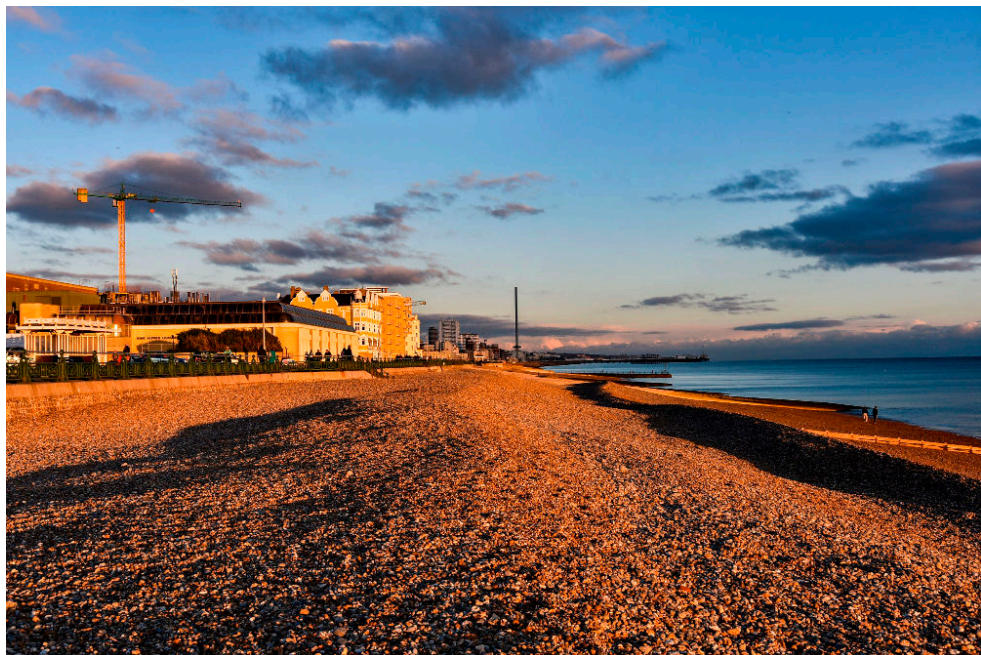


»Where does the journey go to?« A birthday present for Johanna Rolshoven 2019

More than 12,000 steps

Thomas Felfer and Edwina Felfer

Audio paper produced by Thomas Felfer
Voice: Edwina Felfer



Brighton. By courtesy of Courtney Flowers © 2019

A condensed sound recording of a walk through Brighton/UK, taken on February 15, 2019.

Die verdichtete Klängaufnahme eines Rundgangs durch Brighton/UK, aufgenommen am 15. Februar 2019.

© Thomas and Edwina Felfer 2019. Duration/Spieldauer 32:35

Listen: <https://cba.fro.at/407679>

This is not a representation¹

Let's walk together through some of the districts in the City of Brighton/UK. "Vibrant, colourful and creative."² This is a self-description from the official tourist board of Brighton, but how does this city on the seaside on the south coast of England sound? "The city speaks to its inhabitants," writes Roland Barthes (1997, quoted in Tonkiss 2016), but what does it tell us when we record its chatter? Can we understand anything or is it a foreign language that speaks to us yet we can't understand it?

More than 12,000 steps is an auditive experiment that does not give away answers but might leave you with more questions. It is neither a representation nor a mapping of a particular place, however it is not just a collection of sounds. The following text is a commentary that explains certain decisions and assists in framing this piece.

The recording was made on Friday February 15, 2019. It was a sunny day³ and I was recording my whole journey in the afternoon between 2pm and 5pm. The recording itself is not enhanced through equalizing or any other tool in post-production. I have selected different sections and arranged them chronologically. The chosen sequences are between 30 seconds and three minutes. The transition between the different sections is made through cross-fade to create a permanent moving perspective. The narration uses academic quotes that try to guide the perception between the act of walking and the sounds of the different urban ambiences. The quotes were chosen and integrated after the field recording and were devised in response to the ambient composition. The quotes sought to resonate with the sound. The slow pace of the narrator counteracted with the movements in the field recording.

This is not a representation

When I listen to the recording, I immediately contrive an image in my mind. This is not only because I produced the recording but also a recollection of my regular walks through the city. In this sense perhaps the recording reveals more about the person who recorded it, rather than the place it was recorded in. Isobel Anderson and Tullis Rennie support this observation, according to them, field recordings are not objective documents of the sound environment but "subjective, expressive, meaningful and personal to the recordist" (Anderson and Tullis 2016, 222). I have tried to acknowledge the recordist as an active agent in the field by not hiding my body in the recording (Anderson and Tullis 2016).

More than 12,000 steps is mainly informed by different genres of audio production. First and foremost, it is orientated towards soundscape compositions. Barry Truax considers a soundscape composition "a form of electroacoustic music" with the purpose "to invoke the listener's associations, memories, and

1. Inspired by the artwork "La trahison des images" by René Magritte 1929.

2. VisitBrighton. 2019. <<https://www.visitbrighton.com>> [accessed 10.04.2019].

3. I mention the weather to emphasize that not only the time of the day, the season and the materiality of the built environment impacts the sounds, as well as the weather.

imagination related to the soundscape” (Truax, o.S.). Truax explains: “The compositional technique involved [is] minimal, involving only selection, transparent editing, and unobtrusive cross-fading” (Truax, o.S.). At first glance I would not connect *more than 12,000 steps* with music, however the gaps between the single quotes are based on personal aesthetical decisions. Taking into account that John Cage and before him Edgard Varèse considers music as “organised sound” reveals that the boundaries between music and sound are blurred.

