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### **Citation**

Cobussen, M. A. (2023). The role of sound art in soundscape design. *10Th Convention Of The European Acoustics Association*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3718758>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3718758>

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

# THE ROLE OF SOUND ART IN SOUNDSCAPE DESIGN

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## ABSTRACT

What can sound artists contribute to the sonic design of public urban environments? And why is it important to involve sound artists in this design process?

Although slowly, it seems as if a transformation is taking place in the way (local) governments deal with the (re)design of public urban spaces: not only can we notice – at least in The Netherlands – more attention for the sonic design of those spaces; emphasis also shifts gradually from noise measurements and noise reduction policies to a more nuanced approach in which citizens are asked after their aural experiences and desires. This opens the prospect to not only regard sounds in public spaces as a problem but also as an opportunity: sounds can contribute in a positive sense to the experience of an environment; and it is possible to constructively influence and design a sonic environment.

Enter sound artists. Not only are they experienced and (often) unbiased listeners which may help to not denounce certain sounds a priori (e.g., because they stem from unwanted sources); artists can also offer unexpected solutions to specific problems; they can work with the unexplored sonic opportunities of an urban site; they may be able to create new types of site-involving activities; and instead of focusing exclusively on the reduction of noise levels, artists might be able to suggest alternative negotiations regarding sonic aspects of everyday sites and/or situations.

**Keywords:** *sound art, sound design, public urban spaces*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although more and more research makes clear that people's well-being depends for a large part (also) on the quality of their sonic environment, this has not always lead to a substantial amount of attention among urban planners, architects, and policymakers for taking into account the sonic features of a site, at least not tantamount to the attention spent on the visual design of a particular space or object. However, in order to achieve more liveable, heterogeneous, and enduring (semi-)public spaces, there definitely is an urgency and necessity to pay more careful attention to the sonic design of the living environment.<sup>1</sup>

The question then arises who has sufficient and necessary skills for such a task. Because of a lack of attention for sound and the sounding environment in their education, urban planners, architects, and project developers are usually not very well-equipped to carefully, creatively, and accurately design a space sonically; acousticians and natural scientists specialized in sound do have profound, detailed, and useful knowledge on resonances, frequencies, vibrations, etc. but are often less attentive to the ways people *experience* a sonic environment; nor are they schooled in taking into account social, cultural, political and aesthetic issues connected to sound. Hence my proposal here in this paper to get sound artists involved in the (re)designing process of (semi-)public sites, and preferably right from the start of this process.

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas a public space is open and accessible to the general public, semi-public spaces may be restricted to those utilizing a good or service. Examples include outdoor restaurant seating, entertainment venues and seating areas. The difference between the two may also affect the kind of (sonic) interventions that are possible or legally permitted.

## 2. TWO EXAMPLES

In order to discuss and elaborate on the role of sound artists in the design process of (semi-)public urban spaces, let me first introduce two case studies, both coming from my home country, the Netherlands.

Case study 1: Utrecht is the fourth biggest city in the Netherlands (around 360,000 inhabitants), and one of its most well-known streets is called Oudegracht, on one side bordered by a canal (the Dutch word for canal is ‘gracht’), on the other mostly by shops, restaurants, bars, etc. The street is (therefore) relatively noisy practically 24 hours per day, and seven days per week: motorized traffic, bikers, shopping people, and nightlife crowd turn the Oudegracht almost permanently into a lively hustle and bustle. It is certainly not a deafening din, and noise limits will not often be exceeded, but living here in downtown Utrecht might be challenging for people who prefer some quietness and serenity. Nevertheless, the city council decided some years ago to renovate and rebuild one smaller area just behind this Oudegracht: since then, several single-family homes and apartments in the higher segment have been erected there.

What makes this first case study interesting from a sonic perspective is that, although built some 50 meters from a busy street, this neighborhood can be called an oasis of tranquility where, at least in Spring and Summer, the sounds of singing birds and rustling leaves drown out those of traffic and other city din. And although no particular sound design was applied, although no sound artist got involved in this project, I nevertheless include it here as an example of artistically-inspired design, for reasons I will explain in the next section.

