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Taking Care of Sonic Identity – Local Development Between Urban Sound Art and Planning

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ABSTRACT: How can we encourage local development through the development of listening practices?

This paper focuses on the relationship between urban sound art and planning by inquiring into participatory strategies that can stimulate sonic awareness. Sonic awareness contributes here to the development of urban and regional policies, revealing the potential of sonic identities.

In this research, I show how enacting critical listening can become a tool of empowerment both for institutions and citizens, and I examine the main outcomes and perspectives emerging from my participatory sound art project “Listening Closely” developed in 2015 in the southern Italian village of San Cipriano Picentino.

KEYWORDS: sonic identity, intangible common, sonic awareness, participatory sound art, empowerment.

1. Introduction. Sound art and the development of sonic awareness

Sonic identity is the result of a shared acknowledgment of overlapping environments and cultures. For this reason it represents a strategic key to unlock the political agency of urban inhabitants.

This paper explores possible interactions between sonic studies, planning, and policy design, by inquiring into the sonic environments and atmospheres produced by public policies. With this aim, I will discuss strategies that may generate radically different approaches to fostering sonic awareness.

Enacting sonic awareness can be means of empowering both institutions (The Royal Swedish Academy of music 1996) and citizens. Taking account of natural and human sonic qualities of a specific environment in the design process can support the implementation of public policies concerning urban transformation. At the same time the development of sonic awareness among citizens can act as a powerful device for self-government.

In fact, inhabitants' sonic awareness can stimulate radical change in the political sphere, in terms of caring for sonic environments embedded in economic, natural and social issues (Di Croce 2016).

Although often unquestioned or unconsciously perceived (Wissmann 2014), urban sounds are relevant in a policy context: they represent the aural reflection of a political framework in a specific context at a precise moment. This is why urban sound design needs to derive from public sonic awareness. Sonic, and more broadly cultural, knowledge and awareness have the opportunity to address urban and regional policies by suggesting social priorities and requirements to the institution. They also might foster civic engagement in disclosing and taking care of particular sonic environments connected to urban everyday life. In this context, sound art practices claim the potential to reframe political narratives through a radically different political and poetical discourse (Anderson 2014), especially in marginalised contexts and spaces.

When space is understood not in abstract or absolute terms, but as socially and politically constituted, a spatial sound practice can emerge not only as a poetics, but as a politics, not only as an aesthetics, but as an ethics. Such a critical spatial sonic practice does not merely 'happen in' space, but is poised radically to transform the very terms of its constitution. (Ouzounian 2015, 74)

This theoretical framework derives from the literature about *ambience* (Augoyard, Torgue 1985; Grosjean; Thibaud, 2001), from the theory of *aural architecture* (Blessner, Salter 2007); and moves toward sound art practice (Ouzounian, 2015) and participatory art and

design (Ultra-red 2014) in order to explore the effects and the potentials of sonic awareness in the urban agency of the inhabitants. Managing a problematic, and often marginalised, urban issue through the development of sonic awareness becomes then the centre of this paper.

2. Case study. How to encourage local development through the development of listening practices?

In the past few years I have developed a number of art residencies and participative performances with the aim of exploring different kinds of sonic environments, focusing on sonic identity, everyday practices and citizen's sonic awareness. In 2015 I was invited by the Fondazione Aurelio Petroni for an art residency in San Cipriano Picentino, a small village in the south of Italy, where I developed a project named "Listening Closely" (Di Croce 2016).

In this project I was interested in the relationship between the inhabitants of a small settlement and their sonic environment, and the connection between sonic environment, participatory design and the political level of understanding. The outcome I expected was to stimulate sonic awareness so that sonic identity could enter the political framework of the village.

San Cipriano Picentino is located in a mountain area close to the city of Salerno, on the Tyrrhenian Sea coast. It is both on the periphery of a wider economic and social system, and a rural area that has a close relationship with agriculture – the production of hazelnuts is important in the area.

