

THE SOUNDING MUSEUM

CULTURAL SOUNDSCAPES AS A TOOL IN MUSEUM EDUCATION

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1. TUNE IN

Picture yourself standing on a cliff of a frozen fjord in Nunavut, on the south-eastern edge of Baffin Island. Eyes closed, there is no sound to be heard except the cutting wind that constantly blows through the icy desert of the Arctic.

A lonely traveler catches your attention. His snowshoes make crunchy sounds on the frozen ground as he passes by. The ringing of bells from a small Anglican church mixes with howling sled dogs on the other side of the fjord. The scene changes as you approach a small village. Inside one of the small houses we listen to the Inuit women's traditional throat singing, the *katajjait*, rhythmic, with an air of mysticism, and of an excited merriness. It is a playful way to compensate for the harsh environment that the people in these parts have learned to cope with.

Out in the open again, you accompany the hunters on their *ski-doo*s as they ride out onto the frozen sea. They cut wholes into the ice to lure seals in search for air as they dive under the floe. Summer comes along with a flock of wild geese under the mild beams of the midnight sun. A raven croaks. A walrus colony rests on the stony beach. With a small boat you enter a cavity within an iceberg.

All of a sudden you find yourself inside the ice itself. You hear it crackle and gurgle, creak and rustle, you are captured inside the slow evolving and passing of bizarre, ever changing endless forms. A roaring thunder far away bears witness to the great forces at work in nature, as a calving glacier releases its children into the sea to float as mighty icebergs in the Arctic Ocean.

1.1 Listening to Intangible Heritage

For the peoples of the First Nations of North America, whose culture is strongly attached to their oral heritage, acoustic communication always was and still is of high importance.

But another dimension makes the art of listening a vital tool for survival: The ear is the first and the last watch-post in case of danger, it stays on duty after nightfall and even while we are asleep. We have become used to draw our data from texts, charts and tables, also are we no longer in risk of becoming prey of wild animals creeping up in the dark.

In our Sound Chamber we want to re-establish listening as an equal partner among the components of sensual perception.

1.2 The Soundscape

We are surrounded by a world of sound that we call *soundscape*, in reference to the visually perceived landscape, as established by R. Murray Schafer in his milestone publication "The Tuning of the World."

We react to that soundscape, and, to an ever-growing extent, we create it ourselves. The soundscape is a crucial factor to the wellbeing of humanity. It also has strong influence on the cultural development of a society. By assessing it, we can gain access to the strangeness and the familiarity of our own as well as of foreign or even past cultural and natural environments. The museum can be the place to mediate sono-cultural awareness to the public.

2. NONAM

The research project "The Sounding Museum" revolves around the Sound Chamber at the NONAM (Nordamerika Native Museum) in Zurich, CH. The Sound Chamber is a room designed to present the acoustic aspects of the cultures of North America's First Nations by means of sound scenario productions composed of the natural and artificial soundscape of the respective cultural spaces. Deprived of visual stimuli the visitor can fully concentrate on the sonic experience in a low-reverberation quadrasonic setup, and, given an adequate introduction, learn how perception, identity and culture are inseparably intertwined with each other by the link of communication.

The practical implications to be considered when developing such a tool as the Sound Chamber are at least equally important as the conclusions that can be drawn from the evaluation of the data collected during visitor surveys and interviews.

3. SOUND CHAMBER

Early in 2008, the former video cabin on the second floor of the NONAM, next to the permanent exhibition space, saw a great deal of change happening. In accordance with the acoustic concept and technical sketches of Richard Schuckmann the small inconspicuous booth made of pressed wood was turned into a chamber of unique spatial-acoustic experience.

By applying highly absorbent acoustic foam, the chamber's boundaries were acoustically removed, thus allowing the

illusion of distance, as in the endless icy deserts of the Arctic, because the room's own reverberation attributes could not unmask its presence anymore.

Visual stimuli were to be reduced to a minimum. Black sound-permeable curtains, softly illuminated from below, around a circular visitor's platform surrounded by a metal security railing and slightly above the almost invisible ground, create a feeling of being in a safe concealed capsule in the middle of nowhere.

Behind this black horizon beats the technological heart of the installation. Four high-end loudspeakers, one in every corner of the room, and a subwoofer allow sounds to come from any desired direction on the horizontal plane. A DVD-A(audio)-player operated by the museum staff to play back high-quality sound productions is hidden behind a small hatch beside the entrance.

For a special exhibition on arctic cultures, a soundscape production was made that utilises all the merits of the Sound Chamber. The endless polar void, sound events coming from all directions, sounds that continuously change position as they progress, some that are very faint and some that shake the very foundations of the earth (or so it seems), all these merge in the surreal atmosphere of the Sound Chamber into a new, alien reality.

The recordings provided by Philippe Le Goff and other experts of the arctic cultural circle had to be ordered thematically and chronologically and to be technically mastered. Now the selected sounds could be fitted into the timeline for the Sound Chamber presentation. The changing seasons were the chronological basis of the score.

From the studio the final version went to the Sound Chamber at the NONAM, where last adjustments in terms of editing and mixing were made hands on by listening to the production at the place of its intended presentation.

4. THE SOUNDING MUSEUM

"The Sounding Museum" follows (in loose order) a three-stage design.

The theoretical background to perception and education in the cultural field has to be established. This includes recapitulation of the ongoing debates on philosophy of nature, perceptive psychology, cultural theory and museum pedagogy, matched with the demands of acoustic ecology as framed by Schafer and Truax. I chose the aesthetic-atmospheric approach as suggested by Böhme, which has to be aligned to the reality of exhibition design and visitor attitude.

In the next stage the actual Sound Chamber and the soundscapes to-be-presented have to be created in such a

manner that they meet the demands established on the basis of the theoretical and practical prerequisites.

After an extensive testing phase with the Inuit Soundscape I am currently working on the Northwest Coast Soundscape in collaboration with the U'mista Cultural Centre at Alert Bay, BC. In the end, all five cultural spaces presented in the Museum's permanent exhibition will be supported by Soundscape productions, along with special productions focussing on music, speech, etc. These will be presented at the Sound Chamber in workshops that link the culture of the museum's objectives to an educative approach on perception by the example of hearing.

The third stage is the evaluation of the data that will be collected during the workshops, in episodic interviews and visitor surveys.

5. REPRISE

My approach tries to generalise on cultural soundscape production and presentation in museums. The result will be a handbook on how to produce and present soundscape compositions made for anthropologic uses. Composition of course always bears the mark of alteration of reality according to, in our case, anthropologic, aesthetic, and educative requirements. However, I want my soundscapes to be good enough to receive approval from their original authors, the people whose natural and cultural environment produced the sounds I record and use for composition.

The Inuit who live close to the taiga have a saying that the wind, singing in the trees, is a language that just hasn't yet fully come into being.

I will teach you to understand it.

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AUTHOR NOTES

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