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# Site-Sounds: On strategies of sound art in public space

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During the mid twentieth century, space was developed as a composable dimension. Composers used the three spatial dimensions in their own fashion, but space was understood primarily as an abstract concept. It was not until the development of sound installation art that space was discovered in a concrete manner, explored, performed in and could even acquire its own specificity, called *site-sound* (*Ortsklang*).

The article shows consequences and strategies of site-sound installations in three sections – from spatial sound to site-sound, public space as performance venue, and public strategies (acoustic interventions, interactive installations and participatory projects) – with three examples of site-sound installations (*Site-Sound Marl Mitte*, *meta.stases* and *towersounds.2: watch tower*).

Acoustic art in public spaces basically involves installing a space in another existing space, both physically and sensorially, and metaphysically and mentally – an interior space in an exterior space, so to speak. The original quality of sound art lies in the *oscillation of interior and exterior space*. Thus public spaces intensified by sound art cause transitional spaces to come into being, in a political and a psychoanalytic sense.

## 1. REVIEW: FROM SPATIAL SOUND TO SITE-SOUND (*RAUMKLANG – ORTSKLANG*)

With the rise of serial music during the mid twentieth century, space was developed as a composable dimension. Starting from concert situations that eliminated frontal orchestral performances, it was above all the development of multichannel loudspeaker systems – culminating in modern wave-field synthesis – which made it possible to exploit space as a parameter for composition. Varèse and Stockhausen used the three spatial dimensions in their own fashion, as did Boulez, Cage and Schnebel. Space was understood primarily as an *abstract* concept, however.

It was not until the development of sound installation art that space was discovered in a *concrete* manner. The specificity of a certain space could be brought out: sound artists work with the atmosphere of a particular space, its acoustic conditions and its visual and architectonic characteristics, to which they carefully give a new timbre or which they present dramatically through the medium of sound. The sound of a space is no longer one of several compositional dimensions, but moves to the centre of perception as sound space,

as space that is made to resound, which is reflected in the behaviour of the recipient. If the visual focus of a performing musician or ensemble is removed and listeners are no longer compelled to sit in fixed seats but can move around freely within the space, a much stronger spatial perception is possible. 'Seeing and hearing complement each other to become a holistic spatial experience that is intensified, supplemented and completed by the other senses and realised through the movement of the body in the space' (Rüth 2006: 237).

This specific work with space involves a *contextualisation* that is more likely to be found in the visual arts. The performance or installation site itself becomes part of the artistic statement and can even become the point of departure for the artistic concept. When the spatial orientation of the music goes beyond the spatial characteristics in the narrower sense (acoustic, architectonic, sculptural, perspectival; so-called *Raumklang*) and defines the site specificity of the space, I refer to a site-sound, so-called *Ortsklang*. I am not concerned with (more or less finished) works that are installed at a particular site but works that grow out of the site, both conceptually and in their execution.

A site-sound develops from an analysis and investigation of the situation on site. How does the site present itself acoustically, visually and architectonically? What materials and objects dominate the site? What role does the site play in social life; how do people move on the site; what meanings are attached to it? What is the perception situation; what encounters take place there? What memory does the site have; what stories are associated with it? What socio-political references does the site have; what social relationship to nature defines the site? What conflicts are there in the site, concealed or conspicuous?

Through this *site research* – not unlike the psychogeography of the situationists in the 1960s – a thematic focus, a concept, is developed with which the site is altered through sound art – in other words, the situation on the site is influenced and aesthetically intensified.

My first example (Sound example 1) is the sound/light-installation *Site-Sound Marl Midtown. Blue Brat. Much Art. Little Work* from 2002 at a little train



**Figure 1.** *Site-Sound Marl Midtown. (Ortsklang Marl Mitte)*, sound/light installation in which visual graffiti texts at the railway station in Marl were recited as an acoustic speech choir, in combination with two electronically modified grid sounds and blue light. Georg Klein, German Sound Art Award 2002.

station in Germany's biggest industrial area, the Ruhrgebiet. The train station 'Marl Centre' is covered by a concrete hall that has no function: it does not serve as a waiting room since the people waiting are all standing on the station platform below. No train tickets are sold here and there is no information service; the hall opens in a gaping void to the south-west and consequently provides no shelter from rain, sun, wind or snow (figure 1).

