

A metrophonic drift with

Olaf Schäfer

by Jonas Obleser for
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A notion pertained throughout all our WALL OF TIME contributions is the claim that *sound only exists in time*. Time is what enables sound. Hence, sound and time are, in the brains of the hearing at least, two monozygotic twins. Space, however, and the cultivation of space—architecture, that is—is mostly conceived of as something *independent of* or orthogonal to *time*. What happens when we realize that this is fundamentally flawed and begin to realize how space and architecture shape our experience of the most time-bound of our sensations, that is, our sensations of sound?

WALL OF TIME is very proud to have secured as our second interviewee one of the few eminent experts in the field, the trained architect, carpenter, musician and writer *Olaf Schäfer*. Schäfer, born 1974, is now based in Berlin and has just received an additional MA degree in the inaugural class of the UDK sound studies program 2006–2008. In his architectural diploma thesis as well as in various projects since, he has essentially followed a path (i.e., a motorway) that *Marinetti, Russolo* and their futurist friends laid out in the early 20th century: What are the implications of the new sonic weaponry that our machines, our motors, our cities provide? What does it do to our cities that the sounds emitted are ignored, neglected, left uncontrolled, unattended, and poorly utilized?

Ultimately—and this is where Schäfer at his most idiosyncratic, most radical and hence most influential comes in—, how can we incorporate sound more logically, more naturally and to our sensory and psychological profit into the way we build our furniture, our houses and our cities. Schäfer was only half-joking when he ended his first manifesto in 2004 with the Germano-English battle cry, “Ringt mit den Straßenbahnen, kämpft um jeden Groove. *Remix Berlin! Dub Stuttgart!*”

Olaf, thank you for your precious time. As you know, a constant in our publication, an axiom if you like, is the equation of *time enabling sound*. Now, you have a background in one of the most static arts and crafts imaginable, in architecture. You must feel quite at odds with your colleagues sometimes if you centre your own work on taming quite the opposite domain, the travelling sound waves. Generally, it seems that you want to raise our awareness for sound as an aesthetic and visceral parameter when buildings, roads, public spaces are designed.

Do you still consider yourself an architect in the original meaning of the word, and if yes, do you think this requires a re-definition of what an architect is doing?

First of all, thank you for your interest in my work, Jonas. I'm very pleased, if insecure, whether my thoughts contribute to your ideas on WALL OF TIME. You already named it, I as an architect somehow deal with space, which can be seen in opposition to working with time.

To be honest, I just don't know what the work of an architect in its original meaning was. The word refers to the

Greek *archein tekton*, which means head of all building craftsman. More than an artist a moderator he was, I think—I would not expect him to have drawn the ornamentation on the parthenon frieze for example, and I rather believe the detailed work of every part of the building was—at the time the original meaning of the word refers to—part of the subordinated arts and crafts.

That is where I would tie the first part of my identity as a sound architect to: Even being trained as a musician, I don't work as a musician, just as my profound technical knowledge does not reduce me

to being the specialist concerned with building acoustics. To erode any image of what an architect is regarding sound-enhanced artificial environments, you should maybe think of someone who's neither the autonomous composer (the architect as an author), nor a musician (or carpenter), nor the conductor. I think a sound architect carries parts of every of those multiple identities inside himself, but comes closest to the idea of a dubmaster at the mixing desk—which is the built environment itself. Every planning dubs the street.

But that's only the part of the definition reflecting what an architect is *doing*, and not what happens when an architect is *actually at work*. That would be architecture that has a totally different meaning.

Oh, maybe I should investigate some more in your implied dissociation of what an architect is and what he does, which I thought would be (simply put) architecture. You seem to draw a line between your practical work as an architect and the theoretical meaning of architecture. Could you give us a sneak peek into what really happens when an architect is doing architecture?

“Nowadays we have this eternal drone in the streets of our cities but our auditory system hasn't adapted to it yet. We are not able to close our ears like our eyes. That's why I think it's time to re-think the whole city as a filter unit. Think of a busy street in the city where the facades consist not of stone, steel and glass anymore, but of 1-meter thick foam. That would make for a total difference.”

