

Shotgun Diary 2008-9

Justin Bennett

Zuidas, Amsterdam, 10th August 2008.

Most of the work is still unfinished.¹

Lying around my studio; photographs and drawings of the surroundings, a hand-drawn animation in progress, notes for a soundwalk for the Zuidas area,² video experiments with mirrors, audio recordings of motorway traffic, planes, voices, gunshots, echoes. I'm still not sure what my role is here. What is the role of the artist in a situation where the boundaries are defined by capitalism? I still have more questions than answers.

Smoke and Mirrors

Florence, 3rd July 1415.

Filippo Brunelleschi provides project developers with their first advertising trick. Linear perspective combined with mirrors deceives the eye into inhabiting a virtual space, while allowing the designer to order and control not just space, but also our point-of-view with pen and ruler. The artist holds a distorting mirror up to the world.

New York City, 21st October 1978.

Office buildings, tired of the modernist pretence of transparency, become their own mirrors, unscaled "empty" spaces deflecting our vision onto the clouds and other architecture. This is not camouflage, it's an attempt to create a pure volume out of the sky itself.

Amsterdam, 20 May, 2008.

21st century architecture is Photoshop architecture. The computer as mirror – not just improving on Brunelleschi's illustrative skills, but also in the way that textures are mapped onto surfaces, graphical elements are cloned onto buildings, traditional forms are enlarged, copied and pasted into towering retro-edifices.

Amsterdam Symphony

Vienna, 28th March 1827.

Beethoven dies.

All urban development projects have their absurdities. One here is that the streets are named after composers. It's a Dutch tradition for cities to have, e.g. a "Schilderswijk" (painters quarter) but in Amsterdam Zuid the composers' quarter (featuring Brahms, Chopin, Bach, Schubert, Mozart, Wagner) is a kilometer further up the Beethovenstraat. What the hell are Mahler, Schoenberg, Debussy, Stravinsky doing around here?

Mahler 4 is the commercial heart of Zuidas with many top businesses residing there... Gershwin: Easy living in Zuidas... Vivaldi, with its slender high-rise buildings.³

Their names are resonant and redolent of power, tradition, or modernity and the "new world." That's why they're here, not because of their music – cultural references lend credence to the process of development.

Amsterdam, 2nd June 2008.

The comparison of music and architecture has always created powerful metaphors: "Architecture is frozen Music" for instance. These metaphors are based usually on structural similarities that exist in the musical score and the architectural section – outside time and outside the lived space, and thus have little to do with the experience of listening to music, or that of inhabiting or walking through architecture at ground level.

8th June 2008.

I wonder which music, which architecture is being referred to with "Amsterdam Symphony," "Mahler 4." Is there, for instance, a musical equivalent of public space? That depends how you define publicness: When project developers talk about public space, they mean shops. Frequently, the term public space is an excuse for exclusions and prohibitions – it "serves as an alibi under whose protection authoritarian agendas are pursued and justified."⁴

Could improvised music be a model for the democratic public sphere? Aleatoric music a parallel of the contingency of the public uses of, and meetings in the park? Why are architects always obsessed with Bach?

Shotgun Architecture

21st June 2008.

The identification and confusion of optics with acoustics led to many discoveries. However, light and sound are not equivalent, neither in their physical form, nor in our perception. Confusion often gives me ideas. Brunelleschi's trick with mirrors and lines suggests a kind of perverse sonar. A gunshot (a pulse of sound containing energy spread over all audible frequencies) fired in a space lets us hear the shape and dimensions of that space in the echoes and reverberation bouncing back to our ears.

Could one reconstruct the space from a sound recording? Aurally this is certainly possible – blind people do this all the time. In fact firing gunshots – recording the "impulse response" of a space – lies at the basis of audio techniques to create virtual spaces.

28th June 2008.

Trying to visualize this audio data is an altogether more obscure process. Teasing the spatial information out of the stereo recording is mostly guesswork. The fact that the gunshot does not usually take place at the same point as the microphone blurs and distorts the image. Analyzing the resonant frequencies (or rather the wavelengths) at particular angles gives us only an indication of where buildings might be. Strong resonances can arise either from repeating elements (like a wall of identically spaced windows) or from reflections within a closed structure. Still, the process creates images which resemble explosions while indicating spatial features.

