

Constitutive Utopias: sound, public space and urban ambience

By Ultra-red

Formed in 1994 as a collaboration between electronic musicians and political activists, Ultra-red challenges the formalist neutrality of contemporary electronic music and sound art in general. Years after the certifiable death of ambient music, Ultra-red continues to embrace the conventions of that much-maligned genre. And yet, for us, the conventions of the genre are less laws of musical form than prescriptions for social-political action. In fact, building upon an avant-garde tendency which challenges the boundaries between everyday life and art practice, Ultra-red turn ambient music inside out, bending an ear to social space itself as both predetermined and mutable, politically contested and radically contestable.

According to Ultra-red, a radical ambient music suggests that it is social space itself that assumes musical meaning. As good materialists, Ultra-red hold that such a process is less one of natural inevitability than partly the effect of an integrated market. The ubiquity of musical accompaniment to life's most mundane details is less a natural state than a means of the enforced commodification of everyday life.

In the midst of an ambient market (or, more accurately, the images and sounds of market ubiquity), adopting the moniker political artist is insufficient and redundant. This is particularly so if one's politics remains limited to lyrical content and celebrity activism. Whether one considers oneself a street-activist, organizer or direct action artist becomes a mute point and only a matter of patronage. In an age of ambient markets, developing tactics of activism within public space can no longer be reducible to technocratic solutions (the bureaucratic planning of "physical" space). Delivering a blistering lyric, like building community from slum clearance and concrete offers an inadequate engagement with the material conditions of those targeted for empowerment.

When one understands public space as the way in which tactics are deployed, their ambience so to speak, one discovers a wide range of practices with the potential to elaborate on material space. Furthermore, protest as a way of producing public space becomes less about speaking truth to power (a realist definition of social

relations in space) than the affect of specific strategies: theatre, re-signification, deterritorialization, occupations - the ambience of counter-systemic spaces.

In an effort to clarify some of our own positions in matters of public space, audio-activism and the ambience of resistance, Ultra-red has begun to assemble a series of position statements. These statements are by no means intended to be read as definitive or exhaustive. Rather, they are the observations of people involved in the daily struggle of social and economic justice. If our readers still remain unconvinced that any of this has to do with art-making and musical practice we can only hope that they will join us in the experiment. For those who are hostile and wish to argue that the most radical gesture of resistance is total formalism, to them we say, you are on the wrong side of history. The first of these position statements, presented here, represents our collective experiences as audio-activists situated within an urban context.

Position 1: Ultra-red on the ambience of urban space

Use value or exchange value . . .

. . . we should be reminded that for Marx both categories were abstractions bound and gagged to the value form. Both ideals pull a curtain over the theatre of relationships between people and social groups. Urbanism, used or exchanged, functions similarly to a sound-proofing veil drawn around the ambience of interdependent and antagonistic relationships. Call that sound-proofing veil what you will, but in practice, it is woven from the threads of capitalist arrogance and greed. Urban planning, development, real estate finance, architectural design, these are the regimes of assumption wherein urbanism is space managed and manufactured by experts. If we lift the hem of that weighty fabric, we would catch the echoes of a profoundly contrary experience of urban space. This is space wherein we conduct our everyday lives - even those who uphold the imperial muzak of expertise and managed space.

In this regard, public space is vastly dissimilar from space as a thing engineered on our behalf. Rather, between use and exchange, public space is space that is constituted by people, even those convinced it is reducible to manufactured space. Resources and celebrations are planned around what governments, architects and professionals have designed for various groups of people. Whether it be a park, public housing, or even a beach, those for whom the space was created are not authorities in the design of the space. It is only after its design and inauguration that

space begins its movement toward form and substance: its production through social relations and mutually orchestrated uses. The people who use the space (and whose social relations are put to use by the space) give it its meaning - a gift which calls the space into existence as public space. Predetermined uses and preordained values enter into the equation often as a thing against which popular designs are constituted. Again, its the thing we do which we do together that earns the nomenclature public space and not the property capital designs for its own accumulation. Problems for capital arise when the use of the space, its publicness, becomes a practice defining the identity of its users in contradiction to its owners. Since most designs for public space are in fact designs for public control, urban struggle arises when access is suddenly restricted by public officials as a way to control the space and disempower the people who define it and are defined by it.

This contest over who and by what means space is defined as useful and public permeates the totality of our experiences of urban life. Social movements coalesce and take to the streets when the conflict between spatial meanings renders illegitimate that other saturating substance: the ambient market. From the contest between advertised uses and bottom-up practices, between permitted construction to the unpermitted community, through to competing notions of visual and aural pollution, interest permeates the full range of perceptual modalities. However, the fact that those modalities are both expressions of antagonism and the field of conflict itself suggests the inadequacies of talking about sound as merely effect of social relations.

Sounding the city . . .

. . . has before been described as cinema for the ears. It's a redundant description considering that part of cinema which is spatial is precisely its acoustic apparatus. We see cinema in two dimensions, we hear it in three. If Ultra-red dedicates itself to audio vérité then it is a verisimilitude whose materiality reflects on the very means by which sound acquires meaning and value. As that bitter old man Lyotard once said, the proof is in the pudding. There is truth in the ambient sounds of a space, just as there is emotional life in a dining room set with Thanksgiving foods, or a crime scene littered with evidence.

