



Walking, Telling, Listening – Audio Walks

Justin Bennett

Wi: Journal of Mobile Media 2015 9:02

The online version of this article can be found at:

<https://doi.org/10.65968/LNZE7773>

Bennett, Justin. "Walking, Telling, Listening – Audio Walks". *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media*. 9.02 (2015).
Web. <https://doi.org/10.65968/LNZE7773>

Walking, Telling, Listening – Audio Walks

Justin Bennett

Abstract

The form of the audio walk seems ideally suited for artists wanting to work with, and in, public space. Using radios, CDs, iPods, or mobile phones, my audio walks weave narrative through their locations while exploring the specific acoustic environment and the physical structure of the city. In this paper I will describe differing formal, aesthetic and technical approaches referring to a number of works from 1997 to the present.

I have been making audio walks since 1997 and I am writing this text just when I am starting to question the linear structure that most of my walks have used until now, in order to look at alternative structures and technologies. In this paper I will briefly mention most of the audio walk pieces that I have worked on and elaborate on some of them with illustrations and audio examples.

My first audio-walk, *Secret City* was created in the context of *De Verborgen Stad* (the hidden city), an exhibition that took place in and around De Vleeshal in Middelburg in 1997. Middelburg is a small city in Zeeland in the Netherlands, with a compact historic centre criss-crossed with alleyways and narrow backstreets. *Secret City* was presented to the public as a guide to the centre of Middelburg. In fact all the directions and observations were randomly determined and broadcast by FM radio; the public could

borrow a small FM receiver and headphones from the exhibition space. The intention was to sow confusion and to promote drifting. I made short tracks using field recordings from the area. Some of the spoken text consists of directions and my own observations of the current urban situation. The rest uses historical eyewitness reports of events. These are from Middelburg's boom in the 17th Century resulting from slave trade and from the second world war, referring to a Dutch resistance radio that was located in the city and events such as the strategic, intentional floods of 1944. The text contains recurring repetitive elements such as lists of ships cargo, names of houses that refer to overseas trade, etc.

