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An Inclusive Approach to Sound Creation in 'Art in-the-public' Interest

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Abstract

The paper takes up an approach to sound art creation in the public art sphere. Addressed in line with the perspectives on public art by some of the critical authors and artists in the field as Arlene Raven or Susanne Lacy, the paper reinforces the analysis of the sound art practice in the public sphere related to notions of commitment, ephemerality or temporality which are crucial for the 'art in-the-public interest' paradigm and, broadly understood, for the public art today.

Keywords: Public Art, sound creation, Art in-the-public, temporality

1. Cross origins

This section directly linked two terms, those of 'sound installation' and 'public art'. The origin in both cases brings to the United States and a year, 1967. It was at this moment, 1967, when the State University of New York at Buffalo presented *Drive-in Music* a sound installation by Max Neuhaus conceived for the cars' radios driving through a large avenue while catching sounds broadcasted from some devices on the sides. This installation, largely studied, is considered today the first sound installation ever made, mainly because Neuhaus was who coined the term, but also, and beyond that fact, because it is the first example of an installation of this magnitude having sound as a central role. The year 1967 was also the date in which public art practices were institutionalized due to the establishment of the Art in the Public Places Program at The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in the United States. Its first finished commission was the *Grande Vitesse* by Alexander Calder, a monumental red sculpture of sinuous forms installed in a square in Michigan.

Both of them were specifically conceived for the occasion, although with different purposes. While Neuhaus' piece was playing with the space Calder's one was mostly occupying it. *Drive-in Music* was an experimentation responding to Neuhaus' interest in leaving the concert halls; the *Grande Vitesse* however responded to the initial objective of the NEA to commission pieces by renowned artists to be installed in the public space and thus make them accessible to the general audience. The experimentation of one artist versus the consolidation of another isn't the only difference in the conception of these two pieces. While the *Grande Vitesse* was conceived in consonance to the permanence of the architectural site, the devices that made *Drive-in Music* possible were installed in the avenue from October 1976 till April 1968, a little more than half a year covering different seasons (an important factor for the piece) and in consonance with the continuous movement and temporal practices in the city exemplified in the cars and the radio.

The installation by Neuhaus, *Drive-in Music* not only worked in the cross of the public and private space, making the private space of the car interact with the result of its own presence in the public space of the street, but introduced a temporal element and thus created a circumstance, an impossible to retain and evanescent situation connected to the immediate perception and the highly codified relation of all the agents involved in that particular moment. Moreover, the piece did not impose itself to the audience, who mainly might tune the specific dial and find it by surprise. As in many others of his pieces, this real-time installation worked to be temporarily appropriated and then leave behind. This feature of

what is intangible in time is distinctive of the 'public space'. It's absence of a single ownership, does not let it be appropriated but only temporally.

Although it is unclear when the expression 'public art' was first used, there is an early example in one of the texts published by the art critic and historian Irving Sandler in the catalogue of the *Sculpture in Environment* exhibition organised by the city of New York in October 1967. "If enough artists are enabled to work in public places, – stated Sandler – a new aesthetic tradition may develop, a tradition of a modern public art, different from that of studio art."(Harding 1997) This use of the term is in line with the 'art-in-public-space' paradigm adopted by Miwon Kwon (2004) to refer to modernist abstract sculptures placed in open spaces of the city. A public art, which as mentioned by Barbara Hoffman "wasn't public for the most part, in the sense of shared aesthetic vocabulary, symbolism or worldview between artists and their audiences" (1990, 114). This conception of public art, which seemed indecipherable and meaningless to the audience started then to be criticized and carried to public sculptures and projects very much connected to the architectural space.

Entry [into a work] is facilitated when the public perceives the work as performing some useful task, whether it is simply that of shade and seating, or something even remotely associated with the sense of leisure. To be guided through space in a way that rewards the passer-by is of prime value to the public. (Kardon 1980)

All the ideas tended to discuss about the 'public' in 'public art', a slippery concept that has been given much thought. A concept that is or has been depending on the historical periods, connected to art in open spaces, architectural furniture, social works, public sculptures, art and activism among others and of course to the audiences, publics and/or citizens. A concept, which has been associated with different ideas of usefulness, playfulness, commitment, participation and ornament, that continues to be problematic in its definition in the art sphere. A concept, however, opened enough to not refer to techniques and disciplines but concepts, methods, strategies and possibilities of action.

2. Art in-the-public interest

The eruption of artistic practices related to a socially conscious art in the 1980s carried the production of 'public art' to the model of *Art in-the-public interest*. This field initially studied by Arlene Raven and later problematized by Susanne Lacy in *Mapping the terrain*, comprehended practices such as the following listed by Raven: "(...) street art, guerrilla theatre, video, page art, billboards, protest actions and demonstrations, oral histories, dances, environments, posters, murals, paintings and sculpture that radically changed the face of contemporary public art" (1989, 3); a set of practices all of them, that were named later by Suzanne Lacy the "new genre public art".

