

SoundEffects



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Editorial

Functional sounds in history and the public sphere

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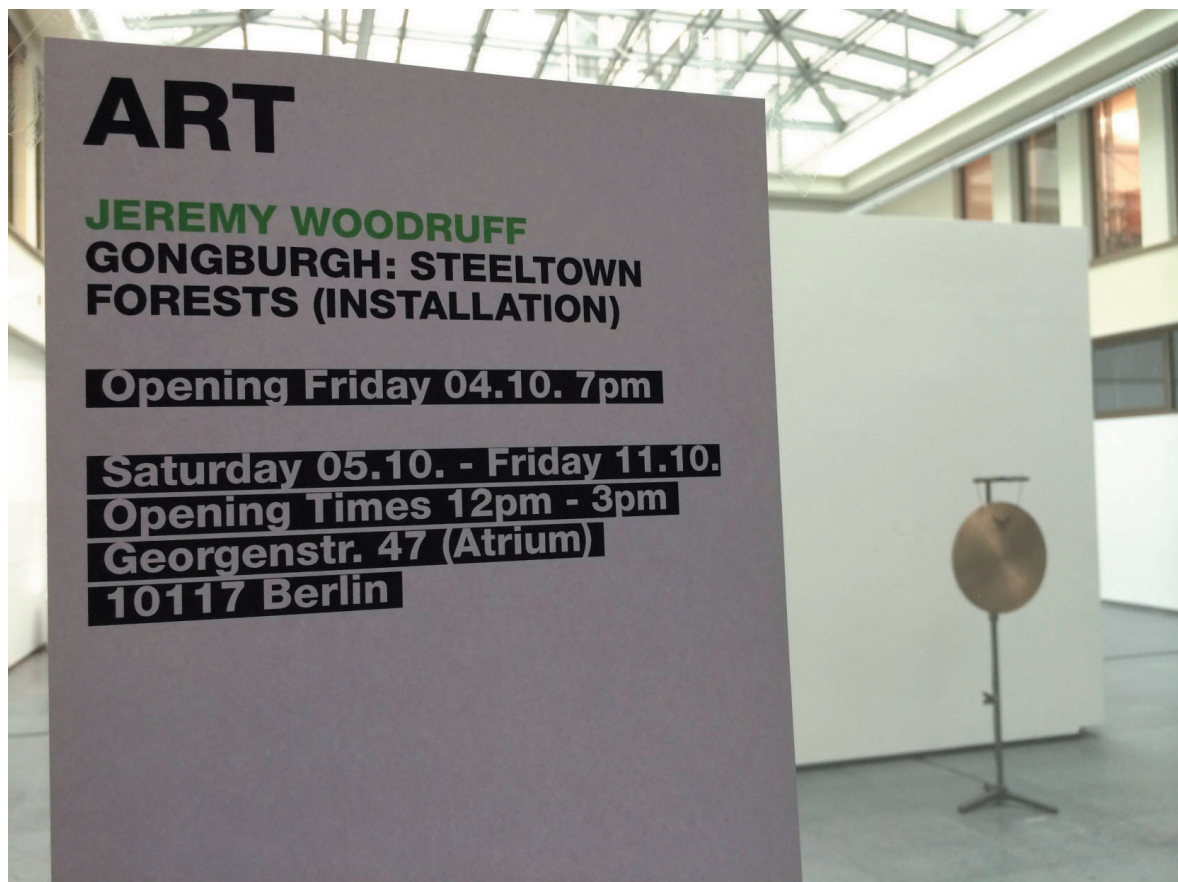
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What are functional sounds?

How do human beings experience mediated, non-verbal auditory signs, so-called functional sounds – and how can a design theory of auditory signs be described as cultural theory? This research question has since 2011 driven the first main research project of the Sound Studies Lab, originally at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, funded by the German Research Foundation, DFG. The researchers involved in the project led by Holger Schulze, Carla J. Maier, Max Schneider and Julia Krause, have worked on various aspects of this question: critical analysis of sound theories from the history of semiotics; field research at the offices of sound designers, who conceptualise and invent functional sounds for specific purposes; and field research in specific listening environments such as public transport, public places, co-working spaces and the personal living room.

