

Thesis Studio 1

Eduardo Menendez

((EGO))

Building sonic logos in urban environments

Thesis Instructor: Christopher Kirwan

Writing Instructor: Ethan Silverman

1. INTRODUCTION

My thesis project attempts to touch, extend, and may be tie; two topics that I covered in my last project “Sound Imprints”. The first one is human **voice as a document**. Human voice is one of the **personal traits** that defines a person as an **individual** and also as part of a collectivity. My concern involves voice purely as sound and its usage within the language. In this regard, my second topic is about **personal traces**, the concept of **signature** and how we **consciously or unconsciously** leave traces of our presence in the urban environment. In most cases, this stands as an **evidence/witness** of us or as a way to **communicate** something. Understanding communication as the action of sending a message between two points that in certain cases can be the same individual and more over as the relationship of the trace and the place.

2. PROTOTYPES

This section contains two iterations of the same prototype that explores the concept of signature without voice as a primary step to examine the core concept.

2.1 TRACING PROFILES. 1st ITERATION

At its first attempt, “Tracing Profiles” is a prototype that explores the concept of signature and the relationship with the author. It consists on a paper canvas and a marker pen.

I asked the users to think on a physical position that can define them (Fig.01), this is to say a pose with meaning. Next I started to trace them with a marker pen while they there posing.



Fig. 01

After that I called two people at the same time: one was posing and the second one was tracing the user. I asked them to change their roles so every participant can trace and be traced. (Fig.02). After observing that they were almost making the same lines, I foster them to be as free as they could with the idea of tracing, trying different kinds of lines and not only making one but several lines if they needed it.

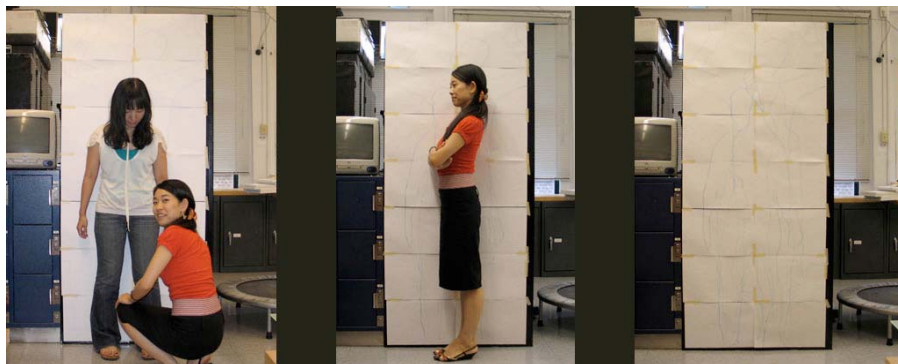


Fig. 02

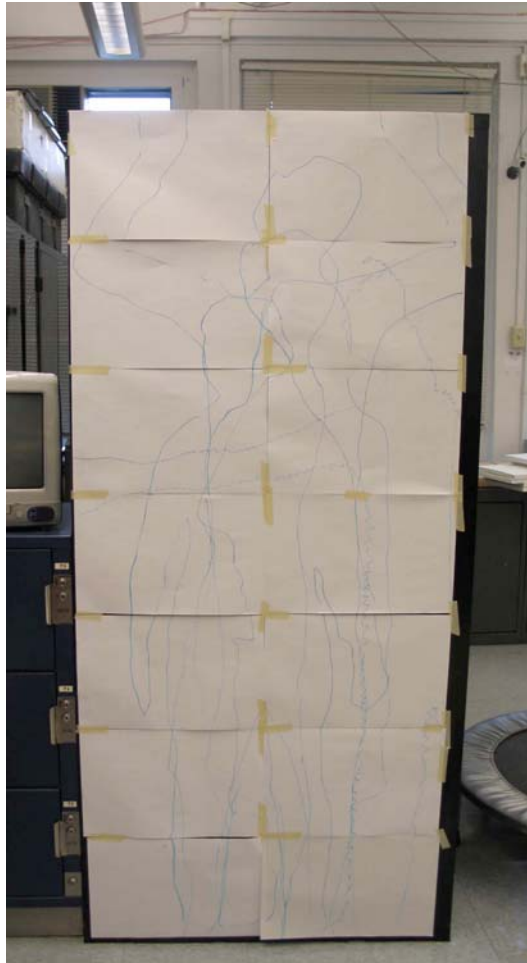


Fig. 03

My primary result of this quick prototype was an interesting overlay of traces on that place. Even though, the fact of using one only color of pen was a limitation for the users, the synthesis of the traces displayed intersected by the other profiles trended to have multiple readings of the same result. (Fig.03).