The Marl Centre train station and its surroundings are marked by an urban desolation characteristic of modern city suburbs and satellites. The decline is all the more painfully apparent when contrasted with its previous wealth (from mining and chemistry), attested to by the art treasures in the nearby sculpture gardens.

The sound material was gathered entirely from this location, the train station itself. Firstly, sound was taken from the bars in the side walls (of two lengths, hence two pitches), which formed the sound background in the concrete hall by means of four loudspeakers and two subwoofers distributed throughout the space. The other sound material consisted of graffiti inscriptions from the waiting room on the train platform where the conflicts of the locale are laconically and bluntly expressed: conflicts between the right and left, foreigners and Germans, adults and youth; between declarations of love and of despair, 'no future' and sunny optimism. 'Suakraz, you're the best.' 'Sick kids. Live in their own filth. Pigs.' 'Dear Geli, dear Vanni, I hope you forgive me! I'm really crazy about you!' 'Life is hard+unjust.' 'Turks! White Power is the best thing in Marl!' 'Love is a name. Sex is a game. Forget the name and play the game.' 'Embellish the city gates with Nazi heads.' 'I hate you right-wing pigs!!! – and I hate you, you left-wing wimp!'



**Figure 2.** *Site-Sound Marl Midtown. (Ortsklang Marl Mitte)*, visitor under the twelve horn speakers. The iron bars can be seen in the background.

These sayings were collected and then spoken to tape by young people from Marl. The recordings were arranged into a voice choir which sounded out of twelve further loudspeakers, hanging from the ceiling of the hall (figure 2). What previously adorned the walls unnoticed now became an unmediated acoustic presence for the passers-by. Therewith, by means of three CD players playing at different time intervals, a constantly changing voice-bar arrangement was created. At night, the inner space of the hall was lit by a utopian blue such that the transformation of the hall could be recognised from far away. A billboard on the side of the train station was rented and, apart from the title, offered a free, white space such that for the duration of the installation a process of public comment came into being.

The installation provoked strong reactions among the public: some speakers were damaged; some teens choose the hall as a meeting point at night, writing some comments on the billboard; and a long discussion on this kind of 'sculptural blemish' and the social problems around the city station was going on in the local press during the three-month run (see discussion in Rùth 2006: 241).

The German term *Ortsklang*, used in the title, expresses a stronger concept of *site specificity*. In terms of its approach, this general development of *space to place* is analogous to methods that are more familiar in the visual arts – from *objet trouvé* to opposite poles such as *land art* and *social sculpture*, to current strategies like artistic *field research* and *intervention*. It is a *material* confrontation with reality, which in the musical tradition has thus far only taken place in *musique concrète* and with several Fluxus artists during the 1960s. The *dual* material orientation to the world – through the site as a performance venue and the aesthetic and thematic conversion of the site – achieves and demands a much deeper penetration and integration with reality, thus enabling another form of political confrontation.

## 2. PUBLIC SPACE AS PERFORMANCE VENUE

Although the development of a site-sound (*Ortsklang*) can be used in concert and gallery spaces, it has a far broader area of application and greater potential if it is related to public and semi-public spaces, especially so-called transitory spaces as shown in the first example. These sites and non-sites – arcades, shopping malls, railway stations, squares, pedestrian underpasses, urban brown fields, kiosks – are not neutral but are influenced by everyday life, by uses and functions, stories and encounters far removed from art.

