



Site of Sound #2: Of Architecture and the Ear

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Mind the Gap
David Schafer

Since the installation of my Muzak-inspired sculpture and sound project in 1996, I have continued to delve into the relationships between the structures of the built environment, social spaces, and sound. I think about these multiple-structures as language, as a linguistic situation; a grammar that manages the fine line between the intelligible and the unintelligible. It is syntax of language-architecture, architecture-sound, language-sound – these subjects are interrelated and interchangeable. I am interested in the spaces, gaps, openings, and distances, the in-between of language, speech, and architecture, which provide the intelligibility. There is a tenuous instability of language, as there is in architecture. This condition is hidden, but is trusted as it is utilized.

The subject of the tower is theorized in many disciplines including philosophy, gender studies, and architecture. It also provides a backdrop for much of my recent work. The philosopher is first an architect, endlessly attempting to produce a grounded structure. In much of Martin Heidegger's and Jacques Derrida's writings, an architectural vocabulary is utilized and interwoven, and is sometimes the basis of their discussion. It identifies with the idea of building and structure, and is useful in visualizing form into the discussion of theory. Heidegger and Derrida draw relationships between philosophy and the visibility of architecture. In Derrida's "Des Tours de Babel", the image of the tower acts as the strategic intersection of language, philosophy, architecture and deconstruction.

By utilizing the architectural motif in my recent work, the tower functions as a material object, sculpture as site. The freestanding structures act as scaffolding for the speakers to be mounted to providing a sonic context for the sculpture. This allows for the spatiality of the sounds emitted and implicates a sculptural status of the object as well as the sound. The materials, scale, and color of the structures generate an aesthetic, a contrasting formalism to the mechanical or functional qualities. As a structure in space, the towers are an assemblage, a construction. These attributes relay to the content of the sound as part of the structure. There is a failure of the tower. I am referencing the Tower of Babel, the failure and the multiplicity of languages, as well as the structural ambivalence and translation. The tower is always marked by a flaw

and as something unfinished. I am interested in the instability and failure of both the tower and of language, as a subversion of the ideal, and the collapse of the intelligibility of form and language.

As a contrast to the Derrida text above, I would like to cite from a 1940 episode of *The Three Stooges* titled "How High is Up?" that situates Larry, Curly and Moe posing as riveters on the 97th floor of an unfinished skyscraper. Their effort can be seen as a form of translation of the architectural tower and offers a humorous reflection on the philosophical discourse of the tower. Generally, it is thought that there is a unifying principal in an architectural project, but here, there is seemingly no unifying system. The haphazard addition they build is not a grid of the International Style; instead, it expresses the revulsion of common sense. The collapsing structure is configured with diagonals representing a disturbance in the forces of reason. Their construction exists in stark contrast to the grid beneath them and appears as an all-out affront to Logocentrism. The diagonally composed I-beams they construct can easily be associated with a work of architect Frank Gehry from 1979. The Stooges critical and comical structure anticipates a critique of Modernism, as well as new architectural forms. The trellis on Frank Gehry's house is identical to the Three Stooges project on the 97th floor of 1940. Their failed effort was perhaps the already existing flaw in the tower that Derrida discusses in "Des Tours de Babel".

Appearing as an Agit-Prop, a Constructivist-inspired kiosk, my towers and recent sound work attempt to undermine and interrogate autonomy and authority. Because of superimposing and layering of audio tracks, the sound component in many of the works is reduced to various states of noise and unintelligible traces. According to music critic Simon Reynolds, noise occurs when language is broken down and is in a wordless state. He says that the pleasure of noise lies in the obliteration of meaning and identity, which he calls ecstasy. Jacques Attali writes about noise as a subversive disorder that can reveal the codes of life and the relations among individuals. Noise is the source of dissonance and power. I am continually intrigued by how effective the decomposition of intelligible structures is in generating the opposite, while causing a disruption of the private and social processes.