

A Million Keys (arts blog) – by Ceci Moss

Interview with Jeff Talman

[Jeff Talman](#) is a sound and installation artist based in New York City. His work is a sensory meditation on the elementary sound of space. In his installations, he amplifies the background resonance of an environment by extracting and strategically redirecting ambient sound back into its place of origin. In so doing, he heightens the occupant's aural perception of the surrounding area.



White Sound Down – Bavarian Forest Installation II

His most recent project, entitled [White Sound Down](#), is a temporary multi-channel sound field installation in a remote section of the Bavarian Forest. *White Sound Down* is only accessible by cross country ski trails, and will be up until January 6, 2008.

The majority of your work examines the ‘room tones’ of man made architecture- the existent soundspace of cathedrals and, in some cases, hotels. In the past few years, with [White Sound Down](#), as well as [Stream Space Lacing](#) and [Sentinel to the Wind](#), you’ve begun to work within the natural environment. Why is this domain increasingly a concern for you?

Without a balance of interior and exterior spaces my work would be lacking in reflecting two major types of places people inhabit. Both are entirely normal to us, but we rarely hear them, being focused on seeing and navigating them. I’m concerned with this sonic perception of space in my work.

Spatial sound acts as an envelopment. Large-scale spaces that exhibit this envelopment carry a powerful impact when compared to the human body. We don't normally go into this, it is part of an overall effect of a place, in which vision takes precedence, except perhaps for the typical sound signals of the place (in a forest that would be the rustling leaves and branches, wind, streams, etc.). But the background of that fascinates me. It is that on which life and phenomena occur. When my installations re-constitute a background, for instance in the atrium of a hotel or in an office space, the enhanced envelopment makes the place somehow seem more like itself — and consequently, people seem to stop and look (and listen) further into where they are. They become aware of where they are. It's a form of "stopping the world."

Working outside, the effect is perhaps magnified, as the scale increases and no walls retain the sound. The stream piece can sometimes be heard floating above the hills several kilometers away, but it fades in and out as the winds shift. It's not entirely tangible. But this is perfect, because sound, no matter how well we hear it has this entirely intangible, ephemeral sense as a phenomenon of space and time. As you leave the place, the sound leaves with you slowly and ephemerally.

It's not so much that working outdoors is an increasing concern, more like I recognize that in presenting a fuller human consciousness in the work I need to keep exploring alternative means of expression, including situations for coming to the work. For instance, working underwater would be an ideal example of upping the ante, and so the experiential harvest of a new work.



Stream Space Lacing

Given the impact of global warming, would you say that in documenting natural sound, such as snow falling in the forest, you're capturing an experience that is "endangered"?

Originally we had planned to put up the installation last winter — but there was not enough snow in the Bavarian Forest that season! Of course the impact of global warming is serious far beyond the tourist industry in the region, even more so beyond crazy artists who want to work with the sound of falling snow. Still, I was fully aware of the environmental problems and had them very much in mind when making the work, more so after waiting a year to see some of my Bavarian friends to mount the installation.

Similarly in Finland, my wind turbine piece, *Hearing Curved Space*, recognizes the dire need for increasing use of renewable and clean energy sources. If you are out in nature making work, it is all but impossible not to think about these things.

Also, the sound of snow falling is a really exquisite sound, far too tempting not to record and use again in some way. You're right, this experience is endangered. But the raw field recordings I made, while perhaps capturing the experience, as they stand are maybe too literal for the poet in me. The act of making the installation is about transforming that experience and those raw files into a finished work, that hopefully offers an essence or distillation, such that the experience is enhanced in the telling.