Public space defines itself not simply by its demarcation from private space but as a political space through its degrees of freedom (explained in more detail in Klein 2003a), which can be briefly characterised as follows:

- Freedom of access: there is no entrance fee, no special dress regulation, no special security and police personnel, no surveillance.
- Freedom of movement: there are no spatial restrictions (fixed seating) and no time limits (length of stay).
- Freedom of possession: the public space is not individual, company or state property in the sense that institutions are in possession of the space, as in the case of town halls or concert halls.
- Freedom of use: apart from its function as urban space, it has no specific purpose, in contrast to state or institutional spaces and pseudo-public spaces such as shopping arcades or entire shopping centres, which simulate public spaces but serve primarily to stimulate shopping.

These degrees of freedom have not come about by chance but have been gained over centuries. Public space is currently losing this freedom, whether through surveillance cameras or huge advertisements, but also due to a loss of importance in view of the increasingly powerful public media. The political importance of public space becomes especially obvious in this context, however. For those who have no access to state or privately controlled media, there is only the street, public space, which then can in turn become a link in the media public again by the attention of the press or TV broadcasting companies.

In particular, appropriation by the capitalist economy aims at doing away with open, public spaces, which are transformed into 'mere passageways, mere access to places for consumption and leisure activities' (Sanio 2006: 9). 'Art in public spaces' has long been part of this appropriation when it refers to urban sculptural furnishings or acoustic ornamental art. Emphasising the freedom of this space and making people aware that it is decreasing and being violated is the challenge of artistic work,



**Figure 3.** *meta.stases (meta.stasen)*: sound/light-installation in a tram car. Vehicle noises are recorded in the engine room of an old Tatra tram and played back live and transformed in the passenger compartment along with loudspeaker announcements. Please imagine intense purple light inside. European Centre of Arts Hellerau, Dresden, 2007.

both in public spaces and semi-public spaces for consumption and shopping.

Critical works quickly come up against boundaries, as one must observe even in a cosmopolitan, traditionally art-friendly city such as Berlin.<sup>1</sup> These boundaries are not merely restrictions but a *source of friction* as well. In contrast to art, theatre and concert spaces – in which virtually everything is allowed but which no one exploits any more, since the artistic environment guarantees benevolent understanding or art makes no impression on indifferent tolerance – in public space, including media space, social confrontation is a given. An artist is at the mercy of societal dynamics, between economic, social and political interests, and soon encounters opposition if his art does not devote itself to mere urban ornamentation. Whereas only people interested in art go to art spaces, public space has the most varied, diverse audience imaginable, from the unemployed to stockbrokers. The reactions of an audience whose everyday routine is confused, disturbed or stimulated are thus equally varied.

Disturbing everyday routine is a main point in my next example (Sound example 2). In the installation *meta.stases (meta.stasen)* an interactive sound installation was built in a tram car that ran on Line 8 through Dresden for ten days (figure 3). The tram operated without a fixed schedule, amongst regular traffic, and appeared unexpectedly. People going from home to work, from work to shopping, from shopping to home entered this tram by accident.

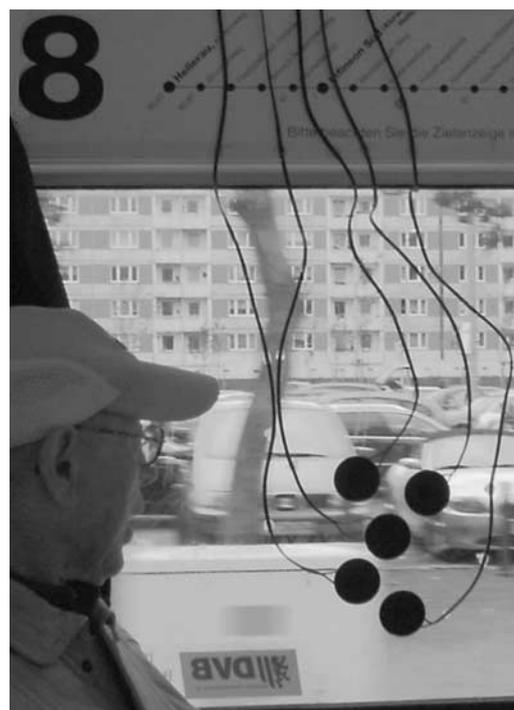
<sup>1</sup>As in, for example, my project 'too big to fail', in an architecturally very attractive public toilet in front of the headquarters of the Landesbank Berlin on Alexanderplatz. It was to examine the Berlin banking scandal, but its execution was prevented. See Klein 2005.

