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When London goes quiet, it's time for the artists to sound out the city

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we offer a review of the sound art online exhibition 'Acts of Air' organized by the Creative Research in Sound Arts Practice group at the University of the Arts London (UAL) and some excerpts from an interview with the organizers Lisa Hall and Cathy Lane to discuss sound, health, the urban sound in lockdown and the future of our cities.

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Introduction

London has become quieter during the past few months of lockdown (Aletta *et al.* 2020), as many other cities across the world struck by the Covid-19 pandemic.

On the one hand, many musicians and artists who rely on public events, gigs and concerts have struggled to maintain their practice and had to find alternative ways to get through to an audience, or even moved to completely different jobs to make a living. On the other hand, the imposed slowdown of many activities and the amount of workers who have moved from the office to a working from home routine, has changed dramatically our outdoor and indoor sonic environment, and has provided inspiration for sound artists to produce new pieces and realize unexpected ideas.

One online exhibition that was born in pre-pandemic times but had to adapt and mature during the pandemic, to be finally launched in the middle of July, is 'Acts of Air'. This exhibition is still available online at the address <http://acts-of-air.crisap.org/> and traces of the public engagement with the artworks can be found on the Instagram channel <https://www.instagram.com/acts.of.air/?hl=en>

It has been curated by Lisa Hall, sound artist and CRiSAP (Creative Research in Sound Arts Practice) Research Centre Administrator at the UAL (University of the Arts London), and is part of 'Un-Earthed: A festival of listening and environment' (<https://www.crisap.org/research/projects/un-earthed-festival/>) organized by Cathy Lane, sound artist, Professor of Sound Arts and Director of the CRiSAP at the UAL.

The exhibition was the result of an open international call for artworks that 'explore the sonic condition of our cities around the world, interrogating how our urban spaces have been built in sound, and what our sonic agency is within them' (Hall 2020a). Over

150 artists from 42 countries responded to the call, many of them young artists at the start of their career, and after a difficult selection, 14 works were finally chosen and presented.

We attended the online launch events on the 16th of July (recordings available here <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQNYGpUnkj6wE9yy5mVbYGA/>), which attracted in total more than one hundred participants, and we enacted – or listened to – some of the artworks, following the artists' prompt and instructions.

On the 31st of July, my colleague Antonella Radicchi and I engaged in a conversation with Cathy Lane and Lisa Hall to find out more about their artistic backgrounds, how the exhibition came to be, and their view on the relationship between urban sound, health and well-being, and what the future holds for our cities.

The festival 'Un-Earthed'

As Cathy explained, this festival was born out of a conversation among many of the CRISAP members around the problematic and simplistic interpretation of the relationship between sound and the environment through the traditional soundscape lens of 'bad sounds taking over good sounds' (Lane 2020).

The title wants to suggest an attempt at digging up 'all the entanglements of our relationships with the environment and with all the species in the environment' (Lane 2020), and weaving these entanglements beneath, on, and above the earth.

There were initially a lot of events planned for this festival that required physical attendance like sound-walks, live performances and symposia that could not happen, but these will hopefully take place when post-pandemic conditions allow it.

In terms of duration, the festival will carry on well into 2021.

The exhibition 'Acts of Air'

Overview

This online exhibition provides a chance to make imaginary sonic travels at a time when physical travelling is disrupted and dangerous. It allows the immersion in a different 'local' or sometimes virtual alternative. The fourteen artworks span durations which range from minutes to hours, involve public or private gestures, alone, in pairs or as group performances – although this may have been, and still is at the time of writing – problematic in countries under lockdown. They require the public to listen in, or to sound out, and in a time of extremely quiet urban soundscape, any such sounding out becomes an outstandingly salient sound source.

'Catherine Clover's score offers an undoing of the filters of hearing – by not excluding or separating sounds based on species or liveness, inner or outer voice. Jacek Smolicki's participatory project sets up a system to bypass expectation, by taking us to an unknown suburb where we can make new meaning from what we hear. Colin Priest's participatory project asks us to connect with the built environment, in both our understanding of its functioning and in how we articulate this. Agnes Paz's sound walk invites a reconnection to water, an essential component of the urban that is often unheard and redirected out of sight and sound. Yara Mekawei's sound work highlights how listening can reveal the social history of a site, as well as how certain types of listening can be prohibited, only granted to the few.

