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The sound of a sound art archive

ABSTRACT
The foundation for this text is my 10xCD opus *The Sounds of Ideas Forming* (2008–2012), an archive of 318 sound files featuring content from art students, children, archives and practitioners such as Yoko Ono, David Bowie, Chris Watson, Douglas Gordon, Lydia Lunch, Brian Eno and George Brecht. The Sound of a Sound Art Archive considers this particular sound archive, examining formats, narrative and the relationship between recording sound and recorded sound. I draw upon first person experiences and examples from curating, pedagogy and sound art to arrive at a series of frameworks for a sound art archive, one that is finite, educational and able to interject into everyday contexts.

My research as a visual artist has centred on the use of curatorial methodologies to explore the relationship between contemporary art and the everyday in non-gallery contexts. These interests have evidenced themselves in major projects on the cusp of each of the past three decades. The first was the Bellgrove Station Billboard Project (1990–1991) in which I curated public realm works from students, professional artists, writers and an aromatherapist. Following ten years of working with communities I became lead artist on tenantspin (2001–2007), an Internet TV project established between Liverpool's

Foundation for Art & Creative Technology (FACT) and elderly high-rise tenants. The tenants worked alongside artists to produce an archive of weekly one-hour webcasts on politics and culture. My role within tenantspin was facilitator, animateur and project manager, and both Bellgrove and tenantspin began in highly localized social situations before evolving into widely published curatorial models.

Since 2008 I have been exploring these relationships by examining artists' uses of sound, to ask precise and specific questions around curating, archiving, distributing and teaching that I did not feel were being asked within art contexts in 2008. These questions formed the basis of a six-year Ph.D. by previous publication at Leeds Beckett University where I lecture on a 0.6fte basis. My research involved the publication of 6433 CDs under the title The Sounds of Ideas Forming and these CDs were given away freely in everyday contexts. The collection consisted of a total of 318 sound files featuring content from children, artists, art students, musicians, philosophers and archival material on which I secured all permissions and collaborated with a Graphic Art & Design student to package the Ph.D. in archive boxes (see Figure 1), of which only five exist. Through the research, I developed methodologies for generating new content to sit alongside existing material, arriving at the notion that only by producing new content can we begin to understand why we keep returning to the RECORD button, and often to the same themes (see Figures 1 and 2).

What form might a sound art archive take? The availability of existing sounds has been revolutionized in the past decade by advances made in compression techniques. This is a topic covered in depth by Milner (2010), concerning the removal of information from waveforms to reduce file sizes while allowing the brain to use auditory masking to compensate. Compression enables almost any auditive phenomena to be transferred instantly and Reynolds uses the phrase 'a liquefying of sound' (2011: 122). Allied to increased server space, this fundamentally changes our ability to access, archive and recontextualize sounds. The primary example of these new archival possibilities is 'UbuWeb', a project that began as a website for concrete poetry and, with the advent of streaming audio and increased bandwidth, broadened to include MP3s. It is now the most comprehensive online archive for sound art, what founder Kenneth Goldsmith describes as 'the

Figures 1 and 2: – Alan Dunn The Sounds of Ideas Forming (2008–2012), archive box, 7 audio CDs, USB drive, screen-printed poster and postcards, 15,000 word synthesis text, 2014, image: Katy Knowles.

Robin Hood of the avant-garde' (1996). All the material is made freely available, often without the creators' permission, and Goldsmith writes: 'As the practices of sound art continue to evolve, categories become increasingly irrelevant, a fact UbuWeb embraces. Hence, our artists are listed alphabetically instead of categorically' (1996, original emphasis). By my calculation, UbuWeb currently hosts around 15,000 pieces of content and can lead to interesting discoveries if browsed randomly. However, I was interested in an archival model that would allow a finite and non-hierarchical set of themed recordings to interject into everyday life. In doing so, new knowledge could be gained about recorded sounds located in specific contexts.

