Site and Time Specificity In the Performance of Live Electronics

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[1] Cambridge English Dictionaries <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/site>.

■ **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the adaptation of site and time specific processes in the performance of live electronics. A worked example of a site and time specific concert in a public bus is provided, allowing for evaluation of performative methods and techniques.

■ **KEYWORDS**

Site specific, time specific, performance, sound art, live electronics, concert venues.

■ **RESUMO**

Este artigo examina a adaptação de processos *site specific* e *time specific* na performance com eletrônicos em tempo real. É fornecido um exemplo trabalhado de um concerto *site specific* e *time specific* num ônibus público, o qual permite a avaliação de métodos e técnicas performáticas.

■ **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Site specific, *time specific*, performance, arte sonora, eletrônicos em tempo real, espaços de concerto.

"site": a place where something is, was, or will be built, or where something happened, is happening, or will happen[1]

1. Introduction

Site-specific art came to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s with artists, such as Dennis Oppenheim, Richard Sera, Robert Irwin and Athena Tacha. As with all modernistic approaches in the art of the 20th century, it departed with a nonnegotiable radical proposal: the rejection of the formalities of the past. Until then, a work of art could only exist in an exhibitional space as an object of commodification. It could be moved form wall to wall between galleries without altering its proportions, significance and meaning. Site-specificity proposed a different approach. It takes the location into account by combining all, or part, of its physical characteristics: size, length, depth, height, shape, temperature, humidity, etc. Thus, it introduces a work of art that can only exist within the specific location for which it was created. Consequently, art and location became inseparable and interconnected in the formation of the work's identity.

Sound Art artists expanded this approach by adding the sonic elements of a chosen location: its acoustic characteristics, natural reverberation and sounding bodies. Kersten Glandien (2016, p.268-269) emphasizes this point:

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[1] Cambridge English Dictionaries <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/site>.

Space was the place in which art and music met, and in which Sound Art was first conceived. It became both medium and environment for the new art form. Artists began to work with the physical properties of spaces in their specific relation to sound – as well as with the psychological connotation that those spaces invoke. Finding interesting and unusual spaces, such as vacant industrial buildings, warehouses, underground car parks, fields, derelict swimming pools, disused gasometers, prisons or churches, became a vital part of artistic practice, since artists conceived works for such spaces in situ, investing them with a site-specific or site-dependent character. Beside indoor spaces, Sound Art artists became equally intrigued by the infinite variety of natural or cultivated outdoor spaces: environments invested with their own distinctive sonic character, or exhibiting a significant natural or cultural identity, offering intriguing sound material with which to work, as well as the compelling possibility of acoustic intervention. Such spaces not only informed the acoustic detail, aesthetics and cultural character of a work, but also often became the work itself.

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A site, or a place, is a microclimatic system with self-regulating rules, which connect all its inclusive elements through specific meaningful and meaningless practices. For example, a square in a city that has been constructed via a macrostructural urban planning can be transformed by hosting a seafood market. A specialised practice, such as the trade of seafood, recontextualises the site by adding new and unique meaningful and meaningless signifiers. Traders and consumers, seafood specialists and connoisseurs are attracted by the common practice. Sounds, images and scents related to that practice, as well as signs and symbols unique in their interpretation and meaning emerge, transform and redefine the place. Thus, the place becomes space. In that sense, space unifies the place into a dynamic network of behaviors, memories and semantics. As de Certeau (1984, p.117) outlines:

A place is the order (of whatever kind) in accordance with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location. The law of the 'proper' rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own 'proper' and distinct location, a location it defines.

De Certeau (1984, p.117) continues: [space] occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalise it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programmes.

Moreover, Nick Kaye (2000, p.1) outlines the relationships and interconnections between a work of art and the place in which is located:

> …the meanings of utterances, actions and events are affected by their 'local' position, by the *situation* of which they are part…a work of art, too, will be defined in relation to its place and position. Reflecting this notion, semiotic theory proposes, straightforwardly, that reading implies 'location'. To 'read' the sign is to *have located* the signifier, to have recognised its place, within the semiotic system. One can go on from this to argue that the location, in reading, of an image, object, or event, its positioning in relation to political, aesthetic, geographical, institutional, or other discourses, all inform what 'it' can be said to *be*.

