

..... **Alphabet of Sounds**

A simple explanation of the *Alphabet of Sounds* is that from the ocean of sounds that surround us O+A have made an aesthetic selection, recording, preserving, archiving certain sounds for repeated use. From each of their libraries of decades of recordings, these particular sounds seem to have more resonance, and bear repeated hearing. Over time they have become compositional building blocks ... an "Alphabet of Sounds."

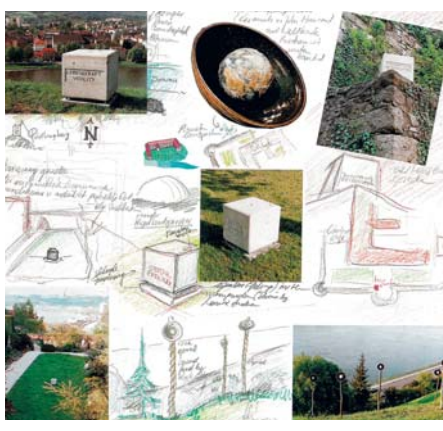
A more complex explanation of *Alphabet of Sounds* quickly turns into a series of riddles. What is the relationship of sound to memory? Why does the sound of gravel underfoot bring back the memory of one young man's grandmother, her white garage, the quiet of her yard, the early morning birds, and a particular time of youth, while to another listener it means nothing? Do sounds encode space and time as well as their own vibrations? How does our brain process these sounds? Why do sounds tend to bring up maps of space in peoples minds—like the girl who knew every squeak in her house, and could tell the position of each inhabitant from these sounds. At least she could until their pet blue jay learned all these sounds, and by imitating the sounds and acoustics disturbed this map. Why does a conch shell call come the ear loaded with ancient meaning, yet the sound of traffic which surrounds us every day seems to have no meaning at all? Do we really know the sound of a gun, or do we merely know the sound of gun sound effects from movies and TV? How have our recording technologies and cell phones altered our ability to hear and remember?

In our exploration of the web of memory, perception, vibration, body sensation, cultural context, architectural acoustics, sound, space and meaning, O+A search for the inner voices, the sounds worth decoding, understanding and repeating. Early last century, the Russian Futurist Vladamir Klebnikov predicted a "sound language of the future." Now in this baroque age of fossil fueled noisemakers, O+A search for meaning in a sea of sound with an ever rising noise floor. They have found an alternative cultural critique based on hearing, and special sounds worth repeating, worth using as a vocabulary, the basis of their form of sound composition: *an Alphabet of Sounds*.

..... **Vertical Game** .....

**25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Ars Electronica @ Franz Josef's Warte**

Franz-Josefs-Warte is an observation tower built in 1888, with a wooden spiral staircase of 126 steps ascending through an enclosed cylindrical plaster and wood acoustic space to an open observation deck. The observer ascends the staircase through layers of vertically stacked soundfields to arrive at the open acoustic space overlooking and overlistening Linz and the Danube valley beyond. Working with their *Alphabet of Sounds*, O+A make use of the special acoustics of the Franz-Josefs-Warte to make a four dimensional sound composition, *Vertical Game*. Since meeting at the Ars Electronica Festival in 1987, O+A have been developing a hearing Perspective of the world around them, exploring the sounds of culture, what they mean, and how they affect us. Their first use of the *Alphabet of Sounds*



was for Ars Electronica 90, when they made a sound cosmology *Garten der Zeiträume* in the grounds of the Castle of Linz in honor of alchemist / astronomer Johannes Kepler. A commemoration of the 750th anniversary of Linz, this 9-month sound composition used the alchemical qualities of the planets as inspiration to create soundfields throughout the castle's gardens. The goal was to create a feeling of slipping backwards and forwards in time, crossing the border between Alchemy and Science, as did Kepler himself. This was also the first use of O+A's iconic "cube" loudspeakers, which produce a hemi-sphere of sound, and couple with the architectural space in a special way. The installation was experienced by 400,000 people.

