Insulating against isolation: Designing private sonic experiences for public spaces

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Abstract

Whilst living in society there is violence in being apart, and even more so in pandemic circumstances. Avoiding others through fear of contamination is a particularly noxious way to stand apart, since it compounds two equally destructive movements: containing oneself and excluding others. As a sound artist, my own form of resistance was to try and find ways of insulating against isolation, by creating private listening experiences and making them available publicly. This was achieved collaboratively, working in groups through online platforms, and using binaural sound-capture and design, and GPS-tagged audiowalks through geo-locating platforms such as Echoes. Through these, one can still share an intimate embodied dramaturgy, experiencing through another body's aurally instigated kinesthesia, moving and listening "together" while apart. This paper is a meditation on how the pandemic has shaped our circumstances and it discusses the potential of the audiowalk, as process as well as outcome, in creating possibilities for shared experiencing in times of isolation.

Keywords: embodied listening, public space, relationality, permeability, audiowalk

Biography

Eduardo Abrantes (b. 1979, in Lisbon, Portugal) is a sound artist and artistic researcher based in Copenhagen, Denmark. He has a background in Philosophy (*Phenomenology of Sound* PhD 2016) and currently lectures on Sound and Performance Design at the University of Roskilde. His transdisciplinary practice is focused on the intersections between artistic strategies borrowed from the sound arts, issues of embodiment, co-creation and navigation of everyday complexities, in both technologically mediated (binaural recording, audiowalk, immersive installation) and performatively driven (sound mapping, physical exploration, choreographic inhabitation of acoustic territories) forms.

Introduction, part one: the endurable world, or, life in the archipelago

It is January 2021 and I am writing from a place of hope, at the beginning of the new year. The pandemic is still very much upon us, but its hold on our imagination is somewhat ebbing. Vaccines are being deployed and a familiar aftermath narrative is slowly being spun: how we endured, what we have learned, the potency of scientific research, space and time for mourning, reparative practices, and soon, hopefully, returning to normality. At this point, there is arguably a sense that the worst is behind us, crystallised, locked in amber in 2020, a very bad vintage. Optimism is liberally prescribed while we still tremble to think of what lies ahead. On top of not knowing what is coming, we are still struggling to understand and deal with what has happened. We have been made aware our everyday cartography is that of the archipelago – islands connected here and there; transit dependent upon weather, goodwill, fear, politics and power tussles – with a wide ocean all around, stretching towards a hazy and uncertain horizon.

Having been born and raised on the coast of a peripheral peninsula – which is a particular kind of pseudo-island of umbilical inclinations, surrounded by the ocean except for a narrow connection (isthmus) to a larger continental body – I am sensitive to insular configurations. To their disorienting potential, to their multi-faceted claustrophobia, but also to their propensity to engender strange encounters. Since February 2020, as the successive iterations of the lockdown policy proceeded to reconfigure our everyday into stricter choreographies of containment, I have returned over and over to this sense of insularity, not only as a principle of restriction but also as catalyst of revelation. Island-thinking, following the knots, gaps and patterns of our woven relationships, is useful in the uncovering of the underlying structures hedging our days and sending us down certain paths. Toward citizenship, normality, mutual acceptance, but also their counterparts: xenophobia, uncritical compliance, the cult of sterility and immunity as ends rather than means.

The celebrated English poet John Donne writes in one of his most famed meditations (1624) that "no man is an island" and here is where the citation usually pauses, omitting that which immediately follows: "entire of itself" (note 1) [Donne 1994, 441]. A proposed extrapolation: let the stress fall not on the former but on the latter, thus on the relational aspect. Instead of denying our insularity ("being an island"), let us deny the isolation ("entire of itself"), and thus question the premise of separateness. Yes, we might be islands, ecosystems of our own, but we are still related to other islands, part of an archipelago, permeable through our borders. A playful yet meaningful association: being a child whose schooling privileged the natural sciences over the arts, I still recall the sweet shock of learning that an island is not a big floating stone, but a mountain-top rising from under the sea.