Anna Raimondo's audio intervention provides the means for you to address issues of gender through your choice of words; Vitório O. Azevedo's audio tour gives a new voice of authority to public spaces; Vagnés sound work shares revolutionary voices from anti-racism movements; Kate Brown's work gives opportunity for non-verbal expression in shared resonance with the architecture around us; Julieanna Preston's live performance invites vibration with the urban to find new connections with this matter; Cédric Maridet's group performance invites exploration of how we can sound together differently, taking a lead from birds, and Anne Leilehua Lanzilotti's score brings us together across the world in remembrance, through the commitment of shared sonic gestures.

Raheel Khan's participatory work specifically explores this moment of change, asking you to imagine what else could be; Vagnés work reflects upon the situation of coping with lockdown in areas of high-density living; and Colin Priest's project draws parallels between the ventilators for bodies and the ventilators of the urban – both servicing different lungs. While Anna Lann's sound work explores the idea of an unfixed urban sonic, not in relation to the conditions of COVID, but in response to an environment that was simply lacking – building her own self-generating sonic worlds from zeros and ones.' (Hall 2020b).

Not surprisingly perhaps, site-specific performance and listening is a key aspect in many of the works in this online exhibition, but the various forms through which the works are mediated, together with a multitude of languages of the explanations, makes this kind of a global happening nonetheless a strong manifesto for the importance and potential of local artistic actions.

When we asked Lisa about the origins of the title 'Acts of air', she explained that 'the urban sonic present is relational, it needs us to enact it and participate to make it happen. But only half of it is pinned down, for example the sound of the bus is fixed to the engine and the road it drives on, but whether or not we enact it is on us, half of the relationship is 'in the air', it's for us to change' (Hall 2020c).

And as much as these are acts of air, they are also acts of optic fibre. The exhibition succeeds in giving the sense that it is an ongoing event, a crawling resonance that is sustained by the collective yet decentralized action of the active listeners.

The access to the works is trifold: the works themselves are available as scores, as calls for action; on another level they serve as documentation of an action happening elsewhere/elsewhen, and on the third level, many of the works ask for us to sign the 'guestbook' sending in a picture or recording through social media.

And according to Lisa, 'They offer an opportunity for us to hear into each others' urban sound environments, and reflect upon the different rules of listening and of sounding' (Hall 2020c).

'Acts of air' has set the task of curating an exhibition that hybridizes some common tropes dealt within the sound art community while allowing many different ways of listening to the urban environment. By pluralising these modes of listening – local and global, on- and off-line, in real time and as a document, in a passive or participatory way – it exposes the relationality at the core of the sonic event while bringing together a diverse community in this turbulent time, and as such it is a much welcome attempt.

Some chosen works

France-based artist Anna Lann presents in 'Locus' (<http://acts-of-air.crisap.org/locus.html>) a series of 'nature mimicking patches' that she coded from scratch in Max/MSP during long layovers in three international airports: Tel Aviv, Moscow and the Faroe Islands. These patches transform and transfigure synthesized digital electrical signals that we would normally consider noise, into interesting and captivating soundscapes which lend themselves to different interpretation and recognition.

Following the cue to enjoy this piece 'whenever you find yourself waiting', we listened to this work while

waiting for one of the home-working paradigm most ubiquitous events to start: an online meeting.

Tel Aviv

Waves of noise crash on the digital shore in front of you – oh wait, maybe
They are cars driving fast on a motorway at night, while
It rains and there's a thunder or maybe
The thunder is an airplane taking off.

Moscow

Chirping birds, emergency services sirens, functional sounds from hospital machines, one or the other, or all. Seagulls calls, beating sounds: a woodpecker? Maybe it's a heart slowing down and accelerating again. Breathing machines – or machines that help humans to breathe when they struggle.

Faroe Islands

A record player starts playing Cage's work '4:33' for MaxMSP and operator – but maybe it's a fire on the beach.
Or the disc is stuck, and no one is there to put it back on track.

This work creates very enveloping soundscapes, with a good sense of presence, and lets the listener wander across many different plausible places at the same time. The lack of narrative or sonic development might challenge some listeners but lead others to different modes of listening.

In 'Two layers of cake' (<http://acts-of-air.crisap.org/two-layers-of-cake.html>), the Cairo-based sound artist Yara Mekawei hires the listener as a partner in crime, to witness and experience the recordings she made of the Coptic Cairo neighbourhood. Field recording, she informs us 'is illegal in Cairo, without difficult to obtain permissions', and this forced the artist to use hidden microphones and equipment. Because of this, the resulting audio is not as 'hi-fi' as some of the field recordings we are used to, and shifts the perception towards an uncanny feeling of mixed and altered reality.

