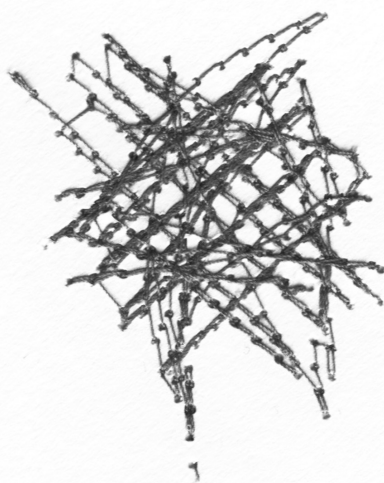




textured listening

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introduction

4

Sound connects. Sound creates friction. Sound frees from control. Sound passes through. Sound is not tangible but exists so powerfully in space. It identifies places so strongly but is not usually thought of, or used to describe one, other than 'noisy' or 'silent'. When thinking about what you hear when you are in public space, it is quite rare for a sound to be noticed if it fits into the expected range of common, 'boring' and mundane.

The intention of this text is to prompt the reader to listen, truly listen, and not just hear. In 'Deep Listening' Pauline Oliveros highlights the difference between listening and hearing. Listening requires attention, whereas hearing is simply the perception of sound waves received by the human ear. Oliveros writes about observing how musicians were not listening to, but hearing their own performances, creating a disconnection from the environment [Oliveros, 2005]. I notice that this is also the case when in public space. Whether you might be sitting, walking or just existing outside, the sound around you

is something that just falls into the background, to which not much attention is paid.

In this essay I write about listening as a method of reclaiming space. To do this, I will introduce some key concepts, some mine and some from others, ranging from Disneyfication [Sorkin, 1992] and city smoothness [Boer, 2023], to focusing on slowness, stillness and how recording changes the identity of sound.

To be able to communicate this to you, I ask for you to re imagine the city as an instrument. For me, listening is also about collaborating with the non-human components of an environment. Thinking of the metaphor of the instrument playing is a useful way to explain this. It is connected to the idea of letting go, moving slowly and imprecisely, paying attention to what is already there, trying to remember more than just the general melody.

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The text (as well as the installation arising from it) is an invitation to practice textured listening in public space. With this I mean listening while taking into account the relationship between the listeners body and the space surrounding it, focusing on how the identity of a space shapes its sound. This is a very personal and subjective practice, which is why I will write about my own experience with it. It is applicable to any space and reveals so much information about the complexity of an environment. To do this, I will also introduce how sound and noise complement each other, what kinds of silence exist in the city according to my research, and what they can tell us about the context in which they exist.

time to listen

6

I walk around a square close to my house, on a Sunday, following the lines created by how the cobblestone has been placed in the pavement. As I do this, I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Time to listen.

I hear:

A constant buzz coming from the traffic.

The voice of a child,
breaking through the air.

Construction noises, coming from
the pavement being repaired.

Some metal falling on the
ground, making a very
distinct sound. Maybe
keys?

Wind gusts, making the last autumn

leaves fall on the ground in a nearby
park.

Some seagulls crying, maybe
looking for scraps, leftover
from yesterdays market.

The loud motor of a car driving
quite close behind me, I wonder
where it is going.

It is quiet for where
I am, I can almost
hear how cold the air
around me is.

As I listen, I start to notice how my imagination runs, questioning the identity of these sounds, speculating about the context in which they exist, where they come from and where they will go. Imagining a story around common sounds makes it apparent that each time you truly listen, and not just hear, the city soundscape is diverse, like listening to the same instrument playing different songs. They are correlated, almost all the same notes are used, but there are many variations in the rhythm, pitch and volume. At first, these changes might seem small, but the more you pay attention, the more you start to be able to identify how they make the practice of listening to the city soundscape so exciting. 7

I have been recording little snippets of sounds for quite some time without having any specific purpose in mind, and at one point last year I discovered they were called “field recordings”. Listening back to some of these audios, I realise they do not have that much in common in the choices of which sounds are being caught, other than the fact that they were all recorded in public space. Last year I started integrating these city noises more and more into my practice. I mapped

the city and its infrastructures through listening, by recording journeys on public transport, bike rides, solo walks, walks with others, while I was sat down reading something on a bench and more. I built a small device meant to not record sound, but the loudness of a space, and then used that data to make a small knitted sound patch. I worked on a publication with my friend Mania focusing on reading the city through the use of scripts, which turned into hosting several workshops where we looked and listened following each others paths to notice what was around. The use of the script allowed for embodied listening through the lends of playfulness, revealing hidden warps and wefts of the city soundscape.

