



ESTHER SHALEV-GERZ

Approaching silence
(on Sound machine)

**KONST GENOM STADEN
ART THROUGH CITY SPACE**

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The presence and circulation of a representation (taught by preachers, educators, and popularisers as the key to socioeconomic advancement) tells us nothing about what it is for its users. We must first analyze its manipulation by users who are not its makers. Only then can we gauge the difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilization.

Michel de Certeau, *The practice of everyday's life*

History is the object of a construction whose place is formed not in homogenous and empty time, but in that which is fulfilled by the here-and-now (Jetztzeit).

Walter Benjamin, *On the concept of History*

When I first came to Norrköping and regarded the city's appearance, I was surprised by the harmonious aspect of the so called "Industrial landscape": it is very clean and calm, like a nicely composed setting that invites visitors to wander through it or take a rest. The present of this place seems to be just the opposite of what



it refers to: the former industrial area, with its noisy textile mills producing a lot of dust and dirt. Only the architecture and the city structure now remind us of this past, but they are renovated and readjusted. The worker's environment is completely transformed, and even the natural environment was manipulated – as the river's water flow has been redesigned.

My starting point was to consider that the industry vanished, and that the traces that were kept point to the esthetical components of the city structure. Visually, the society here had to accept a lot of transformations. I was wondering how this official, urban memory coincides with specific personal memories of elements that physically disappeared over time, and how hidden reminiscences of this past could be reactualized through an artistic intervention.

One of the most distinctive elements of the textile industry that completely disappeared is the sound, the loud and regular noise of the machines that once upon a time determined the acoustic environment of the place. Sound is always a current, ephemeral phenomenon. When the sound source stops, there is no trace left, apart from those inscribed in the affected bodies that keep a particular memory of it. Unlike images that last by the permanency of their constitution, sounds depend on the actuality of their producer. A past sound is lost, can't be retransmitted; it has to be



produced anew. But the loss of a permanent sound awakes the conscience about the fact that it was there, as John Cage made palpable in his works.

So sound is depending on a particular presence. It enters not only into one's ear, producing acoustic effects, but affects the entire body, making it vibrate and feel the sound waves. Being exposed to strong noise influences both the physical and psychical living. The sound's inscription in a body becomes a sort of an index.

I decided to work with women who were pregnant while working in the factory. The spinning factory in Norrköping was an important working place for a lot of women until the 1970s. Working in a factory carried with it exposure to a permanent high noise level. It was not only a continuous, loud sound, but also a monotonous rhythm that went on and on, imposing the time structure of the regular machines that produced it. These sound influences infused the everyday environment of the workers. In this project, I wanted to find out if their permanent exposure to the noise left any traces, any souvenirs in their minds or bodies. I wanted to learn if it influenced their daughters, themselves or their relationship, if mother and daughter share any memories, however diffuse.

By serendipity, through my collaboration with the City Museum, I found a group of women who were pregnant at the time and their



now grown-up daughters. The mother of the curator there worked at the weaving machine at the time, and had kept in touch with some of her former colleagues, and among these friends there were five mother-daughter-couples. By letting them listen to a sound similar to the machine-sounds – from recordings that I made in the city museum from the ancient machines and reworked with a sound designer afterwards - I wanted them to share this exteriorised experience in the present: This situation would create new memories in the now. This moment of concentrated mutual listening was the situation I filmed. After this, I asked them whether they could link any memories or thoughts with this sound, and what else had come into their minds. None of the daughters remembered the sounds, and the mothers remembered the moment when the sound stopped rather than the sound itself. But they evoked other memories, such as details of their particular working situation and their ongoing comradeship with other women– the ex-workers have been meeting to talk about their common times at the factory.

I also reconstructed the machines that were located in the big halls of the factories. I found a couple of blue prints in the City Museum, drafts that helped the instructors of the time to run them. I asked a young 3D designer to construct virtual machines out of the incomplete images. But today there is no memory left of their



functioning. Just as the so-called “industrial landscape” that was given this name after the reconstruction and rearrangement of the buildings, those blueprints didn’t contain sufficient visual and sensible information to really understand their composition: Both have the same lack, the same missing link between the present to the past. The virtual machines are completely invented: their movements are imagined by the designers, their rhythm depends on the mother-daughter pairs’ state of mind.

In the installation of Sound Machine, I assembled these elements in a particular way. First of all, I separated the sound from the images. The sound – the audio track that I gave the women to listen to – was installed under the bridge of Norrköping that connects the former factories with the city. It appears quite ghostly when one traverses the river. One could also hear it outside the entrance door of the Art Museum that housed the other part of the installation, but inside it was silent. The visitor was invited to remember the sound of the machines during the video, or download it from the museums’ web site and bring it along to the exhibition. In this work, nothing is original; everything, except for the participants, is actualized, invented, imagined and constructed.

