

CAN'T HEAR MY EYES

BOOTLEG¹

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In this essay I will describe my working method as an artist with a political perspective, talking about what political art can be and how it can have an effect. I also write about the development of my work, from the interest in the independent *nature person*² to the contrasting role as a citizen. I contextualize my artistic method by raising some questions that I find interesting when dealing with the public in relation to my method; I am recording sound in the city.

THE POLITICAL ARTIST

In the essay *The Political Artist*, the artist Gunnar Krantz discusses the student revolution in Paris in 1968 and other rebellious acts in Berlin approximately at the same time. Students, workers and artists were devoted to demonstrations, occupying universities and printing posters as a protest against the bourgeois. They also started Communes³ where the aim was to create new values and freedom from capitalistic structures. It was a socialistic movement wanting equality for the people. "Throw away your brushes, risk your individuality and security, away with your grants and give up your studies" were some of the attitudes at the time; choosing to belong to a community rather than functioning as individual artists. As an artist you should start a commune to make an impact. Krantz claims it is hard to do art and revolution at the same time.

To me art is immanent political. Similar to what Joseph Beuys thought, I do not believe in any separation between moments of art and moments of life. He does not defer between producing a potato, a car or an art work. It is all a result of human labor and creativity that helps us to experience and recognize ourselves as creative individuals acting on the world. Beuys introduced the term "social sculpture" that illustrates his thoughts on the potential art has to transform society, often as participatory works that aim to reshape the society and having an environmental influence. At Dokumenta 7 Beuys initiated the work *7000 Oaks-City Forestation instead of City Administration* that consisted of 7000 basal stones organized in a pile and formed as an arrow that pointed towards the first oak tree he planted. He announces that the stones could not be moved unless an oak tree was planted in a new location. This resulted in a 5 year long process of participatory planting in Kassel, that is still an evident part of the cityscape of the town hosting Dokumenta. He believed in art to have the real potential to make a change and in the self determination of the individual ego to do social difference; communicating with a variety of mediums and structures to inform people through his art.⁴ "The expanded concept of 'art,' this 'social informing,' or generalized *Gestaltung* can thus be called 'the same thing' as politics."⁵

My question is: what do we approve of being a political act? When does this act have an impact and how do we measure art having a political effect? Krantz criticizes artists today of being too passive; of not wanting to operate outside the gallery walls and willing to risk their grants and security. Krantz seems to think that sacrificing something is important. He thinks of the artist as an instrument for political change; the artist should have clear standpoints towards political issues in her/his art.⁶

1 An illegal musical recording. Originally from the smugglers practice of concealing bottles in their boots during the Prohibition Years in the United States.

2 An individual that is not taking part in a collective experience, isolating from interaction with society and living at-one with nature.

3 Name taken from the *Paris Commune* of 1871.

4 David Adams, "Joseph Beuys: Pioneer of a Radical Ecology." *Art Journal: Art and Ecology* Vol. 51, No. 2 (Summer, 1992): 27-30.

5 Eric Michaud & Rosalind Krauss, "The Ends of Art According to Beuys." *October* Vol. 45 (Summer, 1988): 43.

6 Gunnar Krantz, "The Political Artist," in *We are All Normal (and we want our freedom)*: a collection of contemporary Nordic artists writings, ed. Katya Sander & Simon Sheikh (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2001), 100-105.

In contrast to Krantz point of view you find William Kentridge, whose thoughts I identify with. Kentridge is interested in art that is not necessarily expressing a profound attitude towards something. Instead political art that could contain contradictions, uncertain endings and uncompleted gestures.⁷ A space where there is room for doubt and not always knowing. Political art which is not used in an instrumental way, but where the subjective/individual artist has a more autonomous position in opinion production.

"(...) political art does not always look political, and art that looks political ('speaks' its message as it were) does not always operate politically."⁸ An example on art that is functioning in a more instrumental way was the exhibition *Gentle Action*.⁹ Several artists were invited into the concept of a "social sculpture", functioning as an experimental platform for workshops, discussions and screenings, focusing on environmental issues. Several works invited the visitor to participate and interact socially. You could collect seeds from a "seed-bank" to take home and plant or donate your own. Another work focused on the oil spill in the Mexico Gulf, where you could join collective meditation groups to send positive thoughts to all creatures that had been affected by the catastrophe. In the essay *Den økologiske kunstens politiske potensiale* the author Benedikte Holen discusses the political potential of art, the effect it can have on the viewer to take action into their lives. Holen seems to think that some of the explicit political works of art can be pacifying and not transmit a political message in the best way, because they already reproduce familiar thoughts. She argues through referring to Deleuze and Guattari that art works constructing knowledge through senses, not only being informative, could also be as important in the process of generating new knowledge; producing subjectivity through experiencing art affects us on how we act. From this point of view it is not necessarily art that is labeled as political that has the most power to change our thoughts. How we define action is also of relevance in this context; change of thoughts could also be validated as actions.¹⁰