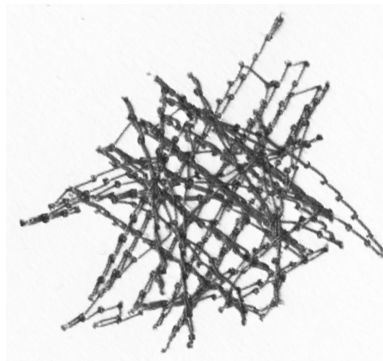


The warps and wefts of the city is what make up its texture. I understand texture as a term describing the composition and feel of a space or surface. Think of a woven fabric. Threads intertwining with each other, creating a solid structure, not flat, but filled with complex layers of materials overlapping and collaborating with each other, kind of like how i imagine sounds to move in a space.

Listening is an embodied and situated practice. Perceiving sound is not limited to what is heard, but it spans much further. Think for example of the vibrations you feel when you stand next to a loud speaker, realizing the physical aspect of sound, or the overwhelming discomfort of hearing an extremely loud noise, involving the mind and body, the full being, the whole self. This is why I call listening embodied. Listening is a practice that helps reveal hidden threads of sound, focusing on the texture of the variations only you as yourself can perceive and notice. It is routed in the subjectivity of the listener

being the curator of what is heard, they decide what to perceive. Listening is not passive, but an active and conscious effort. Sound is created, it does not just exist independently of its context, and it considers how human and non-human components of these surroundings relate to each other. It considers the relationship between the individual and the context they are listening in. It is an approach to understand your city (or a space in the city) through sound. This is why I call listening subjective.

Textured listening is a term I came up with to describe the method I have developed as a result of spending time outside, paying attention to the sound of the city. It is an embodied and situated listening practice happening in a slow and repetitive manner. It is related to how you perceive sound. It takes into account the materiality of sound, how it is created and the space in which it exists. To allow for all of these qualities to be noticed, the listening is slow and has to happen frequently. It mixes with everyday rhythms that are already a part of the listeners context, but often remain unnoticed. What I am looking to get through these listening moments is a connection and a deeper understanding of the environment I am practicing this method in. This is deeply related to who I am in this city, and my relationship to it. 9



Therefore Textured Listening can be defined as an embodied, subjective, slow listening practice, focusing on listening to the everyday context of the individual practicing it, to reveal hidden threads of the city.

The method draws a lot from 'Deep Listening' by Pauline Oliveros, where the composer suggests active and deep listening, by involving not only your ears, but your whole body, mind and space. For example, one of the exercises the author includes in the publication is:

Sound/Silence

There is no sound without silence before and after. Sound/silence is a symbiotic relationship. Sound and silence are relative to one another. Time relationships may be instantaneous to very long. Listening to sounds means listening to silences, and vice versa. There is no absolute silence unless there is zero vibration. Silence means that we can hear no sounds. Silence is the space between sounds. [Oliveros, 2005, p.25]

This kind of practice can allow for the perception of the complexities and variations in sound. The concept starts from Oliveros's experience with experimental music making, playing, composition and sonic mediation. It invites the listener to not be selective with what they hear, but instead try to notice every sound, whether small or big. In my understanding, this is not only about the act of listening, but it is really about being able to, by using it as a tool, perceive the complexity of sound, in a musical, natural or urban context. It is conscious of space. It brings attention to the sounds inside the listener (breathing, heartbeat, thought and imagined as well).

This is extremely applicable to my own listening practice and very important in laying a foundation to the research I am undertaking. In an urban context for example, deep listening allows for discovery of a dynamic and vibrant soundscape constantly evolving and changing, considering all of the city noise, from traffic, to voices and footsteps.

So often sound is ignored outside. People move with headphones in their ears, listening to music, covering the noise. Even when you hear it, the soundscape of the city falls in the background with no one actively paying attention to it, unless something out of the ordinary starts happening. Actively listening all the time is overwhelming, but when it becomes a standard practice to not pay attention to sound, so much is lost. The sound of the city is so rich with information, it is nuanced, variable and filled with life.

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Listening is important to notice change.

Listening is important to defining a space.

Listening is important to understand the urban condition.

My experience with sound in public space is quite different in the Netherlands compared to in my home country, Italy. This is probably also because I have not lived in Italy for a long time, and what I remember of it is a quite romanticised version of reality, but also because of cultural differences in the attitudes towards sound in general. Noise in the Netherlands is increasingly restricted to designated spaces and places that still remain 'porous'. In his book 'Smooth City', René Boer describes 'porosity' as an alternative

to the smooth city (but not as its opposite). A smooth city, is where urban space is stripped of its city-like qualities, and urban life is compressed into a seamless experience, leaving no space incompatible with its clearly defined norms, a city in constant pursue of perfection and efficiency. A porous space, is one where a 'blur of strict boundaries in the urban fabric, a mixed, complex and intense urban environment' [Boer, 2023, pp. 162-163].

