City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Rennie, T. (2020). Sociosonic Interventions: Distributed Authorship in Socially Engaged Sound Practices. Leonardo Music Journal, 30, pp. 113-117. doi: 10.1162/lmj_a_01102

This is the published version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/33286/

Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.1162/lmj_a_01102

Copyright: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

City Research Online: http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/ publications@city.ac.uk

Sociosonic Interventions

Distributed Authorship in Socially Engaged Sound Practices

TULLIS RENNIE

ABSTRACT

How do creative sound practices function in the context of socially engaged art? Toward developing a practical methodology, this paper focuses on sound-led projects that stage socially engaged art practice in community settings, including some involving the author. Aesthetics, ethics and politics are employed as interrogative lenses for distributed creative processes. Methods for collaborative art-making that facilitate a balance between these lenses are discussed, with the author further arguing the necessity of artistic "disruption." Such sociosonic interventions are demonstrated to occur most effectively when sound practices challenge the paradigm of unidirectional audial reproduction: rupturing traditional hierarchies of creator and listener.

Socially engaged art practices are located in creative forms that take human relations and their social contexts as points of departure, as methods, process and/or realization. Often termed "social practice," works are typically characterized by participatory elements, a reticence toward single authorship and a privileging of process over final outcome. While a clear collection of visual art practice, theory and criticism exists in this mode [1–4], socially engaged sound practice is generally not discussed in such detail.

Through previous compositional practice as research, I have suggested a "sociosonic" method for sound composition, combining approaches to ethnography through field recording with aesthetics of electroacoustic music [5]. I have subsequently questioned sonic arts responses to political subject matter, examining the power dynamic between recordist-composer, subject and listener [6]. This article broadens these personal lines of inquiry, collating aspects of an emerging field of creative practice and scholarship in socially engaged sound and asking how such work intersects with wider discussions of social practice.

Particularly of interest are sound artists staging interventions in community contexts: facilitating distributed listening, recording and composing with nonprofessionals. Such activity typically engenders collaborative acts, where participants may collect, describe, discuss, organize and reflect on sound, often relating to local social or political issues. What are the ethical and political dilemmas that arise out of such complex creative entanglements? How do these impact on aesthetics? Do artistic uses of sound in particular allow for such work to emerge distinctly? Can the collaborative nature of sonic endeavors involving distributed listening and composition be clearly *heard* as such?

Prior to a discussion of sound-specific literature, followed by three case studies of sociosonic intervention in community contexts, I review a short selection of positions critiquing participatory art. This conversation is well developed within visual arts while notably underaddressed in sound studies; much however can be directly applied from visual to sound practices.

SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS

Relational Aesthetics, Participatory and Collaborative Art

Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* [7] discusses the use of social contexts as departure points for artists. He describes "relational" practices that "take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space" [8]. While this perspective sees the audience as a community and the artwork as a catalyst for intersubjective experience, these experiences are designed entirely by the artist. Participation is only found in the *realization* of the artwork; the audience are still predominantly spectators.

Grant Kester finds distinction between socially engaged approaches through art: describing Bourriaud's "relational" works in distinction to "collaboration," Kester finds the latter to be more involved and egalitarian. Kester's focus is where "the process of participatory interaction itself is treated as a form of creative praxis . . . in conjunction with local communities, neighborhoods, or sites of political resistance" [9]. His proposal is for art-making that is inclusive, pluralistic, dia-

Tullis Rennie (composer, field recordist), Department of Music, City, University of London, College Building, Northampton Square, London, EC1V 0HB, U.K. Email: tullis.rennie@city.ac.uk. Website: www.tullisrennie.com.

See www.mitpressjournals.org/toc/lmj/30 for supplemental files associated with this issue.

©2020 ISAST doi:10.1162/LMJ_a_01102

logic and communal, where artists cede considerable control to collaborators. This, he argues, is thus one that challenges neoliberal homogeneity.

Does this idea of encouraging artists to intervene within communities and via political action potentially risk assuming nonengagement or exclusion for an identified (othered) community? How might we ensure that notions of participation and collaboration are not understood as positive forces in and of themselves?

