

Daniel Marzona

Sound as Architecture – a Conversation

DANIEL MARZONA: Before we start talking about your most recent project for Poznan it might be interesting to trace what led up to this work. Could you tell us a bit about your earlier work and how your interest in sound-based installations evolved?

JOANNA PRZYBYLA: Sometimes, it takes us the longest time to arrive at what is nearest. Since my childhood music has been my natural environment. I have been integrating its vocabulary into my spatial imagination through different educational activities, at the same time building models of airplanes at the local modeling studio.

I have always been attracted to an expression that is not limited to the process of creation: installation, my indoor and outdoor sculptures, had rather a presence of monumental drawings expanding in the context of architecture or landscape. Later, I used photographic works to register the continuous change of sunlight projected through single lines that I had created as objects.

The sound of a single note played by an instrumentalist is related to the same grammar of forming a drawing in space. The single touch of a string is like a single drawn line in the context of a composition.

DM: It is very interesting that you immediately connect your sound installations to the practice of drawing – even drawing in space. I can understand what you mean but I also think that there is a fundamental difference. A single touch of a string can be understood like a single line but the definition of that line, its location and extension – if you wish – is by far less clear. My understanding of a single tone played within a given space in the context of your installations is more like a signification of an imaginary line which guides us through the space – it is there and not there and it is precisely this necessary vagueness which makes it interesting. Or do I overemphasize the difference between the visible and the audible here?

JP: Yes, absolutely. Thank you for emphasizing this difference. I find connections between disciplines fascinating. While trying to transmute them into one another, the more distance between them, the more innovative ideas can be achieved. A distance between material and non-material is indeed substantial and therefore can be inspiring. This is challenging to talk about, because of not only the visual and the audible language, but the spoken language becomes a substantial means of expression. The vagueness, which you are mentioning as interesting, is somehow irresistible because it cannot be explained. At the same time it provides a necessary space – a kind of reserved interval for the presence of the spectator. I like the way you talked about the “signification of an imaginary line which guides us in space – it is there and not there”... it gives privileges to the individual perception of a spectator which has been an important aspect of my concept.

DM: So each spectator has in some respects more freedom when confronted with a sound installation compared to more classical genres such as sculpture or drawing.

I agree with this notion but could we try to explain why?

Maybe it would be helpful if you could describe your project in Poznan in detail first. Of course there is also a history of artists working with sound and if we have a better idea about your recent project we can also discuss the work in the context of this history.

JP: It's a different kind of seduction. I wouldn't like to believe in it, however scientists recall, that we are more fluent with the perception of sound and our mind is more likely to be ready to "dance" in comparison to a visual perception. Let's start with the single imaginary line. The composing process started with recording various interpretations of single tones played with viola, violin, soprano, mezzo – soprano, cello, bells, entire orchestras. The interpretation of a single note was crucial and predominant at this stage of a long process; it was intended to become a separate entity. Like a single line taken out of a drawing context to be shown on its own, as a clear autonomous gesture. Then, gradually, I've connected these interpretations into a multichannel composition. I perceive the architectural space as series of membranes through which the sound is interweaving. From 16 speakers placed strategically in the space, the sound is traveling in the architectonic context, describing its characteristics: scale, dynamic, structure, matter, distances. Architecture can be experienced as a walk-in instrument. The museum's grand exhibition hall has multiple floors with different heights, a glass roof, a stone floor. These features are reinforced in the way that my composition is attached to the space. Appearing and disappearing in volumetric amplitudes; long reverbs leave more time to listen to reflections, which usually remain unnoticed. Listening needs time, for each individual interpretation, for each spectator to become a participant of the sound, for recognizing self-resonance, and for connecting much more broadly to the space. Diminuendos aiming into extended silences are integrating with the environmental sound, which involves the presence of the spectator.

DM: The scientific findings that you refer to do not come as a surprise and your description of the close link between the given of the architectural space and the single sound components of your work is fascinating. In its intention to physically involve the viewer your work reminds me of certain strategies invented by Minimal Art and of course there are some similarities to people like Max Neuhaus who also closely linked his sound pieces to specific architectural situations in which they were exhibited. Your installations leave more freedom to the spectator but nevertheless you are intending to evoke a higher awareness of the space and a different kind of consciousness of being in a certain space. To my knowledge there has not been a sound installation of such overwhelming complexity as your project for Poznan (we did not even talk about the light component yet which is part of the work). You are making an enormous effort to make this happen with the knowledge that the work could only be exhibited again in this very space it was conceived for – maybe in 25 years or maybe never again. Is it a problem that a work like this is so site-specific that it cannot be repeated anywhere else? Did you ever experiment with sound works that are applicable to different kind of spaces?

