

Neural
Interviewed by Alessandro Ludovico
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1.*

You said that if innovation becomes the *modus operandi* for an artist's work you sense an "emptiness." Do you think that the "innovation" concept has already been abused and exhausted by the technological industry and its surrounding business ecosystem? And do we maybe need alternative terms to define what we use to call innovation (like the "dis-innovation" attempt)?

I guess if one still needs to think within the confines of innovation (as in "dis-innovation") we will continue to be confronted with the same problem – that being the fetishized idea of "newness," as something worth striving for, its inherent value nothing more than this ephemeral idea of something being "new." What is new? Why not just sidestep the problem altogether and forget about "new," about "innovation?" Are these meta-concepts core attributes to the idea of creativity? I would say no: they are by-products. If on the way to creating something one stumbles upon what could be construed as innovation or "newness," then fine. But why obsess on "innovation" vs. "dis-innovation?" This lands us nowhere.

I don't feel the tech industries have been solely to blame for this. A good part of the problem has to do with human nature – it seems we often strive for that which seems new. Perhaps this lends a sense of meaning to our lives, the existential condition of the human being which – on the face of it – has no meaning: we have no reason for being here. But if we can infuse some logical progression measured in perceived steps of innovation then perhaps we can see a reason for our presence here.

2.*

The awareness of space is often seriously obstructed by mobile internet which, as you affirmed, "is sucking people in, like TV did." On the other side these mobile devices are technically very powerful in recording, listening and especially potentially transmitting even if they are prevented to do it. Do you think that we'd foster a re-appropriation of these devices to create listening spaces autonomously created? And do you think that some kind of "social listening" practices would help?

If we want to think about "autonomous listening spaces," then we need look no further than ourselves, for each of us is already an autonomous listening space. I don't see all these machines we use (recorders, phones, etc) as necessary if we just want to listen. Obviously, these are work tools and very useful and in some sense necessary, but on the face of it, when talking about listening – well, all this is just ballast. We only need our ears.

If we go further along this line of thinking, then the notion of “social listening” would imply a social space created from a community of individuals who are actually listening to and being aware of their environment. We don’t need a bunch of people recording something on their phone then broadcasting this to other people on their phones (as an example) in order for this to be “social.” We don’t need any tools for this, we just all need to start listening to the world around us. If we want to infuse our communities with a greater awareness of our presence and how it impacts the world, one way we can start is with the very simple act of listening.

3.*

Speaking of which, you’re also fond of “active listening” practices. Do you think that our primary ability of perceiving sound have been progressively “reduced” by social practices and media inflation? And can we imagine a future when our “active listening” succeed to extend and refining our listening abilities, ruling any possible technological extension?

On so many levels we’ve seen a constant and increasing degradation of both the practice of listening and the quality of sound around us, both in recorded media and in the environment. What can we do change this? On a technological level, nothing. Things will continue to race forward out of control: recorded sound will continue to be withered down to workable formats for listening on mobile devices, in an automobile or on the Internet. And cities will continue to grow, become more dense with sound, producing a veritable mesh of noise around us.

It may sound ironic – or even counter-productive – but for me the only solution I can see is to plug back into the world: listen to all the sound, to the noise, to the quiet moments. Become aware of our environments. Over time – believe it or not – the world will become less abrasively loud and disturbing.

For me, Japan is a prime example of this. I’ve been there many times, both in the big cities and on the countryside. I’ve spent many hours listening to different places and one thing which always struck me – and which at first in fact shocked me – was the actual sense of calm and lack of noise in a large city like Tokyo. If you go to the massive intersection just outside Shibuya railway station sometime in the morning when everyone is on their way to work, it will be at first incredible to see so many people – a veritable wave of human beings migrating back and forth across the vast expanse of intersection. But even more arresting will be the realization of how quiet everything is. Nowhere else in Asia, a region known for dense, loud urban sound environments, will you experience a mass of people so quiet. And the reason for this: the Japanese are very attuned to their environment. They are aware of how they move through a space, how they make sound in a space; how their behavior impinges on others in that same space. In a sense, they have already achieved a state – as you’ve written here – of not just extending and refining their listening abilities, but their overall awareness abilities.

4.*

You once mentioned the psychological impact of being one day in a busy city and the next day in the countryside, only considering the acoustic difference. Do you think that we’re lacking “silence” (eventually both aurally and visually) in our current sense ratio? Do you think we’d

need to preserve silent areas?

In the context of sound I don't believe "silence" exists. Even John Cage, sitting in an anechoic chamber, had to admit to himself that the sound of blood pulsing through his eardrums precluded any hope for the idea of silence. But in the context of consciousness, silence as a conceptual precept can exist. And this can mean through active awareness hearing/seeing things for what they are. In communication theory the idea of "noise" pertains to a loss of signal, of information from the sender to the receiver being lost along the way of transmission. Therefore, "silence" would entail decreasing this noise ratio, of achieving more from the transmission. By tuning in, by hearing more we can achieve a silence not in the sonic sense one has traditionally understood the term but in the idea of being attuned to what transpires around us. A sense of clarity will reduce the dread of noise, of intrusion.

5.*

Your recording and sampling activity is also meant to serve your "political imperative in cultivating a consciousness of our environment" and also the goal to find "the extraordinary in the ordinary"? And do you see these kind of activities as knowledgeable training to evolve through the sensory bombardment we are and will be increasingly be exposed to?

