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Locus Sonus: Introduction

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The major part of this special edition is based on the proceedings of Locus Sonus Symposium #8 Audio Mobility [acp footnote] Locus Sonus Symposium #8 Audio Mobility (April 16-18, 2014), École Supérieure d'Art d'Aix en Provence and LAMES MMSH (Laboratoire Méditerranéen de Sociologie).[/acp]. The symposium assembled an international panel of artists, theoreticians and researchers from various scientific domains to discuss the significance of mobility in regards to the ways in which we create, perceive and organise sound. To situate the context, here is a brief extract from the original call for contributions:

We propose to consider mobile audio-technology from two points of view. These can be assimilated to maps and sounding. In the case of maps, we project space and trajectory through schematic representation while in the case of sounding, we activate the environment around us and in so doing collect information about it through feedback.

Much of the ensuing discussion revolves around the aesthetical, cultural, social as well as philosophical issues arising from the development of recent mobile listening and sound-making devices that allow us to record, transmit, mix, process and geo-localize sound on the move and in real-time. The reader will find references to augmented reality, historical or artistic audio guides and sensor-based systems that sonify the here and now, but also more abstract notions that redefine auditoriums or investigate cultural practice related to mobile sound making and listening. Research from media studies draws our attention to strategies for the conservation of the private audio sphere (e.g. headphone listening) and other tactics that rather invade public territory through the audio dimension (e.g. ringtones or ghetto blasters). Fundamental research into audio perception rubs shoulders with contemporary embodiments of folk musical instruments and 3d virtual “gaming” spaces.

Samuel Bordreuil takes us back to the 1980s – the days of Djs and sound systems and relates the way they conquered territories in Marseilles. In so doing, he addresses (social) commonality, sense of belonging, musical territorialization of urban space and its “dramatizing” effects. Jumping forward to today’s emerging technologies, Steve Jones renews the role of the busker by building on the accessibility and portability of mobile phones. The smart phone or tablet, like a harmonica that you carry in your pocket, becomes an instrument to accompany the wanderings of the contemporary “troubadour”. Also concerned with popular culture, Frauke Behrendt presents a comprehensive taxonomy of mobile sound divided into four categories: musical instruments, sonifying mobility, sound platforms and placed sounds. She develops the last (most widespread) category, suggesting that the practice of walking in locative projects can be considered as sonic interaction design; “we listen with our legs”. Although Elena Biserna is more specifically interested in the arts, her reflection also starts with the act of walking. Her paper provides an introduction to the history of mobile-mediated listening-works from the 1980s onwards. By focussing on the redefinition of boundaries between aesthetic and everyday experiences, it considers three different ways of reshaping the relationship between the walking-listener and his/her environment through the use of portable listening devices – “revelation”, “overwriting” and “interaction”.

This special issue also includes descriptions of and reflections on strategies relating to mobile sound written by the artists themselves. These contributions offer a broad view on an ever-expanding field of art practices that act directly on urban space by using a variety of strategies, approaches, forms and media. In so doing, they critically penetrate the multilayered dynamics of (mobile) listening and soundmaking in the public sphere. Justin Bennett reflects on his long series of audio walk projects that, spanning the last two and half decades,

have “overwritten” urban space in many different ways. Experimenting with recorded sound, radio transmission and, more recently, locative media, he addresses historical, social, economical as well as environmental issues relating to specific sites. Joel Cahen also describes an example of narrative placed sound (to use Behrendt’s terminology). His locative project Interzone Theatre creates a “sound based augmented reality theatre” through the mobile and personal auditorium of our headphones. Murmures Urbains, discussed here by Emmanuel Guez and Xavier Boissarie, is another piece that generates a “theatre without walls” using instruction based protocols, developed on the platform Message situés. By delivering audio instructions, the project transforms the listener into a performer inviting him to play with social norms in public spaces. Jessica Thompson’s way of engaging with the urban milieu and social behaviour involves the use of pervasive computing and networked wearable devices. Posing the body as site and as context, she discusses several projects where mobility, sound and interaction set the stage for networked performances. On the other hand, Matthieu Saladin develops a somewhat different “tactical” approach by investigating the role of the ringtone in the neoliberal soundscape and the mobile phone as an “apparatus” (in Giorgio Agamben’s terms). Starting from these reflections, his project Sonnerie Publiques hijacks our mobile phones by offering downloadable ringtones that deliver “thought provoking” text to speech messages infiltrating the public sphere.

