

NAME

Sonic Landscapes.mp3

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DURATION

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2 SPEAKERS

Jennifer Khakshouri

Ludwig Berger

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:11] Jennifer Khakshouri

You're listening to the ETH podcast today from Höggerberg Campus. My name is Jennifer Khakshouri and I'm in the sound studio of the Media Lab of the ETH Chair of Landscape Architecture, Christophe Girot. I'm visiting Ludwig Berger. Ludwig, you're a research associate at the Chair of Christophe Girot. You're also a composer and a sound artist. Why are you here at this ETH Chair?

[00:00:37] Ludwig Berger

Yeah, so my background in electro acoustic composition led me here. I always worked with recorded sounds from the landscape and from architectural spaces. I did like radio pieces, audiovisual pieces and pieces in public space and was always in relationship to architectural space and landscapes. And so I started teaching here to kind of bring the sonic dimension into landscape architecture education.

[00:01:07] Jennifer Khakshouri

So before we dive into the sonic experience of exploring landscapes, I want to ask you about the chair of landscape architecture here. It's part of the department of architecture, so people who study architecture at ETH can choose to do a seminar or a dissertation or a masters in landscape architecture for people who have no idea what that is. Can you please explain in a short sentence?

[00:01:34] Ludwig Berger

Well, what we teach here is the design of landscapes. It's also the history of landscapes and the media representation of landscapes. And that's what we do in the media lab. So it's about understanding like larger scales of spaces. So it's not necessarily linked to, you know, natural landscapes, but really like cultural landscapes. You know, a city can also be a landscape, of course, and it's about activating our senses to understand how landscapes work, how they affect us in our everyday life, not only through the eyes but also through the ears.

[00:02:14] Jennifer Khakshouri

And that's what you teach students. Can you tell me about what your teaching looks like or what it sounds like?

[00:02:20] Ludwig Berger

Yeah, so we do elective courses called Serendipity, so it's about things you encounter that you didn't expect to encounter. And we go to different places. So we started going to glaciers. Afterwards, we went to dams and infrastructure of water, but also we did some research on Japanese gardens and the urban space of Zurich. So very diverse spaces. We go there with our sound recorders and photograph cameras and video cameras and laser scanners and so on. And then we try to portray these spaces in different sonic and visual perspectives.

[00:03:02] Jennifer Khakshouri

I want to focus on the glaciers first. So tell us about your excavation to the glacier with your students. What was that like or how did you bring serendipity in connection to the glacier?

[00:03:13] Ludwig Berger

Yes. So we started going to the Morteratsch Glacier in 2015, 16. It's a really accessible glacier. You can arrive by train. And we went there with a big group of students and we walked up to the glacier tongue and then we started to explore it with our underwater microphones and contact microphones and large format analog cameras. So the fascinating thing is from a glacier is that it's a really large object or phenomenon, and you can find very different acoustic and visual perspectives. And so the students kind of took the microphone and just hold them against the ice or we froze them also, or we submerged underwater microphones into the glacial ponds and you get like really unexpected sounds. The magical thing is you never know like before which sound you will record. And in that way the glacier also becomes very alive in this serendipitous encounter.

[00:04:17] Jennifer Khakshouri

Can you play us some of the sounds that you collected in the glacier or with the glacier, at the glacier, I guess it's inside, outside and on top?

[00:04:25] Ludwig Berger

Yeah, it's mostly inside the glacier, actually. So this is a recording we did in the winter where it's really quiet, but you have some air bubbles coming out of the glacier tongue where the glacial river flows.

[00:05:05] Jennifer Khakshouri

You said that you froze microphones into the glacier. What challenges did you have doing that? Because I know as an audio journalist, it's very difficult to handle batteries in cold climate.

[00:05:17] Ludwig Berger

Yes. So first of all, we brought many batteries. The microphones we used were like really lo-fi, like we made them ourselves. It's just like piezoelectric microphones that we made waterproof. So it was also not a big problem if, like cables got ripped, which happens sometimes. And so we try to have like really resistant equipment. But later on we also combine these recordings with very sophisticated underwater microphones where you can really capture the smallest details. But then what's actually in terms of sound really challenging in summer is that the glacier has a very, very large dynamic spectrum. So you have like very small, tiny sounds of like little air bubbles escaping the ice. But then you also have like the big chunks of ice breaking off. And so, like, to find this balance of the volume in between these like two extremes is really challenging.

[00:06:15] Jennifer Khakshouri

Can you play what you just described both like the sophisticated sounds of every movement and the larger movements also?