Case study 2: *Fluisterende Wind* [Whispering Wind] is a permanent art installation by the Dutch multimedia artist Edwin van der Heide.<sup>2</sup> It came into existence in 2017 and is situated in a passage for pedestrians that traverses underneath a Leiden University building, creating a new pathway between the Leiden Observatory and the botanical gardens. Besides a 12.5 by 2.5 meter wall relief, the artwork consists of an eight-channel generative sound composition with a varying interplay of soft swooshing wind sounds, silence, and human speech.<sup>3</sup> This gives the impression that the wind

is whispering phrases and messages, even though the sounds will never turn into clearly recognizable words or sentences. Oscillating between nature (wind) and culture (voices), between breathing, whispering, and rustling, between hardly audible sounds and incidental outbursts, between comforting distant and abrupt nearby sounds, the effect *Fluisterende Wind* has on an audience fluctuates from peaceful to ominous and alienating. Technology, nature – their duality implicitly being questioned in and through this work<sup>4</sup> – sound, space, and their interconnections become an assemblage in which the pedestrians traversing the underpass are also actively involved [1].

## 3. MATERIAL AND CONCEPTUAL INTERVENTIONS

Why have I focused on these two, rather different examples of which the first one not even has received any input from a sound artist while the topic of this paper should deal with the role sound artists can play in the sonic design of (semi-)public spaces? I will try to explain and justify the choice of these two case studies in this section, and I will start with the more obvious example, the second one.

*Fluisterende Wind* provides the underpass with a clear (new) identity, creating a temporary cocoon in which the sounds envelop the listener. Traversing an ostensibly insignificant space turns into a special, multisensorial experience, reinforcing the relation between spatiality, corporeality, and immersive perception. The artwork – oscillating between familiarity and unusualness – challenges or incites the existing soundscape, while simultaneously connecting and interacting with the everyday life and already existing sounds outside [1].

Although *Fluisterende Wind* is far from invasive – interaction with the already existing sounds is only possible because the sound volume is adapted to that of the environment – passersby should be tempted to stop, or at least slow down, and listen. Perhaps a listener might even carry the desired form of (attentive) listening outside of this specific site and in general become more aware of the everyday sonic environment. It is in this sense that, through *Fluisterende Wind*, the concept of sound art in public spaces can be rethought: not only as an art genre, but rather as an

the “content” of *Fluisterende Wind*. Although never producing recognizable words or sentences, the voice’s articulations are drawn from botanical and biological terms, thereby implicitly referring to the adjacent botanical gardens as well as the initial function of the university building covering the passage, namely as a botanical lab and storage facilities for the first state herbarium in the Netherlands [1].

<sup>2</sup> See [Fluisterende wind - Edwin van der Heide \(evdh.net\)](https://www.evdh.net)

<sup>3</sup> The term “generative” implies that the composition is not fixed in advance but develops “by itself” according to certain predetermined rules. The sounds, generated and digitally processed in real time, are continually being modified and reordered, thereby creating a perpetually evolving and auto-transforming soundscape composition [1].

<sup>4</sup> Technology, human voice, and natural sounds come together in

affective practice. Van der Heide's sound installation should not (only) be regarded as a site-specific, autonomous artwork, but (also) as an affective, transformative, and deterritorializing intervention.

In short, this work is not only, and perhaps not even in the first place, aesthetically motivated.<sup>5</sup> Instead, it commences from the question of how art can insert its influence within a public space and thereby realize a change in the behavior of people moving through those spaces; moreover, it makes listeners aware of and even encourages them to (re)structure their sonic environment [1]. It is in this sense that I understand *Fluisterende Wind* as a sociopolitically inspired *material intervention*; it is much more than aesthetic diversion as it (implicitly) asks questions about the role and ownership of public spaces.

