

EXHIBITION ESSAY

The Slur of the Local

Nato Thompson

What if you dialed into MapQuest and instead of the standard utilitarian map, your speakers erupted in an auditory cartography replete with Peter Gabriel, bird chirps, samba, evangelists and static? What if you were a 21st century pioneer whose frontier consisted of wireless surveillance camera images? What if you closed your eyes along Halsted Street and decided after listening for a good thirty minutes that site-specific art was impossible, because as far as your ears could tell, there was nothing specific about site at all? This town sounds just like Houston, New York City, Sao Paulo, or Tokyo. What if you could develop a Geiger counter for fear and mapped the city accordingly? What if cartography actually helped you understand the world more? *Echo Local*, an exhibition organized by Paul Lloyd Sargent, uses a random sampling of visual and auditory materials culled from particularly unconventional geographies in order to re-orient us to the potentially disorienting spatialization of urbanity.

In all probability, Sargent selected this topic because he has been collecting audio cassettes throughout Humboldt Park for the last five years. Located on the western edge of gentrification, Humboldt Park may be one of Chicago's current hottest spots for contested public space. As the city grows, who gets to move in and who gets to move out, what folks are attracted by the low rents, who wants to live in this predominately Hispanic neighborhood? While we may believe we have answers to these questions, it might be best to test our assumptions against a device far more random: found audio tapes.

Sargent has collected over 547 of these cassette tape bundles and mapped them for viewers to appreciate. The barrage of sound is available on a computer where the participant is encouraged to take on the anthropologist's hat by cross-indexing and listening. Mexican brass bands, slow jams, Tupac, Paul Simon, and a strange array of deep house spread out like a landscape. Which one do you think the kid bobbing his head up and down with his Walkman is listening to? While the cornucopia of music and impassioned speech fills your ears, one can't help but wonder if, culturally, the sampling of Humboldt Park is united through cheese. Even if hints of a cultural melting pot are evident, what does a populace gain from this corny soundtrack? What do these audio tapes tell us about the auditory delights of Humboldt Park's inhabitants and visitors? If we know that a tape playing Simon and Garfunkel was located by the base of a tree, so what?

Perhaps getting to know auditory cartography is a bit like dumpster diving. The pieces are moldy. The rhymes are stale. The sermons turn to compost. The forensics of sonic decay attract the attention of two additional artists: the video *Lost Sound* by John Smith and Graeme Miller and the Bill Talsma's broadcast, *Detritus: Radio Regurgitation*. In both cases, the audio cassette is used both as source material and provides ambience for contemporary urbanism.

In *Lost Sound*, Smith and Miller document the interstitial spaces where the cassettes are located. In this case, culture literally envelops the landscape as the video shows wind-blown brown tape squished under car tires, wrapped around satellite dishes, cinched into tree bark, and floating

atop a puddle. Culture is literally piling up and possibly burying us. The information age takes material form. In *Detritus: Radio Regurgitation*, Talsma takes the auditory trash-heap to another level by remixing it and vomiting it (in a droning, hypnotic remixed form) into the ears of Chicago via broadcast.

If audio is a culturally-charged dung heap, then maybe the surveillance camera can become a reverse-engineered peep show? Like a peeping Tom who eagerly waits with his telescope at this window so he can “map” the bedrooms of Chicago, Michelle Teran flips the switch by liberating the surveilled private-sphere into a public display of banal voyeurism. By using a 2.4 GHz receiver/handheld video monitor, Teran can scan for wireless surveillance camera feeds. The privately surveilled world can become the source of a walking tour where a pile of newspapers, a sleeping child, a remote parking area or an unoccupied bed (let your imagination wander) become your voyeuristic topography. What lifts these territories out of the trash bin of the mundane is that as boring as these sites are (and sure, let's call a sleeping child boring), they are excitingly controlled. The opening up of a private, controlled sphere almost feels fetishistic and voyeuristically liberating.

The same can be said of Trevor Paglen 's *Listening to Pelican Bay*, where mapping takes on the task of charting the unmappable, or, in Paglen 's case, listening to the un-listenable. While Teran opens up the home as the space of biopower and self-surveillance, Paglen auditorially maps institutionally controlled spaces: in this case, Pelican Bay Maximum Security Prison. The prison is designed as much to keep people out as in and Paglen 's score takes on the overtly political if not outright dangerous role. Listening to the jangling of keys and the almost cliché sound of large doors opening and closing, we become aware of the infiltration and control over the auditory landscape. If a prisoner screams and no one is around to hear him, did he scream at all?

This chilling turn of events finds a form of public outcry in the work of Deborah Stratman 's fittingly titled project *FEAR*. Equipped with magnet cards to attach to phone booths and a toll free number, Stratman conducted a non-scientific cartography of fear. The cards ask people to call and leave a message about what makes them afraid. What makes you afraid?

Maybe an atlas of fear is a useful place to end. Why not indulge the gothic when it comes to urban cartography? If these unusual methods (from surveillance tours to discarded audio cassettes) provide any sense of navigation, they reveal that particular freeways and infrastructures are being made outside site and sound. Whether this new urbanism is developed through sonic refuse, cultural vomit or scopic control, it is useful to track them outside the typical AAA road guide. Off the radar, new vectors of power play on us and these perverted geographers may show us where to locate them.

Nato Thompson, *The Slur of the Local*, November, 2004.

This essay was distributed in the gallery during the run of the exhibition.