Venturing to speak not only for myself, but for the community of artists and researchers I identify with and whose practices, methods and interests guide and influence my own, I admit the pandemic has brought on an intensified concern with relational dynamics – to each other, to our work, and to society at large. Thinking about relationships, particularly under pressure, precarity and/or overall uncertainty, means thinking through *embeddedness*. This concept, borrowed from the economic and social interdependence matrix conceived by Austro-Hungarian historian Karl Polanyi (1886-1964) has

proliferated and metamorphosed in diverse fields of knowledge [Krippner and Alvarez 2007]. In its broadest sense, embeddedness refers to "the dependence of a phenomenon – be it a sphere of activity such as the economy or the market, a set of relationships, an organization, or an individual – on its environment, which may be defined alternatively in institutional, social, cognitive, or cultural terms" [Schmidt 2019]. In modern society, where the individual is often considered both the standard building block and the model outcome, the curtailing of societal resources, access and circulation under the threat of contagion, has forced us to shift focus to our surroundings and the enveloping mechanisms who make each of us not only who we are, but, often a harder and more intricate adjustment, who we want to be.

Embeddedness is about what is available to us, what we can reach and dispose of, what is afforded – each individual like a seed encased in nutritive, protective and dispersive layers, essential for its maturation and growth. It is, however, also about interdependence, about what and who we need and how, the necessary bonds which scaffold the possibilities of our lives, the limitations and the scarcities we usually either avoid or try to navigate around, about resources available and due returns, giving and taking as a feedback loop. In short, to be embedded is to be situated and defined by one's situation, again and again, an island in an archipelago.

Accordingly, the experiences and concerns, pandemic or otherwise, driving this article are a result of my situation, unexceptional as it might be. This article is written from the perspective of a white heterosexual man in his early forties, living in a Scandinavian capital. An immigrant with a higher education, fluency in the local language and, to a significant extent, custom. Walking the streets, particularly in layered winter garb, I might pass for a native. In direct communication, face-to-face or voice-to-voice on the phone, I am obviously foreign, but not easily ethnically categorised. I am able-bodied and have no children. According to Eurostat [2019], the statistical office of the European Union, I live in a country with a high rate of single-person households, and well above average income. My corner of the world is not unfamiliar with how patterns of individualism and isolation are determinant for the social fabric. These elements have impacted my life before, during and, hopefully, after the pandemic – they have framed my experience, my identity, and my relational dynamics to my own near community, to the world at large, and also to the field of artistic and research practice I belong to, and through which I structure my ways of engaging with the everyday.

Introduction, part two: sonic strategies and the potential in insular circumstances

If part one of my introduction emphasised the context and the general sense of the conditions under which everyday life was transformed by the pandemic, part two will delve into the particular field of knowledge and artistic practice I am situated in. Being an artist and artistic researcher, I work with technologically mediated embodied strategies, with a particular focus on sound and co-creative processes. In the last few years, I have been interested in the potential of the audiowalk format, how it allows for site-specific scenographic, dramaturgic and choreographic entanglement with the surrounding environment. In other words, my practice has been drawn to not just what sound can do

when it is playing in our ears, but how it relates to what is happening around us, and to our own body's possibilities of engagement, in both individual and collective terms. I refer here to "sonic agency", meaning, sound understood as a "set of support structures by which one garners capacities for acting in and amongst the world", and I take "amongst" to be the keyword in this citation [LaBelle 2018, 4].