In the 'Smooth Disruptions' chapter of his book, Boer mentions ExSnia in Rome, close to Termini train station. The space takes its name from the factory it used to be, and now it houses a social center, in Italian Centro Sociale Autegestito, meaning Self-managed social center. The Centro Sociale is usually an occupied space, promoting free (or pay what you can) cultural and social activities, as well as a third place for people to gather and meet. It provides space for counter-culture to exist.

ExSnia (like many other centres similar to it) is a vibrant element of the city, that is self-managed and self-maintained, created with little resources and extremely multi-layered. It shows the depth of the time it took for it to grow, and that smoothness is not the only available option for cities to develop.

In the Smooth City, noise has a clearly defined area in which to exist, and if it tries to leave from what has been established as its place, it is to be removed. I think back to this particular moment in the first year of living in the Netherlands, when a neighbour complained about me and my roommate making too much noise while talking on our balcony. They did so in a written letter, describing our voices "shrill and booming". I remember being shocked at how the 'noise' of our conversations was rejected in such a strong way.

This experience in particular made me realise how sound can be perceived differently based on who is

listening. Generally, I have noticed much more space being kept for manufactured silence in cities.

I propose that silence in the city can be divided into two main categories: manufactured (or prescribed) silence and natural silence.

Natural silence is what you hear when you walk out on the street at 2 in the morning, when you are in a park at night or what you hear when inhabitants of the city are asleep. Silence that is there because no one else is. This meaning the silence of human and non-human components.

Prescribed silence instead, is the type of silence that occurs as a result of a rule or regulation imposed on a specific space. This rule can be direct, like:

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NO loud noises after 8 PM!

NO speaking in this train cart!

or indirect, but with a similar effect on the environment like:

NO skating!

NO loitering!

NO music!

NO taking on the phone!

These rules are an example of attempts to control sound in public space by using prohibitions, not only around noise itself, but also around the general public environment. This can in turn remove and blur the identity of a place. Of course, we all deserve to be able to rest in peace, but there could be a space for this naturally occurring noise to exist. By this, I mean

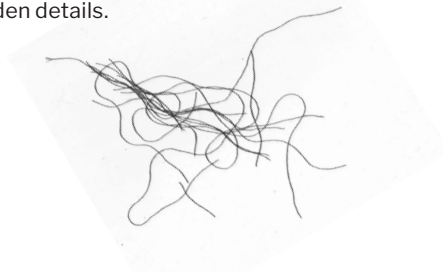
noise and sound that is created as a result of people existing in a space, like chatter, footsteps, the sound of a bike wheel turning, as well as sound coming from the environment itself, like birds chirping, wind etc.

Prescribed silence creates a clear disconnect between the urban reality and the people inhabiting it. This is because it can change and manipulate the identity of a space in time. Listening to a less scripted environment helps understanding its identity. For example, if I enter a space where I hear a lot of chatter, I know it is a space where you can probably spend some time and hang out. If I hear skateboard wheels, I can assume there are certain architectural features good for tricks, like ramps, ledges etc. But when loitering and skating are not allowed, this hypothetical space is no longer one for gathering, and the people involved in these activities become unwelcome.

In “The Situationist City” Simon Sadler quotes Raoul Vaneigem, who states how urbanism and information are complementary to each other, even in differing political contexts. “They organize silence.” [Sadler, 2001, p. 16].

In my interpretation of it, this is what prescribed silence is, a condition imposed from above, shaping the sound of an urban space.

In practicing textured listening, silence plays a key component in identifying the acoustic texture of a space. When the ear gets exposed to a lower volume environment, hidden threads are more easily revealed, allowing the listener to notice smaller hidden details.



When thinking about silence and noise, the question of what is the difference between noise and sound also arises. From a physics standpoint, there is no physical distinction between noise and desired sound, as both are vibrations through a medium. Noise is sound, but undesired and not intentional. So if we consider this, city soundscapes would by definition be 'noise'. However, I would like to suggest a change in the perception of the word noise, from undesired, and not intentional, to surprising and serendipitous. With this slight change in attitude towards the word, the noise of the city suddenly becomes a soundscape, something you want to listen to.

To me, this conception presents an opportunity for a shift in the view of the city itself. By learning to find value in aspects of our surroundings that are usually considered as unwanted, we also learn to appreciate small unexpected accidents, and notice that maybe what appears interesting at first glance is not the only thing worth paying attention to.

