens involved in the pieces and, thus participating in the process of receiving the artwork, cannot be identified as viewers or as an audience – labels given to them in the traditional system of art. Their role must be reconsidered in a wider sense, capturing not only their function as the general audience of an artwork, but also as individuals with their own agendas in the city. Their role as citizens who act, listen and see from the perspective of daily life remains intact.

To achieve the status of 'citizen of the work', which this paper proposes, the global position of the role of the viewers and/or listeners had to change progressively. Instead of being outside the artwork and being a passive viewer/audience, they might be inside it and, as a consequence, be participants in the process which means being an active viewer/audience that is included in the process of the work. Such a transition from passive to active viewers is not exclusive to the field of art; it was emblematic in all the creative disciplines from the beginning of the twentieth century. If we consider all of the elements from these disciplines that have some form of relation to the present study, either because they took place in the city context, used sound or created a new spatial concept, it is possible to underline some aspects that had a subsequent influence on the most important urban sound artists, such as Max Neuhaus.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century a key figure in contemporary creation, the non-conformist playwright Antonin Artaud, wrote some provocative essays on the discipline of theatre. His remarkable approach called into question the numb audience which attended these performances. To reinstate the position of the audience he altered the theatre scene by introducing some aspects that affected the audience's perceptions and emotions. These concepts were a part of his *Theatre of Cruelty* (1948). Light, sound and movement were proposed and used by Artaud in a form of theatre that rejected the idea of the still viewer in his comfortable seat. He proposed a cruelty of the senses: powerful stimuli which would make the viewers or audience fidget in their seats. In that sense, the theatre in itself would not be a spectacle, but a number of experiences shared by the actors and the audience in a common space and time. That is not very different from the context created by

Neuhaus where he looked for a biometric perception of the space of the city through a particular arrangement of sound in a specific place. Perception, reception and context are intimately linked through sound and the bodies of the perceivers in Neuhaus' installations, as was also the case in Artaud's suggestive proposals.

The Theatre of Cruelty has been created in order to restore to the theatre a passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is in this sense of violent rigour and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood. (Artaud, 1968, p. 66)

Even today, Artaud is read and reinterpreted from different viewpoints. But just before public sound art appeared on the scene, one of the most important readers of Artaud, the composer John Cage, declared that he had reorganised his conceptual thoughts after reading Artaud's *The Theatre of Cruelty* (see Kahn, 1999, p. 329). This statement by Cage suggests a number of things. He was one of the most representative figures of the artistic transition mentioned in this paper, which incorporated sounds into the realm of creation with no musical intention. This fact provoked a shift in the spatial discourse of the artworks and implied the transformation of the concept of the listener in music and the viewer in art. It presupposed that individuals were listening and, at the same time, using the rest of their senses. People, as actors, were immersed – in movement – in daily life sequences. Thus, through John Cage's reading of Artaud, we have an audience that takes part in the work. The viewer might lose his frontal position to gain a central one, around which the artistic project was developed. The events or 'theatre prices' that John Cage carried out by the end of the 1950s erased the distance between the audience and the actors; they melted into each other. This process happened at the same time that the frontiers of the disciplines blurred and the space around the works absorbed the art object. In these performances Cage blended the different disciplines into each other and arranged them all as a temporal score.

It was Cage who promoted⁵ the 'happening' artistic form next to a group of young artists living in New York. They all had a clear desire to change the role of art and artists in society. Some of them, Allan Kaprow, George Brecht, Al Hansen and others, moved their work out of the institutional artistic spaces. They moved their artistic activity and happenings to farms, factories and the streets of the cities; happenings did not only need an audience, but also participants. In these events, to which Neuhaus' *Drive-in Music* might belong, people still came from the traditional artistic network of the galleries' mailing lists. At the same time, happenings occasionally involved – which was also the case of public sound art – people outside the realm of art who just happened to be in the location where the event took place: in the streets or public spaces of the cities. In these actions both of them – invited participants and casual participant – acquired the same status, and their usual role as