Following the previous section, sound and sonic approaches are particularly suited to reveal and engage with embeddedness. Beyond the straightforward fear of death and loss, the active core of the violence the pandemic has imposed upon our everyday rests on how it has affected our ability to be "amongst" and "amidst", how it has prevented us from mingling and entangling as we crave and are used to, how it has isolated and insulated us. The pandemic has curtailed our sense of permeability, which is reciprocal. To be permeable is to be affectable, to be reachable and penetrable, but permeability is also about being able to permeate, to affect, reach and penetrate in turn. Embeddedness implies permeability in its full sense, to each other through our circumstances, and vice-versa, to our circumstances through each other. To be embedded and permeable requires one to be in contact with things and others, ideally not from an aloof pick-and-choose perspective, browsing at a distance, but instead in their midst, embracing messiness and "staying with the trouble" as the philosopher says [Haraway 2016].

Sound is soaked in messiness, it positively leaks. This is testified by a civilization-long struggle with noise [Bijsterveld 2008] as the undesirable yet undeniable sonic excess, but also simply by how sound visits us, wave upon wave, "sounds upon sounds; the overheard upon the heard" [LaBelle 2018, 60]. Our ears sometimes feel like gravity wells, not only perceiving in passing but decisively attracting and capturing sounds lurking around us (even in sleep), imposing themselves against our will, seemingly curving acoustic space in such ways that listening feels like a pouring into, and our aural awareness a vessel we can only balance precariously but neither drain nor fill completely. If the listener is thus surrounded and immersed, they are no less also placed in the middle, *in medias res*, literally "in the midst of things." That the very act of listening draws the listener into the midst or mess of things and is considered the foundation of social interaction is patent already in antiquity, where its reverse, to be deaf in a society designed for hearing, was often thought to be synonymous with unsociability and inability to learn [Laes 2011]. It is important to note that though this audist perspective has been challenged throughout history and has greatly receded, a measure of stigma persists even for those only suffering from partial hearing loss [Beckner and Helme 2018].

Sound's overall leaky, enveloping, messy character is constantly inviting us to rethink, reframe, and sometimes, re-embody and re-situate our relationship to it. A sound heard while walking in the street will be louder the closer one stands to its source, let us say a speaker playing Wham!'s *Last Christmas*, and it will eventually decay into silence the further one moves away from it. Yet, one would struggle to account for the precise point in space and time when it begins and ends. It rather fades in and out of our awareness, meshing and blending with other sounds from start to finish. Sound also reveals the permeability of matter, as everyone who has ever had loud neighbours can attest to. To listen is always also to listen through things. Sounds bounce around surfaces, pass through objects, even our own bodies – literally, reaching us through thick and thin. If

exposed to unwelcome sounds, we might cover our ears, turn our backs, retaliate by interposing our own sounds through headphones or loudspeakers, or eventually move away and abandon the site altogether. Alternatively, some of us might gladly dive into the thick woods following the polyrhythmic call of a starling, oblivious to mud and thorny bushes, treading boldly through minefields of droppings, and shush the merry picnickers while cursing the constant drone of the motorway in the distance.

All these ways of being with and through sound can be summed in the notion of sound-world. Navigating the sound-world is thus defined by a push-and-pull movement between listeners and sounds experienced as welcome or otherwise, by immersive embeddedness, by constant mutual exchange and by the immediacy of finding oneself amidst a dynamic play of forces. In short, the sound-world is intrinsically relational, since "by passing between things and bodies, subjects and objects, sound affords an extensive possibility for contact and conversation" [LaBelle 2018, 61]. Given that the relational aspects of our everyday lives are precisely the ones under attack in these pandemic times, it should be no surprise that sonic strategies be called upon to map and enact creative ways of thriving under the circumstances.