Practically speaking, that part of Ultra-red available through mass reproduced and distributed albums resembles the efforts of musicians sifting through audio recordings and listening for music. This is in no way a passive labor; one which reveals some transcendent nature in the recordings like those modernist

photographers who photographed the Southwest for its pastoral essence. When we conclude with listening for music, the original recordings are reconstituted, disassembled, and reoriented. How else can one define the role of the audio activist? Even when we turn off the tendency to listen "for" music (on its behalf), the soundscape our consciousness collages arrives at meaning through the same modalities of memory, repetition, juxtaposition, rhythm, harmonics and silence. Listening, we find there's a lot there: sub sonic rumbles from the street, feet slapping on pavement, coughing, yelling, helicopters.

Low frequencies of automobile traffic and electric generators resonate a city to such an extent that we demand our entertainment provide increasing levels of bass frequencies. Cinema, music performance and audio recordings increase the levels of bass because we consciously hear these low frequencies less and less. Simultaneously, we are steadily growing deaf to the bass and recognize it only as the negative space around, for lack of a better term, the superstructure of audio and visual elements. In this regard, the silhouette of urban space as that which we consciously experience remains fully contingent with that which operates only within and on our unconscious.

Only by artifice can we even conceptualize urban space as distinguishable from its ambience. Separating sound from context produces the most artificial results: a utopia so to speak. Call this practice ambient music, or ambient poesy, either way the crucial question becomes by what interest does the artist take up such an endeavor? Do we insert difference between sound as an effect of urban space and vice versa for purposes of obscuring or transforming the means by which space is produced and given meaning within the sound/space dialectic? Poesy or music, the artifice we construct gives shape to our own position in public space. Listening in the ambience is like assigning musical meaning to our own social relations.

Call it constitutive utopias . . .

. . . we get on the bus, you and I. Listen to the engine, the chatter in different languages. We overhear the homeless man talking to himself, the bus driver calling out the stops. Get off at MacArthur Park, or at a market in East LA. Get off at any corner, listen to the street vendor offering her products - pirated music, mangos, mangos, mangos. The kids running back home from school. Of course we hear the traffic - the brakes of the cars, the horns, the helicopters, the sirens of the police, and the ambulances. All of these sounds accumulate, bouncing off the faces of tall

buildings along Wilshire, along Broadway, or are lost in the openness of Beverly Hills. These are the sounds of lived space under a globalized, capitalized control.

There are also other sounds. At the swap-meet we hear people selling their products, bartering with each other, the sound of the banda music next to the rap next to the ranchero, they mix with one another and with the voices of people talking to each other. They talk about how Juana's son was arrested last night while walking home. They talk about how there was a drive-by at the corner of First and Gless. We also hear the noise of the food being cooked, of the quesadillas dropped into oil sizzling in a ten-year old pan missing a handle, full of collected grease. These sounds are saturated with the voices of a two-year old child, an older sister's rebukes and a mother trying to keep it all under control. At night the same people's labor makes different sounds. With headphones from a Walkman bleeding rhythms, the mother wordlessly boards a bus bound for that part of town dense with tall buildings. Here, she and the others disembark and enter the ghost towers, clean them until the early morning. The night air punctuated with the screams from vacuum cleaners, the honking of a midnight "lunch" truck and a boombox mixing the rap with the banda with the mariachi with the quebradita. Who here can tell the difference?

All these sounds are products of an economy of survival. It is an ambience of the social, economical, political, ideological urban struggle being fought in the terrain of LA. Whether in the alleys between Hancock Park mansions, in the freeway lanes or on the sidewalks of the plazas. How we hear what we hear the spaces we come to occupy, constitutes us within this public space. You and I. Elsewhere in the city, another ambience renders this one silent. A sound system hidden in the walls mixing the Monteverdi mixing the rock mixing the ethnic mixing the ambient. Who here can tell the difference? Parading through the mall through the tourist spot or from within one's car, a carefully constructed soundtrack obscures any trace of the other.

Often, in our soundings of the city, we imagine trespassing ambiances. What if the ambience of Juana and the late night labors of janitors found a frequency in the sanitized corridors of renovated urbanism? What if the din of a sixth-floor sweatshop bled out onto the pavement of fashionable Third Street Promenade, or into the virtual Los Angeles of Universal Citywalk? What if Mrs. Doheny Avenue stepped out of her house to the sounds of a swap-meet enveloped by a choir of helicopters? What if Mr. Brentwood mis-stepped his Excursion into the informal economy of street vendors and front-yard eateries? Would either say hello to

Juanita and buy a couple of quesadillas? Reaching in her purse, fishing in his pocket, use value, exchange value, ambience of everyday struggles.

[POSITION 1 was drafted by the following Ultra-red members: Elizabeth Blaney (artist, activist, community organizer, Union de Vecinos, Strategic Actions for a Just Economy), Pablo Garcia (musician, community organizer, Neighborhood Partnerships Coordinator for Occidental College), Dont Rhine (musician, activist, Pride At Work/AFL-CIO), Leonardo Vilchis (artist, activist, community organizer, Union de Vecinos, United Farm Workers Union/AFL-CIO).]