

Listening to Victory Square

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will share my experiences in listening to Victory Square, a city square I lived in front of for three years. During this span of time, I recorded the square's soundscape from my bedroom window, maintained a field recording journal, created art works in response to listening, and grappled with the reality of engaging with a vulnerable location, which was home for many, while I lived 6 stories above it. When I began this listening endeavour, I was worried about how my field recording practice could ethically co-exist with Victory Square. By maintaining a field recording journal, I was able to deepen my connection to the square, and with time, my practice began evolving in conversation with the square. I will take the reader through my creation phases and how I came to certain methodologies. In addition to sharing my work with you, it is my hope to position self-reflexive field recording as a tool that can help us think about and work with vulnerable locations that are often excluded from conversations.

2. FREQUENCY NICHE

The field of acoustic ecology became known to me while I was studying at University of Montreal. I happened upon a scientific article that referenced Bernie Krause's categorization of sounds into biophonic, anthrophonic, and geophonic ones. I was fascinated by this and continued to search for more. Eventually, I realized there was an entire field devoted to the study of sound. Though my own journey in listening began prior to this encounter, knowing that there were other people as fascinated as I was with sound, was like opening the door to a very secret and yet beautiful place. Remarkably, what I've come to realize, that the interest is not just in sound itself, but in how sound can be used a means of investigating the world that we live in, and to deepen our relationship to place. My particular interest has been the social realm, and to this end Krause's frequency niche hypothesis was inspiring. The hypothesis posits that we are in a healthy environment, the soundscape's spectrum reflects this, and the organisms in that environment have a clear channel of communication [1]. We can apply this principle to our social environments, particularly in thinking about which voices are heard and which are suppressed, and squares are an example of places that we can investigate that are made up of many voices, including the most marginalized.

3. ENCOUNTER

The history of the square is intertwined with my encounter with it. Public city squares are constructed to, among other reasons, provide places of relief within the city, perhaps a place to think and connect. And what I proceeded to do for the next three years was nothing short of thinking, imbued with the refuge that Victory Square offered me. The land upon which Victory Square sits, located in Vancouver, British Columbia, was not always destined to be a city square [2], but when I encountered it, it was as such, and I, a student, venturing into my graduate studies at Simon Fraser University in the Contemporary Arts building, in the vicinity of what used to be known as Woodward's. Over 80 years prior to this encounter, the square would be the site of mass protests against job-loss and lack of housing and then mayor Richard McGeer would read the riot act to a crowd of thousands. This peak moment in its history was preceded by years of colonialism, a fight for resources, racism, and a growing disparity between the rich and the poor [3]. In the present day, its history reverberates within the square, very much alive, and my encounter and first impressions of it were greatly influenced by its history, infrastructure and more.

My own history, and who I am also influenced my perception of the square. I am a white, Canadian-Italian male-presenting artist from Montreal. I arrived in Vancouver after spending all of my life in a French-speaking province, having grown up in a suburb where city squares did not exist; I had a private practice which involved recording sounds and writing about them, and a professional practice which involved creating sound worlds for theater, dance and performance art. When I began conducting field recordings in 2014, they were at first in order to be able to compose with. I realized that I quite liked reflecting over sound. In listening and reflecting, I could hear myself and begin to form deeper relationships with my environments. When I encountered Victory Square, I gradually became determined to work with it because my practice of field recording made it impossible not to. Living in front of it, Victory Square collided into my world, most evidenced by its soundscape continuously pouring into my apartment. Thus, my work in thinking about it began with an attunement to its aural presence.

4. IMPRESSION

The first thing I noticed when I rolled my suitcase down Hastings and arrived at the Charles Chang building, where I would be living, was the amount of people I identified as experiencing homelessness within the square. I felt overwhelmed with the sounds: screeching sirens, lively laughter and loud music. Later on, I would come to classify this first impression as a sign of Victory Square's vulnerability, and by proxy its humanity. Some tangible site-specific research revealed that Victory Square is a "fragmented territory inserted between larger zones of the central city" [4]; that in 2020; 3,634 individuals were identified as experiencing homelessness in Metro Vancouver¹; and there is a clear negative opinion about the square that can be gleaned from a simple Google search, or Trip advisor search, in addition to speaking with people who live near the area. Notably, one of the only research projects done about the square was in the form of an MA thesis which characterized the homeless as "outcasts of wider affluent society" [5]. The consensus seemed to be that the square would be a beautiful memorial location if it was not inhabited by so many people experiencing homelessness.

