

Betwixt and Between:

How the Covid-19 Pandemic changed Media and Education

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Abstract

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020), a team of lecturers conducted hybrid workshops with design and art students from ten partner institutions on five continents. Our goal was to explore soundscapes from an interdisciplinary perspective, and we were deeply impressed by the quality of the results. The resulting soundscape recordings and their accompanying images and conversations dissolved geographical borders along with social, cultural and structural differences. In the common video conference room we experienced an atmosphere of connectivity we had often missed in face-to-face classes. We have attempted to understand these changes and integrate them into our daily work.

Today, we recognize that our teaching practices and artistic work have changed in several ways. We aim to share our personal experiences, insights and interpretations into this change, and we note that our aesthetic perception of “nature” is fundamental to it. Walks through rural and urban spaces, as well as journaling, drawing, mental mapping and other forms of notation, can all be understood as a return to the basic principles of creative teaching. Furthermore, a post-digital approach of merging physical and digital spaces, as well as a determined commitment to ontological diversity and a notion of worldliness as connectivity, transformed the perception of all participants. Such aesthetic experiences beget changes that serve connection rather than appropriation, and it becomes what it has always been at its core: existential.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetic, Perception, Art/Design education, Soundscape, Landscape, Acoustic ecology, Post-digital.

Introduction

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became impossible not to listen, because the everyday ambient sounds had faded away, and a new kind of soundscape began to emerge from listening to an inescapable part of the living world. Stimulated by this experience, we contacted partner institutes in Austria, Botswana, Canada, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Japan, New Zealand, and Switzerland to organize a series of online encounters. Our goal was to develop the workshops on the concept and experience of the soundscape as both pragmatic starting point and catalyst.

So we sat in front of our monitors and played soundscape recordings for one another. Participants exchanged stories about how they chose specific soundscapes and what they meant to them. We listened to each other carefully and responded with our perceptions and associations. We realised how we all listened inside our flats during the lockdown or held microphones out of the window, scouting for this new soundscape that COVID-19 had brought about. And, as we perceived differences between the regions of the world, a quiet simultaneity began to emerge inside a dense atmosphere. We had entered what Rosa has called a “resonance”: something special, something valuable was happening (2021).

This experience did not let us go, and so we tried to reproduce these workshops. We interpreted and re-interpreted our findings and reflections. Then, one or two years later, we began to realise that our teaching, our attitude to students, our understanding of intercultural encounters and power imbalances, as well as the demands we placed on our own work had changed. New moments of shared perception and understanding had emerged, based on our experiences and the new practices of what an aesthetic education could mean.

We have chosen to narrate this process of transformation from four different intertwined perspectives. Our application is organized around seven themes of *Re-Imaging* because each of these words reflects a part of the process which we are still trying to understand and incorporate into our teaching methods and art practices. Finally, in the conclusion we will discuss how these processes fit into the idea of *Re-Placing*, understood as the re-organization of social relations to emphasize the connectivity between beings, places, and

the mental aspects of life.

I Praxis and Interpretation

The performative act of recording a soundscape represents a deliberate choice between inclusion and exclusion. With the concept of “performativity” we refer to indexical actions in space and time that often remain available as documents, scores or recordings. The sounds of one’s own body are reduced as much as possible and a specific soundscape is sought with the microphone that reproduces or represents something desired (Chion, 1998).

The term soundscape goes back to the World Soundscape Project, which was founded by R. Murray Schafer in the late 1960s and then elaborated upon in his ground-breaking book “The Tuning of the World” (Schafer, 1977). Later, in 1993, the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology was founded. It aimed to foster understanding and education about the social, cultural, scientific and ecological aspects of the sonic environment, contributing to the preservation of existing natural soundscapes as well as designing and creating “healthy and acoustically balanced” sonic environments (WFAE, 2020). Truax (2001) added a communicational model to Schafer’s viewpoint, in which sound mediates the relationship between listener and environment.

