

Within Earshot - 2023

'*Stay within earshot*' is a phrase a parent might exclaim to a child as they are running out of the door to play. It lets the human voice determine the distance of a boundary. There is safety in staying within a range where two people can hear each other. To be reached by the sound of someone's voice is to be within the same sphere of influence. It is to be touched by the sound waves reverberating out of their mouth. Sound is a way of locating oneself through the spacial effects of the environment, but it is also creates a common experience that is both material and invisible. When we can hear each other, we are experiencing the same sensations, living in the same space.

The same principle was also expressed in the use of the church bell as the defining feature of a town in medieval Europe. Those who could hear the sound of the bell were within the limits of the town and could appreciate the complex system of communication they inhabited. The bells marked both time and space. This understanding of a boundary is based on a common experience rather than an attempt to partition space through lines drawn on a map. It also implies a locality correlating to the perceived amplitude of the bell; the louder the bell, the closer to its origin and the closer to the center of power and influence. The town was within earshot. The safety and security that comes with knowing others are close, creates a shared experience of space that we perceive as an interior. That interior is not absolute, rather it is dependent on the ongoing experience of place that results from relational interactions.

Our understanding of a boundary as a demarcation between one place and another is often divorced from the reality of the experience of a place. I often drive past a sign that says I'm leaving the city of Atlanta, GA where I live and entering Decatur, a small town that was never incorporated into the bigger city. But that sign is indicative of a line on a map rather than a change in space or place. There are changes in taxes and municipal services, but there is no change in our sensory experience of the place on either side of that sign. What if there were competing bells to distinguish between the two cities? The overlapping church bells would entangle the complex experiences of both places. Because of the unusual way the border of the city of Atlanta is drawn, Decatur is closer to downtown than areas on the northern edge of the city. Standing just east of that sign, I am more connected to the city of Atlanta than people who live on the Chattahoochee River which forms the northwest border.

The concrete boundary of a line on a map gives the illusion of permanence through an absolute interpretation of a contained space. Sound and radio waves are just some of the invisible forces that do not subscribe to this illusion. In my recent installation *Hear and There*, I explored the complicated relationship between the discreet interior space of architecture and the vast expanse of space we understand to be the outside. Using ambient sound recordings made inside and outside the house where the exhibition took place, I broadcast the recordings through FM radio transmitters. The boundary of the exhibition space expanded and notions of what is categorically inside and outside were rearranged. The radio waves allowed the neighborhood to be within earshot of the exhibition.

The materiality of distance and the space it occupies is not easily measured. As we navigate a world that is increasingly reduced to digital signals, the physicality of sound becomes increasingly significant. We all want to know we are within earshot of each other, that we can touch each other with invisible vibrations. The modern day expressions of the church bell can include the cacophony of an urban landscape, the birds that territorialize space with their song or the intimate whispers between companions. All of these reverberations tie us together so that we are sharing the same space.