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SONIC MATERIALITIES

The Sound Tapestry of Water Fountains: Intimacy in Public Space in Renaissance Rome

Ragnhild May and Kristoffer Raasted

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The authors are practice-based Ph.D-fellows at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art, University of Copenhagen.

Introduction

Sound is part of the construction of social and spatial situations. Fountains in public spaces impact the way these spaces are used. The water infrastructure of renaissance Rome included private and public water fountains used for drinking and washing as well as embellishment. Between 1560 and 1630, a series of fountains were constructed in Rome by religious and civil authorities that changed the way the city was used: providing water for the inhabitants, the fountains became meeting points across class boundaries. The sound of the fountains resembled white noise and also impacted urban life by creating thus created calm spaces that stood in contrast with the cacophony of the city experienced elsewhere. The sound of the fountains also gave presented an ideal setting for private and intimate conversations not to be overheard by outsiders. But also an ideal setting for private conversations.¹

This observation raises several questions: in which ways does sound constitute intimacy in public space? In *Ulysses*, James Joyce describes water to have democratic properties: “*What in water did Bloom, waterlover, drawer of water, watercarrier, returning to the range, admire? Its universality: its democratic equality and constancy to its nature in seeking its own level [...]?*”² In which ways can water infrastructure function as a figure for bridging class-boundaries? Does the sound of falling water have similar democratic properties?

In this paper we examine notions of intimacy and privacy in public space, through an exploration of the backdrop sound of Roman Fountains. Using an ar-

1 Rinne, K. W., *The waters of Rome: Aqueducts, fountains, and the birth of the baroque city*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); Butler, S. and Nooter, S (eds.), *Sound and the Ancient Senses* (Routledge, 2018).

2 Joyce, J., *Ulysses*. (Richmond, England: Oneworld Classics, 2012).

tistic research practice, we recreate the sonic milieu of a hydraulic sparkling water fountain, in order to examine its sonic qualities, as a space for intimate conversations. We then proceed to consider how this relates to current sonic practices by comparing our analysis with other sound milieus in public space that have similar properties.

In Fellini's classic 1960 film, *La Dolce Vita*, one of the most iconic scenes in film history takes place in the Roman Trevi fountain. The main characters Marcello and Sylvie are engaged in a romantic conversation, flirting and almost kissing in Trevi. When the sound of falling water suddenly stops, they realize where they are, look around with a confused look as they rediscover and comprehend that they are in a public space, then leave the fountain.

When we think about how public space functions in our current society, it is impossible not to think about the sonic milieu. One example is how real estate prices vary depending on the noise of the neighborhood. Living next to a highway, or a bar with loud music, is less desirable than living on a quiet street. And the sound of falling water is used for creating calming atmospheres, f.i. in hotel lobbies. But what kind of sonic milieus in urban spaces existed in the past?

And why are we interested in these topics? In our own artistic research we both deal with notions of intimacy in different ways. In Ragnhild May's piece *Vindspejlet* (2018, collaboration with Ea Borre), a sculpture constitutes a space for temporary dwelling in urban space. The sculpture's visual appearance refers to buoys. On the top of the sculpture a microphone registers the sound of the wind, a sound almost identical to white noise. This sound is being placed through speakers located in two cone-shaped metal forms, placed at the end of long metal bars. When the wind blows, the bars move and the sound of the very directional speakers are moved around, creating a sonic effect similar to the doppler effect.³

In Ragnhild May's 2022 permanent landscape-integrated piece *All Ears*, big bronze ears are distributed around a landscape. Each pair of ears are connected via underground pipes, so that it is possible to speak to each other through the big ears, encouraging play for both kids and adults.⁴ In her PhD *The Body as a Site for Composition* she rethinks the relation between body, gender, instruments and sound. Ragnhild May investigates the body's place in sonic experiences and its relation to instruments.

Kristoffer Raasted's research on radio voices has a strong emphasis on the podcast voice as a way of creating intimate situations through technology. The podcasts are part of his PhD project *New Connections: Queering The Radio Voice*,

3 <https://ragnhildmay.com/sound-sculpture-vindspejlet/> Accessed, June 2023.

4 <https://ragnhildmay.com/all-ears/> Accessed, June 2023.

commissioned by Art Hub Copenhagen as the first curation in the theoretical format Testing Ground.⁵ Our mutual interest has led us to this shared research area.

Due to the ephemerality of sound we do not know what the past sounded like. But in some cases, we might have a good idea. The Roman fountains that are still in use are creating a sonic space that is very similar to what it did a hundreds of years ago. This is comparable to Butler and Nooters example of the taste of olive oil offering contemporary citizens a door into the tastescapes of antiquity.⁶ In this way, fountains document sound. As a type of pre-industrial recording device, the fountains present us with a present-day sound milieu, that is reminiscent of the sounds of the past. Their hydraulic-mechanical constitution with pressure chambers and other modern technological additions like ultraviolet cleaning systems and electrically automated pumping devices does not subtract from this trope. Of course, the sounds around the fountains have undergone significant transformations. Built between 1560-1630, the Roman fountains turned the city into the greatest city in Europe. As a result of technological and architectural development of aqueducts, the fountains were built through support from the Vatican and wealthy donors. These fountains provided the citizens with clean water for washing, industrial purposes and drinking and were sculptured in marble by the famous sculptors of the time. The fountains had a huge impact on urban development. Housing prices would rise, if a fountain was erected in the area, as it was desirable to live in proximity to water.⁷ City water infrastructures are socio-economical indications of the living conditions for the citizens.