audience or viewers was gradually transformed, until their status as citizens, which they never lost, regained its plausibility. At this point, the artistic action gradually achieved the state Artaud was seeking: the spectacle, not as a performance but as a 'transcendent experience of life' (Artaud, 1958, p. 122). This experience of temporality was often guided by sounds or temporal actions, but temporality was also used to conceive the happening, as if it was a musical score in a space. This was the case with the happening *In Ulm, um Ulm und um Ulm herum* (1964) by the German artist Wolf Vostell (see Agúndez, 1999). They highlighted the temporality of this kind of manifestation, which had been included in the very discourse of the artwork, and also the temporality of the artwork as a process in a specific context, without losing contact with it.

All the components of temporality in these different examples established a strong connection to the urban context. The philosophical thoughts of French sociologist Henri Lefebvre reinforced this idea. Although he never referred to sound art, nor to the 'happening', for several years he worked close to the Situationist International (SI), an artistic movement that focused its artistic activity on the city, and Lefebvre had some features in common with both of them. Before getting in touch with the SI he had developed the *Theory of Moments* (1947) in which he conceptually addressed the time lapses, usually imperceptible, but of great importance, that are useful in everyday life to understand the meaning and the immediacy of the situations people experience. This theory was neither related to the urban environment nor to art, yet, it caught the attention of the situationists.⁶

The theory derives from a need to organize, programme and structure everyday life by transforming it according to its own tendencies and laws. It wishes to perceive the possibilities of everyday life and give human beings a constitution by constituting their powers, if only as guidelines or suggestions. (Lefebvre, 2002, p. 343)

The city as situation and the work as 'moment'

The SI, led by Guy Debord, meant a new step in the transition of the role of the spectator – in addition, they argued they should be abolished, but this also resulted in a rapprochement between art, the urban environment and the idea of public space. The Unitary Urbanism, by way of psychogeography, was the framework for all the experiments around the city conducted by the group of artists and writers that formed the Situationist International. They explained psychogeography as a way of analysing the urban environment based on the emotion and behaviour of individuals. Among the actions they conducted, they included the well-known 'dérive' that they used as a method for crossing the city.

One of the basic Situationist practices is the dérive [literally: 'drifting'], a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. Dérives involve playful-constructive

behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. (Debord, 1958, para. 1)

The SI sought to transform the city – as a space managed by the capitalist economy – into a city that functions as an ‘operations theatre’ (Unitary Urbanism, 1959, para. 3) or, in other words, into an active place where things could happen and citizens might experiment, as if they were in a laboratory. They proposed that citizens built their own creative vision of the environment instead of being alienated from it. The city should become part of their lives.

It is well-known that the intention of SI activities was not art, but rather to establish the foundation of an original cultural system – democratic and horizontal – where individuals were makers and not merely customers. Almost all of the proposals of this movement were manifestos, magazines and pamphlets in which they expressed their proposals to change the artistic panorama. In these writings Guy Debord, as the main leader of the group, followed by the artists Constant Nieuwenhuys and Asger Jorn, among others, rejected the whole idea of an having audience. He preferred the concept of ‘players’ who were guided by situations in the game and by their own intuition, subjects that displayed ‘a playful-constructive behaviour’ (Debord, 1958, para. 1) in their own context. The *dérive* previously mentioned was proposed as a way to revitalise the rapprochement of the individual with the urban environment. And this individual way to move through the city configured a new paradigm for public art.

