

# Articles of kaput. art magazine

## Athens by sound Interviewed by

Elina Axioti

Aaron Betsky, director of the 11th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice (14th Sept-23rd Nov), called for architectural production that “*seeks to collect and encourage experimentation in architecture. Such experimentation ... does not want to present buildings that are already in existence...*”. The Polish participation in the Exhibition was awarded a prize for their work *Hotel Polonia, The Afterlife of Buildings*. Their project illustrates six large scale contemporary public buildings in Poland in the future by presenting their decadence or their assimilation with their surroundings.

The Greek participation, *Athens by Sound*, consisted of Stylianos Giamarelos, Christina Achtypi, Anastassia Karandinou and a long list of people who collaborated for the production of an interactive sonic map of Athens in the Greek pavilion where the visitor could hear, see and interact with the intentionally fragmented but characteristically recognizable and unique soundscape of the Greek capital.

The *Athens by Sound* group describes their presentation and understanding of the urban reality of Athens within the framework of their project.

**Elina Axioti:** What do you want the visitor to see?

**Christina Achtypi:** *Athens by Sound* invites visitors to experience, explore and re-shape an interactive sonic map of Athens through their own physical presence and movement. The visitor is not a passive observer, but an active participant to the interactive environment. By moving within the installation space, he triggers some of its aspects that were intentionally withheld (at first), revealing fragments of Athens that concern its sound. Movement-halt, presence-absence, voice-silence constantly re-form and enrich the Greek Pavilion in a unique way.

**Anastasia Karandinou:** In our kind of map you cannot have an overview; it is rather like a labyrinth. You explore it step by step like you do in the actual city. When the pavilion is empty there is nothing there; when someone walks in, it starts to exist. We play around with the notion of exploration and navigation within the city, and the way it comes forth to you as you encounter it by your own movement. We argue that space is anyway inter-active in the sense that, since you are part of it, you affect its qualities by your own presence and movement within it. Space is not only the built solid elements, but the whole situation of events and circumstances that the visitors create. By our installation we take this to an extreme; the presence of a visitor over-affects the space: it activates sounds and images, and it literally re-creates it.

**EA:** Digital editing of sounds is nowadays a popular media. It is an open field to think about post-production and the extent we are constituted by our technologies. What do you think about this?

**Stylianos Giamarelos:** New technologies, the way they are adopted in our everyday life and the way they affect our perceptions lie at the heart of our investigations. To refer to the project itself and its relation to notions of post-production and popular new media, I would note that various studies show that we generally pay more attention to a recorded sound, rather than to the ‘live’ sounds of our everyday experience. By processing – but in no way altering the character of – our original recordings of Athens by Sound, we somehow exploit this well-observed attitude to the benefit of the goals of the project.

**AK:** The fact that we were recording with our in-ear microphones on, changed for a while the way we experience the city. While you record wearing the in-ear microphones (which are small microphones looking just like the ordinary small portable headphones) you are so much focused on what you hear that you find yourself walking almost with your eyes shut. This – I would say – was an incredibly rich experience and experiment concerning the understanding, exploration and interpretation of space.

**EA:** What kind of sounds did you choose? Did you make any aesthetic judgment of these sounds?

**SG:** We did not intend to select specific kinds of sounds that we considered “most characteristic” or “dominant”. We were not simply trying to record a specific number of sounds that are quite predictable, according to usual categorisations, pre-conceptions or an “aesthetic consideration” of the Athenian soundscape. Instead, we were aiming at the totality of this complex sound system that lends meaning and value to the atmosphere and environment of the city “out there”. The recordings contain all those superimposed layers of complexity and richness of the Athenian auditory environment, which includes flows of vocals, mechanical sounds, media sounds, “soundmarks” etc. in diverse volumes, densities, rhythms, amplitudes and combinations.

**EA:** How do you put the recorded sounds in a different context from their original one? How are they re-enacted inside the Greek pavilion?