15

Lost sounds, forgotten sounds, sounds left behind, discarded sounds, falling in the background. They do not have a stage, but lie in between the stages cracks, making it stand.

I want to explore the beauty of these forgotten sounds, and give them a space where they can exist in the spotlight, so that people will notice them in their natural environment. I listen to this instrument, that is constantly being played by all of its inhabitants, passerby, tourists, all people who come into contact with it. The city is alive, and vibrant, and has so much to say.

Why does no one listen?

curated soundscapes

16

Textured listening is a practice of everyday, of slowness, stillness and repetitiveness. Of paying a lot of attention. Of noticing. Of being careful and observant. Of occupying space while doing this. I realise trying to take in all the sound of a space can be overwhelming, but it is important to acknowledge the power the city soundscape can have on an individual. Paying attention to what is in this space situates you in this environment and reveals threads that at first are not apparent.

My family is from a small beach town in Italy called Jesolo. Although I did not grow up there, I used to stay there with my grandparents for months while growing up. I have spent a lot of time observing how the city developed throughout the years to more and more accommodate the needs of tourists over those its inhabitants. Green and unused spaces are slowly turned into resorts to accommodate tourists, the beach becomes a space that people have to pay to access, small businesses close in order for shops catered to the needs of temporary visitors to open.

This is especially noticeable during the winter, as it is a seasonal vacation spot, where everything seems to shut down as no external eyes are there to see it. The city is quiet. The show is not being put up anymore, as the ‘theme park’ is closed for business.

In ‘Variations on a Theme Park’ Michael Sorkin explores this concept, identifying the evolution of the city into theme park, slowly becoming more hypercontrolled and curated, where public space erodes in time into not really being public anymore. He introduces the concept of Disneyfication of the city, being clean, ordered and safe, but losing its cultural identity and diversity, becoming a controlled performance of sorts, where the inhabitants of the city become spectators and not active agents anymore.

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Following this logic, the Disneyfication of the city causes homogeneity in the sounds that can be heard. Designed soundscapes in touristic neighbourhoods and commercial centres produce a bland but pleasant background sound that flattens the complexity of the urban landscape.

Thinking again about Jesolo, I remember the stark contrast getting stronger as time went by of sound between when the ‘theme park’ is as opposed to closed. Specifically considering the neighbourhood where my grandparents live, and where I spent so much time in my childhood. I remember the loud shopping street next to their house, which in the night during the summer becomes a pedestrian area filled with loud conversations, music through street speakers and leaving from stores trying to invite more tourists inside. This compared to the winter, where all these businesses are closed, and the only sound to be heard is the strong wind coming from the Adriatic Sea, and the stillness of the city.

As mentioned earlier in the essay, prohibitions in these theme park cities also control the absence of sound, creating a uniform soundscape in the spaces, limiting variation and chance.

In the theme park city, sound becomes a designed experience. The value of an individual is perceived as proportional to their economic potential, and the commercial value of the land is placed above the needs of the inhabitants of the city. Movement is suggested by the design of these spaces taking into consideration visual and auditory clues. This can be noticed for example in the homogenous soundscape you hear when visiting a shopping center (like the Beurs area in Rotterdam), where selected music defines the area, encouraging visitors to stay, and consume more. In the Blaak metro station in Rotterdam, a faint jazzy melody starts playing on the platform, as another form of hostile 'architecture' to even further prevent people from sleeping in the sheltered area. The institutions assigning, planning and designing spaces in this way slowly curate more and more aspects of the 'living experience' of the cities inhabitants.



I ask myself how much practicing textured listening in a space like this can shape it as well. Listening in a space means being there. Engaging with it. Discovering more details about it and claiming it as your own. It means using the space in a way different than what it was curated for. You become familiar again with a context that maybe you had tried to distance yourself from, because it feels like it is not for you anymore. I think this can be a very powerful

act. Listening is political.

With my research and the installation emerging from it, I aim to develop a method that will encourage people who interact with it to take this small practice into their daily life. I would like to encourage the audience to listen by playing and learning how to pay more attention. I think this can be effective because it is intuitive. Maybe you do not think right away when playing, but perhaps it does prompt you to pay more attention to the sound of your surroundings, and in time, makes people notice how the sound of a space shapes it so much, and how it shows what is there, and what is missing.

I am issuing an invitation to you (reader) and others to listen in your own context. This is because the practice of textured listening exists in your neighbourhood or in the familiar. It is not about looking for the perfect sounds that are interesting and immediately jump to the ear, but instead paying attention to what falls in the background, and what is mundane.

