MAKING ACTIVIST SOUND

Christopher DeLaurenti

ABSTRACT The author discusses his approach to recording protests and other politically charged soundscapes.

To listen is to liberate. I start with myself by taking microphones toward and—when I must—enough courage—beyond the boundaries of property, the law and oppression. I make field recordings, but I am not interested in building a documentary archive or capturing the essence of a place or an event. When I tape small microphones to my skull, or button up a stout leather vest with sewn-in mics, or strap an ORTF [1] stereo pair to my homemade mic boom, I am venturing into the world to ask, “Who is heard?” “Who has?” “Who is here?” and “Why are we listening to this right now?” I ask these questions to open my ears and open my heart. Can I hear justice?

I do not wait for quiet utopias. Let other field recordists seek the primordial absence of civilization. My “field” is the city, among people. The field is not a place, but an unstable condition where the soundscape may change radically at any moment. In the studio, it seldom rains.

Out in the field, I listen and learn to re-listen. Recording spurs me to imagine what I will miss and what my microphones pick up. Subject to sensory adaptation, my ears quickly subsume passing cars and juddering helicopters into a dull, recessed drone while the portable recorder mics pick up. Subject to sensory adaptation, my ears quickly subsume passing cars and juddering helicopters into a dull, recessed drone while the portable recorder mics pick up. Subject to sensory adaptation, my ears quickly subsume passing cars and juddering helicopters into a dull, recessed drone while the portable recorder mics pick up. Subject to sensory adaptation, my ears quickly subsume passing cars and juddering helicopters into a dull, recessed drone while the portable recorder mics pick up.

Noise, tapestry, text: Protests are one of the few occasions when a city feels lived in, not just inhabited. Unlike chants at regimented sporting events, urban distance conjures poetic depth amidst open space: Every echoing group creates a space for the city, among people. The field is not a place, but an unstable condition where the soundscape may change radically at any moment. In the studio, it seldom rains.

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“As I see it,” declared Igor Stravinsky in *Retrospectives and Conclusions*, “even the greatest symphony is able to do very little about Hiroshima.” Symphonies—by me or anyone else—cannot bandage a wound and feed someone, but they can help expose the behaviors, choices and culprits who allow evil—poverty, racism, property, war and naïve, faultless money—to continue.

Most of what I make remains free, online. There is scant cultural capital and no money in activist sound. I hope a just, radical transformation of society renders these works obsolete, leaving quaint, bygone documents for thesis-hungry scholars.

**Reference**

1 Named after the French National Broadcasting organization (Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française), the ORTF microphone configuration “consists of two cardioid microphones oriented outward from the centerline of the sound source with an included angle of 110 degrees and with a capsule space of 17 cm.” See Streicher and Dooley, “Basic Stereo Microphone Perspectives,” *JAES* Journal 33, Nos. 7/8 (1985) p. 549.

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**THE LINES BENEATH YOUR FEET: REPRESENTING URBAN PROTEST THROUGH SOUND**

Christopher Wood

**ABSTRACT** The author describes the development of a series of pieces based on recordings of protest in public spaces. Particular attention is paid to the ability of each form to represent the experience of participating in a protest.

The biggest strike of U.K. public sector workers in a generation took place on 30 November 2011. The protest was called by a coalition of unions in response to government austerity measures. These measures included pay freezes and a re-drawing of the rules around pensions for public sector workers. Picket lines formed outside major public buildings, and a mass of workers marched through central London. Parallel protests included vocal demonstrations at Liverpool Street station (a major commuter hub in the financial district) and an attempted occupation of an office building at Liverpool Street station (a major commuter hub in the London. Parallel protests included vocal demonstrations and collectively created disruption of the usual function of an urban space. This significance is lost when the depiction is set in an expected and repeatable set of visual news media tropes.

The resulting piece, *Sounds of the Strike*, was carried online on the *New Statesman* website (a relatively left-wing news review magazine). I received comments from listeners that the piece “really felt like being there.” While this could be considered a success, I was troubled by the idea that I had just created a different type of fetish for a different audience. The piece may have presented a more nuanced depiction of protest by emphasizing it as a site of spatial disruption, but the fundamental relationship between producer/artist and consumer remained the same. This was a problem for me, as I understand protest to be an act of engagement, exploration and action, not one of remote listening to a predefined object. To investigate the further potential of the recordings I used them in an interactive installation.

