THEATRUM MUNDI

A score for a terrain vague

"[T]he terrain vague*... lies forgotten among massive structures and construction projects. It is not unique to today's period – under other arrangements, and with variable particularities, it also existed in the past. I think that this elusive in-between space is essential to the experience of urban living and that it lends legibility to transitions and the uneasiness of specific spatial configurations. We can find the* terrain vague *in even the densest city. With its visual markings as underutilized space, these spaces are often charged with memories of other visual orders, with presences of the past, thereby unsettling their current meaning as underutilized space. They are thus charged precisely because they are underutilized. As memories, these spaces become part of the "interiority" of the city, the city's present, but it is the making of an interiority that is outside the dominant profit-driven utility logics and their spatial framings. They are the vacant grounds that enable residents who feel bypassed by their city to connect with it via memory at a time of rapid changes – an empty space that can be filled with memories. And it is where activists and artists find a space for their projects. This is a making of presence that is an act of speech"*
Saskia Sassen, *Does the city have speech?*[1]

This article accompanies the film Voi[e,x,s] Chapelle Charbon #1.

Voie[e,x,s] Chapelle Charbon #1 is a project exactly about this: making a place speak that has lain silent; taking ownership over it by creating new memories rather than unearthing its history; using movement and sound to find how to inhabit it when it lacks visual markings that tell us what it does or means. In this essay that accompanies the film hosted at voiexs.fr, I want to reflect on what happens when a site is configured through performance rather

than architecture, and how we might do urbanism sonically.

Places are systems of space – organisations of objects and boundaries with a certain patterning of nearness and distance. But they are also systems of audibility, consisting of sound-producing elements and acoustic conditions that process sounds produced in particular ways. Churches, for example, extend the human voice through a long reverberation. The singular voice of the priest, otherwise human, can become the 'word of God' as it ascends to the heavens. Conversation amongst the congregation at normal becomes blurred, embarrassing its interlocutors into silence as they hear their profane words accentuated like the holy ones of the priest. Nightclubs muffle the voice: constant high-decibel low-frequency emissions make conversation near-impossible (or at least do in decent clubs with loud enough music and clear enough bass) but allow for a more level, interpersonal communication where bodies demonstrate to one another their rhythmic and sensual capabilities. The acoustics are dry so that fast-moving beats do not bleed into one another, and the voices of the crowd do not echo over the music.

What kind of acoustic, or system of hearing, then, could change a place like Chapelle Charbon from a silent wasteland to a piece of public realm, a setting for social life? Performance is a temporary acoustic, a temporary network of sound sources and listeners structured by *mise-en-scene.* It is also a temporary social situation – "subjects listening to subjects".[2] Performance extends expression beyond the everyday, using expanded capabilities for movement and sound-making developed by performers to create hypothetical situations *hors normal.*

So, when performance is transposed from the stage to the street, it becomes a strategy for experimenting temporarily with the social acoustics of the public realm. It proposes a hypothetical system for hearing and seeing, demands modes of attention that are different to the ones we employ for moving about the city. In designing ways of hearing and seeing one another beyond the habitual, performance is also a way of testing ways of sounding and moving – the spatial, acoustic, kinaesthetic possibilities encoded into a place that are not revealed by everyday usage.

We could think about *Voi[e,x,s] Chapelle Charbon #1* as a series of acoustic arrangements. Just like the church's acoustic transforms elevates whatever is spoken by the priest, or the way the sonic density of a nightclub foregrounds bodily over discursive encounter, each arrangement in Voi[e,x,s] encoded a kind of system or structure of communication whose functional properties are socially meaningful before we even consider the words or actions communicated within them. These words and actions were also rich with meaning – the names of local residents whose etymologies became ways of moving in response to the environment. These acoustic situations change what a space is without changing how it looks – designing it sonically rather than

visually.

Entering the space, we hear a single voice, raised to address the crowd, like someone delivering a lecture or a list of missing people. It is loud and definite enough to convey information through a slight raising of volume beyond the conversational, but not so much that the material effect of the voice supersedes its informational value, as in shouting or the most dramatic strains of operatic singing. Though there is no stage, the raising of one voice in clear address invites the self-imposed silencing of others. This creates an acoustic asymmetry – it acts the same way as the stage that gives to the actors upon it the privilege to be paid attention to by an audience. A park is usually a symmetrical communication space – no one is on stage, there is no audience. This equality informs the way we understand it spatial form: ledges and benches are for group conversations or silent reflection rather than spectatorship. *Voi[e,x,s] Chapelle Charbon #1* revealed that the Parc des 12 saisons is split into two parts. One just the right size for a single human voice to address a crowd of people with detailed information not lost in the inaccuracy of shouting. It revealed that the ledges scattered through it are just enough seating for that crowd, and can just about all provide a view of a single point from which to address that information. Just enough protection by the surrounding buildings reflected the voice back into the space without the enclosure that would shut it off from the public, like the Greek *pnyx* used for public gathering and political speeches.[3] The other half of the space, the football pitch, works differently. Open and flat, it is for running rather than watching, and is just far and separate enough that it can be host to a separate activity – children playing and shouting while focus continues elsewhere.

Voi[e,x,s] inserted *artificial* performative elements into a setting that utilised and therefore drew attention to *real* social capabilities of that setting. The audience gathered in a space that acted like a stage for public address, to hear 'democratic' information (the reading of names and their etymology acting like a kind of register of citizens of that space) proper to that place. Children played on the football pitch as part of the performance, disrupting the artifice to remind us that this place is also acting, right now, for them, as a playground.