To me the difference is less between practice and theory than between producing and perceiving architecture. Whereas producing is part of my common professional approach to architecture—and this is what architects are trained in—, perceiving is a more personal subjective endeavour, but never-

theless necessary for architecture. Without perception it wouldn't be there.

Space, in architecture, is in my opinion the field of possible perceptions. And this field—or, if you take into account the different modalities of our senses—these fields are surrounded by borders. The wall defining your workspace is such: It is one your eyes or your body cannot pass through. Simply it limits your possible perceptions. In the same way, a highly frequented street may be a wall of sound that disables you to hear the kids playing on the other side of it. You may see them, but you won't hear them.

In short, architecture to me is to define borders which exclude parts or even the whole of an environment from us and which establish a new one—which Reyner Banham called very appropriately “well-tempered environment”—, an “inside” that is the new range of our sensorium. If you see it this way, architecture both builds a visual, aural and olfactory landscape and enables the experience of the landscapes sentiments via the space within.

In your works, which many readers might not know yet, you often describe

scenarios, spaces, like your apartment, the staircases outside, the open windows, the trees, the leaves. All this is needed, it seems, to set the stage for the sonic experiences you or the raconteur is having in such an easily imaginable scenario. However, the sounds themselves remain excluded from the written text, they're

main silent, if you like; you usually prefer to *write* about sound.

Where everybody would expect a sound scholar like you to record for us, with your strong background in microphony, physics, sound installations, etc., you rather chose a very poetic and almost dreamlike language as your primary tool to approach the problems that sound poses.

Did the years of training in spatial acoustics, music and sound studies rather weaken your trust in the technical conservation of sound and turned you into a Hoelderlinian poet instead?

A difficult question. First of all I'd like to correct you in saying that to me it's not a *conservation of* sound. Never heard of an architect collecting bricks, besides one freaky French postman in the mid-19th century. The aim of my work is to find a way of communication over a quite complex process which will involve a lot of people—especially the inhabitants—for quite a long time. This makes it a *conversation on* sound, and every single time it is a struggle to find the most adequate language for the special purpose.

To answer the question after what you called poetry, I do consider this way of how I am currently working just as a temporary, provisional state. As an architect I somewhat suffer from its conditions, because I grew up with sketching plans and building models. But if you want to explicitly name and pass on the atmospheres, which you experience or which you want prospectively to be experienced, the common visual communication of architecture is limited—understandably so, when sound is the issue. To conclude, my aim is to write sound and space themselves, and not just about them.

... So, using more subjective, poetic language means happened more accidentally than it really was what you planned for; I see ...

No, not really. Above all, I decided to cast visual and audible experiences into one medium. To me it was writing, which in difference to film for example prevents the visual and aural sense competing for your attention. Our language



is a sense on its own, different from the ones before. As you hopefully may have experienced yourself, literature enables you to sense moods, images and sounds, without really seeing or hearing them. You as the reader are then lead by the author, you drift through inner worlds and outer worlds, the space inbetween, through different sensual modalities or reflecting thoughts that tell you as exactly as technical descriptions what it's all about.

—But doesn't this imply that written text is time-bound just like music? One continuous flow, which may be contradictory to your spatial explorations?

Yes, it seems as if reading a book—a continuous stream of words that is pouring through the readers eyes—might be equal to listening to music where the ears are constantly overflowed by tones. But the sounds of music appear in the listener's real time, and are not capable of directing you to another time layer. There's no *Before* after a *Now* in music you could go back to, so the story it tells lasts irreversibly, whereas our language already implies different layers of time in itself. It thus establishes a time frame independent from the one of the reader.

Ideally my writing is a metrophonic drift through sensual situations. That's why I'm searching for a polyphonic text that can be read like an architectural plan. This means, there's no starting or end point, but a free, nearly randomized way of your eyes and ears putting together the whole story of the space. Right

now I work on a project, which involves text, plans, spoken words and sounds in a loosely linked scenographical work.

This is so beautifully reflected in the extra efforts you put into designing your theses and essays; I mean, not only that you care about graphical layout, but you really develop interesting packaging, borrowing from a technical drawing and planning aesthetic. Do you consider this essential to your text, or will your "scenographical" work also function equally well in a more profane paperback format?

