

10th October 2015 Shoes, Ears, Pathways, Awareness--katrinem interview
(Moving Sounds 2015)

Shoes, Ears, Pathways, Awareness

katrinem

in conversation with Christopher Zimmerman



[<http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-81aOYjQ60Zo/VhknmnrLmAI/AAAAAAAAAQ4/S-l19kgbdwU/s1600/on%2Bthe%2Bpath%25C2%25A9katrinem.jpeg>]

On the Park @ katrinem

As the concept of *Moving Sounds 2015—Liquid Architecture / Frozen Music* [<http://www.acfny.org/index.php?id=2851>] solidified around Bernd Klug's transformation [<http://www.acfny.org/event/bernd-klug-traces-of-dislocation-the-austrian-cultural-forum-as-social-instrument/>] of Raimund Abraham's ACFNY building into a sonic and social instrument, it became clear that the festival should also turn our ears outwards, into the constantly shifting soundscape of Midtown. Sound walks were in order, and thanks to a wonderful suggestion from Ars Electronica in Linz, I met Austrian sound artist **katrinem** [<http://www.katrinem.de/>], who has devoted her creative life to examining the interrelations of sound and space—truly a perfect fit with the festival's exploration of sound / space and music/ architecture.

R. Murray Schafer, in his *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/585024.The_Soundscape], writes, "Today all sounds belong to a continuous field of possibilities lying within the comprehensive dominion of music. Behold the new orchestra: the sonic universe! And the

musicians: anyone and anything that sounds!” katrinem’s *SchuhzuGehör_path of awareness* [<http://www.acfny.org/event/katrinem-schuhzugehoer-path-of-awareness-midtown-ny/>] project heeds this call and opens up transformative, experiential explorations of Midtown and its unrelenting soundscape. Following katrinem through the sonic maps that she carved out (demarcated by the rhythm of her gait and the sound of her shoes), our ears opened, and what was typically filtered out as noise was brought into Schafer’s ‘sonic universe’. Walking through Midtown at a purposefully slower pace focused one’s mind and body on the shifting sounds and sonic details of the built environment. katrinem’s paths heightened one’s awareness of our environment and its sonic complexity, and in turn, it opened the ear to our selves and how we relate to the city and each other.

In addition to this [video documentation](https://vimeo.com/138623589) [<https://vimeo.com/138623589>], the ‘score’ that katrinem developed for these sound walks is available for download here. You can take a path of awareness walk on your own time.

During katrinem’s residency at the ACFNY to develop and present this project, I was fortunate to discuss the project and its ramifications with her in greater detail, and the following interview represents a condensation of her ideas about sound, walking, the experience of midtown, the importance of intentional listening, and on.

Christopher Zimmerman, September 2015



[http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-URz8f-NrBkU/VhkoN3XZGsl/AAAAAAAAAARE/JKWVAVGIE3w/s1600/6andhalf_AV.jpg]