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In my opinion, there is a very strong value in highlighting what is mundane. It creates a place for routines and everyday occurrences to take on a more substantial role. In turn, this can allow for space to be critical and understanding the specific dynamics of a context, notice change, who is welcome and who is not, as well as underline how the environment is being curated by individuals who do not understand it. The ability to be able to notice this can only be revealed by paying attention to the ordinary.

In the book “How to Disappear” written by Haytham El-Wardany, the author describes a series of experiences of being an unseen listener, moving into the background of an environment dominated by sight and observation.

1. “If you sit in your room for hours on end with nothing to do, place an empty cassette tape in the player and press the record button.
2. The player will record the sounds of your room on the cassette tape: [...]
3. Listen to the tape you have recorded.
4. You will be struck with boredom the first time you listen to these random sounds devoid of any meaning.
5. Overcome your sense of boredom and listen a second, third, and fourth time.
6. Starting with the fifth time you listen, you will begin discovering meaning in the sounds you hear. You will sense that their ordering is not haphazard, as you had thought, but rather that a clear logic governs them, as though a musical genius had composed them. The formerly random sounds are now organically inter-joined. As soon as you hear the window hinge moving, for example, it is only logical to immediately hear a car passing by on the street. [...]” [EL-Wardany, 2021, pp. 23, 24]

To me, this example highlights how repetitiveness and paying attention to the mundane can slowly reveal more.

This is why I do not want to guide the listener, telling them what to pay attention to and notice, or design some constraints for contexts with which I am not familiar. Of course this can be useful to start, but it does not necessarily provide the possibility of going deeper, a depth that can only come from personal

experimentation, slowness and repetitiveness. The strength that comes with listening to the city is so closely tied to the familiarity one has with the space in which the listening is performed.

I think it is important to listen everyday. It does not have to be a time consuming practice, taking up hours. More than this, I think it is significant as it is a powerful way of situating oneself in the city and in the context in which the listening occurs. Consider paying attention to sound deeply even just for one minute, but repeating this practice as frequently as possible. Could be every time you pass through a space, or once a day on your way home. Consider putting a bit of time aside to notice, spend time in a space and concentrate on what is there. Everyday listening does not reveal incredible sounds and produce shocking observations in the short term, but develops slowly, over a long period of time.

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I think in this way it becomes truly possible to appreciate the boring, mundane and everyday sounds. In this way, it is possible to understand them. This way they become more important and can stand on a stage, instead of behind it.

For example, I have included some transcribed textured listening moments in different contexts. They are all quite different, and all focus on hearing the unique qualities of the sounds, and understanding how they define the space they were caught in. I am in the mountains, walking in the snow, very high up. I can see the valley below me. And the mountains hugging around it create a sound funnel. I hear:

church bells at 12:00,

the distant buzz of traffic,

a helicopter flying over

my footsteps on the icy ground;

This makes me realise that even though in my memory this was a quiet place, removed from the city and civilisation, it was not true at all. Sound still pervaded and reminded me of the city. What I hear belongs to spaces that are so separated (urban and wild) but are actually clearly connected through sound. Listening in a space that appears quiet at first glance reveals the hidden warps and wefts of texture, like white noise for example.

I am on an island, next to a river, under a big bridge. I am enveloped by concrete, water, soil and mud, and I hear:

22

constant buzz of traffic, really
loud,

waves crushing on the river bank,

birds chirping,

metallic objects meeting each
other with constant rhythm,

water droplets hitting the ground
softly;

I notice how loud and overwhelming the sound of cars and traffic is from far away, I walk closer and closer to it, until I am under the bridge, and it is almost the only thing I can hear. This is a space for people, but the cars take over. Then I try to put the loudest sound in the background, and I hear more threads, finding a shy droplet, not so far away, falling from the bridge into a little puddle. Trying to identify these different threads reveals multiple identities of this space, showing how the separate non-human components

of it interact.

I am in a park in my neighbourhood, with a big playground, trees and sculptures and I hear:

children speaking to each other,

sounds of metal from the
playground,

swings creaking,

cars passing by, quite close to
me;

I follow with my eyes each sound I heard, trying to make them clearer and more defined by looking at them. I move in the space trying to notice the small changes, trying to find something new by chasing the sounds. Feeling the texture in my ears of the swings swinging makes me listen with my whole body, perceiving the high vibrations.