Mekawei invites us to experience her piece in a place 'where you can hear the social history'. As one of the authors lives on the Hove side of the Brighton & Hove city in the United Kingdom, we decide to listen to this piece on a windy and sunny day, along the seafront promenade, with views over Brighton's West Pier and the Palace Pier. Brighton was once a very important fishing town in Sussex county, and most of its working population was employed in fishing. It thus feels appropriate to honour this past and the connection with the sea, experiencing the work close to the shore. The day feels like a normal Sunday in summer, with a lot of people and families walking and cycling along the lawns and cycling paths.

The soundscape presented through the headphones is in stark contrast with our visual surroundings. It suggests a busy city centre where car horns, conversations, the occasional cries of a baby can be heard. And an almost constant feature is the chanting, sometimes of a solo *muezzin*, sometimes of a choir.

The way we listened and enacted this piece generated a sense of chaos, alterity and superposition, and became alienating at times when the audible and imagined chaos of Cairo was so intensely colliding with the visual stimuli of the seafront promenade.

'Breathing machinery' (<http://acts-of-air.crisap.org/breathing-machinery.html>) by the London-based architect and educator Colin Priest, looks and listens to air, experiencing it as a life force being pumped by both organic life forms as well as machines. Ventilators serve as lungs embedded in the urban environment and are a symbol of the frailty of this ecosystem. One can not stop the pump more than momentarily and must constantly breath. Even empty spaces in the city need their respiration.

Priest is suggesting yet another communion with motors in public spaces, but he is focusing on their function as external lungs for the buildings on which exteriors they lay. The work instructs the visitor to go and look for a mechanical extractor in their local urban area, to listen to it for 30 seconds, take a photo and write an onomatopoeic text representing its sound. It seems as if Priest is more interested in creating networked portraits of such extractors, together with their phonetic descriptions, rather than in the act of listening to the sound over time. On the one hand, half a minute goes by pretty quickly for the common listener, but on the other hand, we could also speculate that the repetitive nature of such mechanical sounds could be masked by our sensory apparatus after a while. Tying the rhythm of listening to the rhythm of the breathing and speaking lungs makes sure the sounds stay salient and relatively unfiltered due to ear fatigue and other psychoacoustic phenomena that build up over longer durations.

This also leads to a reading of the work as a kind of a speed painting, a bit like a cartoonist who swiftly draws portraits, mostly of tourists from a pre-pandemic era. It is a quick tour in which we go out to the concrete field, sample our findings, digest it through the symbolic domain of visual and verbal language and send off to the cloud. This quick impression, a single breath almost, is all we get in this encounter, and exposes both the alien nature of these motors as well as our own revolving doors of gaseous exchange.

In her work, 'RPM hums, choral, viral' Julieanna Preston from Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand (<http://acts-of-air.crisap.org/rpm-hums-choral-viral.html>), brings together the humming of motors and

humans to create an online choral performance. She proposes a simple score that invites the listener-turned-singer to attune herself to the sounds of electrical motors by listening to them and then singing along with them by mimicking their tone. Interestingly, Preston asks the human singers to complement specifically the pitch of the motor, hence exposing the basic tonality of its spin. In a way, this is an inverse of the 'breathing machinery' piece, where phonemes, plosives and more complex human sounds were used to capture the sonority of a motor.

While in 'breathing machinery' the human vocal tract is taking a step towards the machine, here we can hear it as if it's the motors taking the step towards us by joining a human choir who prefer to organize its music mostly in the pitch domain.

Furthermore, this gesture of singing along with a motor that normally stands in solitude in a public space is bringing the motors into the virtual public sphere, almost initiating them into a singing community in which they are the principle tone givers. Preston shows here an alternative way to go about noise reduction and of bettering urban planning. Instead of eliminating the hums of motors and treating them as a disturbing kind of noises to be reduced, she offers turning the noise into a meaningful signal by simply giving it attention. The communion with the 'dead' motor, through a dispersed globally connected choir, harmonizes it and creates a polyphony of more equal voices. Such process of *musification*, of making music with what is normally perceived as a disturbance or mere data, could open the ears towards a different way to perceive such sounds in our urban environments.

