



Audial Kinetics and the Disembodied Voice

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Abstract. This paper will explore the basic relationships between disembodied speech and aesthetic experience in sound art through an exploration of two original artworks, *Rehearsal* (2018) and *Souvenir Redux* (2019). The emphasis here is on how these works connect individuals across a variety of listening contexts, as well as the aesthetic and social implications revealed and communicated by the installation experience. The premise is that while sound installation art is a tangible object, it emphasizes a dislocated and dynamic sensory experience through a complex combination of aural, kinetic, and visual experience. The dissociation of sight and sound promotes a particular type of listening in which we can explore the inherent dimensions of sound and discover that a sound's emotional, physical, and artistic value is found not just in its context or meaning, but also in its acoustic qualities of timbre and texture.

In many respects, the works presented here are a meta-referential exploration of *sonic-space*. Furthermore, the objective is to create an immersive audio environment that takes the listener into the constructed sonic world, where the disembodied voice thematically develops over time. The work's disconnected sound world and heightened sense of sonic perspective are explored using low and high-fidelity audio aesthetics, as well as media-specific self-reference. While the works include conversation fragments, it is not driven by a textual narrative but rather seeks to evoke experiences similar to those elicited by hearing poetry read aloud. Ultimately, these soundscape works integrate text, field recordings, and music, all of which play a part and work in tandem to provide each listener with a particular personal experience.

Keywords: sound art · disembodied voice · kinetics · installation · listening

1 The Disembodied Voice

This paper will explore the basic relationships between disembodied speech and aesthetic experience in sound art. The emphasis here is on how these works connect individuals across a variety of listening contexts, as well as the aesthetic and social implications revealed and communicated by the installations. The argument is made that sound installation art is a perceptible object, but it also accentuates a dislocated and dynamic sensory experience through a complex interaction of aural, kinetic, and visual experience. The dissociation of sight and sound encourages a different kind of listening in which we can explore the inherent dimensions of sound and discover that a sound's emotional,

physical, and aesthetic value is found not only in its context or meaning, but also in its sonic qualities of timbre and texture.

On December 6, 1877, Thomas A. Edison inadvertently separated his voice from his body whilst recording his voice onto a roll of tinfoil, creating the first mechanical recording of a disembodied voice with the lines “Mary had a little lamb.” [1]. As phonic technology evolved, new sonic phenomena emerged that not only replicated the human voice and how it is perceived, but also created novel contexts and modes of mediation through which the human voice, speech, and hearing might be interrelated [2–6]. In many respects, the works presented here are a meta-referential exploration of the influence of these phenomena presented as sonic art. Furthermore, the objective is to create an immersive audio environment that takes the listener into a constructed sonic world, where the disembodied voice thematically develops over time within a spatial composition. Low-fidelity and high-fidelity audio aesthetics as well as media-specific self-reference are employed to explore the effect of the disembodied voice on the listener’s experience of the environment, thereby enhancing their perception of the installation soundscape. While the works include conversation fragments, it is not driven by a textual narrative but rather seeks to evoke experiences similar to those elicited by hearing poetry read aloud. It could be considered as a type *sonic-poetry* in which text, field recordings and musical composition all play a role and work in tandem to impart extremely personal meaning to each listener.

1.1 Rehearsal (2018 to 2020)

Creating sound artworks that are congruent with an environment can afford an enhanced visual awareness. *Rehearsal*¹ was the result of an intention to create a piece capturing a chamber ensemble rehearsal process: the musicians tuning their instruments, their first attempt at interpreting the score, their conversations, their voice; namely all of the elements that are intentionally left out of a final recording or a public performance. There is an originality and edge to these first attempts, which slowly recedes through the rehearsal period, as both composer and musicians search for *perfection*. In an effort to flout the conventional standards of aiming for absolute precision, the intention was to document the rehearsal process as something in and of itself: these unique and unsteady moments as the musicians attempt to find the piece, how they converse about the piece, their interpretation, we hear the musicians’ ‘disembodied voices’ together with their instruments.

There are certain characteristics within this period of exploration that are usually lost over time. Moments of uncommon beauty might emerge during the rehearsal phase, along with technical errors that become the exception as this period comes to a close. At the core of all rehearsal sessions is a sound aesthetic that possesses a certain beauty and distinctiveness. By placing microphones in the rehearsal space and recording the first day of rehearsals, the musicians’ initial interpretation of the score was captured. As they converse informally and intersperse their voices in a conversational fashion, the voice itself becomes the focal point of the performance. These initial recordings were taken and then edited. The work was presented in a generative form through eight small wireless

¹ <https://amusement1.bandcamp.com/track/rehearsal>.

powered speakers, which had on-board SD card readers. The audio content would play through a five-minute loop and repeat. By setting up eight different sections of audio on each powered speaker, the parts would cycle through and repeat asynchronously. Consequently, all eight speakers would overlap, resulting in complicated combinatorial variations. The slow gradual process of the changing parts melding and fusing created an ever-changing sonic event that recomposed itself every five minutes. This work explored the idea of performance, chance and generative processes. It was an exploration of ‘teleology’ and ‘openness’. The work was in a permanent flux of rehearsal.