**CA:** After recording and processing 100 sounds of Athens from 100 spots of the city-map, we “read” the sounds as a sequence of 100 spots that seems to constitute a text. The way one reads this text, following the lines of the grid of the map, is also the way in which we selected to re-locate the sounds in the Pavilion. The multiple possibilities of “translation” create a fluid immaterial space inside the Pavilion space. The visitor listens to the sounds of the spots of Athens. The blanks between the spots, just like those between the words of a text, invite him to imagine sounds that are intentionally withheld. In the Pavilion, we present 50 out of 100 recorded sounds through 50 pairs of headphones. The other 50 are written on the floor in a textual form. The visitor is invited to read them, to “listen to” them through written words. On one hand, sound is produced from the sound reality of the city. On the other, language is a construction of words with multiple interpretations, symbols, blanks. The visitor-reader interprets the installation through the available and accessible data and his personal involvement.

**AK:** The fact that the sounds are being re-experienced in a completely different environment is where the “experiment” lies on.

**EA:** Is there a methodology for the sonic mapping?

**SG:** The concept of mapping is of vital importance here. Mapping is a process that entails rationalisation and systematisation of data. The 100 sound recordings of Athens by Sound are the result of the rational and supposedly neutral shape of a grid. A ten-by-ten grid was drawn above Athens; the centre of this grid was placed on Omonia Square; the grid was then stretched until it reached the confines of mountains and the sea, i.e. the natural landscape borders of the Attica basin. This is how the one hundred spots of Athens were determined. These one hundred locations were imported on a GPS system, which led us from one spot to the next in an absolutely accurate way. We decided to assign not only spatial, but also temporal coordinates to these 100 spots, going from east to west. The spatial distances from spot to spot, one and a half kilometers between each pair, were transcribed to one and a half hours on a scale of time. Each horizontal line, thus, was “scanned” from east to west within one day. The sound recordings took place over ten consecutive days from 9 am to 10.30 pm.

**AK:** We didn’t want to allow our preconceptions of what the sound of Athens is like to affect our sample-taking. We followed, thus, this ‘mathematical’ rule - as a kind of experiment – so as to see what sort of sounds come up like that.

**EA:** Can sound define a place?

**SG:** Although we applied an “objective”, “abstract” grid upon Athens, in order to organise this sonic mapping, the locality of each spot can be discerned through the sound recording. In such a context, it seems as if locality is emerging through the neutral grid. This seems to lead to the interesting idea of applying the same grid to another city of the world. What if all the National Pavilions of the Biennale were applying the same organising system of sound mapping upon different cities? We would immediately come up with a variety of different results that would set off different sonic qualities of various cities, allowing comparisons/debates/conclusions. The physical and the cultural characteristics of space constitute two fundamental parameters of sound. Physical characteristics of space include geometry, spatial analogies, frequencies of materials, humidity etc., while cultural characteristics imply language, vocals, as well as sounds that reveal actions specific to a certain cultural space. That’s why the “silence” of Filothei differs

from the “silence” of Argynroupoli. The different spatial relations of the buildings, as well as the diverse human actions and behaviours within those built environments become legible by the relevant sound recordings that manage to capture the innate characteristics of each specific site.

**AK:** Every space has its own physical and cultural sound, but also its orientation, direction, variety of intensities and volumes. The particular way the sounds were processed by our sound designers allow the visitor to re-experience this 360 degrees spatiality, and multiplicity of directions and movements of the sources of sounds.

**EA:** Do you want to orient or disorient the visitors of the Greek pavilion? In what way? I never felt comfortable with the notion of grid within architecture which older generations of architects completely digested. I always felt that it was too controlling.

**CA:** For me, the grid condition is not something that causes comfort, anxiety, or any other feelings. In the era of parametric design, the question is not if there is a total adoption of “conditions” for architectural design and practice.

