

xxxx_terrain at sonsbeek20->24 – force times distance on labour and its ecologies

by sam auinger 2021

“To do my work – to pause and to listen – is a way of being. Sometimes this makes me stumble, and sometimes it makes me dance. It pushes me to realities, it brings fear, and it brings joy. It gives strength, and it exhausts. In the end, I need to talk to you.”

Let me sketch a brief background to my piece xxxx_terrain and give you some context based on my long-term artistic research:

I was born in Upper Austria in 1956, and I spent a large part of my childhood on my grandparents' farm on the outskirts of Linz. A vital practice in my living environment at that time was listening to the surroundings. Sounds and noises were essential sources of information for coping with tasks of everyday life, and music served as a means of social interaction. The living conditions and sound of this habitat led naturally to "thinking with the ears." I experienced this as a world in which humans constantly communicate with their environment through their senses.

Most of the things that were discussed, proposed, or worked on had a direct tangible outcome. Natural conditions and forces like weather, seasons, day and night cycles, and cultural traditions acted as a kind of conductor, providing a structure. This sounds like centuries ago, but at that time (sixty years ago), I think what I experienced was a kind of general condition in everyday life in European rural environments. Indeed, even then, city life was much less tied to natural cycles. Citizens no longer needed to organize their daily lives through sensual information.

For more than 30 years, I have investigated, studied and researched the sonic commons (O+A 2009), the atmospheric and auditory (sonic) qualities in our living environments, and interdependencies deriving from it. I pause and listen, and this reveals many things that remain hidden in the visual sense. Seeing provides information about the surface of objects and spaces with clear lines of edges and borders. Listening gives me access to their inner materials and processes, different interactions and entanglements, and sharp or blurry boundaries. It reveals a dynamic world in constant flux.

The almost unbearable, overwhelmingly visual nature of our economy and culture is undeniable. Slowing down and developing a praxis for attentive listening brings a general change in sensing the environment. By doing so we will change not only how we hear the world around us, but we will smell more, and we will see and notice different things. We experience things where and when they really happen, rather than through mediated representations, sensing space and time as a coherent whole. We start to read atmospheres and get an idea of what makes a place. Great artists and thinkers have written about this and provide deep insights for a deeper understanding of these topics' physiological and psychological aspects. Still, what I really care about, and the whole point these days is doing the work needed, coming into action, walking the terrain, experiencing it, and pausing and listening. In that sense, xxxx_terrain is dedicated to you.

xxxx_terrain is an invitation to visit various marked "Listening Sites" – to linger, explore, experiment, listen and engage with their audible properties and qualities.

Within walking distance, four different landscapes come together: the urban, the cultural, the industrial, and the terrestrial. Each has its own sense of time and rhythm, its unique material conditions, and different spaces of activity. All carry many layers of meaning that tell stories and sing songs. To discover and connect with them, one has to spend time there, walking around, revisiting the same spot, pausing, and listening. In this way, we can hear the information revealed and feel the emotional effects that the audible has to offer.

To participate in xxxx_terrain means slowing down and getting in touch with the senses and the spaces around. The more time spent experimenting, exercising, pausing, and listening, the more we start to think with our ears. For example, when we walk next to heavy traffic noise or experience how motorized traffic dominates the soundscape, we hear energy consumption. But we also hear a car-friendly environment, which means we hear a way of life at that moment. On the other hand, when we enjoy a certain quietude in nature, this can be joyful or alarming – perhaps we wonder, "shouldn't I hear insects too?"