

Blind Field Shuttle, Sunday, June 17, 2012, Portland, OR

The following is my interpretation of the audio documentation from a performance of the Blind Field Shuttle that I conducted through the Park Blocks on the Portland State University campus on Sunday, June 17, 2012. The documentation was produced by Kai Tillman and was mixed for a stereo output. The total running time of the audio from which this text was derived is 00:15:54.

My participants on the day of the walking tour included: my friends Sandy Sampson and Laurel Kurtz, my friend Emily Becker, a woman that introduced herself as Alma Frankenstein, and a group of 10 or so participants (some of which that knew each other) who found the event after responding to a call that I posted in a local newspaper.

“Okay, I gotta line forming here ... awesome.”

One of my participants whispers directions to someone. The speaker’s words are not clear, but their whisper suggests that they are trying not to interrupt my introduction of the project.

“Okay, so what we’re going to do today—I’m going to take you all on a non-visual walking tour.”

An emergency siren sounds in the distance. The alarm weaves in and out of my dialogue like an ambulance through traffic.

“... um, everyone, except for me, is going to keep their eyes closed for the entire tour.”

I pause in thought and the soundscape comes into focus acoustically. Quiet traffic sounds and wind create a soft ambiance of noise—like a veil of mist over a landscape. The sound is more calming than distracting.

Someone rustles with a cellphone or some other electronic device. The thing rattles like a cassette recorder.

Birds tweet from a nearby tree. Their song can be heard beneath my speech.

“... um, the way that we’re going to keep together, is, everyone’s going to hold either the shoulder, or, or, the elbow of the person in front of them.”

“So get to know the person in front of you, introduce yourself, say hi.”

A few participants say hi to the person in front of them.

My friend Emily, who is standing at the end of the chain of participants says “hey”, and another female participant, Alma Frankenstein, says “hi”—from her position near the middle of the chain. The two

women, presumably, aren't speaking to each other, but their voices sound as if they are in close proximity to one another—an effect that is the result of the layering of audio tracks for this 2-channel stereo mix.

Someone says "... David, right?"—but the jumble of voices makes it difficult to discern whether anyone responds to this speaker's question.

I say "... hey, names, if you don't know the person's name—", and my words are lost in the confusion of people engaged in conversation.

A male speaker says "... is that a-good, your elbow, is that good?", and my friend Sandy replies "... yeah, elbow's good" in a calming voice.

I say, "I'm Carmen"—and chuckle with excitement as I listen to my participants greet each other.

A female speaker gently says "... hey Eyva", and, pleasantly surprised to learn of her friend's presence, Eyva replies with a warm and joyous giggle.

"... um, okay and so this is the person that you're going to trust".

"... and you're also going to be trusted by the person behind you."

I address Emily, "... unless, you're in the back."

A female speaker, perhaps Emily, says "I'm into it" in response to my comment.

"... um, so, and, and we're going to stay together like this—"

I switch topics and say "since people aren't accustomed to walking single file, there's a few things that you should know".

The sound of an aircraft breaking through the clouds rumbles in the background for the next few seconds.

"The person behind you might kick your heels and this is totally normal ... just figure out what a comfortable way for you to walk is."

Someone laughs.

"Try shuffling, try to pick your feet up, um, and just try different things."

"... and, and you know, try, to minimize, the, uh, kicking of heels if possible."

"um, there's going to be a few obstacles at different points during the tour, and I, kind of, have developed this communication system."

"It's not that high-tech but, um, I'm going to have a, a few speakers that are going to also, um, repeat information that I tell you all."

Light construction sounds in the distance.

“So I’m going to be a speaker, up here.”

I tap my cane at the front of the line of participants.

“... and I’m going to tap you on the shoulder if you’re a speaker.”

“You’re a speaker.”

Joking, I say “I hope I’m touching shoulders”.

A female participant laughs.

“You’re a speaker.”

Reacting to my own joke, I chuckle “you’re a speaker”.

“... and you’re a speaker.

“um, and all of you—“

I switch directions and say “okay, say we’re crossing the street and I want to tell you to cross—I’m gonna say crossing”.

I continue, “... and I’m gonna say crossing up here and you’re gonna say—“

I point to the first speaker and a male voice says “crossing” with a degree of seriousness.