Audio excerpt 1: Secret City

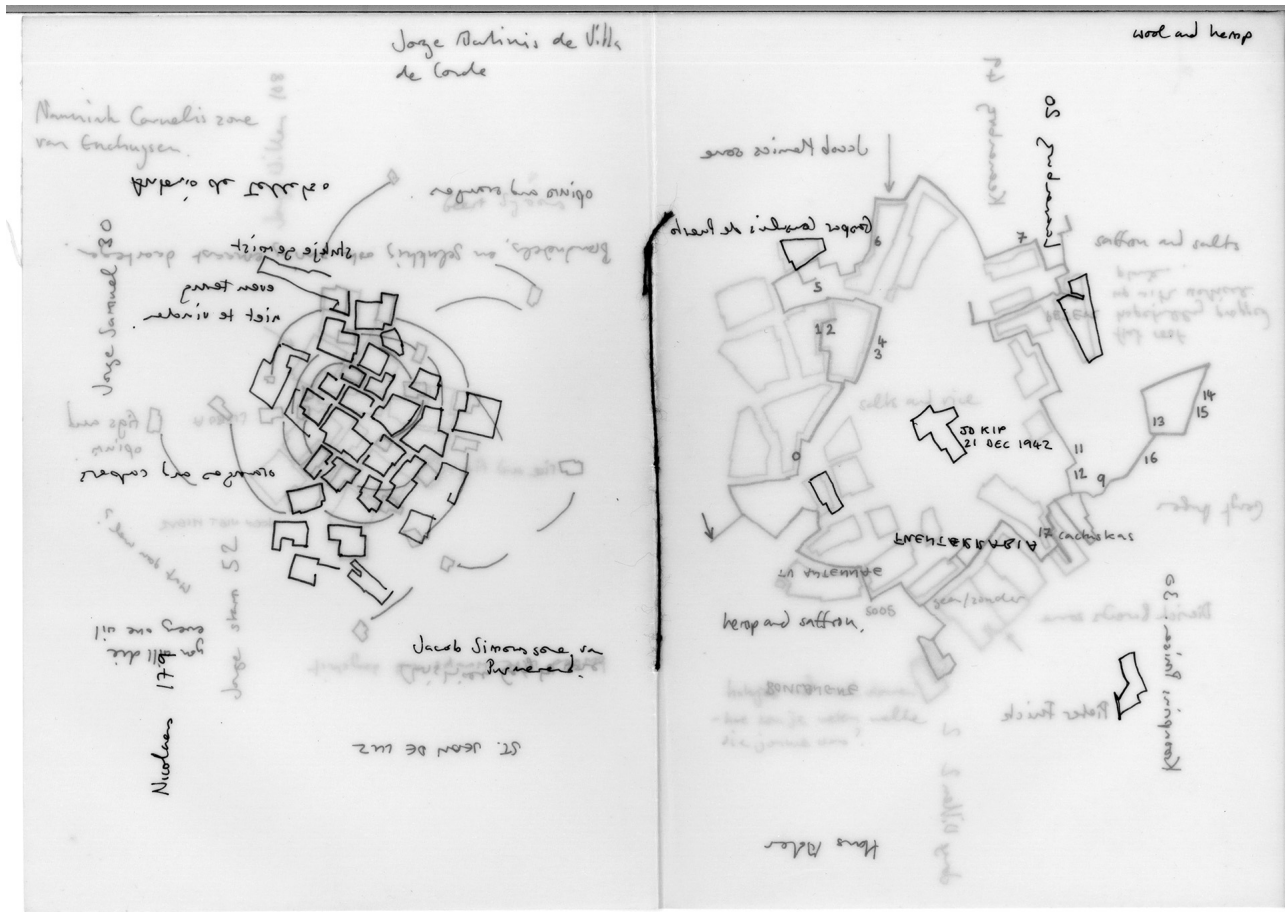
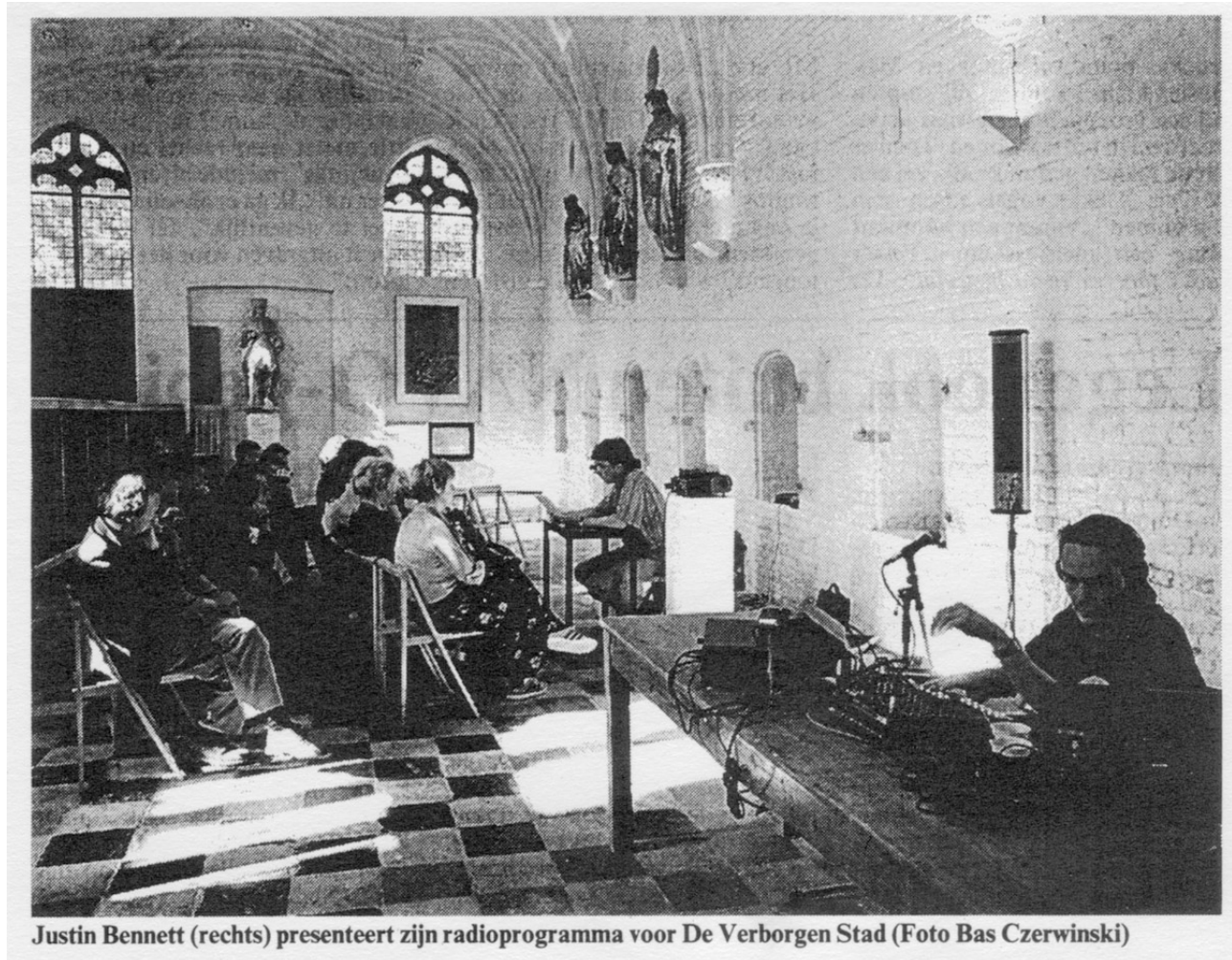


Fig. 1: Justin Bennett, Pages from the score of *Secret City*, 1997.

The “score” – more of a inspirational sketchbook – was a map of Middelburg exploded into layers and combined with the text. The open, randomised structure allowed the piece to grow during the exhibition to include interviews with visitors, recordings of events such as a Charlemagne Palestine's carillon concert, live radio broadcasts and guest presenters and musicians.



