



Thinking eye, wandering ear

Jacek Smolicki & Tim Shaw

To cite this article: Jacek Smolicki & Tim Shaw (2021) Thinking eye, wandering ear, Journal of Landscape Architecture, 16:3, 76-81, DOI: [10.1080/18626033.2021.2046787](https://doi.org/10.1080/18626033.2021.2046787)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/18626033.2021.2046787>



Published online: 07 Mar 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 286



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Thinking eye, wandering ear

Jacek Smolicki and Tim Shaw

Soundwalking is the practice of walking through a space while prioritizing listening. Evolved through the research of the World Soundscape Project, early soundwalking experiments studied the transformation of soundscapes in Vancouver in the late 1960s.¹ The group consisted of scholars, composers and artists united by an interest in sound and environment. As Hildegard Westerkamp described:

Simply put, a soundwalk is any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment. It is an exploration of our ear/environment relationship, unmediated by microphones, headphones and recording equipment. It is an exploration of what the 'naked ear' hears and how we relate and react to it.²

Ever since, the practice has evolved and become absorbed by artists, urban planners, designers and activists as both a medium for ethnographic research and an artistic or meditative method.³ If given enough attention, the spaces around us may reveal to us their thick sonorities that may otherwise be imperceptible. Much depends on our sonic sensitivity, our biases, cultural norms, filters and preconceptions through which we perceive the world around us.

In many cases, soundwalking is a way of defamiliarizing those established and taken-for-granted ways of hearing the world, a method of discovering other positions, perspectives and angles from which the complex soundscape can be listened to and from which it listens back. In recent times we have witnessed a growing interest in soundwalks as a form of paying attention to environmental changes around us and acknowledging other species who actively, although often imperceptibly, participate in the shaping of our sonic ecologies. Soundwalking is one way of being in tune with those other-than-human realms and actors, a way of accepting that our position (and ways of listening from it) is only one among multiple others.⁴

Our senses operate in a complex relationship to one another. They are never autonomous. Listening is one of many ways of connecting with and understanding the world; it informs other senses, just as other senses support our ability to hear. Attentive listening, which can be achieved through soundwalking, can be approached as a way of foregrounding our hearing; it can allow us to rethink our own ways of sensing, but also our relationship to the space at large. Carefully listening to spaces can make us see things differently, transversally.⁵ It can aid in detecting undercurrent transformations that the landscape undergoes, tell us something about the future evolution of places we wander through as well as about the historical characteristics of the place at hand.

Note from the editor:

This curated article introduces a new format for Thinking Eye: 'In Conversation.' 'In Conversation' presents the work of two practitioners, artists or academics whose methods and interests are complementary and able to enhance one another.

The account below is a result from a soundwalking experiment that the two of us conducted in July 2021. We decided to visit places unfamiliar to us, although within a distance of a one-hour commute from where we live in Stockholm and Newcastle. We selected places for each other and agreed to be at designated starting points at the same time. From those starting points (a train station in Palmersville in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and a tram stop in Brevik on the island of Lidingö, Stockholm) we embarked on unscripted, intuitive walks while remaining in touch via a communication app (Signal).

We did not establish any rules to our itineraries. Serendipity and listening were the mere guides. The excursion resembled a psycho-geographical experiment, similar to those performed historically by the Situationist International.⁶ The account below is built of materials we gathered through diverse recording techniques during these two simultaneous walks. They include transcripts of spontaneous thoughts and notes on the encountered soundscapes, visualizations of GPS data, snapshots and spectrograms. This simultaneously performed documentation concurrently disrupted our engagements to our local environment (by transporting material from one sensorium to another) and strangely cross-pollinated our sonic trajectories (by making us pay attention to distant phenomena that in turn inspired us to sense the local ones differently). Therefore, besides two autonomous itineraries, there was a third soundwalk taking place, wherein pieces of each of the walks' soundscapes were mediated to and absorbed by the counterpart walker. What emerged out of these transferences of thoughts, images and sound snippets was a heterotopic space, a hybrid territory that will never be constituted again.⁷ What this experiment made us think of is that hybridity is something inherent to any space. In our case it became additionally exaggerated, but any walk in any environment today seems to be increasingly a form of mobility through a place of elements ever less native and more transitory. Fleeting, of distant origins and of far-reaching reverberations.