6.5th Avenue--katrinem

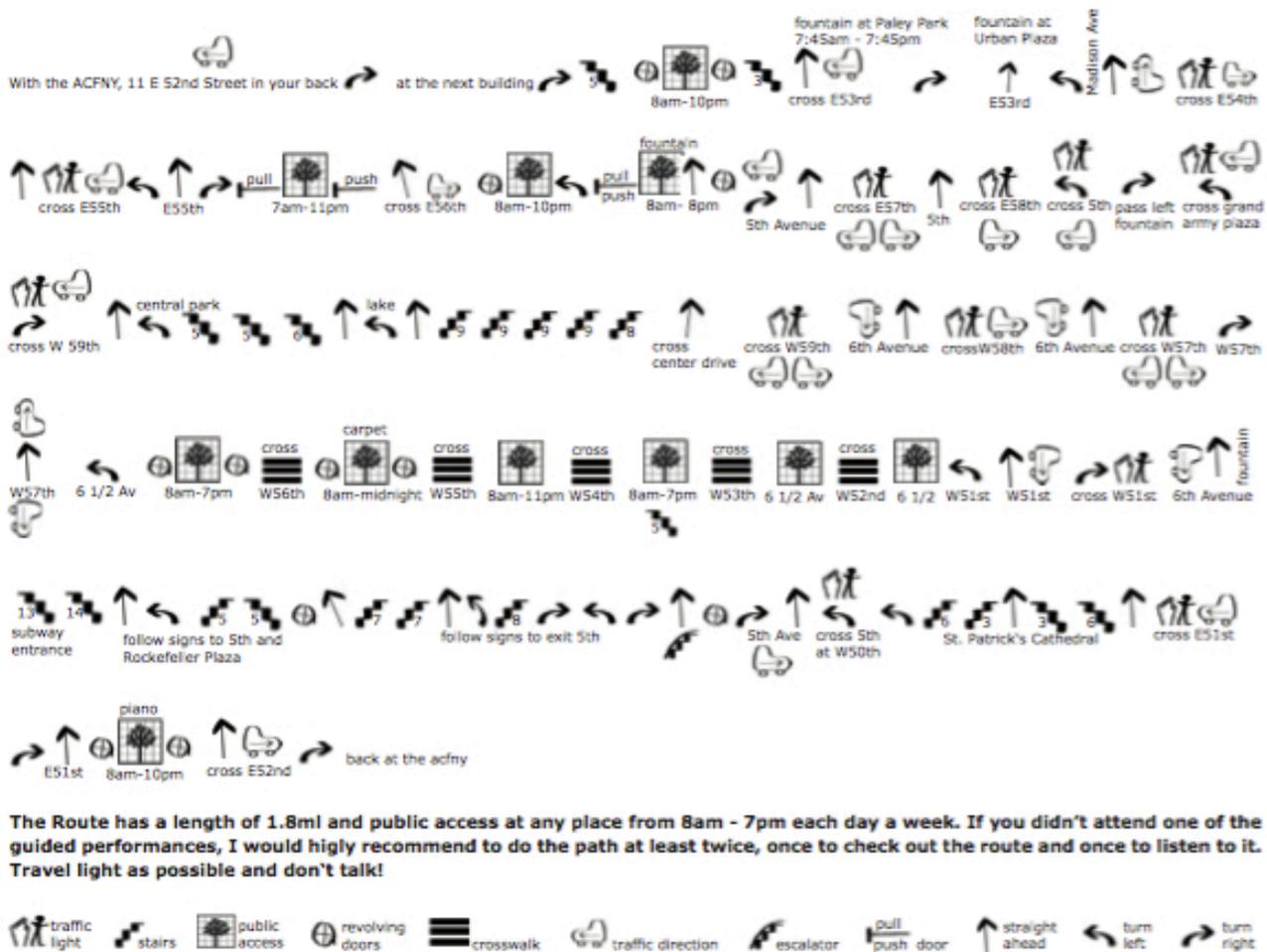
Christopher Zimmerman: You presented your *SchuhzuGehör_path of awareness* [<https://vimeo.com/138623589>] Midtown NY(2015) [<https://vimeo.com/138623589>] earlier this month as part of Moving Sounds 2015 *liquid architecture / frozen music*, which was a week-long festival exploring the intersections between sound and space. What is *paths of awareness* and how did you develop this idea? How does this project relate to Moving Sounds 2015?

katrinem: *SchuhzuGehör_path of awareness* investigates how individuals immediately experience space while walking—in particular, the interaction of an audible event (a pace) and the surrounding architecture. Essential elements of this configuration are the moderate speed of pedestrian locomotion, the regularity of the step-by-step progress, and the readiness to open up our auditory perceptive space and keep it as wide open as possible—thus, in great contrast to our customary behavior of

intentionally filtering out stuff we don't wish to hear.