After meeting several inhabitants in the centre of the village, and after presenting them the aim of my research, I organized a series of soundwalks with the people interested in contributing to my project. During the soundwalks I asked them to show me their environment and to present me with the everyday sounds they believed to be the most distinctive. As we walked, I interviewed the participants, asking them why they had made those choices. I then recorded their chosen sounds with them.

The soundwalks helped people to get closer to their sonic environment and to the urban and rural atmospheres, which sounds contribute to create. In particular, they did realize how important sound is in reflecting seasonal changes, working routines, and events taking place in specific spots. The choices they made also demonstrated slightly different feelings about certain everyday sounds, such as the bell of the main church or the traffic in the central square, and displayed emerging perceptual contradictions between different social classes, occupations and ages.

In the hazelnut fields, in particular, the farmers explained how, in the last 30 years, the mechanical harvest of hazelnuts replaced the manual harvest, and how this change con-

tributed to the composition of the current soundscape of the valley: a monotonous drone takes the place of the old farmers' songs.

Before, when we were working manually, our parents used to sing while working; now we just hear the noises of the machineries...then, when tractors were introduced, we suddenly stopped singing... I was one of the first who bought one. (Taken from an interview with a farmer, my translation)

From these interviews it is possible to perceive an unusual mix of nostalgia and pride, a sort of gloomy trust in the future, which corresponds to the farmers' inevitable adaptation to the rules of the market.

The sound of the mechanical hazelnut collectors suddenly became the subject of the farmers' attention as their ears focused on the progress of the mechanical collectors. This trend also demonstrates the dangerous working conditions for some farmers, whose work requires a sensitive attention to mechanical sounds.

Every machinery you see works through compressed air...Here you can't work with earplugs (even though you must) because if something happens, that means something blocks the airflow...So you need to be ready without any earplug, you need to listen carefully, otherwise you lose your harvest day...If somebody comes and says: you must use earplugs because of the law, I can't do it because if something goes wrong, nobody will refund my working day. There are machineries you need to listen to by will or by force, because this sound lets you earn money. And here there's no money at all...In the end you get used to this sound, now it doesn't hurt me at all. (Taken from an interview with a farmer, my translation)

This need to listen "by will or by force" in order to "survive" constitutes an interesting aspect of some of these interviews. Here it is possible to disclose a relationship between sonic perception and precarious working conditions – that is to say, the exposure to certain sounds derives also from economic junctures. No matter how dangerous it is, farmers cannot escape from their working sonic environment and they have no way of changing it.

On the other hand, those who can afford to live within a better sonic environment do not hesitate to improve their living conditions.

The doctor who was living over there just left because of the church bells. He has moved away because his house was in the direct path of the bell, he

told us he could not sleep anymore... (Taken from an interview with an old inhabitant, my translation)

In other cases people chose sounds which recalled their sonic memories, such as the sounds of street traders in the main square from the 1950s and 1960s, which are now gone, or the evening crickets chirping in a park close to the centre of the village.

When I was a child I was always there, during the night listening to animals, to crickets. I used to come here to play, and together with my friends we were listening to these sounds. (Taken from an interview with an inhabitant, my translation)



Figure 1. Recording the sound of mechanical hazelnut collectors. ©Chiara Caterina

This first part of the project leads me to some significant reflections. Most of the people who participated in the soundwalks realised their personal responsibility in the composition of the sonic environment. Everyday practices, working conditions, government of the land: every single aspect of the inhabitant's life now gradually takes on a sonic perspective. Thus, a divergent but coherent inter-subjective sonic level of understanding emerges, a bond between people and the sonic environment which drives their perception of the atmosphere of the village.

The archive of field recordings and interviews that I had collected later became the basis of a final participatory performance. The public was invited to select sounds from the archive that I played and mixed together in real time. The score I prepared for the performance invited participants to choose a sound, representing a segment of the archive, from a collection of paper notes placed on a table just in front of me. Only three recordings (three

paper notes), could be played simultaneously. One by one, people chose a new note to be played, replacing one that was currently playing.

