

To hear a sound

[*Kraków to Venice in 12 hours*] An Introduction to the work of Magda Stawarska-Beavan  
by Deborah Neely

*“To hear a sound is to see its space. Space has tonality, and I imagine myself composing a space lofty, vaulted, or under a dome, attributing to it a sound character alternating with the tones of a space, narrow and high, with graduating silver, light to darkness.”*

Louis Khan, *Space and Inspirations* 1967

At a printmaking exhibition in early spring 2013, I encountered the immersive, hypnotic work of Magda Stawarska-Beavan. Drifting through the hushed and lofty neo-classical halls in a city art gallery, I had paused momentarily to glance at a series of subtly elusive prints when I became transfixed by the unmistakable ringing of a carillon. Wearing a heavy, winter coat and situated bodily in the industrial north of England, my thoughts were instantly transported to early evening warmth and yellow stone, to a medieval square in central Europe with shops selling the last of the day’s bread. How specifically we find place rendered in sound.

The overwhelming experience was of being consumed by an unexpected narrative, caught on the arc of an adventure. I allowed myself to be swept along on a journey through time and space.

Before me, six large and intriguing “maps”, suspended side by side in metre-high portrait, occupied a linear space of four and a half metres, spanning the width of the gallery wall. Each on heavy, grey, Rives paper, the prints drew me closer as I sought to unravel their meaning, discern the precision in their detail. Examined carefully, these compositions gradually reveal a visual record of the artist’s movement through the streets, squares and railway stations of twelve cities. They chart her journey from Kraków to Venice in the summer of 2012, crossing the national borders of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, Slovenia and Italy in a “borderless” Schengen Europe.

In shifting shades of carbon black and indigo ink, complex line drawings overlay latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates, mapping the urban routes walked by the artist. An outsider navigating the immutable metropolitan spatial structures of Kraków, Katowice, Bielsko-Biala, Ostrava, Brno, Bratislava, Vienna, Graz, Maribor, Ljubljana, Trieste and Venice, she had sought out key points of connection, locating the cities geographically and temporally alongside one another and within their wider global context. On the vellum-smooth surface of the paper, over each stylised diagram depicting her contemplative dérives, small random spots of colour reveal the locations in which she had stopped to make field recordings.

Along the foot of the quietly imposing set of prints, forensic in their detail, immaculate in their execution, twelve juxtaposed bars of carefully mixed, disparate colour serve as synaesthetic representations of nuanced complexion, distinctive ambience experienced in a dozen dissimilar cities by their curious interloper. The numbers one to sixty, shown in the lingua franca of each of the six nationalities represented, names the seconds of each minute, the minutes of each hour-long city sound piece. Layers of tantalising geographical and time related data vibrate against the obstinate progress of the “clock” signified by regimented vertical lines of graphite ink on a grey ground, as gradual and persistent as time itself.

As I scrutinised the works on the gallery wall, a sound pierced the space around me, causing me to turn my head involuntarily, first to my right, then left, attempting to locate its source. Female voices whispered softly but insistently. The voices were counting: “jeden, dwa, trzy, cztery, pięć, sześć, siedem, osiem, dziewięć, dziesięć...” eight bells tolled and a trumpet call, a rousing summons to action, descended as though from a high gothic window, reverberating against the stone buildings of a market square, filling its space. Time, I sensed, was pressing, and passing: “trzynaście, czternaście, piętnaście, szesnaście, siedemnaście, osiemnaście, dziewiętnaście...”

Within the metronomic beat of enumeration, in Polish, Czech, Slovak, German, Slovenian and Italian, the phonology of each language was unexpectedly interrupted by an alien accent: the voice of the Romany, the voice of a people who belong everywhere and nowhere.

Almost imperceptibly, the acoustic changed and I fancied myself no longer in the morning air of a city but contained within the belly of a great marbled railway station, in the resounding hollow of a concourse, in a

cacophony of perpetual movement, of footsteps, of weighty luggage being dragged and of the strangled, tinny announcements of train departures heralded by the falling treble of a public address system. In this echoing cavity, the pulsing sotto voce counted insistently, its rhythm, the iambic dimeter of a locomotive engine: “dwadzieścia, dwadzieścia jeden, dwadzieścia dwa, dwadzieścia trzy, dwadzieścia cztery, dwadzieścia pięć, dwadzieścia sześć, dwadzieścia siedem, dwadzieścia osiem, dwadzieścia dziewięć...” I felt I was travelling, on the point of departure, but the trumpet signal from the basilica window punctured my imagining and called me back to the city square, confusing my visual construct of a busy rail terminus.

When contradictory ambient sounds from divergent architectural spaces are caused to merge in a single acoustic arena, the resulting paradox is perplexing. Many years earlier I had experienced a similar effect in St Paul's Cathedral, overhearing the muted conversation of stone masons across its whispering gallery as clearly as the singing of choristers rising to the great dome from the nave many hundreds of feet below: separate regions conflated by the acoustic mirrors inherent in architecture. Except, in my envisioned railway station, there were no acoustic mirrors to account for the fracturing of the spatial experience in which I had become absorbed. I was left stranded and anxious in another, disquietingly inconsistent space. I know from experience that an artist recording sound doesn't necessarily capture what they think they have heard and they certainly don't always hear what they see. This is also true when one encounters deftly composed sound work. I had been gently wrong-footed.

