SONIC PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY AND ORBITAL VIEWING*

Nataša Petrešin

> "The electromagnetic spectrum is an immaterial field with very material
>
> consequences, and unfortunately it has become a serious commodity."(1)

Since 9-11, ever more sensitive and pervasive systems of surveillance have multiplied and gained political

legitimacy, leading to ongoing discussions about Echelon, the global interception system, whose ears, eyes and

probes undoubtedly span the greater part of the earth. Heightened security in the contemporary world comes as a

result of what we can openly call the society of surveillance. The ubiquitous layer of the infosphere has radically

restructured established centres of power, shifted borders between the public and private domains, and generally

changed out perception of spatial and temporal dimensions. One of the more significant consequences of this has

been the development of new world mapping initiatives, evidencing physical, psychological or social

deterritorialization, going beyond the geopolitical territories Deleuze and Guattari pointed out two decades ago. This

new cartography concerns not merely the material world but human subjectivity as well. It is as if the process

defined by Guy Debord had been thrown into reverse: the digitised flow of information has become a commodity,

abolishing or undermining the spectacular relation to objects and images. The medium is now "intangible, diffuse

and diffracted in the real"(2).

Conceptually and distribution-wise still quite distinct from the business of contemporary visual arts, new media

artists, acting today as analysts and critics, are working to create a fluid field where reflection on and awareness

about global or local issues can be raised by developing tactical gestures, networked projects and autonomous

contexts for their work. "In an era of intensely networked systems, when you create, it's not just how you create, but

the context of the activity that makes the product", suggests Paul D. Miller (3). In the lineage of early twentieth-

century avant-gardists, media artists often produce collectively, in co-operation with experts from other fields.

Science, to which digital or post-digital culture is easily drawn, necessitates such interdisciplinary collaboration. The

"madness of ownership"(4) – that traditional fortress separating us from them, on-line from offline communities,

power from the (neo)colonised – has been tackled head-on by the open source/free software movement. Reciprocal

file-, database- and software sharing challenges the still prevailing notions of art making as an inspired process. Thus

created networks and platforms generate specific contexts for works or projects, outside the art market and artistic channels of distribution. These expand from documentary, experimental, performative to exemple-setting, informative and demonstration-based art events, situations and structures.

THE CONCEPT IN PROCESS

Over the past decade, Slovenian new media artist Marko Peljhan and a clutch of collaborators from multidisciplinary backgrounds including architecture, art theory, computer sciences and electronic music, have been developing tactical media projects using information and communication technologies from the field of science and the military industry, challenging perceptions of the seemingly self-evident function of the "invisible" infosphere, drawing attention to shifts in centres of the power, and providing strong evidence regarding the surveillance machinery and civil control that lies behind it. Peljhan's most complex and well known project-in-progress is Makrolab, a mobile and self-sustainable unit that brings together scientists and artists in an isolated location for a defined period of time. It has been projected to evolve between 1997 and 2007, and is set up continually in various isolated parts of the world. The first phase took place outside Kassel, Germany, during the most prominent contemporary art event documenta X in 1997. Subsequent phases were located on Rottnest Island in Australia in 2000 and Blair Atholl in Scotland in 2002; in December 2006, Makrolab is bound for Antarctica. The construction of Makrolab draws upon contemporary architectural developments in the design of portable, nomadic buildings, providing a shelter for an autonomous environment inside, one that is powered by natural sources of energy (solar and wind power) and is connected with the world through antennas, ISDN, satellite audio and video signals receivers, radio stations, decoding software etc. Using these tools, a team of selected artists, scientists and technicians undertake a month-long research project on weather systems, telecommunications and migration, expanding these three general fields into the realms of acoustics, solar-power systems, social-evolution systems and strategies, wind-power systems, while archiving the dreams and daily routines of each participant. The process of materialising the surrounding immateriality is the objective of Makrolab; or as Peljhan puts it, the goal is "to transform abstract and intangible qualities and properties present in the world, such as radio waves, atmospheric events or psychic movements, into material, 3D structures, documents, objects through a de-abstraction process." (5) Existing within a limited timeframe, and in a defined space, visible on the Internet through specially created websites and e-mail correspondence, Makrolab as a utopian model intervenes in concrete reality, scanning it thoroughly in what might be

called a permanent survival mode. It is this isolated and insulated position that enables the organism to function as a communications centre and reflective machine; for only this kind of a constructed situation could "produce the code for the evolution of social relations. So, isolated individuals in a restricted space, extended time and intensive communication produce more evolutionary codes in social relations than wide-scope political and geographical social movements." (6)