NOTES

1 R. Murray Schafer, *Soundscape, Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1977).

2 Hildegard Westerkamp, 'Soundwalking', *Sound Heritage* 3/4 (1974).

3 Tim Shaw and John Bowers, 'Ambulation: Exploring Listening Technologies for an Extended Sound Walking Practice', in: Romain Michon and Franziska Schroeder (eds.), *Proceedings of NIME* (New Interfaces for Musical Expression, 2021), 23-28.

4 Julie Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters & Social Imagination* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2005).

5 Smolicki, J. (2021), 'Minuting: Rethinking the Ordinary Through the Ritual of Transversal Listening', *VIS - Nordic Journal for Artistic Research*, 5, available at: <https://www.visjournal.nu/minuting-rethinking-the-ordinary-through-the-ritual-of-transversal-listening>, accessed 30 March 2021.

6 Ken Knabb (ed.), *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981).

7 Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias' (1967), *AMC: Architecture Mouvement Continuité* (October 1984), 2-9.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Jacek Smolicki is an interdisciplinary artist, designer and soundwalker. His work brings historical, critical and existential dimensions to practices concerned with recording, listening, archiving and mediating stories from diverse sites, scales and temporalities. He is currently a postdoc researcher at Linköping University, exploring soundwalking and field recording practices from the perspective of media arts, environmental humanities and philosophy of technology. He has performed and exhibited internationally, engaging with such media as soundwalks, soundscape compositions, expanded forms of writing, site-responsive performances and experimental archives.

Tim Shaw is a lecturer in Digital Media at Newcastle University. His practice is concerned with the many ways people listen, specifically how listening environments can be constructed or explored using a diverse range of techniques and technologies. He has a background in recording sound and his practice is anchored in the creative use of field recordings. He is interested in appropriating communication technologies to explore how these devices change the way we experience the world. Shaw presents work in galleries, festivals, museums, through residencies and cultural events nationally and internationally.

CONTACT

Jacek Smolicki

Linköping University
Department of Culture and Society
Building Key, Room 4150, Campus Valla
Linköping, Sweden,
jacek.smolicki@liu.se
www.smolicki.com

Tim Shaw

Digital Cultures Studio
Culture Lab and Fine Art
Newcastle University
tim.shaw@ncl.ac.uk
tim-shaw.net



THE MAP USED IN THE VISUALIZATION COMES FROM OPENSTREETMAP AND IS LICENSED UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION-SHAREALIKE 2.0 LICENSE (CC BY-SA 2.0). © OPENSTREETMAP CONTRIBUTORS.

1 Tim Shaw

From the metro station to the park is a short walk but not one primed for pedestrians. Busy roads and industrial estates create barriers between paths and pavements. Once in the park the walking experience is much more pleasant, a choice of directions within the park make traversing this landscape much easier. Though this is a place for walking it wasn't always this way. The paths are built on old wagonways built to transport coal and material in and out during the various industrial revolutions. The transport now is very different.