Justin Bennett (rechts) presenteert zijn radioprogramma voor De Verborgene Stad (Foto Bas Czerwinski)

Fig. 2: Justin Bennett, *Secret City*, *De Verborgene Stad*, Middelburg, 1997.

One of the things that struck me about the project was how, while walking and listening to a story, I and other listeners associated the text and the sounds with the external world in a very direct way, even though, in this case, any correspondence between the two was serendipitous. I worked with binaural recordings (made by placing microphones in my ears) and was very pleased with the way that the presented audio blended with the live soundscape leaking through the headphones from the real world.

During the next three years I worked mostly on radio projects and spatial sound installations but in 2001 I had another opportunity to make an audio walk thanks to Stroom Den Haag, the city arts centre of The Hague. Stroom develops many art projects in public space. They were interested in the possibilities of sound works in an urban context and they recognized that the technique and form of the audio-guide fitted perfectly – it is non-physical and does not add any more noise to the city itself. In an exhibition *You'll never walk alone* Stroom premiered a series of audio guides for the city. As well as myself, artists taking part in the project included pioneers of sound-walks such as Cilia Erens and Willem de Ridder. De Ridder is well known for his participatory radio works, a kind of flashmob *avant la lettre*, while Cilia Erens produced audio walks in public space as early as 1987. The walks remained after the exhibition and, later, new tours were made by other artists. The piece that I made, *Rumours/Resonances* is an actual and very linear guide to the city purporting to be a “search for the secret sounds of the city.” At first the narrator seems relaxed and matter-of-fact but, as we get drawn into the story, he guides our every footstep into a claustrophobic, paranoid vision of the city. The piece was based on rumours about both the city and the effect of sound and radiation on the human body. In this piece I play with many different possibilities – sound recording as time-travel; cinematic approaches to sound, giving the feeling that the listener is a character in a film; simulated “radio contact” with the narrator and breakdown of the equipment. I realised that if you draw the listeners into the story enough, they are prepared to really participate in the piece by moving and behaving in certain ways, particularly with small groups of listeners. The walk becomes a piece of participatory theatre. Additionally, the

private reception of the sound makes it possible to have very intimate contact with the listener, for instance by using whispered voices.

