



“Every vibration of our body is music”

Soundwalking as an important means of communication

Von: Weronika Kobylińska

Bells of the Erlöserkirche. Opening of the Folkwang Museum just before 10 am. Traffic at the Alfredstrasse. Children shouting from behind the bushes of the city garden. The serenity that is spreading around the elegant, light, almost floating, sculpture entitled *Unendliche Schleife (Infinite loop)*.¹ These are the sounds that I hear almost every day in my nearest surroundings of KWI in Essen while taking a stroll.

Fig. 1. KWI – view from the pedestrian bridge above Alfredstrasse and the sculpture *Unendliche Schleife* [Infinite loop] by Max Bill. Photo & animated collage: Weronika Kobylińska

And what about you? What was the first sound you heard this morning in your neighbourhood? Or is it maybe too difficult to register sounds among us, especially in the Ruhr area? In order to help you answer those questions, this essay first shortly introduces the history and meaning of such terms as soundscape and soundwalking. Later on, we will see if young, contemporary sound artists consider soundwalking as a means of social communication with(in) our space, based on the interview with one of them – namely,

Hanna Schörken. Writing about sound is not without challenges, and thus the multi-angle approach, including examining both historical background and contemporary practices, helps better understand its complex nature.

Fig. 2. R. Murray Schafer in 2007 at the University of Arizona, [photo by Eli n at en.wikipedia](#), animated collage by Weronika Kobylińska

Grasping the immaterial

Raymond Murray Schafer (1933-2021) – Canadian composer, philosopher and academic teacher – was the key figure to establish the term “soundscape” within the academic and social narratives in the 1970s (Fig. 2). In one of his crucial publications, Schafer declared that a soundscape consists of all audible (imperceptible by sight) events that take place in a specific area and time.² The incessant change is an inherent component of the specificity of every soundscape. The sounds are ephemeral, but still should be seen as active agents: they move, come and go, and circulate in a space. Aural actions may be considered rapid and dynamic since they are quickly replaced by new ones.³ Nevertheless, they are also capable of enfolding human and non-human actors in a graceful way.⁴ These observations were inspiring not only for the successive generations of environmentalists but also singers, musicians, and sound artists. For instance, Michel Chion (b. 1947) – a French composer associated with the avant-garde movement called *musique concrète* (lit. “concrete music”) – was also strongly inspired by Schafer’s concept. Chion emphasized that contingency is the sound’s *modus operandi*.⁵

More than a stroll

Schafer’s interest in the aural experience of space was deeply rooted in a romantic vision of nature. In his texts, he repeatedly expressed a kind of nostalgia, or even longing, for natural landscapes, which should be protected from escalating pollution caused by humankind. In consequence, he valued mainly sonic components connected to wildlife or the countryside. Suburban areas which have not been touched by a human hand continued to be the fundamental object of his interest. Hence, Schafer’s thought became essential for acoustic ecology. Already in the 1970s, it was a field of science, which was interested in preserving and protecting “soundmarks” – endangered types of sounds which are dying out. This approach was especially visible among the members of the initiative called World Sound Project.⁶ Therefore, we should not be surprised that the concept of a soundwalk was developed in Schafer’s circle, namely by Canadian composer and radio artist Hildegard Westerkamp (b. 1946).

Westerkamp belongs to the pioneers of the concept of acoustic communication since she established the soundwalk as an empirical method for identifying and registering audible (but usually neglected, or unnoticed) components of various locations. She explained this strategy by a very simple, but powerful formula: “A soundwalk is any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment. It is exposing our ears to everyday sound around us no matter where we are. [...] Wherever we go we will give our ears priority”.⁷

The concept of soundwalking was already widely acknowledged by researchers working in the field of environmental science or sustainable urban development programs.⁸ The question is whether the young artists, who are active today and define sound as a decisive material in their creative strategy, still perceive this practice (which has already a half-century-old tradition) as useful and inspiring.

Can a sound without words say anything? How do we approach the soundscape in the Ruhr area? Is there a possibility to connect with the space through audible experience? Let's try to address those questions with Hanna Schörken – a versatile contemporary sound artist based in Essen, who has met with me for an interview.

Symphony of porcelain, falling spoons and hissing coffee machines. Meeting with Hanna Schörken

Hanna Schörken (b. 1985) – singer, vocal artist, researcher, and workshop organizer – met with me for an interview⁹ at one of the cafes on Rüttenscheider Straße in Essen. We talked among the clink of plates, the roaring coffee machines, and the numerous human voices of the other customers.