2 Jacek Smolicki

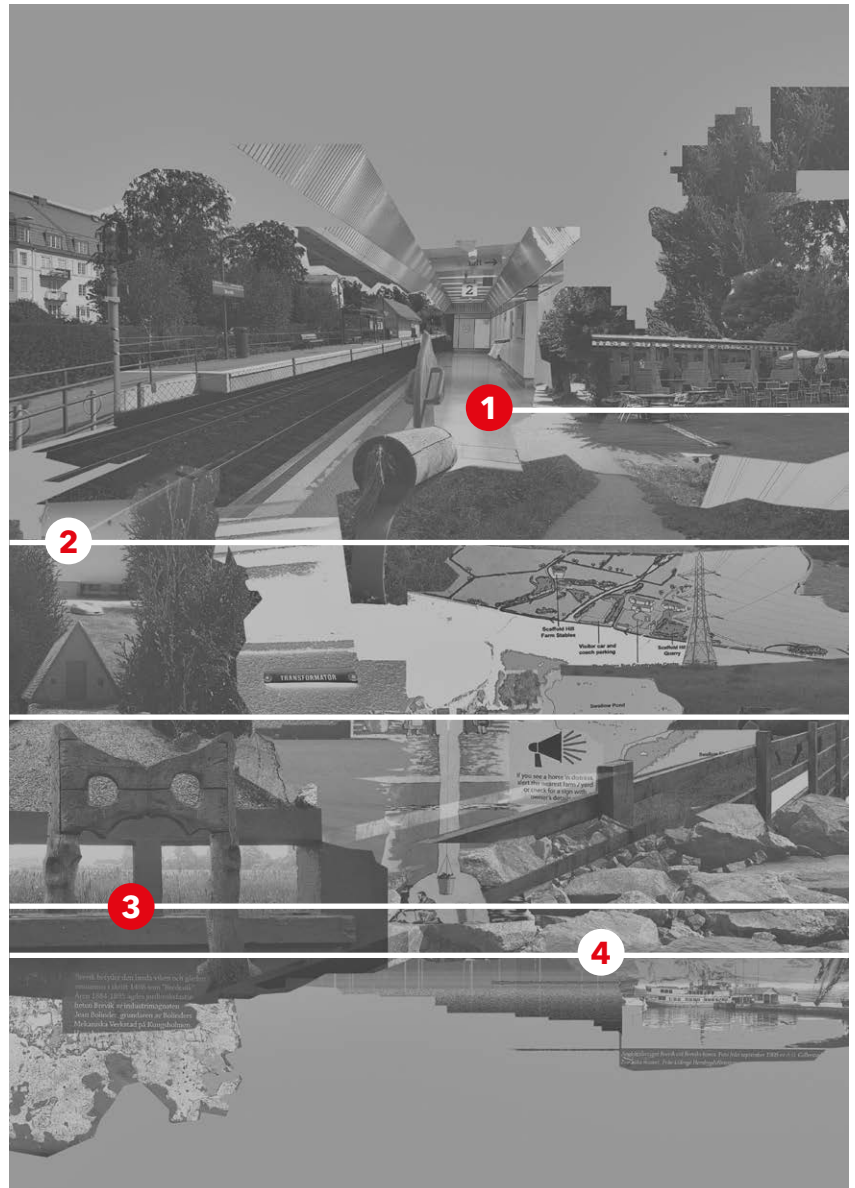
Brevik is a small neighbourhood on the island of Lidingö in Stockholm. It has about 9,000 inhabitants. In the summer, similar to many other residential areas, Brevik feels almost empty. Many of its inhabitants take an annual break, travelling to their summer destinations. Any unexpected visits to the neighbourhood, such as mine, are seen as suspicious and keep those who remain here on guard. The majority of sounds one encounters here seem to be generated by passive elements of infrastructure (electricity transformers, switchboards, utility poles) and nature (breezes, waves, birds). One of my first encounters is with the monotonous buzz of a robotic lawn mower, a device at once autonomous and yet closely orchestrated by the vegetation of grass.

3 TS

Before reaching the huge pond I hear its presence in the landscape. Nesting birds circle around this large body of water. The water invites a different sound, the absence of trees, grass and hedges is replaced by the lapping water, reeds and the consistent sound of birds and they fly around its periphery. These sounds add a complex diversity to the heavy, broadband traffic experienced earlier by the highway.

4 JS

This unscripted walk takes me to the coastline. Sailing boats squeak in the marina, animated by the waves, typically soft though occasionally amplified by the traffic in the bay. In those moments, the overall silence disappears, unconsentedly ripped off by the cavitation noise of jet skis, luxury motor boats and ferries. A dip of hydrophones further reveals the intensity of the noise that, as many studies have shown, significantly disturbs marine species, in some cases even causing their radical decline. With hot summer days, human noise migrates from the land to the sea. And so do its consequences.





