

Spaces of sorts : Q-O2 arts laboratory from inner to outer space

sharing spaces

Space and spaces are there in sorts.

Inspiring ones, depressing ones, shared and lonely ones, neutral ones;
inner and outer, round and square, open and closed, constructed and natural, tiny and huge;

laboratories, air castles, beehives, ivory towers, labyrinths, rooms with a view;

exclusive spaces, common spaces, communicative spaces;

given spaces like cities, fields, forests, cellars, attics, sea sides;

abstract spaces like ideas, images, memories, fantasies.

All spaces have their own sound, their own thoughts, their own times, their own right.

Sound and space can't do without each other, that is common knowledge by now.

Sound is shaped by space, and space, its atmosphere, acoustic and translucence, is determined by sound.

Sound reveals information on an intuitive, often unconscious, and consequently mostly honest level, and can be therefore strongly manipulative. It sets a tone. However, this goes mainly for environmental sound. A distinction needs to be made between environmental or accidental sound, and composed or planned sound which is music.

When environmental sound is unintentional, music is composed, made with a purpose and often for a specific kind of space. In this sense music is manipulative and determining the space, making it appear big or small, friendly or hostile. Music is generally composed with the aim to be shared, to bring about togetherness. This concerns inner as well as outer space: the physical space a group of people share at that moment, and the mental space, state of mind, feeling, atmosphere, vibe - however we call it.

The primary and distinctive duality in this prism can be considered between internal and external, or mental and physical space, which function as corresponding barrels. When two minds in music meet they can get into exchange through images, language, scores, but a physical space will be needed to make the music actually sound.

Sharing ideas – and let's call music ideas - and sharing space alters the perception of both, because it changes perspectives, and highlights different angles. In this sense at Q-O2 there has been the sharing of both, the opening up of mental, perfectly abstract worlds of ideas, while also testing and realising them in real space and time.

artistic laboratory / experimental space

Q-O2 as a laboratory for experimental music and sound art builds on this interaction between thought and its materialisation. At its core lays the offering of time and space for artists residencies and research, but also proceeds at set times to organise concerts, mostly in cooperation with larger venues, as well as a yearly project or festival around a topic which has emerged from the residencies. Spaces and the relation between space and sound have been a red thread throughout this work as an arts laboratory since the beginning, not only in collaborative projects but also in the continuous sharing of new ideas and in trying to understand and communicate new musical realms, as well as the exploration of real architectural and urban space.

Q-O2 has emerged from the ensemble for contemporary music with the same name, and since 2006 has its own space in the centre of Brussels. Here, just like in a scientific laboratory, an allowance of time and space is given to experiment, to carry out research, and to concentrate on conceptualisation and realisation. It straddles both the burgeoning of artistic ideas and their concrete materialisation with presentation to an audience, and as such is above all centred around process and research. The continuous influx of personalities, artistic ideas, ways of approaching things, technical and logistic questions, has fuelled its ongoing continuation. The output is just as diverse as the different aspects of the residencies. Whilst some experiments eventually proved to be fruitless, or remained unnoticed by the outside world, others pushed artists toward new horizons, collaborations emerged, and ideas have been carried out.

In musical terms Q-O2 explores mainly three lines of approach: improvisation (both acoustic and electronic), composed music, and installation/sound art. However, through its conceptual preoccupations, Q-O2 easily finds itself open to other disciplines, whether they be artistic or scientific. The multidisciplinary aspect in this sense is evident.

In the creational chain which propels an idea towards an artefact, Q-O2 has its place very near to the source, at an often still embryonic stage. It is in the first place a safe house in which failures are allowed as they might lead to new discoveries. But artists are also stimulated to let themselves be confronted with other contexts, to leave their comfort zones. This opportunity is enabled through set thematic frames and collaboration. Through these Q-O2 itself has made a trajectory amongst many different stages and virtual spaces, from the abstract head-space made of ideas, via architectural and sonic space, to the urban context in recent years. Space and spaces have been often topic, inspiration, and sometimes also obstacle and confrontational to our projects. This is unavoidable since space is given and is everywhere.

Artistic research / shared mental space

The purpose of artistic research and development, as in science, is to keep art alive, to keep paying attention and to question habits. Music and (sound-)art is permanently renewing and reinventing itself, reaching ever new conclusions and artefacts despite the limited amount of genuinely new material. However, the renewal can only happen collectively. It is a complicated tissue in which each of all the individuals involved has a different role; from experiment to clear definition; between creating, mediating, and assimilating. Nothing significant happens without connection to the world and communication with others. No idea can experience development without resonating from one head into another. Although the ingredients are seldom new, the conclusions are, and therefore have to be made in a context in order to be relevant.