With respect to marketing these works it should probably be a "Yes, they work equal in a book format". But I'm sure they don't. As stated before, it should be a drifting through different layers, not just reading page by page. The plan format of



each page may be bulky but I believe it shifts your experience towards reading a map that leads you through space.

On cars and street sounds: Your work often returns to the beginnings of futurism; you recently contributed to a magazine (*Atlas 31, la citta suonante*) with a creative, sound-centered reflection upon the nerve-wrecking Waldschlösschen bridge debate in Dresden.

In your most recent work, *Metrophonie No 1*, you revisit the Germany-wide Autobahn network as a monstrously-scaled sound installation, the resulting sound of which we are not able to experience, unfortunately, as we would have to fly high above the land to tune in. Also, the famous AVUS finds your attention and you suggest turning it into an open-air museum, for people to come, sit there on the ancient spectator seats (which, by your terms, would then be—audiator seats?) and listen to the roaring motorway in front of them.

In your opinion, what do the sounds of cars do to us? Should they be further silenced? Or do you foresee, speculatively, an aesthetic and possibly pleasing role in our lives for these often demonized noise emissions?

Just imagine the big helium ball above us not as the sun that brings us daylight and warmth but as La Monte Young's magnificent drone balls. If there wouldn't be anything left to see but to hear a constant sound from above and its reflections from below and the side, we would eventually be swarming around in

the streets like bats. Not emitting sounds ourselves but using the ones that are already there. But evolution took another way. Nowadays we have this eternal drone in the streets of our cities but our auditory system hasn't adapted to it yet. We are not able to close our ears like our eyes, and it can be foreseen that it won't happen in near future.

That's why I think it is time to build spatial sound filters, to re-think the whole city as a filter unit that oscillates and resonates.

Are you referring here to the city as an architectonic structure or to the city as a habitat, that is, also including its inhabitants and other entities in it?

To both, actually, but in separate manner. Here, it always helps to imagine [the Godfather of Dub] Lee Scratch Perry at the mixing console. The mixing console and the patch bay with their wirings and effects resemble the built architectonic structure and infrastructure. They define, in ground plans and in wiring schemes, the lines and paths, which are flown through by the sounds. What then really *sounds*, though, is not the mixing console, the metropolis, but the people and all the things, which they do. Driving cars, riding underground trains, listening to music, screaming, et cetera. And the Dubmaster defines all that only to certain degrees.

The technical structure and the man-made sound signals then enter the mix, the mixture in space, in which places are actively defined, where certain sounds origin. In return, the acoustics of these places react passively to that, and—depending on this reaction—the sounds are transformed absorptively, reflectively or dispersively.

That is also why I often return to futurism and especially to Marinetti and Russolo. The latter demanded nearly a hundred years ago to use noises as a resource and to transform this into a shaped sound environment. This was never realised in scale and dimensions that it had been conceived of, and thus remains inspiring to me.

Think of a busy street in the city where the facades consist not of stone, steel and

glass anymore, but of 1-meter thick foam. That would make for a total difference.

Please, tell us how it would sound.

The previous scenario is just a rudimentary one. Imagine the calm and silent mood of a city after snowfall in winter and you get a clue. Manipulations of that kind would just be a starting point in controlling, adjusting and transforming the street sounds into a coherent designed metrophonic soundscape. How it sounds in detail depends on the particular situation with its sound sources, of course. Let's see whenever we've sound-shaped the first city.

No less than we here at the WALL OF TIME, you seem to flirt with the magical idea of reverting the causal flow of time, thus, the emitting and vaporating flow of sound. In your most recent work, the *Berlin Metrophonie*, you describe a sound installation that you visit, and how the sound of a scribbling pen grabs your attention and makes you want to record the heard faithfully into the written text—just opposite to the usual way of sounds as we play them from a vinyl record—, so that it will become audible for others through read-out again. I think we will have to cite this passage to get its magic across:

“Hier hatte jemand mit allerhand technischen Gerätschaften diese Wohnung ausgestattet, und da, wie ich auf dem Bett lag, die Leere der Zeit meditierend, hörte ich, wie sich das Kratzen eines Federhalters [...] in den Räumen verfiel. [...] Nach einer halben Seite schwang sich das Kratzen auf; auf zu einem großen Vogelschwarm, da gleich hinter dem Türdurchgang zum Flur. Ein mächtiges Flügelschlagen, das sich erhob, endlos an dieser Öffnung vorbeizuziehen, die abgründiger wurde, je länger sie so durchklungen ward.