2.2 TRACING PROFILES 2ND ITERATION

After the first iteration, I tested another version of the prototype. This time, I wanted the user to trace her/himself. The setting consisted on a laptop, a camera, a projector, a paper canvas, three different color marker pens, and charcoal. I wanted the users to make decisions of color and texture. So,

like in the first iteration I told the users to think on a gesture that represent them (Fig.04). Next, I took a photo and projected on the paper. They chose a tool (marker pen or charcoal) to trace (Fig.05).



Fig. 04



Fig. 05

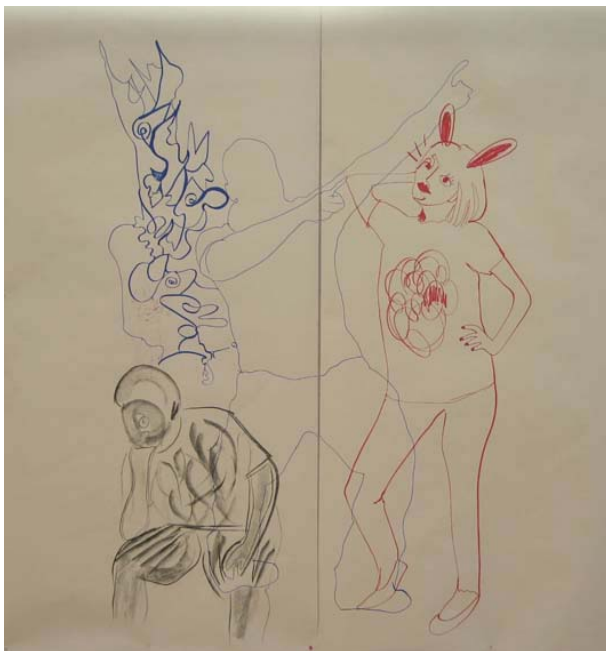


Fig. 06

Users reacted different from the first iteration. As they saw their photo scaled on the paper they started to be very detailed in how they traced their profiles, even when I requested them to be as free as they wish.

3. ASSUMPTIONS

My plan with the first iteration of this prototype was to use a person's profile as a way to create a trace of her/his individuality. Observing what kind of reaction it would create on the user. I noticed that there are different positions and approaches depending on the role of the user: one thing is to trace and other thing is to be traced. The one who traces interprets the model. But my intention was more close to the interpretation of the author about himself, because I see the trace as a personal act that depends only of the author, like a signature. The signature is a self-reflexive phenomenon in which the person became aware of his/her status of maker and faces the fact of the creation. The result of the act is a special trace where the author can look the alteration on the environment.

On the second iteration of this prototype, I was testing the act of interpretation of the user's profile by his hand. For that reason I got ride of the second user (assistant) and took the photo to project it. However, the means weren't very successful. Being able to have a sharp picture force the user to trace details. I was looking more for synthesis than for details. As how we assume a sign: one thing is what is represented and other thing is the representation. The representation in the signature has a minimalist sense. Details are in this case what I mention later on this paper: meaningless noise for a signature purposes.

4. DESIGN CONCEPTS

4.1 VOICE AS PERSONAL DATA

The first time I took a bus in Miami, was the first time I was in a foreign country where citizens didn't speak my mother language. My surprise was that I was listening English but Greek, French and Chinese as well.

This experience happened again and in a more notorious way, when I was in NY and I took the Subway. There were moments where I couldn't recognize even what kind of language they were talking and I started to feel overwhelm by so many different and unusual types of sounds coming out from people's mouths. Because we filter voices through linguistic conventionalisms that condition us to attach sound from human beings with what we know and what we expect to listen from them. This is to say; when we are in contact to a variety of languages, we experience a shock in terms of sound and meaning. Sometimes we cannot understand anything but there is always an intention of at least recognizing a familiar sound, one that we could attach a familiar meaning and as a consequence, feel a sensation of confidence. If that's not the case it can just be meaningless noise with a very negative charge. I then started to image voices as code flowing from people, and merging together in the air without any kind of negativity.

