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Listening to the City: Artistic Articulation of Unwanted Sounds in Open Public Spaces

Abstract: In modern cities, noise caused by human activity increasingly shapes the individual's daily experience, being recognized as a factor that can seriously jeopardizes the health, quality of life, and general well-being of the population. Starting from the observation that the city's soundscape has drastically changed and that excessive noise exposure has long-term consequences, this paper explores the possibility of manipulating noise through artistic practices. The central assumption is that noise is not merely an acoustic surplus to be eliminated, but a complex phenomenon which, through carefully targeted interventions, can be artistically articulated. To explore this, the paper employs a methodology that combines theoretical and qualitative analysis. The first part of the paper examines the nature and perception of sound through the theoretical approaches of phenomenology and affect theory. The second part analyses artistic practices in open public spaces that use "undesirable" sounds as the basis for artistic expression. Key findings indicate that noise need not be treated solely as a communal problem. Through artistic articulation, it can serve as a resource for defining and shaping the identity of space. By doing so, undesirable sounds become building blocks of meaning and a means of spatial articulation in the contemporary urban environment.

Keywords: perception of sound; noise; public space; sound art; soundscape.

Noise in urban environment: A century-long problem

Noise in urban environments is recognized as one of the most pressing problems of modern society. As early as 1972, the World Health Organization officially declared it one of the main sources of environmental pollution,[1] and today, noise is considered the third most harmful form of pollution, right after air and water pollution.[2]

[1] World Health Organization, *World Health Report: Prevention of Noise-Induced Hearing Loss* (World Health Organization, 1997), 55; Noise Control Act of 1972, Pub. L. No. 92-574, "Identification of Major Noise Sources: Noise Criteria and Control Technology" (1972).

[2] Sunday Olayinka Oyedepo, "Noise Pollution in Urban Areas: The Neglected Dimensions," *Environmental Research Journal* 6, no. 4 (2012): 259–71; Karina Mary de Paiva Vianna, Maria Regina Alves Cardoso, and Rui Manuel Calejo Rodrigues, "Noise Pollution and Annoyance: An Urban Soundscapes Study," *Noise & Health* 17 (2015): 125–33; Wafiullah Shirzad, Mohammad Mukhlis Behsoodi, Samiullah Samir, and Samsoor Pasarlay, "A Comprehensive Review of Noise Pollution and Its Impact on the Urban Environment," *Kardan Journal of Engineering and Technology* (2022).

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Furthermore, contemporary research indicates that chronic exposure to environmental noise can seriously endanger hearing and result in irreversible physiological damage.[3]

The first mention of noise as a social problem dates back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when urbanization and industrialization significantly changed the soundscape of cities. According to Karin Bijsterveld, it was during this period that the first anti-noise campaigns and citizens' associations emerged against urban noise.[4] The first such association was founded in New York in 1908, named the "Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise". Similar movements soon developed in European cities such as London and Paris, where campaigns, exhibitions, and conferences aimed to raise awareness of noise as a socially unacceptable phenomenon. Noise is then defined as a public health problem affecting the mental state and overall quality of life of citizens, after which the idea emerges that noise control is a necessity and a civilizational need. In this context, the problem of urban noise is predominantly discussed in European intellectual circles, which interpret noise as a "brutal assault on mental well-being".[5] Although members of the social elite were often the most vocal critics of the noise, they did not leave the city; instead, they sought their own oasis of peace within it. Some authors link these views to the then-dominant idea that "the bourgeois home should be a refuge from the outside world".[6] Foundational studies in soundscape ecology once estimated that natural sounds account for only about 6% of the total soundscape of cities, while almost three-quarters are made up of sounds produced by people, machines, and technology.[7] Historical forecasts indicated that this relationship would worsen, as the average noise level in cities was projected to increase by about one decibel each year due to constant technological development.[8] Not long after, this projection largely materialized in contemporary urban settings.[9]

Recent scientific research confirms that man-made sounds now overwhelmingly dominate the urban environment, effectively masking natural sound sources.[10] This

[3] World Health Organization, *Environmental Noise Guidelines for the European Region* (Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2018).