Most of the paths we take in everyday life are routes connecting specific locations at which we have something to do. The place we've left behind continues to resonate; nevertheless, one's thoughts are often already at one's destination, or, thanks to mobile communications systems, one spends the time in transit in a virtual space. The way becomes a "tunnel" through public space. By proceeding in this fashion, we accept not only the diminution of our auditory perceptive space but also the weakening of our relationship to our real-world surroundings, since hearing is inextricably connected to one's sense of space.

In *SchubzuGehör* the path itself is the destination. To reach it, a "path of awareness" has been delineated, one that offers diverse opportunities to focus on walking itself, on footwear, on the walkability of an urban habitat, and its architectural as well as atmospheric qualities. The liveliness of a city is reflected in the activities of its inhabitants: how, when, and where they move around in it. Walking is the most individual form of locomotion in terms of its direction and speed. Sidewalks, pedestrian areas, traffic-free roads, and squares are the public spaces most preferred by those navigating a city on foot, marking its pavement and paths with the pulses of their steps.



[http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-IMpqq0cURKY/VhkqZZwVNJI/AAAAAAAAARc/A1yvRRHAMkl/s1600/Katrinem_score_nyc.jpg]
 katrinem's score *path of awareness_NY*

CZ: Why shoes?

katrinem: A gait is a person's most distinctly individual pattern of movement. Audible in the sound of footsteps, our rhythm emerges from the regularity with which we place one foot after the other. An individuality which we reproduce almost exclusively in public, where one person's step rhythm joins in polyrhythm with that of another. While this rhythm often becomes masked by a city's background noise, it can be made audible again through the visibility of the motion. The ways once walked leave no trace but crisscross over the city like an invisible network. At all points where these crossings accumulate, we find vibrant city spaces.

I have been working on the topic of gaits and walking rhythms since 2004. Many studies, experiments, and projects [<https://vimeo.com/7615866>] have been created under the title *go your gait!* [http://www.call.walk21munich.com/presentations/BS106_katrinem.pdf], which are primarily concerned with marks and patterns of ambulation in public and urban contexts and which pursue the question of how transitory spaces and public locations interact. I am particularly interested in the extent to which we are able to find spaces for walking in our urban surroundings, how we use them (pathways), and how conscious we are of environmental influences on our walking.

Each placement of the foot upon ground can be understood as a fundamental tone that operates causally on the body—mass upon mass. Accordingly, the firmness and character of the ground plays an important role in the foot's stability at the moment of placement. The footwear used not only serves as a go-between in this meeting of foot and ground but also creates a new set of conditions according to its material, fit, and function (for example: high heels, flip flops, boots, sneakers, etc.). Almost everybody is wearing shoes in the urban environment. When we are purchasing shoes how much do we pay attention to the way they sound in our environment and how they register in our own ears? After checking the fit and look of the selected shoes it is unconventional to test their sonic character as well, e.g. by going for a “test walk” outside the store. How important is it to us that we can hear our own steps?

CZ: You explored Midtown on foot starting ten days before the opening of the festival in order to develop various paths for the sound walks. What is your process? What has been challenging about Midtown, its rhythm, its soundscape?

Katrinem: On the 2nd of September, I arrived at 5th Avenue and 53rd Street around 6pm. The first thing I noticed was that I was almost the only person who wanted to leave the subway (E train) at this stop, but many others waited there to get in. My first impression was that this part of the city must be more business than living space.

At the Austrian Cultural Forum (ACFNY) on the 52nd Street (between 5th and Madison Avenues), after putting down my luggage, I immediately started to discover the environment by walking around in a very slow motion. After this long flight from Europe, it was the best way to be connected with the city and to “arrive” in midtown in all kinds of senses. Over the next 10 days, I explored the environment of the ACFNY by walking during the day and at night. I observed other pedestrians and got to know how they cross streets in midtown. I registered traffic lights and observed where pedestrians speed up and slow down. I am interested in what people are carrying with them and, in particular, which paths they choose and, of course, much more.