Insulation and isolation – intersections between sound practice and the pandemic everyday

The pandemic has turned us, previously unencumbered ordinary citizens, simultaneously into prisoners and jailers. This might sound like a melodramatic utterance, but not by much. There are two movements I have attempted to capture under the notions of *isolation* and *insulation*. In tune with our theme, both share a common etymological root, the Latin *insulatus* ("made into an island"), yet while isolation arguably carries a passive note of "being set apart", insulation mostly refers to the active effort of "keeping apart". It is in this sense that the latter is used in the context of building construction: the use of obstructive materials to reduce heat exchange between indoors and outdoors, thereby increasing energy use efficiency. It is also thus that the term is usually applied to sound: acoustic insulation, also known as soundproofing, is also about obstructing exchange, by reducing the transference of sonic vibrations through building materials. That sound is connected both to isolation and insulation in many complex ways is patent, for example, in the well-documented tradition of prisoners placed in contiguous cells communicating via tapping on the walls [Kahn 1996], covertly conversing through rhythmically coded messages. Sonic permeability, sound's above-mentioned leaky and unyielding character and its essential relational potential, constantly creates possibilities for contact, interference and exchange. Isolation, insulation and permeability, these are the main ingredients in this meditation on the role of sonic strategies in pandemic times.

Strategies are, of course, dependent upon situation. As millions of others, I have experienced the relational loss brought on by the pandemic from the position of a city-dweller. In my everyday, that which has mostly been hampered by imposed separateness is the multiplicity of entanglement potentials enabled by urban life. I refer to both the usual and the strange encounters which intersect and resonate through city dwelling, "the impact of lighted bodies / knocking sparks off each other" [Loy 1996, 59] borrowing the words of Mina Loy from her poem *Songs to Joannes* (1917). Our access to

public and private spaces, to activities and to each other has been severely curtailed, particularly in its most improvisatory, arbitrary and open aspects. Even in a Scandinavian context, where the required timespan when planning ahead, particularly in social terms, can be quite daunting for a southern European, the pandemic has turned calculus and predictability into survival mantras (note 2).

Yet, it can be argued that separateness not only pre-dates our current state of exception, but that separateness, in the sense of isolation patterns and individualistic tendencies, is not only intrinsic to modern life, but its defining characteristic. I have mentioned before the high number of single-person households in my corner of the world and, though I am excluded from this category, I do live in an apartment. It is curious to note that, not only does the very word mean *separate*, stemming for the Latin verb *appartere* (to separate), but that the earliest Roman buildings matching our modern understanding of what an apartment is used the word *insula* for each of its inhabitable units [Nelson 2018, 45]. As a sound artist, to further unfold the chain of complex patterns of separateness occurring simultaneously at different scales, I need to mention here what wearing headphones means to me. When working at home, in my apartment-island, I do not have a dedicated soundproofed room available as a home studio, instead I depend upon headphones, specifically the circumaural or over-the-ear kind – and double-glazed windows, a curious instance of visual transparency meeting aural obstruction – to create my own relatively insulated close acoustic space, a stereo binaural sound field. It is in this sonic bubble that I listen to processed sounds and make compositional choices.

Isolation, insulation and permeability are essential characteristics when considering headphones, not in themselves but in how they relate to the sonic situation in which they are meant to be used. For example, for those working in loud environments, such as a DJ booth, obstruction is key and effectiveness in acoustic insulation prioritized. Field-recordists might also find themselves in loud environments, such as industrial landscapes or crowded public spaces, for them obstruction is also pertinent but discrimination is equally relevant – the headphones should provide reliable information across the widest frequency spectrum usable. For musical recording, mastering and mixing, reliability is essential, but so is neutrality. Here, in most cases, insulation does not depend on the headphones themselves but is delegated to the setting, be it a conventional studio or otherwise, therefore to room design and construction materials. Given the diverse media channels through which music is disseminated and how much they will affect posterior listening, the important here is that the headphones do not unevenly "colour" the sound by amplifying some frequencies in deterrence of others. In all these cases, headphones play the role of a controlled micro-environment created and sustained within less controllable surroundings. One can think of headphones as sonic membranes, instances of acoustic filtration, liminal elements which are part of a sonic immune system – where listening is understood as ongoing modulation of the soundworld.