Claire Bishop articulates this concern, disputing Kester's assertions that collaborative art forms are unequivocally socially, politically and aesthetically emancipatory [10–13]. Bishop writes that any such assumptions lead to uncritical, insufficiently disruptive artforms, which often reproduce the logics of neoliberalism. She appeals for collaborative and participatory art (and its criticism) to be "more bold, affective and troubling" [14].

Participation and collaboration, then, are better understood as attitudes that, through ethically and responsibly organized arts practices, *may* still act against neoliberalist agendas rather than reproduce them. Bishop's more provocative, politically active mode might be achieved through *intervention*—or, as David M. Bell writes, "disruption" [15]. Bell's analysis and assimilation of Kester and Bishop's positions demonstrates much common ground between the two sparring critics. From there we may then move toward a discussion of participatory sound art practices.

Politics of Participation

Bell shows that Kester and Bishop both "identify that an uncritical approach to participatory art supports—rather than challenges—the *status quo*," and also values equally their "powerful critiques of the political quietism inherent to much 'participatory' art practice" [16]. Bell proposes disruption as common to the aspirations of both writers. Disruptive artistic activity, he asserts:

> must occur within a framework of responsibility towards the communities in which one is engaging (particularly when they are already "disrupted" by the effects of poverty, gentrification, police harassment, etc.). This responsibility may take the form of Kesterian collaboration (though clearly artists can also act responsibly without ceding their power); however, . . . this may itself involve disruption [17].

How then, does a specific focus on sound affect the collaborative nature of a project? To what degree can the sound artist cede control and distribute authorship? How does this affect the "disruptive" potential of the sound art in question?

Salomé Voegelin provides one such political possibility of sound. She conveys an "ethics of participation," describing a multifarious listening and sounding of the imaginary where the "ephemeral mobility and generative nature of sound can open the narrow confines of politics to different political possibilities" [18]. Charged with a potential energy from all the unheard and unseen, Voegelin's practical philosophical intervention asks each of us to challenge the status quo. Through her suggestion to adopt a sonic imaginary mode of listening, "sound illuminates the limits of the norm, the how possible, and effects a different resonance that can grasp and communicate the possibility of the impossible" [19].

In the following section we begin to find this evidenced practically in situations where sound artists negotiate and facilitate Voegelin's notions through socially engaged, distributed practices.

FACILITATING DISTRIBUTED AUTHORSHIP

Interdisciplinary researcher Michael Gallagher proposes practical ways to facilitate distributed listening and also reflects on the effectiveness of his approach. Through written accounts retelling his facilitated "listening walks" (distinguished apart from more prescriptive "soundwalks") [20], Gallagher describes groups led on urban routes through a variety of acoustic environments during which he invites participants to listen to all sounds indiscriminately. Uniquely, in this context, Gallagher also proposes to simultaneously "incite people to listen differently to their own listening" [21]. While talking is not allowed during the walk, experiences are shared through an open discussion held immediately afterward.

In this simple example of a relatively nonhierarchical pedagogical platform, Gallagher assures us that sound and listening function "not as ends in themselves, but rather as provocations for a variety of responses, some of which could not have been envisaged at the outset" [22]. Such distributed listening may relatively easily illuminate Voegelin's "limits of the norm" for nonprofessional participants in Gallagher's walks.

What frameworks exist for cocomposing within participative sound projects? Media artist and creative technologist Marinos Koutsomichalis scrutinizes ad hoc and context-dependent compositional traits, preferring "Do-It-With-Others" approaches. As Kester above, he suggests facilitating artists should "largely denounce the hylomorphic view of the artist as a maker/creator . . . in favour of the cybernetic understanding of the artist as a node situated in a broader production hybrid—one which is no longer under the artist's direct control" [23]. Similarly, sound arts practitioners Schroeder and Rebelo propose a new understanding for "distribution" in sound. Their concept of networked participation has much in common with Koutsomichalis's "cybernetic" parallels. Schroeder and Rebelo suggest digital models—designed in principle to connect and democratize—as tools for engaging in sound practice, for example the phenomena of online crowdsourcing for music/sound arts. Such horizontally organized structures "allow for the emergence of social interactions, which in turn question the previously assumed composer-performer/performer-audience hierarchies" [24]. Koutsomichalis continues this line of thought, writing of the facilitating artist:

> their primarily role is neither to create, nor to supervise; s/he is rather expected to creatively engage and to interact with other human and non-human agents, in this way establishing ad hoc poetics. Such kinds of practices celebrate socially empowered and emergent aesthetics that are enacted on top of participatory schemata [25].

