

Street Re-Performance: Practicing Realtime Soundscape Composition

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Abstract

This paper describes a series of street performances which result in an unusual exchange between performer, audience, and environment. In these performances, we capture the sounds from the immediate environment, process them with our laptop-based performance system, and transmit this re-created sound back to the audience through various subtle means. Audiences are encouraged to listen to the soundscape to deduce the relationship between the original and the performed result. The experience of these concerts serves to underscore the urban soundscape and induce heightened awareness. Here we present the theory behind these performances and their relationship to our other field-recording-based work, as well as observations from numerous performances given in several cities over the past year.

1 Introduction

...the world is insane. You're on a jet, you're five miles in the air, you're going 500 miles an hour, and you ask someone to bring you another Coke ... there are a billion pieces of information, and there's so much chaos. So much of civilization is just trying to organize this information. Everyone's trying to have rules so that it's not complete madness-chaos. But as organized as it can be, it's only organized to an extent ... I'm just pointing out the stuff they're trying to make rules about, and the stuff that's spilling over. (Robinson 2003)

In R. Murray Schafer's *The New Soundscape* (1969), he describes the experience of listening to soundscape recordings as a "schizophonic" experience, by which he means the phenomenon of listening to a space mediated through a different space. As performers and composers who practice the art of field recording, we have used soundscapes in our work in a variety of contexts: both in the electro-acoustic *Musique Concrete* tradition, and in "the environmental context that is preserved, enhanced and exploited by the composer" (Westerkamp 1999). Whatever the intention or degree of abstraction, the fact of mediation was and is

a constant, ultimately rendering our creations to some degree artificial and removed from their context.

We wondered if it would be interesting to enact a kind of street performance whereby the real and present soundscape is the central focus. Instead of performing music that people can hear, we decided to try performing music that people couldn't hear, based on what they were actually hearing in the space. The public would encounter our "performances" and hear nothing except the soundscape. We devised a system that let us capture the soundscape and improvise this raw material into pieces using our laptops in real time, without providing a sound system for the public. Instead of a "live concert", we produced artifacts of our performance in the form of free five-minute cassette tapes.

As we performed (with headphones on), we invited the public to listen to the soundscape unmediated by us. Every five minutes a new cassette would be made available, which would contain the last five minutes of the soundscape, mediated by our performance. The public were invited to take these for free, our captured re-performance of the space in a specific moment in time.

The audience, then, would be given the opportunity to listen to the soundscape in its original context, and to listen at a later time to our improvised re-performance of it.

2 Instances of Re-Performance

This experiment has been realized so far in three different locations, with interesting results. Here we will describe the experiences in each of the three locations, and conclude with some observations about its success and/or failure.

2.1 Brooklyn, New York. Corner of Smith and Carroll Streets.

Nature, coincidence, can be a heavy-handed symbolizer. One is constantly being confronted with a sun that bursts from behind the clouds just as the home team takes the ball; ominous rumblings of thunder when one is brooding desultorily at home; magnificent dawns on days when one has resolved to mend one's ways; hurricanes that demolish a bad

man's house and leave his good neighbor's untouched, or vice-versa; Race Streets marked SLOW; Cemetery Avenues marked ONE WAY. The man whose perceptions are not so rudimentary, whose palate is attuned to subtler dishes, can only smile uncomfortably and walk away, reminding himself that good taste is a human invention. (Barth 1956)

Our first street performance was given in the early afternoon of September 19, 2002 in Brooklyn, NY. We set up in front of Gallery The, a storefront gallery on the corner of Smith and Carroll Streets. This is a relatively active neighborhood during the day, with bustling pedestrian activity, an elementary school playground nearby, several markets and shops, and the clamor of a busy secondary street. We were able to position our table out of the direct path of foot traffic, while retaining close proximity to the passers-by.