*The Lines Beneath Your Feet* (Fig. 1) used floor pads as triggers for sections of the recordings. The pads were covered with images of the road surface in London’s financial district. The interaction was intended to invoke the act of marching and the feeling of being present in the streets. I did not draw up any rules regarding how many people...
could interact with the work at once (although, practically, the size of the interface made it difficult for more than three people to interact with a single floor pad at one time). What was interesting for me here was my lack of control over the narrative produced by the work. There are valid criticisms around a lack of openness in interactive art and an inability of the participant to contribute to the overall meaning of an interactive artwork [1]. However, while by no means being completely open, *The Lines Beneath Your Feet* did seem to be more open than the more static meanings of *Sounds of the Strike*, due in part to a different presentational context. The recordings were presented in a gallery rather than in an informational/opinion-led news review context. The sound was also played out of speakers rather than through headphones [2], thus losing the immersive binaural qualities of the audio. These shifts, along with the audience’s role in triggering the sounds, allowed for more possibilities in interpreting the content. In one interaction, two children spent some time running back and forth across the pads. They were particularly interested in retriggering the sample of the chant: “I’d rather be a pigeon than a scab” [3] because they thought the audio was repeating: “I’d rather be a pigeon in the sky.”

Street protest destabilizes and suspends the habitual functioning of an urban environment. During a protest, spaces are occupied and recast as sites of a different kind of sociality. At this point, many things usually taken for granted are up for grabs: power, certainly, but also wider spatial meaning. When the children misheard and repeatedly retriggered the audio, their playful action was much more in keeping with what I understand to be the role of street protest than the piece’s previous incarnation: an immersive soundscape held down by the weight of accurate representation.

References and Notes


2. *The New Statesman* post strongly suggested listening to the soundscape through headphones.

3. “Scab” is a derogatory term for strikebreaker.

*TRUE BREAD: THE SOUNDS OF CHANGE IN CUBA*

**Neil Leonard**

**ABSTRACT** This article examines *True Bread*, an installation that engages listeners in the evolving sonic environment of Cuba. The work was made in collaboration with Cuban street vendors, examining the vendors’ presence as a signifier of imminent social and political change.

*True Bread* is a 10-loudspeaker, two-video projection installation that I presented most recently during a fellowship at the Art, Culture and Technology program in the MIT Media Lab (2014) and previously at the Stephan Stoyanov Gallery in New York (2013). The work is the result of my long-term collaboration with *pregoneros*, the street vendors of Cuba (Fig. 2). *True Bread* reconstructs the sonic environment of urban Cuba as it was immediately following the recent liberalization of policies toward small businesses. The installation’s six loudspeakers present voices of *pregoneros*, within sparse sound design, to evoke the antiphony of the ancient phenomenon of street vendors calling out to attract business. The remaining four loudspeakers in the installation play audio from video projections depicting *pregoneros* at work.

**Pregóns**

*True Bread* had its genesis in a series of field recordings made while visiting my sister-in-law in Mantanzas, Cuba. Having frequented the island since 1986, I was accustomed to a society with virtually no private business and consequently a void of advertising. Of course the black market thrived under the radar with muted vendors traveling door-to-door to peddle their wares, sometimes naming products in code. Around 2011, when they re-emerged on the streets following a loosening of Cuban policies, the *pregoneros* instantly transformed the soundscape of Cuba, creating an ongoing musical theater using idiosyncratic vocal marketing strategies.

The first vendor that I came across at that time was pedaling a homemade cart and singing in a tenor voice, “Soft bread. Really soft. Crackers. Large crackers.” Another vendor sold a liquid concoction that he claimed killed ants, cockroaches and mothers-in-law. One *pregonero* in Havana imitated the sirens and alarms of the car security systems that he sold. Another sang with a voice reminiscent of the famous singer Celia Cruz. Each *pregonero* performs a highly personal chant with a sense of spontaneity that is absent from the formulaic music and commentary that dominates the island’s airwaves.

I was compelled to develop the visual component of *True Bread* when I found a *pregonero* delivering his bread using a “readymade” Styrofoam box mounted on a dilapi-

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dated wheelchair. His chant proclaimed that he is bringing “the true” bread. The image of capitalism arriving on a wheelchair, far in advance of the recent normalization of U.S.–Cuban diplomatic relations, could not have been more striking.