Unlike much of what has heretofore been called public art, new genre public art-visual art that uses both traditional and non-traditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives – is based on engagement. (...) The term 'new genre' has been used since the late sixties to describe art that departs from the traditional boundaries of media. Not specifically painting, sculpture, or film for example... new genre art might include combinations of different media. Installations, performances, conceptual art, and mixed-media, for example, fall into the new genre category, a catchall term for experimentation in both form and content. Attacking boundaries, new genre *public* artists draw on ideas from vanguard forms, but they add a developed sensibility about audience, social strategy, and effectiveness that is unique to visual art as we know it today. (Lacy 1994, 19–20)

Mainly, these practices approached public art beyond the media, and were defined for the methods. The artistic interventions, whether installations, performances, or any other kind of work, were defined by the ways of proceeding or doing something and not necessarily by the inner implications of the media used. This approach to public art, was very clear in the first traces of sound art in the public space: the dé-coll/ages and happenings where sound was an important factor were mainly reclaiming attention to social issues or reflecting on the political and economical situation. The Situationists practicing the drifts and using sporadically walkie-talkies, acted on the same basis, although there are some differences in between them and the projects, such as *Three weeks of May* by Lacy in 1970, which are included in the 'new genre public art'. While in the former, the artists conducts a collective experience,

acting as a mediator in an artistic field that creates a connection with the public sphere, in the second one the artist instigates the general audience to merge a topic of public interest, if necessary disturbing them with public demonstrations. *Three weeks of May* comprised a series of events that denounced the high number of rapes and aggressions against women that took place over a three-week period in May, in the city of Los Angeles.

These practices, as Malcom Milles states “resolves the contradiction of public art by determining ‘public’ as a ‘space’ (or ‘time’) of public issues while subverting the gendering and separation of the public and domestic realms” (1997, 62).

Despite the intentionality of pieces like *Three weeks of May*, the relationship of public artworks, the public domain and the public is ‘uneasy’ according to Raven. Probably because of the amplitude and broadmindedness of the different approaches and the perception of the audiences, but also for the complexity previously noted of defining each of the terms. And probably as well, for the role the artist acquires in this ‘in-the-public interest’ model, and the indistinctness of the artistic practice with activists practices that intend to “affect and transform”– in Lazy words. Lacy in *Mapping the terrain* added some interesting questions to this discussion:

“Is ‘public’ a qualifying description of place, ownership, or access? Is it a subject, or a characteristic of the particular audience? Does it explain the intentions of the artist or the interests of the audience” (Lacy 1994, 20)

Her questions show once again the ambiguity of the term, recalling the attention on thinking the role of the ‘public’ (in public art) to express a quality of mayor concepts, but also suggesting the idea of public as a committed attitude by the side of the artists, and beyond that, inquiring if the ‘public’ of public art is on the intention of the artist or the interest of the audience.

In 2009 the Mexican group Teatro Ojo organized the project *México mi amor nunca mires atrás. Estado Fallido 2: multifamiliar Juárez* (Mexico my love never look back. Failed State 2: Multi Juárez). A dirt football pitch, where a Nike slogan proclaimed, “Nunca mires atrás” (Never look back), was the pretext for this art action, which looked at the state of tension between history and memory, by holding a football match. The territory, that is today a playing field, was once a cemetery, then the site of a national stadium and finally the place of residences – designed as part of a modernizing program undertaken by the Mexican government – which later suffered severe earthquake damage. Through this project the territory became a scenario charged with history and its contradictions that was activated through a

popular football match between the neighbours' football teams, and a specific sound intervention.

While the game was underway, the loudspeakers reproduced the narration of the game between the national selections of England and Mexico in the 1966 World Cup. Since the action on the field had nothing to do with the narration coming from the loudspeaker system, a paradoxical situation arose somehow uncovering the value and role of the media that was subverted by the real process having place in the playing field. In addition, interspersing the game several suspensions took place, like time capsules, broadcasting recordings of political rallies, speeches and other historical archives that could be heard by the audience in the field, coming this time from small speakers carried by the players, who had stopped all their activity.

The action is seen to be a rupture that falsifies play and recovers, in an unusual manner, times gone by, revealing the gap that arises from the tension exercised by history and memory, not just in this playing field but in the entire Mexican state. On the one hand the audience, as public of an artistic action in the field of an anti-artistic practice like football, faces the temporal dislocation, and then embodies the archival speeches in the sweaty and dusty body of the players. A strong situation appears where time lapses and real situation mix through the reminiscent power of archival sounds relocated in that specific context. Visualizing that way, through play and mass culture, the fissures in the fabric of the public codes on which the present is built.

