

Reality Sound – an Interdisciplinary Medium
by *Cilia Erens*

When I was introduced to binaural recording in 1981, I was handed a tool to create a new form for what has fascinated me from childhood: the sound of everyday life.

This recording technique enabled me to approach the transparency of the environmental sound and translate and present it three-dimensionally in a new context. Not as an edited piece, combined with visuals or interspersed with language/text, but with the emphasis on the autonomous power of ambient sound to tell its own story and appeal to the imagination.

This is what prompted me to develop ‘listening *experiences*’, built around my binaural recordings of everyday sound.

A typical Erens experience will have the listener traverse soundspaces linked together by hardcuts or crossfades. These soundspaces have been left (largely) untouched.

The 3D effect of binaural recording can only be perceived with headphones or earbuds. It’s a limitation that is also a strength. The place of the sound source, inside the ear, almost on top of the eardrum, cutting out (nearly) all of the surrounding acoustic space makes for an intimate and manipulative experience which separates eye and ear much more effectively than can be achieved by using speakers. This makes the technique a valuable one to me, in spite of its other drawbacks: the spatial perception of distance is much smaller than it is in reality. The extent to which the sound becomes three-dimensional is dependent on the use of two omnidirectional mics in ear, above the ear or with a dummy head. Having said that, I have noticed that even the illusion of three-dimensionality has been enough to fire the imagination of the listeners.

With these tools – the recording technique and the earphones or earbuds – I was finally able to shape the physical experience of listening.

For my first ‘sound walk’ (China Daily 1987) I linked the recorded sound coming through the headphone to the locations the sound walkers passed as they walked along the route. I was looking for combinations of the visible environment and the invisible three-dimensional sounds I had recorded. It was ‘matching realities’ I was after and I achieved them by using the sounds of the locations or alternate them with contradictory sound. As a result of the sound filling up the auditory canal, the ears could almost be said to determine what the eyes were seeing.

I went on to develop other presentation forms, like sound panoramas and presentations using blindfolds to create different effects. Decontextualised and abstract, the recorded environmental sound only took on its meaning in the new context.

Binaural recording has made me more attuned to ways of interpreting reality through sound. How do I make my way across this sea of sounds with two mics in or above my ears or with a dummy head? What do I emphasise? By choosing a route, turning my head from left to right during an allocated amount of time and standing still I am attaching meaning to the sounds. The listener will have his own associations, different again from the next listener’s, determined as they are by age and background. This is the reason why I try to make my presence inaudible when I’m in the process of recording. The future listener has to feel he is at the centre of the experience and subconsciously choose his own sound details.

I also refrain from using text. Text invites meaning in a different way from sound. Language has a different emotional significance.

I was getting more and more interested in what it is that distinguishes everyday sound from most musical genres: the unpredictability of life itself, the natural rhythms, a phenomenon that I came to call 'random rhythms'. It was the unpredictability of the car tyres as they tick-ticked over tram rails or fly overs, the random rhythm of a spitting fire or a gust of wind. I wanted to respect the randomness. I started to concentrate on sequences, a following-up of sounds, which, for whatever subjective reason, I felt were interesting as a sequence.

My intention to limit myself to the use of pure reality sound led to something more profound in my experience of it. By listening three-dimensionally, or listening to a location as an 'audible space' with point sources, sound lines and layers, I began to analyse everyday sounds. *Why* did they sound like they did in a particular space or situation?

It was then I discovered sound themes, which I started to identify and elaborate upon. My training as city planner made me investigate the audible dimension of the built environment. This resulted in a number of site specific sound walks in new urban developments.

I was also becoming fascinated with the theme of 'collective silence', in which the presence of people is audible but no speech is heard. This theme brought me to convents, gambling halls, hunting parties, remembrance ceremonies, the Tokyo subway during the morning rush hour, always with the absence of speech forming the common denominator in soundscapes that could not be more different.

Reality sound as an interdisciplinary medium

I started to realise that ambient sound is an interdisciplinary medium. *The more untouched the sound, the more it chimes with other disciplines.* 'Collective Silence' found a place in the theatre where the listeners became part of a collective silence as they sat on the stage wearing wireless headphones engaged in a sonically choreographed ritual of toasting each other and eating soup at a dinner table in complete silence ('Silencer, on the sound of keeping silent, 2005).

During the 'Traces of Voices' music festival, blindfolded visitors listened to the random rhythm of exactly 1000 ticks of rattling car tyres as they went over the Prins Clausplein – fly over near The Hague ('Thousand traces – One voice', 2004). The same rattling sound was heard by the participants of a sound walk in architect Richard Meier's immense Atrium at The Hague town hall, as a metaphor for the city council's scaling plans ('Sound map for the Atrium' for Stroom The Hague, a centre for art and architecture, 2004).

(In a Post I'll present three examples how 3D reality sound works for radio, for an artist press agency and for a research about the kinesthetic experience of the body).

New technical developments generate new presentation forms. The walkman caused a revolution in the art world when it came along in the Eighties. This simple portable device running on two AA batteries enabled me to link shared invisible listening experiences to a route through Dutch public space. The 'geluidswandeling' was born. Wireless headphones likewise altered the shared listening experience. Now, the locative and mobile media make it possible to generate new ways of presenting *the sonic experience of dislocated reality.*