5 JS

One way to get to Kottlasjön (Kottla Lake) at the opposite side of the bay after crossing a road, is by walking along a path in the forest. This narrow path must have emerged as an addition to a straight strip of land for a power transmission line carried aloft by an array of massive pylons. In an incidental manner, this clearing works as an amplification tube for traffic noises. Over time, however, the pylons have been appropriated by crows. Being the tallest elements in the area, those metallic constructions serve as perfect vantage points for birds to monitor the place and communicate, which is what I am witness to during my walk.

6 TS

Feeling hungry, I decide to walk to the café that, according to the map, is located in the centre of the park. On route I hear two women with pushchairs mention another café nearby; listening in on their conversation I change direction and head towards this new, more underground café. My journey is conveniently diverted due to my heightened sense of listening.

7 JS

Right by the lake, I unexpectedly come across a large brick building. As I learn from a plaque, in the past it was a water treatment station, but today the building serves as a café and restaurant. The atmosphere is tranquil and despite many people hanging out here, quietness prevails, as if the local aura hypnotized and subconsciously shifted everyone's sonority into the same, barely perceptible frequency range. But a century ago the local soundscape was radically different. Complex machinery was deployed here to clean the previously extracted lake water through the infusion of ozone, a powerful oxidizing agent that eliminates all microorganisms, bacteria and viruses. After reading this, many facets of the surrounding landscape and soundscape begin to appear to me as disturbingly sterile.

8 TS

A café is situated in a farm, it's a farm shop and coffee house. It is not like any other farm I have seen before. Goats, lamas, geese, chickens, pigs, horses, birds and people occupy the sonic and visual space. A cacophony of voices interrupt and interfere with one another. There is also a falconry display. A young girl brings out a huge falcon suitably named Apollo. It flies off into the nearby forest and a special piece of radio equipment is brought out to locate and retrieve it. The accelerating and descending beeps add to the already complex soundscape.

9 TS

I was invited into the back area of the falconry, where large birds are harnessed to the ground by small pieces of rope. They let off an arrhythmical array of cries. The soundscape is intense and oppressive. The flap of wings, the rattle of cases, the distress of caged animals. I don't stay for very long here. I head back to the sanctuary and openness of the Rising Sun Country Park.

10 JS

Finally, I encounter some elements of the space that are not contaminated by a managerial thought of a human. Cut down by local beavers, numerous collapsed trees occupy the bank of the lake. I try to imagine soundscapes that accompanied those animals' painstaking activities. Often approached as pests that damage environments because of misaligning with human visions of the land, beavers actively extend wetland areas, counteracting effects of droughts and supporting the emergence of diverse ecosystems. From the perspective of sound, these wetland architects are also co-composers of soundscapes. Even if non-intentionally and indirectly, their interventions thicken the scope of aural possibilities here.

11 JS

Simultaneously, the other side of the lake is organized almost solely in accordance to human will. A strip of villas follows the edge of the lake. There are no distinct sounds except occasional noises of construction work, especially table saws and hammers. This time of the year many Swedes take advantage of being far off in their summer houses to get their regular everyday habitats refurbished by contracted workers. The soundscape reveals its temporal and class architecture: a time off (and silence) for some becomes a time of labour (and noise) for others.

12 JS

The tram track is at once a physical and sonic barrier that delineates and organizes space for humans and other species. Besides visual signs, a sequence of signals alarms me to stay away from the tracks when the tram approaches. Animals have to remain more alert and act more intuitively than we humans. We outsourced our alertness to various signalling devices. A system of tunnels carved through the ridge enables animals to safely cross to the other side. I try to imagine the acoustics of such a tunnel, especially upon the tram's passing right above, which, I imagine, might be vastly disorienting and even distressing. Standing at the station, waiting for my tram back, I listen to a barely audible COVID precaution announcement launched through a speaker system, another way through which the pandemic is made perceptible while affecting our soundscapes.