Audio excerpt 2: Rumours/Resonances

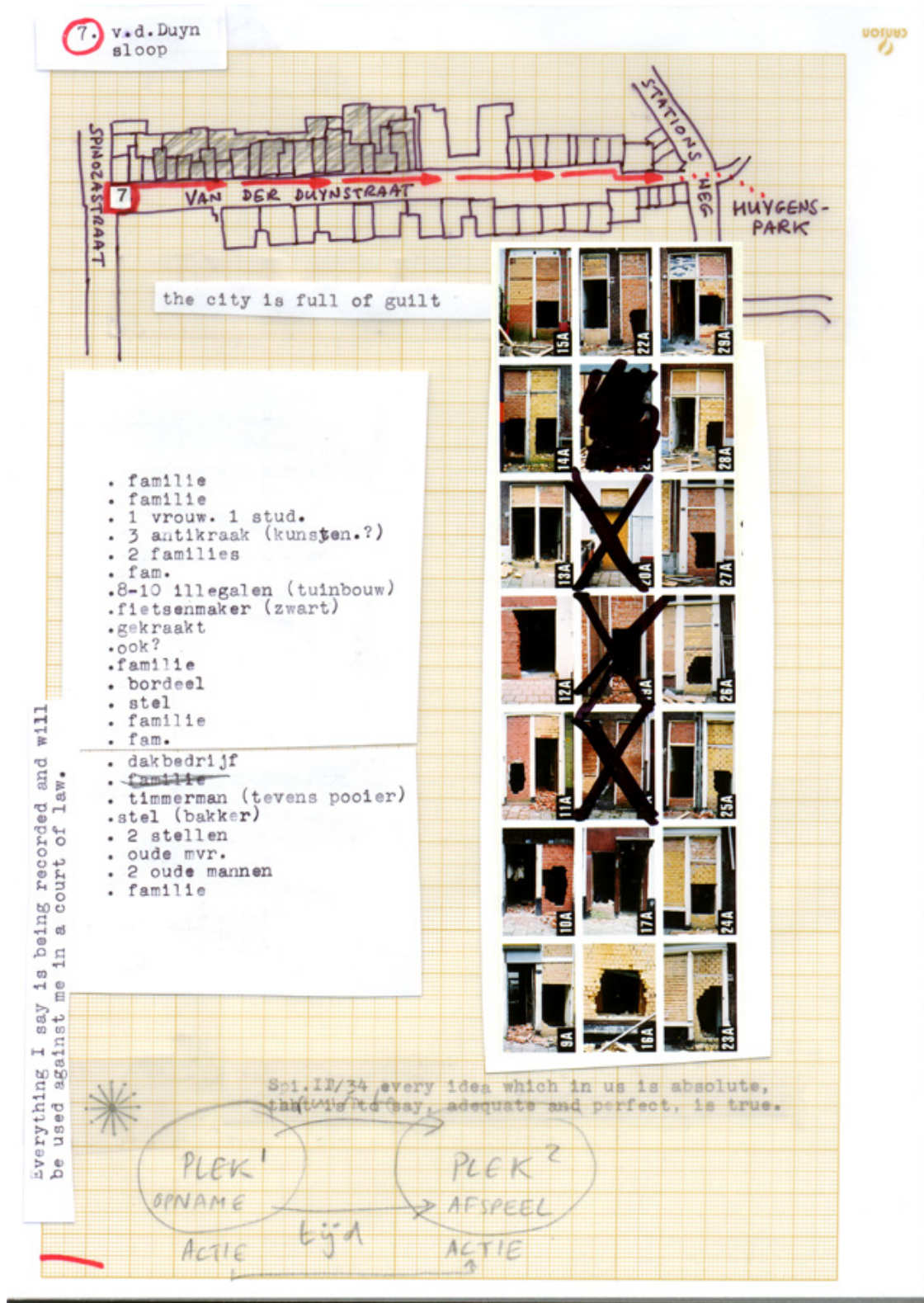


Fig. 3: Justin Bennett, Page from the booklet for *Rumours/Resonances*, an audio guide for Den Haag,

In 2002 I started working with the theatre director Renate Zentschnig. We worked on an historical audio guide for the former NDSM shipyard in Amsterdam which combined interviews with retired dock workers with compositions created from field recordings made in the area. The use of sound was abstract and musical rather than realistic, but using sound sources from the area kept a strong link with reality. Renate Zentschnig is a theatre director specialised in working with non-actors. Her ability to weave a narrative from short statements and fragments of interview fits very well with the format of the audio walk, and this piece was the start of a series of collaborations.



Fig. 4: Justin Bennett and Renate Zentschnig, NDSM audio guide, Amsterdam, 2002.

Renate became very interested in the form of the audio-walk and eventually founded the organisation Soundtrackcity (<http://www.soundtrackcity.nl>) together with visual artist Michiel Huijsman. They started producing audio walks for neighbourhoods in Amsterdam in 2008. Mostly, these walks are made by two artists from different disciplines and incorporate interviews with local inhabitants. Recently, they started initiating projects in other cities and in non-urban areas. The walks are distributed both

digitally and physically, with local businesses such as cafes or hotels hosting the lending service and through frequently organized group walks.

Then, Soudtrackcity commissioned my subsequent walk, *Zuidas Symphony* (2009). Begun during a residency in this business district during 2008, *Zuidas Symphony* combines interviews, actors, and audio “recreations” of fantasy events. The theme was gentrification and the ownership and use of public space. I refer to local conflicts over the future of a park, talk of the subtle differences between public and corporate control of space, trace financial investments of companies behind the development and voice rumours and facts about corruption.



Fig. 5: Justin Bennett, *Zuidas Symphony*, Soundtrackcity, Amsterdam, 2009.

I tried to make the piece open up to different points-of-view by including voices of local inhabitants as well as planners, and I included a critical, political overview by breaking

into the story periodically with a “pirate radio” broadcast from an imagined group of squatters.