Through this performance, the local community was involved in a “sonic meeting” where they could experience their particular role and commitment in the conscious construction of the everyday sonic environment. In fact, every single choice illustrated a dialogue between personal feelings and inter-subjective understandings. Explored in this context, sonic identity was not merely the result of a fight or a mash-up between different perceptions and choices, rather it represented a sonic dialogue, an interplay between inhabitants. The effects produced by the choice of each person reverberated immediately into the sonic environment of the performance, perceived by all the other participants.

It is remarkable how some of the most-selected sounds came from everyday working tools, such as tractors or excavators, and to show how deep is the sonic relationship between people and their job, even though it may be unsafe. At the same time several participants manifested their toleration of the selected sounds, demonstrating how intense and sometimes unconscious the effects of an everyday exposure to a noisy working environment can be.

The performance was an invitation to identify and then untangle the sonic elements to be preserved within the environment. It is an encouragement to stimulate planning awareness, which moves from a multitude of conflicting sonic perspectives: any sort of identity deals with a multiplicity of stakeholders and demands a deep awareness.

It is possible to consider the performance a device aiming to stimulate public engagement in sonic fields. At the same time the participatory event becomes an empowerment tool, allowing people to share and reframe their system of values based on acoustic perception. Finally, the performance explains the most pressing urban and regional issues to be faced both by institutions (through sensitive policies) and by citizens (through their personal behaviours). Far from a simple acceptance of the *status quo*, the inhabitants are exhorted through the performance to move beyond an almost bearable sonic environment, and to address their dedication to improve the quality of their entire lives, therefore to demand a more sensitive political level of understanding about sonic environments.



Figure 2. A spectator participates to the performance by choosing a sound to be played from the paper notes placed on the table. ©Chiara Caterina

3. Definitions and directions. Listening to an intangible common

Participatory sound art projects can play a key role in creating the space for dialogue, especially in those marginal contexts where it is difficult to foster dialogue between institutions and citizens. Sonic awareness refers indeed to a political action (Attali 1984). It is closely connected to any involvement of citizens in public decisions, because sonic environments unveil the government of a city or a rural area.

From this perspective, a well-balanced dialogue between institutions and citizens could create a new community of aware inhabitants (Olivetti 2015); a group of aware citizens able to demand of the institutions a reframing of the priorities of the urban agenda, and to propose sound-based methodologies to deal with them.

The principle of *subsidiarity* proves here to be the most suitable form of agreement between institutions and acknowledged citizens.

Subsidiarity is the principle of allowing the individual members of a large organization to make decisions on issues that affect them, rather than leaving those decisions to be made by the whole group. (Collins Dictionary).

In other words, subsidiarity is “the principle of devolving decisions to the lowest practical level” (Collins Dictionary) while stimulating collaborations and endorsements.

Thus, a large organization (or institutions) should support efforts at the local level (by citizens) in contributing to urban management. This requires inhabitants who are sonically aware, especially in terms of the interpretation of their sonic identities and their cultural heritage.

The notion of *commons* is useful in the context of identity and heritage, and takes into account the subsidiarity level of understanding about the goods or belongings deriving from the everyday environment. A commons is defined as “land or resources belonging to or affecting the whole of a community” (Oxford Dictionary of English), or “the cultural and natural resources accessible to all members of a society, including natural materials such as air, water, and a habitable earth. These resources are held in common, not owned privately” (Wikipedia). Thus, intangible commons, including cultural heritage and sonic identities, need to be connected to their tangible sources, which correspond to the system of urban and regional policies regulating, among other things, land use, licences, working conditions, public space usability, and local development strategies.

This interdisciplinary approach focuses on the relationship between inhabitants and their sonic environment with a special attention on everyday human activities, which shape the contemporary sonic environment. By critically listening to the sounds produced by such activities, which I call “everyday practices”, it is possible to realise the role of specific sonic cues in creating a unique atmosphere (Kreutzfeldt 2014), a distinctive sonic identity. Enacting sonic awareness can contribute then to the design of urban and regional policies in collaboration with aware citizens, and to reveal the potential of sonic identities.

In other words, sonic awareness enables citizens to consider audible everyday practices as intangible commons to be preserved. Furthermore, sonic awareness of everyday practices can lead to a shared, although (fortunately) conflicting, sense of place, which needs intangible commons to gain a strengthened “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1970).

