

**Jason Kahn**  
**In Place: Galerie Ravenstein, Brussels**  
**(2011)**

I arrive shortly after seven AM in the rotunda of the Galerie Ravenstein. I enter from Rue Ravenstein above and descend into the relative darkness of the space, where I'll spend the next ten hours. At first I'm a bit disoriented, everything seems so much darker and run down than when I was here four years ago. From above traffic sounds filter in quietly from Rue Ravenstein and from behind, further down the main passage of the gallery from Rue Cantersteen. A steady current of cool air accompanies the quiet morning sounds.

I take a seat on the steps leading up to the first floor of the rotunda and have a look around me: the restaurant Exki already has its tables and chairs out and a few early bird morning commuters have stopped there for a quick coffee before heading off to their offices. Fashion Food, Exki's main competitor and the only other business on the ground floor of the rotunda, is still closed. A trickle of commuters enters from the Central Station down behind me, and they make their way up the stairways to Rue Ravenstein. Sounds swim around me, I can't seem to locate their source. Up above on the second floor and closed off to the public, the Center for Fine Arts Brussels has its offices and a cafeteria for its employees. They use metal chairs and tables up there and occasionally these screech across the stone floor sounding like some prehistoric birds breaking the morning tranquility.

Aside from the morning cold and my still being a bit sleepy the rotunda creates a comforting atmosphere, like being submerged in a warm bath of sound. Indeed, over the day I'll keep returning to this idea of being in a huge basin of water. I imagine the space getting inverted, with people looking in from the empty shop windows into the rotunda, filled now with water and dolphins or colorful fish, rekindling memories of family trips to See World or the Monterrey Aquarium. But the only place where there might have been water here is the dry and cracked fountain in the middle of the rotunda. Painted a light blue and decorated with reliefs of palm leaves – a nod to some colonial reminiscence, I guess – I can't imagine the fountain having held water for years. The strange thing is, most people passing through the rotunda walk respectfully around the fountain, as if it still holds water or perhaps just in honor of its former glory.

An insane mosaic of half-inch tiles covers the floor, the walls and the eleven columns rising the length of the rotunda's height. I feel like I'm in some giant Turkish bath and the effect is not dissimilar: sounds constantly swirl around, build, reach an incredible density and then suddenly vanish into the heights of the glass dome above. At times this all feels like some psychedelic sound experiment, not only sonically but also spatially disorienting.

Walking around the ground floor of the rotunda I listen for all the areas of reflection, moving towards the middle, back towards the walls. Sounds seem to be clearer the further away from the center I move. Going up the stairs the body of sound begins to thin out, as if in direct relation to the growing intensity of day light streaming in from the roof. Moving towards the entrance to Rue Ravenstein feels like crossing a surging river, with light and sound and cool air pouring in from the street above. The atmosphere is brittle and harsh up here and I head back down to the relative warmth and hospitality of the rotunda's ground floor.

By nine AM or so a thick and steady stream of commuters rushes through the main hall and up the stairs of the rotunda. Astounding how little they talk, the sound of their scurrying footsteps fills the space, the occasional high heels clicking like machine gun fire up the stairs or across the tiled floor to

the entrance of some offices located in the rear of the rotunda. All this sound hangs like a thick gray mist in the space, reminding me of navigating through foggy streets in London.

The door of Exki rips this morning sound field apart every couple minutes or so, as its door slams shut with an incredible bang. At first this bothers me but I soon learn to live with it, even this sound of disruption finding its place in the balance here. Occasionally, one of the restaurant workers will try to prop the door open, but within moments an indignant customer slams it closed again. This will go on and on until the rotunda starts to warm up with morning sunlight and no one minds leaving the door open.

Around ten AM the morning rush hour seems to be over and a quiet settles over the rotunda. Individual sounds become more discernible now, even sounds from outside the gallery making themselves present: a police siren, a large truck moving slowly by, cars honking their horns. And voices from the top floor trickle down like light rain: a laugh, a salutation, someone sneezing. Suddenly, like a growing wave on the horizon, a troop of school children starts marching up the main hall of the gallery. They enter the rotunda with squeals of laughter, screaming, shouting, the teachers barking out orders in turn. The whole cavalcade like a dense train of sound snaking its way through the gallery. As they reach the upper floor their peals of laughter sound like bells going off and before I know it they've disappeared out onto the street above. With them gone the silence in the rotunda descends like a crushing hammer blow. It's as if all these kids' voices had swept the rotunda clean of its sounds, leaving a vacuum in their wake.