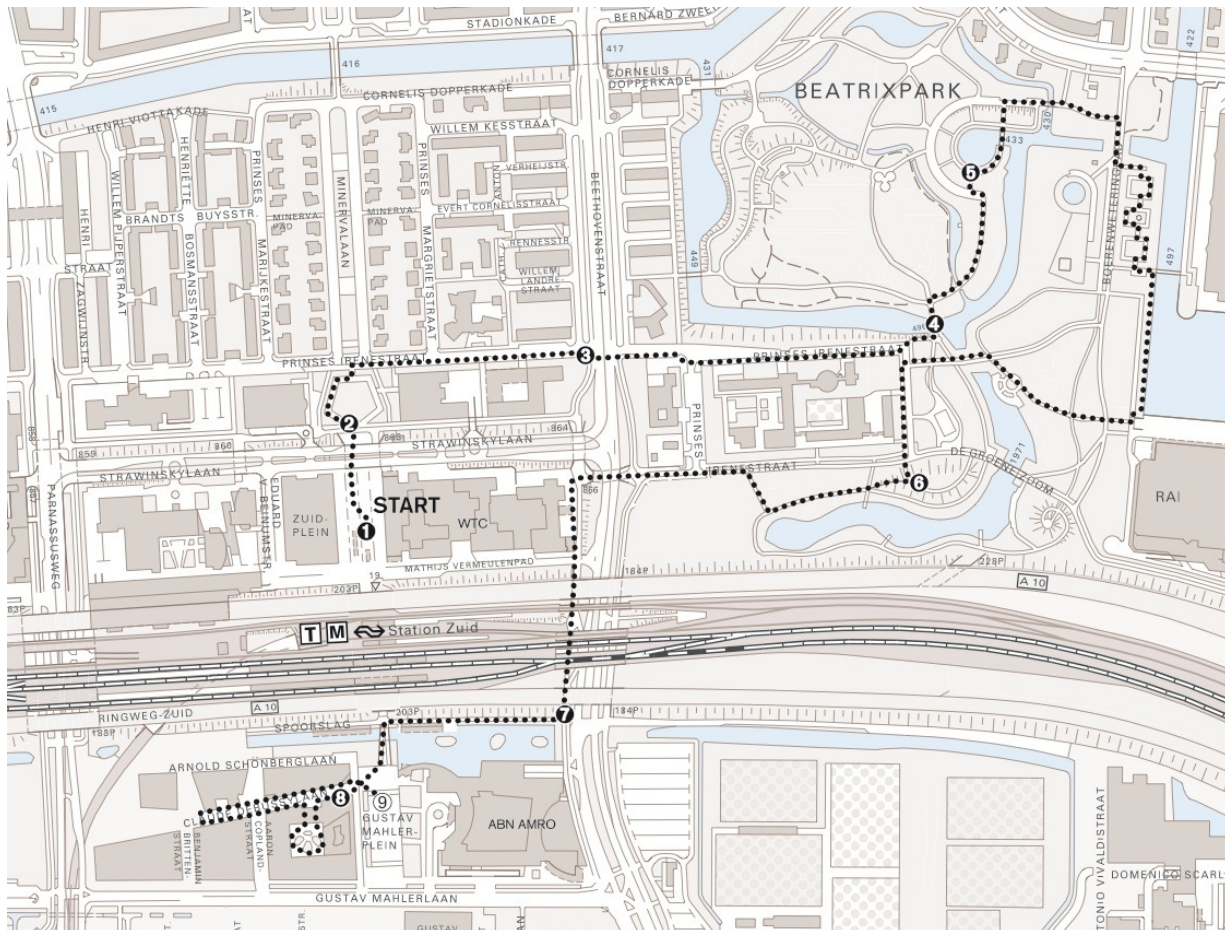


Fig. 6: Justin Bennett, *Zuidas Symphony*, Soundtrackcity, Amsterdam, 2009. The map.

The route itself is very important. Starting at the World Trade Centre, we move out of the new corporate area into the surrounding residential zone and walk through a beautiful, quiet public park before returning to confront the planological problems of combining motorways, train tracks, housing and high-finance. At the end of the walk, all

the different characters appear in a large procession/demonstration that takes over one of the large corporate/public spaces.

Audio Excerpt 3: Zuidas Symphony

In the same year, I made *Hoor de Bomen* (Listen to the trees) for Vathorst, a new town built on former agricultural land in the middle of The Netherlands.

Een geluidswandeling voor Vathorst



Hoor de Bomen.

Fig. 7: Justin Bennett, *Hoor de Bomen*, Vario Mundo, Vathorst, Amersfoort, NL, 2009.

When I was asked to make this piece, only half of the projected houses had been completed. Because of the economic crisis, to date much of the land prepared for building is still empty. Sounds were recorded from the trees themselves using contact microphones and hydrophones. Although these recordings are interesting in themselves, the tree-sounds are just a pretext to talk about the relationship between urban and agricultural landscapes in the Netherlands.

Audio Excerpt 4: Hoor de Bomen

Then, another collaboration with Renate Zentschnig lead to two “paired” audio walks: *Ticket to Amsterdam* (CUMA, Istanbul 2010) and *Ticket to Istanbul* (Soundtrackcity, Amsterdam 2011).



Fig. 8: Justin Bennett and Renate Zentschnig, *Ticket to Istanbul*, Soundtrackcity Amsterdam, 2011.

These two audio walks play with parallels between the two cities and the daily lives of their inhabitants. As the sounds and interviews from Amsterdam are heard along the route in Istanbul and vice-versa, each city becomes the visual decor for the sound of the other, a strange kind of mirror, or superimposition of one city upon the other.

My next audio walk, *Telettrofono*, was made in the context of Stillspotting NYC, a project about noise in the city run by the architecture department of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. The brief was to make a site-specific work for Staten Island.



Fig. 9: Justin Bennett, *Telettrofono*, Staten Island edition of Stillspotting NYC, Guggenheim, New York City 2012.

Researching stories about the island, I came upon one about the Italian immigrant Antonio Meucci, who lived there in the late 19th century. Among many other strange

inventions, many to do with sound and electricity, he invented the telephone, but was swindled out of his patents by Alexander Graham Bell. I asked the New York poet Matthea Harvey to work with me and to write the text. It turned into a complex production because we wanted to use locations normally closed to the public. The locations we chose were not historically correct but were rather chosen for associative reasons – the places inspired the text and the sound.