I'm not sure if in my case the practice of recording enhanced my listening skills – a kind of training, as you mention here – or if I started recording because I was already interested in environmental sound. In any case, the years of recording has definitely sharpened any initial proclivity I might've had.

If we want to escape the sensory bombardment – well, there is no escape. The idea of the Walkman was novel but, ultimately, only added to the problem: zombies locked into their own listening spaces, moving oblivious to the world around them. This will only dull our senses to the "real" world when we come back to it, unplugged from our sonic cocoons. As a society we all need to listen more, be more aware of others. In the long run this will be the only hope for decreasing the deluge of unwanted sonic events.

6.*

Do you think there is such a thing as "experiential sounds" and if yes, how would you define them?

Not to be pedantic or evasive, but I'm not sure what you mean by "experiential sound." Is not all sound experiential?

7.*

Can you please tell me more about your graphical scores concept and production? And how were they influenced by Joseph Beuys' "Sozial Plastik"?

The scores were composed with certain groups of people in mind. In most cases I knew who I was composing for: what instrument they played, how they played (hearing recordings of their work beforehand) or even knew them personally. In one case I composed a piece for a percussion ensemble, and for this I'd only heard previous recordings of the group – I didn't have an idea of the individual members.

The scores use abstract graphical forms set to a vertical and horizontal axis: the vertical axis represents dynamics, the horizontal axis time. The participants are free to interpret the graphical forms as they see fit. I don't give any instruction for this. I only ask that they adhere to the timing of the score (when they should start/stop) and that we all as a group can arrive at some consensus about what might constitute "loud" or "soft" (this is discussed during rehearsal).

I felt influenced by Joseph Beuys' Soziale Plastik because with this he wanted to work with groups of people in the context of art, using this to transform society or the environment. Obviously, through my scores and their realization I wasn't going to change the world but in collaborating as a group on these pieces I did see a model for cooperation – working together, listening together – which might be seen as a practice for co-existence across a wider field, beyond the performance space.

8.*

In your installations you try to produce social dynamics through their acoustic space. How do you relate them with the social acoustics created by activist radio projects, for example? And how you'd compare them with some classic overwhelming acoustics, like the ones in malls and other commercial spaces?

I'm very inspired by the work of the collective Ultra Red, using sound in the context of social relations and as a means of political struggle and resistance. I see in my installations a similar imperative, in that I want to direct people back to an active awareness of both the world and their very consciousness: what am I thinking, why am I thinking? I see awareness as the first step towards resistance. Only when we see what's going on around us can we then begin the struggle to move forward, addressing problems and trying to find ways of rectifying them.

Obviously, the sound environments greeting us when we enter a huge mall or shopping complex are the classic embodiments of the capitalist system: consumption as existential dread and terror tactic. I was recently in a large mall in Beijing. What struck me was not the sound level of the innocuous music (loud) but the overall quality of the sound in the mall: flat, lifeless – like walking around in a cotton ball. The dead space of plastic, cold sweat, shopping as an addiction, an angst, a moral imperative. The polar opposite of, say, the neighborhood food market near where I was staying in Beijing: a labyrinth of food stalls and vendors, loud, chaotic. Alive!

9.*

In some of your installations, like for example "An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Hong Kong (After Perec)", "Drifting" and "Mullae" there seems to be a central question about the relationship of a specific space and its sound, or as you define it "creating a space with sound,"

or “transferring the listener to another place through sound.” Can you tell me more about how you connect field recording and other ways of “transmitting a sense of place”?

Back in 2002 I showed an installation in Berlin, “Unheard Berlin.” And while I was setting up the piece, listening to the sound in the room, one of the technicians from the art space walked over to me and stood listening for a moment and said “die Jannowitzbrücke!” [the Jannowitz Bridge!] He knew exactly how the trains sounded as they traveled over this bridge. It seemed to me then that sounds implant themselves in our consciousness even when we’re not listening. We move through a space everyday, on our way to work, school, etc., and we “absorb” that space, obviously not just through sound, but through scent, sight, touch. A place becomes imprinted in our minds and we carry this sense of place wherever we go, probably until we die. We might never think of this place again until we hear a recording made of it (or, more commonly, see a photograph). This unleashes a flood of recollection, an awareness based in memory but which – hopefully – will carry over into the present. In a sense, the past seeps into the present, making way for a more cognizant passage through future spaces and places.

10.*

In your "We'll Walk in the Rays of a Beautiful Sun" installation you used text from The Migrants' Files, a project which attempts to keep a record of all deaths associated with migration to Europe, writing on A4-size black paper and recording your voice reading the more detailed entries. Do you think that the migration flows are bringing new sounds in our urban environments, changing the soundscape and making cities unawarely evolving accordingly on different levels?

I'm not sure the significant effect from this tragic migration of people fleeing war, poverty, starvation, and terror is a change in European urban sound environments. Rather, I'm hoping that people here in the West will see what our politics, our consumption, our apathy – in short our absolute complicity – has wrought in the world. For hundreds of years the West has pillaged Africa, Asia, the Middle East, South America. We've left these populations with depleted natural resources, corrupt, autocratic power structures and nearly perpetual states of war, poverty and sickness. Reading about all this in the newspaper, seeing it on television is nothing compared to these people arriving in your home town, walking by you on the street, their kids going to school with your kids. You see it in their eyes then: where they've been, probably glad to have escaped but with no direction home.