

The Library By *soundpocket*

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Website Review

Scrolling halfway down the light-yellow homepage of the website The Library by *soundpocket*, visitors see a pictogram of an ear and read the word ‘Listen 來聽’. The two items convey the purpose of The Library: to engage visitors in the act of listening. Launched in March 2013 by *soundpocket*, the Hong Kong non-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of sound in and as art, this online artistic project makes available for listening more than 150 one-minute excerpts of sound field recordings from the everyday world of contemporary Hong Kong. Recorded by amateur sound practitioners, sound artists, and sonic professionals, the featured sounds range from the continual comings and goings of consumers at a fast food restaurant, to crickets’ stridulating on someone’s terrace, to the sound of silence. The Library also contains special field recordings from its own projects or by other professionals, such as sound clips from The Library’s 24-hour sound recording of the summer solstice 2013 and audio excerpts and a transcript from an interview with film-sound-effect recordist Tomy Yu Ka-Luk. In an everyday culture where images and noises have become so omnipresent that they deafen all other sonic elements (see Voegelin 2010: 44), The Library attempts to activate people’s sensitivity and attentiveness toward their sonic surroundings by training their ears and creating a habit to listen. To do so, The Library displaces these recorded sonic elements from their contexts of origin – everyday physical realities – to an online audio platform for unlimited access. In Hong Kong where local authorities condemn noise pollution as a significant urban problem (because of the unceasing noises of traffic, construction, and other commercial activities), The Library acts as a public archive that gives visitors an alternative context to engage with contemporary everyday soundscapes.

In its general digital layout and content, The Library’s emphasis is on the subtle and delicate sonic components of daily life and not on the actual sites of the field recordings. By the means of non-hierarchical keywords assigned to the sound clips, available on the ‘Pool’ page, only generic terms are provided for locations (such as ‘highway’ and not the name of this highway), common activities (‘eating’), objects (‘sword’), or sensations (‘loud’). Also, enquiries about specific Hong Kong locations via the search function generate multiple results that may sometimes have no direct relation with the original keyword(s). While little focus is placed on the sites, The Library nevertheless provides some factual information about the recordings’ contexts through the collectors’ statements. A brief listing of facts introduce the title of the field- recording project, the name of its recordist, the date(s) when and approximate location(s) where the sound recording(s) took place, and the duration. These details also highlight the name of the recording device (e.g. Tascam DR-40), the position in which this device was set up (e.g. handheld or placed near bicycle path), and some keywords assigned to the recording. The personal statements by the collectors, though, tend to only describe the feelings they experienced while recording, not the material conditions in which the field recording took place. Pictures are sometimes included, but they never feature the sounds’ exact points of origin (the person who talks for instance).

By encouraging visitors to make their listening choices based on mood, theme or feeling, rather than a prescribed description, The Library embraces the ephemeral and invisible nature of sound that leaves much room for the imagination (Voegelin 2010: xii). With audible cues that *sounds like* but *may not be*, the listeners have no choice but to construct their own invisible world that relates to some familiar components in their own physical reality. In this new realm, overlooked yet well-known sonic elements find a new meaning *in* and *for* the listeners' everyday existence. In doing so, The Library reframes the conventional approach to heritage that just entombs historical artifacts, with little consideration of their contemporaneous significance. Instead of focusing solely on the maintenance of these audio files, for instance, the ongoing project of The Library conceives of sonic heritage as something to be actively engaged with, involving a constantly evolving practice of listening, one that takes place *in* and *for* the present (Smith 2006: 1). Through this active and conscious act of listening, visitors to the website can build a new basis for their practice grounded in an enhanced sensitivity toward daily sounds. In this context, The Library is an archive of field recordings in Hong Kong and yet it is much more. The website provides a platform for listeners to encounter their own stories, allowing them to find and give meaning to their past and present experiences in the everyday (Yeung 2013). The shift in experience and attention to quotidian sounds, which may resonate with people all around the world via a computer or other devices, connects visitors through a cross-cultural activity – listening.

References

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