With regard to these ideas of the SI, public art could be viewed not as a monument – static, immobile and isolated – but as an experience, always in movement, always changing, always in context. For this reason, and coming back now to Henri Lefebvre’s *Theory of Moments*, in which he referred to the moment ‘as the attempt to achieve the total realization of a possibility’ (Lefebvre, 2002, p. 348), the SI group endorsed his idea of the situation as a created, organised moment (see Lefebvre, 1960, para. 3). At the present, the fact that sound installations are ‘moments’ and not monuments is one of the most powerful aspects of this creation in the city. Through these ‘moments’ public art may transform the collective imagination of the citizens. As the reader might be suspecting already, this is an issue of special interest to public sound art: If these moments were, in addition, built through the immateriality of sound, the aggressiveness of the impression could remain stronger in the citizens’ memory and the way they experience the city. The city projects a situation and the artwork is added as a moment that suggests its own reinterpretation, assimilation or appropriation in this context. The process requires that sound installations are interpreted from the point of view of their integration in the city as an element that brings about a bond between citizens and the urban environment.

In the 1960s, the concept of city prompted numerous insights, based on an analysis of the multiplicity of actions that take place in cities. Henri Lefebvre worked with this plurality when he analysed the city as a 'situation' and mentioned a 'social space' in which multiple actions occur. He employed this term to indicate a space of urban relations that includes material structures, but also all the aspects that make up the individual-citizens in their relations with a community and a social organisation.

[Social] space is not a thing among other things, or a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their [relative] order and/or [relative] disorder. It is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations, and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object. [...] Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others. (Lefebvre, 2000, p. 73)

Lefebvre structured his work on cities around the 'social space' concept: an analysis of the city that covered the more common areas included in these kinds of studies, such as architecture or town planning, but also other less familiar areas that considered the coexistence of these disciplines with all the interrelations that happened between them, as art, for example. For the sociologist, urban studies could not point only to fixed, immovable elements, but also to all the actions that happened between them thanks to the presence of citizens. The temporal dimension, derived from the presence of individuals in the physical space, was essential to Lefebvre. He postulated that a city should be a source of suggestions that allowed citizens to encode and decode information. According to Lefebvre, a city should enable its citizens to generate a personal code of interpretation and thus a feeling of belonging in the urban space.

Lefebvre and the SI mentioned two similar, but not identical, concepts as a way to achieve this aim of reinterpreting the urban environment as temporal. While Lefebvre referred to 'appropriation', the Situationists spoke of 'détournement'. The sociologist used both terms in his essay 'The Production of Space' (1974), and although he did not name the SI – at this point they were no longer working together – he referred, in connection with the term, to one of the events they had carried out in Paris. The term used by the SI, 'détournement', was not really exclusively linked to the city, but rather to an artistic practice. It consisted of emptying situations and/or objects of meaning in order to give them a new and completely different meaning that enabled people to reinterpret them. The concept used by Lefebvre, 'appropriation', referred to the city. 'Appropriation' did not empty things or situations of meaning; on the contrary, it added a new connotation to them that was a result of the interaction between these situations/things and the individual. 'Appropriation' was thus an accommodation to the urban environment, a process of knowledge where diverse elements,

situations or spaces were assimilated as their own. ‘Appropriation’ could not be conceived in isolation from the temporal and vital rhythms in which it took place.

The North American urban planner Kevin Lynch provided some key information on this topic in his essay ‘The Image of the City’ (1960). Lynch, contemporary to Lefebvre and the SI, gave a view of the city based on the premise of ‘legibility’. He made a study of the urban structure in connection with the perception of the individual that passes through it. His contribution explains how citizens perceive and organise the environment, an aspect that the SI addressed through psychogeography. Kevin Lynch analysed in detail the different significant elements of the city, which he distributed in five main groups – paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. In this analysis he explained how the citizen, who learns about the different elements through experience, forms a ‘mental image’ of the urban environment. As Lynch explained, it operates as a mind map of the space that responds to the individual’s experience. This way of conceiving the city is highly valuable in understanding sound installations as one of the significant elements Lynch referred to. In this sense, a sound event in the city might be a point of reference for the citizen which consequently might trigger a deeper perception of the environment. A vigorous image of the city – if we make use of the term that Lynch employed – might arise from the full context in which the artwork is immersed. Lynch called this property of elements ‘imageability’, which he described as follows:

That quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer. It is that shape, colour, or arrangement which facilitates the making of vividly identified, powerfully structured, highly useful mental images of the environment. (Lynch, 1970, p. 9)

This ‘imageability’ is the same that sound installations may have in the urban environment. An ‘artistic’ intervention, such as for example *Suspended Sound Line*, that merely involves the organisation of sounds and their distribution in space, can motivate a specific relationship with the physical and social urban context. A new reading of that specific cityscape might then take place.

