

## Secret City (Middelburg) 1995

Secret City was the result of a commission to produce a piece for the exhibition De Verborgten Stad, which took place in De Vleeshal, Middelburg. The brief was to make a connection to the "hidden" backstreets of the city, away from the touristic areas. I proposed to create an audio-guide that would attempt to get the listeners lost, and after researching the history of the city I decided to use radio as the medium.

The audio fragments (stories, quotes, interviews, field recordings, music) would be played in a random order and the listener would be in a random place within a 1-2 km circle around De Vleeshal where the transmitter was located. This non-linear form made it possible to add extra pre-recorded chapters during the exhibition and also to occasionally broadcast live from De Vleeshal, sometimes incorporating interviews with other people.

Historical elements included documents detailing the cargo of ships sailing to- and from the city, references to the slave trade and stories from the second world war: e.g. a clandestine radio transmitter from the resistance and the flooding of the city.

The score - which was made rather for inspiration than timing - superimposed quotes from documents with a fragmentary map of the area onto transparent paper.

The text consists of poetic observations of things that can be seen in the area, mostly details and traces like graffiti, a window display, but also smells which trigger memories, making connections to completely different locations.

There are also instructions to the walker sometimes to "take the next left / right". "Keep walking". also directions to look: "on the left.." "in front..." etc. sometimes with a description, or a sound, or silence. These are things that, in my view, make a strange but very concrete connection to the environment, causing the listener to ask themselves continually - where am I? why did I end up here? what should I be looking at, what is the relationship between what I hear and what I see. In reality of course there is no correlation between the audio and the location or direction of the listener.

Although there are many references in the text to specific places in the area these almost never fit with where the listener is at that moment. Rather, the wider area itself is treated as the site - mostly through field recordings of the typical sounds that occur there. In addition, the use of FM radio itself creates a kind of locality, linked to the story of the resistance radio from WWII.

Most of the "tracks" are short compositions using field recordings, often suggesting a narrative - a plane flies over, we hear voices behind a fence, a horse and cart passes by, we go through a series of doors, etc. There is much use of general ambience from the place - wind in trees, birds, especially pigeons. Sometimes these ambiances fade in or out very slowly, mixing subtly with the live sound.

"Music" is derived mostly from location recordings of carillions and organ music from Middelburg. This included a recording of Charlemagne Palestine playing the carillion. Once or twice the sources are heard unprocessed but usually they are modified in some way, sometimes being unrecognizable - for instance the organ is pitched down to resemble aeroplane noise, echoing a description of Lancaster bombers flying overhead. The radio is referred to numerous times, talking about the setting up of the resistance transmitter, using voices filtered to sound like they are coming from a radio, morse code, noise, interference.

Water sounds are also a recurring element, referring to the flooding of the city which forms part of the narrative.

The sounds of the "recordist" are often present. Footsteps, opening doors, but also microphone handling noise etc. This gives the whole quite a "live" feel, along with the interference, sudden breaks, non-sequiturs and the general randomness.

A re-activation of Secret City would require some technological changes. The Tracks app at the moment only allows manual playback or location-triggered playback. A feature to be considered which would be very useful here is random playback. I imagine a series of non-overlapping zones spread all over the backstreets, each zone consisting of a selection of the short tracks which would be triggered in a non-repeating random order (like "shuffle play"). Lines would be drawn on the map to suggest routes, scans from the "score" could be used for each zone.