5. A MAN DRUMS A STICK

Rather than remain anchored to my initial impression, which was that Victory Square was loud, I drew upon something I had heard Hildegard Westerkamp share in a lecture, where she both lamented the loss of natural sounds in the environment, but also suggested that for herself, acceptance may be necessary to move forward [6]. When I accepted that my new home was loud, I could then spend time listening to it, become inspired by the textures, and realize how many of Schafer's sound events were woven within it [7]: ambulance sirens, traffic, lone instrumentalists, protests, vocalizations including laughing, crying, speaking and shouting. If we think about McMurray's concept of the body as a macrocosm and the vocal tract as its microcosm [8], then Victory Square, a microcosm of the city, could be said to represent Vancouver's vocal tract, made up of voices seeking to be heard within its confines and extending outwards into buildings like mine.

I began recording the soundscape of Victory Square as heard from my bedroom window for a project as part of a multi-modal autoethnography course led by Darah Culhane and Peter Dickinson. We were asked to create a journal, exploring other ways of knowing that we would come across in our readings and shared discussions. Emphasis was placed on viewing "[the] body as an agent of experience and knowledge [that we can include] as part

of the process of ethnographic inquiry" [9]. Having already maintained an online field recording journal previously, I used this opportunity to focus on a specific location. I proceeded to conduct 18 field recordings over the duration of the course, lasting four months. Each time I would sit and listen, I would try to focus on describing the sounds I was hearing. Sometimes I would be inspired to describe these in detail; sometimes I would take this time to reflect on my day or on my interactions in the square; sometimes memories would surface. I approached each field recording with fresh ears, with no agenda other than listening and observing what came up. In hindsight, this was an important step in building a connection to the location in which I was living. By weaving my observations, thoughts and memories into my journal while engaging with the square's soundscape, I was creating a sense of place and a sense of home. My affinity for it is partly because this was my home for a significant part of my life, just like the people within the square itself. The only substantial difference of course was that my home-making was invisible mostly, hidden behind curtains, and deemed unobstructive to "wider affluent society".



Figure 1. A painting from my field recording journal of Victory Square, entitled "A Man Drums a Stick"

"A man drums a stick against the edge of a hard plastic sheet. He is standing at the edge of the cement circle and he is illuminated under a row of helmet lamps. It is midnight. The sound reverberates against the looming infrastructure and seeps into dimly lit apartments. Laughter from another story beyond the edge bubbles over and disappears. Devoid of low vegetation, flat, open: Victory Square is like a cymbal waiting to be activated. I run to grab my recorder, tripping over wires strewn in my apartment. I perch it on the edge of the open window."

Above is an example of one of my journal entries. In this journal entry, I place myself within the context of recording, and demonstrate what it looked like to be in my apartment, the square being used like a cymbal referring to the multiplicity of stories taking place at once within the space - including my own.

¹ See Vancity Community Foundation, (accessed May 19, 2023) <https://www.vancitycommunityfoundation.ca/initiatives/2020-homeless-count>

6. THE BEYOND

I was resistant to the idea of creating work within a gallery, deeply considering notions of artistic practices that take place in what Rustom Bharucha called “the beyond” [10] outside the white box galleries, into public places like streets and city squares, namely ones experiencing protracted conflict and strife); yet I was also deeply influenced by my research in how sound art in the public could be greatly harmful in these locations. I decided that I would attempt to create within the boundaries of a gallery, reconciling this conundrum of conflicting research and choosing to create in spite of not having a perfect answer. Inspired by my experiences listening to Victory Square, I created *Conversations With You*, a 4-channel composition seeking to immerse the listener in my apartment world, juxtaposing the interior with the exterior, revealing the musicality of the square, the micro details and the macro movements (Fig 2). I presented life unfolding, sounding in all its varied tendrils and stories. I used one of Bharucha’s principles for working in vulnerable locations to inform my composition, which is rather than hide the strife, to work with it. Omitting any recordings that revealed voices, I built the soundscape with pieces of the strife I heard from my bedroom window: in the installation, the broken glass travels from speaker to speaker, as do the sirens, church bells and radio music.