The work of finding, recording and describing one’s own soundscape were elements of the workshop’s *dispositif*. The core element was the experimental layout of the workshops, which took place in the following way: Each workshop lasted for one day. The introduction given in the morning concerning conceptual and technical topics was followed by a specific task, wherein two soundscape recordings were produced, each combined with an image which described the recording situation. These individual works were then realised locally over the lunch break. The two image/soundscape pairs were meant to contrast with each other. All of the recordings and images were then collected and compiled. In the afternoon, the presentations and discussions were held without technical interruptions, and the moderator sought to keep the discussion close to the perceptions, descriptions and associations of the listeners. The schedule was limited to about five hours of online presence with a three-hour lunch break for the production of the soundscapes.

The second element was the technical apparatus (Gronemeyer, 1998), the media situation using Zoom as a video conferencing platform, which was familiar to most participants as a medium, but often new as a shared venue. Each individual workshop included participants from two to three countries as well as the students, artists, designers, professors, PhD-candidates and lecturers as equal participants. All participants took part freely in the workshops in addition to their formal studies. The workshops were held four times between 17.4.–17.11.2020.

All of this happened within the general political and societal framework determined by COVID-19, for which we have used the concept *dispositif* (Foucault, 2003, p. 392-395).

Life as a Collective Pause



Figure 1: A city backyard as the illustration for a soundscape.

We experienced the immediate situation of a collective pause, a moment of intense simultaneity together, which was combined with a surprising openness to listen to each person and their work in a receptive way.

The simple act of listening became something valuable; it was suddenly interesting to observe. For example, some soundscapes from the participants from Botswana, Australia and Canada include a kitchen, making coffee, looking outside, dripping water, and

outdoor soundscape recordings of day and night. It was not preceded by any particular expectation, just perhaps the one, something so normal, so familiar, and yet conditioned by the pandemic as to be recognised with new ears and eyes. *Waiting* during the pandemic fragmented the known, felt dimension of time; it shifted and reorganized perception around the various soundscapes and their inner care of observation.

A Curious Practice

Today Catherine wonders if the quality of this shift could be related to Vinciane's Despret method of "curious practice" as described by Donna Haraway a method requiring "the ability to find others actively interesting [...] of holding open the possibility that [...] something interesting is about to happen, but only if one cultivates the virtue of letting those [...] shape what occurs." (2016, p. 127).



Figure 2: A suburban forest as the illustration for a soundscape.

*To make a new world you start with an old one, certainly.
To find a world, maybe you have to have lost one.
Maybe you have to be lost.
This dance of renewal, the dance that made the world,
was always danced here
at the edge of things, on the brink, on the foggy coast.
(Le Guin, 1981, p. 83)*

The world as *edge*, as *brink*, as a *foggy coast*... These words certainly evoke the *break* that we experienced. While the severity of the enforced lockdown that had arisen simultaneously all over the world was different depending on the country, one thing was fundamentally the same: we were at home, thrown back on ourselves, and kept in contact with the outside world through media. The soundscape had changed and we listened. We became connected through very different things like the croaking of frogs in Niigata, Japan, or the clicking of a goods lift in Thessaloniki.

On the Idea of Landscape

Retreating to rooms in the rain and listening. Listening to stories, drinking tea; time doesn't matter. Building huts out of towels, reading, knitting; the noises are calming.

Let images of memories pass you by. Buds on branches bursting open. Hearing the grass grow. Seeing wet cows standing around. Thinking. Gaining clarity. Quietness. Exploring in the studio what happens when we take a break. Internalizing something that cannot be actively achieved consciously. Switching off the musculoskeletal system to be able to absorb. Directing sounds inwards, reflecting on our surroundings. Preciousness. Happiness. The church bell. Awakening. (Andrea)

The focus on ambient sounds and on the *auditory perception of nature* deepened the practice of taking a *break*. “Nature” is an imprecise term. While we often associate it with an “untouched” environment not influenced by humans, we also use the word separately to refer to an aesthetic dimension, a lived sense (being) and an object to be understood (science/assertion), what Alfred North Whitehead termed the “bifurcation of nature” (1920, p. 20).

