



# Ambulation: An Extended Soundwalk

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**DOI** [10.34626/xcoax.2023.11th.410](https://doi.org/10.34626/xcoax.2023.11th.410)

*Ambulation* is a soundwalk that uses field recording techniques and listening technologies to create a walking performance using environmental sound. *Ambulation* engages with the act of recording as an improvised performance in response to the soundscapes it is presented within. The research around the development and presentation of *Ambulation* contributes to the idea of field recording as a live, procedural practice, moving away from the ideas of the movement of documentary material from one place to another. This sound walk demonstrates how having an open, improvisational approach to technologically supported soundwalking enables rich and unexpected results to occur and how this way of working can contribute to xCoAx design and thinking.

**Keywords:** Soundwalk, Field-Recording, New Media, Locative Media, Walking, Thinking-Through-Making.

## Description

**Figure 1:** Tim Shaw (2021), *Ambulation* at Sonic Protest, Paris, France. Photo: Vincent Ducard.



In *Ambulation* (Shaw 2023) I take the audience on a soundwalk whereby signals from the immediate environment are collected through various microphones and listening technologies and broadcast to a group of people walking with me. Using a small computer, I am able to live-mix, process and manipulate the signals we move through. I use a PureData patch running on a BELA board computer. The BELA board is controlled using a small midi controller which is attached to the top of my recording bag. The sound is broadcast to the wireless headphones worn by the audience via a compatible transmitter. The environmental sound is mediated through microphones, the recorder, the computer, the broadcast transmitter and the headphones.

No pre-recorded sounds are used in the *Ambulation* soundwalk; all sounds heard by the audience are from the immediate activity of the sonic environment. The audience hears these sounds at the same time as I do. When arriving in a new environment, I get to know the space through walking. Without any listening technology I wander through the area finding unusual and dynamic acoustic spaces. These can include shopping centres, busy streets, markets, train stations, pedestrian walkways, parks, forests, lakes, ponds, fountains, rivers, car parks and churches. A contrast of environments works best for an interesting walk. When I have decided on a route, usually lasting around 45 minutes, I walk it a couple of times to get familiar with it. Occasionally I deviate from the route, especially if something spontaneous grabs my attention during the performance. I do not use the *Ambulation* system until I perform it with the public. This means that the first time I am hearing the environments mediated through the system is when I am performing with the audience. At the end of a walk, I usually facilitate an informal conversation with audience members who want to stick around.

*Ambulation* embraces the uncertainty of the everyday environment. It welcomes the unwelcome. For example, when presenting *Ambulation* in Brisbane (Australia), locally sourced RF (radio frequency) headphones were so full of audio artifacts they became almost unusable (Shaw and Bowers 2020). In contrast, in the city's Botanical Gardens, the interference of the urban environment did not impede the *Ambulation* signal as much. The interference experienced on walks such as Brisbane was an interesting problem and became something to tie in to the creative decisions when planning the walk. As *Ambulation* is about the experience of sound, including phenomena not usually within our perceptual reach, this interference felt relevant to explore rather than obstructive. Different species of 'interference' became incorporated into walks and became a part of the creative sonic material of *Ambulation*. The route in Brisbane started within the park where little or no interference occurred. Towards the end of the piece, the audience were taken into areas of interference where, in addition to the usual broadcast sonic material of *Ambulation*, various RF artifacts, audio cut outs and even the occasional taxi driver conversation could be heard. Though the exact character of such interference was beyond my control, a route can be shaped around how much or how little interference is desired and when. The walking route in these instances was built around the quality of possible broadcast, and moved through areas of 'compositional ambiguity', in which it would become unclear what was being performed and what was incidental to the walk.

**Figure 2:** Tim Shaw (2020), *Ambulation* at LUFF, Lausanne, Switzerland. Photo: Francois Genre.



At the time of writing, *Ambulation* has been performed at 34 festivals, events and conferences around the world. Being able to present this work in different environments has been very important to its development. The *Ambulation* system is one I can take to different contexts and perform with different audiences. The system and technologies change depending on the context I am invited to present the work within. This versatility of the work is important to me. It does not have a fixed, predetermined audience. For example, I have conducted *Ambulation* soundwalks to elderly people in a community

centre, to eight-year-olds in a primary school, and after a nightclub programme at a festival. Though some sites are more successful for this kind of soundwalk than others, I am always interested in challenging myself to present this piece in different circumstances. Locations have ranged from ancient forests to brand new shopping centres, from heritage places to construction sites. When introducing the walk to the audience, I explain the process and the system in detail. It is important to me that the audience is aware of the technological details of the work.

A full technical and aesthetic description of the *Ambulation* project can be found in an earlier paper (Shaw and Bowers 2020). The system for the *Ambulation* soundwalk is available to download and modify for free via my personal website.<sup>1</sup>

### References

- Shaw, Tim, John Bowers.** 2020. "Ambulation: Exploring Listening Technologies for an Extended Sound Walking Practice." *Proceedings of NIME (New Interfaces for Musical Expression)*.
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