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### **Citation**

Cobussen, M. A. (2017). Noise, sounding art, and urban ecology. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3250210>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3250210>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Noise, Sounding Art, and Urban Ecology

Marcel Cobussen

## Abstract

Recently a Dutch national TV channel presented a news item which stated that, without measures, noise, within 20 years from now, will be the most important environmental problem with the biggest impact on public health in The Netherlands due to, for example, urbanization, traffic, and technological developments. As is often the case, noise was presented and defined as too much and too loud sounds (yardstick: dBs).

In this paper I will cautiously explore two things: first, I will rethink the concept of noise beyond the limitations of loudness. Noise, I will argue, is sound “out of place” instead of an intrinsic quality of sounds themselves. This means that noise should be thought of in social, political, and ethical terms as well. Second, based on this alternative take on noise, I will claim that sound artists are indispensable for the analysis, evaluation, and improvement of public urban environments. They can raise the auditory awareness of residents and users of those environments and change/improve them without necessarily aiming for noise reduction.

Keywords: sound art, urban ecology, socio-political noise

## 1. Introduction

“Acoustic quality and health.” This is the title of the second subsection in a strand named “Noise and Health.” Whereas the subsection’s title sounds more neutral, “noise and health” will, I guess, usually evoke immediate negative connotations: noise harms one’s health; in order to live a healthy life, exposure to noise should be limited as much as possible as on the long term noise threatens one’s physical as well as mental well-being.

Recently, on 12 January 2017, a Dutch national TV channel presented a news item which stated that, without further regulations, noise, within 20 years from now, will be the most important environmental problem with the biggest impact on public health in The Netherlands due to, for example, ongoing urbanization, increasing traffic, and continuous technological developments. According to the Dutch Health and Safety Inspection over 50% of the Dutch population already suffers from too much noise; noise makes people ill, it causes insomnia, stress, and, on the long term, it can lead to palpitations, increased blood pressure, and depressions.

While writing this paper and recalling the news item, I was thrown back some 40 years in time when R. Murray Schafer first published *The Soundscape*. In this book Murray Schafer comes to more or less the same analysis as presented on Dutch television: we are exposed to too loud sounds and too many sounds. Sound volume and the amount of sounds are still increasing which is bad for our general well-being. And it seems as if the proposed solutions haven't changed all that much over past 40 years either: noise reduction, promotion of so-called *hi-fi* sounds, and sound design taking the human/rural scale as criterion and point of departure.

This paper is meant to make two comments to the observations described above. First, I shall propose a more qualified and differentiated idea of noise: noise cannot (always) be equated with loudness; it is a relative concept with lots of social, political, and aesthetical connotations and implications. Second, I will stress the important role sound artists can play in the analysis and improvement of our sonic environments. Here I will concentrate on urban, public spaces as these are often the most noisy ones and quite difficult to silence.

The whole paper is a proposal to listen and react differently to our sonic milieu, to evaluate and transform it beyond the ideas formulated by Murray Schafer over 40 years ago. I will claim that, instead of aspiring for more silence in our densely populated world, the aim should be to develop a more interesting sonic environment; and sound artists might be indispensable to achieve this.

## **2. Noise<sup>1</sup>**

What is noise? While volume often plays a part in the experience and designation of sounds as noise, loudness alone does not always account for why some sounds are experienced as being noisy. The main reason might be the variability with which volume translates into experience. It mostly depends on the context, whether sounds of similar loudness may be qualified as noise or not: what is noisy in one situation or environment may be quiet in another. And if we consider sounds with dissimilar loudness, the quieter one can sometimes be far more disturbing than the louder one, for example because of the frequency level or the degree of irregularity. In other words, "loud" and "noisy" cannot simply be used interchangeably; something can be noisy though not necessarily loud and vice versa.

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<sup>1</sup> The following thoughts on noise are loosely based on Hugh Pickering and Tom Rice's essay "Noise as 'sound out of place': investigating the links between Mary Douglas' work on dirt and sound studies research," published in issue 14 of *The Journal of Sonic Studies*.