Ambient sounds do not separate, they combine and mix quite different things—resulting in an acoustic idea of landscape. Landscape is characterized by the selection of a sum of individual elements, essentially from nature, which are consciously put together, seen and understood as a unity (Simmel, 1913). This understanding also resonates with Lucius Burckhardt’s more open definition: “The landscape is thus a trick of our perception, which makes it possible to combine heterogeneous things into one picture and exclude others” (2006, p. 82). But where Simmel still romantically searched for a unity or whole, Burckhardt explored the heterogeneous elements of cultural landscapes with the aim of understanding their own qualities. Simmel instead described the piecing together of constituent parts into the composition which we call a ‘landscape’ as a “work of art in

statu nascendi” (1913).

This means that landscape should be understood as a cultural concept that operates as an aid to the understanding or to an identification, a demand, a desire or an expectation—insights that place us firmly back in the territory of questioning and re-conceptualizing what we mean by “nature”.

Preview - The Present as a Glimpse of the Future

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have been experiencing a revival of urban gardening, which is actively re-vitalizing the concept of “urban” landscape. Craft practices are based on locally handed-down knowledge. In this way, social and sustainable action is taken in solidarity. Further, exploitative and colonial practices that damage our planet are being addressed by concrete political activities. Initiatives as different as Plankton in Basel, the Isafjördur base permaculture project and the creative collective Blak Outside running community garden projects stand for such practices.

This paradigm shift has been prefigured by our workshop series and represents a changing understanding of nature.

II The Consequences – Re-Imaging

Re-imaging 1 – re-placing

Discovering an animal, an insect, a plant or a fungus aurally is something fantastic. Another world suddenly appears. *Although I don't understand the language of this world, I can hear it.* Understanding comes later, if at all, but when that moment arrives, a whole set of propositions opens up.

Catherine employs two books to explain this. Both are about sudden and violent animal encounters that radically transformed the authors' thinking and work (Plumwood, 1985; Martin, 2019). Both accounts describe knowing and yet not knowing, of the human error of being stronger than everything else, and of humbly observing, of understanding other dimensions through a dramatic moment in time. Both authors interweave the scientific and the personal in their narrative, pointing to new perspectives through emotions, trauma and healing in order to open up other worlds.

In the first book, Natassja Martin, an anthropologist, is in search of an animist cosmology she can reconstruct. What she previously described as a scientist—the animistic interweaving of all things—she now experiences directly. The boundaries between the bear and herself, or what was herself, become blurred.

Similar, and earlier, Val Plumwood writes, in encountering a crocodile *“Until that moment, I knew that I was food in the same remote, abstract way that I knew I was animal, was mortal. In the moment of truth, abstract knowledge becomes concrete.”* Further, *“Some events can completely change your life and your work, although sometimes the extent of this change is not evident until much later. They can lead you to see the world in a completely different way, and you can never again see it as you did before.”* (1985, p. 10–11).

While the COVID-19 lockdowns cannot be compared with the life-threatening situations described by these two authors, it was also existential, in that it made us aware of the connections between humans, viruses, and animals as intermediate hosts. This awareness brings with it a reorientation of one's own individuality and relationship to “the idea of a world that could be habitable” (Stengers & Despret, 2014). What we carelessly call

“nature” is, in fact, an integral part of us—what does this portend? Can we understand listening as a reciprocally assimilating conversation with nature? And how does this process change our understanding of time?

This has pedagogical implications, which become particularly palpable when working with sounds and soundscapes. As Altman (1992) has pointed out, recordings are a form of representation, not a reproduction, of sound—recording is already an act of interpretation, framing and estrangement. Combined with the seeming “naturalism” and the “immaterial materiality” (Connor, 2004) of sound recording, this generates a dialectic which is pedagogically fruitful, as it forces us to listen closely and critically and question what we consider to be “the nature” of things (Latour, 2005).

Re-Imaging 2 – re-visiting

Two years after the workshops, Andrea repeated a soundscape recording:

Soundscapes from Sent in the Engadine, Switzerland. Water splashes. At the same time, the metallic sound of the tube resounds. A socket made of brass. A bright whirring sound that changes the environment through its association with water. The intervening time has sensitized us to match such interventions with our ability to perceive. To be able to classify them. Where does the water flow from into the fountain basin? Who do I see in the middle of the village square, and by whom am I seen? All the liveliness that was thought lost during the pandemic manifests itself directly in the recorded soundscapes. Birdsong. Being aware that major heat waves and droughts will continue to accompany us globally in terms of climate change. And an awareness of how we can connect together with human and non-human actors to remain permeable beings. An unravelling of image, sound and interpretation.