Our presentation was not deliberately conspicuous, but neither was it covert. Each of us had our own performance system, including a laptop computer, an audio mixer, a bank of MIDI faders, and a touch-activated effects processor. In addition, we had a microphone on a stand, an audio-cassette recording deck, and a video camera for documentation. We were seated side-by-side, facing the sidewalk, wearing headphones. A single sign advertised the availability of the cassette tapes, which we offered for the price one dollar.

During the performance, which lasted just over an hour, a number of "audience members" stopped to indulge their curiosity, though the majority passed by without taking notice. The reactions of those who took an interest in our presence ranged widely. Some individuals conducted a puzzled examination of the scene at a distance. A group of passing schoolchildren engaged our friends nearby in a lengthy conversation, and played with the microphone. On a few occasions, onlookers attempted to engage us in conversation, whereupon our friends intervened and answered their questions (we had foreseen the difficulty of trying to perform without appearing stand-offish, and prepared our attendant friends to handle such a situation). Often, we picked up snatches of conversation from oblivious groups of passing pedestrians. One man deliberately turned and spoke directly into our microphone in passing, without breaking stride.

Musically, the most interesting material was derived from the shouts of children on the playground and the high-pitched squeals from the worn brakes of busses and delivery trucks. Occasionally, a rhythmic "motive" or pitch structure would emerge from the din. The ebb and flow of traffic provided a structure of large-scale changes in noise density. We found it fun and challenging to improvise with the sounds emanating from all sides.

At the conclusion of our performance, we reconsidered our decision to put a price on the

cassettes. Our first thought had been that people would take a greater interest in them if they were not simply being given away. We were not sure whether making them free would improve our ability to distribute them, but the cynicism behind our original decision seemed unwarranted and premature. It also seemed clear that additional explanatory placards would go a long way towards explaining our purpose.

Overall, we deemed the performance a reasonable first attempt, and began to make plans for the next, where we could apply what we had learned.

2.2 Cambridge, Massachusetts. Eliot Street, outside of Twisted Village Records.

If the extension of space and the succession of time are given the motion of a place, then we can say that the distribution of time and the divergence of space give that place the possibility and probability of existence. Distribution of place that is extended towards the past and towards the future; this is exactly what allows the place to exist there. Furthermore, the potential of the space to become a place, the potential flowing out or transported outside, this divergence of the space, allows the existence possibility of territory which the place can occupy. (Sato and Tsunoda 1999)

The second performance was given on November 2nd, 2002 in Cambridge, MA. The location was a very busy neighborhood on Harvard Square, in front of Twisted Village Records, a well-known experimental record shop.

Our setup and approach differed in many ways from the first attempt. Dusk had already fallen by the time we began, lending a greater air of secrecy to our doings. Instead of a table, we used keyboard stands to hold our gear, which kept us standing up and placed a greater barrier between ourselves and passers-by. The broad sidewalk in front of the record store rendered us more unnoticeable to those walking closer to the street. Instead of the warm, bright September day we had enjoyed on our first foray, the freezing cold of November lent urgency both to our performance and to the attitudes of pedestrians who might have otherwise noticed us. Our signage was much improved, explicitly encouraging onlookers to stop and listen to the sounds around them, and to take a free cassette. The duration of the performance was, as before, approximately one hour.

The greatest difference was the addition of a set of headphones hanging inside the entranceway of the record store nearby. This innovation provided the audience with a means to hear our performance in real time, though in a location physically removed from our presence, so that an immediate comparison between our music and the actual environmental sound could not be readily made.

Predictably, the nature of our interactions with the public was also quite different. There were fewer

passive observers, but a greater proportion of people interested in our project. Many asked questions and left with cassettes. A few wandered into the store to listen to the headphones, while others wandered out from the store, having discovered the headphones first. Unfortunately, the barrier formed by our keyboard stands blocked our ability to directly witness these interactions, so it is difficult for us to make a clear assessment of their nature and quality.