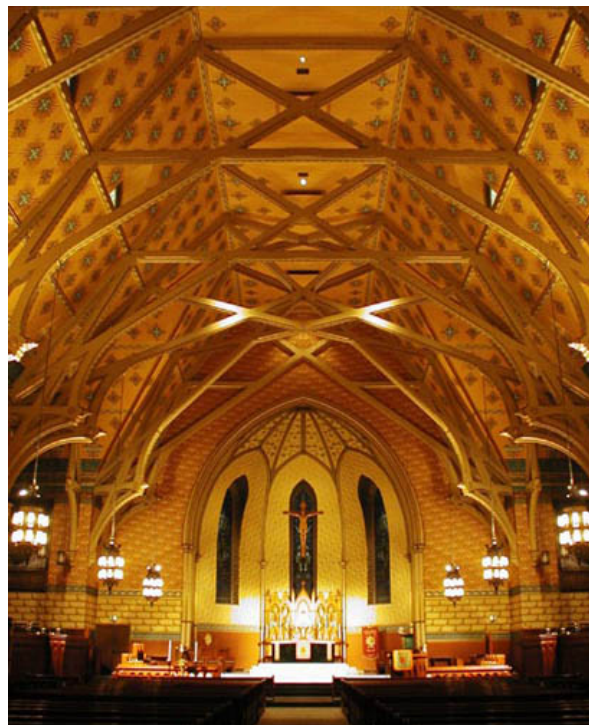
By taking the peripheral sound of historical sites such as cathedrals as your central focus, you perform what could almost be explained as sound excavation. What compelled you to research and record cathedrals? Would you describe this interest as archaeological? In what ways does this investigation relate to *White Sound Down*?

Cathedrals, synagogues, temples, mosques and churches were built to be astonishing spaces and they serve that purpose perfectly. The visual is easy to understand phenomenally. We see it and get it almost immediately. But how much do we really hear the space? Sure, if there is chanting, singing or music the space is of paramount importance in supporting the sense of the sounds heard. But what about when there is no sound program and no tourists shuffling around?

With many trips to St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague in the mid-nineties, I was struck time and again by what I could hear when nothing was sounding. It is something like the wind only with certain bands of frequencies sounding. Some cathedrals exhibit it better than others, the Cathedral of Freiburg in Germany being a spectacular case in point.

The investigation led me to dozens of cities and religious spaces all over Europe. It wasn't archaeological so much as phenomenal. The sound rooted me in the here and now of the place. It's all about phenomena and perception as a gate to now. Of course I knew these buildings were ancient and revered among all others, and I couldn't help but think of myself as a "church artist" in some senses, though the work is not religious. Still some have said that it approaches a metaphysical view regarding human existence. My interest in the experience of being would seem to bear that out.

Later a German art critic noted that it sounded as if the walls of the space were yielding up all of the supplications, entreaties, requests, joyful thanks and abject miseries that people poured out to their gods over the centuries. As I often work with wind-based sounds, in particular frequency ranges they sound like voices. The sounds aren't static or locally repetitive. They broadly animate a space. Apply these concepts to an outdoor installation in the hushed quite of the Bavarian Forest, and you get a site that seems to be speaking about itself. The mountains and the forest are already mystical in aesthetic senses that relate to beauty and any number of other subjective experiences. The sound that was already here is an underscore, I've just shaped it as a plastic art material which hopefully reflects what I experience.



St. James Cathedral, Chicago – *Event Horizons* and *Absolute Elsewhere* installations

In your writing, you describe the aural backdrop of our lives as inhabiting the “negative space of memory”. But like all memories, there’s clearly an emotional dimension, and this is a notion you’ve successfully considered in your project Event Horizons. I recently visited Las Vegas and I was immediately struck by the overwhelming symphonic cacophony of slot machine bells. The sound of the casino was at once disorienting and almost sublime. I wondered why the casinos intentionally used sound in this way to impel visitors to gamble, and how they contributed to a sensation of a “non-place”. Your project In Transit reflects on the resonance of these spaces. What correlation, if any, do you see between these examples of contemporary sonic spaces and those of cathedrals? How are our emotions manipulated by the sound of these spaces, and to what end? Is this a concern for you?