Audio excerpt 5: *Telettrofono*

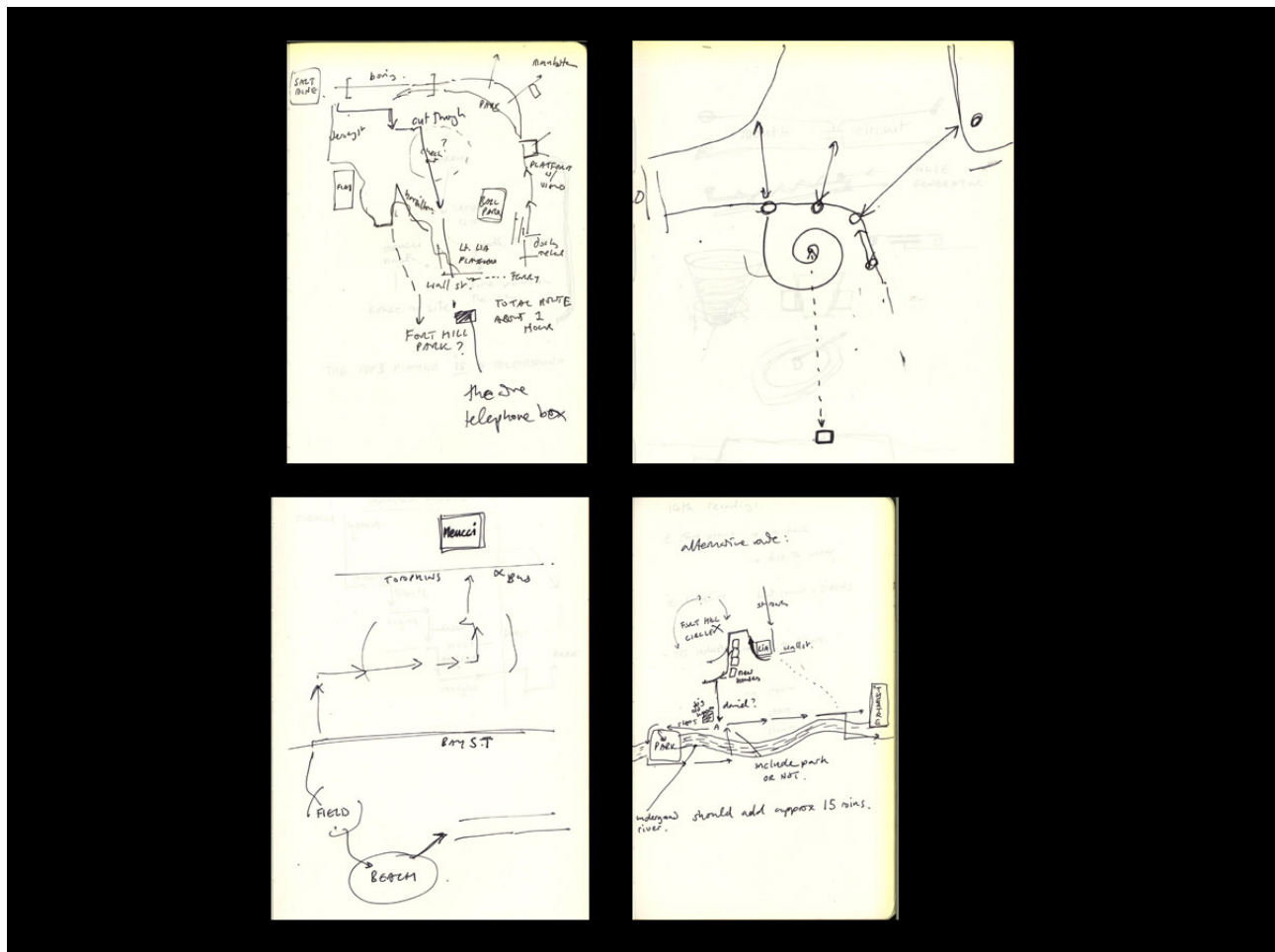


Fig. 10: Antonio Meucci's routes.

My way of working with projects like this is to determine the route before any composition takes place. You can see the physical route as a score which determines timing; the division of the route into parts; influences the sound composition and the structure of the text; the curve of the narrative. Once I have fixed the route, I make a video of the walk and binaural recordings of the ambient sounds. This forms a background on which to place the other sounds. Often, this original binaural layer is left out of the final mix as there will always be live sound present anyway.

In the same year, I started *Spectral Analysis*, an ongoing series of works concerned with the history of the use of technology as a tool for exploring and revealing the invisible – whether in science, art or the occult. The first walk of the series – *Spectral Analysis Krems* (2012), made for Kontraste Festival in Austria – was a series of “audio experiments” focussing on the relationship of electromagnetic radiation and sound. There was no audio for the walk between the locations, letting people find their own way through the small centre.

Audio excerpt 6: *Spectral Analysis - Krems*

His work contributed to the development of modern psycho- hypno- and electro- therapy. In 1777 he left Vienna in a hurry - he had succeeded in restoring sight to the famous blind pianist Marie Theresia von Paradies, but in doing so he ruined both her nerves and her brilliant playing technique. Before moving to Paris, he stayed with friends in Krems and contrived to construct the Bacquet or Magnetic Fountain on the Hoher Markt. By touching the iron bars set into the stone, the patient makes contact with the magnetised fluid within. Mesmer was a virtuoso on the Glass Harmonica, and played it during his healing sessions to tune the nerves and encourage the flow of magnetic fluid.