These contradicting views on what it means to affect politically is brought further in Petra Bauer's questions concerning the political potential of the film. She thinks film is a political act in itself, especially since it has a potential both to affect and prompt collective actions. She is concerned with the role of the audience; the spectator should be shown examples on how they could change their lives and through this becoming aware of themselves. Here you could say that the art work functions more as an active entity rather than a passive tool. The film is the tool that informs the audience and encourages further discussion and action. Bauer does not believe in being "passive in the dark" but that the experience of the film can prolong into learning processes outside of the cinema, processes which the audience takes into new settings and opens up for possibilities to generate new knowledge.¹¹

MY WORK PROCESS/to listen/to observe/to bootleg

When looking through my sketch books, in order to find out where this project started, I find a note from June 2010. I am in the changing room at the gym, unwillingly listening to two women talking. First I feel annoyed, being caught up in something that feels meaningless. I can not hear my own thoughts. I wondered how it is possible to use so many words, but say so little. The

7 Lecture by Magnus Bärtås, Konstfack 31 March 2011.

8 Simon O'Sullivan, "From Aesthetics to the Abstract Machine: Deleuze, Guattari and Contemporary Art Practice." In *Deleuze and contemporary art (Deleuze Connections)* ed. Simon O'Sullivan & Stephen Zepke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 194.

9 Kunstnerens Hus, Oslo 2010.

10 Benedikte Holen, "Den økologiske kunstens politiske potensial." *Kunstforum* No.1 (2012): 43-45.

11 Lecture by Petra Bauer, Konstfack 8 April 2011.

tempo of the dialogue was fast and loud, yet still friendly. It was obvious that they knew each other from before, maybe old colleagues. Their dialogue filled up the space of the silence and I was caught up in the middle of it. In my mind the changing room became the scenario of the play *Waiting for Godot*.¹² The trivial dialogue suddenly revealed itself to me and appeared as important. In that second it felt like the dialogue could tell me more about my own existence than the words of the greatest philosophers. Not necessarily by what was spoken, but the feeling it gave me of everyday life. The importance of the so called trivial, while we are waiting to get some answers on our own existence. "It is true that when with folded arms we weigh the pros and cons we are no less a credit to our species. The tiger bounds to the help of its congeners without the least reflexion, or else he slinks away into the depths of the thickets. But that is not the question. What are we doing here, *that* is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come."¹³

This small revelation was the starting point of my project. I then started to pay attention to subjective and "small" voices around me in everyday life. I am interested in these voices that are usually not heard and not considered of great importance. For me this is a political act.

Since September 2010 I have been recording my eavesdropping of found conversations in public spaces, mostly in urban surroundings in Stockholm. I am working like a spy; the people recorded are not aware they're being documented. It varies between me observing or taking part in a given situation. The conversations recorded are of strangers, I am curious of who they are and their story. The information gathered is scattered, it is like when you move in the city walking down a street gathering small pieces of sentences from different individuals that melt into new meanings.

I have developed my technique of recording. It has been a challenge to make the microphone more subtle and to get good recordings. I contacted Ricardo Atienza, who has expertise on recording sound in city space. He helped me to develop a more suitable technique.

Since the beginning of 2011 I have been recording with microphones that I hide in my ears, instead of a hand held recorder. These binaural microphones look like regular ear plugs, allowing me to get closer to what I am recording and thereby having better control over what is recorded in my left and right ear. Now I can work more intuitively with the total sound-scape experience, since what I hear is what I record, and work more directly with the medium. The sound space in relation to my own body becomes important; how I move, how I turn my head and where I decide to go. My body becomes the performative tool of the recording when I use binaural microphones.

My methodology consist of two moments. In the first moment I identify myself as the flâneuse¹⁴; a female voyeur observing her surroundings. I collect material, not directly deciding what to emphasise as a narrator would do, by composing the surroundings, but rather letting my characteristics, peculiarities and desires navigate me in the city.

