my "personal" sound space - an exploration by ears

a set of little exercises with an experimental character by sam auinger / berlin in early may 2020

This little piece is for anyone who wants to communicate with and to expand the world (indoors) - she or he is living in - just by listening.

To start this exploration, we will need one object, and we will have to give time and personal attention.

the object

I would suggest you go and find a little stone something like a river pebble, a little pebble you can easily hold in your hand like a small piece of chalk for writing on a blackboard.
The pebble should be small because we don't want it to be too heavy; otherwise, it would limit our range of experiments.

What we will do and what we will listen for is based on material laws and the laws of acoustics and can be described scientifically. But this is not important for us in the first run. In a kind of a little appendix, I will introduce a book on these topics, but this knowledge will not increase our Experience, this will only come from attentive listening. To do these experiments more often, and be engaged and listen carefully, creates a sonic memory and, finally, a personal way of thinking with our ears.

Each space carries an atmosphere which conducts in significant parts our way of feeling and how we operate. A significant factor in this is playing the auditory domain; it shapes our likes and dislikes. Each has its unique sound, which varies. These exercises bring us closer to an idea of why we hear what we hear and how it makes us feel.

we will experiment in 3 different ways:

stone/pebble meets objects
a stone/pebble falls on surfaces
stone/pebble meets an arranged situation (to investigate an aspect in more specific ways)

stone/pebble meets objects

We treat our little pebble as an old friend who comes by the first time, and we show him around. His materiality and his hardness produce a perfect small impulse hitting different materials. These little, very light hits make the materials and objects speak. Let's say we start with our doors and windows. Soon we will realize that it makes a big difference where we perform the little click/hit on the glass surface or the door blade. We will recognize that different window sizes of the same design speak differently. From the glass panels, we move on to explore the frames….., and from there, we continue to cabinets and other objects. And again, we perceive the sound change in where and what type of material our pebble hits. After a while, we start to imagine how it will sound before making an item speak with the help of our little pebble. We will realize that the same materials (for example, wood) have a lot in common in the way they are sounding, but still, it can sound very different according to their size and form.

a stone/ pebble falls on a surface

Here we explore the different acoustics of a room besides other materials. When we let our pebble fall more or less from the same height in separate rooms with the same or different surfaces, we start to hear how space speaks based on its shape and materiality. Are the reflections amplifying or dampening it? Is the room coloring the sound? And again, many things are there to experience and to play with, to be perceived, and to recognize.

stone/pebble encounters an arranged situation (to investigate a sounding aspect more specifically)

By letting the pebble fall or gently hitting different objects, ideas and questions came up, so we will be eager to investigate some ideas more thoroughly, combining our previous methods into little experiments. For example, we realized that the surface beneath an object plays an essential role in how the item sounds when it gets hit. To investigate this further, we think up a specific experiment, like comparing the sound produced when the stone gently hits an object laying on the hard surface of a kitchen table and secondly when a towel is dampening it in between the object and the table surface, etc., etc..

These little exercises act as an entrance into the endless variety of experiments you can do. You must not take it as a strict manual. It should just make you start to investigate your personal sound space with your ears and have a good and inspired time by doing it.

It is essential that our imagination leads us and that the game forecasting the change in the sound is part of this exercise. By doing this, we will develop a kind of an inner ear and the ability to hear the sounding properties of objects and spaces and to feel their inherent atmospheres in advance - which allows us to act more according to our needs.

For sure, I would love it if it became a more regular practice for you to listen consciously to the sounds around you caused by your action or by some else's.

Sound is energy in the form of vibration, and all vibrations are a movement of matter, and this is why listening is direct communication with the concrete aspects of space and life. And maybe one of the most important lessons - which comes with each listening practice - is that listening tells a very different story from looking, which we are so used to and dominated by.

Appendix

Here I would like to introduce you to a book which will give you all the insight one would need to become an expert in auditory experiences and how they carry out specific effects on our well being and our minds:

Sonic Experience - A Guide to Everyday Sounds by Jean Francois Augoyard and Henry Torgue /McGill-Queen's University Press ISBN-10:0-7735-2942-x

In a multidisciplinary work spanning musicology, electro-acoustic composition, architecture, urban studies, communication, phenomenology, social theory, physics, and psychology, Jean-François Augoyard, Henry Torgue, and their associates at the Centre for Research on Sonic Space and the Urban Environment (CRESSON) in Grenoble, France, provide an alphabetical sourcebook of eighty sonic/auditory effects. Their accounts of sonic effects such as echo, anticipation, vibrato, and wha-wha integrate information about the objective physical spaces in which sounds occur with cultural contexts and individual auditory experience. Sonic Experience attempts to rehabilitate general acoustic awareness, combining accessible definitions and literary examples with more in-depth technical information for specialists.

Jean-François Augoyard, a philosopher, urban planner, and musicologist, is the founder of CRESSON-CNRS (National Scientific Research Centre) at the School of Architecture in Grenoble.

Henry Torgue, a sociologist and urban planner, is a researcher at CRESSON and an author, pianist, and composer.