I'm back on the stairs now, sitting and staring across the sea of tiles spread out before me: every now and then, among the blue, yellow and beige patterns, a small red tile makes its appearance, most of the color long since rubbed away on the tiles approaching the center of the hall, those near the wall still a bright crimson. I can't even imagine the work that went into doing this. It's absolutely crazy. Looking up I notice a boy and a girl with recording equipment. Now, this was something I didn't expect to see. I mount the stairs and saunter slowly by. The boy eyes me suspiciously. I walk over to the other side of the rotunda. They spend around ten minutes making a recording then move back down to the ground floor and do the same. I guess it's not that interesting for them, though I can't imagine why. But then, they probably couldn't imagine why I would find it so interesting to spend ten hours standing around here all day. Maybe I don't really understand this myself, either.

And the strange thing is, no one seems to notice me here. Or at least they politely refuse to acknowledge my presence. Not many people linger here: the occasional homeless person, maybe someone stopping to make a phone call or sit down for a minute to read a map or newspaper. Virtually no tourists arrive – which is fine by me – and only very rarely does anyone stop to look at the space or snap a photo. I start to feel sorry for the rotunda, it seems to have been forgotten or perhaps never even noticed in the first place. All its grandeur has slowly faded, its stores stand empty, commuters rush through every morning and every evening but none of them notice the beautiful tile work, the fantastic acoustics, the body of light showering down from the glass dome above.

Around midday the tempo picks up again, the office workers make their way to Exki and Fashion Foods for their lunch. Pretty soon all the tables in front of these restaurants are filled, the rotunda surges with the sound of conversation, drifting up from the ground floor and colliding with the same lunchtime rhythm in the cafeteria of the Center for Fine Arts up on the second floor. That light and airy feeling from the morning is gone now, the sound is compact, compressed, tight, like a giant block expanding outwards to fill every nook and cranny of the rotunda. I walk from the ground floor to the first floor, trying to find some respite from this onslaught, but everywhere I go it seems the same, just

this one dense field of pulsating sound.

Within an hour or so most of the workers have returned to their offices. It feels like the rotunda is now digesting all this sound, which it has gorged itself on for lunch. I imagine this space feeding off the sound its visitors bring each day, for if they don't give this grand old hall their attention at least they can contribute the sound of their voices and motion. I walk again slowly around the perimeter of the ground floor, savoring this new lull in the day's rhythm. Standing in front of one of the abandoned stores I suddenly hear voices. It sounds as if someone is talking right over my shoulder. I turn around and look into the store: only darkness, not a person inside. And also nobody near me in the space. This reminds me of being in the Gol Gumbaz tomb in Karnataka, India, where one can send whispers around the wall inside. Does the rotunda of the Galerie Ravenstein work the same way? This could hardly be possible, but all day I've felt this disassociation from sounds and their sources, with suddenly a voice or a scrape or indiscernible noise raining down on me, whispering over my shoulder, appearing before me like a visitation from another world. I guess I must be hallucinating at this point, punch drunk from too many hours spent in this swirling kettle of sound. I'm losing my bearings.

And then three teenage boys swing up the stairs behind me, hooting and hollering, just like my kids do when we're hiking up in the Alps and they want to hear the way their voices echo back from the stone ridges around us. But these kids' voices don't echo, they ring out like a pinball machine gone haywire: vectors of sound zigzagging back and forth from wall to wall, from top to bottom. They slice the air of the rotunda asunder. It's exhilarating and I find myself wanting more of the same. The sun has finally made its full appearance and fierce white light fills the rotunda. And now I'd like to hear something analog to this: even more kids screaming, sirens and horns and a thousand secretaries in high heel shoes and every metal chair and table screeching across the stone and tiled floors of the rotunda. But no, the three boys are gone as quickly as they appeared. The sun vanishes again behind some dark clouds and the gray cap from the glass dome above descends slowly, filling the space with a somber silence, not unlike a mausoleum.

As I'm getting ready to leave around five PM, streams of workers enter the rotunda from the Rue Ravenstein above. They scurry and rush to make their trains waiting for them below in the Central Station. Like in the morning, their shuffling feet and occasional voices fill the space, though maybe now there is more laughter for their work day is done and they can go home. And I guess, I should go to.