[4] Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (MIT Press, 2008), 93–125.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Michael Cowan, "Imagining Modernity through the Ear," *Arcadia* 41, no. 1 (2006): 124–46, as cited in Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (MIT Press, 2008).

[7] Raymond Murray Schafer, *The New Soundscape* (Berandol Music, 1969), 6, as cited in Raymond Murray Schafer, *The Book of Noise* (Price Milburn and Co., 1970), 15.

[8] Raymond Murray Schafer, *The Book of Noise* (Price Milburn and Co., 1970), 3.

[9] Bryan C. Pijanowski et al., "Soundscape Ecology: The Science of Sound in the Landscape," *BioScience* 61, no. 3 (2011): 203–16.; Elie Grinfeder et al., "What Do We Mean by 'Soundscape'? A Functional Description," *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* 10 (2022): 894232.

[10] Francesco Aletta and Jian Kang, "Promoting Healthy Sonic Environments," *Lancet Planetary Health* 2, no. 2 (2018); Karmele Herranz-Pascual et al., "Going Beyond Quietness: Determining the Emotionally Restorative Effect of Acoustic Environments in Urban Open Public Spaces," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 7 (2019): 1284; Andrew Mitchell et al., "Effects of Soundscape Complexity on Urban Noise Annoyance Ratings: A Large-Scale Online Listening Experiment," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 22 (2022): 14872.

growing concern over noise has led to an increased focus on quiet areas, particularly after the adoption of the EU Environmental Noise Directive in 2002,[11] which obliges member states to identify, map, and develop strategies for the protection and preservation of these areas. Quiet zones defined that way play a significant role in mitigating the effects of urbanization by ensuring access to relative quietness and promoting associated health benefits.[12]

However, while noise mitigation strategies remain central, the question arises: Is regulating noise levels always the only solution to addressing the issue of unwanted sound in public space? As a response to this problem, the manipulation of everyday sound material is developed through artistic practices that transform noise into an aesthetic and experiential phenomenon.

Since the period of industrialization, noise has been recognized as a social problem, but contemporary art responds to it in different ways, transforming it into artistic material. In the broadest sense, noise is defined as unwanted or disturbing sound that disrupts the acoustic balance of an environment and can have harmful consequences for human and animal health.[13] While noise arises as a by-product of urban life, *sound art* emerges as an intervention in the existing soundscape. Unlike sound design, which has a functional role within media, film, or exhibition spaces, *sound art* does not aim to aestheticize sound. By focusing on understanding the sonic environment through listening, *sound art* is shaped as a spatially oriented artistic practice that treats sound as a tool for reflecting on the relationship between humans and their environment.

Building on these interpretations, the following section analyses the theoretical approaches that shape the contemporary understanding of sound (ranging from the phenomenology of perception to affect theory). It also explores artistic practices that use unwanted sounds as the basis for expression. Through this framework, listening is elevated beyond mere perception, becoming a means of understanding the city. In doing so, sound art offers a new perspective on how we engage with our urban environments, inviting us to reconsider the role of noise not just as a problem to be regulated, but as a medium for artistic exploration and reflection.

[11] European Parliament and Council, Directive 2002/49/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council Relating to the Assessment and Management of Environmental Noise, 2002.

[12] Gunnar Cerwén and Frans Mossberg, "Implementation of Quiet Areas in Sweden," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 1 (2019): 134.; Henk Booi and Frits Van Den Berg, "Quiet Areas and the Need for Quietness in Amsterdam," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 9, no. 4 (2012): 1030.

[13] Pervez Alam, Tarique Ahmad, Lubna Maqbool, Raisul Islam, Shadab Ahmad, and Mufeed Sharholy, "Noise Pollution Mitigation and Control in Urban Areas near International Borders through 2D Noise Mapping," *Scientific Reports* 14 (2024): 30582.