The more time we spent listening to functional sounds in history and the present, and the more we were submerged into existing, still rather tentative and timid efforts to theorise those rather non-musical and non-verbal sounds, we realised that as tiny as these sound objects are, as big is the field of functional sounds enveloping us – and as rarely has substantial and daring research been published on these matters. In 2013 the European Sound Studies Association decided to organise its first large, international, peer-reviewed conference (co-funded by the German Research Foundation, DFG), and we felt Berlin could be an inspiring venue. We thus decided to ask researchers interested in sound in all its various forms, emanations and contexts to present their individual approaches to exploring these functional aspects of sound, asking: In what ways do functional sounds organise and regulate life? In what ways do they bypass regulation? In what ways and at which levels of consciousness do they inform the everyday life of individuals and of smaller or larger groups? Can sounds be representative of sexes, genders, ethnicities and other human categories? Can everyday auditory cultures be regarded as semiotically coherent cultures, or do they work as large series or bundles of non-related signs? How do citizens think about the auditory cultures they are living in? How do they verbalise them? In what ways do functional sounds create and monitor borders, and how do they ignore and transgress borders? How do they heal and cause illness (tinnitus, nervous breakdowns etc.)? How has sound been used as a weapon, becoming a means of torture, a nuisance or a tool of oppression? How do sounds afford, and how do they inhibit? We were curious to learn how the researchers would approach these issues at the conference.

By October 2013, when the conference was held, the ESSA, being a rather young academic society, was happy to welcome more than 450 members (a number which has almost doubled by the time of this issue's release, approaching 800 members): young scholars, experienced researchers, independent researchers and PhD stu-

dents, designers and artists, musicians, bloggers and journalists. And we received more than 150 proposals for peer review for this first conference. Once we had selected the best fitting papers, we still had 60 promising and thought-provoking presentations on how the functionality of sounds could be researched and conceptualised. But what exactly is this notorious *functionality* which stood at the core of the conference? If anything can be called functional, then almost every single moment and action of our lives seem to be under the spell of functionality. But is that true? What is it like to live in such *functional times – sonically*? When you turned on your computer to read this editorial, you had to listen to a series of disjointed system sounds, start-up chimes, alert noises and auditory warning signals, perhaps accompanied by your favourite music in the background or on your headphones. This morning, when entering the building, you may involuntarily have set off the security alarm, the guards quickly materialising looking as if they would beat you up if you did not instantly produce your electronic identification card. As you made a cup of coffee in the kitchen at work or at home, the automated (or humanly operated) coffee/espresso machine emanated a wide range of hissing, beeping and crumbling noises, and while drinking the coffee you read a newspaper article about sound torture. Later, when you entered a subway station sounds announced just about any action taking place down there, accompanied by sounds from mobile phones and game consoles. Once in bed you may be unable to sleep because of sounds coming from the traffic outside.

Functionality in historiography and the public sphere

Approximately 60 papers were given at the ESSA-conference. We decided to select for this special issue a number of these papers turned into articles, mainly exploring aspects of functional sounds in history and the public sphere. A second, complementary special issue of the Journal of Sonic Studies explores different aspects of sound art and popular culture in relation to functional sounds. Most of the articles presented here were delivered as papers in two streams during the conference: a stream on methodologies of sound in the humanities and a stream on cultural politics and sonic experience. We wanted to ask and invite the participants to answer the following questions: In what multifaceted ways can sound as a functionalised phenomenon be studied in the humanities? Can sound be perceived as an important avenue into theorising literature and other cultural productions such as music, visual arts and theatre? What could be narrative functions of the sonic as a methodological approach? Is it possible to move beyond theoretical dichotomies – between the visual and the sonic, the oral and the written, the performative and the objectified – and explore cutting-edge methodological approaches that investigate the manifold implications and functionalisations of the sonic – such as identity con-

structions, aspects of gender, race and ethnicity or of notions of time and space – in literary texts, musical productions or theatre and dance performances? How do sound studies scholars speak about sound, and how can they display or represent a sonic experience in their research publications? What is the special focus that sound studies can contribute to different disciplines and research strands? And how is interdisciplinarity manifested by all this?

With respect to cultural politics and sonic experience we looked for contributions that explored the functionalised sonic in various approaches to the cultural politics of artistic production and perception that have become integral to cultural studies, social anthropology and literary theory over the past decades. How do functional elements of sound constantly cross and challenge geographic, political and cultural borders? How can we address the functional sounds of protest marches, the use of highly functionalised sonic weapons, or the transgressive and, at the same time, highly functional power of bass-oriented club music? Which kinds of sonic practices, media, texts and technologies are used in order to challenge racist, essentialist and Eurocentric ideas of culture? What are the new relationships of the global and the local, centre and periphery, mainstream and sub-culture etc. that are negotiated through sound? What is the function of music as a form of critical noise and participation? How do people listen and produce sound differently within a world in constant flux? How does sound become a matter through which people envision collectivity, agency and change?

Historical approaches to the public sphere and the role functional sounds play there are a way to understand how our individual lives are restricted, regulated, articulated and policed by those sonic regimes. As editors we are particularly interested in listening to artistic research into the functional sounds of the public sphere of, for example, Shanghai sonic epistemologies. In their performance, which was part of the conference's evening programme, Auinger and Strobl manifested musically the sonic materialism present in the city and through their hearing perspective provided us with a gateway for experiencing the sonic materiality of functional sounds in this urban agglomeration – even if we have never been to Shanghai.