Another group of contributions is more concerned with sensing and sonification. Here Peter Sinclair speculates that the new power of calculation that we carry in our pockets might enable innovative methods for generating sound directly from the situation, rather than overlaying it with recorded sound. He describes his research leading to the development of an app that generates music for cars and argues for the prolongation of perception through

mobiles devices. If Sinclair places his production clearly on the side of the probe, Jean Cristofol challenges the dichotomy between map and probe (mentioned above) with the idea that the latter, arguably, generates its own cartography. By the same token, his paper provides an articulation between these two modes of audio mobility leading him to question the validity of traditional boundaries and geographical limits. He suggests that mobile devices – technologies of transmission and localization, but also those based on probes – represent a new way to define limits between individuals and social groups. Both Dom Schlienger and Aisen Caro Chacin are developing devices that literally use sounding to perceive physical space. Schlienger’s acoustic source localization principles use measurable time differences between points of reception to propose a new technique of sound spatialisation. This offers perspectives for possible interactions between a performers position and musical expression in future artistic projects. Aisen Caro Chacin with her Echolocation Headphones offers bat vision to her audience – converging beams of ultra sound bounce of surfaces in the environment providing an intuitive but precise form of audio navigation that, aside from its aesthetic and ludic qualities, could also potentially be useful for blind people. Gaetan Parsilhan’s (et al.) research also seeks to further sightless navigation. In this case, the aim is to improve sonification design for guidance tasks and the study compares the efficiency of different sound parameter control strategies in relation to perception of localization. Romain Barthélémy and Roland Cahen are also involved in sonification design. Their project My Smart City uses a “topohonic” approach to distribute carefully tailored sounds linked to location and task.

Moving away from the applied science of audio perception, the following authors engage a discussion about the aesthetics of environmental sound in its relationship to movement and/or mobile media. Aline Veillat interrogates the notion of soundscape/landscape and the way we frame our audio field. From

multidisciplinary research including sound anthropology, neurophysiology and philosophy of perception, she brings us back to more artistic concerns with her deambulatory sound installations. Jerome Joy is concerned with the notion of auditorium, which he redefines as any environment in which audio content or practice is shared. He discusses displacements in the acoustic environment in terms of musical practice; ways of activating or modulating the sound environment through our movements and (inter)actions. Laurent Di Biase proposes what might be considered as a practical embodiment of this idea. In a project produced during a residency leading up to the Locus Sonus symposium – Four Mobile Tracks – the path becomes the score as performers stream audio from the outside urban environment which Laurent remixes live in the auditorium. Exploring the relationship between field recording and environmental awareness, Owen Chapman presents a mobile sound-mapping and soundscape project focused on an abandoned stretch of urban wilderness in Montreal, Canada. Marie Muller also mapped sounds of Aix en Provence during a Locus Sonus residency. She incorporated her field recordings into a 3d model, using video game technology. In the resulting installation, the spectator can navigate in a schematic reconstruction of a city soundscape mapped to the volume of an empty space.

Finally, Fabrice Metais brings a singular approach to the debate addressing the philosophical question of shared phenomenology modified by technological mediation – the amorous relationship conducted through mobile phones.

The reader will have understood that this collection of essays is deliberately multi disciplinary. We hope that, taken as whole, the contributions in this issue will offer useful insight into questions raised by contemporary and historical mobile audio related practices. We further hope that the reader will get as much enjoyment as we have from tracing paths through this rich selection.

Peter Sinclair and Elena Biserna.

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