

# SOUND; ARCHITECTURE: CATASTROPHE

By Nigel Helyer

nhelyer@extro.ucc.su.oz.au

**S**ound, Architecture and Catastrophe examines the nexus of historical relationships between sound-power and ideology by exploring the metaphoric structures of two sound-sculpture installations (one recent and one which I am currently developing).

“Oracle” (exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney 1995) inhabits the nexus between the body and architectural space by proposing the voice as the carrier of both prophecy and of ideological imperative. In this fusion of *corpus* and *polis* the soundfield simultaneously operates as actuality, as virtuality and as metaphor, to create an architecture *un-frozen!*

The second installation; “Silent Forest” (to be mounted at the San Francisco Art Institute as part of “SoundCulture 96”) proposes that we listen to a silence decreed by political and military power. The work is constructed as a tracing of colonial and (neo) colonial relationships linking cultural form with political force. The installation (& its accompanying Radio broadcast) weave a sonic web between a natural environment under chemical siege - to metaphorically link the creation of an *Ecological* silence (by the massive deployment of dioxin de-foliants in VietNam) with the *High* culture of Western Opera exemplified by the French built Ha Noi Opera House - here Opera is employed as both a sign and transmitter of the colonial process. (I shall explain the leitmotiv later).

## “Oracle”

It is indeed :- *A Tale of Two Cities*, but two cities in the process of falling down. Let us begin with “Oracle”-These are the original instructions for dissolving architecture (Q).

*“And the Lord said unto Joshua, See, I have given into thine hand Jericho, and the king thereof, and the mighty men of valour. And ye shall compass the city, all ye men of war, and go round about the city once. Thus thou shalt do six days.*

*And seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of ram’s horns: and the seventh day ye shall compass the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets.*

*And it shall come to pass, that when they make a long blast with the ram’s horn, and when ye hear the sound of the trumpet, all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city shall fall down flat, and the people shall ascend up every man straight before him.*

Joshua 6, verses 2-5.

isea95@er.uqam.ca T : (514) 990-0229

**ISEA95**  
montreal



We are still amazed that a city might be razed to the ground by sound (but listen closely) its is not the sound of trumpets, but the sound of a "great shout" the sound of the voice, of human resonance. We are sounding bodies, and so a great part of our knowledge of sound is formed in relation to our own sounds and principally through the voice.

Again this falling under the pressure of the voice is distinct from a falling under the agency of the "Word" as propaganda or the metaphorical and imperious - "*in the beginning was the word*". Here the voice is an embodied and powerful instrument - somewhat akin to the *granular voice* of Barthes; operating at the juncture between music and language.

*"The grain of a Russian tenor is....directly the cantors body, bought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages, and from deep down in the Slavonic language, as though a single skin lined the inner flesh of the performer and the music he sings".*

Although explicitly corporeal such a voice is detached from individual expressivity to act symbolically, in effect to act politically - it is body without personality from which issues a battle cry.

In adopting the voice and to a certain extent, musicality "Oracle" enters the problematic and habitually dualistic manner in which 'sound' is conceptualised - as real or as virtual, as signal or as noise, as low-fi or as hi-fi *et al* - establishing the conditions of dilemma - when it may be more useful to consider sound as effectively filling and flowing between the poles of such binary categories, rendering them as marginal rather than central characteristics.

Our (in)ability to recognise and describe sonic experiences is in part due to a dearth of appropriate acoustic metaphors. The metaphoric structure of English is visually overdriven and typically surrenders experience of the aural dimension to the nearest codified category; that of Music. As a surrogate conceptualisation of all sound, Music and to some extent the Voice, absorb our acoustic experiences and suppress the invention of alternative categories of expression. The central issue being - how are we to describe an aural sensitivity which recognises that sound by nature androgynously embraces the real and the virtual, to operate simultaneously as phenomena, as representation (a sign for its source) and as a metaphoric substance, active in the memory and the imagination.

But we should return to ancient history. Naturally the Walls of Jericho *should* have acted as sound baffles - reflecting and rebuffing the sonic assault as they would have deflected arrows and lances - for it is the function of such walls to mark out an interior space; able to guarantee the differentiation of culture and identity - a singularity in the midst of chaos, in the sea of noise.