[00:06:23] Ludwig Berger

Yeah. So this is a collage of different recordings actually, and it's called "Inside Morteratsch".

[00:06:53] Jennifer Khakshouri

What was that, the stone?

[00:06:57] Ludwig Berger

Yes, it could be a stone. It's also hard to tell because if you like record these sounds, you don't see anything like it seems really active now when you listen to it. But when you stand in front of it, you're just looking into a little pond of melted ice and you don't know what's actually going on. And you're also connected to the whole body of the glacier in a way. So like, even very distant sounds can, can cause larger events on the headphones. And then you take off your headphones and you're wondering, where does that sound come from? Could it be dangerous for me? So it's really interesting also, the mix of auditive and visual perception. One piece was recorded in March on a very warm day, way too warm for March. And I just recorded this drone that is kind of created by the flow of the water and that resonates in the ice. And then you had like a larger chunk of ice breaking off in the back, and that is audible here in the piece called "Drone".

[00:08:13] Jennifer Khakshouri

You captured all of these sounds together with your students in the past years in different seminars and excavations, and you published records, three records and also booklets with pictures of the glacier. And actually you follow the metamorphosis of water from the glacier down to dams all the way down underground to the reservoirs in Zurich. The books that you publish together with records is called "Bodies of Water, a Swiss Landscape trilogy", and that's the title of the entire publication. Tell us about why the sounds you captured with your students, why you put them on vinyl records.

[00:08:53] Ludwig Berger

Yes. So we really wanted to turn these very abstract and elusive phenomenon to something tangible, something graspable. And so we tried to really make an object out of it that you can hold in your hands. And if you have a record player, put it on your record player. Otherwise just look at it also as an object. We also have digital downloads, by the way. It's not just the record. And another reason is the durability of the format. Vinyl is really one of the most long lasting formats. They say a vinyl can last 100 years or longer, and it looks like glaciers won't last another 100 years in the Alps. So when all the glaciers are melted, at least we will have some records of them.

[00:09:41] Jennifer Khakshouri

Speaking about the melting glaciers, what do you read like on a scientific level from the sounds that you collect? Like how do you interpret what you take home from a glacier like the Morteratsch Glacier?

[00:09:53] Ludwig Berger

I mean, I'm not a scientist myself, but luckily now also glaciologists are starting to work with sound. And I think for many scientific disciplines, there's really a bias in favor of visual information. And what they found now is that you can not only determine the amount of melting, for example, also in Arctic glaciers, but you can from the frequency of the bubbles that escape the ice, you can determine the age of the ice. So really, like each sound that the glacier makes also potentially holds an information of the history of the snow basically, the compression of the snow, then determines the density of the ice, and that helps to determine the age. So from our perspective, we didn't use these recordings as scientific data. For us, it's much more about kind of an artistic approach to this phenomenon that can complement scientific information.

[00:10:56] Jennifer Khakshouri

Speaking about art and this being an art project or an artistic project of exploring landscapes, I've mentioned before, but still that the whole box with the records is accompanied by beautiful books layouted beautifully analog, black and white pictures that the students took as well aside from recording the sounds. What can art contribute to stopping climate change or to the awareness of climate change?

[00:11:24] Ludwig Berger

Well, I think many of the phenomena of climate change, especially in the global North, are hard to grasp. And for me, for example, also before I did this project, I didn't really have an idea of what a glacier is. I mean, I knew like how it works more or less, but I didn't had like a personal relationship to it. And I think through the images and the sounds, we get a really sensory access to an otherwise really abstract phenomenon. And we can, yeah, really through an intimate way of encountering it through our ears, through like the delicate textures that we can, we can hear and also see, it somehow becomes alive in a way, you know, like it's not any more inanimate matter, like something passive, but it's something really active. And so, I mean, without anthropomorphizing it, it kind of almost becomes a person.

[00:12:25] Jennifer Khakshouri

The glacier - I mean you hear it breathe and you hear it die actually, if you listen to the sounds of the melting ice.

[00:12:32] Ludwig Berger

Yeah, exactly. So like what listeners describe when they hear it, you know, they have many associations. Also, like the other day, a listener, she described the experience of listening to the glacier, like putting the ear on the womb of someone, really listening into the body of someone. And yeah, you have these very personal associations. And I think this is really important to kind of activate us that we don't only see all the problems because these things can be really paralyzing. And I think to also construct a positive relationship to these things that we need to protect is crucial.