[http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-Mo5uG1B5qCs/Vhkq8QuRSyl/AAAAAAAAARs/oSftvLho6x4/s1600/on%2Bthe%2Bpath_1.tif]
on the path--katrinem

You constantly have to deal with a very high noise level in midtown. Especially when you're trying to keep your auditive senses as wide as possible. At last, I found a rhythm of walking for about 2 hours, with a 4 hour rest in my room at the ACFNY, followed by more walking and so on...

Most of the streets in midtown are organized as one-way streets, the directions alternate regularly, and with traffic lights at each crossroads. My measurements of the traffic light phases were about 45 seconds per direction, with different symbols for cars and pedestrians. For car traffic, the red-yellow-green lights, for the pedestrian the white walking human and the orange stop-hand. Mostly, in the middle of the "green" phase, when they show the walking human, it changes to the flashing stop-hand, sometimes combined with a countdown.

You can see many pedestrian in Midtown. The three biggest groups are commuters, shoppers, and tourists. Commuters usually walk alone and seem to follow an invisible line in a purposeful pace (brisk gait), talking on their phones, carrying some to-go-drinks and crossing the streets just by turning their heads in the direction of the expected traffic. It seems as if the traffic lights doesn't concern them. Usually, the commuters carry a bag or a backpack in which a laptop fits in easily. Their main time is between 8am-10:30am and 4pm-6:30pm.

Easy to spot are the shoppers: marked by the stores' shopping bags that one can see from afar—rarely alone, usually in pairs, constantly talking to each other or on their phones. Compared with the commuters, their walking speed is a little bit slower and the direction is not clearly intended. The largest concentration of shoppers is between 5pm-8pm on a weekday. The tourists are often underway in pairs or larger groups. They meander a little bit back and forth through the streets without any recognizable aim or they block the traffic in front of sights and events. During lunchtime, all groups mix up in the little parks, in the public access areas, or in the private properties.

As I had already experienced upon my arrival, Midtown is not a residential area. In the evening hours and during the night, when business sleeps and the stores are closed, there are fewer people and cars on the street. The speed of movements and the noise level of traffic calm down significantly. Now comes the time for the maintenance in Midtown, the construction sites get busier, the garbage trucks pop up, and the stores get their new supply. All these actions are enormous sound events in the general soundscape of air conditioning and traffic, the variations happen with changing their positions.

In the score to *SchubzuGehör_path of awareness*, the rhythmical structure of midtown can be seen: the grid, the one-way streets, the traffic lights, the cross walks, and the various opening hours of the public access ways trough the private properties, all influence us in our walking.



[http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-tAYkmAlIK1A/VhkptY5wgKI/AAAAAAAAARQ/DqAmcVYD8T4/s1600/crosswalk_1.jpg]

Midtown crosswalk--katrinem

CZ: What did our audiences experience on your sound walks? What is the significance of these experiences?

katrinem: For each guided walking performance, the number of participants was limited to 10. The starting point is also the end point and the meeting place, where I gave little introductions about the performance itself and the participation during the walk:

We will not talk during the walk and will not stop on the tour, except for traffic lights or things like that.

'tay close next or behind me, not in a line, more like a swarm.

We don't have to walk at the same pace; everybody should find a rhythm which fits him or her best

When we are changing the direction on the route, I will make a gesture in advance.

Travel as lightly as possible. All our bags and backpacks influence our posture and gait and subsequently our auditory perception. It may reduce the experience of the performance.

For the performance I will wear a pair of my 'sound full' shoes and will choose a slow but steady walking rhythm. Open up your ears for it!

Being more aware of our auditory environment allows us to be more aware of everything happening around us. The interesting point here is that each participant experienced the walk very differently, depending on what the person focused on.