Cables, streets and railways are the arteries of our civilisation. Goods, information and people are shuttled from one place to another – uninterrupted, busily, tirelessly – pushed by the main economic aim: *growth*. Like a magic word it is supposed to solve all the social and economic problems of our globalised society. Growth has to be relentlessly stimulated – worldwide, permanently, without limits. The installation confronted listeners, workers and consumers, with the prevailing ideology of growth in all spheres of life – health, business or politics – including all its excrescences and deformities. On their way the passengers got the latest ‘news’, original quotes on the topic of growth spoken by well-known news announcers from Dresden’s MDR radio station and the US-American NPR news radio.

These ‘news’ items contrasted natural growth, which – unless pathological – always proceeds gradually, with globally propagated economic growth, which should be as unchecked as possible. The language of business ‘growth makers and pushers’ was confronted with the language of cancer researchers, who regard this excessive enlargement as a communication failure between cells which ‘issue orders to grow to themselves’.

These texts were permeated by musical processes: a contrasting medium that sharpens perception. They rendered the theme aurally and visually perceptible, in the form of a spatial–acoustic metastasis with 111 tiny loudspeakers (figure 4). The loudspeakers were stuck to purple-tinted windows in small groups; from each one a black wire led along the tram’s ceiling to the front, producing a seemingly floral excrescence. An *acoustic metastasis* could suddenly occur, produced by ring modulation processes mutating the spoken texts into a chirping flying quickly through the space of the tram. The sequence of texts was controlled by the tram itself as it appropriated the announcement of stops with their characteristic ding-dong and used it as a chance impulse for playing a certain text. This resulted in a continually changing rendition corresponding to the 26 tram stops in Dresden.

Two additional floor-level speakers also transmitted the moving vehicle sounds of the tram, recorded live and musically transformed by means of resonance filters and delays. The result was the fundamental sound ambience for the tram. Together with the purple-tinted windows the installation transformed the tram car into an audiovisual space of alteration. The city appeared in a tinted light, while tram noises, signals and announcements were musically processed live, creating an acoustic and visual alteration of our accustomed perspective of the world outside. Some people were fascinated, some people were shocked by the ‘sick’ atmosphere inside – the light, the sounds, the excrescence of cables and the permanent reading of news, telling the opposite: ‘This is no disease. This is growth.’



**Figure 4.** Sound/light-installation *meta.stases* (*meta.stasen*). Listener with group of loudspeakers. At each of the 13 windows a group of speakers is playing news, sometimes ring modulated (all together 111 little speakers, 13 channels). All the cables are installed so that they are visible through the entire tram car.

### 3. PUBLIC STRATEGIES

The performer’s relationship with the audience had already been approached and examined radically during the 1960s. Experimental concert forms, theatrical abuse of audiences and actionist performances broke down conventional audience attitudes, but their shock effect was also exhausted. Whereas serious music soon returned to its conventional practices, visual art gradually developed new forms of audience orientation with *interaction*, *intervention* and *participation*. These forms also occur in sound art, although this is less likely to have a political dimension. All three forms – intervention, interaction and participation – are process-based, which is to say they do not start with a finished work but a *situation*.