[00:13:14] Jennifer Khakshouri

And this is what you give your students. So you make them more sensitive to the topics and you make them see landscape with their ears. You give them a vocabulary to talk about what they feel and what they see and put that in relation to the landscape.

[00:13:29] Ludwig Berger

Yes. And there the interesting thing is that I think it's kind of a discourse that we create between, you know, the students and the landscape that something that can later influence also their architectural practice. But it's not a discourse through words, but it's something like through artistic production. So how they develop their pictures in the darkroom, how they treat their sounds. It's always a statement. It expresses their own idea of the landscape and they can critique it or comment it or worship it, or there are many ways of portraying a landscape, and this helps to train the senses to look and listen more carefully. But it also has the potential to have a more critical look towards spaces and kind of reflect on your own position within them.

[00:14:18] Jennifer Khakshouri

I want to speak about the artistic use of what you captured in the glacier and the sounds that you collected so far. You're also a sound artist and you also perform with these three records. Can you tell us about how you use these sounds and how you produce art with actually documents of real nature?

[00:14:40] Ludwig Berger

Yes. For me, it's really important that these recordings are not something sacred, like something that you just listen to from the outside, but that you'll really find a playful interaction with them. So what I do, for example, is I play in a formation called the Chuchhepati Orchestra, which is a loudspeaker orchestra with like 32 landscape speakers from Nepal. And the musicians, Patrick Kessler on the bass, Julian Sartorius on the drums and Dieb13 in on turntables, they play along with the glacier. So I play the records and different recordings through my laptop and controllers, and they kind of respond to these sounds and find a way to communicate almost with the glacier, You know, like, we really try to treat the glacier as another player. So they pick up certain rhythms, textures, certain melodies also that emerge out of the glacier. And so it becomes really a collective concert by the musicians and the glacier.

[00:16:28] Jennifer Khakshouri

So in your course called Serendipity, you don't only collect sounds, but your students also have to take pictures with analog cameras. Tell us about what the difference is of capturing an image which actually seems frozen and sounds being something that are ongoing and that is not just one brief moment, but it's a whole sequence of moments.

[00:16:52] Ludwig Berger

Yes. So we combine these two techniques. At the end of the semester the students present just one image and one minute of sound. That's always the format that we have. In the especially analog way of working with images you also actually spend a lot of time on site. It really takes long, long hours until especially in an environment like a glacier you produce the image, but afterwards you just have a very still one moment of this place and you don't have the element of time in it, time passing. That's where the sound comes in. It touches you maybe in a different way than an image does. Like literally, you know, like the sounds that reach your eardrums and and your body, they literally touch you. So it has maybe something more physical involving more your body and the images give you, yeah, more references. So you can really understand how the space actually looks. You can maybe connect it to more experiences than the sound. You know, it's much more graspable in a way. But also, like you look at textures, you can look at movements. So there are also many links between both elements and I think they can exist in a really equal way in our ways of perceiving. So you look at a picture and you hear a sound and kind of both exist for themselves independently. But there's also something third that emerges in that encounter, and that's where you come in also as a listener and a viewer and become active.

[00:18:27] Jennifer Khakshouri

Is one of your goals also that people become artists rather than architects?

[00:18:31] Ludwig Berger

Some students that, you know, were our students in the past, they went actually into that direction, which of course I really like. But I also hope that the students that actually become architects, that they can also bring something in from that practice because I think especially architecture is so much potential of evolving all the senses. And I think sound is really not noticed enough and the potential is really enormous, you know, of like the way how we perceive space, how we orient ourselves in space, how we, you know, how larger space seems to sound, but also really like the personal associations that we have when we listen to a place, you know, it's always connected to previous experiences we had in other spaces, and especially because it's so subconscious unconscious, there is a lot of potential to activate also these memories and the cultural signification of sounds and the relationship between different sounds. You know, architecture is really the composition of the everyday, you know, like I'm a composer too, but I only play my music on speakers. But architects actually build instruments in a large format, so they're like in terms of impact, the much bigger composers. So it's really great when they also listen and, and work with sound consciously.

[00:20:10] Jennifer Khakshouri

Thank you very much, Ludwig Berger. Thank you for listening to the ETH podcast. This is a production of the Audiobande. My name is Jennifer Khakshouri and thank you for having me here as a guest at the Media Lab at the Chair of Landscape Architecture. Christophe Girot. The publication we talked about is called "Bodies of Water, a Swiss landscape trilogy", three booklets with photographs as well as three records. And you don't need a record player to listen to the sounds because there's also a download link right next to the records. Thank you very much.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



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