

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Susan Philipsz | Sound in Space

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6:43

Susan Philipsz: I'm inspired more by popular culture, literature, music; those have been my inspirations. Place. I never think of myself as a sound artist. I come from a sculptural background and from a visual arts background, so it seemed like kind of a natural thing to work with sound in that way, in a kind of sculptural way, how it can define a space and create a space within a space.

I've been drawn to places like bus stations, and train stations, and bridges, and those are places that you're not really that engaged with, you're just waiting to be somewhere else.

One of the first places that I visited when I came to Berlin to make recordings for an exhibition was the Friedrichstrasse train station. And they're incredible sights because acoustically they're so interesting; the noises, they echo and reverberate and they almost become sort of disembodied and spectral.

They (train stations) suggest other things in Germany, like the émigrés had to flee Germany in the 30s. That's also been something that I've been very interested in in more recent work; composers who were considered degenerate and had to leave.

And not only have they been an inspiration to my work, I've actually installed works in train stations, like in Documenta I did a work right on the train tracks. When I stood at the platform's end and looked out towards the hills, it was then that I got the idea to work with that space, that I could create something that you would experience from a distance. So really thinking about where those train tracks led at that time, it's a very dark part of Germany's history.

And then Hamburger Bahnhof, that was a former train station and you can really see that when you go into the historical hall; it's got these 12 steel archways that are really hard to ignore. So I wanted to strip it right back to sort of remind people of its former function as a train station.

That started here in Berlin when I first encountered these fragments of these instruments that had been found in a bunker during the Second World War, and I was imagining what kind of sound it might still produce, even though they were broken, if you were to you know, breathe through them could they still produce sound?

I gradually built up these recordings. Some of the instruments that I was able to record were amazing and they had these incredible stories attached to them. So what I've done is to separate each of the tones and record them individually and have them play from different horn speakers in the space. They were used on the battlefield; different tunes to indicate certain things, like 'retreat', 'advance'. You might have the horn from the Battle of Waterloo called the balaclava bugle from the Charge of the Light Brigade. People are all of a sudden engaged in who they're beside, and they're aware of the place they're in.

Sometimes the acoustics can be really challenging, especially in museums, they can be very echoey with these hard surfaces, so I really have to think a lot about that when I'm making a work for a space like that. But I think if you make a work that works with the acoustics, it can actually enhance the work, it doesn't have to work against it. So I'm always very conscious of that when I come to visit a space for the first time, what kind

of acoustics it has. I might do a little clapping my hands, or just projecting my voice into the room to get a sense of the echo.

Sound was always in the house; we went to church, I was in the choir, and my mum used to lock herself in the room and turn the light off and listen to classical music, and that meant 'don't disturb'. I spent a lot of my time just being lost in music, and really that time just to be alone informed my work later for sure.

The 'You are not alone' work that's in the show, that was inspired by Marconi, he was the pioneer of radio. That's what brought me to these radio interval signals that I've worked with, because they were kind of like placeholders for a radio station; if you were going to tune in to your Radio Berlin International say, Radio Faro Islands, the Voice of the People of Hoi Chi Minh City, you're trying to find it on the right frequency, then you might come across this very simple tune that you can identify as being Radio Berlin International. So I'm transmitting from Modern One to Modern Two into the stairwell, utilising the acoustics of the stairwell.

Something that Marconi once said was that when sound is generated it never actually dies away completely. I just think such an evocative notion, that you know, all sound is still there, resonating around the universe however faintly.