A significant influence on this work was from the Japanese performance artist Damo Suzuki. During the 1960s, his band *Can* created an improvisation approach known as ‘instant composition’ an expressive form of improvisational composition. Another conceptual influence on this piece is the traditional Japanese aesthetic of *Wabi-sabi*, and *Mono no aware* which considers imperfection, impermanence and pathos as being integral parts of any artwork. The rehearsal period encapsulates both these principles, and the piece *Rehearsal* is an attempt to acknowledge and celebrate them. This work was presented in the foyer (not the central performance space) of The National Concert Hall in Dublin, from in 2018/20. We can view the foyer as a bustling place, full of people making their way to the main hall for what they hope will be a faultless performance, not a rehearsal.

By presenting the work within the confines of the concert hall, rather than a gallery space or traditional rock venue it was possible to explore the established conventions and hierarchical distinctions that exist within this world. Particularly that of the meticulous rehearsal period prior to a performance. Curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud [7] suggests an artwork can be defined as a ‘relational object’ if its ‘symbolic availability’ is representational of the site. The intention was that this sonic micro-sculpture would blend into the ambience within the foyer of the Concert Hall, similar to Erik Satie’s *Furniture Music*, or Brian Eno’s *Ambient Music*, but with the additional exploratory element of the transient nature of rehearsal and performance. As Eno [8] remarks, ‘ambient sound’ can ‘reward attention, but not demand it’.

It is also crucial to note that there was no compositional control over the manner in which the technology mixed the individual recorded sections of the piece. Although the system was probabilistic, it was not possible to predict the repeatable configurations. Despite this, the outcome was not fully stochastic because the generative rules constrained the random events. This is somewhat similar to Steve Reich’s comment on his phase music that ‘once the process is set up and loaded it runs by itself’ [9].

Having setup, the installation and let it run on the first day it was discovered that the batteries on each speaker would randomly drop out toward the end of each four-hour cycle. Instead of attempting to fix this technological flaw, it was determined to maintain it, despite the fact that it produced another layer of processual recombination and disintegration, leaving only a single speaker playing. This highlighted the creative ambiguity even more, which was interesting because it was not something pre-planned or considered in the design of the installation. Kim Cascone [10] relates this ‘digital detritus’ as a by-product of a medium’s shortcoming in what he defines as a form of ‘failure’ within a ‘post-digital’ practice, but that it ultimately leads to new and unintended aesthetic experience (Figs. 1 and 2).



Fig. 1. Rehearsal, National Concert Hall, Dublin, 2018



Fig. 2. Detail from Rehearsal, 2018

1.2 Souvenir Redux (2019)

*Souvenir Redux*² is a sound installation that explores the disembodied voice through binaural listening, live radio transmission, and repetition as the principal aesthetic. The installation is concerned with telecommunications and, specifically, the impermanence of radio transmission, and human voice. The initial concept was influenced by installation artist Maryanne Amacher, in particular by her telematic works *City Links* [11]. The conceptual underpinning of *Souvenir Redux* also included the transmission and network-based works of Max Neuhaus. His use of radio transmission in *Public Supply* [12] and *Radio Net* [13] articulated this relationship between broadcast infrastructure and listener. However, conceptually *Souvenir Redux* is also not far removed from William Burroughs and Brion Gysin's *cut-up and fold-in* techniques for literature [14]. Another, more contemporary influence on this piece would be from Robin Rimbaud and, more specifically, his experimental use of a 'police telephone-scanner' in his early work under the name *Scanner*. His creative use of this technology allowed the listener to hear snippets of people's personal conversations as a type of audio-voyeurism [15].

The installation was presented as an acousmatic real-time event with no live performers within the Arts Technology Research Lab, Dublin in from 2018 to 2020. The work was presented through headphones rather than loudspeakers, so that the listener would have a more refined and intimate aural experience. Essentially, the audio component was

² <https://amusement1.bandcamp.com/album/souvenir-redux>.

made up of three audio layers: live Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB), live microphone feeds from exterior locations and pre-recorded material from the workshop period. One element that remained from the 2016 developmental period, was the incorporation of a recorded interview with John Cage [16] discussing his theories of music, silence, and time. These excerpts from Cage emphasize the fundamental principles on which this work is based. *Souvenir Redux* also pays homage to Cage's *Imaginary Landscapes No 4* [17], essentially making works *with*, rather than *for*, radio.

