TRANSLATING HISTORICALLY REFLEXIVE PERCEIVING FROM VISUAL TO SONIC ART

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ABSTRACT This article discusses making Within History, an artwork that translates a commentary on historically situated perceiving from the visual realm to the sonic.

Origin
I made Within History [1] early in the Listening Art project, which explored making sonic artworks that encourage critical reflection on listening [2]. In this phase I emulated works that successfully affected awareness of perception—these were mostly visual, following visual art’s better-documented critical engagement with perception [3,4]. The model for Within History was David Thomas’s Amid history 2 [5]; I sought to abstract its encouragement of reflection on historically situated looking to listening.

Inspiration
Amid history 2 combines visual media, leveraging their implicit ways of looking against one another. It is a large photograph of tourists visiting the Brandenburg Gate, partly painted over with a square glossy black field.

Multiple types of looking acts are shown and encouraged, foregrounding the perceptual act and its relationship to the image’s historical subject. Tourists in the photograph look passively; the viewer’s reflection looks out of the black field; the photograph’s informality encourages passive looking; the censoring reflective square encourages active looking for the obstructed, and at oneself, image and gaze complicit in censorship.

Translation
Thomas’s method of capturing attention—a structure of relationships between sensing, an object, and cognitive process—seemed translatable. According to Benjamin, “The task of the translator consists in finding that . . . which produces in it the echo of the original” [6]; my task was to echo an effect on visual awareness, in auditory awareness.

I focused on eliciting perception of a historically significant object and making listeners complicit in censorship.

A recording of historically significant sound is analogous to Thomas’s photograph of a historic site. Using criteria of historical/political significance, likelihood of recognition, and susceptibility to inattention, I chose Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

For the blocking/reflection effect, I made a Max patch that, when it detects a listener, silences frequency bands of the recording, replacing them with ambient sound of the showing space. I tried both visual and sonic detection of listeners.

For visual detection, I associated areas of a camera’s view with frequency bands: greater movement increasing the obstruction’s gain. Listeners easily understood the interaction; however, emphasis on vision/movement rather than sound marred the translation.

For sonic detection, I associated frequency bands of a microphone’s signal with bands of the recording: spikes in the incoming signal triggered silencing/replacement. Using loudspeakers caused feedback problems, and listeners made little sound, inhibiting their detection. Using headphones removed feedback, but exacerbated listeners’ quietness, encouraging stillness.

I realized a difference between looking and listening: When looking, observers are visible; when listening, listeners are not necessarily audible and may try to be silent.

I also noticed recognition of a historical reference can be general or specific—the Brandenburg Gate looks historical, recognized or not; unintentionally, I had translated this—the King recording sounds historical, recognized or not, due to its sound quality. Further, I noticed presentation of others’ listening was missing from the translation.

Retranslation
To integrate others’ listening, I reframed Within History 2 as a re-recording, overlaying sounds of people listening: movement, footsteps. Side-chain compression subtly emphasizes their obstruction of the recording. I intended they also enhance awareness of and encourage listeners’ own sound-making.

In this version, following an acclimation period, a revised bandpass obstruction/reflection system activates. There is a fixed obstruction band of noise at 1000–3000Hz. If the microphone’s signal passes a threshold, ambient sound replaces the noise; if it passes a second, the obstruction band expands. To improve self-recognition, the microphone playback is delayed.

Conclusion
Within History 2 presents others listening and listeners themselves and encourages passive listening to a historical object and listening for sound beyond an obstruction. As a translation it succeeds in form and perceptual effect—the latter less so, due to differences in audience visibility vs. audibility. Fortunately, these are the work’s essential features.

When considering publicly exhibiting this work, I discovered the King recording is vigorously controlled, even against fair use, and exhibition as-is presents a legal hazard [8]. However, other recordings that evoke a sense of history
and familiarity may be used and still maintain the work's integrity.

This project suggests several avenues for further work: further variation on the artwork, investigation of the relationship between perceiving and being perceived, and the relation between generalized and specific perceptions of historicity.

References and Notes

1 Camille Robinson, Within History. Audio recording, environmental sound, software. Exhibited: Graduate Research Works in Progress Symposium, University of Melbourne (2013).


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Public Art in New York, Entertainment Districts and Privately Owned Public Spaces

My research found that object-based public art in New York is primarily concentrated in business areas of the city of New York, on privately managed public space or so-called plazas outside skyscrapers that are also privately managed and owned, as well as in the tourist-dense districts of the city.

According to Kluge and Negt and others [3], capitalist interests now dominate public space in the form of corporations buying and managing public areas in Northern European and North American cities. In New York this trend has been catalogued since the early 1990s by various writers and watchdog groups such as Whowespace [4]. The southern tip of Central Park, Battery Park, The Highline, Times Square, Union Square and most plazas have similarly been converted into privately owned public spaces, often cosponsored by museums and heavily funded by private donors and foundations as well as public moneys. As of August 2018 there were 75 BIDs across New York City’s five boroughs, of which

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THE PUBLIC UTERATON MACHINES

Recording What People Think of Public Art in New York City

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ABSTRACT In 2015–2016 the author installed interactive public artworks on sidewalks in Brooklyn and Queens using ordinary city permits. The locations were chosen in counterbalance to the dominant choices of location for public art in New York, which tends to be placed in Manhattan or other tourist-concentrated areas. The works are entitled the Public Utteraton Machines and enable passersby to utter their opinions about other public art in the city as well as art’s role in society. The device’s earpiece recorded over 100 open-ended narratives and opinions about other public art in the city as well as art’s role in society. Sound archives of the responses can be found at local libraries in Queens and Brooklyn and at <http://utteraton.com/>.

Public art—object-based art that exists in public space for a long period of time in the form of objects [1]—is managed within a particular system in New York City. It is created and implemented by administrators, artists represented by commercial galleries, city officials, private business improvement districts (BIDs) and public art agencies. Patricia Phillips [2] used the term the Public Art Machine to describe this system in 1989 and according to many this machine has exponentially grown in the last 25 years. Phillips’s original notion of this Public Art Machine is used as a point of departure against which to map the art interventions the Public Utteraton Machines, which consist of several iterations that are being moved around to different New York boroughs’ sidewalks (Figs 1 and 2). They operate outside of this system of public art through direct city permits.

Visually emulating nineteenth-century public telephones, the Public Utteraton Machines reference the bygone communications method of the telephone in public space. Inside the machine, viewers can see other public art and hear audio, via the telephone earpiece, asking passersby what they think of other public art and about what its role in society and in the city should be. Using an e-ink e-paper display screen similar to the PaPiRus screen for Raspberry Pi, which requires very little power and stays visible after use, I designed a five-question survey with push buttons, which was installed at the base of the custom phone housing, where the dials would have been. A solar panel, Raspberry Pi and audio recorder using Perl enabled the Public Utteraton Machine to record audio sound through the “pretend” phone’s earpiece and to accept yes/no/maybe answers to the e-paper display survey.

References and Notes

1 Camille Robinson, Within History. Audio recording, environmental sound, software. Exhibited: Graduate Research Works in Progress Symposium, University of Melbourne (2013).


48 Artists’ Statements

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