Koutsomichalis indicates that "ad hoc" aesthetics are arrived at through negotiation between all participants equally, built on an ethical, egalitarian platform designed for distributed authorship. In combination, the practitioner-led methodologies above exemplify approaches to distributed authorship in and through sound. From the politics of expanded listening (Voegelin, Gallagher) to the ethics of networked organizational thinking (Schroeder and Rebelo) and ad hoc compositional aesthetics (Koutsomichalis)—increasingly plausible horizontal structures appear available to practitioners.

However, for these to succeed as critical artistic forms—ones that challenge the status quo as well as providing relatively horizontal and ethical platforms for participation—the disruptive (yet reflexive) figure of the sociosonically minded practitioner is a necessary facilitator. In the following three examples, sound artists—including the author—are found striving to stage effective sociosonic interventions. Through creative use of sound, these projects intend to balance and combine sensitivity toward local politics, ethics of participation and distributed aesthetics for contemporary sound composition.

SOCIOSONIC INTERVENTIONS

Kate Carr: *bangs, ghosts and mutterings*

Carr's community-engaged sound practice contains evidence of sociosonic intervention in the "disruptive" compositional collaboration between professional sound artist (Carr) and nonprofessional young people participating in her workshop in southeast London, U.K. The resulting audio piece, archived online [26], moves deftly between carefully constructed undulating pitched drones and less-polished (some even distorted) shorter samples, often recorded by children excitedly using their voices close to the microphone.

The listener hears interaction between these two positions (sound artist and workshop participant) occurring within the work through looping and compositional development of the participant-produced samples, integrating one language with another. There is audible clarity between two entities, while a crossover and blurring of these positions is also heard. The result is a unified and subtly compelling piece, drawing on ad hoc aesthetics.

If Carr's collaboration sonifies a beautifully balanced cordial conviviality, how can participative sound practices also allow more challenging social or political issues to be heard? How might these issues be defined collaboratively by the participant group? The following case study exemplifies such an approach.

Jacqueline Waldock: *Welsh Streets*

Waldock's work with the community of Welsh Streets in Liverpool, U.K., focused on residents of houses under compulsory purchase orders for demolition (CPOs). Her combination of creative sound practice and sonic ethnographic methods looks to understand changes occurring in urban space, heard through sound from a community perspective. Resident-participants used sound recording to document the sociopolitical change occurring as a result of the CPOs. Waldock's distributed methods included leaving recording devices with participants for repeated use in their own time. She discusses how this method accessed private, normally unheard spaces, allowing an intimate revealing of participants' ethical and political considerations. The relatively inobtrusive and accessible medium of sound recording appears crucial to revealing that intimacy [27].

Collected sounds were edited into composed audio by participants, in parallel with the artist. Ranging from front doors closing and washing machines turning to conversations with neighbors, some compositions were later shared online and via local radio (although almost no audio is currently publicly available). Waldock reflects on the difficulties of "partnering" as a collaborative composition method, for example when sounds appearing of significance to the researcher-composer were overlooked by the partner, with acceptance of these decisions "crucial" to the dialogic approach [28]. This exemplifies a redressing of agency on behalf of the nonprofessional participant (as described above): rupturing traditional compositional aesthetics, toward more ad hoc arrangement of sonic materials, through doing-with-others.

Notably, Waldock's work is shared publicly as a written chapter in an edited academic volume. While this is not an accessible platform in many senses, does this text actually afford those experiences in sound to be better "heard"? Maybe the readership that this work is shared with need only imagine the intimacy of the sound recordings? The emphasis of the project was on the intervention through sound recording as a *process* with residents rather than on any resulting recording being shared. The further questions this raises indicate a need for more specific research in the areas of documentation, evaluation and perceived value of participatory sound projects [29].

