Project name: Sound Switch

Category: Installation

Artist: Leah Stevens

Abstract
How does sound impact and influence the way we absorb various surrounding environments? How does our expectation of what we will hear in a specific environment encourage our interpretation of what we are seeing? How does sound serve as a key factor to the human-nature relationship? Sound Switch attempts to tackle these questions by mismatching familiar environments and familiar sounds around the Cleveland area, allowing the viewer to experience these scenes from a new perspective. Additionally, Sound Switch moves through varying degrees of urban and natural environments at different times of the day, destabilizing and disorienting what is expected of the human-nature relationship. This five minute journey through Cleveland begins with the bustling 8 AM rush hour in University Circle, and incrementally moves both spatially and temporally to close with the dark and vacant Observatory Park at 10 PM. While these video clips play, the accompanying audio clips play in reverse chronological order, thus displacing sounds both when and where the audience would expect to hear them. This takes the form of viewing heavy traffic but hearing the eerie and mournful calls of evening birds, or viewing the church tower at noon but not hearing the chiming of bells, or viewing the peace of the woods but being confronted with honking car horns. In some instances, the brain attempts to make sense of the mismatched sounds, equating the sound of footsteps to the pitter patter of rain drops while viewing a storm, or equating the waves of passing cars on pavement while viewing the water of Lake Erie hit the shore. The mind craves to interpret the uncomfortable illusion as truth. The result of this deep listening experience is a blurring of boundaries between nature and non-nature, man and non-man, and an opportunity to recognize and appreciate the diverse sights and sounds around the Cleveland area.

Background

Sound Switch was originally created for Dr. Andrea Rager’s class, “Art, Eco-criticism, and the Environment” at the Case Western Reserve University, where we were given full license to create any project that reflected the themes discussed in the class. The piece is a response to the 2001 documentary “Rivers and Tides,” where landscape artist Andy Goldsworthy works with natural materials and interacts with the environment to bring to life spiritual, ephemeral, and fantastical elements of the land. The videography of this documentary becomes a part of the art pieces themselves, capturing large-scale nature works that melt, drift, and fall away. The sound serves as a critical cue as to what is about to happen visually. In the case of the whirlpool-like branch structure placed near where the river meets the sea, the groaning and crackling of the sticks as the tides rise to meet the sculpture informs the audience of the energy potential of the inanimate art object. The sound foreshadowed the sculpture’s journey and demise. This project also draws from a faint memory I have from my childhood, where my mother created a project for a class that plays with how sound effects and musical genres affect monologues; she played MLK’s “I had a dream” speech over varying music.
**Detailed Description**

*Sound Switch* considers what would happen if a disparity was created between what we absorb aurally and visually from our surrounding environment. What if what we hear does not inform what we see, and vice versa? My project, *Sound Switch*, addresses these questions, exploring how sound affects our visual interpretation of the surrounding environment. By mismatching video and audio clips, human-nature relationships are destabilized and disoriented, blurring the boundaries between natural and urban environments. In addition to Andy Goldsworthy, the brief video project, totaling just over five minutes, draws influence from themes associated with William Morris, Robert Smithson, and Agnes Denes.

*Sound Switch* contains ten video segments with ten overlaid audio files. Each video, recorded at various locations around the greater Cleveland area, is taken at a similar vantage point, thus presenting a formal aesthetic element that ties the various videos together. The low to the ground perspective offers a sense of closeness to the earth, where the audience could imagine feeling the physical sensation of sound waves moving through the ground. The first video displays rush hour in University Circle, recorded at roughly 8 AM. This opening clip is marked by bustling cars, large trucks, masses of concrete, sidewalks, and the large buildings of Uptown Cleveland. Each consecutive video progresses chronologically, from 8 AM to 10 PM. Simultaneously, the locations gradually move from the heart of an urban environment to a secluded rural environment, going from University Circle, to the quieter suburban area of Cleveland Heights, to the Cleveland Museum of Art, to Wade Lagoon as the church bells toll, to Ohio City Farm, to The Shaker Heights Nature Center, to Mill Creek Falls, to Lower Shaker Lake, to Edgewater Park, and ending with Observatory Park, the only location that could fully evade the sounds of humanity. While these video clips play, the accompanying audio clips play in reverse chronological order, thus displacing sounds both when and where we expect to hear them. In contrast to the visual-aural relationships presented in "Rivers and Tides," *Sound Switch* invites the audience to question the interplay between differing video and audio.