**Llegooo Fefa**

Prior to creating True Bread, I created Llegooo Fefa (2012) in collaboration with my wife, Cuban artist Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, for her homecoming exhibition at Casa de las Americas in Havana. Fefa stands for “Familia Extranjera, Family Abroad” and is stamped on the passport of Cubans living outside of the country. Within Cuba the Familias Extranjeras have limited rights and share an influx status as do pregoneros. For Llegooo Fefa, we invited the pregoneros to sell their chosen products, plastic flowers, peanuts and imitation Chanel No. 5, and also promoted the arrival of a mythical character “Fefa,” who was invented and enacted by Campos-Pons. Apparently, the pregoneros’ black market image had not yet faded at that time, and our performance was interrupted by the arrest of a pregonero for selling Chanel outside the gallery.

The idea of providing a forum to reverse the negative image of the vendors stayed in my mind. For the 11th Havana Biennale we created a performance called Llegooo Fefa (2012) that we presented during the opening of the Biennale at the Wifredo Lam Center. The performance was loosely fashioned after “American Idol” and included pregoneros from the Casa event and a jury of respected music specialists. Introducing what to my knowledge was the first pregonero competition, I detailed how they revived an iconic cultural practice and how growing up in the United States I knew of the pregoneros long before I had heard of Cuba—due to Louis Armstrong’s version of the iconic Cuban song “El Manisero” (The Peanut Vendor) in which Armstrong sings the part of a Cuban pregonero.

Without mentioning the antagonistic diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States and the trade embargo specifically, Llegooo Fefa suggested the need for family reunification, international cooperation and mechanisms to enable growth of small businesses. The day before the competition there were attempts to censor a companion installation that we had created, but to my surprise the pregonero competition was reported on the front page of the national newspaper and was later recreated on national television. The collaborating pregoneros told us that the performance helped legitimize their practice and stop the police harassment.

**True Bread**

True Bread’s composition and diffusion strategy came from a presentation at the Cuban pavilion of the 55th Venice Biennale at the Museum of Archeology, Piazza San Marco. This mixed media installation, entitled $53+1=54+1=55$. Letter of the Year (2013), featured pregonero chants and interviews with Cubans describing the economic and material support they would like from family abroad. I used their voices to create a sonic map of urban Cuba, projecting the voices via 18 bidirectional, custom-made speakers, each emitting sound in two discrete directions, creating a total of 36 sound sources. The piece was suggestive not only of the antiphonal sound of Cuba but also of the innovations carried out in 16th-century Basilica San Marco, where composers of the day, such as Adrian Willaert and Giovanni Gabrieli, specified site-specific placement of instruments and voice in their musical scores for the first time in Europe.

**Black Field Plates:**

**Emergent Ecologies in Sonic Art**

Nathan Thompson

**Abstract**

Black Field Plates (2014) is a series of sound installations. The series is an investigation into the politics of emergent sound composition. By imitating the ways in which natural systems organize matter, these sound installations self-organize sound and compose music.

Musicians have long drawn inspiration from the natural world. Predetermined musical structures are used to fit the fluid and complex sounds of the natural world into patterns of discrete pitches and durations. The origins of Western music can be traced to the harmonic relationships Pythagoras derived from the hammering of blacksmith’s anvils. In
order to create his musical system, Pythagoras separated sounds from their materials and divided them into mathematical ratios. This separation of sound from its materials created a political division between noise—defined as the sounds of the world—and music, which adhered to discrete mathematical ratios. The works I have created in the series Black Field Plates (2014) challenge this exclusionary politics with emergent systems that generate audio feedback from basic materials such as steel, electricity, copper, piezo crystals and standard effects pedals. The process is a political one in which the power of the composer is redistributed from a predefined and hierarchical musical structure to an adaptive material system. The emergent sonic ecologies of Black Field Plates challenge the use of predesigned musical systems as the only way to produce music.