Soon, another male participant says “crossing” in a naturally deep voice.

A female participant echoes the message shortly after, and, finally, Emily concludes by politely saying “crossing”.

“Okay, and, if you’re a speaker you have a responsibility to project your voice, um, so everyone knows what’s going on.”

“Also, um—“

I pause in thought.

“We’re going to—“

I take a breath and continue “... just keep in mind how our bodies are taking up space and how we’re moving through space and consider soundscape, and um—“

I switch topics and say “yeah just, I mean this is also an-a silent walk but if you feel the need to talk though that’s totally cool.”

“... if you are nervous or anxious or you feel like you want to express something that you find particularly interesting you can totally do that.”

A car drives by on a nearby street. The sound of its engine soon blends into ambient traffic noise. Another car abruptly revs its engine and speeds away.

“um, so yeah I think that’s about it.” I hang on the words “about it” for a second as I think whether there is anything else I should mention.

“any questions before we set out?”

A female participant says “um, how many minutes will we be out walking for?”

I reply “about 20 minutes or so ... yeah”.

“...Okay”.

“and so, again, everybody keeps their eyes closed for the entire walk, I kind of—“

I switch directions and say “if you happen to open your eyes, you’re totally cheating”.

I start another comment with the word “and” but pause as everybody laughs.

I get caught up in the laughter and start laughing.

“and I kind of think of this as like I’m trusting—“

I start again and say “you’re trusting me to get you to the destination safely, which I will,, um, and I’m also, I’m then trusting you, uh, to participate given the terms of the project”. I stumble over the word project.

As if posing a friendly challenge, I say “... so, I hope everybody keeps their eyes closed”.

“Alright, so I guess we’ll set off now.”

As I take my spot at the front of the line of participants, Sandy asks “would you like me to hold you’re elbow, or your shoulder?”

I respond, “um, whatever’s comfortable to you”.

As she positions her hand, Sandy says “I think I have to do the other, o, can we do that ... there”, to which I reply “yeah sure”.

Taking Sandy’s hand, I say “... or maybe around here”.

We both agree and I say “all right” so the group knows that I’m about ready.

As the group silently takes their first steps, the soundscape comes into focus acoustically. Layered city noise rushes over everything like water from a waterfall. The sound is fluid and constant, and only

breaks slightly as traffic passes on a nearby street. This sound, along with the intermittent tapping of my cane and the skitter of footsteps on the paved walkway, becomes the focus of the recording for the next few seconds. Although this ambience is obvious now, it was, only moments ago, masked by my dialogue.

A female participant whispers "... ow, sorry".

Focus shifts to the sound of a vehicle gaining speed while driving—perhaps after stopping at a stoplight.

Someone giggles.

A bird caws but the sound is obscured by noise.

A bird that I can only assume is smaller tweets for the next few seconds.

The vehicle's engine slowly surges as it gains momentum. The sound almost completely blends in with the wash of background noise, but still peeks through—like a single wave on a photograph of the sea. The wave persists for a few long seconds. It finally breaks against my loud, solid voice.

I shout my first directions to the group and interrupt the ambient soundscape.

"turn right."

Soon the first two speakers (who are male) repeat my message, and the second two speakers (who are female) follow their lead—and pass the information along. Emily, who is the last speaker, repeats my words with a degree of cheer and confidence—perhaps since she has already been on one of my walking tours, and is familiar with the route that we are about to embark upon.

The repetition of the simple phrase, "turn right", reminds me of the children's game Telephone—as each voice brings new meaning to the words being said.

As the group turns right, the soundscape changes from carrying the qualities of a wide open space, to being bound by the obstructions of the landscape—which include a number of brick campus buildings and scattered trees. Waves of traffic ambience can still be heard, but these sounds do not blanket the entire soundscape as they did earlier. Instead, they are muted and exist somewhere in the distance—like the rumble of rapids through a dense mountain trail.

The sound of footsteps is constant and consists of a few key elements. Participants hurry to catch up to the person in front of them, bump into one another, trip on twigs and raised stones, clumsily step and scuff across the concrete walkway, and, on occasion, react with surprise to unexpected obstructions.

The groups footsteps sound like laundry flapping in the wind.