Sensory sensibilities and signifying sounds

The five articles presented here explore a wide variety of aspects concerning functionality in the realm of the sonic. And by doing so they use examples from the fields of sonic historiography and the audible public spheres in order to understand how technical dispositives, aesthetic practices and specific sonic artefacts deal with the requirements of functionality. We found it interesting to read and hear how the authors and their research approach and understand the intense aspects of sensory sensibilities, spatial representations and signifying sounds and their more general

approaches to interpreting functional sounds in contemporary societies, mediated representations and history. Another aspect linking those five papers is their decision to let the issue of functionality in sound take them back to the most basic, most situative and corporeal questions of how sound does actually affect the listener. Functionality in sound may therefore not be disregarded as peripheral or marginal, but instead placed at the core of everyday listening experiences.

Darryl Cressman from Maastricht University in the Netherlands presents with 'Acoustic architecture before science: The case of Amsterdam's Concertgebouw' a thorough historical re-reading of the noble history of concert hall acoustics, and he comes to the conclusion, 'Instead of thinking of it as a break with history or the starting point of a modern science of acoustics, the reverberation equation can be considered a more effective form of aural imitation. From this perspective, the acoustic design of the Boston Symphony Hall may have been new and modern, but the actual sound of this building was not. Applied to the design of the Symphony Hall, Sabine's formula was used to replicate the reverberation time of Leipzig's Neues Gewandhaus, because the patron of the Symphony Hall decided that music, and in particular the symphonies of Beethoven, sounded best in this hall'.

As another example of the functionality in spatial sound, Philippa Lovatt from the University of Stirling in the UK explores 'Carceral soundscapes: Sonic violence and embodied experience in films'. She analyses three films, *A Man Escaped* (Bresson, 1956), *Hunger* (McQueen, 2008) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (Bigelow, 2012) in order to unfold their sonic representations of prison experiences: 'Importantly, in these films the phenomenology of sound – the intimacy of the sounding body and the materiality of the space that confines it – foregrounds the personhood of both of these characters. Embedded within the very fabric of the films then is a commitment to human dignity and justice'.

Under the title 'Listening today: James Ferraro's "Far Side Virtual" and the fate of functional sounds' Andrew Cappetta from the City University of New York examines an extensive musical use and assimilation of everyday functional sounds such as the log-on sound of Skype, alert sounds from computer programmes and melodic ringtones. He comes to a conclusion that is of great relevance to the experimental music community: 'While Cage sought to subtly decontextualise sound, highlighting the autonomy of the compositional context, "Far Side Virtual" makes evident that this condition of autonomy is impossible to achieve in the contemporary listening environment, in which music and functional sounds co-exist, fused together as a single entity. Rather, "Far Side Virtual" reveals a greater autonomous sphere: that of the digital music-making and -listening environment. If the experimental music community chooses to address this changed environment of production and consumption, it can no longer pretend to work outside of the commercial dictates

of the digital environment; rather, using Ferraro's "Far Side Virtual" as an example, this community should acknowledge this context and engage in a more concerted resistance within it'.

Leo Murray, Lecturer in Sound at Murdoch University in Western Australia, scrutinises the possibilities of 'Adapting Peircean semiotics to sound theory and practice', and he proposes this specific strand of semiotics as especially useful for the analysis and production of sound in film: 'Applying the Peircean concepts to the actual practices of sound practitioners can help to describe some of the ways the soundtrack is used as well as illuminate the theoretical basis and rationale that underpin the work of sound producers'.

Finally, Melissa Van Drie, Postdoc researcher at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) in Paris, in her article facilitates 'Hearing through the theatrophone: Sonically constructed spaces and embodied listening in late nineteenth-century French theatre'. She explores how the theatrophone was introduced, used and experienced and comes to a conclusion that expands the historical and methodological reach of sound studies: 'From an archaeological position, the theatrophone proposes new historical elements for considering how early sound media were immediately entangled in practices of listening in the education of aural, artistic sensibilities in the nineteenth century. In addition to extending the reach of the theatrical event, the theatrophone was a means of reflecting on sonic practices and, as Proust and Guitry attested, on the possibilities of using the ear as a tool'.

After working with these five authors and their articles, bringing together their various approaches, methodologies, research idioms and objects, this second special issue on functional sounds may open up the field of functional sounds in the most profound way: Their historical findings, original interpretations and the culturally meaningful connections they make between sonic historiographies and the audible public spheres provide an approach to functionality which exceeds any ideas of highly pragmatic effectivity. Functionality, in their reading and listening practices, seems to be a strong reminder of a basic materiality, even of the anthropological character of sonic events. From such an auditory research perspective, the use of and reference to functional sounds in history and the public sphere can be understood as a major generative cultural form in contemporary and historical societies.