In '(not quite) a catalogue of birds' (<http://acts-of-air.crisap.org/not-quite-a-catalogue-of-birds.html>), the Hong Kong based artist Cédric Maridet presents what he calls 'a performative protocol to sound out and listen to dislocated bird songs'. The work asks for two or more people to go to a public space, a street or a square, and to 'explore its interpretation by listening to the provided examples'. These examples are sound recordings of a classically trained soprano singer who is apparently interpreting recordings of bird calls but for the most part, we only hear her voice. The dislocation happens on two levels. On the first, it is subtropical bird calls from Hong-Kong that are being transported to a remote city, and on the second the recordings themselves are being transposed onto a human voice. In a sort of artificial way, Maridet asks us to sing with the birds, but in reality, we sing with a singer who is singing with the recordings of birds. The title of the work is a clear reference to Olivier Messiaen's work 'Catalogue of birds' in which he composed a series of piano pieces based on transcriptions of bird calls from 13 French provinces. But while Messiaen keeps the transcription mono directional and the listener is being presented with the

abstract instrumental sound of a grand piano, Maridet's work skips the transcription all together and goes straight to activating the listener with recorded interpretations by the singer.

The immediate problem is that for a human listener there is nothing more familiar and emotionally charged than a human voice. And this singing voice, with its cords, envelopes, its vibrato and air sounds, is so present to the point of overpowering the calling birds. A strange desire arises to not be confronted by this buffer layer, and to be able to sing with the recordings of the birds themselves. But knowing about the state of political turmoil in Hong Kong in which this work was born, we think that what might seem at first as an attempt for interspecies communication, could be a mirror of the environment the piece was born into. We speculate that the reduction of our interpretative freedom by the use of the trained singer may represent the Hong Kong governmental repression of pro-democracy activists since last year. Thus, the impossibility to pick our own voice in the score makes things uncanny and unresolved, but is also charging the work with current political meaning.

In conversation with Cathy Lane and Lisa Hall to discuss sound, health, the urban sound in lockdown and the future of our cities

In this section, I've selected some of the questions that Antonella Radicchi (AR) and I (MC) asked to the exhibition and festival organizers Lisa Hall (LH) and Cathy Lane (CL) that resulted in particularly interesting conversations (Lane 2020, Hall 2020c).

What is the relationship between the urban sonic environment and health and well-being?

LH: The urban is the space we mainly live: more than half of the world population is in urban environments. We are surrounded by it every day. Key is the idea of agency. Understanding how we can contribute to this sonic environment, recognizing that is not impermeable but we can have an effect and impact on it. Hearing it differently is already a start, or we can decide to sound it differently.

MC: The classification of an acoustic event as sound or noise indeed depends among some other factors, on the level of control that you have over it, and the perceived annoyance is a function of this control. It goes back to the idea of making sound as a tool to define your own territory (Witchel 2010). We are territorial beings and we use sound to establish and affirm our territory. And we perceive the crossing of different territories by attuning to and listening to different sounds.

LH: Yes, and this is also related to how we can reduce it or cut it out, with noise cancelling headphones for example, which is useful and needed but there is a huge number of ways through which we can impact on it instead of cutting it out.

MC: I recognize their effectiveness in protecting the neurodiverse and auraldiverse population and any other citizen particularly sensitive to sound and noise, but my opinion is that we should focus more on action and interaction instead of attempting to ‘cut it out’. Noise cancelling headphones and in general personal audio devices are very effective to create local and personal soundscapes (Bull 2000), but this multitude of sonic bubbles completely unrelated to each other can cut out social relationships and we may miss ‘the unexpected, the new and the evocative (encounter)’ (Lacey 2017). Last but not least, they impair your ability to hear functional sounds and vehicles approaching and thus can pose a danger to your own safety as a pedestrian (Schwebel *et al.* 2012, Lee *et al.* 2020).

CL: This is a very nuanced question and the oversimplification ‘loud is bad and quiet is good’ is not nuanced enough. As an artist I’ve found the disappearance of sounds in the city under lockdown very uninspiring. But as a person I’ve found it quite nice. And finally, there’s the issue of who has the right to make sound, who has the right to define which sounds are made and which are good or bad. During the day I have to live with a neighbour who plays the saxophone, this morning I was sitting in the garden and listening to very loud children playing in a small swimming pool in the garden, and it was kind of nice. But last night I was kept awake by a police helicopter going round and round over my house, and some foxes’ calling. It’s a big mixture and it can be very stressful, but we should also redefine how we relate to this, we need to learn to stop, to listen. To listen properly, we need to slow down. To listen to all the layers, we need to stop and actively listen. By doing this, we will forge very different relationships with people, things and our surroundings. And we need to develop criticality as well, and ask ourselves ‘has this always been here? What did it replace? Is it going to be here for a long time? Have I got any choice in listening to this or not?’ I feel our agency and our recognition of presence or lack of it is key to our health and well-being.