In his essay, "The Beauty of Life" (1880), William Morris states that there is “No square mile of earth’s inhabitable surface that is not beautiful in its own way” (p. 170). The creative process of *Sound Switch* gave me the opportunity for this notion to resonate with me as I explored my city from artistic angles. It opened my eyes to the potential of beauty through a variety of environments, both urban and natural. Furthermore, Morris expresses the dire need for the preservation and care of these spaces. “Of all things that is likely to give us back popular art in England, the cleaning of England is the first and the most necessary. Those who are to make beautiful things must live in a beautiful place” (Morris, 1880, p. 170). In his own works, there is a sense of locality and care for homeland, not just faraway parks preserved for the sole purpose of city folk to retreat to. His prints take inspiration and imagery from the backyards of England, creating local awareness and paying attention to natural elements unique to where he is from. In a similar way, *Sound Switch* seeks to explore imagery unique to Cleveland so that the audience may appreciate a truer and deeper beauty to locations they may pass during their everyday lives.

The videography in *Sound Switch* also explores philosophies of Robert Smithson, including his beliefs in the interaction of humanity and nature, as well as natural processes as a viable art medium. In *Land Art*, Ben Tufnell states, "Smithson was fascinated by the way in which the landscape is marked by man’s use of it, seeing this as a wholly natural process. For him, such sites embody the sense of collapse - of entropy - that he felt was a guiding principle of existence" (2006, p. 32). *Sound Switch* reveals a gradient of urban and natural life and how the
two intermingle visually. The audio tracks add an additional layer to this narrative, because sound acts as a major indicator of the type of environment we are in. Although the angles, the duration, and the proximities were all elements under my control, my project played with the chance and spontaneity of nature and its processes, from the dancing of light, to the rhythm of waves, to even the dialogue of traffic.

The most noteworthy element of Sound Switch is, of course, the mismatched audio and video files, which to me, is reminiscent of Agnes Denes’ work, Wheatfield - A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan. This work involved the clearing of the Battery Park landfill in order to harvest a field of wheat, just blocks away from Wall Street, in the shadow of the World Trade Center, and in the heart of bustling city-life. In her writings on the work, Agnes Denes states that the philosophical goals of the project were to, "Introduce a leisurely wheatfield into an island of achievement-craze, culture, and decadence. Confront a highly efficient, rich complex where time is money and money rules.... The peaceful and content against the achiever. The everlasting against the forever changing" (1992, p. 22) Her project derived from themes of stark contrast, and I too wanted to create contrast between hearing and seeing. What is nature and what is urban when we are absorbing both simultaneously? Like in Wheatfield, the boundary between man and nature blurs, while questioning and confrontation ensues. As the audience sees certain images in Sound Switch, they are confronted with sounds that they may not necessarily feel comfortable hearing, such as the quiet night being overtaken by honking horns. Furthermore, perhaps there is unease in viewing traffic early in the morning while hearing only the haunting songs of birds at night. It is disorienting to the audience in not only space, but in time, as well. With each viewing, the mind attempts to make sense of these contrasts; the cars begin to sound like waves when viewing the lake, and the footsteps begin to sound like rain when viewing the oncoming storm. The mind craves to interpret the illusion as truth.

The result of Sound Switch is a five minute journey through space, sound, and time. Defying expectations and common interpretations, it is an opportunity for fresh insights into familiar places, as well as an opportunity to appreciate the many sights and sounds that the city of Cleveland has to offer.

Works Cited

Bio

Leah Stevens has been playing the flute for thirteen years, and is currently pursuing her Master of Music with Alberto Almarza at Carnegie Mellon University. Leah has studied with world-renowned flute instructors, including Stefan Hoskuldssoon, principal flutist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and Joshua Smith, principal flutist of the Cleveland Orchestra, who she studied with at The Cleveland Institute of Music while pursuing her Bachelor of Music in Flute Performance. Additionally, Leah earned a minor in Art History through Case Western Reserve University during her time in Cleveland. She currently works as the Customer Service Specialist for Center for Young Musicians and interns for Pittsburgh new music ensemble NAT 28.

In her free time, Leah enjoys biking and running; she ran the 2018 Cleveland Marathon and is currently training to run a 49-day, cross-country relay run with 2019 4K for Cancer, where with her team she will be fundraising for the Ulman Foundation, visiting cancer patients, delivering care packages, and doing other acts of community service. After completing her graduate studies, she plans to make a career out of performing, teaching, and organizing outreach events to bring art and music to the community.