In a site-specific approach, the structural and morphological characteristics of a work, its properties and meanings are constructed in relation with the place it occupies. The work is associated with the place, it utters its uniqueness and unfolds its environmental, spatial and sonic particularities. This bond between the work of art and the place it occupies is unequivocally emphasised by the sculptor Richard Serra's aphorism: "To move the work is to destroy the work" (SERRA, 1994, p.194). In other words, to move the work is to abandon the umbilical cord, which carries the essential elements of the work's substance, its very hypostasis. In that sense, site-time specificity is understood as a "condition of perception" (CRIMP, 1993, p.16-17) an irreplaceable consonance that feeds the co-existence of characteristics, elements and interactions, without which the work of art will never be perceived in its entirety.

2. Site And Time Specificity In Live Electronics

As already mentioned, site and time specificity has been emerged from, and is mostly related to the visual arts, incorporating dance and theatre performance. Although individual examples can be found, site and time specificity has not been fully and systematically developed into the practice of live electronics. A site and time specific performance with live electronics and/or live acousmatics adopts and uses the unique sonic characteristics of a chosen location and the time structure of the activities that take place in that location. Specificity is related to particular and identifiable conditions of a site, as opposed to its abstract characteristics.

The preparation of a concert that uses site and time specific techniques is a process of investigating the chosen location both:

a)   Formally (analysis of its soundscapes, materials, structures and forms, changes in content   over time, etc.).

b) Contextually (how it is used, for what reasons and by which parts of the society, etc.).

During the preparation of a site and time specific performance, the sound artist should observe the impact to the sonic environment of the chosen location caused by:

a)   The specific conditions in the location (how many people, if any, occupy the site and under which conditions, which are the sound bodies that compose its soundscapes, which are their triggering causes etc.).

b)   The time structure in the location (whenever a time-based activity is

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related with the site) and its impact to the overall sonic evolution.

An aesthetic criticism for site and time specific performances would undoubtedly be extended to include architectural and environmental aspects, as well as patterns of social behavior and cultural reflections.

3. The Bus Setting: A Site and Time Responsive Instrument

The Live Electronics Ensemble (Ensemble) of the Music Department of the Ionian University in the island of Corfu, Greece, has adopted and developed a site and time specific approach for some of its performances. A worked example of a concert/performance in a bus is analysed below, along with all the stages of its preparation. The concert took place during a bus commuting that covers a distance of about 7 kilometers from the city of Corfu to a suburb. The bus was conceived as an additional instrument that would expand the Ensemble's textural and gestural palette, rather than a concert space. Since the performance was not announced as a public concert, the unaware passengers and the driver would participate involuntarily in the creation of a holistic sonic environment that comprises both real and imaginary soundscapes, and intentional and unintentional musical events. The bus would consequently become a site and time responsive instrument, a resource providing for constant performance material.

4. Preparations For The Performance

4.1. The sonic analyses of multiple recordings of the bus

Members of the Ensemble recorded the interior soundscapes of the bus during different daily itineraries. The recordings were then analysed and the sounding bodies of the bus, such as bells, noises of the engine, brake grindings and squeals, horns and other alert sounds were identified. Their spectral characteristics, dynamics and temporal evolution were analysed and categorised. The frequency of appearance and the occupancy of sonic events during the commuting were also taken into consideration.

4.2. The building of the time structure of the performance (time-specificity)

The time structure of the performance was identical to the duration of the commuting. Two parts of fifteen minutes each matched the return trip of the bus. Thus, the duration of the performance was expected to be thirty minutes, not including a 10 minutes stop/interval at the end of the route. According to this time structure, a series of graphic scores representing both the recorded sonic events of the commuting and performance details were created as shown in Image 1.

Image 1. Graphic score representing sonic events between certain bus stops.

4.3. Analysis of the social behavior of the passengers

The behavior of the passengers was, at the time of preparation, an unpredictable factor, which could adversely affect the continuous flow of the performance. We need to keep in mind that the bus is a commuter people use to travel to their residences or businesses. A feeling of intrusion into a scheduled daily activity, such as the commuting, could create undesired behaviors. Their reaction to the performance could extend from inconvenience and disturbance to intentional participation and from irritation and anger to playfulness and gaiety. In fact, both behavioral reactions were emerged during the performance. A number of passengers were furiously agitated whilst other participated in a joyful manner.