Fig. 12: Justin Bennett, *Spectral Analysis*, Kontraste Festival, Krems, 2012. At Anton Mesmer's fountain.

Secrets of the Amsterdam Canals (Soundtrackcity, Amsterdam, 2013, made with Renate Zentschig and Fred Feddes) is an historical walk using many interviews with people who live and work along the canals.



Fig. 13: Justin Bennett, *Secrets of the Amsterdam Canals*, Soundtrackcity, Amsterdam, 2013 (with Renate Zentschig and Fred Feddes).

Here the long route and the texts dominate the piece. My work was mainly problem solving, for instance how to give the feeling that the walkers can hear events happening inside houses through closed windows, or how to create “quiet” moments in the busy soundscape of central Amsterdam. Some of this was done by using music. Because the listeners do not have so many preconceptions about what they are going to hear, it's possible to incorporate very contrasting types of sound and music – from electronic noise to “classical” piano or rock music – it can all be accepted as “belonging” to the story and the locations, in the same way that both diegetic and non-diegetic sound and music “belong” to the image in cinema.



Fig. 14: Justin Bennett, Fred Feddes and Renate Zentschig, *Secrets of the Amsterdam Canals*, Soundtrackcity, Amsterdam, 2013. The map.

This was the first walk where I used a different method of capturing sound. Whereas all the walk pieces up until this point used mostly binaural recordings, here I used a Soundfield microphone to capture 3d audio which can then be manipulated before rendering it into binaural audio. Although this adds a layer of complication, it gives me a lot more flexibility to play with distance, perspective and immersion.

My latest audio walk was created for the *IV Mostra 3M de Arte Digital*, held in Sao Paolo in 2013.

“Ever since I entered the city I have been troubled by dreams,” says the narrator at the start...