23

I am waiting for a train to go home, it is night, the train is late, the station is not busy at all, and I hear:

construction noises (why at this
time?),

trains leaving and coming,

breaks,

the wind;

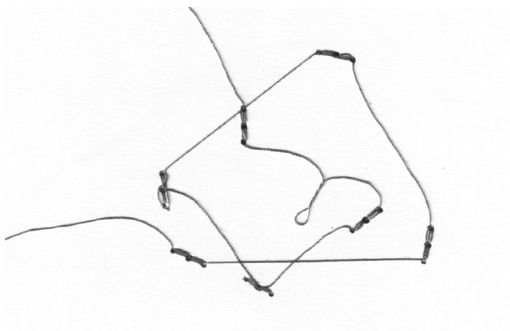
No people are around. I wonder how the sound of the station would change if I was not the only one there. I know how a full station sounds, so I think of that. I notice how much the sound in this space depends on the non-human components that make it up. How

much movement is integral to the identity of the sounds I hear.

All these observations are deeply personal and subjective. If you (reader) would have been in the same situation, you probably would have noticed something I did not. Focused on another sound. Had other thoughts or memories connected to it. Perceived the same space in a completely different way.

In the essay 'Hello, and Welcome to Pain' by the sonic performance collective Pain, the artists write about how both space and ears are filters for sound, how it traveling through these layers filters what is being heard. This becomes even more strong and apparent when thinking about recording sounds.

The recorder becomes a listener too. I find it very interesting to listen back on recordings, comparing them to the memory of what I heard, of notes I took. I like to hear what sounds are picked up more, and which less. For example, the wind is usually a constant main character, sometimes taking over the whole scene. It is almost like listening with someone else in the same space, both capturing different elements of the soundscape.



At the beginning of the development of this project, I was a bit annoyed by this, but now see its value

and lean into this quality using it as an aspect that is highlighted instead of trying to hide it. I was frustrated at the fact that my recordings never sounded like what I was listening to, changing the experience of what I heard in the first place when listening back. I tried to cover the microphone, use my phone, or a proper recorder, and yet, I was never able to capture exactly what I heard. At one point I came to the conclusion that it is actually quite poetic, not being able to hear back exactly what I wanted to record, and quite indicative of the nature of city noise itself too. This is a valuable quality to explore.

This also reminded me that what I hear is so different depending even on the slight height position I usually hold the recorder, compared to where my ears are. I did some experiments recording at the same time with my phone and recorder, pointing in the same direction, one on the ground and one at eye level. The results were so different. The sounds are similar yes, but the texture surrounding them changes completely. What they hear, bounces off of different surfaces earlier (or later), impacting the final result. This makes how movement and position of the listener in a space affects what is captured so apparent. I begin to consider this non-human listener as a part of the environment I am doing this in. I notice I have to surrender to the 'wants' of the recorder, capturing what it wants to pay attention to, letting go of controlling what sounds are being caught. Of course, I am still holding it where I want, choosing the space to listen and record in, and pressing the start and stop buttons, but the recordings present almost a different perspective on the sound of this specific space.

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My body in the space acts as a filter for the recorder, and my ears act as a filter for what I perceive in both cases. When I focus on what I want to hear in a space, both while there and retroactively, different aspects

of the sounds textures can become apparent. For example, the layer of vibration you would feel from a motorcycle driving close to you is deleted. Instead, the sounds I make by just existing become much clearer in the recordings.

Choosing what to hear, paying attention and situating yourself in a space contrasts the curated soundscapes of the Disneyfied city. The listener and their body are components of the sound of the city and become the curator of what is being heard. The listener is active, present, and does not stop at the surface of these soundscape. They perceive the texture of the city through sound. They are stimulated to discover more and re-imagine the city they wish for through this exploration. The listener focuses on structure and materiality of the sound, not stopping to only what they can hear, but what they deduce, critique and feel.

caught sounds

27

Textured listening goes deeper than the simple distinction made earlier in the essay between noise and sound, but considers the materiality and unique quality of each sound that is heard. It is about collaborating with the non-human components of an environment. Let's think again about the city as an instrument. It is connected to the idea of letting go, moving slowly and imprecisely, just paying attention to what is already there, trying to remember more than just the general melody. This method is, in my opinion, by its very nature something that is collaborative. This is because even if an individual is listening by themselves, all of the elements composing the city noise are working together to create it. If the listener is active, they are a part of the city noise, as what they hear and what they choose to focus on shapes the sound in the space.

In 'Walking from Scores' Elena Biserna writes "Walking is also a tool for re-establishing an embodied relationship with the world, a way of inscribing one's presence in space, triggering new

experiences and perceptions of reality” [Biserna, 2022, p.27] and in my opinion this is true to listening as a method of reading the city as well. She explores how walking can be an act of reclaiming space, and how it influences the relationship of an individual with both their surroundings, but more specifically the city. She also reflects on how public space can shape experiences, in a historical, cultural and political way. Of course cities are made up of infrastructures but they are made such by the people living inside them, and spending time in these places can slowly reveal the hidden layers and threads that make up their context.