7. LABYRINTHS

In thinking about the square itself with its many paths and nooks of activity and explosions of sound, I’m reminded of Westerkamp’s octophonic composition *Into the Labyrinth*². Westerkamp ventured into different locations in India to record the sounds she composed with, while I recorded mostly from one position in my apartment. However, in both mine and Westerkamp’s case, we both underwent a long-term listening endeavour in environments that were new to us and used the recorder to connect on a deeper level with these places. Both *Into the Labyrinth* and *Conversations With You* draw from listening experiences and use narrative-focused composition techniques where sound events blend into each other, swirling and combining various events and people that we recorded in fragmented yet inter-connected strands. Here, the ephemeral nature of time becomes evident, even in the transformation from day to night, and the musicality of the street and square are emphasized through pitch-matching and juxtaposing. Through these techniques and because of the amount of time spent in these locations, we can hear the composer listening, coming to experience place, and processing experiences within the compositions themselves. Referencing her soundscape compositions, Hildegard writes about the interplay between the fine details and the soundscape as a whole: the micro and the macro. In working with Victory Square,

my journaling informed my composition process, by helping me choose which of these sources I wanted to bring to the foreground, and what embellishments might work to tie the experience together in one unfolding, narrative-driven composition that honoured my experience in listening to Victory Square.



Figure 2. *Conversations With You*, 4-channel composition. Still from video documentation by Ash Tansiychuk.

8. SOUNDMAAPPING

Some of my work took place within the early COVID days, where I decided to go back to Montreal, and continue this project from afar. In this space, I began to create maps, in a way helping me remember what I had experienced. In my bedroom office across the country, I drew an eclectic onomatopoeia map of Victory Square, with every instance I could remember populating it. Rather than focus on perfect proportions, I used simple drawings, inspired by Lynda Barry’s aesthetics in allowing the drawing to become whatever it is. I also began to place myself within this map: drawing me at my kitchen, me working, sitting, having a breakdown, me looking outside, showering, falling in love, going through a grad school puberty. The act of drawing allowed me to reveal the listening experience, and to engage more of my inner-world in symbiosis with the ecosystem of Victory Square (Fig 3).

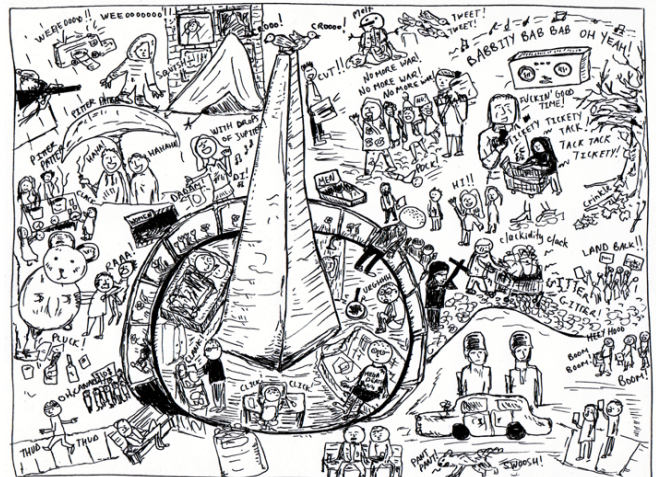


Figure 3. Onomatopoeia Soundmap of Victory Square.

² H. Westerkamp, "Into the Labyrinth," 2015. Available: <https://www.hildegardwesterkamp.ca/sound/comp/1/laby/>

9. A VISUAL JOURNAL OF VICTORY SQUARE

I returned to Vancouver in October 2020, back to my studio apartment overlooking the square. Before leaving, I remembered the grassy wide area being sort of fenced off, with official signs claiming that a tulip field would be built. When I returned, it was just grass: no fence, no tulips. It sounded similar, but there was less fullness to it. I felt a sense of dislocation, having been gone for seven months.



Figure 4. Zine panels from *A Visual Journal of Victory Square*.

To rebuild a sense of home, I began listening to the square again, and this time, rather than wait for something to pique my interest, I would simply sit at my window nearly daily and create a page of panels, where I'd draw what I noticed. I began building a visual library of details, which I had before not paid attention to. This culminated in a zine, entitled *A Visual Journal of Victory Square*. I would say that learning to listen to it in the previous years made me more attuned to those micro details. My ears seemed to have taught my eyes how to see, and through observing these ordinary, everyday exchanges between people, I began to fall back in love with the square.

10. TALES FROM THE SQUARE

The last work I completed about Victory Square was an online, interactive soundmap (Fig 5), using my field recordings, observations, drawings, and other artwork. By

this time, I was back in Montreal again, my graduate housing having come to an end. I remember throwing a large canvas on the ground in my new apartment, and beginning to paint a reimagined map with simple shapes and bright colours - similarly to how I had first represented the square in 2018 at Alexander 611 studios. The daunting task of putting an end to my research and creation had come, and though my thinking had spiraled into so many other possibilities, especially in the solitude of those months prior to creating it, I was drawn to making a soundmap because it would afford me the possibility of mapping my sonic experiences onto the square, inserting myself into my work, and revealing the inner dialogue between myself and what the square brought up, in addition to some of the soundscapes I recorded. I created clickable icons using drawings of objects and items of clothing worn or seen in the square, and animals like birds and dogs.