With the return to face-to-face teaching (Autumn 2020), the question of the repeatability of the workshop experience no longer arose directly. What we did not notice were changes in our in-person teaching, in the way we taught and the attitudes we worked with. We had not thought it would be possible to transfer the experience to the classroom. Andrea began to develop a new workshop format out of the experience of creating longer text passages from the sound postcards, “Miniatures, Sound and Text” (29.9.–2.10.20). A kind of “third narrative” accompanied the soundscape recordings and formed a perceptual channel that connected a temporary sound community of students and lecturers via poetic-linguistic transcriptions.

Accompanied by a digitally connected writer, there were daily “Écriture automatique” as

well as listening exercises in the stairwell, which served to personify sounds in order to grant them a life of their own. This recalled Bruno Latour's famous appeal for a "parliament of things, for meetings where, for example, a river is given a voice, where we include insects or mussels because their behaviour shows whether the river is healthy or sick" (Weibel, 2023). This radical shift in perspective towards the agency of sounds spurred on the inventive spirit of the participants or poems reinforced the immediacy of the soundscapes.

The most impressive moment for Andrea was when the students took over the workshop in the middle of the week and decided to combine their individual contributions in a collective film. She was surprised—then thrilled. The wood had sparked to reveal a basic pedagogical principle: it is not about sticking to a curriculum, but incorporating the abilities, identities and needs of the students as they contextually emerge.

Re-Imaging 3 – intervening

Looking back, we took on the task of recording soundscapes in a time of uncertainty. By filtering out sound files from their specific continuum of space and time, and then adding still images and an index, the files began to develop a life of their own, and this is true whether they are left slumbering on a hard disk or brought out and shown.

In this process of combining a specific instruction with an aesthetic perception, and then analysing the subsequent experiences, we developed a trust in what is "fleeting". By this we mean the interplay between human and non-human actors that consciously allows for different levels of reality in order to hold them in suspension together. This is why we cannot conclusively say that a student has portrayed a kettle as a kitchen utensil or has chosen water in its essence as their subject. Doesn't such a picture and the sound that goes with it reveal a third thing? Isn't that why we find it so attractive?

Re-Imaging 4 – un-ravelling

In the analysis of our collected soundscapes and image pairs, we repeatedly divided examples into categories, formed classificatory systems, and made juxtapositions. For future artistic research projects, it is essential not to understand this activity as "purifying". Rigorous separation denies the buzzing, croaking, chirping and rattling their right to exist. Not being heard or seen only hinders understanding of the respective

context, which is precisely where the different partial manifestations express themselves. As soon as we try to understand we must also learn how to relate to them.

By “unravelling”, we mean that knotted, condensed or polyphonic structures can be seen or heard in relation to our soundscape recordings and images. Exploring their function, patterns and interconnections does not mean having to destroy or dismantle them.

In this way, new fields of work or art can emerge that refer to textures, connections or hybridisations. In listening, looking at, unravelling and discussing the particular manifestations of each “thing”, we will also uncover processes of consensus and cooperation that utilize different ways of seeing and listening.

Using mobile phones as recording devices and videoconferencing as a medium of communication and transmission, which was to some extent forced by the situation, led to a beneficial demystification of the sound recordings. In their imperfection, they helped us evade the reproduction fallacy described by Altman (1992) and led us to inquire about the first-hand experience hidden behind them. In this way, the recordings evolved a unique and direct quality of density.

Re-imaging 5 – re-turning

The pandemic suddenly plunged us into a reality that seemed to have been borrowed directly from catastrophic science fiction stories. At the same time, speculative fiction is more than ever present, with authors around climate (Ursula Le Guin), racial and gender issues (Octavia Butler, N.K. Jemisin), and the emergence of new narratives between humans and non-humans (Natassja Martin, Vinciane Despret). Catherine was particularly moved by the Reader “This All Come Back Now: An anthology of First Nations speculative fiction” (Saunders, 2022). She felt that she didn’t understand everything, and so tried to read very humbly by listening and being still.