Die Klänge kamen von nebenan, doch aus einem Raum, den ich nie betreten können würde. Ein okkultur Raum, dem Auge verschlossen, so weit und tief man auch durch die Öffnung des Türrahmens blicken mochte. Auf meine daliegende Entblößtheit legte der unsichtbare Klang die bedeckende Umhüllung dieser Magie des Unmöglichen. Ein diaphaner Vorhang, mehr noch: Umhang, der sich vor meine rationale Erkenntnis schob.

Was in dem Zimmer, in dem ich mich befand, Klänge waren, die aus gut sichtbaren Boxen kamen, waren im anderen Zimmer schon Klänge, die einer anderen Welt entströmten.

Das Flattern wollte nicht enden, und ich fragte mich, ob es womöglich sein konnte, diesen Vogelschwarm, der hier aus den Klängen einer Füllfeder entfleucht war, nicht ebenso wieder einzufangen: Wie eine lebende Neumann-Schneidemaschine, die ansonsten die Schwingung des Schalls mit vibrierender Nadel in die Mutterform der Schallplatten einritzte, nunmehr mit den suchenden Fingern einer mitschwingenden Seele die Klänge in die weiße Fläche vor mir einfließen zu lassen, und ebenso wieder auslesbar machen zu können?“

(Brief excerpt from the second movement, *Metrophonie No 1*, Olaf Schäfer, Berlin 2008)

To me, it appears as if a big driving force in your dealing with sound is its *elusiveness*, its immateriality, its fleeting nature; in stark contrast to the stones and wood we build our houses and furniture from. Isn't this the biggest problem in designing, describing, planning sound? What prevents you from giving up then?

You state an interesting idea: If you say that the immateriality of sound is a driving force for me, I agree and say it pleases my idealistic mind.

But on the other hand I ask myself how much longer this visual idea of what materiality and/or immateriality is will last? It's just your idea of what “material” is that makes you believe that sound is immaterial. As I described it before, sound is physical, with strength up to the character of walls. Volume and spectrum can make it that dense you'll not be able to pass through it to another sound source with your auditory system. I see no difference to a wall your body cannot permeate or fields of mist your visual sense cannot reach through. At the end they're all kind of membranes that limit your sensual affections to the inherent surrounded space. That's definitely not what I would call *immateriality*. Accordingly, why should I give up on them? Sounds will never leave. I can tell you exactly when my neighbours' TV will start emitting its compressed low-

pass filtered mumbling and grumbling. And it's time to become more sensitive to the thoughtless and undesigned sounds, the noise that surrounds us everyday, and work on it.

Now for two questions, which we include in all our interviews on time and the phenomena around it. Please feel free to answer quite shortly or to draw, or to remain silent, of course. First, the big issue: What is Time?

I think Time is overrated. Why not just let it loose? Forget about it! It's only a matter of mind. I never thought that much about it, and I had my most unhappy time when I thought I should have to worry about it in my life. Upon further reflection—I would welcome Time as another dimension in multimodal perceptions. According to my definition of space in the beginning, time is—in very much the same way—the wide field of sensational possibilities limited only by a border at the end of life.

What role does time play for your primary work, that is, describing, recording, planning sound?

As short as your question is my answer. Time doesn't play any inherent role in my work.

—Nicely put, Olaf. I am sure that whoever just has read our whole conversation will see how very Schäferian your last answer is. I would like to maintain, though, that you are rather quite a master of time and might hence not really care about it any longer, just as the carpenter not necessarily dreams of a forest when he falls asleep.

Hah, I always dreamt of being a woodsman, with an emphasis on Being. Believe me, it's all about *getting inside the space* *).

Thanks ever so much, Olaf.

*) Probably a word play and a variation on La Monte Young's "One must get inside the sound".

Our conversation took place in February 2008 in Berlin and Leipzig while Olaf Schäfer finished the *Metrophonie No 1*. Pictures show Olaf Schäfer, 2007, by Hannes Woidich (p. i) and by Karolina Cutura (p. iii). Olaf can be reached at olaf@urbanresonance.org.