Sound art—establishing the official terminology

The term *sound art* first appeared in the 1970s and gained wider recognition following the 1979 Sound Art exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA). Although the term is not definitively defined, it is commonly used to refer to artistic practices that use sound as a primary material for expression, such as sound installations, sound sculptures, public space interventions, and site-specific projects that explore the relationship between sound, space, and the listener.[14]

The roots of the discipline lie in the avant-garde experiments of the early 20th century. The Futurist Luigi Russolo, in a manifesto published in 1913 entitled "The Art of Noise" (it. *L'arte dei rumori*), calls for the artistic articulation of noise and the introduction of "the noises of machines, explosions and urban bustle" into music. He believed that music, confined to its own language and cut off from the sounds of the real world, had become self-sufficient and static, while the contemporary life around it advanced to the rhythm of the modern age. His *intonarumori* instruments produced the sounds of the industrial age, laying the foundation for the idea that noise could become artistic material.[15]

During the same period, Erik Satie developed a series of pieces titled *musique d'ameublement*, conceived as background music for spaces that integrate into everyday life by rejecting the traditional framework. His conception of music as an ambient element of space was in line with the ideas of Jean Cocteau, who articulated the need for a simple, immediate "music for every day", freed from excessive elitism and pretentiousness. These ideas anticipated later explorations of the relationship between sound and space and paved the way for the development of contemporary artistic practices focused on the manipulation of sound material. They were subsequently taken up by the Dadaists and Surrealists and, after the Second World War, further developed within the Fluxus movement and experimental music. At the same time, John Cage radically redefined the boundaries between music and silence, while Pierre Schaeffer developed *musique concrète*: compositions created by manipulating recorded, everyday sounds. Satie's ideas of music as part of the environment and Cage's conceptual approach converge in a new understanding of sound as a spatial experience, which, during the second half of the twentieth century, became the foundation for the development of *ambient music*, where sound functions as a constitutive element of atmosphere and a carrier of the overall spatial experience.

The term *sound art* has been imprecise since its inception and is the subject of constant debate among researchers, artists, and audiences.[16] As there is no universally accepted term to encompass all practices of sound art, a wide range of terms emerged

[14] Leigh Landy, *Understanding the Art of Sound Organization* (The MIT Press, 2007), 9–21.

[15] Michael Clarke, *The Concise Dictionary of Art Terms* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Douglas Kahn, "The Latest: Fluxus and Music [1993]," in *Documents of Contemporary Art: Sound*, ed. Caleb Kelly (Whitechapel Gallery, MIT Press, 2011).

[16] Sanne Krogh Groth and Holger Schulze, eds., *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound Art* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 10–11.

in the second half of the 20th century to cover the various approaches to working with sound. The most significant of these are:

1. **Organized sound—**term introduced by **composer Edgard Varèse as early as the 1930s to denote music based on an expanded spectrum of sounds—from new percussion to electronically generated tones and recorded ambiance.**
2. **Sonic art—**term denotes artistic forms in which sound is the basic unit of expression; in a broader interpretation, it is considered a subset of music, that is, of works of organized sound. In German, the term *Klangkunst* (Motte-Haber) is a rough equivalent, whereas in the Romance languages, the less common translations *art sonore* and *arte sonora* are not used consistently.
3. **Audio art**—a term that is occasionally used as a synonym for *sonic art*, but in certain countries, such as the Netherlands, is most commonly associated with radio art and radioplay (*radiophonic work*).
4. **Musique concrète**—a concept developed by Pierre Schaeffer, based on compositions of recorded and processed everyday sounds.
5. **Elektroakustische Musik**—term introduced by Meyer-Eppler and Eimert for music that combines acoustic and electronic sources of sound.
6. **Ars acustica**—term used by Klaus Schöning for works at the boundary between musical composition, sound installation and radio art.
7. **Musique acousmatique**—term introduced by François Bayle for music listened to through speakers, without a visible sound source, emphasizing the experience of pure perception.
8. **Soundscape composition—**term used by R. Murray Schafer and Barry Truax for compositions that interpret sounds from the natural and urban environment.
9. **Sound-based music**—term **proposed by Leigh Landy as a common framework for all practices that are based on real sound materials instead of written notation.**
10. **Non-cochlear art**—term introduced by Seth Kim-Cohen, which describes the art of sound that transcends the physiological act of listening and includes conceptual, social, and theoretical aspects.
11. **Aural architecture**—term developed by Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter to explore the acoustic properties of space and the way architecture shapes the perception of sound.

