

Dematerializing Space

An Interview with Desire Machine Collective by Sandhini Poddar

In this e-mail interview, curator Sandhini Poddar and the artists of Desire Machine Collective discuss *Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted* (2008/10), an interactive sound installation along the Deutsche Guggenheim exterior.

Sandhini Poddar: *Is this your first project incorporating sound?*

Desire Machine Collective: This piece was commissioned for the festival 48°C Public.Art.Ecology in New Delhi in 2008. A lot of our work is conceived through explorations of soundscapes, but this was our first sound installation on a large scale.

SP: *The nine audio channels contain sounds from the sacred forests of Mawphlang. How did you hear about this site?*

DMC: The sacred forests are part of the belief system of the Meghalayan people, and we have always been aware of their existence. Destruction of any plant or animal life or taking any object from the forest is forbidden, and it is believed that if you do so, U Ryngekew U Basa, the guardian spirits, will cause serious trouble. The sacred grove is part of a traditional system of knowledge of indigenous cultures. It has communal ownership, and the entire community bears responsibility for its preservation.

The small Kingdom of Mawphlang was noted in British colonial records as early as the 1820s and probably dates back to at least the 15th century. According to Mawphlang's indigenous leaders, the sacred forest has been protected since the settlement of the area hundreds of years ago. It is also a sacred cultural location with large stone megaliths around which rituals are performed. Strict community rules ensure that no human interference is allowed within the sacred grove, banning any cutting, collection, fires, or settlement. The traditional *lyngdoh* (or king) and clan leaders in the area currently manage the forest.

SP: *Do you consider your intervention—recording sounds from the forest—a violent act?*

DMC: The work questions notions of materiality in terms of taboos, and if taking sounds falls within the scope of those beliefs. The project enabled us to realize the feasibility of the intangible, which cannot be touched or seen but can be heard and carried.

SP: *This work is equally about the porous divisions of the natural and the unnatural, along with the role of technology.*

DMC: The installation's conceptual point of departure is critic and technology theorist Paul Virilio's definition of "space." He points out that the limits of the city itself have come into question, largely because of new informational and communication technologies that have introduced a novel idea of space, i.e., space as virtual or dematerialized. He also shows the relative devaluation of a physical idea of space and place.

SP: *This work could never be staged again at its origin. Its sitespecificity constantly haunts itself as a perpetual absence. How did you envision its life in each instance?*

DMC: An important characteristic of this work is for it to be temporary. We understand mediated reality as a space-time continuum. The soundscape has a linear, temporal organization and in addition a spatial order. So the sound is structured according to the space, and the space in turn is altered by the sound. It has the possibility of being installed at various sites and locations. The work also seeks to summon false

memories of nature via the soundscape of the sacred forest, invoking the idea that on some primordial level, we remember our earlier existence in any particular location, hypothetically as natural beings in a forest, not of the urban fold. The installation focuses on the dialectic between the soundscape and our memory of that precious and perhaps irretrievably lost space.

SP: *How do the four audio channels with motion sensors work ?*

DMC: This installation explores the relationship between architecture, spatial perception, and the concept of nonnarrative musical form, which are all essential to the work. We want to use sound as an alternate way to map physical spaces by creating a subjective "ideoscape" in each observer's mind. This internal soundscape in a public space, with subliminal notions of memory, ecology, and geography simultaneously compels a realigning of sensibility to external space. Thus the passive, fixed public space is reclaimed and rendered dynamic with the use of technology. The interactive element, which was absent in the previous version, creates a relationship between the passerby's body and the forest, while critiquing the notion that the world comes into existence only in relation to a viewer or an audience.

SP: *You have also created a web-based "sound map" for the special edition.*

DMC: Yes, it explores the shift from map-making and cartography in a colonial context to the make-your-own-map approach that technology affords us today. Using QR codes as an interface helps further dematerialize and "deterritorialize," in Gilles Deleuze's words, the forest's location. Visitors will be able to scan these codes on their smart phones and listen to the sounds on a specially designed Web site.