**Acoustic interventions** in urban space are extremely dependent on the perception situation on site. People’s visual orientation in everyday life and acoustically effected stress of traffic noise make sound art interventions considerably more difficult than performative or visual interventions. Purely acoustic art is rare<sup>2</sup>, and sound art is generally accompanied by visual elements, be it visible sound objects, light or video. The factor of

<sup>2</sup>For example, the works of Sam Auinger, which are often positioned at acoustic borders in urban spaces.

confusion is the most important element – to interrupt the everyday routine for a moment, to make people pause and assume a different perceptual attitude is the basis of every acoustic intervention.<sup>3</sup> Depending on where these subtle situational changes are installed – whether in trees in a park or in parking garages, on church façades or in the midst of crowds of shoppers – the intervention also acquires a political dimension. The choice of site is crucial to the statement.

**Interactive installations** incorporate the physical movements of the recipient into the sound generation so that the audience orientation is intensified. Using computer-controlled systems, interactive sound events can be produced which generate musical processes that are far from simple stimulus–reaction schemata and which bring the body into play again in the otherwise incorporeal installation world.<sup>4</sup> They provide a framework in which the work is not executed until the moment the recipient appears, which consequently involves a certain incalculability calling for great openness on the part of both the producing artist and the receiving listener. The category of chance introduced by John Cage is continued here in a perpetual process of musical transformation oriented to the audience. Although they are not easy to execute in public spaces because they represent a substantial installation expenditure, interactive installations hold a special fascination, since the possibility for discovery – and thus the element of surprise and pleasure in the discovery – is considerably greater than in art spaces, where the visitor is already pre-attuned, forewarned and prepared by the artistic setting. Inviting an art public to an installation of this kind in a public space is thus almost counterproductive, since the possibility of happening upon it by chance no longer exists. Professional art viewers are also compelled to observe not only the work but the audience's actions and their reactions to it as well.

Up to now, **participatory projects** have rarely been found in sound installation art, but more in Internet media space or in other communications media. With the network structure of an *open broadcast system*, anyone can become a potential broadcaster, and since the technological basis (computer with sound generation and processing software) became affordable for the general public in the 1990s, anyone can also become a music and sound producer. Participatory potentials thus emerge which go beyond a simple participatory phase. Although the available audience on the Internet is limited, particularly as far as the heterogeneity of the public or the participating actors

is concerned, what initially was still restricted to knowledgeable, technically skilled users will expand in the future (see *YouTube*). The artistic potential is still open-ended. This development will also have a retroactive effect on physical public spaces in which participatory installations can be created, as has already been established by visual media façades.

The forms of audience orientation presented here can be combined and are obviously not only encountered in public spaces. But working in public spaces particularly necessitates thinking about how I reach my public, attract it to the work, hold it and let it go again. These are questions that also arise in the concert hall, and within the music are sparked by the concept of tension, which is oriented to time. With installations, however, I am referring to an *area* of tension that is created by sound art interventions and in which a concept of time exists that is fundamentally different from that of concert music (see also Klein 2003b).

The audience orientation can also be developed into a regular public relations strategy that makes the external appearance of the artwork in public (announcements, press releases, website) part of the work. One form of this is the *fake* which, at first glance, pretends not to be art at all but poses as something else. The element of confusion can thus be enormously intensified and developed beyond the initial moment. The provocative potential can be very great, as I was able to establish in my project *towersounds.2: Watch Tower (turmlaute.2: Wachturm)* (Sound example 3) at the MaerzMusik Festival in 2007, with the appearance in public of a newly founded organisation – the *European Border Watch (EUBW)*.

EU citizens were invited to monitor the EU external borders from their homes as web patrols against illegal immigrants. The audiovisual and interactive installation in a former GDR border watchtower was passed off as the registration centre of the EUBW (figures 5 and 6), which demonstrated the new surveillance technology modelled on Google Earth and at the same time was integrated into the gruesome surveillance history of this site.<sup>5</sup>

The background was a test run in November 2006 in Texas, where, at the instigation of Governor Rick Perry, webcams were installed along a short section of the fence on the US–Mexican border, the images from which could be accessed by anyone worldwide.