In my personal work, I use field recordings as a research tool. This relates to John Levak Drever’s (2002) call to reposition soundscape compositions as ethnography. Jacqueline Waldock (2016) writes, “it is more accurate to see soundscape composition either as an ethnographic tool or as producing an ethnographic gaze” (p. 158). *More than 12,000 steps* doesn’t fit within either of these descriptions, however it is not “sonic tourism, where the concert performance is akin to a public showing of personal holiday slides” (Drever, 2002: 21). Peter Cusack describes his use of field recordings as “sonic journalism”.

“Sonic journalism occurs when field recordings are allowed adequate space and time to be heard in their own right when the focus is on their original factual and emotional content, and when they are valued for what they are rather than as source material for further work.” (Cusack, 2003: 26)

More than 12,000 steps attempts to attribute meaning to the field recording by framing the sounds through speech. This is not achieved through description but the speech is a “trigger” for the listeners’ own associations. In this sense, the production seems closer to the format of an Audio-paper. Susanne Krogh Groth and Kristine Samson (2016) propose that an “audio paper” is “an extension of the written paper” where “sounds and soundscape becomes framework in which language performs”. The “audio paper” follows the process of disseminating an academic argument like a written paper, however it is more experimental in its character.

More than 12,000 steps doesn’t fulfil this requirement, but I still want to position it as a form of “phonographic methods” (Gallagher and Prior, 2014). “Phonographic methods” not only focus on recording but also on listening (playback), editing and mediation, with a special emphasis on performance (this could also include broadcasting or installation). The methods also acknowledge the importance of the written word. Gallagher and Prior propose that a “descriptive, poetic and creative form of writing about sound can provide insightful and evocative interpretations, [...] written words can furnish contextual details about recording, location, sound sources, microphone positions and so on” (Gallagher and Prior, 2014: 270). I consider sound a vital form and a way to create awareness of our sensual perception of the body in space/place, but I also see its limitations. Fritz Schlütter (2019: 96) notes:

“Wenn es stimmt, das Field Recordings einerseits ‘mehr’ als Sprache, ‘einzigartige Qualität’ oder ‘etwas auf sinnlicher Ebene’ vermitteln können, müssen wir auf der anderen Seite vielleicht auch ihren Mangel an Eindeutigkeit, Sinngehalt und Aussagekraft kritisieren: Während sie das eine zeigen, verschleiern sie etwas Anderes.”

This is not a representation

So what does *More than 12,000 steps* provide if not a representation? Does it relate to Edward Said's (2003) concept of orientalism? Is it a form of "sonic orientalism" or "sonic othering"? At this point, it's worth taking a step back to look at the city again in more general terms. Fran Tonkiss (2016) writes a city is not necessarily a "shared perceptual space" (p. 244). We might walk together through the same city but not necessarily perceive things the same. "The urban ambience is created as a product of different sights, sounds, smells, textures, tastes and thermal conditions, resonating with individual and collective memory." (Bruce a.o., 2015: 2) Taking this into consideration, I argue that a sole focus on sound still has value to better understand the fabric of urban life. For example, spatial clues are present in the sound recording. The sounds create a dialogue with the architecture and reveal a certain constitution of spaces, not only in an acoustic sense but also in a socio-cultural form.

I want to reflect on this thought with three brief examples that can also be heard in the recording. Seagulls, voices, and buskers.

The seagulls are ubiquitous; I did not intend to give them so much recording space but they are inescapable in Brighton. The City is characterised by the seagulls to the extent that the local football team Brighton and Hove Albion is nicknamed The Seagulls. The seagulls in the recording are not only a reference to the geography of the place, they also "sound" different according to the architecture of the city. Sometimes they indicate the wideness of the sea and other times the density of the built environment, which brings me to the next aspect, the captured human voices.

Jean Paul Thibaud (2013) asks in his essay about the sounds of Rio de Janeiro, "what if we focus on the textures and sounds of the spoken word with different dynamics and accents. [...] Listen to the musicality of spoken word rather than semantic content?" (p. 75). For Thibaud the different phonic gestures demonstrate the different atmospheric nuances of places. They "accompany and embody public life and render the dynamics of places" (Thibaud, 2013: XX). This statement insinuates that the voices on the recording are not random but refer to different socio-economic spaces.

The voices blend with the sounds and create different pace, rhythms and densities. Sound makes differences audible. The busy main roads, the sounds of the buses, other machines and the human voices produce differing rhythms and densities in comparison to the lanes where the narrow streets almost create tranquillity.

The sound of buskers in Brighton is also very common. This is not only because Brighton has its own music college and two universities with large music departments but also because the policies in the city are very lenient towards bus-

kers. The City Council of Brighton generally welcomes buskers and does not require them to apply for a licence.⁴ In the recording, the sounds of numerous buskers are present because of the time of day and sunny weather. Where they position themselves is also not by chance. They choose an audible location to ensure the music travels and position themselves amongst the crowds for exposure. According to Michael Bywater (2007) buskers are liminal performers. Not only do they create a space of performance, but they also occupy the time of pedestrians. “Timespace” is audible in the recording.

This is not a representation

Let’s walk together through some of the districts in the City of Brighton/UK. The sounds should resonate with the individual memories of the listener, not necessarily of Brighton, but of places that have been walked through.

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