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Sound in the City

Urban environments, what with their bright lights, architecture and people, tend to be more visual experiences than anything else. Take any tourist walk or guided tour and most of the items on show will point to the beauty, ugliness or peculiarity of something you see. Yet, with the advent of 'localisation', new forms of locally-crafted tourism have emerged. These connect the human being with his or her environment, mostly through other senses than just the sight. Travel to Vancouver, London, Brooklyn or even Brussels and you might stumble upon small groups of people smell-, light-, eat- and sound-walking. The roots of soundwalks go back to Buddhist and Hindu teachings as well as the sixties' 'Situationist' movement. The 'Situationist' artists saw their surroundings as playgrounds with elements that could be singled out and combined into new realities. Andrea Murs (Brooklyn, NYC) organises

soundwalks often in collaboration with art projects and city festivals which focus on 'intersections' of individuals with their environment. Part of psychogeographer group Conflux, she encourages walkers to take in their environments (be it traffic or air-conditioning pipes), the middle-ground noises and the unexpected, high-pitched tones (ambulances, helicopters, a baby crying) that suddenly capture the melody of your whereabouts. She focuses on musical elements such as keynotes, signals and soundmarks during her walks, in which she constructs melodies together with her fellow walkers. Another aspect of soundwalks is an awareness of the ecology of sound, of the noise surrounding us and of the pitches of everyday audibles. Through soundwalks, people become intensely aware of their surroundings and a city's 'sound pollution', measured in signal-to-noise ratio. For example, an environment is deemed 19-fi when there is a high ambient sound that blocks discrete ones, categorising it as a 'polluted' area. This goes back to Robert Murray Schafers' 'Soundscape project' in the late 1960s, in which the traditional landscape is replaced by a soundscape. This

community still exists and, in the general trend of ecological thinking, continues to strive to rekindle people with their sonic environments. This implies that people are not separate from their audio environment, but instead play an active role in it: whether our car engine roaring or our feet walking, everything we do is an added tone in the city's heart beat. This principle is also taken up by Brussels-based artist Ann Vandevijver, known as IrmaFirma, who creates audiowalks in which the actions of the participants shape the walk itself. "They might be walking in a street and listening to some neighbourhood gossip on a tape and be instructed to try walking in the same rhythm as the person next to them. Suddenly you'll see a fragmented group synchronise their steps and take on a marching rhythm. But it doesn't have to be disciplined; it can also have an aboriginal quality to it." Ann has made thematic soundwalks for the Expo58 anniversary, but dreams of bigger things: "I would like to broadcast sounds that touch a whole city, or large masses of people. Imagine the whole of Brussels moving to the same beat." And what a sound that would make... (KVG)