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Acts of air: reshaping the urban sonic

Acts of Air: Reshaping the urban sonic is an online exhibition that invites audiences to engage with their environments through a set of intricate instruction scores. It was conceived and sensitively curated by Lisa Hall as an online activity to “collaboratively reconsider our evolving relationships with our urban environments” (CRiSAP UAL 2020). *Acts of Air* consists of 14 scores by artists from 11 different countries. They were selected from over 200 entries across 42 countries. Although set in motion prior to the COVID19 pandemic, it was launched some time into it, on 16 July 2020. The exhibition is second in the series of *Un-Earthed: A festival of listening and environment* organised by Cathy Lane under the auspices of Creative Research into Sound Arts Practice (CRiSAP). *Acts of Air* occupies a dedicated website which is well designed and informative. Its title points to the permeable sonic spaces between architecture: “It is in the air, performed and enacted each day as we ride the buses, press the buttons and talk to one another” (Hall 2020). It is therefore shaped and potentially re-shaped by us.

Instruction scores have been a staple in the creative toolset since Fluxus members sent their audiences into their environment with similar intensions to this exhibition, and it’s hard not to be reminded of the aims of Acoustic Ecology, exploring the relationship between humans and their environment through sound.¹ In *Acts of Air: Reshaping the urban sonic* these relationships are probed in different settings, from diverse perspectives, individually or in small groups. In any case, participation requires mobile internet access, although for those with less robust data plans some parts could be downloaded or printed out. The design of the website is thoughtful – scores are given in English and in their original language. To facilitate selection, they are headed by the environment needed to experience them, for example a bus stop, or an extractor fan. On clicking through, the viewer is presented with a page outlining the work and other requisite items. A further layer then presents us with the actual score.

The meaning of the term score is applied widely: Some are relatively straight forward instructions scores, others include drawings and audio, or present compositions for site-specific listening. Many of the works engage audiences with existing structures, activating vibrations through direct interactions, whilst a further set explores the environment through vocal imitation or textual transpositions. Several scores engage with familiar if overlooked environments, imagining changes, while a number address new environments or situations. Many of the instructions scores include recordings, as a guide, as a point of inspiration, as an experiential parallax. In all cases, the scores only fully come into being through the enactment by audiences, which are collected as “traces”, as text, photograph, drawing or recordings which are returned to the world via a dedicated Instagram account.

The scores are summarised here in order of their online appearance:

The heading “Along a daily path” leads to the score *Encouragements* by Anna Raimondo. The work was created in Brussels, Belgium, and is based on the premise that by verbalisations we can affect our urban environment. We are invited to collect supportive statements from personally significant women, prepare an imaginary phone conversation that is then enacted in public spaces, bridging personal and public spheres. Because we are encouraged to sit close to strangers, looking into their eyes as the score is enacted, this score is one for braver natures; depending on the location, we might want to pick our strangers wisely.

“At a source of water” directs audiences to *Triple Point* by Agnes Paz. Originating in Santiago de Chile, the work explores water – a key prerequisite for life – in its three states: gas, liquid and ice. The title indicates the equilibrium where “the solid, the liquid and the gaseous coexist” and which we are invited to explore via a sound walk. The score itself comes in the form of three somewhat ambient soundtracks, each about 30 minutes long, and points perhaps less to urban environments themselves, but to the required underlying necessities so often forgotten.

Hidden Pieces: Citywide Gallery by Vitório O. Azevedo is situated “At a bench, lamp post and bus stop”. Azevedo is based in Porto Alegre, Brazil and plays with disruption as a means to renew our relationship with everyday objects. Again we are invited to listen to tracks on our mobiles, this time 5–7 minutes in length, providing a fictitious narrative about the items in the title plus a closing statement. Where a gallery often introduces us to new or canonised works, here we are encouraged to refresh our understanding of familiar everyday objects.

The headline “In your community” offers *Beyond the accident of time* by Anne Leilehua Lanzilotti. A version of a previous project, it honours “Isamu Noguchi’s never fully-realized Bell Tower for Hiroshima, 1950”.² It aims to connect us with the past by firstly resonating a metal object (again, a lamp post is one of the suggestions) and exploring its tones permeating into the environment, then humming along. Several short texts by Noguchi are offered to be read with lips closed, a more private remembrance of past and present horrors.

“An unknown suburb” is the location for *Inaudible Cities #2* by Jacek Smolicki, made in Stockholm, Sweden. An ongoing research project, this instance explores urban fringes and “marginal(ized) soundscapes”. We are sent to a suburb of our own choosing, engaging in a sound walk which is to be recorded by any means such as drawings or notes, to be reworked into a short story reflecting our experiences. Although we may live in suburbs and are familiar with their sounds, this score reminds us that cities contain more than their well traversed centres.

This is where we are sent next, “the historical centre”, to experience *Two layers of cake* by Yara Mekawei. Based on the artist’s multifaceted experience in Cairo, Egypt, this work invites audiences to listen to the social history of an accessible historical location. This temporal re-alignment is facilitated by a 9 minute long recording, which includes processed field recordings of Coptic Cairo, calls to prayer, overheard voices, traffic sounds. It aims to create an appreciation of living within a web of current and past historical associations, two layers of the experiential cake that may take on very different flavours depending on what memories these locations encapsulate.

“In open spaces” leads to the work (*not quite*) *a catalogue of birds* by Hong Kong based Cédric Maridet. This work for groups imagines cities entirely without human inhabitants – an experience many city dwellers may have encountered during lockdowns – and instructs participants to pick from a selection of vocalised Hong Kong bird recordings, filling the vacated air with these sounds. Through this imitation of soundings, the author appeals to our imagination “to explore other forms of being, of being together and of habitation.”