The voyeuristic point of view can be seen in Andy Warhols films. He is functioning as a "fly on the wall", never directly taking part in

what is happening in front of the camera. He is a silent observer. His friends at The Factory described him as being a voyeur instead of a storyteller: "(...) he did not have anything to say, but a great deal to look at."¹⁵

The second moment of my practice is the storytelling, i.e. composing the found material into narrations by editing the scattered information into new stories. Contrasting to Warhol is Michel Auder who was also a part of the crew around The Factory and Chelsea Hotel in New York. In most of Auder's works there are stronger narratives than in Warhol films. In recent works his subjective approach to the material has become even more evident. He never writes scripts but edits other people's voices into powerful texts. Like in *Voyage to the Centre of the Phone Lines* (1993) we can eavesdrop on telephone conversations between unknown people, illustrated with holiday images from sunsets and beaches. His interest in playing with the relationship between image and sound to create stories is also visible in the work *Heads Of the Town* (2009). We see characters on the screen, but we never hear them speak, having an audio-visual impact on the viewer.¹⁶

In the editing process I work with surround sound to tell a story in a three dimensional space. Somehow mimicking how we experience sound in our daily lives. I will show the work in a traditional cinema; a public setting where we are familiar with sharing experiences collectively. We easily project other spaces into the cinema. This heterotopic quality is interesting to me and the ability it has to mirror the different spaces of the sound recordings. The illusion of the cinema creates the possibility for several real spaces to be projected as illusions into this space, having a relationship to several places at once. This in relation to Foucault's notion of heterotopia; the reflection in a mirror is a utopia, because it does not exist and it is a placeless place, but it is also a real place because the mirror as an object exists and is then what he calls heterotopia. The sound could be the utopia, the placeless place in the mirror reflexion and the cinema could be the heterotopia; a real space functioning as a mirror for the spaces of otherness.¹⁷ I am interested in the functions and connotations of this place and how it effects the reading of the work. I would like to invite the viewer into a familiar situation of experiencing where the viewer easily accepts the set of rules present, e.g. that the work has a defined beginning and end. A cinematic setting is therefore a space that intrigues me. I am interested in playing with the imagination of the viewer. I often think that the strongest sensations/pictures are created in our own minds. My observation is that sound and image become separate experiences carrying two different meanings. In my work the sound is carrying the story and the mind is projecting the images onto the dark cinema-screen. We experience the sound in a frontal setting, with the screen as focus point. The framework of the cinema is the concept, making the context define the nature of the work, creating a film out of an anti-film.

SOUND OF THE CITIZEN

In Knut Hamsund's literature we experience everything through the protagonist's point of view. In *Pan* (1894) we meet Thomas Glahn that is both described as an independent nomadic character living close to nature and as a citizen having to relate to a society that he struggles to adjust to. In former projects I have been interested in the individual that stands alone contra to the one that is part of a community and having a collective

12 *Waiting for Godot* (1953, Théâtre de Babylone, Paris) is a play by Samuel Beckett. From an existential point of view it is often interpreted to be about the meaninglessness of life with its repetitive plot, where nothing much happens. Questions such as death, the meaning of human existence and the place of (or lack of) God in that existence.

13 Samuel Beckett. "Waiting for Godot, Act 2". The Samuel Beckett On-Line Resources. http://samuel-beckett.net/Waiting_for_Godot_Part2.html (accessed May 6 2010)

14 Derives from the french word Flâneur, a man about town who saunters around observing society.

15 Ubuweb. "Warhol's Cinema - A Mirror for the Sixties." Directed & Produced by Keith Griffiths, http://www.ubu.com/film/warhol_cinema.html (accessed January 31, 2011).

Quote from Stephen Koch (time of quote 00:18:04).

16 Åsa Nacking & Anders Kreuger, LundsKonsthall; Michel Auder, (Lund: Fäth & Hässler; 2010), 57-64.

17 Michel Foucault, info. "Michel Foucault: Of Other Spaces (1967) Heterotopias." Berne Convention, <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html> (accessed March 4, 2011).

experience. Different contexts shape our identity and creates roles. I find it fascinating how you can never know if you experience the same as the person beside you. Sometimes I feel frustration knowing that I will always be alone with my own mind; experiencing miscommunication and alienation from the group, being the individual longing to belong to something greater.

Who we are when we are alone, and when we are with others.

The subjective experience fascinates me. Lonesome or alone. Alone together. After graduating from Iceland Academy of the Arts in spring 2009, most of my work has been for one viewer at the time. The work *Blue* (2009) was a sound-piece in earphones placed on a microphone stand on the top of a stage calculated for one single person (1x1x1m). The participating viewer also had a strong spotlight directed towards her/his body. This installation focused on the viewers subjective experience while being public and exposed. In my work today I am still interested in the individual, but more in relation to the role as a citizen. A question is raised in how we relate to our surroundings differently and how collective experiences are not interpreted in the same way. In some of my recordings I intervene in the city space in a very direct way; I talk to people in the street or take part of a communion in a church. Then I am not a passive peeker anymore, but an intervening citizen and mediator that the listener experiences the sound through. I become the protagonist of the story, but also the storyteller.