The investigation happens on two levels which are closely connected: individually and collectively. Without individual research there would be no starting points; but just as crucial for the continuation of the whole artistic biotope is exchange. An artefact as an artistic conclusion gains meaning only by the imprint it makes in others. It cannot exist on its own. At an early immature stage the research ideas have to be tested, experimented with, taken up and exchanged by and with others from the field, until they are ready to be similarly valuable to a larger public. Different people take specific

positions in this: Some are good at proposing, others at listening, observing, verbalising, executing, presenting, etc. Yet all these tasks are important, and often intermingle. Re-interpretation, a change in perspective, defining as precisely as possible what is experienced, heard or seen, provides ever more clarity, and thus development. For artistic research the product can be the ultimate project, but cannot be the immediate goal. Accidents and coincidences are fruitful for discoveries, and can offer solutions. Nor is the unity in time and place necessary; it is not exceptional that it takes years or decades to draw everything required out of certain starting points. The trajectory through different imaginary and real spaces highlights different angles.

With music and sound the most important and at the same time the most intriguing and necessary quality in a researcher is an availability to listen. It is the main means of observation in this domain. The receiver of the aural message needs to clear inner space to receive an imprint from it. This way of listening does not serve expectations, but requires a genuine openness and availability to experience. Nonetheless there will be a gap in the communication, which the listener needs to actively fill in with his or her own inspiration, if a mutual resonance is intended.

Form, frame and context are supportive to the advancement of the research: by setting up a good situation, messages can be received by the best means possible, with an open and calm mind - we have all had the experience that music can speak to us in certain spaces, but remain hermetic in others. By setting a frame, the amount of options can be pleasantly limited (even temporarily) and habits can be avoided; a specific context can enhance aspects of a work or of an idea, and can provide a feeling of legitimisation. In this same way, silence can clear some space and provide the potentiality of a white sheet of paper - a start from scratch.

Playing space / sounding space

Space is important as (sonic) facilitator, but can as well become given material. Space is sound, and appropriately framed it can become composition and art. It can be appointed protagonist in a performance, it can be resonator, it can play itself, or can be played. Sound art on the other hand tends to create sonic space, which the public is invited to explore at their own rhythm.

In the tradition of Cage and Fluxus many of our artists and projects have dealt with these opportunities. In the early works of some minimalist composers the performers do nothing but mark a space and situation with a few sounds and their presence. Monochrome, simple material as well as silence are appropriate material for such projects. Others thematize sound as phenomenon and primary material which opens up a sound world in any real space. George Brecht's work frames everyday situations, normally overlooked, and somehow validates them. Many field recording artists approach their work in the same way, with or without recording material, regarding fields as spaces, big or small, built or natural, human or not. Spaces can be situations, opening up in an ephemeral way, but leaving an imprint nonetheless. Such approaches mean to pay attention to the world at hand, rather than building emotional universes.

For sound art the relation presents itself slightly different: it creates sonic space and needs therefore to be placed carefully in a suitable spacial context. Often it even

requires a certain protection, unless it is specifically designed to relate to given space. It is in the nature of sound art that it creates itself an already sometimes complicated relation between an architectural and a sonic space, such that an eventual interaction with a presentation space needs to be carefully weighed. At Q-O2 we have been involved in the materialisation processes of sound art works, but also have experience that a neutral space can even allow a mutual enhancement of several works in one space, if carefully placed.

Urban and social space / public and private

The most outward shared space - which in this sense can be seen as the last step in the chain of opening up into yet bigger and more mixed, complex and non-committal sonic spaces - is the public space. Recently for Q-02, as well as for many of the involved artists and the general political climate, this has gained a main importance.

Urban space is the space which is shared by all people, regardless to their socio-cultural backgrounds and intentions. It is problematic that this sharing happens often in a systemic way, people knowing their kin overseas far better than their nextdoor neighbours. In general, life seems to have withdrawn into private realms, fleeing the predominantly unpleasant experience of public space, whilst urbanistic decisions generally don't help this situation. High on the scale of problematic factors is sound, experienced as noise. A vicious circle has ensured that humans have ceded the public sonic space to machines which they want to provide comfort but prefer not to hear. By now, public space is generally used, not shared, which we believe with philosopher Martha Nussbaum to be harmful for a healthy society.