Audio excerpt 7: *Dream Map Sao Paolo*

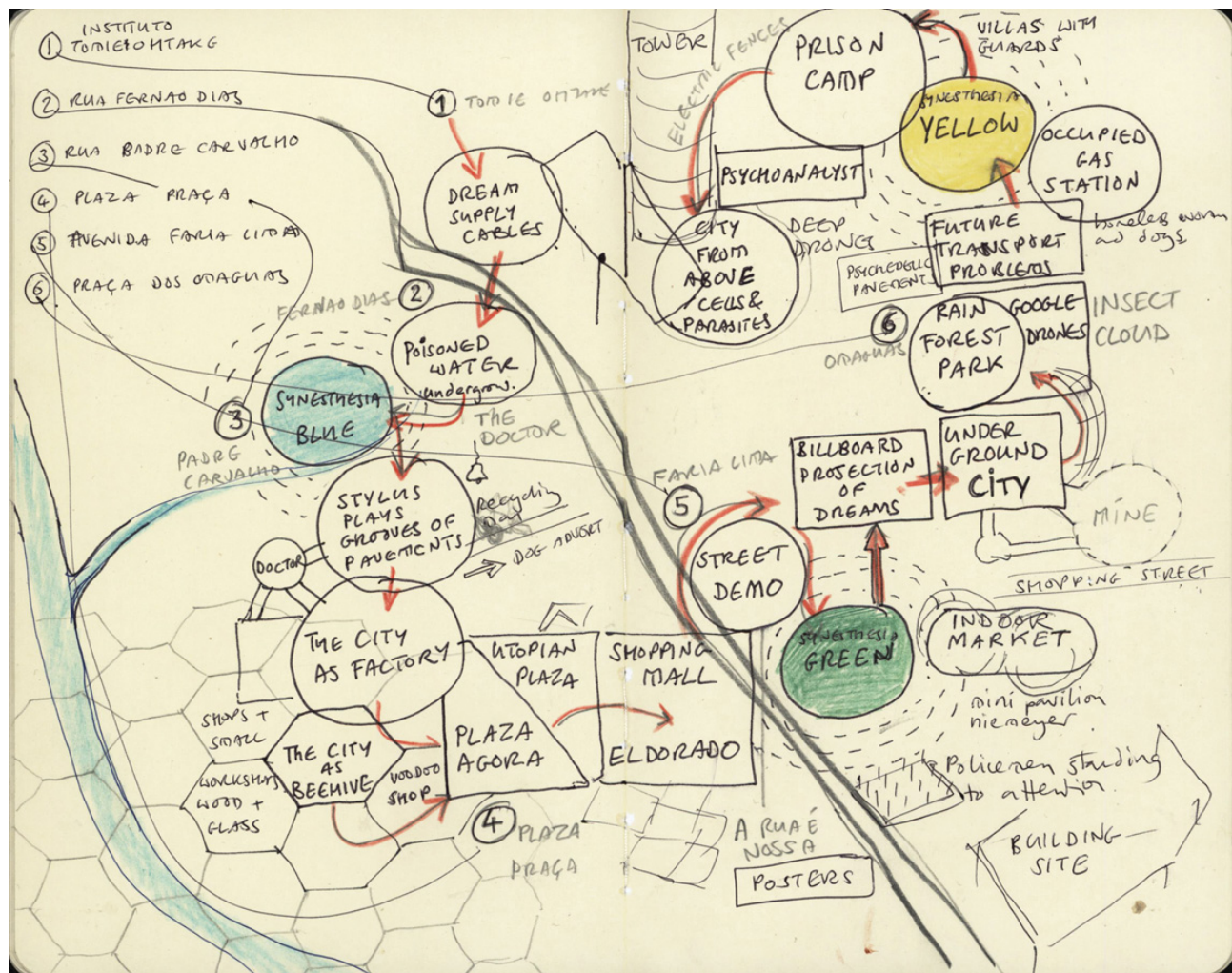


Fig. 15: Justin Bennett, Sketch for *Dream Map*, audio walk for *IV Mostra 3M de Arte Digital*, Sao Paolo 2013.

Dream Map recounts and stages a series of dreams which are tied to locations around the route – surreal interpretations of reality, dreams of inhabitants, the dreams of the city planners. Sao Paulo with its unpredictable street life made creating a linear route and dealing with the timing of the piece very difficult. This experience made me decide to look closer at using locative media for future projects and made me think about the form of the walk itself.

Currently, I am working on a new locative audio piece, *Secret Garden*, for the Amstelpark in Amsterdam. I am making recordings of usually inaudible phenomena (using ultrasound, vlf radio, contact mics, hydrophones, resonances of inaccessible spaces, etc.), which will be spread out through the park as a layer to be browsed with a mobile application. You can see the piece as an invisible garden of sound laid over the actual garden.



Fig. 16: Justin Bennett, *Secret Garden*, in production for Zone2Source, Amsterdam, 2014.

I chose to use the “miniatures for mobiles” app by Udo Noll who runs the *radio aporee* project. I felt that a non-linear approach to the composition was needed because the park already suggests (visually, haptically, olfactory) routes and territories. Another advantage of using this system is that it is open to later additions and changes to the piece. One thing I still have to decide is whether to use visual cues on the mobile screen. I would rather that people use their ears to find their way around, but here the technology is not yet developed enough (or fast enough) to be able to use binaural rendering which could give directional cues to the listener. That's one problem I never really had with the linear walks, assuming that people follow the instructions. I will probably draw a map which will show where sound is to be found.

Although the technology is so different from my first soundwalk, *Secret City, Secret Garden* has for me a similar feel to it – I hope that the listeners will lose themselves in a world where audio and location blend into a new experience.

In all these audio walks there are two scales. One is the plan, the route, a shape drawn on the city; the other is the scale of the pace, the footstep. It's like the relationship between the musical score and the "now" of sound. The one slowly reveals or traces the other.

In Paul Auster's book *City of Glass*, the writer-turned-detective Quinn trails Stillman around the city following his seemingly everyday actions. Only when he starts making maps of the walk does Quinn realise that Stillman is actually writing on the city, one letter per day, spelling out a sentence (Auster 1987). This idea of writing or drawing on the city, creating large forms, is very seductive – the ultimate dream of the city planner – but in an audio walk, at street level, having to deal with everyday life and the problems of moving through urban space, the listener cannot feel or comprehend this level of organisation.

For me, the gap between the two scales – between the larger structure of the walk and the actual experience of the listener – is problematic. Michel de Certeau speaks of “practices of space” which are “foreign to the geometrical or geographical space of visual, panoptic or theoretical constructions” (de Certeau 1980). The walk, although tracing a theoretical figure on a map, has to be composed at street level: as de Certeau might say, the narrative walk has to be composed at the level of the phrase and the word. Gradually though, with the ubiquity of locative technology, I think that there is a shift happening in how we find our way around the world and how we perceive our position and movement in space. It is possible that through using locative media the listener can perceive both levels of composition.

References

Auster, Paul. 1987. *City of Glass. The New York Trilogy*. Faber & Faber.

de Certeau, Michael. 1980. *L'invention du quotidien. I Arts de faire*. Paris: Union générale d'éditions.

Biography

The widely ranging work of Justin Bennett (1964, UK) is as rooted in the audiovisual and visual arts as it is in music. Central to his thinking and his work is a process-orientated approach and an interest in the elasticity of the concept of “space”, with a specific focus on urban development, technological progress and the relationship between architecture and sound. Bennett produces (reworked) field recordings, drawings, performances, installations, audio walks, videos and essays. Recent work consists of thematic projects focussing on the role of the artist in urban development, the relationship of sound and memory and the history of psychiatry in relation to the occult use of technology. Recent presentations include: *Hors Pistes* video screenings at Centre George Pompidou, Paris 2013; *Dream Map* audio walk, Instituto Tomie Ohtake, Sao Paolo 2013; *Spectral Analysis* audio walk, Sonic Acts, Amsterdam 2013; *Telettrofono* audio walk, Guggenheim New York 2012; *Orakel*, sound work in public space, Zürich 2011. <http://www.bmbcon.demon.nl/justin/>