What is or can be the role of a sound artist in the first example, the newly created residential area next to the rather busy and noisy Oudegracht? Probably unconsciously, the project developers and architects involved in this project have generated (or maintained!) a quiet space, a space in which natural sounds, sounds of human voices, and the faint sounds of all kinds of human activities create an interesting, heterogeneous and polyphonic composition. The Flemish architects Geert Peymen and Pleuntje Jellema would probably call this space a "luwteplek," a lee site, a sonic shelter, a quiet spot in an often busy and noise (urban) environment albeit beyond mere acoustic silence. According to Peymen and Jellema, this "luwteplek" is an example of a heterotopia as defined by the French philosopher Michel Foucault: an "other" site, a tangible intrusion into everyday spaces, a space that distances itself (or deviates) from other spaces. In their book *De luwteplek: Een ruimtelijk onderzoek naar stilte, rust en verstillings in de stad*. [The Lee Site: A Spatial Inquiry into Silence, Quiet, and Tranquility in the City], they list as a few of the best practices, enclosed gardens, empty buildings, and covered parking spaces. In short, a lee site typically is enclosed (offering shelter), permeable (not completely detached from its surroundings although they are less audible, less "present"), meaningful (for example because it is cultural heritage), contrasting (a different sound level in comparison to the environment), relational (dependent on other, human as well as non-human agents), and not appropriable (it is, for example, not a thoroughfare) [2].

<sup>5</sup> *Fluisterende Wind* might be labeled as a research in and through art, a research into human experiences of space and sound, research into the affective relations between human and non-human agents (their attractions and repulsions, sympathies and antipathies,

Once more, Peymen and Jellema are no sound artists, nor did they – in the strict sense of the word – create these lee sites; in their book they defined them and listed several of them in their hometown Ghent (Belgium). What sound artists can do is pretty much the same thing as what these two landscape architects did: to identify interesting already existing sonic sites (not necessarily always quiet sites as far as I am concerned); to protect these sites from being absorbed by new city projects; and, if necessary, to further improve the sonic quality of the sites. In addition to the *material intervention* mentioned above, I call such (quasi-)artistic activities *conceptual interventions*.

#### 4. ARTISTIC TOOLS

Preceding material and/or conceptual interventions, sound artists can apply several methodological strategies to analyze and reflect on the urban environment in order to decide whether interventions are desirable at all, and, if so, which ones will be most appropriate.

Doing sound walks, making field recordings, and/or developing sound maps, provide information regarding the question which sounds are dominant and which are covered. They also inform the sound artist who or what "owns" or "occupies" a particular site as well as who is "in control" of that site. By carefully and attentively listening to a site (and by inviting residents and/or users of that site to do listening sessions with them), artists can inventory which sounds are active agents in the construction of a site, which sounds can be classified as disruptive or intrusive and which sounds do contribute to a positive ambiance, not only acoustically but, for example, also socially (are social interactions possible and stimulated by the sonic environment?), ecologically (is there enough biodiversity and how does that affect the sonic atmosphere?), and culturally (which human as well as non-human agents or groups are invited to let their voices be heard?).

If on the basis of these analyses and reflections concrete interventions are desired, artists can use several strategies:

- (a) *Removing* dominant sound sources, so that more pleasant sounds will become better audible. The above-mentioned identifying, adapting, and – if necessary – creating of lee sites can be an example here. With the input of sound artists – if only to draw the attention to the sonic aspects of a site – certain sites can be transformed sonically

alterations, amalgamations, penetrations, and expansions), a research into various listening attitudes, a research into the role of sound in appropriating places, a research into all kinds of forces that generate a site [1].

(and thereby socially and politically as the example of *Fluisterende Wind* has made clear) Making streets car-free, for example, can unblock more welcome sounds and enhance the social and/or cultural cohesion of a neighborhood.

- (b) When removing sounds is not a realistic option, an opposite strategy can be used, namely *adding* sounds, not only to mask unpleasant ones but also to create a more heterogeneous soundscape. *Fluisterende Wind* might count as a good example here, not so much because the existing environment sounds really terrible but because the work interrupts a certain sonic uniformity. A far more famous example is of course Max Neuhaus' work *Times Square*.<sup>6</sup>
- (c) The everyday sonic environment, even when it is not explicitly noisy or disturbing, can also be *transformed* in order to add more variety or to enrich the way people experience that environment. Soundwalks with headphones and apps can add different layers to a sonic environment and make a different relationship with the environment possible.<sup>7</sup> Besides *Fluisterende Wind* a clear transformation of already present environmental sounds takes place in *Harmonic Bridge* by Bruce Odland and Sam Auinger.<sup>8</sup>
- (d) The strategy of *disclosing* offers the possibility for listeners to discover inaudible sounds, sounds from the past, or sounds which are sometimes disqualified as noisy or unpleasant. Besides the soundwalk, mentioned above (see fn 4), one could also think of using QR codes at certain spots which will give you access to an app with sounds that are absent otherwise. Another good example: the *Electrical Walks* developed by Christina Kubisch in several, mostly European, cities.<sup>9</sup> On a more conceptual level, identifying "luwteplekken" could also be considered as a disclosure.