Waldock's intervention, and the residents' wishes to participate in the project, were both politically motivated. Waldock recognizes this multifaceted role, writing that her methodology is the "tying together of the academic, activist and artistic positions" [30]. She highlights the inseparable nature of these roles, articulating a necessary balance between ethics, politics and aesthetics, including the need for activism, or intervention.

WALLS ON WALLS

Walls On Walls is a community-engaged arts initiative, cofounded by me with independent visual artist Laurie Nouchka. By facilitating the project, I had firsthand experience of many challenges found by artists staging interventions where one is an invited collaborator. Through codesigning and coleading Walls On Walls, I better understand the precarity of approaching any community from the position of outsider, the complexity of balancing the role of project coordinator within a collaborative and nonhierarchical structure, the broad and nuanced nature of participation, the pressure of expectation from funders and partner institutions, and personal conflict over the aesthetic validity of resulting work. The following accounts are brief examples of some of these aspects, focused through the lenses of aesthetics and politics.

Aesthetics: Distributed Authorship through Dialogic Composition

Walls On Walls facilitate the cocreation of participatory audiovisual installations, most commonly in tandem with residents of public (i.e. local authority owned/managed) housing in London (Fig. 1). The artists employ collaborative working methods, beginning by asking participants (mostly nonprofessionals) how they relate to their surrounding environment, using sound and image as tools of engagement. The work encourages communities to explore and engage with their local area in ways that are often unfamiliar to them—an example of intervention. This method can allow participants to reveal and share new understandings of local history, culture and the evolution of place and also engenders new social interactions. The resulting coauthored audiovisual artworks can be experienced at the site (with audio accessed via a smart device and headphones) or online [31].

As for Voegelin, sound is understood to articulate the wider sociopolitical contexts from which it emanates. Like Gallagher and Waldock, we found listening walks, location recordings and audio interviews become ways to listen to local issues. As heard in the work of Carr, a dialogic approach is employed for audio composition created from field recording and audio interviews made by participants. Here, open-playback sessions at the end of each working day allow participants to listen to the work in progress made by others and provide constructive criticism. Composition becomes an ad hoc space for a variety of voices to coexist in parallel and to begin to engage in dialogue—exemplifying a distributed "sociosonic" methodology for composition [32].

While this could be viewed as a "relational" realization of the author's own methodology, it demonstrates the level at which the collaborative process is influenced by my intervention as composer. My intent to suggest new artistic methods for each distinct project staged by Walls On Walls encourages a variety of aesthetic directions—heard through comparison. The possibilities and outcomes of these approaches are unknown equally for the participants and for myself. This creates a less hierarchical structure for creativity through a pedagogical approach.

Politics

It is interesting to note that individuals with some power and influence over the resident-participants began to identify with Walls On Walls—even claiming ownership and responsibility for the projects—after participants and wider community deemed them successful. Parties actively seeking greater levels of involvement and ownership of "finished" projects included tenants and Resident's Association chairs [33], who seemed keen to claim an increased level of responsibility for the existence of the project on their estate, once activities were completed and the residents had expressed generally positive experiences. Meanwhile, local Councillors—often present at the public presentation of each artwork—typically made speeches implying some level of responsibility for the project. Councillors often requested a spoken brief from the artists before making their speeches, with their prior knowledge of the project tending to be minimal, and the briefing often happening minutes before their address.

While this is perhaps more an insight into local politics than any reflection on the work or its impact, greater political effect is London's Camden Borough Council Housing Department inclusion of Walls On Walls within their three-year housing strategy. Through such a decision the council demonstrates belief that participative arts activity has wide-ranging benefits for tenants. Does this significant event mark a merging of Walls On Walls artistic intervention with the agenda of the council—i.e. one step too far in the ceding of control by the artists? Is this a bid by the council to co-opt participatory artistic activity or, alternatively, perhaps a

Fig. 1. Walls On Walls at Camelot House, August 2015. (Image © Walls On Walls)

rupture in the status quo in which interventionalist artistic process becomes a more regularly funded part of Council housing policy? Either way, the works retain the potential to be "bold, affective and troubling."