Sound is intrinsically dualistic: it has sources and receptors, is itinerant yet settles deeply, is potentially indiscriminate in its reach but creates intimate relational spaces. Stawarska-Beavan plays the essential contradictions in sound, drawing on its capacity to soothe, locate and call to memory long forgotten people and places, or disturb, dislocate and disorient us. Sound is omnipresent. It is the powerful unseen. But sound can also be duplicitous. In *Kraków to Venice in 12 hours* we see how deeply and selectively it is possible to listen and how exactly the sense of a place can be distilled in sound. Hearing simply happens, or does not, it is a physiological function. Listening, by contrast, is a psychological process, a subjective, interpretative act and those who listen with meticulous attention are few. This composition demonstrates not only the artist's accomplished deep listening but her sensitivity in interpreting complex acoustics and skill in rendering them so as to be simultaneously accessible and thought provoking. Through her agile and adaptive craft in filtering, layering and channelling sound, she demonstrates an uncanny ability to reframe time and place. Within a suspended reality, she creates the ambient sensation of a very different four dimensional possibility.

Recurring themes, adroitly interwoven in sound and image, become increasingly apparent over time spent with the work. A babel of conflicting languages speaks of the artist as an outsider, a foreigner, as one who does not belong, as one who must continually adapt. Her light, unhurried footsteps betray her as a flâneuse, a wandering woman. Specifically, she is a female drifter with a memory of curfew under martial law and through her solitary walks she asserts herself, robustly claiming the traditional space of the libertine, the male flâneur. Crossing borders unchallenged is a silent but deliberate political act. Railway stations: points of continual departure and arrival, places to rest for a while, where time is synchronised and metred, where hours spent must be measured, hint at a nomadic restlessness in the artist. The durational is a key aspect of her practice. In *Kraków to Venice in 12 hours*, she confronts her audience with the time required of us by distance and the waiting required for thoughts to settle, ideas to form. A sonic journey of over 1200 miles unfolds over twelve hours and throughout this period the listener will vacillate between a sense of the known and feelings of being lost, but they will always be conscious of the relentless passing of time.

There is a performative element in much of Stawarska-Beavan's work. In this piece she acts as a wandering narrator, involving the audience in her journey, asking us to consider, interpret and judge what we experience. She places before us a riddle of finely detailed but impenetrable maps offering many layers of data. Revealing locations only as geographical co-ordinates, she challenges us to navigate the unfamiliar streets of foreign places. She offers intimate acoustic windows on cities which are, perhaps, unknown to us but somehow recognizable. Her sonic drawings are suffused with nostalgia, stirring personal recollections to slowly crystalize and then suddenly snap. Through the mnemonic power of sound and image, she creates “memory theatres” enabling us to recall lost narratives from the places of our past whilst offering us the possibility to construct new stories in unknown cities.

A closer inspection of the *Kraków to Venice* series of screen prints, however, causes a creeping sense of alienation. In these ostensibly benign and helpful “maps,” we are forced to view the cities they represent as conundrums which must be deciphered, unravelled, navigated. Through a multiplicity of conflicting languages, coded numbers and roads which appear without the humanising characteristic of their “given” names, the

“maps” are expressed as outlines of uncharted territory which could possibly conceal menace, of which we should, perhaps, be wary. We are forced to consider them as potentially unwelcoming places, where one may fall foul of accepted customs and protocols and may not readily understand or be understood. The viewer is challenged to imagine the confusion experienced by an immigrant in a strange and conceivably hostile metropolis.

In *Kraków to Venice in 12 hours*, to hear a sound is undeniably to see its space and the places evoked by the sounds we hear are strikingly different. Sometimes we sense a festive, frenetic, heavily populated space, at other times a place can seem eerily deserted, wistfully silent and filled with a deep melancholy; occasionally we are profoundly bewildered. Like any traveller to a previously unexplored city, we are presented with the polarity of the mundane alongside the startling shock of the new. These sound pictures, layered with contradictory elements, become temporary auditory hallucinations until, softly, we are returned to the safety of the almost familiar. Travelling simultaneously as explorer and revenant, drifting gradually but purposefully from East to West, leaving half-formed questions in her wake, Magda Stawarska-Beavan leads us across the mutable, sonic borders of six nations, capturing an omnidirectional flux of urban, linguistic and social reverberation.

Almost four years after its conception, *Kraków to Venice in 12 hours* has taken on a chilling contemporary relevance. In a fragile 2016 Europe, as re-introduced border controls tighten and freedom of movement is threatened by the falling of a new “iron curtain,” there is a prescient and urgent message in this work. *Kraków to Venice in 12 hours* archives the acoustic territory of a short-lived and vanishing time in a place without tangible political frontiers.

In an accomplished and expanding body of work, the artist persuades us to ponder the impact of urban acoustics and the democratic significance of public space. With penetrating and insightful facility she challenges us to reflect on the complex notions of time, place, language, borders, selfhood and memory. Her prints, film and sound art offer the possibility of many shifting narratives and are threaded with allusions to our conflicting responses to the built environment: of belonging and exclusion, freedom and confinement, interiority and exteriority, security and anxiety.

In *Kraków to Venice in 12 hours*, Magda Stawarska-Beavan allows us to glimpse her private experiences in twelve European cities from the inside looking out and from the outside peering inward to meet her gaze. She creates each city as a three dimensional auditory wireframe which becomes our personal memory theatre and onto which inevitably we project unique renderings of recollection and imagination. But she remains within the capriccio and, though hidden in plain sight, her footfall is never far away. With this arresting, multi-layered installation, Stawarska-Beavan has perfected the art of public intimacy and set a footprint in the world of urban sonic landscape art.