Q-O2, located in the very centre of a metropole, is directly concerned with the recent developments and discussion about urbanity, identity, integration and multi-culturality. The city influences both our own and our artist's choices, but the city itself also takes note of this workspace and is influenced and changed by it. An urban context meets other challenges than a rural context, and develops in an other way. It fuels the discussion about how political art can be - or if it can even ever be nonpolitical. Also, negation is reaction.

The doubts of artists and arts organisations about their place in society, together with the issue of participation is as openly and heavily discussed as never before. This has brought on the wish to explore and 'conquer' public space, and to share artistic processes with people who live in other sociological systems than the art world.

Brussels has always been a very friendly city to art and artists. The centre has from the eighties on provided generously space and freedom, as it was more or less deserted. The bilingualism and the resulting intersection between Latin and Anglo-Germanic culture has an inspiring effect, as has the multi-culturality which was provided by different waves of immigration from different corners of the world. Brussels is a great playground for artists.

Concrete projects and critical note

Coming from a tradition of classical music, a first step to sharing was the turning away from the frontal, rather consuming one-way situation of classical concerts. This meant using existing space in an other way, including the addressing of peers and setting up

discourses. Discussion became important, but also different practices such as improvisation, deep listening, and inter-disciplinarity. From this followed in an organic way the construction of and search for new spaces.

With this starting point and the above-mentioned different topics and questions at hand Q-O2 has curated and organized a large amount of projects in private, public and open sonic space, from field recording to sound walks to outdoor performances. The overall aim has always been exploration and research, and consequently most of them were exciting, but also regularly left a question mark, and consequently led to new questions, starting points, details and projects.

Two early projects in this spirit were 'De Tijd is Rond/Le Temps est un Cercle' in 2000 and 'Abstract Adventures' from 2001 to 2004. With the first we made a reminiscence to the change of the century with a series of twelve very different collaborative projects which were tested on different urban contexts, once a month over the course of a year. 'Abstract Adventures' had a more introspective nature, stemming from the simple idea to juxtapose each time three works or projects with different artistic and/or formal approaches within experimental and avant-garde music, presented during three consecutive days. A former swimming pool provided inspiration and space for the resulting reflections and discussions.

In 'DoUndo/recycling G' a reservoir of continuous, monochrome, exceedingly tone-rich and partly distorted sounds was presented to a number of (sound) artists for further processing, whilst exploring the nature and uniqueness of sound. Here sound becomes spacial in itself, a universe being passed on and becoming touchable through the rather unusual spaces in which the results were performed.

2010 saw the launch of the project '///2009// - what do you make of what I say', in which 10 sound artists were invited to make a 7-minute-long sound work as a response to one made by an unknown predecessor. The objective was to explore exactly and specifically how we observe music without secondary information, and whether it is possible to 'understand' experimental music per se. It was a pure recording project, detaching a sound universe from a real space. But in this project a very crucial aspect was that of the self-reflection, which was documented in accompanying book.

Together with a number of residents Q-O2 then turned toward an interest in work with environmental sound and field recording. This resulted in the first place in 'Sounds of Europe', and the related 'Field Fest'. For both the main aim was to provide a platform for the biggest range possible of approaching this as a practice, in material and in content.

To invite and co-curate a Brussels edition of 'Tuned City' felt like a natural prolongation of the topic, and complementary at the same time. Much of what had been addressed in 'Sounds of Europe' came back in a real-time and -place version during the preparatory workshops and meetings with the city's people, organisations and politics, and of course during the four day festival. The overall aim of 'Tuned City' is the research on the relation between sound and space, and during the festival we addressed sub-topics of Noise, Situations and Atmosphere with conferences, installations and concerts, mostly in public space. The most difficult and only partially successful aspect in the realisation was the social transversality. At moments there was an awkwardness to work around the city's sound world without always being

accessible for the whole of its inhabitants. This was not a matter of intention but of (artistic) vocabulary and form.

The latest projects however, 'Finding Song Home' by Kaffe Matthews, and the series 'Voice-Gender-Language-Identity' which are planned for the near future, tackle these topics as collaborations with different communities from our near neighborhood. The challenge is to counter political polarisation with participation, to open up the closed spaces of sociological systems into permeability.