

Anthropology of Music Masterclass *** 26th - 29th of June *** Prof. Steven Feld

Walking-with-sounds: Creative agency, artistic collaboration, and acoustic communities

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The title of my presentation is “walking-with-sounds” and focuses on mobile sound art works such as sound walks and sound maps while considering sounding arts in general. I will discuss case studies of sound art in public spaces that demonstrate the development of the social interactions taking place in the networks formed by the interlacing of spatial, acoustic and informational layers, mixed realities and digital landscapes. These sound art works employ mainly field recordings and soundscape compositions that are coproduced by artists and audiences that eventually form acoustic communities. They exist in - real, imagined, or hybrid - space, and are technologically mediated, geo-located and experienced through headphones. In this presentation I will argue that thinking about our experience of space through the filter of the sonic provides a new and extended vocabulary for the discussion of both space and sound on which anthropologists, ethnomusicologists and others increasingly draw.

I will debate about the use of an interdisciplinary research methodology that firstly triangulates ethnographic tools, and experimental auditory phenomenology, and secondly understands sound walks and sound maps as a method for knowing soundscapes. As such, a research methodology for the artistic practices that use mobile audio devices, can contribute to the development of a new interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological framework for researching the social and cultural study of sound and sounding arts. Both my theoretical and epistemological considerations are informed by Steven Feld’s theory of “acoustemology” (Feld, 2015) that brings acoustics and epistemology together. In employing an acoustemological approach my aim is to theorize ecosophical thinking about sound further and explore the potential of acoustemology to advance ethnographic studies of both space and sound.

My research is based on the concept of the soundscape and its multiple uses for capturing and studying the sonic environment, as well as the ways we exist as social agents within it. Therefore, in my presentation I will ponder over phenomenological listening as a form of collective belonging to a place that has the potential to generate feelings of equal participation to our everyday sonic experience. I will thus expand upon a case study of collaborative sound walking/mapping that will enable me to explore the relation between body and physical space, and the local conditions of acoustic sensation, knowledge, and imagination. I call this method experimental sonic-social phenomenology (Born, 2013) that draws from social phenomenology and hermeneutics of senses of place, to address sound as a condition of and for knowing, creating, and developing, both a sense of place and an acoustic community. The implication of sensual bodily presence and of perceptual engagement in the context of a sound walk enlivens situated modes of listening, and sonic ways of knowing, sensing, animating, and sounding place; and these are potent shaping forces that inform how people make sense of their sonic-spatial experiences.

Ultimately, I will present a definition of acoustic communities through a sound art outlook. I am interested in how acoustic communities emerge in a sound art context, and how this informs the ways these communities perceive, document, and share their experience of space. Again, the coming together of acoustics and epistemology “to investigate sounding and listening as a knowing-in-action” will allow me to consider the application of playful, collaborative and creative sonic affordances in urban design and in the right to the city that is a product of “a knowing-with and knowing-through the audible” (Feld, 2015, p.12). Departing from “metaphysical or transcendental assumptions surrounding claims to ‘truth’ [acoustemology] [...] engages the relationality of knowledge production” (ibid) and understands listening as “relational and contingent, situated and reflexive” (p.15). In this sense, acoustemology can animate the experience and agency of artistic acoustic communities. In this framework, sound art may inspire a revised understanding of space and of representation according to a performative non-representational perspective (Timeto, 2016). My aim is to show that the development of a sound art practice, where everyday and artistic listening practices intertwine with agency and creativity, assembles inclusive acoustic spaces. In those spaces artistic acoustic communities emerge through the performativity and the situatedness of knowledge in sound art practices and through the prevailing of situated listening in engagements with place and space-time.

References

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Feld, S., 2015. Acoustemology. In: . D. Novak & M. Sakakeeny, eds. *Keywords in sound*. Duke University Press, pp. 12-21.

Timeto, F., 2016. *Diffractional technospaces: A feminist approach to the mediations of space and representation..* New York: Routledge.