7th July 2008.

Tracing the most important features of the gunshot-images suggests strange, playful, sculptural spaces that are situated far from the reality of the recording location. Translating back and forth between media – playing with the relations of image and sound, architecture and music.

Diagonal Sound

12th July 2008.

Make a recording of a gunshot in a particular urban space, e.g. the Mahlerplein. Then play

the recording back into the same space, re-record the sound and then play this new recording back, ad infinitum. This controlled form of feedback causes the sound to change gradually with each “generation.”⁵ At first the shots change subtly. The pulse of sound with which I started gains more echo, then becomes a resonant “clang,” turning eventually into sustained notes and chords, corresponding to harmonics of the resonances of the space. These resonances are created by the size, shape and materials of the space itself.

13th July 2008.

A space bounded by glass walls creates a very different result in comparison to a space with concrete buildings and trees.

14th July 2008.

A singularity, a small explosion, unfolds to become a musical structure and in doing so, changes the focus from a linear perspective model (the sound tracing lines, reflecting from surfaces like radar or the ricochet of a bullet) to a wave model (waves of intensity occupying space). It’s a movement from vertical to horizontal, passing through Dick Raaijmakers’ “diagonal sound” on the way – a sound that “folds out, surrounds and fills space.”⁶ A single subjective act transformed in time begins to resemble a piece of music, a sonic space for the listener to inhabit. I like this “not-quite” music, but the intention of the piece lies in the action itself, in the process, in the toppling of the vertical.

The city is a battleground

17th July 2008.

Hearing these shots echoing around the spaces of the Zuidas makes me wonder what a larger explosion would sound like here. All tall buildings cast a long shadow, and on the shadow side of investment in building, in upgrading and metropolizing a city are the investments in warfare and armaments, and the involvement of criminal organizations. Many of the financial institutions situated on the Zuidas invest their money – my money? your money? – in companies that produce, for instance, cluster bombs, depleted uranium munitions or nuclear warheads.⁷

Beirut, 16th February 1996.

A family is killed when the building they are living in is demolished as part of the re-development scheme.

What is, in the end, the balance between the constructive investment and the destructive investment of these companies? If those munitions were to be detonated at ground zero of the Zuidas, it would quickly resemble the center of Beirut and, in turn, just as occurred in Beirut itself,⁸ create yet more amazing opportunities for capital-driven reconstruction and development.

“The rhythm that is proper to capitalism is the rhythm of producing (everything: things, men, people, etc.) and destroying (through wars, through progress, through inventions and brutal interventions, through speculation, etc.).”⁹

Amsterdam, 19th July, 2008.

Of course, it’s much more likely that the explosive power of these armaments will be unleashed somewhere far away. Then, in some godforsaken place on the opposite side of the globe will be an enormous crater, like a perfect negative space, a mould of the Zuidas itself. Perhaps this mould already exists.

Public Space / Civilian Space

23rd July 2008.