## 5. THE VIRTUAL AND THE ETHICAL

In the preceding sections I have introduced some inchoate ideas regarding possible interventions that can be applied by artists to contribute to a better living environment. Through the two case studies – the construction of a new residential area in the city center of Utrecht, close to the rather busy and noisy Oudegracht, and the artwork *Fluisterende Wind* in a small tunnel on the Humanities campus of Leiden University – I could introduce two new concepts, material and conceptual interventions. The ensuing four strategies – removal, addition, transformation, and disclosure – as well as some of the examples I mentioned, were roughly based on Jordan Lacey's 2016 book *Sonic Rupture* and described several concrete interventions in which sound art plays a fundamental role, in thinking about the interventions, in realizing them, or both [3].

What connects all those interventions, apart from the fact that they all are based on a more artistic or aesthetic approach of (semi-)public urban environments with human experiences of those environments as their point of departure? The answer to this question is, perhaps, already embedded in the word "disclosure" introduced above. Perhaps the most important contribution of sound artists to a more inclusive and comprehensive (re)designing of (urban) sites is that they are able – and maybe more so than other professionals – to reveal the potentialities of a site. As sound artist Åsa Stjerna writes: The practices of sound artists can be considered as "a mode of thinking, and an affective, transformative, and site-specific practice that on the one hand emerges as an exploration of the heterogeneous and complex affective force relations which together constitute the assemblage that is a place, and on the other hand acts as a modification of those very relations through strategies of deterritorialization and the production of affective territories" [4]. Establishing new connections and transforming a visitor's relation to a specific place means that all these artistic interventions and strategies do not stay with what a site *is* but what it actually could *become*. Both the conceptual and material interventions I described above introduce what I would like to call "the virtual," that is, the not yet actualized capacities of a site. Through artistic interventions, certain forces become perceptible that are not normally possible to experience [4]. I would like to conclude by stating that it is important to

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gahUMGmKZIA&t=4s>

<sup>7</sup> In 2022 I have created the soundwalk *Leiden Unheard* in the city center of Leiden (the Netherlands). With an app and GPS tracking soundwalkers can experience sounds that are usually inaudible while walking from Leiden Central Station to the botanical gardens: underwater sounds, sounds from the past, electromagnetic fields,

sounds recorded underground, sounds recorded inside of a building (while the soundwalker is of course outside), etc. See [ongehoordleiden | izi.TRAVEL](https://www.ongehoordleiden.nl/izi.TRAVEL)

<sup>8</sup> See <https://vimeo.com/29100787>

<sup>9</sup> See [Electrical Walks - Christina Kubisch / deutsch - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)



realize that disclosing the potentialities of a site, actualizing its virtual possibilities, and thereby enlarging the experiences people can have, not only serve mere artistic or aesthetic objectives. Sound connects. Living beings, non-living matter, and environment affect each other and are affected by the others. Through sound. By actualizing the virtual these affective relationships are stimulated and enhanced. Improving the sonic environment by taking the sonic design of (semi-)public spaces more serious, by permitting artistic interventions, and by taking advantage of the knowledge and experiences of sound artists might make new encounters and new experiences with sites as well as human and non-human agents at those sites possible. Expanding the affective potential of a site can therefore be called an *ethical* act, as it challenges those forces that restrict the possibilities to create spaces of interaction and experiential diversity. By increasing the affective potential of a given environment, the possibility of reconfiguring one's relation to the sonic environment is intensified [3]. And in this context, intensification with the help of sound (and sound art) doesn't only affect an individual's mental and physical health but certainly also their social, political, ethical, ecological, and aesthetic well-being.

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