Each of these terms highlights a different aesthetic, technological, or methodological aspect, but none fully encompasses the diversity of practices that today fall within the field of sound art.[17] Despite this terminological fluidity, *sound art* functions as an umbrella category that allows artists to experiment with sound and explore it through spatial, social, and affective dimensions, transcending the boundaries of traditional

[17] Landy, *Understanding the Art of Sound Organization*, 9–21.

music.[18] This diversity reflects a plurality of approaches, as well as the fundamental fact that sound art eludes rigid classification, remaining an interdisciplinary field in constant theoretical expansion.

Theoretical framework

Sound as an ecological component

Given that noise pollution is a current global problem, two dominant schools of thought can be distinguished.

The first theoretical approach is rooted in concerns for public health and highlights the lack of social efficacy and responsiveness to acoustic environments. In this sense, authors such as Raymond Murray Schafer point out that the key problem for the absence of human action is the fact that "noise is a sound we have learnt to ignore".[19] Schafer warns that many noise abatement programs are based solely on a negative approach that needs to be adapted to a more positive tone. Instead of asking how to get rid of noise, he asks: "Which sounds do we want to preserve, encourage, and multiply? Once we know that, the tedious or destructive sounds will become obvious enough on their own, and we will understand why we must remove them."[20] In this way, R.M. Schafer calls for a paradigm shift: from combating noise to enhancing exclusively desirable sounds. Shafer's approach, which is based on "organizing, limiting, mapping and preserving sounds to re-establish harmony", has been adopted by artists in various ways.[21] However, recent discourse introduces an essential oppositional perspective that challenges this idea. Sophie Arkette, for instance, criticizes Schafer's "urbanist prejudice", pointing out that the noise he speaks of in a negative context is precisely what "makes a city a city", and that "it cannot sound any different". Arkette provides an essential counter-perspective to the view of noise as mere environmental degradation, advocating instead an approach that demonstrates how city residents develop specific listening techniques and the ability to recognize sounds in their everyday environment.[22] This shift moves the discourse from a passive model of exposure toward an active model of sonic agency. The second theoretical approach views noise as a complex phenomenon that, precisely because of its chaotic nature and polysemy, becomes an inspiring subject for research. This is the position of Michel Serres, who understands noise as "the background of all communication": the fundamental layer from which all possibility of expression and meaning arises. For him, noise is not a disturbance but a vital principle of the world.[23] Thus, in the contemporary under-

[18] Groth and Schulze, eds., The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound Art, 10–11.

[19] R. Murray Schafer, extract from *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Alfred Knopf, Inc., 1977); revised edition (Destiny Books, 1993) 3–4, 7–8.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ari Y. Kelman, "Rethinking the Soundscape: A Critical Genealogy of a Key Term in Sound Studies," The Senses and Society 5, br. 2 (2010): 16–17.

[22] Ibid. Sophie Arkette, "Sounds Like City," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 1 (2004): 159.

[23] Caleb Kelly, ed., Documents of Contemporary Art: Sound (Whitechapel Gallery, MIT Press, 2011).

standing of sound, two paradigms clash: one that strives for acoustic order and regulation, and another that accepts noise as a reality of city life.