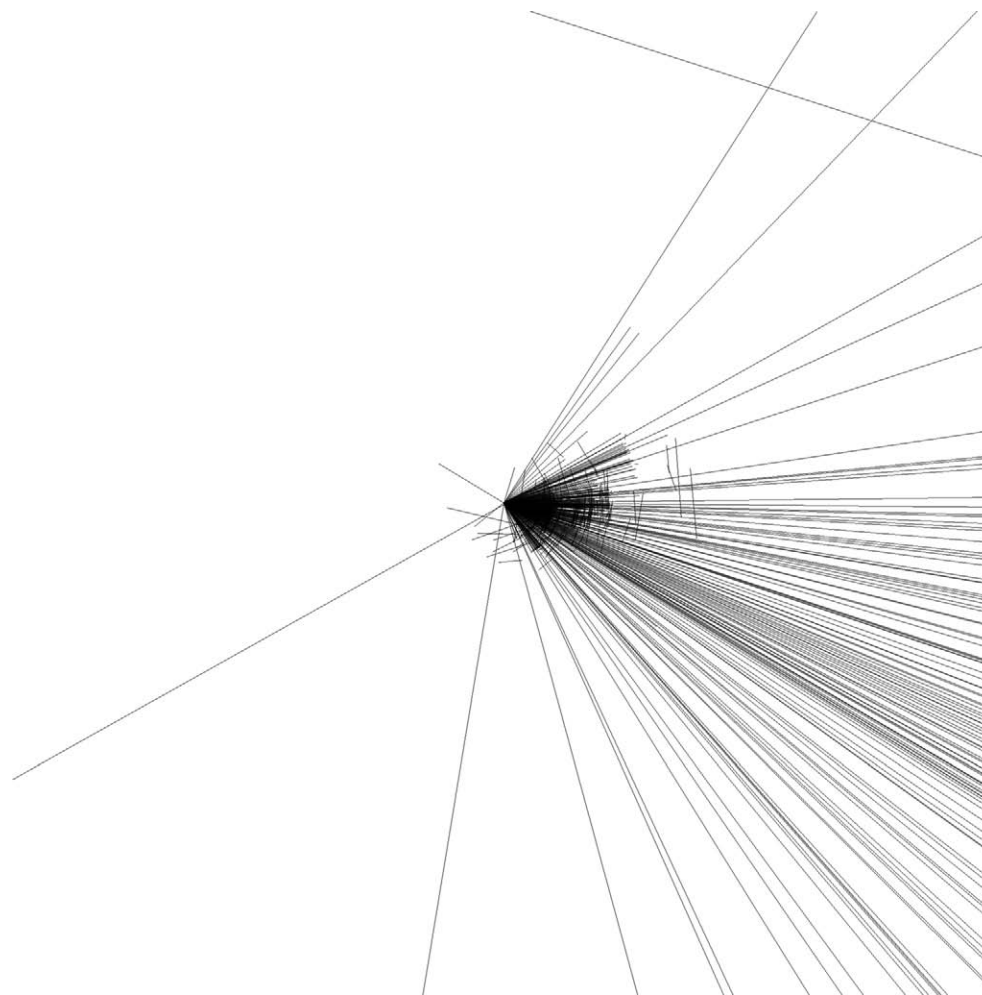
The only place around here that feels like a true public space is the Beatrixpark (Ok, there’s another one: the small pentagonal park next to Zuidplein). There one finds young and old, rich and poor, joggers and cyclists, owners of cats, dogs and lizards, gardeners and nuns, parrots, crows, geese, coots and squirrels. People even live there, hidden in the undergrowth. It is not “erected” space, but it was still planned at some point – in the 1940s. Do the Zuidplein and the Mahlerplein just need TIME to be accepted, occupied, changed and used by the public?

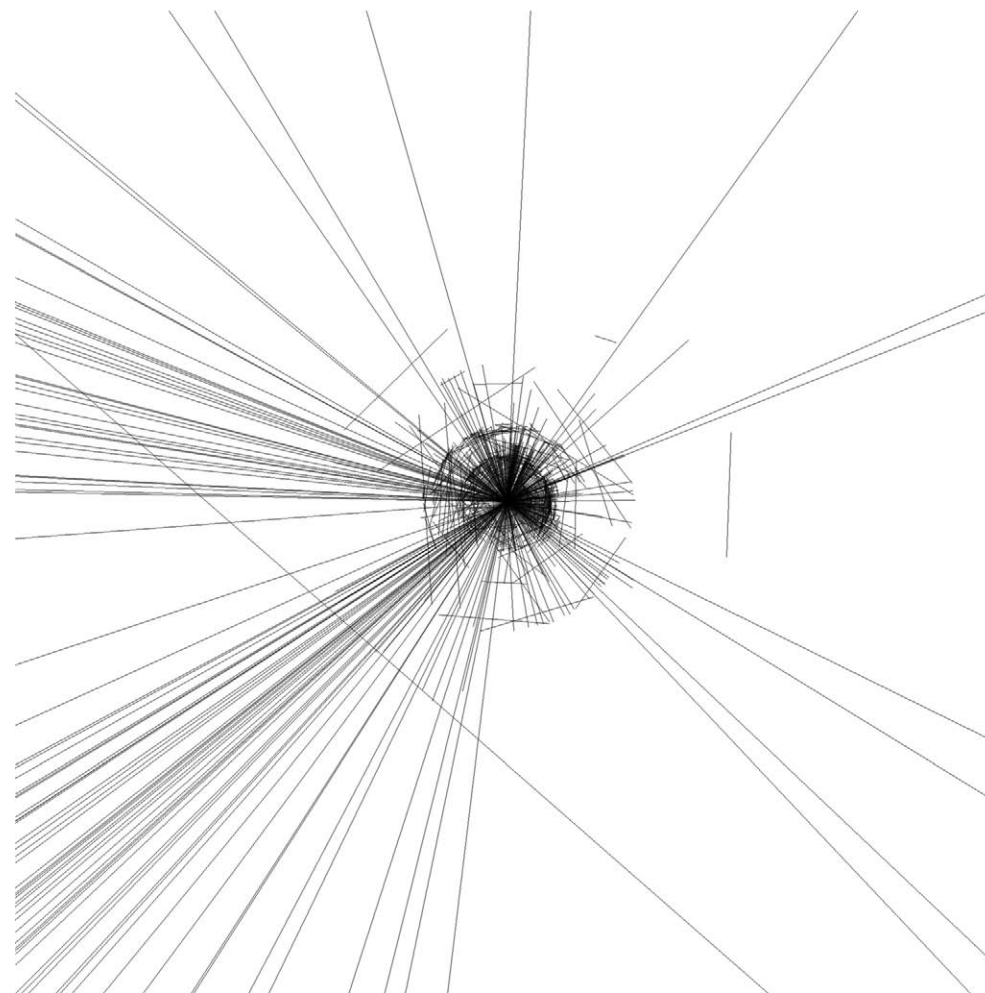
24th July 2008.

