cross(referenc)ing the namib
Paul Moore
Since the invention of sound recording technologies artists have experimented with the potential of sound as a creative element within the avant-garde and modernist project. The ability to record sound opened up a creative space between the musician/composer and the artist/interventionist. Early works by the Dadaists and Surrealists set the tone for subsequent experimentation that sought to define a position for sound based works outside of the Western classical tradition. John Cage’s 4’33” (1951) could be viewed as the culmination of this inquiry and persists as a work that resists definition as music, sound, visual art or performance. This uneasy relationship and the attendant formal and conceptual questions that arise are still the basis of much sound work that contends with the primacy of the visual within contemporary culture.

Paul Moore works within this contested area of sound and has made a substantial contribution to new knowledge in this field. This is a remarkable achievement as he manages to occupy a complex space somewhere between the use of site-specific installation and the more familiar contexts where we might expect to listen to sound. His work responds to a specific set of political, social and historical circumstances and develops out of a process of attentive observation and listening.

The new work for the Namib has evolved out of such an intensive engagement with place and those who occupy and use it. An ongoing dialogue about the nature of technological innovation/change and the point where such rapid growth meets ‘tradition’ has shaped this work. Moore’s work avoids facile understandings of such loaded terms as ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ by seeking to create a different set of meanings for his use of the granary store. He recasts the granary store as a vessel for a new way of experiencing what can be perceived as ‘authentic’. It is perhaps the contested and indefinable nature of sound itself that offers up the potential of this work to create a new experience of landscape. A landscape that is infused with the sounds of the desert layered with the soundtrack of a contemporary and vibrant culture.

Willie Doherty
A real environment, such as an urban street, a concert hall, or a dense jungle, is sonically far more complex than a single wall. The composite of numerous surfaces, objects and geometries in a complicated environment creates an aural architecture. (Blesser and Salter 2007:2)

At the beginning of her study of the Namib Desert Mary Seeley (1987) implores visitors to ‘take only photographs, leave only footprints’. While underlining the fragility of this spectacular space this quote also serves to underpin the primacy which is given to the visual in relation to environments which are subject to the tourist gaze.

This hierarchy is not new and is something which those working in sound have long contested. Hence in the introduction to The Auditory Culture Reader (2003:1), Michael Bull and Les Back make an impassioned plea that sound, as an area of study, should be taken seriously: ‘In the hierarchy of the senses, the epistemological status of hearing has become a poor second to that of vision’. The work of the World Soundscape movement and, in particular, that of R. Murray Schafer has also shown that fragile environments have a sonic aspect which is as important as the visual or ecological. Not only do areas like the Namib have a unique soundscape but as Murray Schafer has shown they also have particular sonic footprints which he refers to as soundmarks. Schafer argues that each geographical area has a unique soundscape inhabited by a range of particular sounds which both denote place and connote identity.

This concept of ‘soundmarks’, developed by Murray Schafer, is defined by him as ‘a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community’ (Schafer 1994:10) and he argues that ‘whatever we may think of such soundmarks, they reflect a community character. Every community will have its own sound arguments about soundmarks, even though they may not always be beautiful.’ (Schafer 1994:239).

It is perhaps not surprising that the Namib is not confronted as such an aural space. Paradoxically the vastness of the dunes, the extremes of climate, the archaeological depth, the peculiarities of the biology, the continual presence of what Seely terms the desert’s ‘detritus’ (Seely 1987:26) and an exaggerated sense of space all conspire to create a notion of emptiness, an impression that one is traversing some kind of spatial void. Naturally this void, this emptiness, is silent.

Such an impression is, of course, just that. The desert is in actual fact criss-crossed with a range of sounds connected to the very visual and ecological elements creating this illusion. With his piece 4’ 33” the artist and environmentalist John Cage illustrated that emptiness and silence are not the same thing. This work, which has become known as ‘Silence’ underlines the fact that sound is always present. As Cage said (Cage 1961: 8) ‘there is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot’. To embark on an examination of the sounds present in a space such as the Namib, however, requires that we do two things: appreciate, as Brian Marley insists that, ‘essentially silence isn’t what it appears to be….to appreciate silence we have to understand what it is not rather than what it is’ (Marley & Wastell eds. 2005:24) and, more crucially, we have to listen.