But besides these characteristics that tie and define voices with ethnographic groups, voice has other traits that build other kind of differences among people. Tone, timbre, speed, rhythm and volume are characteristics that define and create individualities. Indeed, voice stands as a very particular human label. A label that I assume as a sonic fingerprint that takes shape constantly depending on the necessity, gender, age and context.

This sonic fingerprint is what I try to visualize with the usage of technology in means that can be recognizable for people as a kind of personal logo.

My aim is to create **new ways to display people voices in public spaces and to show new means of expression by interpreting visually the voice's data**. It is a form of visualizes on the streets an important component of individuality, collectivity and interaction. My contribution is in this sense social, conceptual and visual. I want to propose a serial of meanings and concepts like voice, tone communication, class, volume, signature and image to face one aspect of our way to change the city.

4.2 SIGNATURE AND THE CITY

When I was at the art school in Lima, an artist left his sculptures on the main garden. A couple of weeks later, he took them off and the result was geometrical shapes of yellow grass that contrasted with the green garden.

But not only things leave traces, we do it as well and even more drastically. Our clothes, the street, our rooms, everything that we use, touch or spend time for a while ends being shape by us. Those issues are what make us feel comfortable, confident and identify. We customize with or without intention what surrounds us. We shape our environments. We leave the witness of our presence on them. We sign them.

An intentional sign stands as a unique visual EGO of the person while a non-intentional sign evidences our time on certain places that sometimes we can't avoid. Thus, my intention is to craft a way to use the same concept with technology. Design new means to generate signatures of people's presence within an urban environment and produce awareness about it. These signatures are the result of a process that begins with the voice. The sound and words would create a specific kind of signature. This signature will struggle with the ephemeral quality of the voice, because they try to mark a permanence to the restrict voice event. They will prolong

in time and space the event of the voice, but also they will be changed and replaced by other new signatures. With this constant replacement I try to make permanent what is ephemeral (the voice) and to change this apparent safety of the permanent (the signature).

5. RESEARCH

5.1. PRIMARY RESEARCH

As primary research I started reading books about physics of sound and how it has been represented visually throughout the history of music (*The Computer Music Tutorial* by Curtis Road); as well as books about sound and identity such as *The Empire of Signs* by Roland Barthes. My aim was to find sources where I could confirm my personal thoughts about sound and identity.

Following, I looked at people who studied the relations between humans and their environment; and precisely about the city and its inhabitants (“City: Rediscovering the center” from White and “Environments and People” from Philip Wagner). This focused my attention towards the idea of trace and the concept of signature, where Jacques Derrida plays an important role.

Thus I begin to interview people about what signature means for them, it was curious how the meaning differs from person to person. For instance, Hernan (Hispanic male 33 year old) mentioned that for him a signature can be to pee in a park, Jennifer (Hispanic female 26 year old) said that she would like to assume it as a gesture and Leticia conceived it as a graphic element.

5.2. SECONDARY RESEARCH

As secondary research I am listing and explaining related projects in three groups: “Urban Interfaces”, “Sound Shapes” and “Customizing our Environment”.

Urban Interfaces

As secondary research I would like to mention first the work “**Ecologue**”, “Social Sensing and Its Display” a MAS thesis from Orkan Telhan. This piece is a very important project that shares similarities and points of view with my ideas. Telhan’s thesis touches and develops the concept of “Social Mirror”, concept coined by him, and it is about creating urban interfaces for social sensing. Technically it consists on a metal “origami” built with LED panels that the user can shape manually and reacts to people’s presence with light and sound. It builds not only a physical interaction between the user and the device but a collective and psychological one too. The device has a questionnaire that records people’s voices and let others users know the anonymous answers left before by others, as well as light sensors that react to people presence, leaving a trace of light.

Sound Shapes

“**Mesa di Voce**” from Golan Levin / Zach Lieberman uses the data from sound and the position of the performer to “paint” with voice on a screen, this has visually and technical similarities with my thoughts that I might take from but my address is conceptually different in the way that I am concerned about the visual result and its recognition by the author.