In my practice as a sound artist, there is at least one instance where the headphones' permeability is just as significant as their ability to insulate from unwanted external sounds. Even before the pandemic took over, I have been quite interested in the audiowalk format, and its potential in deploying sonic narratives, scenographies and choreographies in public spaces. In terms of a working definition, I hold an audiowalk to be "an immersive soundscape composition that is anchored in an exploratory embodied

perspective and created for an audience that listens while moving and interacting with a specific environment" [Abrantes 2021]. Since it is designed to be listened to "in the midst of things," through headphones, an audiowalk relies on activating and modulating permeability. An example: imagine an audiowalk that is to be experienced in an urban setting while its listener walks across a busy shopping street heading towards the direction of a canal, imagine also that the audiowalk consists of a first-person narrative about someone who lost their keys the night before, which happened to have been a Dionysiac event with plenty of dancing, drinking and overall merriment, and is now trying to find them while recalling the fragments of the previous evening's interactions, conversations and atmospheres. Whatever sounds are part of the audiowalk composition, they are crafted to blend with the actual situation the listener finds themselves in, with pedestrians conversing, traffic noises, acoustic variations in echoes and reflections from the crowded street to the open canal, and so on. In this case, two elements are necessary. First, that the headphones provide enough insulation so that the audiowalk soundscape is heard clearly in the midst of the surrounding noises, while allowing enough of these to blend in when appropriate. Second, that the audiowalk composition, both its vocal narration and its soundscape, has been created and mixed in such a way as to match the acoustic properties and local sounds of the path the listener is supposed to take while listening to it. In other words, that the layer of the audiowalk which consists in pre-recorded and/or processed sounds, interacts appropriately with the soundworld of the site the listener is to navigate while listening. In this example, the stereo binaural field or sound bubble created by the headphones is a hybrid space, both private and public, encompassing both recorded and real-time situated sounds, with the listener being the nexus where these elements meet and affect each other. It is at producing these kinds of aural intersections and chimeras that the audiowalk format excels.

When I am working towards creating an audiowalk whose composed content is acoustically related to the on-site sounds, and which is meant to be experienced through headphones, one technique I often rely on is binaural recording. I understand binaural recording as a kind of reverse headphone experience where the passive listener becomes an active sound gatherer, with the help of a digital memory bank – a portable sound recorder, such as the popular Zoom series (2006-present). In the same way that a pair of headphones creates a stereo sound field by providing each ear with a dedicated speaker, a binaural recording is achieved by placing two omnidirectional microphones at the entrance of a listener's ear canal (note 3). The recordings achieved through this method are very realistic in embodied terms, accurately reproducing the spatial immersion of a listener in a three-dimensional space. This is due mainly to three elements: (1) the spacing between the microphones, which is that of the average human head between the two ears, assures that the time difference in which sounds reach each microphone is consistent with normal hearing; (2) the fact that the microphones sit at the entrance of the ear canal surrounded by the cartilaginous auricle, so that the sounds captured also register the tiny reflections and the realistic physical interference of the structures of the external ear; finally, the most obvious, (3) that the listener is free to move while recording, and those movements also become imprinted in the recording, creating a stereo field that represents a dynamic embodied perspective.

The audiowalk has, in its genealogy, always been tied to the navigation of a certain