My Root is the Tree of the Future by Vagné can be performed “anywhere”. A second piece from Bazil – Cajazeiras, Salvador-Bahia to be precise – it consists of a 5.38 minute long composition originally featured on the album *Mapas Sonoros – Cajazeiras in LockDown?*, combining Afro-indigenous traditions with musique concrete. The piece intends to convey an experience of lockdown life in Cajazeiras and slum environments. Through listening, our imagination is invited to follow the composer into this environment, “mostly made up of Afro-descendants”.

“At an extractor fan” is the location for Colin Priest’s *Breathing Machinery* created in London, UK. It highlights the fragility of human endeavours by linking these ubiquitous devices to medical ventilators, which became so vital and in short supply during the pandemic. This score

can be enacted in groups and involves a 30 second long period of listening, and then writing an onomatopoetic representation of the sound that is to be shared, alongside a photo, as a trace on the dedicated Instagram account.

Another UK based work is *oscillate//terrain* by Manchester based Raheel Khan for enactment "In the financial district". It invites audiences to create a "social planning blueprint "for post COVID-19 life, envisaged as one of transformation. The instructions are given via a 7.30 minute long soundtrack to be played when in situ. It combines field recordings with musings about the area and potential changes, stimulating participants to re-imagine such spaces and their functions. Having gone through the instructions, participants are asked to record their journey.

"By an electric motor" is the location for *RPM hums, choral, viral* by Julieanna Preston from Wellington, New Zealand. She too directs audiences to the sound of machinery and their palpable intrusion into the sonic realm. This score differs in being performed only at the Zoom launch of the exhibition. Prior to this event, participants were asked to locate a device, first listen and then contribute their vocal imitations as they joined the Zoom meeting.

Lay-By by Melbourne, Australia based Catherine Clover offers a different kind of location, a transitional one, as we are directed to enact it "On public transport". *Lay-By* is a text score notating snippets of thought, audible and visible facets from two journeys across Melbourne plus an acknowledgement of that area's traditional owners, the Wurundjeri people. It is left up to participants whether to enact this score in private, on transport, quietly or verbally. In reading, it has a surprisingly filmic effect.

A second work from Australia, this time Sydney, is *At the Guts of it* by Kate Brown. It requires space "Where there is echo" such as an underpass or stairwell, and consists of a very specific instruction score combined with an example video. The specified vocalisations activate the air in an interaction with their echo responses from the architectural fabric, almost an overlapping duet between participant and their environment.

Locus by Anna Lann was made in airports in Moscow, Tel Aviv and the Faroe Islands and should be enacted "While waiting". Constructed entirely from digital synthesiser patches whilst in transit and waiting at "these estranged spaces", the three approximately 15 minute long pieces (from each airport respectively) imagine the natural world. We are invited to join and thus bridge such non-places (see Augé 2008) by listening.

To connect audiences with the scores, the exhibition is accompanied by a range of workshops led by the curator Lisa Hall. One such workshop took place on 1st December from 6–8pm GMT. It was hosted by the Sound Practice Research Unit (SPR) at Goldsmiths, University of London via Zoom. Hall introduced the exhibition, its purpose and design before going through the scores in more detail. The selection was limited by the time of day and availability of environments. Participants then went outside for approximately 45 minute to explore their selected score; *Hidden Pieces: Citywide Gallery* and *Beyond the accident of time* were the most popular choices. This was followed by a discussion which revealed an appreciation of the blended nature of the experience: While an online workshop, we also engaged with the outside world, knowing that others enacted a score elsewhere.

Several scores asked for interactions or voicing, and participants felt that the exhibition framework gave them licence to act somewhat strangely, for example hitting an enticing metal object. Thereby, boundaries of comfort and social acceptability were revealed – the loosening of which COVID-19 may also have contributed to. Nevertheless, enacting scores in the dark also raised issues of safety, especially for female participants. As the 2 hour workshop felt rather short, many were inspired to perform other scores at a later date, and perhaps in the day.

Overall, *Acts of Air* invites an engagement with different urban conditions across several countries, through the lens of sound. Some of the scenarios encapsulated in the scores can be experienced directly, others are surveyed from afar, accessed through our imagination. Collectively, they allow us to consider similarities and differences across urban locations affected by varying material and cultural circumstances. The exhibition is successful in allowing for different kinds and degrees of participation by adopting a range of responsive strategies such as “re-voicing, re-hearing and re-sounding”, intended to reconfigure the urban sonic.

For me, rather than changing my urban habitat per se, the impact of the scores was more personal. I now can't pass the metal viewing platform across the Thames I had chosen for *Beyond the Accident of Time* without giving it a good kick and enjoying its gentle yet sonorous tone. The impact of this act does not quite amount to changing urban life, but imaginably inhabiting it a little more boldly. Perhaps this is just one small step towards reshaping our urban environment.

The exhibition is available at <http://acts-of-air.crisap.org/>

Traces can be found on Instagram at @acts.of.air

Notes

1. Since the advent of COVID-19 MoMa have made some Fluxus scores from their collection available <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/407>
2. Where direct quotes are presented without references, these are taken from the respective score.

Notes on contributor

Iris Garrelfs is a sound artist exploring the relationship between performer and audiences, for example in improvised voice performance or her curated score project *Listening Wall*. She is the co-head of the Sound Practice Research Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London where she also runs the MMus in Sonic Art.

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