CONCLUSION

Visual arts theory has much to offer sound studies and sound arts practitioners regarding participation and socially engaged projects. Meanwhile, unique qualities related to creative approaches in sound and listening allow sound arts practices to explore a distinct and rich field of possibility within socially engaged arts. Shared listening, distributed recording and cocomposition may create shared platforms, affording possibilities for reciprocal and contrary perspectives to coexist in parallel and for shared imagined possibilities to emerge.

Projects staging sociosonic interventions should consider the balance of tensions regarding relevant local politics, horizontal organizational design for distributed participation and authorship, and affordance for multiauthored aesthetics of any given format and outputs. For such collaborative, community-engaged sound arts practice to occur effectively then, facilitation through disruptive artistic *intervention* should be considered part of a successful approach.

References and Notes

1 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

2 Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2013).

3 Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

4 Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2011).

5 Tullis Rennie, "Socio-Sonic: An Ethnographic Methodology for Electroacoustic Composition," *Organised Sound* **19,** No. 2, 117–124 (2014).

6 Tullis Rennie, "Power Struggles: The Politics of Composing with Sounds of Protest," *Leonardo Music Journal* **25**, 17–20 (2015).

7 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002).

8 Bourriaud [7] p. 113.

9 Kester [4] p. 9.

10 Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *Artforum* **44**, No. 6, 178–183 (2006).

11 Claire Bishop, "Claire Bishop Responds," *Artforum* **44**, No. 9 (2006) p. 23.

12 Bishop [1].

13 Grant H. Kester, "Another Turn: A Response to Claire Bishop," *Artforum* **44**, No. 9, 22–23.

14 Bishop [1] pp. 6–7.

15 David M. Bell, "The Politics of Participatory Art," *Political Studies Review* **15**, No. 1 (2017): www.doi.org/10.1111%2F1478-9302.12089 (first published 11 May 2015).

16 Bell [15] p. 81.

17 Bell [15] pp. 78–79.

18 Salomé Voegelin, *The Political Possibility of Sound* (Bloomsbury: London, 2019) p. 36.

19 Voegelin [18] p. 38.

20 Michael Gallagher et al., "Listening Differently: A Pedagogy for Expanded Listening," *British Educational Research Journal* **43**, No. 6, 1246–1265 (2017).

21 Gallagher [20] p. 1260.

22 Gallagher [20] p. 1260.

23 Marinos Koutsomichalis, "Ad-Hoc Aesthetics: Context-Dependent Composition Strategies in Music and Sound Art," *Organised Sound* **23,** No. 1 (2018) p. 16.

24 Franziska Schroeder and Pedro Rebelo, "Distributed Sounding Art—Practices in Distributing Sound," in Marcel Cobussen, Vincent Meelberg and Barry Truax, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Sounding Art* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016) p. 449.

25 Koutsomichalis [23] p. 16.

26 Kate Carr, *bangs, ghosts and mutterings*: www.soundcloud.com/katecarr/iklectik-piece (accessed 20 March 2020).

27 Jacqueline Waldock, "Hearing Urban Regeneration: Community Composition as a Tool for Capturing Change," in Michael Bull and Les Back, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader 2nd Edition* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016) pp. 151–162.

28 Waldock [27] p. 155.

29 See e.g. Pedro Rebelo and Rodrigo Velloso, "Participatory Sonic Arts: Towards a Socially Engaged Art of Sound in the Everyday," in Simon Emmerson, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Electronic Music* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2018) pp. 137–155.

30 Waldock [27] p. 155.

31 Walls On Walls: www.wallsonwalls.co.uk (accessed 20 March 2020).

32 Rennie [5].

33 Representatives acting on behalf of the wider community who were also often initial contacts overseeing collaboration with residents.

Manuscript received 8 January 2020.

TULLIS RENNIE *is a composer, improvising trombonist, electronic musician and field recordist. He is cofounder of Walls On Walls and senior lecturer in music at City, University of London.*