CZ: At the centrepiece of the festival was Bernd Klug's installation and social instrument—*traces of [dislocation]*. Bernd has transformed Raimund Abraham's architecture into a social instrument, which allows us to experience the building sonically, through our ears. In certain respects, Bernd is turning our ears inwards or 'into the building'. With your *paths of awareness* our ears are being oriented outwards, into the built environment around the ACFNY. Your sound walks explore the context, environment, and soundscape in which the ACFNY is embedded. Can you comment on these relations and their significance?

katrinem: Both projects explore the interdependency between a sound event and the architectural environment. Especially, at the ACFNY, the in-door space is much more of a controlled space, while the outside is more influenced by infrastructural measurements and permanent changing interactions.

Bernd Klug's site-specific composition *rhythm method: string quartet and skyscraper* [<https://www.newmusicusa.org/projects/string-quartet-and-skyscraper-2/>] invited the audience at the ACFNY to explore while walking around the interactions of the sounds produced by the musicians and the significant indoor-architecture of the 3 floors of exhibition space, with an open staircase and little gaps between the stairs and the wall. During the performance, the musicians changed their positions and locations while playing. So one could decide whether to follow them in order to experience the sound somewhere else or just to stand still and listen to the variations while the music is moving. It was possible to hear the sounds anywhere in the exhibition space, in different mixtures, of course. Every person in the space was part of the performance. They knew it and behaved like this.

During the SchuhzuGehör performance, you have constantly changing interactions around the group of 10 people. No two performances can ever be the same.

CZ: What is it about walking that intrigues you? How are walking and listening related?

katrinem: I am continually fascinated by walking as a highly complex interplay of motion sequences for which our body is ideally constructed. This act of walking, which we learn with so much effort, will, usually, only come to our attention again, once more, when the rhythm and the processes of our muscular-skeletal system are disrupted. The walking rhythm is a pulse that accompanies us along all paths radiating inside of us and outwards. It is an important aspect that deserves a place in our living spaces, which are primarily urban spaces, and in our awareness.



[http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-3qRlGk8v4sU/Vhkq2NOGxnl/AAAAAAAAARo/gw627YiWrL4/s1600/public%2Barcade_1.jpg]

Midtown public arcade--katrinem

CZ: What is intentional listening? Why is it important? How does it relate to space and our environments? Does listening carry ethical dimensions?

katrinem: With a small child next to us, we can easily see that while growing up we learn how to filter out what we don't want to hear. In an intense and overcrowded soundscape, we immediately and unconsciously reduce our hearing space. Small children, however, name individual sound events, far beyond our field of vision. Using our intentional filters, we are weakening our relationship to the real-world surroundings and our readiness to open up our auditory perceptive space as wide as possible. For a better understanding of our living environment and our culture, it would help us to keep our auditory senses more open and simply be more aware of our filters. In addition, hearing is inextricably connected to one's sense of space. In any case, increased awareness would influence our decision processes and interactions, and, perhaps, we would not be so egomaniacal.

CZ: Is sympathy involved in listening? If so, in what ways? Western knowledge has been very much linked to the eye, to the visual. Our worlds have been ordered visually. In what respects does the ear open an alternative experience? Is aural experience emancipatory? What can we learn about our world, ourselves, and each other through the ear so to speak.

katrinem: What we like to listen to is very much interlaced with our cultural and personal habits. For example, if I were to have a Harley Davidson, I would open up my ears when one is driving by. Or, when I order a package, I am pleased when I hear the delivery truck stopping in front of my house. Or, I used to speak with my Mum in Spanish, so it is always an emotional feeling when hearing this language.

There is a big divergence between what we simultaneously see and what we hear. Our eyes give us a field of vision; our ears give us a field of the space surrounding us and location. Here I will recommend O+A (Bruce Odland and Sam Auinger) with their performance-lecture "my eyes – my ears [http://www.bruceodland.net/pdfs/LEOMJ19_pp063-068.pdf] ". O+A elaborate on

the so-called sonic commons, their designation for any acoustic ambience that human beings share with one another and in which anyone can become an “earwitness” to the actions of the others and the contradictions of visual and acoustic information.

Katrinem's video documentation of the project can be viewed here: [path of awreness midtown NY 2015](https://vimeo.com/138623589) [<https://vimeo.com/138623589>]

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