environment, and to the notion of exploration through listening. Orienting oneself, allowing the attention focus to sometimes linger on external factors, the surrounding wildlife, landscape noises, sometimes on one's own body, its breath, the sound of steps – these are aspects inherited from its initial iteration as *soundwalk* [McCartney 2014, 212], a practice developed in the context of the acoustic ecology movement in the 1960s, and its guiding notions, such as *soundscape* (Murray Schafer) and *deep listening* (Oliveros). Later, in the 1990s, with such figures as Canadian artist Janet Cardiff taking the lead, and affordable portable digital recording technologies becoming available, the scenographic, dramaturgic and choreographic potential of the audiowalk was embraced by the contemporary arts, particularly by those working in the context of performance. In Scandinavian contexts, many of the artists working currently with this format are mostly interested in the immersive aspects of the audiowalk, and how it can stimulate roleplay and blend the radical intimacy of private listening while bodily navigating public spaces and interacting with external "real-world" elements, often incorporated in the audiowalk's narrative. In this context, the work of Poste Restante (SE), Osynliga Teatern (SE), Wunderland (DK) and Hotel Pro Forma (DK) comes to mind – these are transdisciplinary artist groups which, as far as I have experienced their work, when deploying audiowalks are driven primarily by its world-building potential. By how this format can directly affect the way the listener behaves and interprets their environment, particularly through the permeability and highly suggestive influence of binaural stereo sound. Such listening experiences easily get under one's skin, one can say. A banal but also quite precise statement.

Another interesting field, and arguably that in which the audiowalk has become most popular, is that of cultural tourism, particularly in relation to museums and sightseeing tours. Here, the audiowalk has been preceded not by the soundwalk but by the audio guide, which is arguably "one of the most significant practices of staging sound as cultural heritage today" [Schulze 2013, 195], and whose primary functions are "cultural translation and interpretation" [Wissmann and Zimmermann 2015, 808]. Though an audio guide usually relies primarily on narration and storytelling and its main goal is to impart information, it does so in an embedded and embodied way, precisely by allowing the listener a certain measure of freedom of movement and providing space for unscripted choreographies. In a conventional guided tour there is an inevitable aspect of mimicry and entrainment in how the audience follows the guide, how they stand, look and how much time they take to inspect each attraction. The situation naturally becomes one of hospitality, with its implied rules giving the host the hierarchical primacy over the guest. These aspects of how much space there is for unscripted action, or how wide a range of agency is explicitly understood to rest upon the listener, are some of the constant hovering negotiations which can become quite an inspiration when designing an audiowalk.

Returning to our pandemic context, I find that the kind of constraints and associated either-or scenarios we are intensely facing right now – always double-thinking and second-guessing whom to see and how, where to go and what to avoid – resonate particularly with the audiowalk's core variables and components, particularly its focus on mobility, navigation, situational awareness, and the exchanges between private and public, or in other words, dramaturgical, scenographic and choreographic permeability. As a sonic strategy, the audiowalk is rife with the potential for intervention, subversion or

even simply sidestepping some of the most damaging restrictions we are facing. In the next section I will sketch a few of the ways in which I have tried to explore this potential.

Insulation against isolation – surreptitious sounds, or, sneaking the private into the public

Once I felt the need to continue developing my audiowalk practice throughout the pandemic, I found myself sliding back into the necessity for conceptual framing and creative incitement. The main notions which have informed my sonic approaches have already been presented above – the focus on relational exchanges, the interest in the permeability between private and public, immersive embodiment – but I have also teased a few mentions about immunity, which I would like to clarify at this point. Also, in the spirit of the times, I would like to take one last tour through my apartment before venturing outside.

The call for self-isolation in pandemic times implies the premise that we are safest in our own homes, that they assume the role of an extension of the body's immune system by obstructing exchanges with foreign bodies. Staying at home is instrumental in restricting contact, it enacts both isolation and insulation. For most of us urban dwellers, home happens to be an apartment. According to German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, an apartment can be defined as a "nuclear or elementary egospheric form – and consequently as the cellular world-bubble whose mass repetition produces the individualistic foams" [Sloterdijk 2016, 530]. This definition appears in the third volume of Sloterdijk's trilogy *Spheres* (1998, 1999, 2004), which is a wide-ranging inquiry into the complex resonances between spherical configurations as modelling ways of being, inhabiting and co-existing (bubbles, globes, foams), and the isolating patterns of individuation which define contemporary life. In Sloterdijk's perspective, the apartment, particularly its individualistic pinnacle the studio or one-room apartment, represents an intensely insular drive towards self-sufficiency, by embodying a prototypical example of modernity's characteristic "technical production of immunities" [Sloterdijk 2011, 25]. The kitchen, the bathroom, the bedroom, all of its sections are understood through a kind of primordial single cellular model of the body's basic systems and needs: nutrition, digestion, defecation, hygiene, sexuality, and so on. The apartment becomes a symbiotic extension of its inhabiting body, in a feedback loop that seeks to detach that body from external exchanges. From a critical perspective, one can interpret Sloterdijk as pointing to the fact that this strength is also its weakness – self-sufficiency becomes narcissistic self-absorption and isolation, the fetishization of immunity and the panic of contagion.