With all this in mind, I think of listening as a tool to discover more about the urban condition. Listening in the city is crucial in understanding that. Even though sight is the dominant sense when exploring any environment for most people, I believe that textured and deep listening can reveal so many hidden aspects that are not immediately apparent, like the dynamics of a space, or invoke a particular memory.

The rhythm of the city can be perceived in this way. Think for example of peak hours, when the city becomes fast with people transitioning, hurrying to get somewhere else, driven by productivity. Standing still for a moment in these situations and truly listening to the rhythm can say so much about the dynamics of particular places. I think of Marconiplein in Rotterdam, a transport hub more than a square. With many offices and people living nearby, a tram, bus and metro station, in these hours it fills with people transiting, the screaming ‘tin tin tin tin tin’ of a tram crossing a walking path, and overall traffic. The rhythm of this space is clearly frenetic. Whoever transits is in a rush.

During these textured listening sessions, I have been able to make observations slowly revealing the

threads that make up the sound space of the area I am listening in.

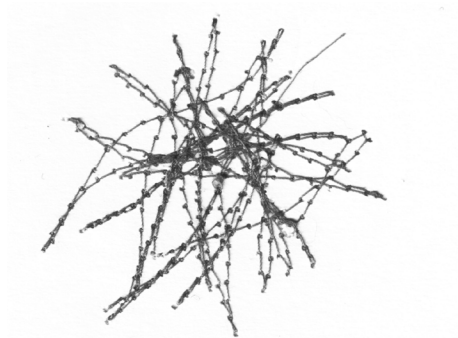
The **material** thread, considering how the sounds interacts with the environment it is in. Think for example of clapping your hands in different positions inside of a square. Based on the structure of the space, it will be received differently.

The **vibration** thread, feeling sound on the skin of the listener. By this I mean perceiving sound with the whole body, and not just the ears. Think of a loud motorcycle driving past you, or a coin falling on concrete. 29

The **subjective** thread, connected to the memories and personal experiences of the individual listening, as well as what they are actually able to perceive and focus on, the choice of what to listen to is crucial here.

The **invisible** thread, made up of sounds we are not able to hear or perceive without the aid of something else.

The **political** thread, based on observations made relating to prohibitions and controls imposed on the listening space, taking into consideration how the sound would change if these were different.



Something else that becomes apparent while considering all these layered threads is the acoustic identity of a neighbourhood. They can be very distinct, and it is important to consider that each space is very different, depending on its designated purpose, actual use and historical context.

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In 'Walking From Scores' Biserna also collects a series of walks written by artists, designers and composers. I have been performing almost all of them, trying to notice a common thread between all these different perspectives. I feel connected to my surroundings. I wonder how they would be different if performed where these artists imagined them at first. By listening in a textured way, I am gathering the sounds that will be played from the installation I am developing as a result of this research. I would like for this to be a game that visually and acoustically highlights the threads of space and sound, mixing printed and hand woven matter, overlapping each other, playing with the concept of textured listening. This will be done by considering movement, touch and interaction with the environment in which the piece is exhibited, while listening to the recordings.

Some of the patches will contain printed observations made while listening, some will be interactive patches playing caught sounds, and some will contain reflections on listening back to what was heard.

The caught sounds consist of recordings made over a multi month period, where I am practicing textured listening every day while in a square close to my house I will not name. It is a transitional square, where people do not really stop in, and just pass through. Including me. I pass by it every day, and I have chosen to stop there every time I traverse the space, for little or long, and listen. By doing this, I embrace the concept of slowing down, taking time, and occupying space while listening to it. This is a very powerful action in my opinion.

I chose this square specifically because it is important to my context and my everyday. I did not want to find a perfect space, or look for special acoustic qualities because this defeats the purpose of what I am trying to do, which is exactly paying attention to what is mundane.

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I made this decision because it is impossible for me to try to represent or re create the sound of a city. It is complicated and maybe even a bit inconsiderate for me to try and do this. What I can do is simply listen, following the method of paying attention. Like I mentioned earlier, recording the sounds, already changes their identity so much, and this is why I plan to do as little 'curatorial' work as possible with what I record, and will let a python script select small increments at random. What I record is not the same as what I hear. It will never be, but there can be value in this as well.

The audio recordings will be played when triggered by touch, in a random manner, as the script will select a different snippet from the day each time. The sound will not be edited or altered in any other way. To highlight how the recorder changes what I heard, I will print lists of sounds, and observations I made while doing these listening sessions, that will, if people

who play pay a lot of attention, reveal another layer of hidden sound.