Composed of suspended black steel plates in two sizes, each installation consists of multiple audio feedback systems placed in dialogue with one another (Fig. 3). The installation as a whole models the complex behavior that can arise from simple materials and electricity. The works in the series explore relationships among feedback, systems of self-organization, nature and sound. The plates are paired: One plate contains a speaker resonator and the other a piezo transducer. Together these form vibrating plate speakers and reverberant microphones. The plates form compositions that respond to movement within the environment, including movements in the air, talking and incidental noises. The sets of plates are augmented by a variety of tuned phaser and effects pedals that break the feedback into adaptive rhythms and patterns.

Black Field Plates sits within an expanding lineage of musical compositions that use feedback to connect materials and environment. Alvin Lucier’s Vespers (1968) employed sonar location technology to create a composition that maps an environment with sound, drawing attention to nocturnal navigational processes associated with bats. Lucier’s work challenges the politics of traditional musical notation by replacing a musical system with a communication system. David Tudor’s electronic works replace musical notation with meticulously tended networks of electronics. Nicolas Collins’s work Pea Soup (1974) produces an adaptive composition from a combination of audio feedback and phasing effects that sonically mutates beyond its score. More recently, Usman Haque’s Evolving Sonic Environment (2009) presented an interactive sonic environment that built a representation of its occupants through a network of sound and sensors. This work also draws from its environment in a way that moves beyond traditional musical structures. These works rely on a systems-based approach to composition that is grounded in the interactions that connect us to the natural world.

Haque specifically references the work of cyberneticist Gordon Pask, who was one of a number of mid-century cybernetic researchers to explore the adaptive processes that composed the biological, social and physiological worlds via material systems.

Pask’s Musicolour (1953) operated within theater environments and engaged participants and observers in symmetrically adaptive relationships. The music in Musicolour was not specifically controlled by a composer, a device or the audience; rather, it was self-organized directly from a recursive environment composed of light, sound, simple electronics and human interaction. Pask’s work built on that of other cyberneticists, including Ross Ashby and W. Grey Walter. Ashby’s homeostat (1948) modeled biological processes and self-stabilizing physiological processes; Walter’s Machina speculatrix (1948/1949)—robots that resembled tortoises—demonstrated how emergent behavior could be modeled by small groups of wheeled robots armed with little more than a series of simple recursive electronic processes. Pask, Ashby and Walter each presented devices designed to facilitate emergent activity beyond their physical designs.

Emergent material systems connect both cybernetics and experimental music to ecological systems. Emergent compositions, whether they are formed within cybernetics or experimental music, do not rely on instruments for their composition; instead they form music from the connections between elements in the system. Emergent compositions, such as Black Field Plates, are systems built from the ground up, and their operations are directly linked to their material constructions. The construction of Black Field Plates generates indeterminate behavior—a connection to nature that was explored extensively by John Cage [1]. Cage’s replacement of musical systems with indeterminate systems associated with nature is no less political today than it was when he first conceived of it. In this context, the adaptive nature of Black Field Plates challenges composers to think beyond the constraints of pre-structured musical systems.

The Black Field Plates series explores connections between nature and adaptive systems by grounding them in the interactions between simple physical materials. Some installations of the Black Field Plates have used a linked double feedback loop that produces a kind of dynamic stability in sound. In these cases, the two plates are networked so that when one speaker-plate combination increases in volume, the other draws energy from it, creating a shifting dynamic equilibrium. Using stiff wires that create an...
additional physical connection between the speaker cones and the plates can add further sonic complexity.

Emergent compositional systems de-emphasize the role of the composer by integrating his/her role within the wider context of the environment, blurring the boundaries among the composer, the environment and live performance. The adaptive processes that compose the natural world provide a rich resource for musicians and offer a challenge to determinate musical structures. By using simple networked materials, sound generated by Black Field Plates produces complex emergent ecologies of sound that intrinsically link audience, composer and architecture—organizationally and materially—to the environment.

Reference

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SOUNDSCAPES OF THE POST-SOVIET WORLD TODAY: RESOUNDING LITHUANIA

Sandra Kazlauskaitė

ABSTRACT Soundscapes of the Post-Soviet World Today is an ethnographic sonic art project that aims to reveal the soundscapes of contemporary post-Soviet countries. In this statement the author presents the project’s first case study: the soundscapes of Lithuania.