JP: A given sound resonates differently in different spaces. My sound installation has a new concept in each architectonic context. The score might be different but the wide spectrum of continuously recorded interpretations of single notes can be applicable to different kinds of spaces. I had applied such elements from various recordings with vocalists Nathalie Claude, and Lisa Tjalve, cellist Zoe Cartier, and violinist Bene-

dikt Bindewald. Many classical music instrumentalists feel more creative choosing to express themselves and their connection to the instrument in experimental projects, rather than being a member of an orchestra having a, what they call, “recreating instrumental function”.

Experiencing the differentiation is also related to the perception of the spectator. The meaning of the word “unrepeatable” is being individualized here. This kind of uniqueness I would like to acknowledge, although it has a predisposition to be obvious. In contemporary civilization a repetition is predominant, often attached to strategies of consumerism. If we allow it, we can be guided by algorithms, dispersing our own creative instincts. Or we can choose to be in the mode leading to focus our attention, reorienting or regaining our own level of activity for diverging the richness of experience.

As far as Max Neuhaus is concerned, I’ve heard from somebody describing great impressions that his piece at DIA Beacon has had on them. I had no opportunity to experience his installations, however, I feel close to his theory regarding for example the unimportance of time, that is unnecessarily trying to dominate sounds. As far as I know, he preferred locating a composition in space and letting the listener place it in his own time. I have also heard about the intriguing piece which he had composed for a swimming pool; one was encouraged to put on a bathing suit in order to enjoy the installation.

DM: I believe it is telling that you refer to the instrumentalists and vocalists you have worked with on recording the single notes. This points immediately to the performative aspects of the work. The way you describe your project also sounds like you are describing a performance rather than a fixed situation. I think the work could be understood as something in between a performance and an installation. Although it is bound to and made for a very specific architectural setting, its components – the individually performed single notes – could be used again and applied to new contexts. In any case you are aiming for a unique and unrepeatable experience of the spectator. Would you agree with the understanding of this aim as a political one? Meaning that your work seeks to offer an experience to the viewer which cannot be consumed, cannot be repeated and is by nature individual and cannot be shared through any other media with others. Some 30 years ago all this was self-evident for most of the artists and most of the people involved with art. But from my perspective the insistence on a one to one experience of a work today implies a critique of the current circulation of art which is a political critique in the end.

JP: For some this could be a very fixed situation – for example speakers integrated (hidden) within walls with a sound installation showing the architectural characteristics of a given space or promoting the entire building. For some it could be a work of art installed in a single room. Instead of pointing to restrictions, my intention goes more towards the potential of centering the spectator’s perception which is always unrepeatable and unique. Even if we change the space of a particular sound composition, it will be a different sound in the new spatial context. The precise description of the process is bringing nuances to our attention. Simply spoken, an instrumentalist’s sensitivity is on one end while the spectator’s is on the other. I am trying to draw the imaginary line in between them, first precisely guiding each note that is played and recorded, then attaching it to a given space.

I think we agree that political or commercial strategies aim to impose opinions on people in such a way that

they have the illusion to perceive them as their own, and in effect give up the power of individual choice and therefore the power of their own imagination. That said, yes, I think my work can come close to a political manifesto.

DM: A manifesto for what I would call a first hand and non-hierarchical experience – and a manifesto for the freedom of interpretation of this experience as no guidelines have been given.

One important aspect of the entire installation is the specific inclusion of light which also relates to the architecture. Can you tell us how and why you are including light in your sound installation?

JP: Light is a very obvious component related to observation. However, people often take it for granted. I am talking about daylight. Let us imagine an object that is glimmering in complete darkness when it catches a very small quantum of light, and then let us try to see the same object next day, lit with a huge amount of light in a fully bright space. It's like leaving a dark room when the sun is on its peak and our eyes need to adjust. Some of my photographs relate to this phenomenon, I am thinking here of the series of images that can be described as underexposed or overexposed.

We often miss nuances of the constantly changing natural light... Many architects are talking about light as a construction element. It brings the presence to the form. Luis Kahn would say, that space is the place of the mind and this presence belongs to the "in-common-ness" of humanity's desire to understand itself. In that sense human beings constantly seek to create, seek progress and development (often thinking that they themselves are a completed concept). The progress component is carried and stimulated with light. Le Corbusier considered architecture a magnificent play with masses of matter unveiled in light. He introduced his perception of light in simple words: "The key is light and light generates shapes and shapes have an emotional power."

(from the catalogue published by National Museum in Poznan, on the occasion of the solo exhibition Joanna Przybyla – Sound as Architecture, 2015)