"(...) So when one eye looks at another and gazes into that inmost part by virtue of which that eye sees, then it sees itself".¹⁸ We define ourself through how we relate to our surroundings. Our identity relies on the interaction with fellow citizens, whether we see ourself taking part in the social sphere or not; we choose to participate or isolate from society. It is through mirroring we get a glimpse of who we are.

BOOTLEGGING THE TRIVIAL

There is constant negotiation about the boundaries between what we view as private and public. What do we decide to talk about in public spaces; can people's voices tell us something new about our surroundings and how it effects us? Have we become more private in our public conversations in recent years? How has the technical revolution had an impact on our privacy and daily rhythm, with the arrival of the mobile phone and the Internet? Are we becoming more alienated from each other; distant, more onsome¹⁹? Or connected and experiencing a wholesome (GPS, Facebook, iPhone etc.)? These are questions that goes through my mind when I'm working.

Liv Ullmann was asked in an interview in television what she predicts for the future and she answered:

"(...) the technology moves forward, but I think it becomes more and more a way where we alienate ourselves from each other with Twitter and Facebook and all this new stuff. People play with their phone rather than approaching another person, and when they are alone, instead of doing good things, they constantly sit with this little device and think that they are not lonely, and I think that we may eventually make ourselves very lonely (...)"²⁰

Liv Ullmann is saying that we are getting more distant from each other despite the fact that we now can communicate without doing much effort. On the other hand I regard the technical revolution as something positive that constructs a common ground and opens up for more people to participate in a social sphere. The artist Marysia Lewandowska talks about the importance of sharing and publishing

18 Socrates quoted in: Bill Viola, "Video Black - The Mortality of the Image," In *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall & Sally Jo Fifer (San Francisco: Aperature, 1990), 484.
19 I'm proposing a new word for being on your own. The word lonesome and alone has both the connotation of being lonely. Onsome does not share these connotations but rather expresses a feeling of content in your solitude.

20 NRK-web tv (Norway's national broadcasting). Interview with Liv Ullmann, <http://www.nrk.no/nett-tv/klipp/706795/> (accessed January 27, 2011). My translation from Norwegian.

culture. She sees great possibility in the Internet to make culture available to the public domain.²¹ Like showing your art work, publishing texts and sharing files. These thoughts underpins the philosophy of the open source concept; that everybody should have the same access to information. When Teo Enlund, professor in industrial design at Konstfack, gave the lecture *Why iPhone is a great design*, he focused on how the iPhone has a positive cultural impact e.g. how you can track your friends with GPS. He also mentioned how fast, reliable and convenient the device is.²² What disappointed me was that he was promoting the product rather than asking important questions like: how is this affecting us? With the intention to make information more accessible and share it faster it is no doubt that the new technology has a positive cultural contribution. The new technology also interferes with what we conceive as public and private in our daily lives. We can share our thoughts on Twitter and Facebook and tell the world what we had for breakfast even before the first bite. Is this interfering with our conception of the private? In a conversation with a librarian, while searching relevant literature on my topic, she told me a story of once she was travelling by train. There was a young girl talking on her cell phone revealing intimate details about a boy that treated her badly. The librarian told me that she got involved emotionally in the conversation. She really wanted to give a pep talk to the girl and pursue her to dump the boy, but she did not. This is one of many stories and not a unique one on how we can be affected by our fellow citizens. The librarian thought we had become far more private in our conversations, this would be an unthinkable behaviour twenty years ago she said. I think it is a good example on how our behaviour has changed publicly.

Jürgen Habermans argues that private and public should be kept separate. Important issues should be kept in public spaces and trivial issues should be kept private. He makes a distinction between public and private and see them as two poles. I would rather argue that the public and private is more interweaved and not segregated as he claims. Both aspects I see as important ways of producing knowledge and that they are dependent on each other. Tom Sandqvist, professor at Department of Art in Konstfack, thinks the important questions are the "big" political questions. Sandqvist seems to think that the personal is less important and of no political value. In a conversation with Vanja Hermele, Sandqvist gives us an example of this:

"Tom: Here at Konstfack it's more common that the girls - rather than the boys - base their artistic practice on the autobiographical experience, that they start by looking at them selves. And then it is, if one can be a bit ironic, more about the little ego than about the major political issues.

Vanja: Provided that you don't see the self as the big political issue.