The European Border Watch Organisation (EUBW) was founded on the basis of the Texan model and has established its recruitment centre in the Berlin border watchtower. Registration takes place

<sup>3</sup>Found in a conceptually pure form in the visually marked listening points of Akio Suzuki, which sharpen hearing in everyday situations.

<sup>4</sup>Interactive musical processes such as *interactive variation* and *acoustical text topography* are described in detail in Klein 2006.

<sup>5</sup>*turmlaute.2: Wachturm – Klang | Video | Installation | Organisation | Interaktion (towersounds.2: Watch Tower – Sound | Video | Installation | Organisation | Interaction)*, MaerzMusik Festival 2007, with the 'official' website [www.europeanborderwatch.org](http://www.europeanborderwatch.org), on which there are still reactions and 'registrations'. For the full project description, see <http://www.georgklein.de>



Figure 5. East German watch tower at the Berlin Wall.



Figure 6. Entrance situation with EU flags and EUBW guiding staff.

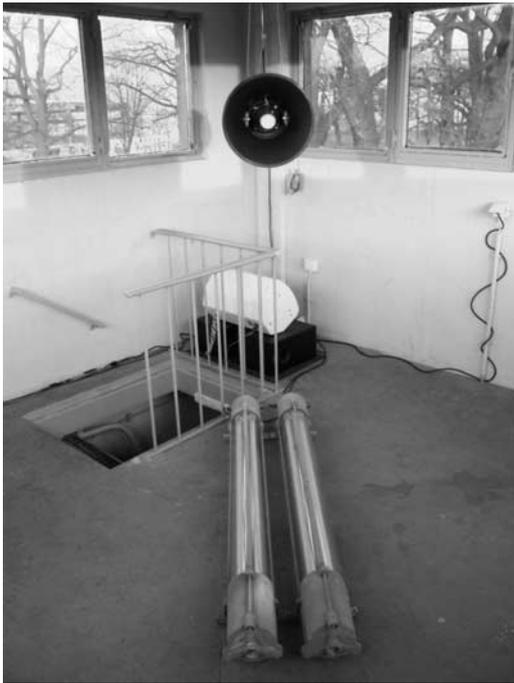
on the ground floor; blue EU flags at the entrance create an 'official' atmosphere. The EUBW's visual showroom, with a camp bed and an old telephone, is situated on the first floor, and the second floor houses the acoustic control room, in which the interactive surveillance equipment is mounted.



Figure 7. *towersounds.2: Watch Tower (turmlaute.2: Wachturm)*, first floor with video screens installed in embrasures and hidden speakers.

The dark *visual showroom* on the first floor only has narrow embrasures as window openings, six of which are converted to viewing screens for the installation (figure 7). Webcam images of ostensible border events are seen on them which only show desert, ocean or forest. Various border images are simulated in a preliminary trailer: the Bug river on the border between Poland and Ukraine, a view of the Carpathian Mountains, an image on the Moldavian border at night, an ocean beach between the Canary Islands and northwest Africa, and a webcam image of the US–Mexican border – the only genuine border photo – allegedly from the partner organisation, Texas Border Watch. In the same room, behind the six embrasure covers, small loudspeakers are also concealed under the video screens, from which electronically altered clicking, crackling and rustling sounds and voices can be heard now and then.

In the *acoustic control room* on the second floor a standing acoustic field is generated. The basis of the sound is a recording of the natural vibration of the concrete tower (a low F-sharp, stimulated by slamming the heavy embrasure covers). The continuous sound represents the continuousness of the surveillance and changes only gradually over the duration of the installation in the spirit of an 'interactive variation'. The field can be modified from the outside by means of a laser sensor and a surveillance camera which react to 'incidents' – movements of uninvolved passers-by or traffic in the vicinity of the tower. The basic sound is composed of odd-numbered harmonics of the low F-sharp so that approximately a square wave is generated, which visually depicts a 'tower wave'. As a result, the sound resembles an electric generator and, because of the low-frequency tones emitted by a subwoofer, is extremely large at times.