Space – non-space, these seem to me not so distinguished. We could look at the internet and say “non-space,” as well as the casino or the hotel. But we inhabit them in some sense, perhaps mentally, by interaction with others or content retrieval or by avatar, or perhaps physically-corporally, though we are impeded by the means and any overwhelming generics. I’m no expert in telematics theory, and I’ll refer you to my good friend Eddie Shanken regarding the latest there, but I believe the case is made for experience; the question is what it means to inhabit. A generic contemporary space, a 7-11 for instance, is not inhabitable metaphorically as it is essentially reproduced thousands of times with whatever superficial construction discrepancies might exist. A casino and a hotel are similar. But we do live in these spaces and they have factual data that our bodies receive, whether we acknowledge it or not.

But we are so not connected to our bodies, and the generic spaces more than others seem to do all that they can to keep that disconnect in place. Events like overwhelming slots can do this. Of course, in the states it is all about sales. The focus is on the sale of the space as a sale of whatever is in it for sale. You could think of a cathedral as similar — except that a cathedral is “selling” existence. It is trying hard to make you aware of your existence (yes, for the eventual glorification of a god, but first you have to be aware of yourself before you can give thanks for being alive — so the first mission is “selling” the fact of your existence to you — and here we are not even going to begin to get into prestige and the builders of the cathedral and what THEY were selling, that’s a whole other sales department).

So the similarities between the then and now spaces are that they have missions and they effect these by the best manners they can find. The difference is in what they offer. As an artist who works with fundamentals of perception, in some senses the cathedrals are overkill — they already exhibit what I try to make more manifest. Still, people don’t seem to realize the process, though they are drawn to these spaces. That’s where I come in. The cathedrals are perfectly suited for bringing sonic perception of space and the resultant sense of self to the fore. When I enhance the sonic mechanism, I believe these senses really jump out. I’ve been told over and over that this happens.

By transposing these sense enhancements to neutral, generic spaces, particularly places of business, there is a subversion of mission. The work is more attuned to “selling” existence via phenomena, rather than selling casino chips or hotel rooms. But like a spa in the basement, my brief hope at exposing a moment of sonic-spatial phenomena and their resulting experiential aftermath becomes co-opted as a “service,” so has an acceptable business usage. It’s a funny way to co-exist, because a subversion so essential as “existence” becomes another “event” that is subsumed by the original sales message. But we’re Americans damn it, we *should* have it all!

Regarding the sound of spaces and emotional contact: this is a key concern, but maybe the hardest to approach — because it is subjective. It gets into the experience and memory of the perceiver. Places are powerful. They signify the past, continuity and the now. From the point of the immediate that is already overwhelming. Places such as cathedrals are built to be emotional. Historically the scale of self-sound in these interior spaces is huge, unlike any other spaces, except perhaps caverns — to which I believe they are very much related in some primal sense. We register this and it overwhelms us depending upon our degree of sensitivity and emotional range.

I have personally experienced agoraphobia only once in my life. It was just after I completed my first large-scale installation. I had just been told that I was being considered to put up a work in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. I went to the space and almost immediately had a severe panic attack based on the scale of the space, the overwhelming volume of space and what I perceived as something like the depth of sensibility and capacity for magnification that the space presented. Sure, it was too soon for me to look at a place like that with the

idea of putting up work and I hadn't slept for days while completing the previous installation, but it was more the confrontation with my own limitations within that spectacular framework. Because I really had to confront the space, in an instant I was shocked by my own complete finiteness.

I had a similar feeling, though not panicked, moving stones on the Island of Kökar in the Åland Archipelago. The flesh giving out after lifting and carrying hundreds of stones hundreds of meters for days; walking across the stone, the red granite island, I felt immeasurably finite.

So you could say there is a profound sadness and longing to these spaces, and the sound brings that forward as much as it does the power of the places. It's paramount that we shouldn't forget that humans made the cathedrals and the longing of the people that made them still sings every day. That longing is also in the forest, and paradoxically, and very sadly, it's in the hotels and casinos, too. We can't escape it.

Interview conducted via email on December 29, 2007.

<http://amillionkeys.com/>

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