At times, the sound of footsteps changes based on what terrain the group is walking on—which, on the Portland State University campus, includes concrete with raised stones, roughly paved walkways, sidewalk, streets, streetcar tracks, metal storm drains and covers, foliage, twigs, brick, gravel and grass.

The way that the group maintains coordination with one another (while they react to sudden movements and unexpected changes in terrain) reminds me of the way a centipede's many legs work in conjunction with its body. Each step is but one gesture in the context of the creature's movement—and easily disappears as one watches the thing skitter across the forest floor. Similarly, each step and scuff that is produced by a participant on the walking tour is a consequential part of the group's trajectory, but, still, is the least obvious characteristic of the chain of participants.

The sound of this body, and its many appendages, becomes the focus of the recording for a long while—so long, in fact, that it becomes redundant. Like the ambient noise of the city, the sound of the walking tour, on occasion, falls into the background of the soundscape.

A bird chirps clearly from a nearby tree—which is most likely situated to the left of the group.

The faint sound of electricity surging to the motor of a streetcar.

Surprised to run into his friend on campus, a speaker says “what's goin' on man?”. The speaker's voice is naturally deep, and, after this question, he and his friend carry on a conversation of pleasantries. The content of their conversation is obscured by ambient city noise and footsteps.

As the group marches forward a bird's shrill chirp can be heard in the distance. The sound is prickly and quick, and its consistency reminds me of an alarm clock. It persists for the next few seconds.

Two consecutive footsteps produce a hard sound—which indicates that the group is about to step over something solid. An abrupt knock can be heard each time a participant's foot comes into contact with the material, but the material is not easily identifiable.

It becomes clear, as the group passes by, that the spot from which the sound is resonating is localized and not part of the pavement—like a storm drain or streetcar track.

A participant runs to maintain the group's brisk pace.

Two women talk with each other.

A shrill, repetitive chirp—like a cricket's song.

The chirp persists as the streetcar glides away.

Participants run to maintain the group's brisk pace—which may be resulting from the slope of the walkway.

It soon becomes clear, in the quiet of the area, that the chirp belongs to a small bird.

A car or motorcycle speeds up with traffic on a nearby street—its engine overwhelms all other traffic sounds. It eventually recedes into an ambiance of traffic noise.

A female participant quietly clears her throat.

A male participant breathes heavily—as if he is tired.

The small bird continues to chirp as the group progresses on the path. The chirp is relatively steady and adds a driving rhythm to the soundscape—which consists of an ambience of traffic noise, and feet stepping and scuffing on the walkway. The bird’s chirp persists for a long while—until, with distance, it becomes less and less clear. As if carried away by some predator, the small chirp is eventually lost in the long guttural caw of a large bird.

After a few seconds, the prickly chirp returns—although its rhythm is not consistent with its earlier showing. Instead, the chirp is wild—as if the little creature is completely exhausting its breath in producing the sound.

The chirp soon gains some regularity and persists.

A wave of traffic on a nearby street slowly rolls by.

Focus moves, once again, to the clatter of footsteps on the path. The sound is not uniform, as the sound of marching might be, but, instead, is fluid and erratic. Some participants walk with small, quick steps, some run to catch up, and some shuffle and scuff. These variations are most likely due to variables such as: height, length of arm, walking style or speed, type of footwear worn, type of terrain encountered and amount of space between participants.

The abrupt sound of clothes rustling—perhaps as a hand pulls away from a shoulder.

A female participant laughs quietly at something.

Another female participant giggles in response.

Traffic and footsteps.

I tap my white cane on a metal sidewalk cover in order to point it out to my participants.

Someone’s shoe hits the thing—which produces a solid tap.

As the group encounters a crossing street, the sound of traffic refines for the listener. What was, only moments ago, a blurry part of the soundscape, becomes clear. Individual vehicles can be heard as they pass by—their engines surge as they speed away.

A car rolls along slowly.

Its shocks squeak as it rolls over a bump.

A child says something to her caregiver.

Her caregiver says “wait” as the two prepare to cross.

I say “okay, we’re going to veer right”.

The message is repeated by all of my speakers with a degree of seriousness. Each speaker sounds alert and prepared to serve the group—except for Emily, who sounds as if she, with her prior experience of the walking tour, knows what to expect.

A female participant giggles with excitement.

I turn and say “waiting to cross” quietly—as if in concentration.