**SG:** The grid is in fact the constituting element of the map. If we regard the whole Pavilion space as a map (an interactive sonic map of Athens), then we suddenly realise that this is a map that is in fact “disorienting”. It is a map that never offers an overview. A well-observing visitor may soon discover the structure underlying the map he is engaged with, yet he will also simultaneously realise that this map follows him at his every step. It is not the map, then, that indicates and defines the visitor’s path; it is the visitor’s path that activates and un-conceals this map step-by-step. And then there are the other visitors who trigger different sounds and images in different directions, which can also affect one’s path in the pavilion, adding yet another dimension of “disorientation” in this peculiar map of Athens.

**EA:** Do you think there is a limit between art and architecture nowadays?

**SG:** Whatever seems to share ground that traditionally belongs to different fields inevitably flirts with both. However, the strong and genuinely architectural background that contextualises similar projects one can visit in this year’s Biennale remains evident. I like to think that projects who defy the traditional limits of two “separate” fields of thought and action in fact help enrich both fields. In our case, the architectural interest lies in reading and experiencing urban space through new technologies and the interactive relations of human bodies that move within this space. Our aim, as a young generation of architects, is to understand the ways in which technology, immaterial elements of space, internet or even gadgets could enrich our architectural design tools, our conceptions of space, our way of enjoying life in the built environment.

**CA:** The limits between architecture and art are often let loose. In our case, the architectural interest lies in reading and experiencing urban space through new technologies and the interactive relations of people moving in space. We cannot simply ignore what is happening all around us and simultaneously believe that we design and build in a “fresh” kind of way. With this project, we intended to investigate spatial aspects that might be apparent or withheld, without really touching upon the subject matter of architecture-art relations.

**AK:** There have been many artists, architects, scientists who deal with sound art and space, from Xenakis and his most inspiring and progressive work to many others, whose experimental work touches the limits of art or architecture. Etiquette performance of the Rotozaza group handles sound not only as something that you hear while experiencing their performances-installations, but also something that you embody and produce yourself, since you are expected to literally perform it.

**EA:** Some of the visitors of the exhibition have claimed that your work is not entering the structure of the city of Athens and that your setting is too decorative. What would you answer to them?

**SG:** A map is a structure in itself. A map of Athens is a structure imposed upon another structure. It is a means of representing the city, a means of un-concealing urban qualities, a means of “writing” the city, as well as a means of “reading” the city. The city is a structure open to interpretation. The map is also a structure open to interpretation, albeit it is far less complex, as the map is already the organisation of data

within a certain context of codification. The map and the city are two different structures in a dialectical relation. Maps are constructions; they could even be fictions; they are imposed orders on our far more complex and interesting cities. This is how our mapping procedure worked. It is a new structure that helps us isolate certain aspects of the far more complex qualities of the city. Instead of aiming at the structure of the city's totality, we rather focus and delve deeper into specific spots and fragments of its structure. We focus on details that have to do with the everyday experience of the city; not with the total organising structure of Athens. On another note, I'm impressed to be informed that our setting has been described both as too decorative (as you state here) and minimalistic (as they state there).

**CA:** Urban experience is extremely difficult to reproduce in its totality due to the multiple variables it includes and the complex way in which they form inter-relations. However, some selected elements can be re-located and transmit a spatial experience – more or less effectively. In *Athens by Sound*, we attempted to create an interactive “subset” of the city of Athens, which involves the visitor in a unique experience in different moments in time.

**AK:** Our purpose was not to make a beautiful image, but rather an immersive challenging experience, even if that meant that it would not be easily photographed or reproduced.

**EA:** Is there something that you wouldn't do if you had the chance?

**CA:** When looking back at projects that were finished and constructed, the creator is bound to trace things that he would like to modify – or even avoid, in retrospect. Whenever I design a space, I imagine circumstances or moments I would like this space to create; a “promise” of the moment I want to achieve, in other words. When this space stops being a drawing, a rendering or a model and I am finally enabled to physically experience it through my bodily presence and all my senses, I always discern things I would like to change or imagine them function in a different way. *Athens by Sound* is one of those projects that challenge not only the visitor, but first and foremost the creator, to understand the “promise” of the moment and find the right tools for that task. In such a context, I think this project achieved its goals. Consequently, there surely are things I would change in *Athens by Sound*, but if somebody were to give me that opportunity, I guess I would be more intrigued to try something completely different now that I am armed with a better knowledge of what I should avoid!

