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SAMPLES

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Intersensory Silence

Here and there the buzzing of an insect,
sometimes a shy birdcall,
a little wind chime ringing at the slightest breeze:
the bustling of the urban surroundings.

Sitting in the garden,
I see the soft surface of moss-covered stones.
I feel silence. /NS

Animation: page 6

Vertical Listening

If I don't follow a horizontal path through the garden, but listen to it from a fixed position instead, the garden invites me to discover it vertically—as an orchestration of multiple layers. As with visual layers, each sonic layer has its own function to contribute to the holistic composition. Listening vertically, I may find a correlation between frequency and elevation and thus a spatial validation of the relative “highness” or “lowness” of a tone. But a garden and its house can also play with our spatial preconceptions, even overturn an established acoustic hierarchy.

The lowest layer determines the textural foundation of the entire composition. Its surface effects also constitute the fundamental acoustics for all subsequent layers. The range of textures and acoustics is abundant: the ground may appear deep and resonant (wood), high and dense (gravel), squeaky (sand) or absorbent (moss), dry and reflective (stone), or bubbly, dripping, flowing and roaring (water).

Above this textural layer, more consistent sonic objects hold the potential for tonal gestures such as the light sliding of a *shōji* (“paper screen”) or a deeper *fusuma* (“wooden door”) inside the house. These linear vertical gestures may be contrasted by the irregular splatter from a *tsukubai* (“washbasin”) or the constant noise of a waterfall. Other objects in the middle layer may remain passive, but they shape and organize the tonal objects: the vertical surface of a large rock reflects sounds from the front and blocks the ones behind; an enclosing *engawa* (“wooden veranda”) harmonizes the voices of the visitors in a warm acoustic space.

Finally, the highest layer of the garden defines the depth and plentitude of our vertical horizon, creating either a sense of expansion or intimacy. This layer's quality is mostly articulated by trees, which reveal a wide range of textures in the wind: from the soft and gentle gusts blowing through the feathered maple leaves to the deep, tonal humming of rigid pine needles, or the diffuse, elevating hiss of bamboo blades. If you get lucky, fruit trees may even attract the incisive stridulation of cicadas, deciduous trees the screeching of a heron or crow, a black pine the lyrical song of the *uguisu* (Japanese nightingale). This song is sometimes mimicked in a temple or palace, where a wooden *uguisubari* (“nightingale floor”) produces a chirping sound when walked upon; the highest sound is echoed in the lowest layer. /LB

Animation: page 20

Threshold

The act of stepping from one space into another, of passing through the threshold from garden to house, from one room to the next, is often performed casually, even incidentally. We pass through doors, gates, and openings dozens of times every day. But there is something significant—even immaterial—about this ubiquitous, narrow strip. It may be a small portion of the stone, wood, or concrete on which we tread, but its significance goes well beyond its material nature. A threshold can range from a few centimeters to a couple of meters in depth; from the extent of a *nijiriguchi* (small opening in the wall of a teahouse) to that of a massive *torii* (“gate”). Its common purpose is to simultaneously mark the beginning and end of something. A threshold brings us from one domain to another, separating and connecting each decisively in the process. Over time, one’s back-and-forth movement through this liminal space reveals the horizontal layers between the two sides. Whether short and sharp or long and soft, this interval filters the light, sounds, and heat along this gradient; the threshold becomes a fader, both dimming and amplifying the sounds on either side of this membrane. With a more extended interstitial construction, the “margin” becomes a distinct place in its own right, with its own characteristics and atmosphere. In short: it is a space between spaces. And although a threshold is by definition experienced in transition, its spatial quality is unique—that is, defined by neither of its adjacent domains. A blank surface is colored by various indirect influences, altering the appearance of these external projections before reflecting back an image of its own. /MV

Animation: page 26

Hide and Reveal

Once I've passed the garden's visual threshold, the splash of a fountain emerges on the left. I turn my head to discover only a shady corner. My eyes adapt slowly to the darkness: a thin strip of running water becomes distinguishable. As I approach it, I catch a glimpse of another *tsukubai* ("washbasin"). It is positioned behind a wooden wall, dripping more lightly. This time I see the water but I cannot hear it: its delicate trickle is masked by the noise of the steadier stream. I go around the corner, leaving the first basin behind. Here, the wooden wall separating the two basins creates an acoustic shadow: the soft, high-pitched water jet becomes audible behind the dull and diffuse splash of the bigger one. I turn back and follow a path to the lower garden. The unmasked songs of the crickets grow louder, dragging me deeper into the garden. The audiovisual labyrinth continues. Navigating the garden's paths, it occurs to me that I am experiencing an audiovisual *miegakure* ("hide and reveal"): A sound reveals what the vision hides; the vision reveals what a sound hides. In this way, the design of the garden makes productive use of the differences between visual and sonic spatiality. Through visual and acoustic barriers, it creates a distinct rhythm. Eyes and ears alternate in guiding my path through the garden—an infinite route? I never reach an actual end or even a center—only new acoustic or visual branches, which may lead me along new branches: a rhizome par excellence. The entirety of the garden will never be seen or heard. /LB

Animation: page 30

Gestures / Clearing

Amid the introspective ease created by a Japanese garden, gestural sounds bespeak a kind of wordless human presence. Aside from the vocal tones and footsteps I am used to listening for in a European public park, these “gestural” sounds I hear at Mii-dera are mostly crafted by hand: the occasional unlocking and opening of a sliding door, the ritual ringing of the temple bell, the careful raking of fallen leaves, and the daily refining of a sand drawing, or the placing of the wooden ladle back on the rim of the *chozubashi* (“water bowl”) after rinsing one’s mouth and hands in preparation for tea ceremony. Unable to read the full emblematic meaning of these sounds, I focus instead on feeling the subtle movements that they imply. These intimate, bodily impressions enhance the exteriority of the more global ambience arising from the garden’s surroundings—a spatial experience perhaps most comparable to a forest glade. /NS