My first speaker says “waiting to cross” in a loud voice, and soon, the other speakers follow his lead and repeat the message.

A vehicle passes by.

I say “okay, and we’re crossing”, which is soon condensed to “crossing” by my first speaker. Each subsequent speaker uses this economic variation.

As soon as Emily repeats the message, a female participant reacts in surprise to an unexpected bump in the terrain. She says “uh, curb” as if she is uncomfortable.

Soon after, Emily says, as if in sympathy with this participant, “ah, curb”. Emily laughs. The participant responds to Emily’s gesture with an uncomfortable laugh.

A participant shuffles to find the curb.

I say “okay, and we’re turning left”.

Noticing that my message isn’t being echoed, I repeat the word “left” with a degree of command.

My second speaker pipes up and says “turning left”, and, soon after, my first speaker, sounding a bit distracted, says “turning left”.

I quickly say “... and curb”—so as to indicate that the obstruction requires the group’s immediate attention.

My first two speakers say “curb” simultaneously.

A vehicle passes by on the street that is parallel to the group.

A female participant sighs as she concentrates.

I say “and there’s a curb” loudly—a message that is repeated by my first two speakers, and by Emily, at the back of the line.

Feet shuffle for the curb and smack against pavement.

A female participant says “curb” to a friend that replies “okay” as if she is deep in concentration, or, perhaps, overwhelmed by the task at hand.



Vehicles continue to pass by on the street that is parallel to the group. Despite the pavement being dry, the moving traffic sounds like the ocean—each car or truck is a wave rolling to shore. Vehicles travel from East to West and from West to East, and, together, make a traffic flow that is relatively steady. As a vehicle passes by, it consumes the acoustic space completely—an effect that makes the traffic seem as if it is in close proximity to the group.

I say “turn right”.

An up-tempo drum beat flows from a passing car’s stereo. Its steady rhythm can be heard beneath each speaker’s voice as my directions are repeated.

The music disappears as the vehicle drives away.

Feet shuffling on rough pavement.

As the group walks farther and farther from the crossing street, the sound of traffic recedes further and further into the background of the soundscape—until, once again, it is an ambiance amongst incidental sound.

A woman with a foreign accent speaks to her companion, but her words are not clear.

Feet shuffling for detail.

The woman speaks again—but, still, her words are obscured by noise.

My cane scraping for detail.

A bird chirps in the distance.

The groups footsteps can be heard for the next few seconds—as they walk a path through the park. Some participants lift their feet up high with each step, and some take short, quick steps as they shuffle along. One participant’s shoes scuff against the rough pavement more loudly and distinctly than the rest, which produces a scratchy sound each time his or her foot happens to find a bump.

I say “okay, veer right”, and the sound of a passing vehicle overwhelms my dialogue.

My speakers shout over the loud vehicle as they repeat my message—except for Emily, who repeats the message quietly.

I say “okay, we’re crossing”, and, once again, the speakers follow my lead and pass the message on.

The movement of traffic in the distance becomes the focus of the soundscape as the group crosses the street.

A dog barks wildly—perhaps at the group.

I say “veer left” in a tone that suggests that it is routine.

My message is echoed by each speaker in a loud, assertive voice.

As the group finally reaches the sidewalk, vehicles, that had originally stopped for the group's safe passage, proceed on their way. The sound of the vehicles accelerating from a point of rest reminds me of the eager burst of energy at the beginning of a race—but at a smaller scale. Instead of speeding away in a cloud of dust, vehicles gain speed gradually. The sound of engines consumes the acoustic space.

The flow of traffic sounds like the sea.

A participant runs to maintain the group's brisk pace.

A female participant giggles.

The sound of traffic persists considerably as the group walks further into the park.

A heavy truck chugs steadily on a nearby street—but the acoustics of the area make the vehicle seem as if it is barreling across the walkway. The vehicle's engine is loud and clear as it surges for speed. The sound washes over the area like a tidal wave—until it finally recedes with distance.

The large vehicle continues to be the focus of the soundscape as it moves along on a nearby street.

Just as the sound of the truck is about to be lost with distance, a blast of sound startles the group.

The unexpected nature of the sound is disorienting—and takes a moment to process.

Once in focus, the noise refines and is identifiable as an ...