4.4. A risk assessment

A risk assessment is a process to identify potential destructions and analyse what would happen if such destructions occur. Potential impacts that could result from the interruption of time sensitive processes must be considered and, if possible, predicted during the preparation period.

5. The Ideal State

The ideal state during a site and time specific performance is based on the assumption that both the specific conditions of the chosen location and its time structure will remain stable and, more or less, similar to those that have been studied and analysed during the preparation stages. However, this is not always the case. Irregularities or deviations may appear during the concert testing the reflexes of the performers. Such irregularities may be a *Site Occupancy Distortion* or a *Time Disturbance*. For example, a larger than usual occupancy by travelers on the bus may alter its acoustics and block out the placement or motion of the performers. Moreover, an external cause, such as traffic congestion, a car accident or a blocked road that prevents the regularity of time may also lead to unexpected results.

During the commuting/performance the bus was blocked in by a parked car. After fifteen minutes of loud shouts and honks the driver decided to change a great part of the itinerary. As a result, one member of the Ensemble waiting at the next stop never got on the bus.

Whenever a major Site Occupancy Distortion or Time Disturbance occurs, preplanned actions that maintain control may be applied in order to recall the Ideal State.

6. Superposition of Micro-soundscapes and Non-identical Spaces[2]

A site and time specific performance in a public bus confronts the performers with an additional challenge. The irregular and unpredictable movement of the bus appends a new *variable*, which has to be taken into consideration by the performers. For example, a sudden braking or acceleration can cause the loss of balance of the performers and, consequently, the inability to control their instruments, laptops or electronic devices. The movement of the bus becomes itself a sound source and an external controller that influences the sonic outcome in a similar way to a bow that controls a violin. A significant difference however, is that the bow is intentionally driven by the performer.

This variable is an integral part of the site and time specificity and can lead to unexpected and deformed sonic results. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1991, p. 100) describes a similar situation where a seemingly external phenomenon distorts the perception of an object:

> When I look through the density of the water, at the paving in the depths of a swimming pool, I do not see it in spite of the water and its reflections. On the contrary, I see it through the reflections, because of them. If these deformities, these stripes of the sun were not there; if I was glancing at the paving's geometry without the interference of this flesh, then I would stop regarding it the way it really is; there, where it really is: beyond every identical space. (Author's translation).

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[2] For a detailed description of non-identical spaces, see Lotis (2003b).

Non-identical spaces appear as deformities of objects due to the interference of other objects or causes. If the morphology of a sound object is altered (due to the alterations of the movement of the bus), then the perception of its spatial dimensions and dynamics is also influenced. In Merleau-Ponty's description, non-identical spaces are the result of light interference on water, which causes the alteration of original shapes and contours. Stripes of the sun reflect on the water illuminating an "unrealistic" image of the "paving's geometry". The philosopher suggests that this "unrealistic" image is indeed the most genuine perception of "the depth of a swimming pool". Taking his argument a step further, he argues that it is the deformities caused by the interference of light and water that show the swimming pool's true colours. Without this interference, the real world would seem unrealistic and its spatial dimensions imprisoned within limited topological barriers.

This is a critical point to understand when preparing a site and time specific performance.

We perceive the real world through its constituent's deformities, through "curtains" of obstacles, such as the water between the eye of the observer and the depth of the swimming pool, which act as reshaping filters of contours and shapes. Substantial, or illusory creatures of our own imagination, these deformities reveal non-identical spaces, which influence the way we perceive everything observed.

In a moving bus situation, it is exactly these deformities that the Ensemble decided to exploit.

Similar approaches can be found in recent painting. In Mark Rothko's "Centre Triptych for the Rothko Chapel", the notion of non-identical spaces is dominant. All grades of black and red colour are mixed together in a pandemonium of shades and different degrees of density, creating non-identifiable illusory spaces. Does the colour black define a space? If so, where are its boundaries? Does red offer a juxtaposed space? There are no clear shapes defining a spatial continuum, except, possibly, the edges of the canvas. The eye can shift around the composition of colours receiving red hues beneath black clouds, or black shades beneath grades of red. The whole painting seems to be a spatial cluster, an amalgam of colour juxtaposition, as if the painter put layers of coloured transparencies one above the other: starting from the top, one can see the last transparency at the bottom and perceive its colours through the layers that come in between.