Sound as spatial experience

Contemporary artists are re-examining the way we perceive the world through listening. This approach is based on the very physical nature and manifestation of sound, best described as "sound as a phenomenon".[24] This heightened awareness is a direct response to the overwhelming saturation of mechanical noise by reclaiming the concept of „embodied hearing". This shift toward the physical resonance of sound finds its theoretical foundation in the phenomenology of perception. Rejecting the subject-object dualism, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that perception is not a mental representation of reality, but an existential relationship between the body and the world, in which meaning is born from their mutual interaction. In this context, sound becomes an extension of the body into space, a bridge between the sensory and the spatial, between the listener and the listened-to.[25]

For decades, many composers and theorists have similarly focused attention on the very act of listening. Among them, Pierre Schaeffer occupies a special place, who in "Traité des objets musicaux" (1966) writes: "For years we have been practicing phenomenology without knowing it, which is much better than talking about it without applying it." With this statement, Schaeffer points to the practical and experiential origin of his methodology, which, although it does not rest on an explicit philosophical program, is fundamentally phenomenological in character. Many authors engage in the interpretation of Schaeffer's text, and some relate it to Merleau-Ponty, for example, Makis Solomos,[26] while others, such as Brian Kane, find more similarities with Husserl.[27] As a key work that enables a poetic understanding of Schaeffer's theoretical framework, Solomos cites *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which Merleau-Ponty elaborates on the idea that listening is not a reflective activity.

Brian Kane, whilst acknowledging the strong influence of Merleau-Ponty on Schaeffer, argues that the structure of his phenomenological approach can be understood within the Husserlian tradition of thought. According to Kane, Husserl's analysis of consciousness and perception provides a conceptual framework that illuminates how Schaeffer formulates concepts such as the sound object, reduced listening, and the acousmatic field. Although Schaeffer does not directly reference Husserl, his approach to sound shows similarities with Husserl's analysis of perception. According to Husserl, the meaning of a phenomenon does not arise from the sensory datum itself, but from an act of consciousness that synthesizes it and connects it into a whole

[24] Ibid.

[25] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Routledge, 2012).

[26] Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 18–19.

[27] Ibid.

experience.[28] Husserl defines this process through the concept of 'shadings' (Ger. *Abschattungen*), referring to the continuous series of unique and partial perspectives through which an object is revealed to the subject. As consciousness links each new perception with the previous ones and encompasses them into a single whole, an object is formed before us which is recognized through the various acts of consciousness. If we were to remain at the level of individual perceptions, we would have only a series of transient qualities, but thanks to synthesis, consciousness constitutes an object that transcends the very flow of perception. Husserl calls this act of mental synthesis *noesis*, while its intentional correlate is the *noema*—an object of consciousness that does not exist independently of it, but is constantly formed within it. It is in this sense that Schaeffer's *sound object* is not a thing in itself, but a phenomenon that arises in the relationship between sound and the consciousness that perceives it: the result of a process in which perception organizes auditory impressions into a meaningful, aesthetic, and experiential unity.[29]

According to Brandon LaBelle, sound art emerges as a link between the real and the imaginary world, the intuitive and the transient. In this way, sound demonstrates its ability to establish dynamic interactions among different fields of experience and perception, while simultaneously exploring the relationships among the sensory, emotional, and spatial layers of perception.[30] Listening is understood as a reflexive practice through which the subject enters into an immediate dialogue with their surroundings. Through this dialogue, sound becomes a form of spatial thinking and is usable for formulating "spatial research insights, proposals and spatial constructions".[31]

Sound as affect

While the phenomenological framework allows for an understanding of sound as an experience shaped in the listener's consciousness, affect theory shifts the focus to what precedes that experience—to the bodily processes, intensities, and energetic dynamics that produce the affective experience of sound. In this sense, "sound as affect" becomes a field of research that connects perception, the body, and energy, revealing how sound acts before it is interpreted, named, or translated into meaning. This perspective aligns with the James-Lange tradition, which posits that physiological arousal precedes emotional recognition, suggesting that sound triggers a bodily resonance before a cognitive label is applied.[32] While other models, such as Lazarus' appraisal theory, argue that even immediate affective responses require a degree of

[28] See: Edmund Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (Collier Macmillan, 1983), 104–110; and *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 34–37.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Brandon LaBelle, Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art, 2nd ed. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 319.