While being in this square and listening, I have already noticed a lot. Of course when you are actually there, listening is not the only thing you do. I look at where the sounds come from. I try to really hear them. I try to feel the vibrations that come from them if they are loud. I try to understand more about what they mean, and what they tell me about this space. People look at me, because I am in the middle of the square for a long time, holding a recorder and taking notes. This makes me feel a bit uncomfortable sometimes. I try to focus on what the voices sound like instead of what they are saying:

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start recording

voice on a radio, talking not singing

laughter

voices in conversation

voices in conversation

new voices

footsteps

a metal sound

many new voices

I am moving in the square while recoding this

some sort of machine, sounds like

it is made of plastic

voices

a heavy object being put down

new voices

bird song

a cry

new voices

someone whistling a tune

new voices

33

movement

a car door being closed

cough

new voices

cough again

[...]

stop recording

The tone, rhythm, and pitch of these voices cannot be transcribed. It can only be listened to. This is a thread staying hidden when considering the transcription you (reader) have available.

I have noticed how as a result of being a recurring character in the square, I start to blend in. My sounds become more and more part of the square as I connect more deeply with it.

start recording

[...]

movement

a sigh

birds cooing

a voice

another voice

car passing by

birds

crumple

car again

pic pic pic

two birdsongs overlapping

another car passing by

sniffle [i have a cold]

car passing by

stop recording

Even if they are small, my still or moving body being in the space contributes to the threads and layers making up the city soundscape.

It is spring as I am writing this, and I see so many birds flying in spirals and circles around the square.

They are there every day, and always fly in the same pattern, producing a noise I do not know how to describe. There are always groups of men sitting on a low wall at the edge of the square. Sometimes, I hear kids with their caretakers playing and chasing after each other. They scare the birds when running towards them, making them fly away. I stand there and listen to what happens around. I take notes. I write lists of what I hear. I record. I walk around the perimeter of the square.

conclusion

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The method of textured listening has revealed the potential of listening to the city soundscape to me. By learning how to identify and separate the qualities and aspects of sound in public space, I have become more familiar with my context and I feel deeply connected to my city. It is a personal and subjective connection that can be developed through repetitive, attentive and slow practice.

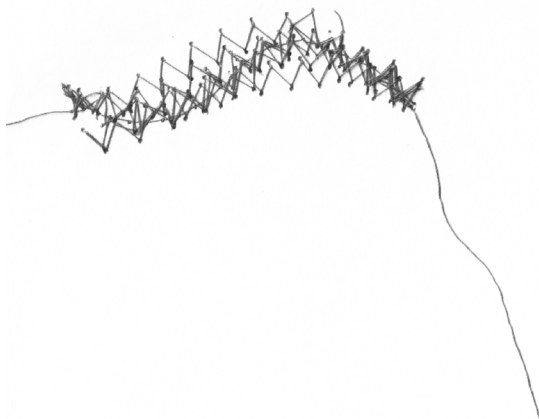
When I began writing this text, I wanted to listen to the city to highlight the hidden and playful aspects of it found in sound. Now I realise I have been able to discover much more through it. I have developed a method to listen, been able to make careful observations based on it and discovered new aspects of my nearby. I am conscious of the fact that listening is collaborative by its very nature, taking into consideration all the components of the environment I listen in, including myself and my recorder.

By the time I am writing this, it is not hard to focus on sounds anymore. I have realised that every listener

is the composer of the city soundscape, how I am a part of the soundscape as every element of the city is. I will bring this practice with me, and keep listening slowly, when I sit on a bench, stop to tie my shoe laces, or stumble upon a new street.

To end this text, I would like to once again issue an invitation to you (the reader) to listen, even just for a minute and to maybe begin a listening practice for yourself. Explore your neighbourhood by paying attention to the sounds in it. Be conscious of how regulations in a space shape its sound and identity. Notice how sounds bounce off the structures of your area. Pay attention to the quiet and loud places, especially when they are boring. Record and listen back. Recognise how powerful sound can be. Find the texture in sound. Stand still for a moment and open your ears. Play with what you hear. Take off your headphones once in a while, stop and focus on your surroundings. 37

Listen!



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colophon

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XPUB is a two year Master of Arts in Fine Art and Design that focuses on the intents, means and consequences of making things public and creating publics in the age of post-digital networks. <https://xpub.nl>.

This publication is based on the graduation thesis Textured Listening, written under the supervision of Steve Rushton.

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acknowledgements

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Anita Burato