In today's post-industrial world, the fountains are no longer functional as drinking water sources, because of acid rain and other forms of pollution. Thus, the primary functionality of the fountains has fallen away, and their current function is less directly connected to the survival and health of citizens. As an example of what Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter refers to as Aural Architectures, the fountains – and what more specifically interests us here: the sound of the fountains-shapes and is shaped by the surrounding cultural situation.⁸ Thus, fountains are not only shaping the public culture atmospherically; they function as an example of outdoor furniture that establishes an intimate setting for low-key conversation. This functionality differs somewhat from the initial watering hole like meeting point, also across class differences, languages etc. to a more aestheticized

5 https://arthubcopenhagen.net/en/media_item/podcast-kristoffer-raasted-new-connections-queering-the-radio-voice/
Accessed June 2023.

6 Butler/Nooter, *Sound*, 44-45.

7 Rinne, *The waters*.

8 In the chapter 'Sounding out public space in Late Republican Rome', co-written by Erika Holter, Susanne Muth and Sebastian Schwesinger (with Muth as PI for the Cluster of Excellence "Image Knowledge Gestaltung").

and quasi-functionless functionality. This loss of identity for the fountains gives them an air of scenography, they become a setting for recreational activities: rather than wells, they have become sonic tapestries or backdrops. There are still around 2.500 functional drinking water fountains in Rome, commonly referred to as the *Nasoni*, installed in 1872.⁹

When we think about the past, there are some things we know, while others are unknown to us. And to fill in those gaps in our knowledge we imagine. In that way, it is similar to the way we think about the future, filling holes in our knowledge and assumptions with imagination. In non-linear time, the past and present exist simultaneously with the future, perhaps contained within it. This is explored by Henri Bergson, with the famous image of the memory cone.¹⁰

This conception of time corresponds well with artistic, partly irrational or paradoxical processes. In a practice-based mindset, theoretical inquiry is considered a prolongation of our artistic practices, and the other way around. When imagining how the past sounded, we have been using artistic methods to observe and investigate the fountains.

During a research stay at the Danish Institute in Rome in 2019, we had the chance to research the fountains through audio recordings, photography and observation (see fig. 1, p. 6). Some of the fountains were in use, while others were dry, or undergoing restoration. Some of the fountains are constructed with *spolia* marble, which made us think of recycling and ready-made aesthetics. *Spolia* is the archeological term for reuse of materials, for instance marble. We used underwater microphones as well as microphones for airborne sounds, to make recordings of different fountains and realized that each fountain had its own unique sound. Some of them had very subtle patterns with singularly discernable drops of water, composing tiny microtonal melodies (à la Tod Dockstader's *Drip Symphony*), while others were more stream-like. As if the fountains were instruments that use water as medium, they structure and compose with water, creating their own unique rhythms. Each fountain had its different characteristic ambience. There would always be something happening in the *piazza*. A helicopter would cross the sky between the building blocks, a scooter would be parked next to the fountain. In the proximity of one of the fountains, we met a boys' choir rehearsing in an alley, and recorded a chord with their permission. The most famous fountains are used as backdrops for selfies by tourists.

9 <https://bsr.ac.uk/water-infrastructure-and-public-space-exploring-the-enduring-legacy-of-drinking-fountains-as-place-making-devices-in-rome/> accessed 14 Jun 2023.

10 Bergson, H., *Matter and Memory* (*Matière et Mémoire*, 1896), translators N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer, (Zone Books 1990).



Fig. 1: Untitled (selfie couple), 2019, analogue photograph. Photo: Ragnhild May

Thus, our research was open-endedly and processually responding to what was happening, and the composition flexibly followed the transformation this approach resulted in. During our research, we also came across Ottorino Respighi's symphonic poem *Fontane di Roma*. We transferred the melodies of the fountains to partly traditional, partly graphical notation for string quartet, and recorded the piece in a studio upon our return to Copenhagen. Accordingly, we mixed a layer of the real sounds into the composition in a live mixing studio session in a residency at Dansk Tennis Foundation in Gudhjem, Bornholm. The record that we made in collaboration with Morten Winther Nielsen, was released at a reception at the book shop in Kunsthal Charlottenborg in November 2021. Prior to that, a draft version had been presented at gallery *Zwitschermaschine* in Berlin. On our way home by train, we also presented some of the recordings at a live session on Radio Cashmere, also in Berlin.

Some of the Roman fountains are popular as tourist attractions, always surrounded by hordes of people, while others are lesser known, and live quieter lives as part of the city interior. The fountains are often used as seating, thus becoming meeting points. The fountains are usually located in the center of a square, spaces that already function as places for rest and leisure. When standing on one side of the fountain, it is possible to drown your voice in the sound of falling water, a sound that resembles white noise. White noise is a term for the noise that occurs when all frequencies are playing simultaneously. The sound of the white noise drowns the noises of the city during the day. Noise from cars, chatter and busy street life be-

come less present. The experience is similar to walking on the shore on a day with big waves, the sounds of the waves create a rhythmic ambience that makes other sound sources drown. In that way, the noise is calming in a hectic city soundscape.

When the water fountains lost their original main function of providing fresh water for the city's inhabitants, they maintained their aesthetic qualities as sound givers, and another increasingly important function as sites of calm, quiet and intimacy in the postindustrial city.

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