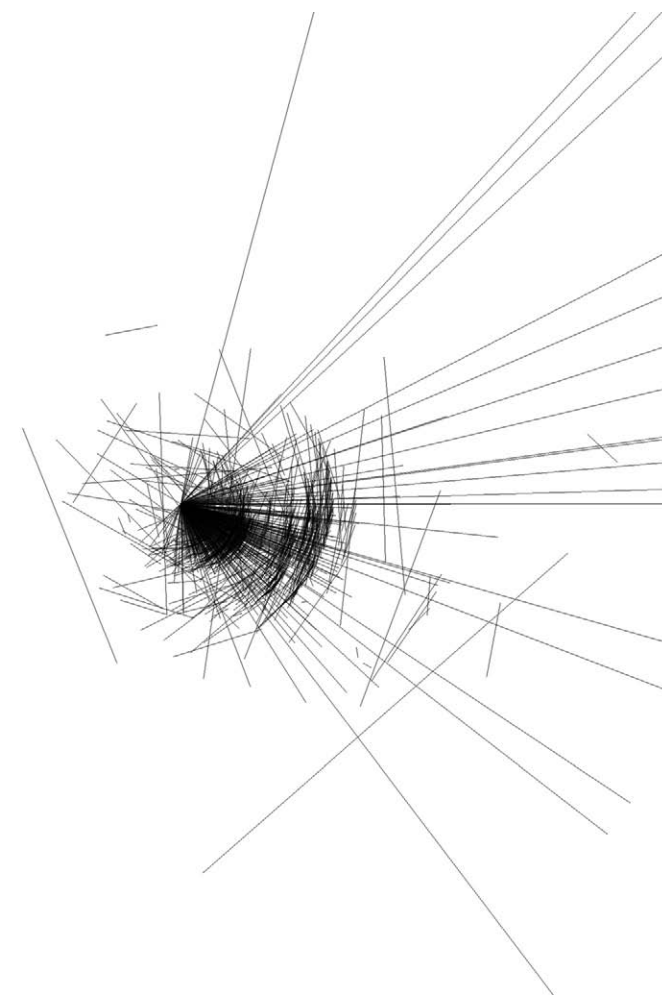
I find it difficult as a temporary resident to relate to the constructed “public” spaces here on the Zuidas.

My presence there just confirms my role as an outsider.

In fact, from today onwards, I refuse to accept them as “public.” They are at best left-overs, negative spaces, areas which have not been sold yet. They are Public in the sense that one is allowed to be there without a professional reason. At worst the “public” spaces are civilian zones in an otherwise militarised area, a space where the word “public” is linked with “security” as an excuse for coercion, censorship and surveillance.







