



INTERVIEW WITH O+A

by Lex Baghat

Bruce Odland: Our culture is extremely visual. Everything we see around us is justified by visual logic. What we see here at the World Financial Center Plaza is basically a power-point presentation actually built out of glass and steel. No acoustician created this soundscape. If an acoustician worked on these buildings, he worked on the inside and his job-title disappeared when he walked out the door. All the auditory elements we hear are purposeless, entirely accidental.

We observe this kind of cognitive dissonance between our visual and aural environments, and in response have made a series of pieces in different cities that are all site-specific. This piece, Blue Moon, is specific to a nice looking 1980s plaza with old weird gaslights that are supposed to let people know that they should feel comfortable in the middle of an alienating building full of futures traders. And it works! The consumers know how to follow the cues, how to feel comfortable with the Disneyland gaslights. The odd part is all these safety cues are visual, meanwhile the auditory cues are totally out of hand!

Sam Auinger: This discrepancy between visuals and sound has been developing gradually. By now it seems normal to people born in this soundscape that it does not give you correct information. For example, if you hear an aircraft passing overhead and you close your eyes here, you hear it from three sides and you could not point at it.

Bruce: All the aural information here is completely messed up, giving false signals, because of multiple reflections from tall glass surfaces. So your hunter gatherer hearing system with its sophisticated direction detection capabilities is totally tricked and confused. You end up using half of your brain to cancel out all this noise in order to think, to walk down the street.

Sam and I are aural thinkers trying to place one purposeful element into this messed-up soundscape. Our installation is reducing this chaos to an overtone series, which is the simplest sonic order. We're installing that order in a geometric form on the plaza as part of our purposeful intervention. Blue Moon decodes all the incoming random noises and

organizes them into a tuned overtone series and puts them back in real-time out of 5 "cube" loudspeakers on the plaza. Transforming these incoming noises to harmony reroutes the way the information is processed by the human hearing mechanism from the computation intensive part of the brain that decodes noise, to the part that decodes harmony. It's closer to the brain stem, part of the audio cortex that automatically decodes harmonic intervals. All of our tuning tube installations transform an environment of chaos into one of order and harmony and reconnect the observer to their environment in the moment. They can relax a bit.

Sam: Don't get us wrong. There is a certain aesthetic in noise. But when we talk about public spaces, all these machines become the players within the soundbox of the architecture. Being so much louder than humans, machines fill up the soundspace, and also the acoustic space available for humans to communicate in. We are working with this marriage of architecture and engines and are creating from it a musical order, and the possibility to decode the sonic environment. It has never been our interest to merely displace a sound, to bring sound from point A and put it in point B. We make compositional choices with the basic sound sources already existing at the site and the overtones they generate through our tuning tubes. But the noise of our society and the reflections of the architecture are our basic materials.

Bruce: We are not adding music, because to us soundtrack replacement is the first stage of not listening to a place. These nightmare soundscapes are formed by accrual, by a series of non-choices based on not listening. Another such overlay, even justified by the term "music" merely extends the disaster. We aim to decode the existing soundscape and make sense and music of that.

Sam: We have realized that as a culture we have no real words to talk about sound in our society. We have thousands of words to talk about visuals, but very few for sound. Everybody has a basic idea of gravity, but we don't have a basic idea about sound. Everybody wonders why cities are humming, but they have no idea that the lowest frequencies they can hear have a wavelength of 16 meters.

Bruce: People don't realize that low-tones bend around corners and high-tones don't.

Sam: These lowest frequencies act like water. They just swim around in the glass and steel canyons until absorbed by the only soft objects, people.

Bruce: Now in Rome, the acoustical zones were beautiful! That's where we came up with these ideas of using resonance to produce overtone series.

Sam: That's because during the Renaissance, everything was shaped according to golden proportions, which are very close to the proportion of the overtone series. So, in a little town, let's say Ravenna, in the inner circle, an old monk walking late at night with a bundle of keys is a musical event! Because everything is so proportional that the spaces start to talk, and not to fight with each other. The problem is that spaces now fight with each other. For instance, at the new British Museum dome by Norman Foster, the half Taurus glass roof creates an endless inverted echo at odds with the visuals of the original square architecture. The opening Jazz concerts, (meant for a non-echoey space) caused physical nausea creating a totally disorienting user experience. We are working on a language to describe and address this sort of problem.

Bruce: It would be fun to work with an architect, rather than working, as we often find ourselves, in counterpoint to architects.

Excerpted by Alexis Bhagat from an interview conducted at the World Financial Center in May 2004. A more extensive version of this interview will appear in Sound Generation: Recording - Tradition - Politics, forthcoming from Autonomedia.