As a specific extension of the activities within the broader body of Makrolab research, the performative situations named Wardenclyffe accompanied the first station in Kassel in 1997. Makrolab operates outside the spectacle, in physically remote, non-urban spaces, it is a place of a production of knowledge and an archive of acquired data, whereas Wardenclyffe performative situations were realised within a more formal and representational frame, presenting the results of the research done within Makrolab. A sound and video performance, lasting several hours, acted out together with electronic musicians and sound avant-gardists (Aljosa Abrahamsberg, a Slovene sound artist, and the founders of the German post-techno music label Raster Noton, Olaf Bender, Frank Bretschneider and Carsten Nicolai), took place in the lab itself, combining in real time the documented sound material of the three months' telecommunications research with sampling from the frequency generators and broadcasting talks of the performance crew with radio operators from Eastern Europe. The sound and the video that were produced live have been broadcast on the Internet, thus bringing the source of Wardenclyffe's inspiration, Nikola Tesla's never realised 'world telegraphy' project, into a partial, symbolic completion. Tesla's visionary plan of an integrated, interconnecting planetary communications network, was embodied in the world's first transmission station, Wardenclyffe Tower, on the north shore of Long Island. Soon after being erected, between 1901-03, the plans for finishing the Tower had to be scrapped and the Tower destroyed for lack of money needed to complete the project. But Tesla was certain that it could have been the beginning of the unification of the globe by the flux of electrical energy that would traverse the world with the flows of language, images and money (7). He managed to transform Edison's notion of electricity as a consumer commodity into a phenomenon of potentially re-directed energy in which "everything was transcodable and which could instantaneously intervene anywhere, even to literally occupy the full body of the earth and atmosphere" (8).

POLITICAL SONIC PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY

Situationist-like *detournement* is one of Marko Peljhan's aspirations that he endeavours to reflect through his projects. Through the series of sound performances, Wardenclyffe, Solar and Signal Sever!, always on the fine borderline between the existing polarities of legal/illegal, private/public, access/surveillance, Makrolab has expanded its activities into the acoustic sphere, addressing what might be called political sound mapping. The Situationist movement presented the results of its urban drifting in the form of psychogeographical maps, collages of various tables, charts and maps. Borrowing the term from the Situationists, American radical theorist Hakim Bey developed the idea of psychotopographical zones within real world cartography or the digital web (9). On-line communities made up of political-, media- or culture activists use digital networks for communications, political work and strategies. Bey links this phenomenon to the fact that every last square centimetre of the Earth has belonged to some state or other since the beginning of the twentieth century. Whereas the abstract map of Earth is completed, the 'temporary autonomous zone' is open. The psychtopological map, based on human consciousness and the digital web of communications, emotions and interaction, functions as an index of places with the potential to burst into temporary autonomous zones. Their basic goal is finding a space and time to avoid the pressures of mass media and political surveillance, as well as expressing the danger of accepting them as norms.

Translating the information and energy streams that surround us, which could otherwise not be heard or viewed (thus remaining outside our realities and consciousness), into a perceptible and mentally provocative audible and visual event and experience, the process of Signal Sever!'s sound mapping also probes the relationships between accumulated data and its intrinsic message. Such performancs certainly confront viewers with the shock of an unconventional shift of focus on immateriality as a signifier of an enormous source of human manipulation. It means a step further away from the formalist, post-minimalist, post-digital laptop electronica in which the listeners were made to hear inaudible software glitches, skips, clicks and cuts. In a way, such performances move in the opposite direction from those electronic music tendencies that Achim Szepanski described as producing "sensorial shocks and shake-ups rather than meaning and sense effects… Whereas machines transmit information and signals, which contain and relay the information of other machines, meaning is a temporary, codified condition that fills the gaps between these modes of information (10). " Taking the obviously activist aspect of performances that use the 'aether' as a material and the computers, satellites, antennae and radio equipment as tools, we could also talk about Marko Pelhjan's practice of orbital perceiving. As Lisa Parks argues, 'orbital viewing' is a critical practice, involving an

