

## Places of Memory, Topologies of Remembrance – On “Still/Silent”

By Miya Yoshida

*Still/Silent* is a work that is being created collaboratively since 2007 by Greek composer Antonis Anissegos and Japanese visual artist Erika Matsunami. Mixing intricately calibrated acoustic and visual elements, each version of *Still/Silent* represents a unique work: as part of each temporary installation, a site-specific performance has been and will be presented which becomes an integral part of the whole experience. With its audio-visual oscillations, *Still/Silent* is constantly generating different “versions”, much like a living organism breathes in and out and takes elements of the environment into its body.

Over the duration of approximately eleven minutes, *Still/Silent* projects sequences of superimposed fragmentary images from different cities – Berlin, Barcelona, Hiroshima and others – accompanied, contrasted, commented, undermined and underlined by electronically generated sounds organized in four channels. The departure of a train from Berlin’s Central Station to the East takes the viewers’ imagination on a nightly trip beyond time and composes sceneries passing by in quick succession outside the window, reflections of urban architecture on the glass, blurred images of pedestrians and automobiles, slowly floating and reversed motions of water that capture something invisible in their peculiar flow, gently sparkling lights and glistening reflections on water. The visual segmentation combining different motifs is organized in four chapters, titled “empty city”, “day of the city”, “still/silent”, and “A.I.”. The subject matter of the images could be described as clearly non-touristic camera captures that draw the viewer into a close view on scenes of daily urban life, but still retain a strangely abstracted distance. The flow of images parallelized with synthesized noises that may remind some of the early avant-garde sounds of Trautonium inventor Oskar Sala, but through their changes manage to shift the overall impression considerably, in a range between humdrum, machine-like noise to more pronouncedly characteristic almost naturalistic passages. Sala, the maker of the sound effects in Alfred Hitchcock’s “The Birds”, seems a not too far-fetched association – since he used synthetic sound generators to amplify a “natural” sound experience which, as a recording, would never have achieved any comparable impact. A combination of the visual and the acoustic such as *Still/Silent* offers invites the listening viewer to immerse him- or herself into a certain mode of flowing contemplation, rather than being shocking with sharply contrasted impressions. The composed interplay of video and audio of *Still/Silent* in its finely tuned, formal urbanist impressions to me was particularly reminiscent of some of the video aesthetics of the 1980’s – as it was, for instance, epitomized by Godfrey Reggio’s 1982 semi-documentary feature *Koyaanisqatsi – Life Out of Balance*, a hugely successful and influential key movie of cultural pessimism that was even more famous for its minimalist soundtrack by composer Philip Glass. In a sometimes crude way, it juxtaposed spectacular images of technological progress with those of nature’s immensity, staged as the great clash between Nature and (American) Culture. The perception of the city by the flâneur as a competition of sensorial inputs was the theme song of modernism, sung by Baudelaire and reviewed, rectified by Benjamin who said: “Mass movements are usually discerned more clearly by a camera than the naked eye” (*Experience and Poverty*, 1933). What has survived from early modernism and is present in *Still/Silent* is the ideal of this impersonal, seemingly random, detached machine eye. With its much more delicate and reflexive range of tones and layers, Anissegos’ and Matsunami’s *Still/Silent* is unmistakably contemporary, but through its austerity and concentration achieves to convey moments detached from any

recognizable time. *Still/Silent* refuses the trivial temptations brought by digital technology and decides to remain both visually and acoustically subtle. The underlying attitude rather conveys a sense of the fragility of life than any spectacularized drama; in all its complexity, it is still “life in balance”, and not “out of balance”.

The subtlety in the details of the work demands a lot of attention and stimulates the work of the imaginary. Water is the all-encompassing element here, with its great power to unify the seemingly opposite, it is picture as the medium of microscopic levels of life, levels on which snow resembles dust or plankton, on which jellyfish are luminous beings embodying the bodylessness of perception that Matsunami’s imagery seems so fond of. The view from the night train going to Poland and the generated sound that once tries to connect to the train are overlapped in a repetitive pattern with rhythms and subharmonics, a bleak impression at times, apparently intended to be connotative of the ubiquitous shadow of historical tragedy and of war memories, as Erika Matsunami explains. There is a set of formal characteristics – the persistently low camera angle, the synthesized, “estranged” sound of conversation fragments – that allude to a world view beyond the purely human, a world that inanimate technology, unconscious animal life and the ever-busy human mind share with each other. The title of the last chapter, “A.I.” connotes plural meanings, acoustically and semantically – “ai” can signify “love”, “harmony”, “encounter” in Japanese, it is shorthand for “Artificial Intelligence” in English- and consists of two vowels, which acoustically embrace all. Going through the chapters, the work metaphorically proceeds, being conscious about experiences from different cities and leaving a memory trace to sublimation, just as a photograph slowly develops from negative to positive. As if the image converts itself to sound and vice versa, the two perceptual fields oscillate, producing a dense and meaningful atmosphere. *Still/Silent* is a journey from places of memory to topologies of remembrance; memories produced at certain locations, enriching life as much as they constantly destroy it, slowly transcend themselves into remembrances – the protection of impressions and the impulse against stimuli to find life in balance. *Still/Silent* liberates the one (the self) from both personal and over-personal experiences.

Starting from the nightscapes in Berlin, the journey of memory comes out of its hole, reaches another state of understanding about life in balance. Tunneling through complexities in organic tranquility, *Still/Silent* continues from one experience to the next, to a space that has to be filled by the audience as a fifth chapter.

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