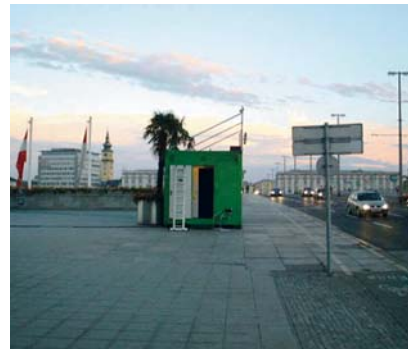


The transformation of public soundspace from noise into harmony was at the heart of the next piece O+A developed for Ars Electronica. *MaxRes* in 1995 altered the harmonics of the Hauptbahnhof in Linz, with a tuning tube on the railway platform generating a harmonic series in response to sounds of trains and people. This sound was sent in real-time to MAX, an anthropomorphic sculpture standing in the terminal, greeting visitors. MAX's feet were formed by a "cube" loudspeaker, he had no genitals, his chest was a video monitor showing the interior of the tuning tube and the trains which were generating the harmonies. MAX's head was a binaural microphone feeding a control and surveillance observation station at the Brucknerhaus. At the Ars Electronica festival, visitors could put on headphones and hear

through MAX's binaural ears, and select filters via internet which would alter the harmonics in the train station. We discovered that the "O Superman" filter would cause the newspaper salesman in the station to burst into song. The "Shatter" filter would draw crowds of school kids in swarms.

In 1997, O+A, working with Ars Electronica, developed the real-time retuning of public space into both installation and performance with the transatlantic real-time piece, *Cloud Chamber*. The Kitchen in New York was fitted with three tuning tubes, gathering and harmonizing the pulse and flow of NYC traffic, and using it as the basic material for nightly performances. The city was used as a huge oscillator, sculpted live and real-time by O+A with guest performers into a pulsing swarming symphonic musical HIVE. An ISDN feed sent the mix to the Ars Electronica Center, where Rachel DeBoer did live video remix, and sent video of Linz traffic patterns back to NYC.

In 2002, O+A brought their audio Camera Obscura, *BOX 3070* to rest just outside the Ars Electronica Center. The bright green container facing the Nibelungenbrücke held a 4.5 meter stereo tuning tube. Within the soundproofed *BOX* real-time harmonic feeds of the city, accompanied by video clues, alternated with scenes from O+A's *Alphabet of Sounds*. A history of the other eight cities visited by the *BOX* was archived within, so visitors could meditate on the various acoustics, economic soundscapes and traffic patterns of Berlin, Rotterdam, Witten, Dresden, Los Angeles, Düsseldorf, Spandau, and Vienna.



Their most recent sound composition with the *Alphabet of Sounds* was *Requiem for Fossil Fuels* at the Sophienkirche in Berlin, commissioned by the Interventionen Festival 2004. This piece used the form of the Requiem Mass as a meditation on upcoming changes in energy use, by finding the Agnus Dei, the Dies Irae etc. in the extracted voices of our urban soundscapes. It was the first time that formal compositional elements of fugue, cannon, and stretto had been used by O+A with the sound materials of their alphabet.

2004 also marked O+A's first major installation in New York City, with *Blue Moon* at the World Financial Center. Sounds of the harbor, waves, boats, tides and air traffic generated three overtone series in tuning tubes fixed to the harbor wall. The sounds were mixed by the tidal action in the Hudson River as it responded to phases of the moon. Five cube loudspeakers marked an exponential arc across the plaza, transforming the random soundscape into a harmonic zone. This was sponsored by Creative Time, World Financial Center Arts and Events, and Battery Park City Authority.



O+A who began their many fruitful years of collaboration at the Ars Electronica Festival in 1987 are pleased to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ARS by showing the evolution of their work in *Alphabet of Sounds—Vertical Game*. Though this particular piece is rooted in architecture, composition, and a visceral sonic language, it has been fed by flights of fancy, the evolution of the internet, and the spirit of international intellectual stimulation embodied by the festival itself.



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