The silent installation in the museum is composed of several elements - two video projections (one behind the other, slightly



dislocated, so that the visitor can see both at the same time) and six canvases. Each of the videos shows a large room full of green machines – the 3d reconstructions based on the blueprints. These spaces look very authentic; the colours resemble very much the representations of the former working spaces and their equipment. In the videos, the engines operate in a special irregular rhythm. In one of the videos, I inserted the image of the two women seated next to each other as they listen to the sound in front of the machines. I filmed them in front of a blue screen – a technique of the film industry since the 1950s that was common for many years and allowed back-projection of different backgrounds. I could have inserted the women in very different realities, making shifting images and times.

Each mother-daughter-couple is shown in front of a different background: the machines behind them are personalized in a way, each kind of machine is attributed to one couple. The reactions of the women to the (now absent) sound determined the movements and flows of the imaginary machines that thus are activated by the memories and thoughts.

On the walls of the exhibition space were hung six illuminated, lilac canvases reminiscent of the factory’s former textile productions. By coming closer, one can discern words written in a



style that recalls technical instructions. Those words and sentences were taken from the interviews with the women: I extracted some of their statements, the ones I kept in my mind, and converted them into present tense and gave them a shortened written form inspired by telegraphic, incomplete and fragmented instruction formats. The sixth canvas's text retraces, in the same style, my approach, thoughts and working process.

1

Being in sound that is too loud with earplugs is fine as long as the result is nice fabric
Recognizing the sound after so many years
Hearing the sound brings back the machines that one wanted to get away from
The big halls filled with many machines are very noisy
Opening the door and getting hit by the loud sound of countless weaving machines
Sound coming straight into the head
Walking outside yet still hearing the sounds inside through the walls
Tiring for the head to hear hard, loud noise all day long

2

Watching bands to search for missing threads
Locating the error; walking down to the machines
Informing the weaver; correcting errors
Recognizing the distant sound
Comradeship remaining strong within the factory
Uniformity prevails by workers dressed in coat and clogs
Dirty, dusty work without finesse



All the factory occupants hearing the dull sound
Never talking about sound
Going to locker-rooms next to machines; sound grows louder
Not liking the dusty, heavy sound
Always hearing machines in the background
Bad hearing because of the noise during pregnancy
Being heavy for the head
Needing to shout and stand close to be heard
Factories shut down; machines are quiet

3

Walking quickly through the noise
Liking the workplace
Hearing sound; but forgetting the aspect
Needing to run outside to talk
Sounds belong to the factory
Shutting-down is hard to imagine.
Thinking it is a joke
Liking it before.
Meeting monthly and remembering co-workers

4

Sound deafening the first week; the next week getting used to it
Living in the sound makes it disappear
Sound more fun than boring
Knowledge disappears.
Old guys, now dead, know how to start machines with a special noise
Closing comes as a shock
The sound is noticed more by non-workers
Walking around in sound



*Remembering the sound as monotonous but not hideous
Positive memories and no complaints*

5

*Wondering about how people can stand the noise and vibrating floor
Remembering noise and still wondering
Learning about the shutting down by a letter in a brown envelope
Inconceivable to not be warned
After maternity-leave working for a month before shut down
Progressive shut down in headlines
Remembering the “shub” sound
Noise that can’t be worked in
Shivering while hearing the sounds
Many machines hammering all the time
Four workers being simultaneously pregnant with daughters
More than a hundred workers yet quiet and calm
Mending as an art and good feelings
Rhythmical sound, rather like music
Unimaginable working in such noise
Admitting it has all gone*

6

*Mother and foetus exposed to noisy environment
For the workers seeing is more important than hearing
Sound is physical
Noise ends at the time of birth.
Only mothers wear mikes during recording
Constructing three-dimensional machines from blueprints of real machines
Animating the machines according to women’s behaviour
Projecting the video in silence*



*Relocating the sound to the bridge
Sound filtered and modified in time and space
Re-exposing to sound
Film possibly runs for 4 minutes 33 seconds
Machines still working in the museum
Inventing the functioning of the machines
Representation of interviews in texts*

In this work, the visitor is invited to link the different elements by traversing the city, passing through different spaces and remembering the sound elements in order to connect them with the images. Memory is created by the imaginary meeting between the visitor and the separate parts of the work, by actively going through the different elements that each rebuilds a possible connection with the past kaleidoscoped into the present. The approach is both sensible and intelligible: This is how the vanished parts of the city’s history are re-invented according to actual forms of remembering and imagining the past in and through the present.