[31] LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art*, Appendix.

[32] William James, "What is an Emotion?" *Mind* 9, no. 34 (1884): 188–205; Carle Lange, *The Emotions* (Williams & Wilkins, 1922, first published in 1885).

cognitive evaluation, the focus here remains on the autonomy of affect as a pre-discursive intensity.[33]

In the anthology *The Affect Theory Reader*, Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth position affect as a central concept of contemporary humanities. In their introductory essay, "An Inventory of Shimmers", they write that affect arises in an *in-between-ness*, in the capacities of bodies to act and be affected, as a *force of encounter* which takes place between human, non-human, and material entities. They interpret affect as a "gradient of bodily capacity" and the constant changing of the body's capacities through the rhythms and modalities of encounter. Citing Spinoza's famous maxim that "no one has yet determined what the body can do", the authors emphasize that the body's capacity is never defined by the body itself, but always within the framework of the relations and contexts of the forces that surround it. Gregg and Seigworth emphasize that there is no single, general theory of affect, nor, in their view, should one be established. Their methodological stance is based on a deliberate refusal of universalizing definitions, and they propose a plurality of approaches, defending the fluidity and elusiveness of affect. It is precisely this position that Eugenie Brinkema interrogates, arguing that the concept of affect has become too amorphous and abstract and needs to be re-tied to form and structure as the concrete conditions of affective experience. In *The Forms of the Affects*, Brinkema re-examines the dominant currents of contemporary affect theory and their tendency to equate affect with formless energy. By returning attention to form, detail, and materiality, Brinkema restores affect's conceptual precision and aesthetic power, transforming it from an elusive force into a specific way in which text and art produce meaning and experience. In this way, a phenomenological and affective understanding of sound together allows noise to be understood as a dynamic event in which body, space, and meaning constantly interact.

Artistic practices and the transformation of noise into aesthetic material

One of the earliest and most influential approaches in contemporary sound art is based on field recording and the interpretation of sounds from the real-world environment. Artists use authentic recordings from their immediate environment as a basis for creating complex soundscapes in which the boundary between documenting an existing state and artistic composition is erased. The pioneer of this approach, Max Neuhaus, was the first to use sound in *site-specific* installations, believing that the perception of space also depends on what we hear.[34] His installation *Times Square* (1977–1992, reactivated in 2002) was a constant, harmonic tone placed beneath a ventilation grille, blending imperceptibly with the city's noise. A similar approach is evident in the work of Jacob Kirkegaard, who, in Hypogeum, leads the listener on a sonic

[33] Richard S. Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation* (Oxford University Press, 1991); Richard S. Lazarus, *Psychological Stress and the Coping Process* (McGraw-Hill, 1966).

[34] Kelly, ed., Documents of Contemporary Art: Sound.

journey through Copenhagen's network of sewer pipes, tunnels, and reservoirs.35 The composition is based on authentic recordings of these spaces and reveals the complex infrastructure of the invisible city—a system of crucial importance for its daily life and health. Kirkegaard thus makes audible that which is usually hidden, transforming the technical functionality of the urban fabric into a meditative, almost sacral experience of space. Another similar example is the work of Emeka Ogboh, who uses field recordings of everyday life in Lagos (e.g., sirens, traffic noise, generator hum, the voices of street vendors, and fragments of music) to create a realistic portrait of the city.36 In the *Lagos Soundscapes* project (2008–), he does not attempt to eliminate noise, but rather embraces it as the primary material from which he builds an image of the city. In his work, noise becomes a document of the urban experience, an indicator of the place's rhythm, chaos, and vitality. Ogboh views the city as a "composer" that creates its own music and uses listening to recognize social changes and community identity.