**Figure 8.** *towersounds.2: Watch Tower (turmlaute.2: Wachturm)*, second floor with horn loudspeaker, green shining lamps and windows, subwoofer at the back.



**Figure 9.** Laser sensor for traffic control used for sound transformations.

Due to continuous variation in the partials, however, it never remains static, at least until the video camera detects a passer-by (figures 8–10).

If a passer-by crosses the middle surveillance zone, a voice also emerges from the horn loudspeaker hanging at head level in the centre. The various snippets of sentences come from an interview with a border guard who did his military service in this tower in GDR times and, over 18 years later, recounts how they worked and what unusual events occurred ('... yes, definitely', '... so what we made, they were such wires, they were self-firing devices, but



**Figure 10.** Video camera for observing the park paths and interactive play of the surveillant voice. Please imagine intense green light.

they weren't lethal ...', 'but somehow the woman probably – she didn't make it'.

The second floor has continuous windows that are covered with green transparent sheeting. As a result, on the inside all colours are altered: the viewer's own face is pale green and all contrasts are strangely weakened. At the same time, the view towards the outside is coloured green, as with military night vision equipment.

The publicity for the installation became part of the artistic work and was fully integrated into the project. Through a website created for the installation, which appeared to be very serious, as well as electronic and written invitations, EU citizens were invited to actively monitor the European external borders. In addition, an invitation to the opening of the Berlin registration centre of the EUBW was sent to the press and everyone accessible to us via the Internet. Responses were collected by reply mail and the feedback form on the website, and were pasted into the comment book that was made available in the tower. For on-site visitors there was a special guided tour, with a welcome at the entrance on behalf of the European Border Watch (figure 11) and a green informational handout with a web patrol registration form on the back. In the video showroom 'George Klein' appeared as a guide to the EUBW and explained the satellite webcam system and the goals of the organisation to the visitors, inviting them to lie down on the camp bed and, with this overview of all EU external borders, to choose a surveillance area. A few people were taken with the idea, however, and were in favour of more restrictive measures at the border. But most of the visitors got upset, which led to many in-depth discussions about the background, the subject matter and the objectives of the installation during its four-week run.



**Figure 11.** Logo of the fictitious European Border Watch Organisation, based on the actual Texas Border Watch Organization, which served as the model for the project *towersounds.2: Watch Tower (turmlaute.2: Wachturm)* in the border watchtower.

#### 4. CONCLUSION: TRANSITIONAL SPACES

The European Border Watch project dealt with the overlapping of media space and physical space, even though it concerned a fake. Acoustic art in public spaces basically involves installing a space in another existing space, both physically and sensorially, and metaphysically and mentally (as a space for reflection and emotion) – an interior space in an exterior space, so to speak. The original quality of sound art, which cannot be achieved by either music or the visual arts, lies in the *oscillation of interior and exterior space*.

Thus, public spaces intensified by sound art are not only *accommodated* in so-called transitional spaces (arcades, underpasses, and so on), they *cause* transitional spaces to come into being, in a political and a psychoanalytic sense.<sup>6</sup> They intervene between interior and exterior as well as between the public and the private. ‘This transition represents one of the great problems of the continuation of the European Enlightenment’ (Neubaur 2002: 29) and has a social dimension that becomes apparent in sound art works

in public space. The previously mentioned dual material orientation to the world beyond the site and the open form as a situational process (in the three dimensions of intervention, interaction and participation) defines sound art (or audiovisual art) in public space. Its transformational potentiality in a medium that is as space-filling as it is transitory qualifies this kind of art. *To be in transition* signifies life as a transitional space in which one can continually get lost – and at the same time find oneself again.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>From the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott comes the term ‘transitional object’, which enables the baby to make the initial transition from its mother to the world, in which the ‘real achievement of sublimation lies in the creation of *transitional space*, an “intermediate area”, a “potential space”’ (Neubaur 2002).

<sup>7</sup>Further details on my basic concept of transitions can be found in Klein 2003c.