London in Covid times has been like a stage that has been taken over by different things, first the birds and the wind, then the ambulances, and more recently by the sounds of protests (Black Lives Matter A/N).

AR: I agree, questions as ‘what is good and what is bad?’ and ‘Who has the power to decide it?’ are very important. Probably we need to engage more people

and have more community engagement projects to fairly answer these questions.

After months of isolation and reduced exposure to urban noise, for most of us the sensitivity to internal and external sounds has definitely increased: how is this going to affect our relationship with the city and our role as sonic agents?

LH: I feel people have ‘stopped’ to listen more during this lockdown. The beginning of a kind of recognition of what did stop, what is stoppable, and what else can be changed. We conceived the exhibition before the Covid pandemic, but it was interesting to bring it together during lockdown. This demonstrated that with us stopping, all of these usually omnipresent sounds can stop all of a sudden. So, we do have an agency, and in the long run, what will happen next, will be determined by how people have felt empowered during this time.

CL: people have got very new relations with their local. People being confined to their area, made them rediscover it, through all their senses. Instead of the daily commute by tube for example, they have had daily local walks often through the same routes. This however may have caused a lack of variety for a lot of people. I appreciate the variety of sounds in the urban. The problem is that too many are dominant and too many of them are sounds out of our control. I feel people have made relationships with different sounds, local sounds, and a lot of people will hang on to that, individually.

Are there any sounds that you have been surprised to hear during the lockdown?

CL: the wind going through an ash tree. I have a shiver of excitement every time the wind approaches my little urban garden and I can hear all the different leaves start to kind of activate.

LH: later on during the lockdown, when we could have our daily hour out, when I was out in the streets with other people, it was the fact that it was a leisure space, the sounds of bikes, or people paddling past on water since I live on water at the moment, and runners. The streets in these urban spaces stopped sounding like spaces of work and started sounding like playgrounds because the work was locked away in the houses.

CL: I think people must have listened to the sound of their own body a lot more. The amount of people who started cycling or running or walking is just

extraordinary, so people must have spent so much more time listening to their own breath!

How do you think the urban soundscape will change in the next 10 years? And how would you like it to change?

LH: what is there to be listening to? We are moving forward in terms of design and technology, and sound is a by-product, thus it will decrease, while more sounds will be designed, like electric vehicles' ones and user-interactions. Synthetic voices, although highly problematic, will also increase.

CL: I'm really not sure actually, it's difficult to imagine how far this moment is going to go. What's going to happen to public transport, to the cities with a lot of offices but no leisure spaces, will there be more common playgrounds now that less people need an office?

I'd like to hear more voices, a wider variety of people's voices and a mixture of species as well.

LH: the rules of sounding and listening, I would like them to change. What would be amazing is if we as humans changed entirely the way we communicate, like Kate Brown (one of the exhibition artists, A/N) score asks us to. What would technology change? Is there a way such as the body becomes a microphone to experience our sound environment?"

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Mattia Cobianchi is an acoustic and transducer engineer, and a PhD student at the Music Department of Goldsmiths University of London. With a professional life in audio systems design and an academic life as a researcher in

adaptive soundscape composition, he is interested in everything related to vibrations, noise, sound and music: electroacoustics, psychoacoustics, noise management, the soundscape approach and audio processing and synthesis. In his practice, the word electroacoustics implies both the physics of transforming electricity into sound through transduction, as much as the use of loudspeakers and amplified sound to reshape the sonic environment around us.

Bnaya Halperin-Kaddari is a composer, performer and sonic artist whose work explores the intricate connections between sound in space and music's place-making abilities. Through acoustic and electronic music, improvisation, performance and installation, his work embodies sonic thinking in order to explore re-ritualized ways of listening. His work was heard in concert halls, as well as galleries and museums, was awarded the Busoni Förderpreis for composition in 2015 by the Berlin Academy of the Arts (ADK), the Ad-libitum composition prize in 2016, and he was commissioned by leading ensembles such as MusikFabrik, Klangforum Heidelberg, Israel contemporary players and more. He is currently working on his PhD at Goldsmiths, supported by the Siday musical fund and the Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich foundation.

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