Just as Lefebvre and the Situationists, Lynch also pointed out the importance of time in the city structure. He even referred to the power of art for this task and referred to the arrangement of space as a ‘melodic sequence’ (Lynch, 1970, p. 108), where the elements are arranged in the same way as notes in a musical score.⁷ Temporality, according to Lynch, should be interpreted as a way of testing the environment. In his urban planning studies, the visual legibility of the city should be completed by the legibility of the temporal. The different approaches of Lynch, Lefebvre and the Situationist International all highlight an interest in the urban environment in a specific historical period of the twentieth century. A time in which the first sound installation, *Drive-in Music*, was also performed.

Art in the city as a space of temporal perception

There is a factor that has not been mentioned yet that distinguishes public sound art from the previously mentioned experiences of SI and ‘happenings’. These activities revolve around the presence of the artist – and it was precisely that factor which constituted the artistic action – however in public sound art the artwork regains its autonomy once it is finished. This is an important difference when comparing it to the artistic manifestations previously mentioned. It is also this difference that highlights one of the strengths of public sound art: the processing of space through the perception of sound. A process that occurs after the work has been installed and the artist has left it. In this sense, it is possible to appreciate influences from other artistic fields that offer other roots for the topic of public sound art.

The 1960s, aside from being the scenario for the proposals of action art, was also the cradle of great transformations in the very structure of the object of art and its framework of interpretation. Especially in the United States where sound installations first appeared, minimalism, land art and conceptual art proposed new paradigms, some of them considering the temporality of the artwork as a constant linked to space. These artistic movements considered the object – or the work in the cases in which it no longer exists – an element in the space that needs the body or the mind of the individual (viewer/spectator/subject) to acquire meaning. It is the subject that gives the work the meaning it lacks. Thus, they need to take into consideration some aspects of relation to the pieces that the artworks propitiate – in terms of proportionality, as in the majority of Robert Morris’ cubical sculptures, but also, conceptually, in Lawrence Weiner’s textual works or by generating specific situations which is what happens with Carl Andre’s mosaics in the floor. All these experiences will occur in time and space when the individual meets the work. So the artworks will need a temporality in the specific space to be discovered, perceived and interpreted. This temporality was measured in many of the artworks of these movements as a spatiotemporal coincidence with the work, in terms of a corporal relationship between the object – or the installation by the artists – and the subject’s body. There was a tendency to include the perception of the individual in the artistic experience. The body is positioned in relation to the objects and the other individuals that are present in the same space, forming a hub around which the artwork gravitates in a specific situation.

With the attention still focused on the situation raised by SI, the similarities can be seen even though the formal results were completely different. These links are precisely the ones which public sound art is going to increase: the development of a spatial and temporal situation for the individual that perceives a complex context in a specific place. If Guy Debord achieved this through psychogeographical experi-

ences; Robert Morris, one of the main representative artists of minimalism, did it through a phenomenological conception of sculptural work.