Emphasizing the contextual nature of noise, one could state that noise is sound out of place instead of an essential quality of sounds themselves. As Douglas Kahn writes in *Noise Water Meat*: “We know they are noises in the first place because they exist where they shouldn’t or they don’t make sense where they should” (Kahn 1999: 21). Sounds are thus not noisy in themselves, but can become noise if they occur in a place where they are not supposed to be. Noisiness then becomes a label attached to them. If noise is indeed sound out of place, it implies that any sound occurring in its appropriate place is, by definition, not noise. “Out of place” then refers to disorder, instability, contravention of the expected, undermining the dominant organization, disharmony etc. (see also Jacques Attali’s seminal study *Noise. The Political Economy of Music*). This implies that labels such as “quiet” and “loud” can be mapped on to more overtly moral ones such as “harmonious” and “disharmonious” or “good” and “bad.” And the general opinion is that

[...] to be quiet is to be good, to agree to cherished classifications, to uphold the sonic and social order and to follow accepted ways of being. To be noisy is to be bad, to disregard convention, and to confuse or ignore classifications and have different and unacceptable ways of being. Noise, far more than just ‘sound out of place,’ is indicative of an entire moral system. (Pickering and Rice 2017)

Besides referencing to volume and morality, noise is also essentially social, cultural, and political in nature. When noise is for example contrasted with signal and refers to any kind of interference with a message being transmitted, this is not solely a technical issue to be solved but also a social one. Complaining “I can’t hear you – it’s too noisy!” in a busy café of course implies the noise/signal distinction (Murray Schafer would call this the difference between lo-fi and hi-fi sounds), where the desired signal (speech) is drowned out and obscured by all other sounds (noise). However, the sentence also touches on social norms and values: noise is used as a descriptor for unwanted or inappropriate sonic behavior, highlighting societal customs and delineating what is acceptable and what is not. Besides, the question can be asked, “unwanted by whom?”<sup>2</sup> Loud music played by a neighbor late in the evening is noise, not because it is opposed to music

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<sup>2</sup> In *Sonic Bodies. Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing*, Julian Henriques describes the Jamaican soundsystem culture as *socially* dangerous. Not only is its loudness polluting the environment, the songs’ lyrics are vulgar and misogynistic, even promoting violence. As these noisy sounds thus pose a threat to an existing socio-political order, action is required from the ones who want to defend the status quo: these sounds must be regulated, even banned. Alternatively, noise as a non-lethal sonic weapon may be actively embraced (by those accused of it) as a form of resistance. To the disenfranchised, downtrodden, and silenced, noise is a way to be heard, and can be an effective tactic used to exercise a “politics of presence” (Gandy and Nilssen 2014; Oosterbaan 2009; Attali 1977).

or signal, but because it occurs outside the accepted sonic order. Its designation as noise implies that evenings and nights are quiet times and denotes an expectation that music be kept under control.

In Mark Smith's edited volume, *Hearing History: A Reader*, Hillel Schwarz maintains that "noise is an issue less of tone or decibel than of social temperaments, class background, and cultural desire, all historically conditioned" (Schwartz in Smith 2004: 52).

Class, culture, and morality are inextricably connected to value judgments about noise: speaking of noise immediately touches upon wider social structures at play in societies. Joanna Kusiak illustrates this point nicely in her work on the sonic encounters between classes in Warsaw. Kusiak takes us to luxurious gated condos of the gradually gentrifying district of Powisle, whose affluent owners protested against the noise of nearby cafés and bars, thereby trying to take control over the sonic environment and even attempting to privatize public spaces. This is just one example of how hegemony over sound and silence is used as a tool of political class struggle.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Sound Art in Public Spaces

Let's try to summarize and tie some things together before taking the next step: arguing what the role of sound artists could be in the analyses and improvements of "noisy" public urban environments.