In the 'architecture' of "Oracle" however, the function of the defensive wall is inverted, the imperative and prophetic voice fusing with the architecture to address us, as citizens. The very fabric of the city is re-formed as an architecture of transmission and prediction and pressed into the service of; a king? the state? of corporate culture?.

You might be familiar with Hitter's statement from the 1937 Manual of German Radio . "*Without the loudspeaker we would have never conquered Germany*" - It's an old story.

Architecture lends its morphology not simply to contain or propagate sound but to modulate and designate sound within a spatial identity. In this respect sound memorises the spatial and textural character of architectonic space, sound being the primary key in our perception of space. Italo Calvino describes the metaphoric correspondence between the physical structures of the body (and perhaps the body politic) with those of architecture - here a king , transfixed upon his throne - trapped immobile, is listening at the centre of his kingdom. From - *The King Listens* by Italo Calvino -

*The palace is all whorls, lobes; it is a great ear, whose anatomy and architecture trade names and functions; pavilions, ducts, shells, labyrinths. You are crouched at the bottom, in the innermost zone of the palace-ear, of your own ear; the palace is the ear of the king".*

"Oracle" develops this, perhaps passive, metaphor by constructing a dynamic Oracular Architecture which functions as a mnemonic device, where language unfolds itself from cold storage. Here the visions and auditions of Nostradamus - memorised across time as text replicate themselves (*a la* Burroughs) in a viral contagion - the word, as the *analogic form* of thought, repopulating, migrating and colonising geographical space and historical time.

To conclude this section quote Nostradamus (perhaps).

*When the animal tamed by man begins to speak, after great efforts and difficulty, the lightning so harmful to the rod, will be taken from the earth and suspended in the air.*

(Radio?).

### Silent Forest

At the second site of falling down we encounter a multitude of silences, but naturally these silences are drowned by the cacophony of rocket motors, aero engines and wailing sirens (but unlike the argonauts we have no wax for our ears!).

Conceptually a "Silent Forest" is intended to address the negative spaces generated by political and cultural events, in the belief that it is these in-articulate voids which often hold the key which allow us to grasp the massive contradictions of our economic and aesthetic realities. So the principal axis here is to actively seek zones of cessation, of inertia of smothering, for they are traces of suppression and marginalisation.

"Silent Forest" juxtaposes multiple silences and loss. The work is sourced within the specific historical and geographic locales of the Vietnamese forest, a forest reduced to silence by chemical defoliants. In the cultural silencing implicit in colonialism, embodied here by the imported culture of European Opera and ironically, in the silence of the Divas themselves since they departed Hanoi in 1954.

As its central icon the work adopts the form of the large carousel of early-warning speakers that still surmount the Opera House in Hanoi. This siren configuration acts as a physical and sonic leitmotiv, delivering the audio works which interrogate the politics of French colonialism and subsequent North American neo-colonialism (and believe me this is a process which has been accelerating since April 1994!!!).

The work weaves a sonic web between a natural environment under chemical siege and the events of 'Opera Culture' as they unfold across a historical matrix in Paris, San Francisco Sydney and Hanoi. The voices of absent species re-emerge alongside arias in a direct linkage of the principal events of the conflict.

Between the sound loci of the Forest and Opera, voice narratives drawn from archival and contemporary sources will flow to locate these historical moments within individual subjectivity - the subjectivity of those who experienced these events.

Physically the work will consist of two sound delivery systems - one modelled on the early warning siren acting as an incongruous image to ironically link the technologies and soundscapes of Warfare with the technologies of Music culture. The second gallery space will house a sonic forest of absences. A matrix of sculptural objects will relay fragments of archival 78 rpm recordings of endangered animals, birds and environments.

The loss, silence or absence evoked by such usage is manifold: in a real sense, many of the animals, habitats and singers on the recordings will be dead - indeed, some of the recorded species may well be extinct. This extinction is doubled by the fact that analogue, disk based recordings are themselves an *endangered species*, the majority of these 78rpm recordings are, in effect silenced, or drowned in their own surface noise. Relegated to the margins by the *hygiene* of digital fetishism.

This is then a re-composed forest, a forest of surface noise, the sound of the needle in the groove, the scratches and clicks creating as much of the rhythmic drive and texture of this forest as the faint calls of creatures.

The vast, empty, dome of the Opera House, as reverberant as a political vacuum, the siren's wailing call and a muted ecology technical and natural ~ may have the resonance of poetry - But I assure you they are also objective realities.

© Nigel Helyer 1995