

JOHAN DEUMENS GALLERY

Sarah van Sonsbeeck: Mental space - how my neighbours become buildings, 2009

“Looking at my neighbours has become an almost uncontrollable impulse since I began working on my project *The Neighbours*. It began in a casual way. Now I always just take a look when I enter the room. I can hardly not look, otherwise I would have to draw the curtains. This applies even more to hearing the neighbours above me. In the six months they’ve lived here, my house has changed. They have taken over my space. I went mad with irritation, until lying awake on my bed, I decided to reverse the roles.

I took the noise they make as a starting point for my work. Now I miss them if I don’t hear them for a minute. I’m glad when they make a strange new sound. Listening to them gives me a feeling of being busy with something (acute and exciting). And I was really concerned, alarmed even, when they insulated their floor with new under flooring. I think it’s new but I can’t be sure. I only hear their sounds, I’ve never seen them. The more I became preoccupied with this, the more new sounds I’ve begun to notice. My ears seem to be more sensitive to detail since I’ve listened to my neighbours, also for the slightest sound. If I’m visiting someone, I hear more. It’s amazing how often you hear someone coughing in the house next door. At first I couldn’t work properly as I was constantly irritated by the sound of the upstairs neighbours. I was cross with myself that something so trifling could loom so large in my head. I lay on the bed. I tried for a while not to hear anything, it forced itself on the periphery of my consciousness, like a hum, like a dripping tap. I was quite astonished when I realised that this could lead to my making a work. Precisely because it’s so trifling. Precisely because it’s on the edge of my conscious perception.

The word background noise has something spatial about it, like a kind of environment, a private room, which - when it is quiet - you can always take with you (some people will feel exactly the same with a lot of sound - in that case it is their ‘background’, and perhaps they feel ill at ease if it’s missing). Unexpected noise tell you that this private space doesn’t exist. This is especially true of noise from which you can’t escape and which you can’t do anything about. A dripping tap is less frustrating, as I know I can also turn it off. Noise from the neighbours, however, is uncontrollable. The only thing I can do is adjust to it. Or phone them and hear my phone ringing above my head. Or put very loud music on, which gives a kind of temporary satisfaction. If my neighbours are quiet for once, something strange happens. The silence drives me mad. It’s like a story I read about a man who every night is resigned to hearing his upstairs neighbour take off his shoes one by one. One night, the upstairs neighbour, in a sudden fit of awareness having taking off one shoe, thinks the sound is antisocial. He is overcome with guilt. With the same precision as a moon landing, he then places the right-hand shoe next to the other. After fifteen minutes he wakes up with a start. He hears a voice saying: ‘For goodness sake, take the other shoe off, then I can get some sleep!’ I’m now so used to my neighbours’ routine sounds that they’ve become almost background noise and in fact I now notice when they’re missing.”

(Quotation Sarah van Sonsbeeck)

This book has been originally published in the Dutch language (2006) This is the English version. An artist’s book in an edition of 400 copies.

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First floor apartment with through lounge, Amsterdam 9 April 2010

Dear Upstairs Neighbours,

After making a calculation, I've come to the conclusion that you take up 80 percent of my apartment with your sound. I would therefore kindly ask you to pay the corresponding amount of my rent forthwith.

Summary:

Total rent 500 Euro.

80% of this equals 500 divided by 100 times 80, equals 400 Euro per month. Please transfer this sum onto my account number 46.68.26.370.

Thanking you in advance.

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