In summary, the notion of the “intangible commons” is helpful to clarify the political role of communities in public decisions. Taking care of a shared and acknowledged sonic identity becomes the ground to establish a subsidiarity (rather than a subordinate) level of understanding.

4. Sonic reflections. A shared sonic acknowledgment

Taking care of sonic identity has become a crucial node to be researched within sonic environment, sense of the place, and planning fields.

“Sonic Commons”, as defined by O+A (Odland, Auinger 2009), intends to build up the basis for a shared understanding of public care about urban and social issues.

By labelling our shared sound space the Sonic Commons, we are reminding ourselves that certain things like air, water and humane sonic environments should be considered human rights. [...] We are not advocating quiet for quiet’s sake; we are advocating humane design that takes into account how we perceive and interact with the word. (Odland, Auinger 2009, 67)

Here, sonic environment should not be interpreted as a mere by-product of human activities, rather as a non-accidental event (Serres 2016) inviting sonic awareness.

It is a never-ending story of how we use power and how the byproducts of that power reach us through space, resonating and coloring the space in ways we rarely notice, or discuss. We do not have the language. The process is so subliminal that the language will have to be invented. Let's begin. (Odland, Auinger 2009, 66)

Therefore, "taking care" of intangible commons leads to a new understanding of urban regeneration, wherein sonic awareness is the first step, the basic grammar for such a new language to be invented and developed.

Sounds contribute to create the sense of the place. Thus, in order to preserve any intangible common, a special attention to the sonic awareness of the whole eco-system is required. "Conserving 100 Soundscapes in Japan" represents the perfect example of an action plan developed for this purpose.

The plan was achieved between 1994 and 1997 by the Environmental Agency of Japan, which decided to select through a "bottom up" process a number of soundscapes, linked to Japanese culture, to be potentially conserved, altered or restored.

The aim of this project was to encourage individuals or groups throughout the country to recommend the soundscapes which can be appreciated in specific localities and which the dwellers wish to preserve or to conserve for the next generations, and to select 100 soundscapes out of the recommended ones as the symbols of the richness and wide variety of Japanese soundscape, and old Japanese nature and culture. (Torigoe 1999, 104)

This remarkable project operated through a sensitive process by taking into consideration that any urban environment, like the natural ones, is an eco-system wherein every political, social and economic issue is related to the others.

Here, it is very important to be aware of the fact that we cannot just conserve the sounds of birds separated from the environment. In order to conserve their sound and songs, we have to conserve the habitat and eco-system where the birds can come and live. In this way, conserving soundscapes mean conserving eco-systems which rise or cherish these natural creatures and sounds. (Torigoe 1999, 106)

Through sonic awareness dwellers can enter the design of public policies in order to conserve an ecosystem. More widely citizens can demand and commit to the preservation or the improvement of the quality of urban and rural sonic environment. They have the chance to finally reconsider silence as a public value, thereby establishing a new relationship between us and the environment (Oliveros 2005).

Urban sound art, together with the practices related to sonic environment, deal with urban regeneration through the development of sonic awareness. Such art practices attend to the same issues that planning should take into consideration in order to improve the quality of sonic environment. Therefore urban sound artists and planners should cooperate more, especially in order to foster participation and the involvement of citizens in public discourse.

The more you bring people into discussion, the more they start to understand that sound and urban sound is not sound that is just around them, but that they also realize how much they are part of the urban sound, and how much it has to do that urban sound is also an information about our society and the way we organize our interactions. (Auinger 2013)

In conclusion, improving sonic acknowledgment is not just about encouraging listening education itself, rather it is about stimulating the political debate around sonic environment, therefore about every social and economic aspect connected with it. Sonic identities are in fact neither unique, nor homogeneous, they witness instead socially precarious conditions as well as the “common feeling” of the majority. This is why atmospheres are political, they require governance (Feigenbaum, Kanngieser 2015), and demand a shared sonic awareness. Within this frame urban sound artists must work through sensitive participatory processes in order to invigorate public sound design and disclose the multiplicity of the agency of inhabitants.

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