26th July 2008.

“There are two great schools of thought on urban planning: for one, the origins of the crystallization of the city is mercantilism; for the other [...] it’s war.”¹⁰

27th July 2008.

Over the past weeks I have been reading the work of other artists and theorists. People concerned with the relationships between war and the city, between democracy and violence, between culture and urban development. People developing strategies for dealing not only with the dilemmas of public space, but the dilemmas of working as a “free artist” in a “free space” which is nevertheless defined by forces over which we have no control. I still have only questions.

28th July 2008.

Can capitalism create public spaces at all?

29th July 2008.

“As we usually try to see ‘public space’ as a combination of defined, identified spaces that maintain rights for certain democratic acts, we never try to see, or define public space from the perspective of subjective acts.”¹¹ Can one claim a space as “public” through a subjective act?

30th July 2008.

What is a creative act?

Can one perform such an act in public without it being recuperated, used as another billboard advertising the Creative City?

Auto-Destructive Art

1st August 2008.

Gustav Metzger’s (theoretical) strategy of making auto-destructive art short-circuits the art market system, creating “Monuments to man’s capacity to destroy”¹² which contain the seeds of their own destruction. “Auto-destructive art is an attack on capitalist values” wrote Gustav Metzger in 1961.¹³

This process, where an object is made one with its own accident is akin to the destruction implicit in technological progress. “the invention of the boat was the invention of shipwrecks. The invention of the steam engine was the inventions of derailments,

The invention of the highway was the invention of (the pile up). The invention of the airplane was the invention of the planecrash...”¹⁴

2nd August 2008.

The, albeit unwilling, involvement of artists and other cultural workers (the creative class) in the process of gentrification is well documented. An often multicultural neighborhood becomes safe, hip and desirable for investors and project developers. Art is the oil in the machine, just as with the process of “City Branding.” Ultimately the gentrified zone becomes expensive, monocultural, and the previous inhabitants and the artists are forced to move elsewhere. The success and flexibility of the creative (low paid) cultural workers is used as a model to deprive other workers of their rights.

The whole process is “auto-destructive,” though not with Metzger’s intended result. In a parallel way, the residency project here will eventually become a victim of its own success. (Capital) kills artistic creation, creative capacity... Capital kills social richness. It produces private riches.¹⁵

Sounding the Mortuary

Hamburg, 10th October 2008.

Onomatopoe, who are publishing the Shotgun Architecture record are guest curators for Filter at P40, Hamburg. I’m visiting the space to make recordings – the idea is to expand the S.A. piece into an installation – what is it going to sound like in interior spaces instead of open spaces?

The P40 space turns out to be a former mortuary. Three rooms – morgue, chapel and a third room, probably for “viewing” the bodies. Underneath in the basement are the cooling cells. Isn’t it going to be too dramatic? – theatrical – gunshots in the morgue...? And then again, the space kind of fits: it is also the object of a process of development – soon to be turned into an arts centre for the neighborhood. Hang on, it IS one already – what’s that all about?

11th December 2008.

The sounds work. The three soundtracks control the lights as well, so that when there’s a sound, we see the space, when it’s silent we are in darkness. The beginning of the piece is extremely spooky – you can’t really see where you are going – have to stand still to listen and wait for the next flash/bang. Then, as the sounds get longer, we also see more of the space and can move around. But then something strange



happens – the sounds seem to detach themselves from the speakers and move through the space. The source becomes a cloud, the explosion becomes a wave. At the end, although the lights are on almost all the time, it is as if the space has been erased by the sound, or cleaned somehow – it takes on a different character. The mortuary cleansed by art and made ready to become a cultural centre? Sounds awful – but like the Zuidas piece, I feel that the sound creates a kind of utopian space – full of energy, that is somehow separate or parallel to the visual space.

Back to public space

Barcelona, 26th January 2009.

I'm here working on a project proposal for Barcelona but it seems the city is working against me. Now, with only two weeks left, I'm concentrating on concrete things. Mainly I'm just visiting spaces and listening, sometimes making recordings. There are an enormous number of new "public" spaces here; most have been created by demolishing houses, such as the Rambla de Raval, which displaced 5000 inhabitants.¹⁶ Some of these new spaces are already bustling, others are almost abandoned – maybe their use is still waiting to be discovered.