- Noise is often connected though not reducible to loud sounds;
- Noise has a technological component in the sense that it might be defined as the disruption of a desired signal;
- Noise has political, social, cultural, and moral aspects to it as well, which justifies questions such as: who is controlling a specific sonic space? Who decides what noise is and when sounds become noise and for whom?;
- Although noise is often characterized as an inevitable byproduct of technological progress, traffic, commerce, and human activity, which has led to many projects of noise abatement, scientific

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<sup>3</sup> Noise control has influenced class relations in Europe throughout (recent) history. To give just one example: in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, intellectuals and scientists such as Arthur Schopenhauer, Charles Babbage, Michael Haberlandt, James Sully, and Theodor Lessing complained about e.g. street music, carpet beating, and whip-cracking. These unbearable noises, as Karin Bijsterveld writes, were regarded by them as "the vengeance of the laborer working with his hands against the brainworker who laid down the law to the former. Silence, on the other hand, was the sign of wisdom and justice" (Bijsterveld in Bull and Back 2004: 167). These intellectual factions of the socio-economic upper class spoke about the struggle for silence in terms of civilization versus barbarism.

measurements of noise, and legal regulations of loudness, exposure to noise, technological and otherwise, has become integral to contemporary (urban) life; far from being regulated itself, (mechanical) noise is regulating and controlling our daily lives.

Although noise – noise as unwanted sounds, noise as sounds out of place – seems to be unavoidably intertwined with economic and technological developments, this doesn't mean that people take their sonic environment for granted; neither shouldn't they. More and more our habitat is designed: sonic design, sound art, and, of course, music/Muzak – their omnipresence and importance cannot be neglected. Unwanted sounds have to be covered, utensils need to sound solid but also pleasant, and music/Muzak should create enjoyable atmospheres or activate increased productivity. Besides, sound has attracted the attention of policy makers and urban designers, albeit often in a rather negative way, namely when it is defined as noise pollution (Devilee, Maris, van Kamp 2010; Elmqvist 2013; Kamin 2015). Current management of the acoustic environment has predominantly been concerned with diminishing noise levels, thereby all too often reducing the complexity of reality and of context-dependent human perception to demonstrable variables such as decibels (Lavia et al. in Kang and Schulte-Fortkamp 2016: 270).

According to the German philosopher Gernot Böhme, city planning and acoustic design of public spaces can no longer be content with noise control and abatement; it should rather pay attention to the character of its acoustic atmospheres (Böhme 2000: 14-18). And art can be of help here. Böhme states that the role of (sound) artists is to develop our sensibilities: through art we can disinterestedly experience atmospheres so that we can learn to engage with them (Böhme 2013: 16). Contrary or perhaps complementary to Böhme, I see a more comprehensive role for artists in analyzing and (re)shaping our sonic environments. On two levels: first, sound artists can be asked to participate in mapping and analyzing sonic environments, and this not only from an aesthetic point of view; second, sound artists can contribute to the potential improvement of the sonic ambience of a particular (public urban) space. Here I don't think in the first place of hiring a sound artist to temporarily “prettify” a certain place by installing a work of sound art for a limited amount of time. In general I would maintain that an autonomous artwork cannot easily fulfil the requirements I have in mind. No, artists should be invited to work on a more fundamental level of reflection and intervention. But let's proceed slowly ...

To raise awareness, to become more conscious, and to increase our knowledge of the (sonic) world that surrounds us, artists can, for example, organize soundwalks, create permanent or temporary sound installations, make and use field recordings, or develop soundmaps (Cobussen 2017). In these practices, socio-political, cultural, historical, and aesthetic fields convene, e.g. because it offers people the opportunity

to engage with acoustic environments in a critical way (Ouzounian in Gandy and Nilsen 2014: 168). In short, new knowledge can be gained from the sonic information provided by the above-mentioned artistic means. Sound art in public spaces may contribute to the development of theories in which urban space is mapped onto the socio-political, the historical, and/or the cultural: doing research before, during, and after the creation and establishing of a sounding art work may disclose public spaces as sites of exclusion or cross cut by multiplicities along relatively clear-cut lines of social and cultural difference.

Sound installations, soundwalks, field recordings, and soundmaps can be regarded as mediations that may show specific socialities: who or what is affecting and being affected, how, and why (Stirling 2015). They evoke, expose, and produce social-affective relations, emerging from complex intersections between the sounds themselves, socio-cultural milieus, institutional forces, and more contingent material, geographical, and sensory environments.

In and through sonic analyses – executed in and through the production of sounding art – socio-political and cultural differences and resemblances are revealed; mapping and analyzing sonic environments can thus contribute to “making things public” (Latour and Weibel 2005). Only by examining and redefining precisely how the relations between all agents or actors are assembled in each instance, can one detect a specific situation; and sound is one medium through which symbolic, representational, and ideological differences become entrenched and reproduced.