Minimalist artists such as Robert Morris, Donald Judd and Tony Smith along with conceptual artists such as Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry and Douglas Huebler produced works of art whose 'objecthood'⁸ had abandoned its role as a bearer of elements (and meanings). Instead, objecthood became the non-significant surfaces that took their expression from the environment around them. The process of emptying the artwork of meaning made the work an element in the space. Forms tended to be simplified into simple structures. French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who in 1940s developed a complete thinking system related to the 'phenomenology of perception' (see Merleau-Ponty, 2002), was for these artists – and continues to be to current sound installation artists – a decisive figure in the formation of their own artistic thinking. Merleau-Ponty dealt with the relation between sense perceptions and things perceived: a relation that, far from being objective, is considered reciprocal and determined by the circumstances of our bodies and lives. The perception appears to Merleau-Ponty as conditioned by the individual's own experience in the context where it takes place.

The process of emptying the artwork of meaning turned the work into an element in space. Forms tended to be simplified into simple structures. Since they were obtained in processes similar to those used in industry, their final aspect implied a roughness that made the artist Donald Judd label them as 'aggressive' (Judd, 1996, p. 19). The term brings to mind Artaud's 'cruelty'. In a similar way, Judd's aggressiveness refers to the same fierceness of impressions on the viewer that Artaud described in his theatre. Through physical objecthood, the minimalist sculpture may provoke a strong connection between the individual and the situation in terms of proportionality and a spatiotemporal relationship.

This aggressiveness or cruelty managed to transcend the very aesthetic character of the objects, to address the artwork as a situation in space and time. The artwork includes the encounter with the individual and all the physical space-time relationships. The specific placements of the objects, actions and sounds would trigger its meaning. Sound installations in public space put all of these arguments into practice. They bring the artistic experience into the urban context and add the citizens that move through it. One of the most important pieces that Neuhaus developed is representative of this argument. *Times Square*,⁹ an outdoor sound installation, which has been running since 1977 on the corner of Broadway and 7th Avenue in New York, evidences these principles of aggressiveness and cruelty.

In busy Times Square there is a pedestrian island with a subway ventilation duct that shelters all the machinery of Neuhaus' installation. A huge loudspeaker was placed there, broadcasting a single frequency. As some authors have mentioned, the sound that people can hear from the street is an irregular hum which is reminis-

cent of the reverberation of huge bells (see Loock, 2005, para. 1). Although noticeable, the sound goes unnoticed by the majority of the citizens and tourists that pass by. The sound introduced is completely integrated into the rhythm of the city, and far from being monotonous it changes continuously thanks to the currents of air in the ventilation duct that modulate and vary the oscillation of the wave and thus its sound.

Neuhaus decided not to announce the piece with a sign. He was seeking a perception that was linked to the specific attitude of the citizens who recognised something special in that particular place. Many will not perceive the sound coming from the underground, but the small percentage that do will treat the experience as their own, a discovery. Neuhaus considered that moment the connection to the real artwork he was constructing. The discovery opened up a new and aesthetic experience of the place.

I often make a sound which is almost plausible within its context when you first encounter it. The point where a person realizes that it is not plausible is when he jumps into the piece; he's swimming on his own from then on. [...] it is usually the way I build the entrance to the work. (Neuhaus, 1994b, p. 98)

So, Neuhaus' *Times Square*, as he himself asserted, deals with space through temporality. In fact, Neuhaus framed this installation and others under the label 'place pieces' in which, in Neuhaus' words, 'you have to go to the place' (Neuhaus, 1994b, p. 98). The pieces use the sound to refer to the space that this temporality occupies in the experience of the city.

Traditionally composers have placed the elements of a composition in time. One idea which I am interested in is locating them, instead, in space, and letting the listener place them in his own time. (Neuhaus, 1994c, p. 34)

In this way, Times Square might acquire a new facet of perception, but it will always be in the mind and experience of the citizens who must, conceptually and spiritually, be involved. The intangible relationship between the artwork and the person suggests that the spectators must mentally project themselves over the formal aspects of the artistic intervention. It could be a cube, as is the case for Robert Morris, or a sound-space correlation in a Neuhaus sound installation. In other words, it implies interpretation on the part of the subject, who is inevitably immersed in the situation created by the work. Individuals - whether in minimalist art or in most of the sound installations in public space - must compensate for the lack of meaning and the absence of representation by adding something from their own experience. The individual's imagination projected onto the elements of the artistic object or installation may create a situation that might be considered an artwork. The viewer's mental projection over something that in itself has no meaning, such as sound, provokes a new conceptual dimension for the whole surrounding space.

