

ssst...

sit in a quiet room

think back,

remember a sound,

a sound that was important to you, that struck you, that stayed with you

take the first sound that comes to mind

try to hear that sound again

recreate it in your head

and describe that to me, describe it in detail, where, when, why

describe what you felt

please

## Soundtracks

*Soundtracks* is an installation about memories. Memories of sound, and how those memories lodge themselves in our head, nestle themselves in our mind and interconnect with feelings, thoughts and situations. Unconsciously, sound marks situations and things happening in our own life. Consciously or unconsciously listening to those sounds marks our own presence in those moments.

And yet, when we are asked to remember something, we usually begin to describe what it looked like, and maybe what we felt or thought at that specific moment. A memory is always inscribed in a train of thought and thinking is, especially in our western culture, an act that is structured along spatial and visual narratives. When we describe something, we explain what it looked like, how big or small it was, how it was positioned in space. Precisely because sound is not part of our immediate memory reflex, it can be a powerful trigger in remembering something. Much like a smell can be, or the taste of a madeleine-biscuit was for Proust's storyteller of "À la recherche du temps perdu".

Remembering a sound is difficult. When we want to remember a sound we can readily describe what we felt or where we heard the sound. How it looked like. But when asked to hear that sound again, to recreate it in our head, things become more difficult. When asked to remember something it's relatively easy to close our eyes and picture the situation. Not so when asked to recall a certain sound. Could it be because our auditory awareness is less subject to cognitive structuring than our visual perceptions? Because auditory perceptions are more direct, less malleable by our pre-existing mindsets?

According to the psychologist Michael Forrester sounds and the memory of sound play a significant role in our emotional lives. Certain sounds become lodged in our memory as markers of security, homing in to a sense of security and belonging. (Forrester, 2000 quoted in Toop, 2004)<sup>1</sup>. The sounds of the grandfather clock in our parental home, footsteps on your bedroom floor, a bell of a church nearby. However, sounds can be related to other feelings as well. Fear about the unknown sounds of dark woods, or an empty house that suddenly comes alive with cracks and whispers when you find yourself alone in there. Sounds can be linked to any emotion, but according to me sounds have the quality of hinting at an unspoken quality of the emotion. It gives the emotion a certain depth, a substance that is difficult to explain. It's a blind spot to the recaller of the emotion or the event.

It is this blind spot I am interested in. Cage thought us to explore silence as a compositional feature, to allow for external sounds to come to live in a composition. In that way, he tried to get under the surface of listening. Instead of

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<sup>1</sup> Toop, D. (2004) *Haunted Weather. Music, silence and memory*. London: Serpent's Tail

listening to a predefined piece of music, he invites the listener to guide his own attention. To consciously decide what to listen to, to make a performance about the act of listening itself.

I am trying to get under the surface of listening as well. More than visual perception, listening is imagining. In ordinary life we have a selective ear, we decide what we hear, and we have to ascribe the sounds we (decided to) hear a certain meaning, we have to imagine a meaning. In recalling the memory of a sound, this imagination gets even more confounded, since the sound is no longer in our ear, we have to recreate it, and our minds are not built for that. Hence the imagination, the selective attention is even stronger in recollection.

It is this interconnection between actual sound and imagination, this imaginative recreation I want to research in the installation *Soundtracks*. A room is filled with racks of shelves against the wall. On those shelves stand jars with pieces of paper in them. Each piece of paper has a recollection of a sound written on it. Visitors are invited to open the jars and read the testimonies. The recollections are personal and diverse. In the middle of the room you find a small table, where visitors can sit, write down their own memory of a sound, and put it in a jar and put the jar among the collection. Writing down something is a tactile process which connects the visitor to the sound. This tactile endeavour is necessary to force the visitor to sit down and focus instead of quickly typing some passing words on a computer screen. It makes the visitor ponder his or her own memories. Putting the memory in a jar is an act of conscious conservation. Just as opening each jar and taking out the paper and reading a memory is an active process, a focus on someone else's memory, and our own imagination in trying to recreate that sound.

There is no sound in the room. The archive is faulty. It can't save the sounds from annihilation. It can't and doesn't want to preserve sounds. Every sound is a temporal thing, a linear happening with an end. The archive is not a collection of documented sounds or soundmarks like Schafer's World Sound Project. Some field recording artists want to document existing soundscapes. A friend of mine saw a sketch of the installation and was reminded of the 'smell collection' of the Stasi, who have developed a way to even catalogue and preserve smells. However, *Soundtracks* is not about preserving sounds, it's a reconnaissance of people's memory. How sounds have made an impact on them, shaped them as an individual. Sounds disappear, and unless we walk around with a recorder 24/7, we only have our own imagination to recreate the sounds, which makes it very personal. Everybody constantly takes pictures with their cell phone, but how many of us use that electronic gizmo to record something. How many cell phones even possess that function? No, our imagination is the only thing we have to recall sounds.

*Soundtracks* views these memories as traces in the sand. Tracks, traces of sound through a personal history. Our memories constitute a large part of our definition of self. We use our memory, however selective, to define our identity.

*Soundtracks* takes these sonic memories as tiny little traces. Small ruins of moments of self definition. That's why the installation is built around a double confrontation. In reading the memories of others, we are confronted with other peoples imaginations, and to decipher their memorys we can only rely on our own sonic imagination. And in describing our own memories, in recalling those sounds that made an impression on us, we are forced to use our own imagination in recreating these sounds in our head. A confrontation which unavoidably confronts us with a past self.

This confrontation seperates this project from previous endeavours to preserve some sounds for posterity. I have a lot of sympathy for the music preservation by etnomusicologists, or the work of Alan Lomax or even the cataloging and use of folk melodies by Bartok, and the sound preserving of Schafer's World Sound Project. But those projects deal with an absolute preservation of sound, sometimes even in an almost scientific way. I want to explore the sounds that shaped people, to discover if they even realise how sound influences them. I want to explore how people remember sounds, how they relate to them, what makes a sound personal.

The memories for the *Soundtracks* archive are collected in a variety of ways. Whenever the archive is exhibited in a new city, the artist spends a week in that city, looking for people with memories, and who are willing to share them. He goes out in the streets and interviews people, talks with them about which sounds they remember well, and why, and what impressions it made on them. Then he asks them to write them down. Also, on the website of the artist there is a lasting call for memories. People are invited to seclude themselves for a time and write down their own memories, and mail them via post to him. And during the showing of the installation, visitors are urged to participate, to write down their own recollections.

At the moment, two related fields of research are guiding my artistic endeavours: the memory of sound and the ruin of listening. For myself, this installation is the beginning of a reconaissance of these questions, which I hope to use for new work.

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