Reflecting upon these issues and the workshops, Catherine wonders if they were themselves collective speculative narratives, in the sense that they were initiated by the process of returning to a familiar and close place or situation, but in the act of listening and recording this familiar place was made strange again, rendered and kept “in-between” the sounds (audio) and the images (stills). Is this “in-between” a form of artistic research in its own right, oriented by the interaction between the soundscapes, images, and digital classroom in the workshops?

“The standard by which aesthetic thought should be measured in consequently not the confirmation of a truth or reality but solely the evidence of a moment. Such evidence is to a certain moment unassailable, for we either see (into) something or we remain silent.” (Henke et al, 2020) P. 40).

Re-imaging 6– re-interpreting

Retrospective analysis of the workshops reveals the importance of the spatial construction of the media we used in the formation of a temporary community. We could describe the whole communication set (Zoom) we used as a heterotopic space in which different rules apply than in everyday spaces and which is separated from such everyday spaces by a clear threshold (Foucault, 2013). The spatial signs of social and cultural representation are slightly “faded out”, and the performative social signs are less evident, as all participants sit in front of the screen with a comparable “stage set” behind them. The opening and closing of the respective videoconferencing application is the entry and exit gate to this heterotopia.

Similar to Victor Turner’s rituals of transition or passage (liminality), a temporary communality (communitas) can emerge in this virtual space (2005). The usual hierarchical rules and norms are partially suspended or not effective. Overall, there is also a reduced legibility of the individual *habitus* (Bourdieu, 2010). The background is excluded and often also technically blurred, movements and gestures are only recognisable to a reduced extent, and the interest of the group or individual is focused on the specific task—working with soundscapes.

Re-imaging 7 - De-parture

While these insights specifically apply to online and hybrid situations, they retroactively occur in face-to-face situations. In Andrea’s workshop *Close to the Weather* (6.-8.11.22) the group began to deliberately change the physical space they were in. As the body shifts its awareness from a campus to a nearby park by walking, the pressures of everyday student life dissolve into a curious openness to the surroundings. Having time to connect with the landscape and then to exchange ideas creates a diverse and humorously touching processuality. The students began to set themselves tasks that reach far beyond their initial questions; we were connected in a community. The participants began to support

each other and work together. Via the internal collaboration platform (Microsoft Teams), a channel for joint exchange remained open and was actively used. One student, who was ill and never on site, drew a comic and received on-line feedback from fellow students, being “absently present” in a way only possible online, which was unimaginable for Andrea before COVID-19.

III The Process – Re-Placing

As a degree program in Process Design in the Arts, we have been engaged with the emancipatory potentials of the internet age since our founding in 1999. We seek to advance the worldwide exchange of our concerns and ideas in social, cultural, economic and intellectual life for a more diverse, just and sustainable world. However, in everyday pedagogical life, we experience digitalisation primarily as an increase in efficiency, and emancipatory effects fall by the wayside.

Therefore we were pleased and surprised when new forms of cooperation between social actors and technical media emerged in our workshops. Although the experience of the international workshops made a deep impression at the time, we probably did not recognise its underlying potential. Despite this, it changed us, and influenced how we conceive of and practice our daily work. Our practices changed irrevocably. It was only after 2–3 years that we recognized an Event in what had happened that created and unfolded new possibilities. As Badiou writes, “this basically means accepting to participate in the new subject that makes the Event possible” (2012, p. 58).

In this respect, the immediate resonance of the Event was obscure to us because it was not redeemed, could not be redeemed, with the attempt to repeat it and make it useful. But as Hartmut Rosa points out in his work on resonance (2020, p. 37ff; 2021), the central part of this worldly relationship to resonance is one’s own transformation: experiences of resonance transform us and confer upon us the very experience of aliveness, while we recognize simultaneously that resonance itself is constitutively unavailable and cannot be forced (2020, p. 41, 44). And in the attempt to make something available or use it, to objectify it, lies a profound tragedy that perhaps begins with the attempt to produce aesthetic perception on command. Therefore, our relative “failure” to reproduce an experience of resonance actually assists in comprehending the aesthetic limitations of such experiences and of ourselves.

IV Conclusion and Discussion – Re-Visioning

Results

We understand the concrete changes in our pedagogical practices during COVID-19 in the following four areas: technology, temporal perception, inter-relationality, and care.