Conclusion

Any experimental and innovative process, developed in a specific place and moment, needs to be analysed to make possible further progress in building consistent concepts around it. So far, public sound art, despite its nearly 50 years of history, has been explored very little.¹⁰ However, the value of contemporary sound creation, in art, music, anthropology, sociology, architecture and other disciplines, is on the rise. An outdoor sound installation in the public space of a city might act as an element that dynamises the aesthetic perception in the urban context and the role of the citizen. *Suspended Sound Line* and *Times Square* summarise these aspects very clearly. The purpose of connecting public sound art to previously non-sonorous examples, methods and traditions of visual art and philosophy is to provide innovative ideas for the analysis of creative processes in the cities that use sound as a material. Far from its sonority this sonic material refers firstly to the space, secondly to the individual in the space and finally to the context that is created there. Establishing connections between public sound art and other non-sonorous works enlarges the implications of sound art in contemporary culture.

This study contributes to revealing how public sound art was the natural outcome of a series of concepts used by different creators (musicians, artists, writers, sociologists etc.) from different disciplines. Through the work of the different artists mentioned in the essay the reader can grasp the conceptual basis that public sound art shares with other disciplines, leaving the field wide open to new approaches, suggestions and meaningful examples that need to be included in sound studies.

Notes

1. The paper summarises a part of the author's PhD dissertation (2010).
2. Neuhaus abandoned in the mid-1960s the field of music performance as a percussionist. In favour of an attitude that fit better with the field of art he moved his activities to Public Art. He moved from the concert hall into the city space in which he found the perfect space to interact through sound with the context and the citizens.
3. In some of his writings Neuhaus connects the visual and the sonorous, using colour (Neuhaus, 1974). Robin Minard subsequently used Neuhaus' way of referring to sound as a form of the visual. He actively wrote about it in his book *Sound Environments. Music for public spaces* (1993).
4. 'Sound organisation' points to the expression used by Varese, 'organised sound', a new use of sounds to ponder a new conception of music. Varese additionally linked sound to space in some of his works, for example 'Electronic Poem' composed for the Philips Pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair in 1958.
5. Between 1956 and 1960 John Cage taught Composition (1956-1958) and Experimental Composition in the New School for Social Research.
6. In their bid to avoid the failed discourses of traditional art, the SI embedded their activity in the everyday substratum of the city. They wanted to address a criticism of the cultural and capitalist system. They found in Henri Lefebvre's 1947 essay 'Critique of everyday life' a stimu-

lating reflection on everyday activities which shared some of the ideas they were working with. For this reason, in 1957 some members of the newly formed group established a relationship with the French sociologist, and they worked together for some years. Even though the fruit of this collaboration is barely known, it is nevertheless exceptionally remarkable. It put back on the table the common ground shared by art and the city that is accepted naturally today. In addition, the knowledge of this relationship reveals the interest that different disciplines (town planning, sociology and art) have in analysing the city as a whole and not as something fragmentary, in separate fields.

7. This is John Cage's idea previously mentioned in connection with the *Theatre Pieces* he performed in the 1950s. The actions were arranged in space, as if they were notes in a musical score.
8. The term refers to the seminal writing of Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (1968), in which he criticised Minimal Art.
9. The first title of the piece was *Underground Music(s) I*, mentioning a series of installations entitled *Underwater Music* created to be heard by a submerged audience, with water acting as a diffuser.
10. As mentioned in the introduction, some authors are working in this field and have referred to public sound art, although only tangentially. Probably the most representative case is the artist Georg Klein who has written about the subject in a number of articles (cf. Klein, 2009).

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