The concern in this project has been the representation and the qualitative aspects rather than quantitative or phenomenological aspects of sound. It could be considered as a study of transient sonic events that are rich in reference and symbolism, such as mainstream radio broadcast and the urban-soundscape. When these two audio streams are juxtaposed and experienced binaurally in real-time, this highlights not only the ephemeral and temporal aspects but also the sense of place, as Guy DeBord once suggested, places are made by subjecting them to 'experienced time' [18]. Another principle used is that of repetition and how when certain phrases are repeated, they begin to lose the original semantic meaning, as observed by Diana Deutsch. This phenomenon was explored by delaying and repeating random segments of radio interview broadcasts, and it was discovered that the captured transmission implied a new semantic meaning. When the transmission is of spoken word and processed in this manner, it can change the prevalent meaning, becoming almost musical, in a phenomenon known as 'semantic satiation' [19]. This simple act of repetition or 'speech-to-song' can make the most mundane spoken phrase become almost 'musicalised', as noted by psychologist Diana Deutsch [20]. As each repeat gives way to the next, we are exposed to the micro-timing, articulation and the speaker's pitch-inflections. This has the effect of making an everyday spoken-word radio broadcast acquire new contextual meaning. To illustrate the importance of repetition within music, cognitive scientist Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis [21] carried out an extensive empirical study of the aesthetic responses to repetition, which she claims it was preferred even within what is considered complex Western art music [22, 23].

In terms of the technical execution for this work, all audio signals were routed to *Reaper DAW* where real-time automation and processing occurred. Feeds were processed from two stereo sets of radio microphones placed in different exterior locations (see Fig. 4), and four channels of stereo radio DAB were routed into *Reaper* via a virtual audio cable (VAC). This was then spatially, spectrally, and dynamically processed within a 10-min loop. All audio feeds were processed through a Neumann KU100 Dummy Head microphone to encode the audio binaurally in real-time (see Fig. 3). The use of the KU100 not only served as a real-time binaural encoder but was also a sculptural object in its own right as it emphasized and alluded to the physicality of hearing.

The microphone locations were chosen for their different acoustic qualities: one set was urban street sounds and the other placed at Grand Canal Dock (see Fig. 4). There was a certain drama represented within this soundscape, as sound events emerged, evolved, and decayed throughout the work. The urban soundscape, with its architecture of hard surfaces, and the street sounds of people made for a varied and dynamic tapestry of sound events, coupled with the more soothing water-based sounds coming from the microphones placed at the canal.

This piece is concerned with evoking a listening experience that is embodied and relational. The intention was to explore the idea of listening carefully to events on a very high-quality headphone system. The overlapping audio textures create moments of spatial and temporal uncertainty of space and sound. Although there is a seemingly repetitive cycle of content within radio broadcasts, there is also impermanence to its lifespan; it comes and goes continually, decaying into the radio static and interference.

The project highlighted the unique perspective of the flux of sound within a certain place, and across a timeframe, and how this can have a resonance with the embodied experience. Richard Kostelanetz classifies this type of installation as a 'kinetic environment' where 'time is open but space is closed' [24]. There is a certain spectral and spatial watermark that is hardwired into all real-time aural events, and it is interesting to observe and experience how these are interpreted within a different listening environment. The juxtaposition of everyday radio-banality, static interference, and urban sonic activity presented as a type of contemplative *listening from a distance*, was an interesting artistic intervention and one that supports John Cage's aphorism concerning the 'organization of sound' [25]. The aim with these works was to make *contact* with an audience and leave them with a 'sonic souvenir' and a heightened sense of curiosity about temporal aurality and the convergence of listening and place.



Fig. 3. Detail from *Souvenir*, Arts Technology Research Lab, 2019



Fig. 4. Souvenir Redux, External Microphone Placement, Dublin, 2019

2 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to attempt to locate the practice of working with sound within the context of contemporary art installation in the hopes of better defining what it means to work with and experience sound. What is often overlooked (pun-intended) may be brought to light through sound art's exploration of orality and auditory perception, as well as the social practices of listening in urbanized contexts. In addition, there is an endeavor to contextualize sound art both historically and philosophically in connection to the evolution of the visual and musical arts. These presented works seek to partially address the sometimes overlooked interactive and reciprocal impact that occurs between these two fields, which sound art appears to distinctly cultivate and occupy.

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