We found that the skills and use of audio have now become commonplace at our institution. As participants confirm to us, the soundscape recordings removed the students' fear of technology and encouraged close listening.

Second, our approach to teaching has permanently changed. We developed practices of slowing down, such as walks, spatial interventions in classrooms like changing and moving furniture, shifting traditional roles and perceptual exercises. Situated and flexible action in everyday teaching has become more important.

Third, we learned about and appreciated the qualities of soundscape recordings as tools that produce an ecology of attention (Citton, 2017). The recordings show both sides of the bifurcation of nature: the aesthetic, mental and affective dimension, and assertions, or objectivity and the factual.

Our attention in teaching, artistic and research practices has expanded to include the qualities of mindfulness and care. Process was crucial for this aim: We listened to, looked at and described different landscapes and soundscapes with their attractions and wounds, and refrained from evaluative interpretations. In this way we got to know and respect each other. Although differences and social inequalities cannot be eliminated through such a practice, we managed to open spaces with respect and acceptance. Valuable moments of listening and understanding became possible.

Four Intertwined Pedagogical Reflections

Daniel realized that there is much to be gained in unlearning the reflexes acquired through years of training and experience in the field of recording. The aim is not to extract idealized sounds to process them into consumer products in form of films, but to find sounds that can serve as gift to a community, as a way of expressing something of personal relevance and value to a community of listeners. Therein lies an often undervalued pedagogical potential of sound and soundscape recording.

Andrea wondered if it could be that our dispositif of sound postcards in the COVID19

lockdown has taken us out of our daily routines, that listening to the soundscape has brought us all into a resonance and we have created proxies for a virtual polis that cannot be repeated at will, but is always worth searching for.

At their best, Max thought that the workshop's dissolved the physical and cultural distance between the social actors. He is aware that there are and must be clear limits to such claims of commonality, but he is also convinced that we need precisely such spaces as a prerequisite for any understanding and work on necessary changes.

Catherine thinks that, by stepping back and taking the time to listen, the body sinks into a mode of observational curiosity that opens up reception to whatever is being recorded. Thanks to this process, it is possible to learn differently, focusing less on what we think we know or can recognize, and more on what we don't know, which makes it possible to have unconventional new conversations. She is also interested in the ways that this minor practice emphasises unforeseeability and the always already in-conversation of social life.

Conclusion

It was only sometime after COVID-19 that it became clear to us that a soundscape's ephemerality isn't reductive and instead serves a philosophy of care. Such a practice requires a careful negotiation of the attention economy in curricula or in the design of teaching formats. Taking care work seriously and maintaining it helps to connect perception and sensations in such a way as to establish a creative atmosphere of togetherness, which is also always the negotiation of difference.

The main demand of our workshops—to take time and to give time to oneself and others, while anachronistic in today's ideology of self-optimisation, is absolutely essential. We demand sensitivity in a time when refugees embark on life-threatening travels because their livelihoods have been destroyed. Recording Soundscapes means taking this into account, discussing it and thus radically exposing oneself to an artistic practice, in addition to the worldliness it presupposes.

Guattari writes that the human condition is characterized by simultaneously living and also subjectively observing part of the world (1994). Why is the understanding of perception deeply inscribed in an understanding of change? We are and at the same time we perceive. This can only be understood as a process. To be involved in the world means, from the very beginning onwards, to both experience and engage.

Any education which seeks to incorporate this insight must deeply reflect on the role that reciprocity plays in the curriculum and in the nature of the relationships between all the actors involved in the educational system.

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Partner Institutions

- Australia, Canberra, Australian National University, School of Art & Design,
- Austria, Graz, FH Joanneum & University of the Arts, Sound Design
- Botswana, Gaborone, University of Botswana, Industrial Design and Technology
- Canada, Montréal, Université du Québec, École des arts visuels et médiatiques
- Greece, Thessaloniki, ArtBox
- New Zealand, Auckland, AUT Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies, School of Art and Design
- Finland, Rovaniemi, Lapin Yliopisto, University of Lapland
- Island, Isafjörður, University of Akureyri, University Centre of the Westfjords
- Japan, Niigata, Nagaoka Institute of Design

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