Animation: page 36

The Nature of Intervals

A bamboo pipe pivoting like a scale on two lateral wooden posts guides me into my first visit to the garden of Shisen-dō in the suburbs of northern Kyoto. Water pours into the upper part of the bamboo pipe until it tips the balance, empties, and finally falls back into its original position, at which point its tip gently—elegantly—strikes a carefully placed, smooth stone. The resulting high-pitched impact sound reaches my ears even before I arrive at the entrance gate. The tonality and level of this sound, shifting with the growing and waning distance between myself and the sound's source, give a strong spatial sequence to the experience of strolling through the garden. In contrast to the auditory ubiquity of the recurrent impact sound, the instrument itself remains barely visible, even from up close; it is hidden at the arboreous edge of one of the garden's open sandplains. I find it set within the course of a small water channel which has been deviated from the river that delimits the garden's eastern edge, now surrounded by lush foliage. Listening to it up close, the impact is just one sound in a sequence: gently gurgling, the rivulet in the channel; suddenly whooshing, the water being released from the bamboo pipe which will soon be poised to tilt back again and meet the water jet; a resounding splash, just before the other end of the pipe hits the stone. The little trickle in the channel, still gurgling, resumes even more delicately in the wake of this sonorous impact. /NS

Animation: page 40

White Open

The path is narrow; it bends around tight corners. Thick, perfectly shaped shrubs fill the space around my knees while branches, heavy with summer foliage, filter the sunlight overhead. The dense vegetation swallows not only sights but also distant sounds, creating an enclosed space composed of path, stepping stones, and moss-covered borders. Occasionally, I catch a glimpse of the sky through a small opening in the canopy, but my ears are tuned into the sound of my own steps, the gravel crunching beneath my feet, the rustle of leaves when my knees brush against a round-shaped Azalea, the rattling sound made by wind shaking the bamboo grove. There is constant movement, and a walk through such a breathing aisle reveals the smallest changes in topography, luminosity, and volume. With no end in sight, my perception of time also begins to change. Time appears to become stretched until everything appears as if in slow motion.

But suddenly the path simultaneously reveals an opening and an end: a bright gate pulls me out of this cloak of damp darkness. The transition is fast and staggering. Sharp sunrays illuminate the patch of uncovered, white gravel, converting this clearing into a dazzling sea of light. With the sky wide open, sounds hailing from distant, unknown sources fall in large curves from all sides, engulfing me like a flock of darting starlings. The opening is a funnel for the electromagnetic waves coming from every direction, overstimulating the sensitized receptors and whitening the information that reaches the brain. Only after a few seconds will the sensors regain full functionality and be capable of fully perceiving the white, open space which immediately dismisses the damp, muffled feeling from before. /MV

Animation: page 44

Sequential Listening

Standing on the sidewalk in front of the *machiya* (“townhouse”), my sonic sphere is shaped by cars, bicycles, footsteps, voices, and everyday objects. Each of these sounds are reflected back and forth between the facades of this narrow side street, creating an even denser environment. They approach, peak, and veer off again in clearly defined dynamic envelopes and spatial vectors. I can identify the source of these sounds with my eyes; all auditory events are transparently linked to visual events. While the streetscape may remain anonymous, there is no sound which does not potentially concern me. Just like sunlight, wind, or scents on the street, sounds hit me directly and immediately.

The street is still audible as I pass through an entrance in the *machiya*’s thin walls. Beyond it, however, the sensory scene is a totally different one: The air is cool, the light is dim, the acoustics of the house are dampening those of the street. The invisible outdoors appears a safe distance away, becoming almost domesticated by the “coloring” of the house acoustics. In this protected indoor environment, an acoustic niche opens up. My every step and even the rhythm of my breath become audible. I am no longer just listening for sound sources; I am adding to them.

As I slide the *shōji* screen to the side and step through to the garden in the back, the acoustic horizon opens up once more. The city reappears, but only as a distant drone in the sky. Its sounds are blurred and do not concern me anymore. I wait. After a while, a bell is delicately triggered by the wind. A crow passes overhead. A siren howls in the distance. Sonic figures continue to crystalize from out of the continuous city drone. Sounds drift into the garden as leaves onto a neatly raked ground. This tiny, enclosed space holds limitless potential—call it silence, if you will. /LB

Animation: page 48

Black Hole

One is pulled towards the light, perhaps because brightness always seems to represent the “good,” or at least provide the illusion of relief in moments of fear or inner darkness. The intensity of light masks the senses and thoughts. It is drawn into the dark corners under the roof and even into the smallest room. But when I enter the immersive space of a Japanese garden in Kyoto, I discover a new construction of darkness. And under the stinging summer sun, this darkness becomes an unexpected friend, for the dim light creates a retreat where I can find a moment of contemplation. Here, in this place of reduced optical perception, my focus shifts towards other senses, which are becoming more acute. The singing birds and buzzing insects, the air touching my skin and the aroma of water, of wood or Tatami, become all the more present—these sensations form a gradient of impressions. From my position, taking shelter inside this black hole, I experience the outside world in a new way: my senses are sharpened and easily focused on subtle and minute events all around. And suddenly, very little effort is needed to highlight any kind of visual or sonic event. I notice the smallest piece of decoration glimmering golden in the darkest corner, the creaking of the wooden floorboards under the pressure of my foot, the grinding of a sliding *shōji* door, the soft summer breeze rushing in through the window, the framed view onto the *kare-sansui* (“Japanese rock garden”)—a landscape submerged in silencing fog and the humming of the city beyond. /MV

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