

Meridian Space

Interviewed by Dorian Cave for the exhibition "Drifting" at Meridian Space

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Zurich-based artist Jason Kahn spent March 2016 wandering the streets of Beijing, following his instinct, harvesting sounds. Every day, after waking up, he wrote short texts based on his recollection of sounds heard the day before — touching, lapidary, vivid fragments of life caught on the photographic film of memory. Then he went out, and using the two inconspicuous, pompon-like microphones sprouting from his jacket collar, he recorded hundreds of sonic snapshots as he walked.

In the resulting installation, *Drifting*, texts and sounds are integrated to form a dialogue between remembered sonic space and the words and feelings that it summons, and the actual soundscape of the city as recorded by mechanical means — from the din of construction sites, busy intersections or tiny screeching scooter radios to the soothing trill of crickets in the nightly hutongs.

Far from being a sound documentary focusing on “strange Chinese sounds,” Jason Kahn’s installation is a subtle, poetic and evocative meditation on the sounds that make up the fabric of social space within a given city — the sounds that embody social and cultural life in its entirety. Simultaneously, it also constitutes an investigation of the “space of memory” in which the sounds of our everyday life linger, echo and mingle in our mind, impregnated by the rich cacophony of the modern-day city life. But above anything else, Kahn’s work is a call for renewed attention and awareness to our surroundings, no matter how noisy and chaotic they may seem: indeed, making the world intelligible is the first step to regain agency over it... And to find or rediscover gems of hidden beauty within it.

**Meridian Space: The technique used in *Drifting* (texts + speakers) recalls that of previous projects such as *Other Ghosts*, or *In Place* — and its focus (mundane city sounds) is similar to works such as *Seokyo*. To what extent is this installation a continuation of previous projects of yours? Is it part of a larger series of works?**

Jason Kahn: I guess one of the overarching focuses of my work is the idea of space — not just in the sense of a physical space but, in the words of German philosopher Leibniz, as “a system of relations.” And for this I’m thinking often in terms of social space — all the components of our daily lives coming together to form this fabric we live in — as experienced through and defined by sound. My friend Brandon Labelle sums this up nicely in the introduction to his latest book *Lexicon of the Mouth*: “To think about the acoustical as a specific paradigm, a type of knowledge structure from which understandings of social life, bodily identities and cultural practices can be considered and brought into dialogue.”

**Meridian Space: In previous projects, you have used the medium of text alone to conduct “field recordings” in certain spaces — using words to “record” your experience of a certain space, instead of sound. How does using one or the other of these two media alter your**

**perception and subsequent memory of places? Why choose to combine the two in this installation?**

Jason Kahn: I find that when i'm working with text the space of memory comes into play — this dissonance between what actually sounded and what i remember sounding. I'm also interested in how such an abstract system as language can evoke sounds. So when a person "hears" a work of mine through text, they are put in a position where they have to use their imagination to "hear" these sounds, thus giving them a certain free space to think about the sounds i'm describing and the idea of sound in and of itself: what it can mean or imply.

**Meridian Space: Does this project aim at shaping or changing the way people perceive the spaces in which you undertook these sound recordings — and their perception of these everyday life sounds, too? In other terms, is there a particular "ethics of sound" at the heart of this project?**

Jason Kahn: Yes, I suppose there is a certain political agenda at play here in my work in that I'm very much interested in people somehow returning to their environments rather than always trying to screen them out or ignore them. I feel that awareness is the first step in fighting repression at all levels. The less aware we are of the world around us, the easier it will be to coerce us into doing things we don't want to do. It's maddening for me to see how many people walk around like zombies with their eyes glued to a phone and not paying any attention to the world around them. It is this antisocial behavior which paves the way for even more repressive tactics by political regimes (that and rampant consumerism).

**Meridian Space: Does the installation itself aim at shaping the way people perceive the space where your exhibition is being shown? Is your intention to build, through sound and text, a new "space" within the exhibition space?**

Jason Kahn: I think that i'm less interested in the space of the exhibition per se as the space which occurs in each person's mind when they visit the installation, which, I hope, will create a space of recollection, introspection and reflection about sounds in Beijing and, beyond this, how these sounds play a role in the production (in Henri Lefebvre's words) of social space: "How are these sounds part of the place I live in?"

**Meridian Space: How are you hoping that spectators approach this installation? Should they try to forget they are listening to sounds of Beijing? Should they first read the texts, or listen to the sounds? Try to connect the two?**

Jason Kahn: First of all, not all of the texts refer back to the recorded sounds. In many cases, the texts refer to a sound which I didn't have time to record, or which I didn't even feel the need to record. So, if a visitor to the installation reads the texts first or not is not that important — and in any case, they will be reading a text while at the same time sound will be coming from the

loudspeakers. There will automatically be a give and take between the texts and the recorded sounds.

I think it is important to consider that the sounds are from Beijing and, beyond that, recorded by a visitor to Beijing. My vantage point is obviously quite different than, say, yours, as many of the sounds I recorded might not have seemed interesting to you or perhaps to even anyone else who is coming to see the installation. And that being said, I don't focus on "interesting" sounds, rather, on sounds which I feel portray or play a great role in the place I'm working in.

**Meridian: Did you select the sounds displayed here with the intention that any person having lived in Beijing could quickly recognize these sounds? Or did you also select "abstract" or "globalized" sounds that one could maybe hear anywhere around the world?**

Jason Kahn: As I've done this kind of project many times before in different forms and contexts (radio, installation, acousmatic composition, etc) I have a general feel for what sounds I would like to portray — globalized, as you say — as well as certain sounds which I feel characterize (at least from my point of view) the place I'm visiting. Of course, one could argue that traffic sounds can be heard anywhere in the world but you would be surprised how different the traffic sounds in Cairo or Delhi or Beijing. And the point is not to think about just the sound of traffic but this sound as part of a greater fabric woven from many different sounds, some utterly banal, some fascinating.

**Meridian Space: Did you consciously pick certain sounds because they reminded you of other places, or perhaps because they evoked certain specific images or feelings within you?**

Jason Kahn: Naturally, every experience one has evokes certain feelings, images, memories, etc. And since I'm only human, many of the sounds I chose to record did in fact have some greater meaning for me, even if I wasn't conscious of this at the time of recording. Sometimes only in retrospect do I realize what a certain sound meant to me. But overall, I just chose sounds to give what I felt was a picture of the place I was investigating. When you walk around a city for several weeks, just being out in the street, drifting around and not really "looking" for anything, with time you develop a sense for what a city is about, how its sound environment works, which sounds prevail, which sounds go under, which sounds (from memories in other cities) never even appear. And it is actually my wandering through a city (the situationist *dérive*) which more than memory or expectation determines what sounds I actually end up recording and using for the installation.

**Meridian Space: To what extent is this project a snapshot or a portrait of public spaces in Beijing in 2016? Are you interested in the documentary, anthropological or historical aspects of your work?**

Jason Kahn: Obviously, this piece becomes a de facto snapshot of March 2016 in Beijing — at least from my vantage point. But I'm not so sure my portrait of the city would be useful in an anthropological sense. More important for me is that "drifting" allows people to think of the place

they live in as more than a nuisance, a headache of noise (which, of course, undeniably it sometimes is), and rather something to be explored and fully conscious of.