Just considering the public spaces in terms of sound, the characteristics of spaces which WORK seem to be ones which encourage a particular kind of activity, which itself creates a sound (re)defining the space – another kind of feedback loop. For example the sounds made by the skaters on the Plaça del Àngels, chiefly the sound of skateboards hitting the ground, echo between the buildings as a territorial sound-mark and say plainly: this is our place, come and skate too.

Plaza Real's beautiful reverb encourages street musicians, the voices of children and birds and impromptu performances of alcohol-fuelled flamenco singing. The acoustics mix the sounds together – no one can claim the space as exclusively theirs, the different users have to accept each others presence. Not a great place to live, though, as this sound-world continues deep into the night.

28th January, 2009.

Fountains, like the unspectacular example at the Miramar on Montjuic, define space too, by creating a visual and a sonic focus to a place. The sounds of water reflect from steps, low walls and statues, creating a subtle reverberation which encourages a sense of place which is more intimate than the visual experience would suggest. Intimacy in

public spaces is also encouraged by the masking properties of sounds which allow one to conduct private conversations.

4th February, 2009.

Those who attempt to control public behaviour also use sound – like the use of high pressure hoses to "clean" the Plaça del Àngels periodically – to move on the skating youths and noisy drunks.¹⁷ (At the same time their activity is recuperated in exhibitions of "skate culture" which stress the hipness of the surrounding cultural institutions). Other places use "mosquito" loudspeakers, which emit high frequencies which are supposed to annoy young people with good hearing. I can hear them quite clearly still – sometimes they sound like insects, but sometimes they are penetratingly loud. All the kids are listening to iPods anyway, so it doesn't have much effect.

Again I find myself at one of those places; feeling powerless in the face of huge urban development and bureaucratic cultural institutions while being stimulated and inspired by the noise and chaos of daily life in public space. The sounds of people playing, relaxing, bartering or conversing claim and delineate spaces as public, whatever these places were originally designed for.

I think I'll just go and sit in the park and listen.

1 This text was started in 2008 during a residency at the Virtual Museum Zuidas in Amsterdam. A version of this text appeared in the catalogue *Vrije Ruimten Zuidas 2008*. The Zuidas is a new business district initiated by a number of financial institutions which has according to the developers the ambition to become a "dynamic, creative zone" within the city.

2 *Zuidas Symphony* – one of eight soundwalks in Amsterdam available from <http://www.soundtrackcity.nl>.

3 Quoted from brochures, Projectbureau Zuidas 2006.

4 Rosalyn Deutsch, *The question of public space* in: Journal of the American photography institute, 1998.

5 This technique was most famously used by Alvin Lucier in his tape piece *I am sitting in a room* in 1969. and is a much used technique in electronic music. Feedback within any system accentuates the characteristics of that system. <http://www.ubu.com/sound/lucier.html>

6 Dick Raaijmakers: *Cabier M, kleine morfologie van de elektrische klank*, Orpheus Institute 2000, page 51.

7 For an up-to-date list of Dutch companies investing in the weapons industry see the website of the Campagne tegen Wapenhandel: <http://www.antenna.nl/-amokmar/>

8 The company Solidaire, evicting previous inhabitants to then re-brand the centre as a "heritage trail" and creating yet another militarised zone within the city. Saree Makdisi, *Beirut/Beirut* in: Tamáss, *Contemporary Arab Representations 1*, Fundació Antoni Tàpies 2002.

- 9 Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis. Space, time and everyday life*, Continuum 2004. page 55.
- 10 Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, *Pure War / 25 years later*, Semiotext(e) 2008.
- 11 Pelin Tan, *The Impossibility of Public Space in Europe* in: *Trans(ient) City*, BOM Publishers, 2007.
- 12 *Metzger's Quest for Social Change*, Gustav Metzger interviewed by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Art Orbit issue 4, 1999.
- 13 Gustav Metzger, *3rd Manifesto of Auto-Destructive Art* 1961.
- 14 Virilio, page 46.
- 15 Lefebvre, page 53.
- 16 Manuel Delgado, *La ciudad mentirosa*, Catarata, 2007, page 58.
- 17 see <http://www.laciudadelespectaculo.blogspot.com>