Listening is not the same as hearing. Interestingly communities such as the Bororo in Brazil and the Kaluli in New Guinea frame their lives according to what they hear rather than what they see and Paul Carter (2004) suggests that had the visual not gained primacy in western societies then ‘engaged’ listening would have been an integral part of our culture allowing us to theorise our encounters with ‘other’ places and peoples in entirely different ways. More importantly it would also have facilitated an entry point into the sphere of auditory space:

Auditory space, then, gives back to discourse its old physical sense of running hither and thither. Such a space is like the field of play in a ball game. Hearing its discourse is like defining the rules of the game solely in terms of the white lines governing the moves. Only by becoming a player and...
following the ever-uncertain flight of the ball can one begin to listen. (Carter 2004:45)

This exhibition developed from the conviction that the Namib is a space which is inhabited by a range of sounds which have the capacity to signify, and invoke, aspects of the Namibian landscape and Namibian culture in ways that the purely visual cannot. It evolved from a range of art and media projects undertaken by me in Namibia which culminated in a keynote paper delivered to the first Namibian Media Symposium at the Polytechnic of Namibia in 2005. In this paper I argued that like many African states Namibia found itself confronted with the problems that arise from a rapid entry into the digital global environment, which took the country from what was essentially an agricultural base to a post-digital economy and in so doing ‘leap-frogging’ the key modernist developmental phase. Such a rapid growth left the country and its population subject to the tensions evident in such an accelerated growth path.

The discussions arising from this paper centred on the role of the creative arts in such a process and it was suggested that there had to be a means whereby the digital could be expressed through what might be termed a ‘traditional’ Namibian aesthetic. Ultimately these discussions, particularly those with Joseph Madisia and Alfrida du Plessis, clarified my thinking around the issue of the relationship between the digital and the site specific and in Joseph’s case led to the commissioning of a sound work which would address this problem by a juxtaposing of the traditional and the digital.

THE PROBLEM OF THE ‘TRADITIONAL’

One must be careful when writing of the ‘traditional’ in Namibian culture/arts if only because as Adelheid Lilienthal points out ‘the subject of traditional Namibian art and its transition to modern marketable craft has yet to be thoroughly researched and documented.’ (Lilienthal 1996:65) It is this very transition, however that prompted the decision to site the installation in a particular way using a particular craft based artefact, the granary store.

The granary store, as constructed in the north of Namibia, has become a multi-functional signifier in Namibian society. For most visitors coming to Windhoek it has become a tourist icon appearing outside shopping malls and craft shops, and adorning tourist hotels as a potent representation of the ‘uncharted/authentic’ Namibia which awaits the part-time adventurer. It is this ambiguity which makes the granary store such a profound symbol of the contested meanings inherent in the binary opposition represented by the traditional and contemporary Namibia.

The term ‘re-presented’ is crucial here since it must be recognised that the notion of ‘the traditional’ is itself a contested concept. This ‘history of tradition’ is mapped by Volker Winterfeldt in his article, ‘Traditionalism – Social Reality of a Myth’ (2002) in which he maps the process by which the cultural oppositions hinted at above (urban/rural, tradition/modernity, African/western, female/male) are shown to be part of a means to address issues of hybridity and what he calls ‘re-invented tradition’ in the region.

The colonial past is associated with tradition, whereas colonial transformation is interpreted in terms of modernisation, in the end creating those patches of modernity in everyday life which is ascribed to metropolitan culture. Rural vs. urban, tradition vs. modernity, often overlapping with African vs. western and even female vs. male – these are the conceptual oppositions typical of the common understanding of the historical transition from the plurality of south west African social formations to the one and integrated Namibian society. Even the advocacy of an ‘African renaissance’ is not free from this bias. (Winterfeldt 2002: 227)