Despite this uncertainty, we felt the performance was successful on many important levels. The site provided our improvisation with a rich palate of traffic sounds echoing off of several tall buildings in the vicinity and resonating in a large parking structure across the street. All of the cassettes were distributed, many observers had expressed an interest in our activities, and we felt we had managed to adequately communicate our purpose to many of them. Above all, we began to develop an idea of what a “successful” performance might mean in this context – one of the things we had originally set out to discover.

2.3 Troy, New York. Inside the Student Union Cafeteria, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

In order to draw closer to such introductions (situations that can't be captured by a preconceived layout or scheme), the position from which music interacts with its environment must be reconsidered. (Wollscheid 1998).

Our third took place on January 21st, 2003 at the Student Union cafeteria on the campus of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY. We decided to try setting up inside, and chose a table in the heavily trafficked Student Union Cafeteria. We performed from noon to 1:00AM, at the height of the lunch hour.

Besides the drastic difference in venue and the return to using a table, our approach to this performance was comparable to the previous one. We hoped to expand on the success of that earlier iteration by performing in an environment more conducive to casual interaction and repose.

However, despite the greater intimacy and informality of the setting, we found this group to be the most disinterested of the three. Soon after we began performing, we discovered that we resembled a number of other tables in the cafeteria, where students had spread out their laptops and textbooks to study with friends. Additionally, this audience found themselves in a comfortable setting, which further discouraged perspicacity and drove potential onlookers deeper into their own interior worlds. By contrast, we realized, a public city street is constantly providing new data and demanding the attention of its occupants, increasing their ability to detect and react to the unusual.

Headphones were placed in a conspicuous location removed from our table, but only one observer in an hour of performing mustered sufficient curiosity to try them on. At one point, a group of people at an adjacent table noticed our microphone and approached us to ask whether we were recording their conversation. The intense commotion in the space prevented us from pulling out distinct words from any conversation, and we invited him to listen to the headphones for proof of this (they did not).

In the course of the afternoon's performance, we did not distribute a single cassette, and experienced very few interactions with interested parties. Furthermore, the surprisingly uniform level of commotion in this environment provided little interesting material musically, forcing us to rely heavily on audio processing techniques that severely abstracted the source sound in order to improvise convincingly. While the performance itself was a failure, it raised a number of interesting questions and showed us how much we have yet to understand about the practice of street re-performance.

3 Interpreting Evidence: Future Plans and Conclusions.

“Even facts become fictions without adequate ways of seeing ‘the facts’” (Laing 1967).

The many beautiful and strange sounds that we hear, as well as things that we see, are fictions until we really notice them. They exist at the edge of our perception, fully audible and visible, but relegated to the periphery of our attention. Only when we focus our attention on them do the fictions become facts. We often refer to these facts as evidence. Evidence of what? Evidence of the minute details in everyday life that comprise the underlying structure of our understanding of experience. An appreciation of this evidence is what has inspired us to rely so heavily on field recordings in the construction of our music.

Our practice, as artists, is to listen to and re-organize a soundscape, while requiring our audience to experience that soundscape before hearing our composition. In this way, the audience is brought into a unique collaboration with their sonic environment and our music that mirrors our own process and instills a deeper appreciation for the soundscape's intricate features. One vital purpose of our music is to share our celebration of the sonic space we occupy.

This work has raised many questions for us. In engaging the public, we have learned that, because there is no apparent sound being made, people are reluctant to recognize the performance. Most people who walk by are only slightly aware of their surroundings; their attention is fixed internally. How can we snap them out of it? Each of the three performances described here presented unique

challenges in regards to this question. Are there any stigmas attached to our appearance on the street? If we resemble traditional street performers, does our expensive equipment create unwanted cognitive dissonance? Are we responsible for ensuring that we are not inadvertently violating someone's privacy, as in the case of the lunch conversation in the third performance cited above?

Ultimately, we hope that our continued learning from these and future performances will help us to realize a practice of soundscape composition and performance that resists Schafer's schizophonia. While we recognize that the results of our performances are by definition abstracted and mediated, we aim to increase their immediacy and impact by presenting them to the observer within the context of their creation, thereby significantly shortening the schizophrenic gap.

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