“**Amoeba**” from Shigeru Nato / Etsuro Okuyama and “**ST**” from Douglas Henderson are both projects that shapes figures or letters on water by using wave frequencies. As my idea about how sound have an identity, Douglas’s installation shows the visual uniqueness of certain frequencies that are so low that human beings can’t hear them. That differs from Nato /

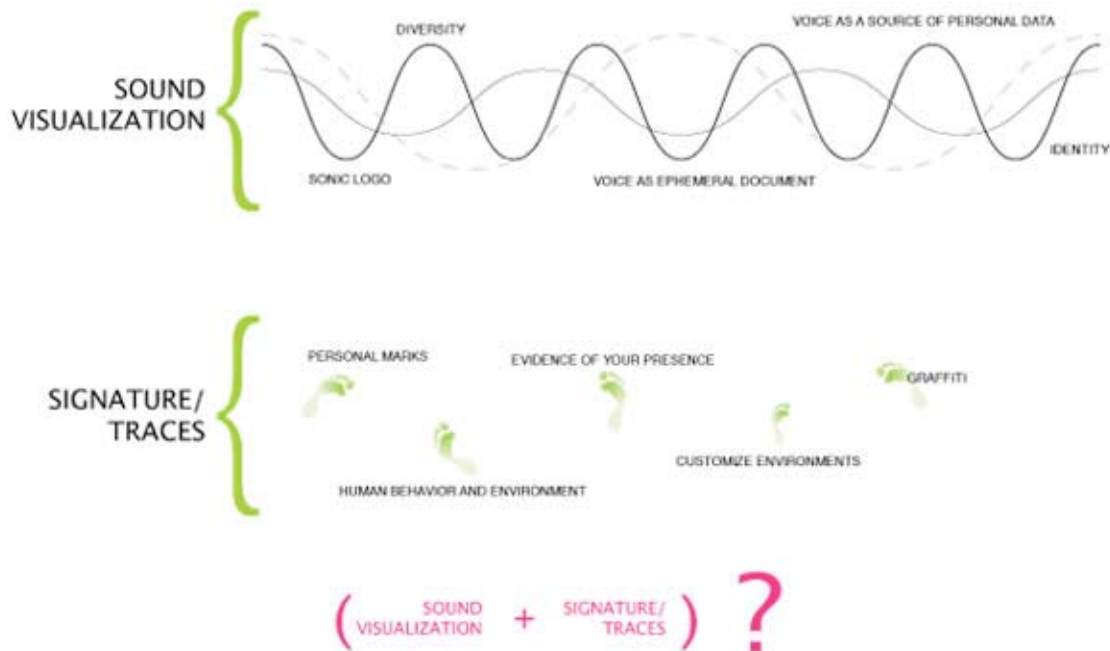
Okuyama's project where letters result by applying different frequencies at the same time in a circular way.

Customizing our Environment

As a good reference about the concept of tracing because of our interaction with the space I want refer to **"Drawing Machines"** from Angela Bulloch. Bulloch's machines trace the wall of the gallery depending on the position of people seated on a bench facing them.

In completely different way, **"Sonic City"** a project from Layla Gaye, Ramia Maze and Lars Erik Holmquist, is about making and customizing music by using the city as an interface. The user shapes the desire sound by his behavior within the metropolis.

5. VISUAL MAP



6. CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

This project works on the conceptual idea of human voice as a personal trait and signature within an urban space. With influences of Jacques Derrida's concept of Signature and works of artists like Orkan Telhan, Zach Lieberman and Golan Levin. Attempting to explore how to design ways to use technology on new ways to create sonic impromptus of people presence that can function as personal marks.

At this moment my process has change a bit, in the sense of researching and exploring more the signature as a concept than the voice; but my intention is to continue building prototypes for both ideas in parallel. I have planed to create more digital prototypes that may be will not cover all the concepts but my intention is at least to touch the ideas that I am trying to address. I decided this because I have spent much time reading and thinking than designing; and I guess what I need to do more in this moment is to build and do, to design and test. Learning by doing as when I was learning painting and they taught us that there is other kind of knowledge and wisdom that you acquire by crafting.

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