It is, however, this very tension that underpins the significance of the granary store as a symbol of the ‘old’ life as lived in the north of the country. The granaries (ligandhi) are grain or mahangu containers made from mopane
branches woven together with the bark of mopane trees. (They can sometimes also be made from palm trees.) As such they are the grandest example of the basket weaving activity which takes place in the Caprivi, Kavango, Oshikoto, Ondangwa, Oshana and Ohangwena regions and which has become a central facet of the tourist industry. Within the homestead, however, these stores had a central significance being constructed over a period of months only by men and being seen by other villagers as a sign of the owner’s wealth. ‘The more granaries a person owned, the wealthier he was.’ (Shigwedha 2002:25) The use of the completed granary was also a matter of considerable ritual. Sealed with animal dung and clay to keep out insects and control use of the grain no one was allowed to open the seal without the permission of the head of the household. If a household was in desperate need of mahangu the husband could instruct the second wife to open the granary and it was also the second wife who had the power of distribution; other foods such as meat and fat were distributed by the first wife. Clearly, as Frieda-Nela Williams argues (1991:49), ‘the cattle kraal and the granary (esinzi) form the economic base of the homestead.’

The granary could also be used as a means of exchange for other commodities such as cattle, goats and sheep. And just as they sustained life so the importance of the granary sustained the families in death.

When someone is constructing a granary and at the time a close relative dies, he is not allowed to make any contact with the deceased’s family until he has finished making the granary. Further investigation into the reasons why a person cannot leave the unfinished granary for a funeral is needed. The entrance into the granary area (Etambo) was restricted to one passage only. It was a taboo to fetch mahunga from the granaries into the homestead through the main entrance. There is a separate entrance from the Etambo into the homestead so that the neighbours do not see how much mahunga is being carried into the house. This was especially important during famine or drought because if neighbours saw you carrying lots of mahunga they would come and borrow some then you would not have anything left for your family. (Shigwedha 2002:26)

The granary store, then, represents a complexity of meaning in the contemporary Namibia and to borrow an over-used digital term it is the convergence of these meanings which made it the perfect focal point for the installation as a means of transmitting the cross-referenced sounds of the desert.

THE SOUND OF REMEMBRANCE

Sound in the desert environment has three key related facets. Always there is the overwhelming sense of space. Any kind of aural activity appears to travel further in the desert and this ‘distanced’ ambience is underpinned by the lack of man-made noise to reflect or divert the reverberations. Dislocated ghosts of voices, machinery, birds, animals, always framed by the subdued rush of the desert wind and detached from their origin invade one’s space at ground level. Toop quotes the renowned nature sound recordist Chris Watson who suggests that this type of aural space can only be found in the west at night: ‘they [night sounds] point up an exciting, secret world upon which we can eavesdrop, appreciate and enjoy, but not
necessarily understand and I think that sense of mystery and awe is an important detail which is missing in much of our daily lives.’ (Toop 2004:53)

Secondly, there is a unique sense of quietness which underlines the understanding that this is a space where normal temporal rules cease to apply, a place where the sonic ecology has had literally millions of years to emerge. Hence memory is voiced through a myriad of sounds each reliant on the other for meaning and status.

Quietness is the key. In an undisturbed place where there is a layer, a reference, an atmosphere which we can rest our ears upon. These are usually harmonically complex and with a significant, noise free, low level, low frequency content. Other single sounds can impinge upon this layer, but if the dynamics are too great, i.e. too loud, the effect is cancelled.

(Chris Watson quoted in Toop 2004:53)

Finally, there is a minimalist shape to the sounds of the desert. This term is used not in the musical sense of a particular style or school but as a literal description of the kinds of sounds to be found in the desert space. It is one of the few places where the notion of ‘deep listening’ is a prerequisite rather than an acquired luxury since the ‘grail’ of stones tracking the side of a basalt ridge, the silken slither of succulent leaves blowing in the breeze or the staccato rustling of the tok-tokkie (tenebrionid beetle) have to be actively listened for. As the Futurist artist Luigi Russolo pointed out as early as 1913 ours is a society immersed in ‘noise’ as opposed to sound and while there are situations in which this noise can act as a form of pleasure in everyday lived experience the constancy of noise acts as a sonic fog, creating a dense orchestration of disinformation which hides the ‘subtle traces that people and their actions leave behind’ (Scanner aka Robin Rimbaud quoted in Toop 2004:85) The recording of sound in the desert using digital technology demands a return to a different type of listening one which ‘enables one to construct an archaeology of loss, pathos and missed connections, assembling a momentary forgotten past in our digital future.’ (Scanner aka Robin Rimbaud quoted in Toop 2004:86)

