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Acouscenic Listening and Creative Soundwalks

Evoking Memory and Narratives through Soundscape Exploration

SEAN TAYLOR AND MIKAEL FERNSTRÖM

ABSTRACT

Sound art is at the vanguard of contemporary creative practices seeking to establish a platform for meaningful debate on a range of accelerating global environmental crises. This paper explores how the Softday art/science collaboration moved from exploring histories of the natural world in the epoch of the Anthropocene, while engaging in a continuum of public and politicized contestations addressing climate change issues, to a participatory sound art practice that that we call Acouscenic Listening and Creative Soundwalks, which may help to develop a novel frame of understanding of the world.

In this paper we reflect on what we call Acouscenic Listening, which has evolved over a number of years in the collaborative and discursive sound art practice of Softday [1]. In our past work, we have used large “contested” environmental data sets and various forms of sonification as part of our compositions. The motivations behind our work have been predominantly environmental, political and social inasmuch as we are attempting to remediate contested territories in a scientific and creative way to the public. Working with communities of interest, we identify possible stakeholders and potential collaborators, utilizing field recordings, soundscape analysis, photography and video. More recently, we have organized “creative soundwalks” as a novel attempt to engage with the public, aiming to democratize the relation between artists and a community of interest and to help our participants to develop a new understanding of soundscapes and sound art.

In 2012, Softday started to run creative workshops based on our practice in Acouscenic Listening—a sonically engaged collaborative art practice that draws upon and combines methodologies from a range of practices, including acoustic ecology, sound art and socially engaged art, and can be defined through the assimilation and application of some key theoretical frameworks that demonstrate where and how

the practice may be positioned within the everyday. These include the practices of Luigi Russolo [2], R. Murray Schafer [3], Hildegard Westerkamp [4], John Cage [5], Pauline Oliveros [6], Dada, Fluxus and Situationist artists, essayist Georges Perec [7] and philosopher Henri Lefebvre [8].

In our workshops, participants are introduced to the theoretical, contextual and practical frameworks of Acouscenic Listening, both as a creative deep mapping exercise and a holistic sound art practice.

A typical Acouscenic Listening workshop may be broken down into a number of learning outcomes:

- Introduction to theoretical contexts and practical frameworks for the use of Acouscenic Listening
- Participation in and understanding of Creative Soundwalks
- Introduction to psychogeography and deep mapping
- Introduction to collaborative, coauthored sound art practice
- Critical reflection on all aspects of the practice and potential creative outcomes of the workshop
- Introduction of group sonic meditations
- Introduction to graphic scores and the application of a creative turn to a completed soundmap
- Performance, recording and dissemination of a completed sound work

A workshop is driven by a general consensus by the participants and the artists to collectively develop, document and track the emergence of the work, from its original “pitch” by the artist as a workshop concept, to the collective mapping, movement meditations and improvisations, to final performance and dissemination of the work. Continuous collective critical reflection helps inform the participants, steering the development of the work toward a possible shared vision. The artist’s role in this process is both socially communicative and creatively pedagogic, working with participants to share expert and lay knowledge and allowing participants to find their own voices or forms of expression that can coexist with others in a communal discourse.

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CONTEXT

Sound can be an invasive phenomenon of everyday experience in that it assists our engagement with, immersion in and commentaries with the environment in which we live. Auditory engagement further challenges the prevailing bias or dependence upon a predominantly ocular-centric focus of reading an environment through visual metaphors. To help participants understand and talk about sound, we tend to use the vocabulary and concepts from Barry Truax [9] and Bernie Krause [10].

In an urban landscape, *Anthrophony* is the predominant sound source (sounds originating from manmade sources, directly or indirectly). A city can be an incessant inundation and movement of sonic action. It can be experienced through the listening body as sound incorporates and mediates a connection between space and narrative. We can also try to understand sound in terms of phenomenology, memory, imagery and associations. This may be thought of as sound's specific relational condition. Sound interacts with space. As Salomé Voegelin suggests, "Sound narrates, outlines and fills, but it is always ephemeral and doubtful" [11].

The Acouscenic Listening approach to the Creative Soundwalk may be considered closer to the *dérive*, or "drift," defined by Guy Debord and the Situationists as "a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll" [12]. A *dérive* requires participants to temporally forsake habitual motivations for movement, action and relationships with and through soundscapes in order to elicit a different form of subjective understanding. A Creative Soundwalk may also be considered as a means for memory activation.

Our auditory understanding of soundscapes needs to be both extended and deepened. Acoustic gestures function as aural triggers that locate the active listener in the tempi of the everyday, assisting in the social and cultural characterization of both space and place. It is important to take time to encourage the listening participant in a process of aural way-finding. Auditory engagement with space and place is the result of a reciprocal process between a listener and the sonic environment. Information pickup in the environment suggests distinctions and relations that allow the listener to select, organize and transform the meaning of what is heard. Therefore the listener plays an active role in perceiving sound in the world and simultaneously plays a creative role in developing an impression of a soundscape. This may in turn lead to emotional satisfaction, creative stimulation and communicative experiences of the everyday. A complex soundscape can also reveal localized histories and memories that may lead to the creation of fresh narratives for further creative development.

THE ACOUSCENIC LISTENING CREATIVE

Soundwalk is normally undertaken in silence. Walking in silence can be an important element so that there are no extra demands on the attention of the participant—for example, from mobile devices or conversation. This gives the participant the space to temporarily switch off from the demands of technology and conversation, to concentrate on the listening body situated in the live soundscape. Trying to be silent may also be thought of as a meditation striving for a mode of Acouscenic consciousness, a full experience of an embodied response to the sonic environment. In this state of mind, the participant becomes aware of all that happens with transient and situated sounds of place occurring within a real geographical timeframe. At the start, participants are given a simplified paper map of the territory—our route. During the soundwalk, participants often write down some brief notes about their listening experience as an aide-mémoire.

Upon completion of the Creative Soundwalk, participants are invited to collectively create a soundmap of the experience (see Fig. 1). Even if the participants have walked together or followed the same route, each participant may articulate a unique listening experience. The map is not necessarily an accurate graphic representation of sonic features that appear in the sound environment. The Acouscenic Listening sound map is at this juncture a visual representation (a graphic artwork in itself), which suggests no limitations as to how it may be further represented or transformed (see Fig. 2). Therefore, the map can be received as subjective truth insofar as a sound map is an abstraction derived from the territory of the lived sound environment but is not the thing itself.

At this stage of the workshop, participants are also confronted with the difficulty of describing their listening experiences. What makes everyday sounds difficult to analyze and describe is that there is no precise vocabulary or score



Fig. 1. Participants mapping the Limerick City Creative Soundwalk, October 2016. (Photo © Sean Taylor)

CONCLUSION

Participants collectively draw upon an immersive research methodology, translating listening, empirical and soundscape material through different modes of listening, storytelling, sound making and performance. They create a rich selection of field material and soundscape analyses, evoking

a synthesis of natural, economic, political and social associations in the process.

The resulting aural manifestations are at the intersection of cultural anthropology and conceptual sound art practice while drawing on a range of creative languages.

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