This alludes to a conscious strategy articulated in discussions that took place within Theatrum Mundi meetings that shaped this project. In making a performance in and with a public site, what layers of the space can be translated into musical and dramatic form? One approach is to tell the history of a site, uncover and fix a narrative of what it has meant and to whom. But if a place is defined by its history, how can those that have no part in that story feel that it is theirs? Rather, our aim was to make the site speak, as Sassen suggests. We treated it like an instrument or a tool – a set of possibilities – rather than a historical document to be communicated. The metal railings surrounding it were heard springing into life as percussion instruments, via amplified and

recorded acts played back into the space. Sticks were drawn across the ground in live percussive acts. Attention was drawn to the rhythmic, tonal, and acoustic possibilities of its current materiality, rather than the loss of its history. This counterpoint between memory and possibility gives texture to the notion of inclusion – the former is fixed and unchangeable, demanding acceptance, while the latter is an invitation to anyone to carry out new actions in that place. Though here we are speaking of inclusion in a work of art, that work is also a real situation of public life, so inclusion takes on an even more political bent: becoming part of society by being offered the possibility to use public space as a tool for the creation of new memory, rather than by being asked to incorporate the memories of somebody else.

If performance is a way to reveal the productive possibilities of public space for making new forms of movement and sound in the hypothetical reality of a performance, how does this creation leave its mark on the Parc des 12 saisons? There is no physical trace of the one-hour events that took place on 22 and 23 June. Hopefully it is carried in the memories of those that attended – the people called for by their names will always be present there in the minds of those that heard them. But memory here does not just mean a mental trace, it is also ways of acting or paying attention that leave traces on the body as new habits that could be recalled in that place. People become skilled using their environments, and urbanites especially so. Dark alleyways, open public squares, busy shopping streets do not come with instruction manuals, but we know how to inhabit each of them differently. If we are presented with a new kind of space, like Chapelle Charbon or Parc des 12 saisons, that are not visibly like places we have experience of, how do we know how to use them? Performance, perhaps, can be a way of skilling the body in relation to an environment. Could those temporary, staged ways of behaving be left as traces in that space via the embodied knowledge of participants in a performance that become its future users? We do not know, but it raises rich territory for future research alongside the creation of the next stage of Voi[e,x,s] Chapelle Charbon.

As well as experimenting with ways of using a single space, this performance used dramatic techniques to play with the way coherence in space is perceived in the first place. How, at any given moment, do we determine 'where' we are? Rooms with four walls provide are nearly enclosed, and homes usually have clear ways of marking the boundary between domestic interior and public exterior. Streets offer addresses, and public squares use defined landscaping to denote their edges. In any case, we usually use visual clues: anything beyond what we can see is somewhere else. Something like the Parc des 12 saisons is less clear: it is composed of two distinct terrains, enclosed in two layers of fencing, and offers views that are bounded clearly on one side by building edges but overlap in other directions into surrounding spaces. Which of these scales described the single space occupied

by the audience for Voi[e,x,s]? Visually, we might choose the closest boundary: the construction fences used to close off the space at night probably mark a line beyond which is a different space. At the beginning of the performance, the acoustic field replicates this edge, with the positioning of hidden speakers tracing its route. Whispered voices amplified to the level of public speech intensify the sense of interiority. Whatever is whispered, speaking in such a way is suggestive of sharing between intimates, and perceive the world beyond the focused space is creates as even more distant. Tower blocks in the background are somewhere else – seen but not heard. Later, as the performers break free of the performance space and start playing the outside of the fences as percussion instruments, the immediate exterior surrounding the park, becomes incorporated into the space of focus, and the spatialisation of the recorded voices extends outwards to amplify this. In each case, the it is aural clues that tell us what is inside and outside. As the scale expands outwards, voices from far-off rooftops are added to the ensemble, and suddenly we are inhabiting a single space far beyond the immediate visual confines, tied together as a system of hearing. The two most diametrically positioned performers are 483 metres apart, and the space drawn between all of them encloses six hectares. Six hectares of city become one space – a stage, or theatre perhaps – without a single physical change.

What Voi[e,x,s] offers, then, is a model of how the built environment can not only be represented by, or a passive setting for, performance, but how performative techniques tested out through composition and mise-en-scene can actually change its functional possibilities, the way it is used, and the relationships between its parts. How, then, does a work like this travel elsewhere? This is a big question for the project as it develops beyond 2020, and further afield than Chapelle Charbon. Rather than been 'specific' to a site, we wanted to be informed by it, something like the way a composer is informed by an instrument to write music that can later be played by another instrument, revealing new qualities of both the instrument and the score. A score written for a site could be 'played' by other sites, as ways of revealing spatial and acoustic potentials within those sites, whereas a recording of that site can only be listened to. This does not mean the same sounds will be heard – here the score represents a whole protocol for working with people to activate, record, and perform. The score acts as an invitation to make rather than an object to consume, but now to people in other places at other times rather than only those local to Chapelle Charbon.

There is also a political imperative to this: at a time in which local identities are asserting themselves against the global values of migration and universal citizenship, art should resist reinforcing fixed identities of place and instead stimulate modes of cooperation. This is not to say that art is placeless or itself universal – it is developed in and with the material, cultural,

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economic specificities that are geographically distributed, but can be circulated as scores, tools, knowledge rather than objects, recordings, and facts.

To return to Saskia Sassen's question 'does the city have speech', the answer here is yes, but to hear it we need a score that the city can perform.

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1. Sassen, Saskia. (2013) "Does the City Have Speech?" Public Culture 25 (2 70): 209—21
2. Viyay Iyer intervewed in Guernica Magazine www.guernicamag.com/beyond-objects-beyo nd- scores/. Reference suggested by Gascia Ouzounian.

1. Sennett, Richard. (1996) Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization. P. 37.