I do not mean to argue, through Sloterdijk, that there is anything inherently bad or destructive about living in an apartment, but it does seem that in a pandemic context some of the most pernicious aspects of the confinement and compartmentalization tendencies in urban environments are thus amplified. Sitting at home, considering my options in terms of artistic production, the audiowalk kept recurring as a format I felt could counter isolation, even under the constraints imposed upon navigation of public spaces. I wanted to find a way to place an audiowalk in public space, not only as something to be experienced at a specific location at a certain time, but so that it could be anchored in that location and remain there, available for listeners to experience it in their

own terms, at their own leisure. An audiowalk understood as an intangible and dynamic sound sculpture one could manoeuvre through, or a zone of exception – maybe the Strugatsky brothers' novel *Roadside Picnic* (1972), or Tarkovsky's unsettling film adaptation (*Stalker*, 1979) were lingering in my mind (note 4). One way to achieve this is to make use of the diverse online platforms that enable GPS-tagging an audiowalk as a geo-located path through different stations in a map. These platforms, as for example Echoes which I have been using most often, have different capabilities and offer different levels of customization. They are available to those with a background in sound design, manipulation and composition, providing user-friendly interfaces without the need to think in code. I have used them in my practice but also in teaching, since they enable very sophisticated map-tagging also for beginners, or for those who want to invest more time and energy in the sonic manipulation side of things. They usually allow the user to access a map matrix like Google Maps, define zones with different shapes, covering variable areas and couple specific sound files to these zones, so that a listener having installed the respective mobile app will trigger a sound by simply physically entering a certain zone. The zones can be combined, overlapped, and used in a patchwork structure, supporting multiple-choice paths and main and secondary narratives simultaneously.

The first audiowalk manifestation I worked on during the pandemic was a serial piece made in collaboration with six different narrators, who interpreted six distinct texts collected from a 2017 artistic research anthology titled *Being There: Explorations into the Local* that I co-edited [Greenfield et al. 2017]. All the texts dealt with place in some form or another, the first one was my own, titled *Local sound families and a choir in Estonia*, and it was a diaristic account of a series of encounters with soundscape elements during an artistic residency in Mooste, a small borough in a rural municipality in the south east of Estonia, with less than 1600 inhabitants and located just 20 km from the shores of Lake Pihkva, marking the border with Russia (note 5). The audiowalk's narrative perspective followed that of the text, that of a sound gatherer trying to make sense of the aural impressions found on site, and involving a small local choir of inhabitants of the rural area surrounding Mooste. Once completed, this audiowalk was placed, via the Echoes platform, in eight different locations spread out throughout Scandinavia and the Baltics, including the "original" location, Mooste, and my current hometown, Copenhagen. In Copenhagen, the audiowalk was designed as a path following the perimeter of the Botanical Garden, a peripatetic meditation for a listener constantly edging along the liminal area between the grounds and the streets around it.

The collaborative aspect surrounding the different vocal narrations was quite interesting. I did not physically meet any of the narrators, all the contact happened via Zoom and through the exchange of recordings and a feedback process. This kept bringing to my mind the epistolary novel genre, where the action is implied by the allusions expressed in mail correspondence between two or more individuals.