Fig. 3. Hanna Schörken, photo by Peter Gwiazda

WK: *Remembering your powerful performance at the Katakomben in April 2022 (Fig. 4), I cannot help but ask: is your energy as a performer somehow connected to the specifics of the Ruhr area?*

HS: It is an interesting question, it makes me think (*laughs*). In my opinion, Essen is a bit blocked in terms of creativity. Of course, a lot is happening in the research on sound or at the university, but what about the activity of the common citizens? I was born in Ruhr and I spent most of my childhood in Duisburg. I am not an explorer of the region, since I know most of the places quite well, but the surroundings still have a strong impact on me. Even though Ruhrgebiet is not popular, I love this area because it combines beauty and hideousness in an alluring way. It is a region full of contrasts: it is always floating between elegance and roughness, chicness and bitterness. I like this style and I think it fits my personality as a performer since I often incorporate rough, harsh, difficult, and unobvious sounds into my practice.



Fig. 4. Hanna Schörken performing with Christina Zurhausen (guitarist) and Ramon Keck (drummer), Katakomben Theater im Girardet Haus, 27th April 2022, photo by: Weronika Kobylińska

WK: *Why are you interested in the field of soundwalking?*

HS: Soundwalk can be described very easily as a combination of walking and listening. In my opinion, however, this definition is very superficial. When thinking about soundwalk, one should conduct a deep, insightful analysis of what is really hidden in this practice.

One basic reason why I like soundwalks is that they allow exploring the space. Consequently, space may change into a place: it becomes less abstract, and less disconnected from me. There are many ways in which we can go on a soundwalk, but usually, when I am alone, I allow myself to follow my intuition when choosing the route.

Since voice and silence are equally important components for me, I am especially interested in the soundwalk combined with meditation. I always try to consciously integrate the field of silence and listening, especially because I am fascinated by the method introduced by Pauline Oliverios (1932-2016) around 1989.¹⁰ In my practice, I combine Oliverios' approach with the strategy called *Die Lichtenberger Methode* (it is taught at the institute in Fischbachtal, close to Frankfurt and Darmstadt). It concerns only voice, but I find it intriguing to open it up to all kinds of sounds, besides language and words. When I provide voice workshops based on combining 'deep listening' and the *Lichtenberger Methode*, I encourage the participants to discover that our voice is not a smooth, delicate float, but has numerous layers.

WK: *Do you think that soundwalks can actually say something about us, as a society?*

HS: Yes, of course. Our experience of the space is based on its own "speech". Soundwalk allows us to concentrate and acknowledge the rapidly changing structures and relationships between people (for instance the way we avoid others in public places). Sounds we generate tell a lot about our individual vibe, and our energy. Opening your ears will help you to notice an ongoing, vivid performance in front of you. It is not happening on a stage or in a concert hall, in any special circumstances, but on the street, on a daily basis.

If you will be patient enough to exercise and repeat soundwalks, you can establish a certain memory of sound experiences. Then it is easier to recall different memories and flashbacks and work with them. In my vocal practice, it is very inspiring to consciously embrace the surroundings. I am truly glad that I am capable to perceive various sorts of audible events around me. A mature listener is able to control his/her focus and grasp sounds lasting only a few seconds. It is very difficult at the beginning, since we concentrate so much on our future plans and dreams, that we ignore those small magical moments that are happening right now around us.

WK: *In your practice, you modulate your voice in different ways and create sounds that are not related to any country's language. Are you interested in such experiments that were conducted in the field of avant-garde, such as for instance Luigi Russolo's generators of noise (*Intonarumori*) or the famous Kurt Schwitters's sound-poem *Ursonate*?*

HS: Yes, avant-garde movements were important for me, because of my education and a strong background in literary studies. Especially William Butler Yeats, Fernando Pessoa and Edward Estlin Cummings were crucial for my future carrier. Sometimes I did recordings that integrated poems with my improvisation.

Past inspirations will always assist me, however, currently, the question I am fascinated with is how to shape the sound of my own body. I am focusing on creating music that connects me with my environment because I really want to underline this bond.

Everything I do is sound since every vibration of our body is music. Personally, I believe that the process of creation does not begin with a concrete point, you are embracing it throughout the whole of your existence.

WK: *How do you actually work with the sonic data, gathered during soundwalks?*

HS: I integrate sounds I hear into my artistic practice, but I never try to repeat or imitate what I have heard. I am not interested in artistic strategies based on found footage material or appropriation. It is pointless just to describe the sounds of reality with my voice.

My intention is to reinterpret the surroundings, that is why my voice may recall sometimes elements that listeners associate with various components of our environment. It is funny that we still do not perceive voice as an instrument, as a tool. Sounds created with a drum or a trumpet are obviously more abstract for the audience – they are categorized differently (as less human-related). That is also why voice performances and improvised music are quite demanding for a wider audience.