In another painting, "Ad Parnassum", Paul Klee creates a hugely impressive environment of non-identical spaces. Windows within windows, square units of construction, create *melodies of colourful space*. Clusters of colours are juxtaposed in such density that the observer perceives them through other superimposed layers. Patterns of colours act as translucent "curtains" which reveal other patterns hidden beneath them. According to the painter, a polyphony is thus created due to the simultaneity of several independent themes (JANUSZCZAK, 1996). The density of colour juxtaposition blurs the shapes of the patterns, deforms and eventually reveals them as non-identical spaces, which, however, are parts of a more global space. The mountain of Parnassus is represented through juxtaposed and

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superimposed patterns of non-identical spaces. The two definite lines on the canvas, the contours of the mountain and a gate leading to it, although offering a more pragmatic view, emphasise this observation by contrasting definite and identical with blurred and non-identical spaces.

Giving a precise definition to what non-identical space is can be a difficult task because it cannot be compared with other types of spaces and, therefore, categorised. However, an attempt to illustrate it is shown in Figure 1:
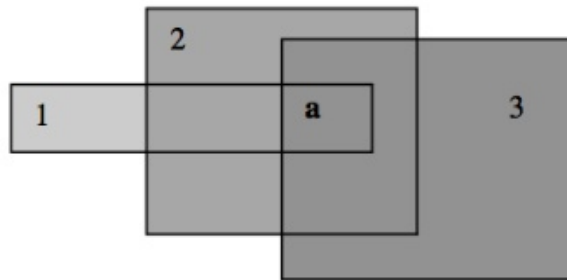

Figure 1. Non-identical space.

Three different spaces, 1, 2 and 3, are partly superimposed creating areas, such as space *a*. Is space *a* part of space 1, 2 or 3? Or is it a space on its own? With which of the three spaces does it identify, and with which spaces does it share boundaries? Which, if any, of the three grades of grey is more dominant in space *a*? Which of the three spaces is above the other and which beneath? Many more questions of sophistry can be raised without apparent answer. Space *a* can be described as non-identical because it is questionable whether its boundaries and colour content are autonomous or the result of superposition of the three spaces 1, 2, and 3. Therefore, it can be perceived both as an individual entity and a component of a larger-scale composition.

Let us return to the bus setting. Acceleration and deceleration during turning manoeuvres, bus stops, unexpected brakings and countless variations of the vehicle's movement create a microseismic environment in which various types of *undulatory motion patterns* propel the performance. The motion of the bus sculpts the sonic outcome, creating non-identical spaces, which exist between the intention of the performers and the unpredictable movement on the road. Trapped in the wake, the performers have to submit part of their control to the mesmerizing motion of the bus.

The co-existence of individual spatial layers, or micro-soundscapes in the bus, consisting of sound sequences with different spectral characteristics, create "transparent sonic curtains" through which the listener/passenger can perceive non-identical or deformed spatial environments with blurred contours and contents. The co-existence of such different spaces results in a large perspective occupied by individual spatial bodies. The overall spatiomorphology is thus constructed with the me-

ans of perspective (occupation of the foreground, middle-ground and background of the bus) within which, spatial "melodies" consisting of sonic planes and trajectories create illusory sonic motion.

Although deceptively unrealistic, non-identical spaces provide a view that combines cause, interaction, and a flair of imagination, and they are, therefore, genuine aspects of reality. If Merleau-Ponty's statement concerning the interference of light and water reflects anything, it is that **non-identical spaces define what is perceived as reality**. Still, they abrogate the Euclidean notion of space continuum by offering a spatial view with no clear or blurred boundaries, totally dependent on the influence of external causes, such as the interference of the sun, the motion of water, the colour of an object or the spectral appearance of a sound.

In the bus environment, non-identical spaces express the allure of its motion.

7. Codetta.

The conception of a site and time specific event requires innovative strategies and methodologies both during the design and the staging of the performance. The discovery of new concert spaces, the conscious and/or unconscious participation of the visitors, the new ideas for sound organisation emerging from the locations are all added musical values that spring out of the site and time specific processes.

Site and time specificity allows us to expand in reasons and applications regarding performance concerts, to extensively explore the scope of performance for public, to embrace diverse practices and new methodologies for performance, to intervene in the daily public realm and to produce performances to be performed at unique, non-typical and specially adapted locations. Furthermore, site and time specificity provides new contextual content during the concert and allows us not only to produce unique performances but also to develop unique musical styles.

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