

Thoughts on The Sonic Gaze: November 30th 2017

There was a visit to the Walker Art Gallery in William Brown Street Liverpool starting at 1.00 pm.

The first listening session was of 20 minutes in the ground floor area. This includes a reception and sales desk, a cafeteria, access to display rooms on the ground floor and stairs to the upper floor. The interior is largely marble, which is hard and highly reflective.

The area was constantly busy with people and was notably divided into two areas with the cafeteria semi-sectioned off from the entrance and reception.

The discussion noted the mix of sounds that happened in the areas. There was the noise of passage of people (talking, footsteps etc.), the refrigeration units, of serving of food and the coffee machine, of chairs and cutlery, and the intermittent noise from an installation in the floor above which had pop music tracks. Opinions differed as to the degree that the sounds were discrete. Certainly the harsher sounds (e.g. clattering plates) were strongly in the foreground, but there was disagreement as to the degree of blend of the more continuous sounds.

There was a consideration of how the sound would appear if recorded and how much harder it would be to locate the sounds without a visual reference to the geography. One listener wondered if there were to be a film made in this area how much of the sounds would have to had been taken off so as not to confuse a viewer. That is, much of the sound was coming from areas adjacent to any one area. This made the act of listening challenging as it needed a shift in focus to relate the sounds to the different locations. It was noted that the reflective surfaces sometimes blurred the sounds, which appeared to have a 'coating' round them. It was thought that that the acoustic spaces were generally socially functional, in that they allowed conversations in all parts of the space.

The second listening session was of fifteen minutes and was in Gallery 3. This is almost exclusively a room of paintings, with benches for seating and some art objects in the central space. The flooring was of short wooden planks, which generally gave and creaked.

The level of sound was generally very muted indeed. There was very efficient sound proofing given by the three sets of glass doors. This is probably a by-product of the heating (and humidity?) requirements of the gallery.

There was some interest in the sound of a) perhaps five visitors moving across the floor b) the jangle of keys by the gallery attendant and c) the generally muted conversations of the visitors.

The main interest was in the continuous sound of the heating (or air-conditioning?) system coming from the ceiling.

It was thought that this stopped the room from ever being silent or deserted. It acted as a signal that the space was designated as requiring constant human intervention – a sign of 'conservation', with the implications of of value, cultural heritage, state funding etc.

There was a discussion about the way this special acoustic environment acted as a moderator of the behaviour of the visitors, in that that they tended to speak softly. A connection was made to libraries (though these are often, oddly, noisier). The term 'reverential' was not used, though it perhaps it should have been. There was then a discussion with a gallery attendant about how formal the rules of behaviour were. He had the view that people should not rowdy, but in general he thought he would probably intervene only if someone complained. There was some chat about people who have sufficient ego to talk loudly and be overheard by all in the gallery. He didn't think it was his responsibility to have an opinion on this.

The third listening session was to consider the installation Pink Rooms by Quinlan and Hastings with Piaseki. This was of visual footage of empty bars with a sound track of pop songs and various kinds of noise. The visit was fifteen minutes of a film lasting six hours.

The discussion was pleased to note this was a consideration of the relation between human space and the soundscape. It was noted that there was a melancholy contrast between the gay social time to be heard and the visual deadness of the empty spaces to be seen. The question was raised as to

why the film was so long and what was expected of the listener/viewer. Secondly, once the basic premise had been understood then what more there was to be gained by engaging with the art object. There was some scepticism of the fruitfulness of the relation created between (the sounds of) global warming in relation to the disappearance of the gay bar scene. The experience was more positive for those who has not read the background information in advance.

The session as a whole was thought to be interesting and thought-provoking. It raised issues as the notion of the gallery as a state funded institution, the way the sonic aspects affected the response of participants in the space, and the fact that the relation of sound to environment is appreciated by some in the contemporary art world as a site enabling the communication of ideas of place, historical change and identity. The question of the musical or aesthetic response to the sounds experienced was not raised in this session.

To be continued.

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