

I Can Walk Through the World as Music (1966)

In 1966, at Town Hall in midtown Manhattan, Philip Corner invited a concert audience to leave the venue and follow him through the streets around Times Square, to “just listen to sounds as given as if at a concert (with that attention).” It was the first iteration of a piece he went on to call “I Can Walk Through the World as Music,” a title he also later bestowed on a book-length, stream-of-consciousness poem published in 1980, inspired by his own solitary sound walks around New York:

‘That morning I decided no museums, no other art, but belief in this reality. To act it and spend a day within that other place where everything from this one turns to pure meaning. Oh!—it became three weeks long of it, of this every infinite second being full, heard.’

Nearly 50 years later, in 2014, Corner presented “I Can Walk Through the World as Music” at the Museo Civico in Reggio Emilia, the northern Italian city he’s called home since his retirement from teaching. He began by reciting a quote from Luigi Russolo’s 1913 futurist manifesto *The Art of Noises*:

‘Let us walk together through a great modern capital, ears more attentive than eyes, and we will vary the pleasures of our sensibility by distinguishing the gurgling of water, of air and gas in metal pipes, the rumblings and the rattles of the engines which breathe with an indisputable animality, the palpitation of the valves, the coming and going of the pistons, the shrill cries of mechanical saws, the sonorous leaps of trams on rails, the cracking of whips, the flapping of flags. We will have fun ideally orchestrating the sliding doors of the stores, the hubbub of the crowds, the different din of stations, forges, spinning mills, printing works, factories, power stations, and underground railways.’

To bring things into the present, Corner’s added his own proclamation:

‘Let’s go through a small town like Reggio Emilia and let our sensitivity welcome the pleasure to distinguish the sound of the elevator, the sounds of our footsteps and pebbles under the feet, the dry leaves in the park, the games of the fountains and the children, the calm under the trees, and the cries of the street and the market.’

As described in Deborah Walker’s doctoral thesis, Donna Rosanna Metteva *Fluxus in Cascina* (2020),

“At the end of the reading, [Corner] invites the participants to follow him, first inside the museum, then outside. On a small square covered with gravel, everyone is invited to explore the sound potential with foot movements. Then everyone lines up next to a fountain, listening to the rhythm of the jets of water, while a rainbow suddenly appears, drawing eyes to the sky. The sound walk continues its course under a tree, then in a shopping street, until gradually returning to the familiar paths of everyday life.”

In February 2023, Extradition presented “I Can Walk Through the World as Music” as part of our EXTRADITION PLAYS CORNER festival (and later album), preceded by a new proclamation: ‘Let us walk through Portland in February, braving what weather we find to discover sounds large and small, making the streets into our concert hall. Let us walk pathways laid by the great landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, imagine the summertime sounds of his fountains’ flow and spray, hear the different sounds beneath our feet, hear maybe raindrops and wind among the buildings, rushing down from the gorge and up from the river. Let us hear what we can find and find what we can hear, taking time to just listen—because how often do we get a chance to do just that?’