Tom: Yes, but they don't."²³

In my practise I am not working in a self biographical way, but interested in everyday life voices and the political potential in the "sound of the trivial". Could these marginalized voices be the big political potentials? I am questioning how we value things in the politics of everyday life. The gesture of bootlegging these subjects is about making them more significant, placing them on a pedestal and saying this is important. A dedicated fan that makes a bootleg from a concert is doing the same thing; she/he is appreciating the music, sharing with other fans what is an important personal experience. This kind of recording is not the official recording controlled by the sender, the spectacle of a

21 Lecture by Marysia Lewandowska, Konstfack 3 September 2010.

22 Lecture by Teo Enlund, Konstfack 1 April 2011.

23 Vanja Hermele, KONSTEN -SÅ FUNKAR DET (INTE), (Stockholm: KRO/KIF publication, 2009), 20. My translation from Swedish.

band, but an unlicensed pirate copy made from the perspective of a receiver, an audience.

WHERE I AM HEADING

How can recording people's voices in public spaces be a political act? To take the role of a flâneur; being an independent observer that boldly decides what to look at? Becoming a bearer of the look, employing the "aggressive" female gaze by taking ownership of my movement in the city. Not only being observed, but observe, possessing the power of the erotic look. The pleasure of looking has often been associated with a male active gaze where the female figure has a passive role, not being the protagonist of a subjective story. When looking back in history the female character has often not had the same autonomous power to talk about subjectivity by articulating the look and creating the action.²⁴ The myth about the lonely male genius has both derived from Hamsun's and Strindberg's literature. In Strindberg's *Alone/Days of Loneliness*, published 1903, there are strong autobiographical references. The protagonist is looking at himself, examining his position and digesting his surroundings. He is a writer that isolates himself from people in order to transform his observations of society into writing. He is playing the role of a Flâneur that gives him the right to describe and analyse a modernizing city that he feels alienated from, trusting in the genius of the independent male figure to tell wisdom about the world in a self-confessing way by referring to other male philosophers, writers, biblical and ancient heroes:²⁵ "Empowered by this unilateral patriarchal diet, the self confines to be capable of 'changing the world order, rule the fate of nations, declare war and dethrone dynasties.'"²⁶

My recordings can be seen as an active female gaze, produced by an independent individual, breaking with what has been the traditional role of the female character. I believe my existential and personal perspective as a narrator, both in the process of recording and editing, is a part of doing a political act. In the essay *The Personal is Political*, Carol Hanisch explains the idea behind the phrase. One of the things she argues is that the "political" refers to any power relationship and that the women's movement of the 1970s was about consciousness-raising and not about solving any women's personal problems.²⁷ This early feminist statement "The Personal is Political", I interpret today as a comment on all individuals regardless of gender, as potential participants in generating public opinions through personal and subjective statements. Women in the 1970s that put equality questions on the agenda, were often criticized by their male colleagues that their agenda were getting too personal, often compared with being "female therapy groups". Their male colleagues would claim that the problems they addressed were more universal problems that did not need to be labelled as "female issues". It was difficult to be heard as a woman, and if a woman succeeded, it was classified as something subjective and of no importance.²⁸ What I am asking is if subjective/personal political gestures in art and in the public opinion, like the words on the street, could be validated of equal importance as more widespread statements from media and politicians. I am interested in using the sound recordings as a way to investigate these voices that make themselves heard in our contemporary society, which are not the dominating voice of the media and politicians (marginalized- versus dominating stories in public places).

The unpredictable and the not-knowing I see as something valuable in my process, where intuition and the blindfolded journey create the

work, not the concept of it, by trusting the process. I have a method of recording and a method of processing the recordings through my body, building narrative sequences of my journey in space/place into new journeys in sound. Playing with the viewers' imagination and feelings by taking familiar sounds into a new setting and being able to create a personal experience for the viewer is important to me; an autonomous happening that exists outside my ideas of the work. The 3-dimensional quality of the recordings is centred around me recording, having a faster way of moving and relating to distances through the sound. I become the protagonist of the story and the world happens around. You can hear me move and feel the different spaces in the city. I move in a new way through the city.

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²⁴ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Main Street, Malden, MA, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) 983-987.

²⁵ Ebba Witt-Brattström, "Til bunns i kjønnskrigen," *Morgenbladet*, April 27-May 3, 2012, 22-23.

²⁶ Ebba Witt-Brattström, "Til bunns i kjønnskrigen," *Morgenbladet*, April 27-May 3, 2012, 23.

My translation from Norwegian.

²⁷ Carol Hanisch. "The Personal is Political." *Writings by Carol Hanisch*, <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIPhtml> (accessed May 1, 2012).

²⁸ Susanne Björkman, "Sveriges Radio DOK: Vad är det ni tjejer vill egentlig", 1978.

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