For Rodoway (1994) experiencing the resonances of such an aural environment is a ‘sensuous experience’ since unlike a visual experience where although we know the world is happening around us we negotiate a world in front of us the auditory world not only surrounds us but makes us feel we are within it and participating.

Furthermore, not only is auditory information acquired about a world, an environment of sounding things and organisms in inter-relationship, but also things and people emit sounds, or have a voice, which projects them into that world. Expressed alternatively, we not only perceive of a world, but have a presence in it. (Rodoway 1994:90)

The act of transferring this experience to a gallery is in many ways futile. The notion that a soundscape can be reproduced has been one of the key discussion points for the World Soundscape movement pitting those who see soundscape recording as a curatorial and conservationist imperative against those who wish to use the raw sonic material of a soundscape as the primary source in a digitally processed evocation of a place or space. The sounds in this exhibition have been processed since like Brandon Labelle I would maintain that ‘sound is always present as a momentary force, a temporal form, because it is always deflected and refracting against its surroundings – it is always interfered with by other stimuli, by bodies and space. In this way it is never isolated.’
The theme which unifies these disparate ideas is that of ‘crossing.’ The sounds were gathered during a physical crossing of a part of the Namib; cultures crossed in terms of a western art sensibility struggling to come to terms with an African state with a unique aesthetic resonance; notions of generational understanding cross in the design of the installation; the digital and the analogue cross in the creation of the processed soundscapes; most of all spatial understandings cross as the noise of the everyday meets the silence of the desert’s underlying aurality. Initially this installation was to have been site-specific set amongst the ‘community’ confronting people in their own environments. Fortunately it became clear that for an outsider artist, what Miwon Kwon (2004) describes as the nomad artist who measures validity according to the ‘accumulation of frequent flyer miles’ (Kwon 2004:156), would have been both presumptuous and Eurocentric. It would have suggested a kind of departicularisation based on an acceptance that globalisation is, at best, an uncontested concept or, worse, a good thing. For it to be housed in the National Art Gallery of Namibia suggests that the installation may be issue-specific rather than site-specific in that it asks the listener to engage in an interaction about what it means to share commonalities and to create what Anderson called ‘imagined communities.’

The slide from site-specific to issue-specific in public art can be seen as yet another example of the ways in which the concept of the site has moved away from one of concrete location. The invocation of the community-specific and the audience-specific, in which the site is displaced by a group of people assumed to share some sense of common/communal identity based on (experience of) ethnicity, gender, geographical proximity, political affiliation, religious beliefs, social and economic classes, etc., can best be described as an extension of the discursive virtualization of the site, at least to the extent that identity itself is constructed within a complex discursive field. (Kwon 2004:112)
References:


Williams F-N. (1991) Precolonial Communities of South Western Africa Windhoek: National Archives of Namibia

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Notes on method

The recordings for this exhibition were gathered on a series of visits to the Namib between 2005 and 2007. They were recorded using both an omni-directional microphone and a set of binaural microphones. The sounds were recorded digitally to minidisc and transferred to computer for processing.

The processing involved the isolating of key sounds which were allocated a category, atmosphere, percussive or processed. The ‘edited’ sounds were then developed into a composition, with self-designed score, and re-constructed using a range of software including Nuendo, Cubase, Reason and selected filtering systems.

The multi-channel mix was completed using Pro-Tools.

All the material heard in the installation is found sounds from the desert. None of these sounds have been produced using any kind of instrument or have been taken from other sources. The range of sounds indicates that the desert is indeed natural, digital and electric.

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If you are not included in this list and should be I apologise and please accept my gratitude.