An ocean of sound relentlessly pulsates, vibrates and resonates in and through our bodies. Some sounds remain unexplained, unidentifiable, mystical and unrecognized, while others find their source and origin, thus becoming visible. Most are heard; however, not all are attended or listened to. As a practicing sound artist and a researcher of sonic environments, I search for noises, hidden sounds and silences buried under the dominance of the visual—flashing lights, digital images, billboards and faces. I search for sound in order to inspect and define my immediate territory and embody new meanings. I choose to close my eyes, exit the audiovisual complex, locate and sustain the discovered sound objects, and patiently wait for the sounds to reintroduce me to soundscapes that compose the contemporary world. With this in mind, I began my search for a sonic world that is an integral part of my social identity and artistic essence: the post-Soviet bloc.

Lithuania, a country that faced harsh political, economic and social clashes during World War II, lost its independence in 1944 and became a part of the Soviet Union, where its identity remained until 1991. In wartime, Lithuania was a noisy place; sounds of military, machinery, political resentment, social injustice and the partisan resistance movement were audible. However, during the postwar period of its occupation, the country’s voice was slowly muted and assimilated by the oppressive voice of the occupying forces. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Lithuanian soundscapes have been gradually acclimatizing to the aural constructions of the West, consequently obscuring the gap between Western and post-Soviet urban and rural soundscapes. Here I present a selection of field recordings from Soundscapes of the Post-Soviet World to showcase the modern soundscape of Lithuania.

Soundscape #1: Town Suburb

In creating this soundscape, I was located in a small Lithuanian suburb, facing a sonic landscape that encompasses the echoing bark of animals, a resonating electric hiss, the sound of snow on gravel roads, creaking metal, reverberating tones of populated rooms, gardens, television sets, record players and voices—a cacophony of natural and mechanical human-made sounding events.

Soundscape #2: Living Room

Sonically, the household in this recording reveals a dissonance of internal and external voices, incidental unidentifiable sounds, sonorous ambience composed of mechanical objects and musical noises that interrupt the spoken words. Language shifts from Lithuanian to Russian; words resonate, bounce back and then shift again. Suddenly, language becomes secondary; it is all noise and vibration that melts into discordant aural accidents.

Soundscape #3: Laisvės Aleja (City Centre)

Once a buzzing, raucous sounding space full of voices, conversations, background noises, hums and roars, the city center is now a place of sonic abandonment: The central department store now resembles a construction site; the fountain has become a pile of rust, ice and mold. The place produces minimal incidental noises; some mechanical, some organic in nature. The place has lost its sonic time. It is deserted; sporadic voices and muffled footsteps become audible at points; however, the overall sonic landscape lies there still, filled with minor harmonies.

Soundscape #4: Public Transport

This short but compelling aural event recorded in a minibus in Lithuania captures a combination of radio sounds, car-induced mechanical sounds and leading vocal parts of two individuals. A somewhat existential, yet banal, conversation between two strangers becomes melodic in nature; it forms a special sonic space that is shared with the rest
of the minibus audience. The minibus presents itself as an exclusive, private space where secrets can be shared.

**Soundscape #5: Nida Airport**

The sonic image of this piece escapes the urban soundscape—it evades/flees noise pollution (Fig. 4). The silent environment foregrounds sounds that are usually ignored. In this extreme soundscape, we cannot identify any human voices, movements, screams or machines. Instead, the acoustic environment is filled with natural life: voices of the sea, moving trees and wind. A sudden realization follows—the industrial world has not entirely receded. The low-frequency humming of ship and port noises invade the listener’s ears, and we surrender back to the contemporary landscape. Ultimately, nature cannot escape the industrial noise.

**The Cacophonous Landscape of Contemporary Lithuania**

While trying to determine Lithuania’s newly transformed sonic identity, I have so far discovered a sonic landscape that appears to be more ambiguous than initially expected—an environment surrounded by nonlinear, disparate sounds, where the notion of sonorous independence is yet to be embodied. The new conditions of contemporary culture have neutralized the national soundscape: Sounds of religion, tradition and rituals are dissipating. Fables, myths and sonic constructions of tradition are contained within dedicated, separated spaces and tend not to leak to public consumerist spaces or even rural environments. Sonically, I face a world of contemporary capitalism and urban noise production: sounds of consumption, electricity, networks, connectivity, automation and labor power. This soundscape is not stable or linear but fragmented, malleable and constantly evolving, according to the unspoken laws of capital. Such a construction produces a hybrid sonic environment that has yet to find its identity.

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