imagined spectatorial position that can gaze both at the planet and into deep space. She suggests that an alternative view is possible, one which goes beyond the usual appropriation by the state, scientific community or corporation. Orbital viewing, instead of notions of 'big brother', offers possibilities for other social formations and interests to become aware of the use and power implications of satellite technologies. "Orbital viewing offers several critical interventions, then. First, it involves the politicization of orbital platforms -- that is, the recognition that the earth's perimeter is now a conduit for thousands of orbiting information machines that produce forms of knowledge that are immediately relevant to social and political struggles on the earth. Second, orbital viewing assumes that it is possible to develop a critical and self-reflexive scrutiny of practices on earth that occur on global, national and local scales. It's not necessary -- nor even desirable -- to achieve an objective, neutral distance from those activities in order to see and analyse them adequately. Rather, orbital viewing attempts to occupy satellite vantage points in order to make visible the operations and effects of a constellation of invisible knowledge machines. Third, orbital viewing is not about eliminating satellite technologies. Instead, it's about struggling over how they have been and should be used. It's about questioning who controls, regulates and accesses orbiting machines that are integrally involved in the organization of time, vision, history and culture. (11)"

NOTES

1. Raitis Šmite and I. Auzina, Marko Peljhan. *Artist as an Expert* (make-world.org/interview_marko.html, 2001).

2. Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra", in: B. Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism. Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), p. 278.

3. K. Jordan and P. D. Miller a.k.a. DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid, *Freeze Frame: Audio, Aesthetics, Sampling, and Contemporary Multimedia* (www.rhizome.org, 2002).

4. N. Bourriaud, "Under the Cultural Rain", in: *Frequenzen [Hz]. Audiovisuelle Raume* (Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle, 2002) p. 136.

5. Marko Peljhan, *Insulation/Isolation Proceedings* (makrolab.ljudmila.org/reports/marko.html, 1997).

6. Ibid. Peljhan deliberately links his approach to that of the Situationists. Their aim of inventing the situations and studying the effects of the geographical setting was to conceive a '*détournement'* in the consciousness of an individual, acting directly on his/her mood and behaviour.

7. J. Crary, "The Eclipse of the Spectacle", in: B. Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism. Rethinking Representation,* op. cit., p. 283.

8. Ibid.

9. Hakim Bey, *T. A. Z., The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York: Autonomedia, 1985).

10. Achim Szepanski, "Digital Music and Media Theory", *Parachute* (Electrosons_Electrosounds), No. 107, p. 27 (2002).

11. Lisa Parks, *Orbital Viewing: Satellite Technologies and Cultural Practice* (www.cas.usf.edu/communication/rodman/cultstud/columns/lp-07-11-99.html, 1999).

*An earlier version of the foregoing was originally written to accompany Signal Sever!, a project developed by theart organization Projekt Atol, founded by Marko Peljhan in 1992, and was published in *Acoustic Space: Media Architecture, Reader 4* (eds.: Rasa Šmite, Raitis Šmits, Riga: The center for new media culture RIXC, 2003, pp. 152-159).

Marko Peljhan was born 1969 in Šempeter pri Gorici, Slovenia. In 1995, he co-founded Ljudmila (Ljubljana Digital Media Lab) and has since 1996 worked in Ljudmila as a programme coordinator in many different fields. He is also coordinator of the international Insular Technologies initiative and the Makrolab project, as well as coordinator and producer of flights for zero-gravity artistic projects in conjunction with the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre in Moscow. See http://makrolab.ljudmila.org. He currently holds a joint appointment with the Department of Art and with the Media Arts and Technology program at UC Santa Barbara.