“This construction of a history of new genre public art is not built on a typology of materials spaces or artistic media, but rather on concepts of audience, relationship, communication, and political intention” (Lacy, 1994, 28–29)

3. Ephemeralness and distancing

Contrary to the permanent relations forced by the big minimalistic sculptures, the temporal practices, which happen and end up in a short period of time allow to elaborate dynamic relationships in which both the permanent structure of the public space and the ephemeralness of the events provokes the brightness of the immediate. Patricia Phillips who has widely written on Public Art, points to the temporality as the feature that stimulates in public art

'the idea of the research laboratory' (Phillips 1989, 332) allowing to rehearse approaches to the public and thus creating and/or proposing new readings of the public sphere.

"A temporal public art may not offer broad proclamations; it may stir controversy and rage; it may cause confusion; it may occur in non-traditional, marginal, and private place. In such art the conceptual takes precedence over the more obvious circumstantial" (Phillips 1989, 332)

In 2007 Sharon Hayes performed during one week in New York *Everything Else Has Failed! Don't You Think It's Time For Love?* She stood in front of the offices of an important financial services company at lunchtime with a microphone and a PA system and spoke to an anonymous lover. The private sentences of one lover to another heard in the public space, displaced from the intimacy and carried to the publicness of what might be listen by an other anonymous, provoked a situation of strangeness and triggered curiosity of some people, causing as well indifference in many others.

The ephemeral features connected to relations of perception, semblance and codification organizes – following the anthropologist Manuel Delgado – the public space as a social construction based in the anonymity and mutual neglect. (1999, 12) In this space, actions like Hayes' make an incision that is closed after its disappearance. Who and how appropriates it in the meanwhile, and how the artwork implicates and derives from the context makes it public.

The transitory environment of the public space, which is mutable and flexible, makes temporality in public art an opportunity to converge attention on specific issues. The sequence and the stacking of unstable components characterizing the public space made the public space oscillate for Delgado. The public space is unstructured not because there is no structure, but because it is always structuring. (Delgado 1999, 12, 46) In the continuous movement and transformation of the public spaces, things, actions and situations appear and disappear. That's the reason why he asserts, "the public space is a foamy space is which almost nothing deserves the privilege of staying" (Ibid, 46) Things appear and disappear, are consumed, ignored, refused or accepted by a period of time. The meaning is gained in that temporality.

"The inclusion of the public connects theories of art to the broader population: what exists in the space between the words public and art is an unknown rela-

relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may *itself* become the artwork” (Lacy 1994, 20)

In 2011 Iván Argote filmed *Untitled (New York)* a video in which people in the city turn back looking towards the camera for a very short period of time. In silence and slow motion the video captures the short period of attention he managed to attract by yelling words of love. Two years later, in 2013 this piece was installed in the frame of *Augmented Spatiality*, a project on public space and sound creation held in a suburb of Stockholm¹. Argote’s piece was installed in a big window shop of a café in the main street of the neighbourhood. Facing the street the piece repeated the original action, that of yelling, with the power of the image this time. The image and sights of people in the video, acting as a silent yelling in the real space appealed for moments the attention of citizens and evidenced once again and real time, the micro-responses that actions in the public space originate. The unregulated audience of the piece, citizens of the neighbourhood, suspended their activity for a very short period of time – that of decoding the situation – and then continued their way. The temporal and spatial distance in between the video and the recognition of the situation created illustrated once again the attention and neglect policies in public and urban environments.

As Phillips argues “Ephemeral public art provides a continuity for analysis of the conditions and changing configuration of public life” (1989, 335). A public life whose temporal practices make the public space be lived – as the sociologist Isaac Joseph stated – “as spacing, that is, as a social space governed by the distance” (1995) which might be shortened by micro-practices flowing with the rest of the complex public grid.

4. An inclusive approach

This paper addresses topics such as distance, ephemerality or the public interest to point to different issues in which sound creation and public art are considered to meet in interesting areas of work and analysis of the public: methods and strategies of appropriation, notions of identity and anonymity, topics of analysis on temporality and urban space or practices that

1. For more information on the *Augmented Spatiality* project, curated by the author of this paper, visit the website www.augmented-spatiality.org

activate and reflect on the public. These issues open up some of the topics that I'm working on my on-going research, which is not grounded on the qualitative aspects on sound art, but rather on concepts sound art incites which are similar to those previously pointed by Lacy such as "audience, relationship, communication and political intention" (Lacy 1994, 29) and others to come.

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