WK: *How do you perceive noise? Is its occurrence inevitable and crucial in any functioning system (is there any semantic wealth in it?) or are you representing the antagonist of this kind of “sound pollution”? Do you experience a lot of noise – from your perspective – in the Ruhr area?*

HS: To be honest, in comparison to such big cities as New York, it is not as loud in the Ruhrgebiet as we may assume. From my standpoint, we are in fact strongly influenced by past photographs of the area, which represented noisy mines and factories. Our blind trust in imagery is still more powerful than our urge to actually experience reality here and now.

However, I would like to underline, that silence is also hearable, but often we do not acknowledge it. Soundwalking helps us to feel the absence of sounds.

WK: *Are there any specific “sonic spots” you have determined in the Ruhr area that you would recommend to go and experience?*

HS: For sure Duisburg's Ruhrort (Fig. 5, 6). It not only has the largest river harbor in the world, but the soundscape there is very specific. Its importance has obviously declined, but it is still alive. Therefore, it is both active and deserted at the same time. If you want to listen to the voice of a lost place, you should definitely go there. In my opinion, it is far more intense than the calmness that can be experienced in Essen's soundscape.



Fig. 5. Historical postcard showing Duisburg in 1905, public domain, [Wikimedia Commons](#)



Fig. 6. Aerial shot of mouth of the Ruhr river at Duisburg-Ruhrort into the Rhine, 2014 photo by Tuxyso, [Wikimedia Commons](#), CC BY-SA 3.0

WK: *What is your advice for our readers who would like to try a soundwalk?*

HS: Soundwalk is all about quality over quantity. It will certainly have an impact on you, even if you – especially at the beginning – will have an impression that you have not actually heard much. The more often you will conduct the soundwalk, the more your

sensitivity toward sounds will increase.

Would you like to embrace the Ruhr area through sounds? Try out those simple exercises that can be performed by anyone. Please, feel free to share your experience in the comments, or via e-mail with the text's author. Good luck!

Exercise no 1.

Take a walk. Write down all the sounds you hear. Take your time, do not rush. Would you like to check if listening is personal? Then go with a friend and note the differences. Both of you will have a different list. Remember: all answers are correct.

Exercise no 2.

Find a photograph from your childhood – what sounds do you hear when you look at it?

Exercise no 3.

Stand at a street corner. Listen out for the most distant sound you can hear. What is it? Can you estimate its distance from you?

References

1. The statue was created by Max Bill (born in Switzerland in 1908 and died in Berlin in 1994) in 1974. More data about the sculpture can be found here: Rötzel, Noa (2021): Max Bill, unendliche Schleife, 1974, Essen, on: Kunstruhryal.de, [<https://kunst-ruhryal.de/max-bill-unendliche-schleife-1974-essen/>], 2/3/2021. (last accessed: 06.09.2022).
2. Schafer, Raymond Murray (1994): The Soundscape. Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World, Rochester: Vermont, p. 8.
3. Ibid., 181-202.
4. Latour, Bruno (2000): When Things Strike Back: a Possible Contribution of 'Science Studies' to the Social Sciences, in: British Journal of Sociology 51.1, p. 116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/000713100358453>. Also: Latour, Burno (2004): Politics of Nature. How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy, transl. C. Porter, Cambridge (Mass.) – London: Harvard University Press, pp. 69-89, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674039964>.
5. Chion, Michel (2016): Sound: an Acoological Treatise, London: Durham, pp. 6, 33-39. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822374824>.
6. The World Soundscape Project (WSP) was an international research project founded in the late 1960s at Simon Fraser University. The project's ultimate goal was "to find solutions for an ecologically balanced soundscape where the relationship between the human community and its sonic environment is in harmony." Truax, Barry *et al.* (2014): World Soundscape Project, on: The Canadian Encyclopaedia, [<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/world-soundscape-project>], 16/07/2014. (last accessed 05.09.2022).

7. Westerkamp, Hildegard (1974): Soundwalking, in: Sound Heritage 3.4, pp. 18.
8. See for instance Hellström Björn *et al.* (2014): Acoustic Design Artifacts and Methods for Urban Soundscape: a Case Study on the Qualitative Dimensions of Sounds, in: Journal of Architectural and Planning Research 31.1, pp. 57-71.
9. I would like to deeply thank Hanna Fink from the *Gesellschaft für Neue Musik Ruhr* for her support in contacting me with Hanna Schörken.
10. Oliveros defined this practice in her book in a following way: “What is Deep Listening? This question is answered in the process of practicing listening with the understanding that the complex wave forms continuously transmitted to the auditory cortex from the outside world by the ear require active engagement with attention. Prompted by experience and learning, listening takes place voluntarily. Listening is not the same as hearing and hearing is not the same as listening. The ear is constantly gathering and transmitting information—however attention to the auditory cortex can be tuned out. Very little of the information transmitted to the brain by the sense organs is perceived at a conscious level”, Oliveros, Pauline (2005): Deep Listening. A Composer’s Sound Practice, New York: iUniverse, Inc., p. XXI.

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