Once GPS-tagged, the audiowalk is a public yet intangible installation, which can be accessed by anyone physically on site, simply by checking the available trigger zones in a mobile device. I have received direct feedback from acquaintances that have experienced it, but since the audiowalk is public and there is no user data feed, those who experience it via the Echoes platform do so anonymously – their experience outside of the range of my awareness. In this specific manifestation, the audiowalk is actually cast out and

encountered as a kind of message in a bottle, its placement on location being also a form of letting go of ownership. There it lingers, a sonic potential in digital space, anchored on a physical path and position, like an aural minefield, waiting to be triggered, or like a gift. As a public art piece, it inhabits to a certain extent an interstitial layer – I see it as kin to a pirate radio transmission, embedded in an unclaimed bandwidth. Still, artistic offerings of this kind carry a burden – severing the umbilical cord of recognition of authorship can feel like one sacrifice too many in an age of constraints. In a pedagogical context, when I have been teaching about sonic strategies and intervention in urban spaces, particularly to first year students, this is the one aspect that they struggle with the most, the limited feedback after the audiowalk's deployment, the lack of a direct path of call and response. I prefer instead to think of the audiowalk's potential in terms of resonance and echoes, where there is a necessary letting-go, both of the ownership of the experience and of the participation in its iterations. That the audiowalk format is a transitional experience is not incompatible with it occurring "in the midst of things," on the contrary, the fluidity of its listening while in motion is what constantly creates news spaces and new possibilities for co-habitation beyond immediate co-presence.

Conclusion: life continues or so we hope

When all of this is over something will remain, as it usually does. Life continues because it is "a restless activeness, a destructive-creative force-presence that does not coincide fully with any specific body" [Bennett 2010, 54]. There is hope in this non-coincidence, there is also a kind of vertigo in considering it – how the everyday structures of our lives, which we easily think firmly anchored in our choices, agency and motions, can be revealed to be so bound to circumstances fully outside of the scope of our control and, even, understanding. As an artist, an occupation familiar to acutely fluid and unpredictable entanglements, these issues are constantly at the foreground of my practice.

Conclusions are semicolons not full stops. The sonic strategies described above point to potentials not only of adaptation but of acknowledgment that changing circumstances can open up new paths, present new references for navigation. In many of my often-remote conversations with friends, colleagues and partners in the past months, there is an underlying pattern, a timidly avowed undertone of relief. Not projected relief transpiring when considering the hopefully near future beyond the pandemic, but relief in that dealing with loss and the narrowing of one's everyday possibilities also emerged a kind of productive abiding – the refinement of the application of sparser resources, both in social, economic and creative terms. Stated as such, it does sound a bit dry, and there is definitely the caveat of privilege to consider, both when speaking for myself and for my immediate network. I am of the number of those who have been lucky, and luck is one of the strangest arrangers of the world, a chimera of chaotic turns and weird accounting.

Notes

1. "No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe;" in Donne's original Old English. This line is included in the seventh meditation of a collection aptly titled *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, and several steps in my Sickness*, which appropriately deals with disease and recovery, from a first-person perspective and through a metaphysical lens. Donne wrote it while convalescing from a life-threatening relapsing fever of unknown origin.

2. Maybe *social algebra* is an even more appropriate term given the mathematical term's etymological resonances with bone-setting and restoration of what is fragmented.

3. This technique can also be achieved by using instead a proportionally sized artificial head, a so-called *dummy head*. This option is usually preferred when producing binaural recordings from static positions, prioritizing control and clarity over the performative potentials of mobility, or simply when a human microphone wearer is not available or convenient.

4. A sci-fi novel in which an unspecified alien visitation on Earth leaves scattered circumscribed areas (*zones*) rife with unexplained phenomena, such objects of unknown properties and even localized reconfigurations of the laws of physics.

5. The audiowalk is also available as a single stereo track (link).

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