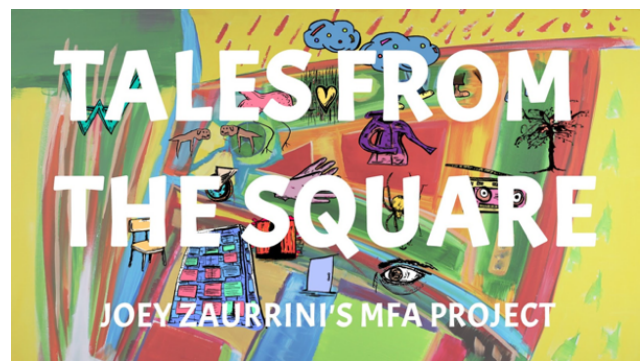


Figure 5. *Tales From the Square*. Online interactive soundmap of Victory Square.

These icons would lead to recordings and short zine-esque stories. I avoided using any recordings that contained clear conversation or vocalizations of distress. I wrote about the “charge” of the square, and described an evening where I heard intense yelling, but I focussed on describing the other people I noticed watching the scene, rather than the scene itself, and did not include a recording of it.

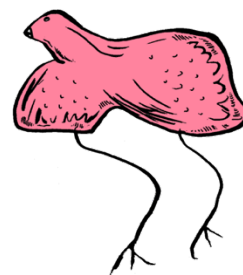


Figure 6. One of the icons, leading to the story, “Worms” in *Tales From the Square*.

I also wrote about the colour of the square, how I could notice all the different colours people wore, and how those brightened up the square from its grayness. Through the interactivity of the soundmap, visitors were invited to click through short panels of text while listening to the field recordings. I had not succeeded in repre-

senting it in its entirety, but I had succeeded in providing a representation from my vantage point, which was embedded within.

11. CONCLUSION

The experience of listening to Victory Square's soundscape gave me the opportunity to think more critically about my own positionality in recording for the first time, and I was able to create artworks that revealed both the complex beauty of the square, its strife, and my own inner world in response to its soundscape. Furthermore, in sharing vulnerability, the distance of the "flâneur" – the detached wanderer – which sound artists and researchers such as Andra McCartney or Stephanie Loveless [11] have noted as occurring in absence of true connection, became transformed to some extent as I reflected over my participation in my home space.

The time I spent listening living in front of Victory Square greatly shaped my ability to co-compose with it: this long-term listening endeavour could be compared to what Jan Gehl would call "a positive process", which is said to take place when we remain in one location for a duration of time. During the positive process, memories are formed and a deeper engagement with the environment is possible. If I were to continue researching Victory Square, or pursue further research in other city squares, I would eventually, after an initial encounter of it, work towards establishing relationships with different square frequenters, vendors, and businesses in the vicinity, and expressing both my interest in the square, and my interest in their perspectives.

In Andra McCartney's *Journées sonores*³ canal de Lachine, for example, she recorded the Lachine Canal over a period of multiple years to document the shift in sound as the location was developed. She also presented a time-lapse of these recordings as an installation, specifically targeted for people living near the Lachine Canal, thereby opening up a curated conversation for people who were actually affected by the canal's transformation. O'Keeffe's [12] work in Smithfield Square includes soundwalks, archival research and interviews with over 80 participants, uncovering data linking the construction of identity to memories of sound events in the square. The interviews O'Keeffe conducted, as well as her analyses of these demonstrates how community sounds transform a space into a place. Both O'Keeffe and McCartney's site-specific works provide ample inspiration in community-based approaches.

I myself developed a bond with Victory Square, and the life that graced it - heard and unheard. My hope is that sharing this trajectory of my work can spark more conversations of what it means to think about and work with fragile locations - and some of my methodologies: in

self-reflexivity, revealing my inner dialogue in my work, site-specific research, and finally to not be afraid of the "beyond" [16]: that just because something is messy, complicated, it shouldn't mean that we can't co-compose with it. In fact, because it is, we should. To conclude, a city square is a living context, and so are journals. The context is a collection of experiences, ever accumulating and merging - forming life.

12. REFERENCES

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[1] ³ See A. McCartney, "Journées sonores canal de Lachine, 2000-2004": <https://soundwalkinginteractions.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/joumc3a9es-sonores-canal-de-lachine1.pdf>