In an interview from 2015 sound artist Peter Cusack talks about his project *Berlin Sonic Places* on which he worked with – among others – Carsten Stabenow and Sam Auinger (Cusack 2015). Rationale behind this project was to explore the effects of urban planning and development on a soundscape. In the interview Cusack describes how urban planners tried to turn the Nauener Platz in Berlin, a place known for its often occurring anti-social behavior, into a community-friendly and safe playground. Part of the renovation included the redesigning of the acoustic atmosphere, for which, according to Cusack, only acousticians were invited. After consulting the community about the sounds they would like to hear there, loudspeakers with birdsong and sea sounds were installed in the park. Cusack’s quite damning judgment was that they absolutely should have invited an artist as the continuously looping of the recorded natural sounds appeared to be very tiring and boring after a while.

What can we learn from this example? Which strategies are available to sound artists to intervene in already existing (urban public) soundscapes? Let me list four possibilities.<sup>4</sup>

- Sound artists can attempt to *subtract* dominating noise sources from the environment. This could be regarded as a way of silencing a space, but the idea is that it thereby reveals sounds that would otherwise be masked because of the intensity or the particular frequencies of the more dominant sounds. Subtracting transforms the acoustic space through a creative inversion of the acoustic horizon.
- Closely related to this first strategy is *disclosure*, which demonstrates that beyond dominant affective sounds that shape everyday sonic experiences, there are hidden qualities waiting to be revealed. Disclosure not always leads to a concrete intervention as is the case with subtraction, but enters into an attentive listening relationship with a specific place to bring to attention and appreciation the sounds that are already there. An interesting effect of disclosure might be that sounds previously considered as noise, are somehow accepted as interesting, rich, and diverse, thereby being less of a nuisance.
- A third strategy is to *transform* everyday sounds into new sonic experiences. Through the reworking of site-specific sounds, people are given the opportunity to perceive their environment differently, just like soundwalking has the capacity to transform one's perception of everyday sounds, e.g. by stimulating one's (sonic) imagination.
- A fourth strategy is *addition*. When a noise source cannot be removed, artists can add sounds to the environment or augment specific sounds that are already there in order to create a more heterogeneous soundscape. Especially this last strategy doesn't primarily aim at reducing the amount of sounds or their volume; the environment is not made more silent. The idea behind *addition* is that people consider a soundscape as noisy when it is uninteresting, homogeneous, flat, dull, etc. Especially urban soundscapes can benefit a lot from heterogeneity, from a rich, lively, and diverse sonic atmosphere.

#### **4. Conclusion: The role and position of (sounding) art in society**

Of course, a lot more needs to be said about both the concept of noise and the role sounding art can play in the design of – often noisy – urban public spaces. By investigating noise from a socio-political perspective instead of a mere biological point of view, I have shown its versatility. Although the effect of noisy environments and loud sounds has on the well-being of living creatures should absolutely not be underestimated, it is my firm claim that problems with sonic environments cannot be reduced to the amount and loudness of sounds alone; the socio-political approach I have briefly investigated above calls for a less dogmatic opinion as many other forces play a role in rejecting or accepting certain “noises.”

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<sup>4</sup> For these four strategies I am indebted to and inspired by Jordan Lacey's suggestions in his book *Sonic Rupture* (2016).



Additionally, what must be taken into account is that we are living in a more noisy world than our ancestors, e.g. because the world's population has grown enormously. With more and more people living in big cities surrounded by more and more technical utensils, it becomes harder and harder to escape from (unwanted) sounds. Reduction of decibels is useful, desirable, and worthwhile, but my claim in this paper has been that other strategies can also help to increase well-being and a simple *joie de vivre*. It is my belief that sound artists are indispensable in this respect as they can make a fundamental contribution to arrive at a good balance between functionalism and creativity in urban public spaces. They are indispensable to the process of reimagining and (re)designing public urban spaces as sites that simultaneously provide for daily needs as well as facilitate environmental comfort by affecting the moods and emotions of the ones traversing and using these spaces. They are indispensable for rethinking the relation between noise and health.

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