**AK:** Although the response from the visitors was amazing – most of them got really involved and immersed within this interactive sonic environment, seemingly enjoying it – you always want to take it further. My question for evolving it would be about how its political aspect could be brought forth spatially in a more profound and provoking way...

**SG:** I usually like to think if there is something more I could do for a project I'm involved with, rather than things I would not have done. Alfred Hitchcock once said he is totally satisfied with a project when the final result manages to reach 70% of his original vision. In such a context, I think I could say I'm about 85% happy with the final result of the *Athens by Sound* project, which is really good, indeed. Yes, there is always room for improvement, but I think that *Athens by Sound* managed to evolve and become “enriched” during the design process and its final realisation in situ. In the end, it managed to make some clear statements, remaining consistent with its initial intentions. Partly agreeing with Christina, I would now like to use the experience I gained from it in a next project. The challenges ahead seem far more interesting than regrets for the past.

**EA:** How political are you?

**AK:** The selection of sound as the main element or tool of our mapping is already a political act. The means of representation or of design (our working tools and means of exploration) are never given by default; they already contain our stance towards the polis – they are already ideologically loaded. Athens is not only what we see; it is also what we touch, what we listen to, what we smell. Space is not only what we see; architects do not only create a visual field, but a whole environment of senses. To take it further, space (of course) is not even only that; it is always beyond what the architects design; the space is – at the end of the day – created by the inhabitants themselves. The architects give a background -the inhabitants, their everyday life and activities are what finally create the atmosphere and the placeness. Thus, someone could

interpret our installation as a question towards the prioritisation of the visual. This involves the notion of time too of course: an image can be viewed instantly whereas a sound always has a duration, a sequence of qualities, a series of events. The sound takes you through a process, an exploration step by step; sound doesn't provide you with a distant overview. It rather gets you involved in the situation it creates in a more intimate way.

**SG:** The inclusion of the interactive element in this project also works towards this political direction - in another way. The movement and actions of visitors inside the pavilion have a direct effect on the whole of the installation space through the sounds and images of the videos that are activated. We would like the visitor to think about those outcomes of his movement in that space and not just stand amazed by them. It is the visitor himself who is responsible for some quite drastic changes to the sensual environment of the pavilion. We would like him to understand that the discussion about "out there" is not limited to a discussion about the outcomes as such. It is a discussion that attempts to realise the forces that trigger these outcomes and encourages a critical stance against them, against our own way of life and actions, if we are willing to improve our urban environment as a whole. Architecture "out there" is the fruit of collective labour; therefore, of collective responsibility, too.

**CA:** We use Google maps to note our path through the city according to our personal interest, we use our cell phones to orient ourselves according to our digital map, we take snapshots and videos that will later form parts of our daily map, i.e. our blog. Our city, a personal map, a de-codifying mechanism of our observations, our perspective, our obsessions, our passions. By extension, the way in which we perceive our presence and actions in relation to others, our personal interaction with others and space under conditions of succession, evolution, continuity, discontinuity in time.

**EA:** How did you perceive this double role of yours in the Architectural Biennial, I mean, being the curators and the designers of the work?

**SG:** I think the architect never ceases to be a kind of curator of his own work (to a lesser extent, of course) – when presenting his design to a client, for instance. The architect is a multi-tasking entity, because architecture is in fact a "multi-player game". In the end, the sum of an architect's activities is always the fruit of collective labour, though.

**CA:** Curating an exhibition of international range was something totally new and different for us. I personally think we reacted more like architects that take over a project and select the group of people that will work for its realisation. Advice from people experienced in the field of curating proved extremely helpful. I would say that curator-architects and architects-in-practice belong in two different fields; they could of course be combined, but it's also true that each of them demands the relevant dedication and education.

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