An alternative approach within sound art shifts the focus to listening as an active, communal, and reflective practice. In this context, artists do not create new sounds; they enable the audience to hear what is present in their everyday lives, which usually goes unnoticed. The pioneer of this approach, Hildegard Westerkamp, also the most influential woman working with sound, defines and begins working in the genre of acoustic ecology, composing with sounds from the immediate environment.37 In fact, in the 1960s, she established herself as a pioneer in the given field, specializing in guided walks called *soundwalks*, in which she invited participants to listen to the sounds of their surroundings as part of a shared ecosystem, connecting art, ecology, and bodily sensibility. Similarly, since 1996, Akio Suzuki has been developing the *oto-date* project, based on the simple yet highly poetic concept of listening.38 In various cities and landscapes, he marks "listening points" on the ground and invites passers-by to pause and listen to their surroundings. With this gesture, Suzuki shows that art need not create new sounds but can reveal those that already exist, yet are usually overlooked. In a related manner, Janet Cardiff and her husband, George Bures Miller, share a very similar approach; their contribution to this field is reflected in the so-called *audio walks* they have been doing since 1995.39 Their installations connect sound, theatre, and narrative into spatial compositions that expand our perception of reality. Additionally, Stijn Demeulenaere, in collaboration with the duo *The Third*

[35] Jacob Kirkegaard, "Hypogeum," Fonik—Official Website, accessed October 4, 2025, https://fonik.dk/works/Hypogeum.html.

[36] The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)—Artists, "Emeka Ogboh," accessed October 4, 2025, https://www.moma.org/artists/134122-emeka-ogboh.

[37] Hildegard Westerkamp, Hildegard Westerkamp Official Website, accessed October 4, 2025, https://www.hildegardwesterkamp.ca/; Landy *Understanding the Art of Sound Organization*, 41, 112; Kelly, ed., Documents of Contemporary Art: Sound, 17.

[38] Akio Suzuki, "Biography," Akio Suzuki Official Website, accessed October 4, 2025, https://www.akiosuzuki.com/en/bio/.

[39] Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller: Official Website, Cardiff Miller, accessed October 4, 2025, https://cardiffmiller.com/.

Guy, is realizing the project Everybody Lives Here, which explores the relationship between the listener, space, and its sonic environment. Drawing on the idea of attentive listening—"stop for a moment, listen, observe"—the artists invite the audience to recognize sounds that often pass below the threshold of conscious perception.[40] For instance, in his work *Metro (untitled)*, created during a workshop led by Guy De Bièvre, Stijn Demeulenaere explores the soundscape of underground urban flows.[41] The project began as a conceptual connection between Brussels and São Paulo through an exchange of recordings of their metro systems, but as it evolved, the focus shifted to the rhythms, vibrations, and acoustic echoes of the spaces. This shift reflects the essence of Demeulenaere's approach, where everyday environments become places of listening and attention, thereby revealing a complex, often unnoticed dimension of the city.

A third type of artistic approach views sound as a means of conceptual and temporal articulation of reality. Within this framework, artists examine how sound intertwines with perception, emotion, and meaning. One such example is Peter Cusack's *Favourite Sounds Project*, where he seeks to uncover through interviews what people consider to be positive sounds in their environment, in order to explore the emotional and ecological values of sound.[42] In a somewhat different vein, Christian Marclay's *The Clock* uses a 24-hour video collage to combine thousands of film scenes showing clocks in real time, turning the rhythm of everyday life into an audiovisual phenomenon. Every moment in the video corresponds to real time, so the work simultaneously functions as both an artwork and a clock, playing with perceptions of time and rhythm.

In more recent practices, artists are expanding the boundaries of the audible and the material. A prime example is Chiara Luzzana, who critics describe as one of the most innovative and visionary sound designers on the contemporary scene.[43] Her work explores sound as both aesthetic material and a means of communication, through which emotions, perception, and the identity of space are shaped. For instance, in her *The Sound of City*, cities are "performed" using their own sounds (e.g., traffic, mechanical rhythms, and ambient tones) which are transformed into musical compositions and multimedia installations. In addition to her artistic endeavors, Luzana also uses everyday sounds in the context of *sound branding*, creating distinctive acoustic identities for companies and events. This duality of purpose blurs the line between artistic and commercial expression, turning sound into a means of shaping the sensory experience and the collective memory of a place.

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[40] Stijn Demeulenaere, "Everybody Lives Here," Stijn Demeulenaere Official Website, accessed October 4, 2025, https://stijndemeulenaere.be/elh.html.

[41] Stijn Demeulenaere, "Metro (Untitled)," Stijn Demeulenaere Official Website, accessed October 4, 2025, https://stijndemeulenaere.be/metro-untitled.html.

[42] Peter Cusack, Bandcamp Page, accessed October 4, 2025, https://petercusack2.bandcamp.com/.

[43] Chiara Luzzana: Sound Designer and Composer, Chiara Luzzana Official Website, accessed October 4, 2025, https://www.chiaraluzzana.com/.

While these diverse approaches differ in their methods and objectives, they all share a fundamental belief in the power of sound as a medium for deepening our connection to the world around us. Whether it's uncovering hidden urban soundscapes, encouraging active and communal listening, or using sound to explore time and space, each of these artistic practices demonstrates how sound can transform our perception, shape our experience, and redefine the way we engage with the environment. In doing so, these works reveal the potential of sound art to expand our understanding of the sensory world.

Conclusion

From the industrial noise of the Futurist to contemporary ecological and participatory installations, *sound art* shows how noise has transformed from an unwanted phenomenon into a means of aesthetic and social exploration. Artists no longer eliminate noise: instead, they listen to, transform, and contextualize it, recognizing it as an integral part of the acoustic landscape. In this process, listening becomes an active and reflective practice: a way of understanding the city, its rhythms, and the tensions that drive it.

Urban environments are fundamental to this argument because the contemporary city represents the most concentrated intersection of social, technological, and spatial dynamics. Unlike other environments, the urban context is a site of permanent acoustic negotiation, where noise serves as a physical manifestation of the city's metabolism. In cities, the soundscape is shaped by a multitude of factors, from the constant hum of traffic and industry to the subtle, often unnoticed sounds of nature. The dense concentration of people, buildings, and activities creates a dynamic, ever-evolving acoustic environment, where noise is both an inevitable byproduct and a reflection of the pulse of urban life. Centering the analysis on the city allows exploration of how these 'unwanted' sounds serve as essential records of human presence within a shared, high-density fabric. This affirms the idea that listening is an active exploration of the relationship between humans and their environment. Contemporary *sound art* thus becomes a model for reflecting on urban reality and a means of aesthetic articulation, critical reflection, and dialogue with the world. This work presents an initial framework for further research into how artistic practices of listening can contribute to shaping urban space and to understanding noise as an unavoidable component of our everyday lives.

When we learn how to listen to the city, we recognize that noise is a product of life unfolding within it. In the city's soundscape, its distinctive identity is shaped: a layered configuration of tones and rhythms through which the city reveals its spatial, social, and affective layers. This identity is not fixed but constantly changes in response to everyday life, the atmosphere of the place, and how people use and experience space. Artists who work with unwanted sound in open public spaces show that the boundary between cacophony and harmony is revealed only when we learn to

listen carefully. Through the artistic articulation of noise, what is perceived as undesirable becomes material for a deeper understanding of space and the coexistence of urban areas with nature. In this way, open public spaces, often characterized by a high density of overlapping unwanted sounds, are transformed into places of attention, learning, and dialogue. By listening to the city, we realize that it is constantly speaking to us; we just need to learn *how* to hear it.

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