To achieve this, the CD was chosen as my publishing format, despite digital music sales already accounting for 15 per cent of the market in 2008. As Gustin (2012) reports, by 2011 digital had surpassed physical sales, but the CD had a size, weight and unit cost that made physical distribution feasible. It also had a fixed 74-minute durational framework in which to curate content. As such, The Sounds of Ideas Forming was not an open-ended archive, but a set of finite curatorial decisions. The CD as a format may have lacked the gravitas of vinyl or the instant gratification of the MP3, but it did open up a conceptual space somewhere between analogue and digital. The CDs asked us to think about the time and spaces we have to produce, share and consume recorded sound in this era of hyper-acceleration and option paralysis, and to question what size an archive should or could be.

As to what constituted this particular finite sound art archive, the broader context for my research was a breaking down of categories and class distinctions between sounds in order to consider the drivers behind pressing the RECORD button. I sat with artists Jeremy Deller and Bill Drummond in the Bluecoat Gallery in Liverpool as Deller unveiled his sketch The History of the World (1997–2004). It was a flowchart proposing connections between Kraftwerk, Throbbing Gristle, the KLF and concepts such as the North, melancholy and de-industrialization. He suggested a remixed history of sounds based on sampling, scavenging and surfing; mining the spaces between sounds as much as listening to the sounds themselves. During my research, critical writing on sound art increased. Whitechapel and the MIT Press published Sound: Documents of Contemporary Art (C. Kelly, 2011)

which drew together examples of artists composing manifestos, burying ideas and contemplating silence when working with sound. It was one of the first non-chronological anthologies on sound art and writers were switching between documenting sound art practice, creating new historical chronologies and examining underlying themes. Kim-Cohen's In the Blink of an Ear (2009) located all sound art as primarily a conceptual practice and Miller's Sound Unbound (2008) reflected upon sound in relation to digital sampling. By considering these publications alongside Deller, we can use their themes and connections to think beyond the purely sonic qualities of sound. We are invited to focus instead on the social and conceptual ramifications. Attali suggests that 'to understand music, one must understand much more than music. What must be constructed, then, is more like a map, a structure of interferences and dependencies between society and its music' (Kelly 2011: 105). To begin to consider new connections between sounds in specific contexts, I required a curatorial framework with an entry point into existing material while setting up themes for new works. The sounds in the archive were to be important, but what were the connections between them? What themes were recurring? What behavioural drivers were behind people returning to the RECORD button?

The Sounds of Ideas Forming answered these questions by curating content against seven fixed themes (silence, water, revolution, grey, catastrophe, background and numbers) and eradicating any accepted chronologies amongst sounds. The archive was categorized and non-hierarchical. Reynolds (2011: 57) suggests that as a result of YouTube, there is less need to locate sounds in specific temporal ranges. He suggests that we now experience sound in a more horizontal plane and that 'the presence of the past in our lives has increased immeasurably and insidiously. Old stuff either directly permeates the present, or lurks just below the surface'. My research brought old and new together, children and pensioners, Turner Prize winners and Black Panthers, restagings and one recording from deep space.

The archive, published on finite media, was thus able to employ a form of narrative in relation to its particular content. One student, Rob Swift, recorded a 'Big Bang' which became the opening track on the A History of Background (2011) volume as reference to the beginning of time, space and sound.

The final track was a rare backing track from David Bowie's 'Space Oddity'. Bowie and Swift were of similar age when they pressed RECORD and both were curious about sonic space and a sense of loneliness. For a split second in the history of time, Swift and Bowie were in the same contextual space that Miller describes as 'an ecosystem of hunter-gathers of moments suspended in a culture founded on a world where information moves only because someone invented and shared it' (2008: 17). My research drew out this connection between them and demonstrated the complexity and freedom on offer when working with recorded sounds. The archive spoke about its content through its form; it was a community of thematic examples of the RECORD button being pressed, of humans satisfying the impulse to freeze time, challenging our own mortality and leaving messages behind for future generations (Figure 3).

What is the relationship between recorded sounds and recording sounds? I wanted the archive to highlight the process of recording sound as well as housing recorded sounds. The contribution from Brian Eno, for example, featured him talking about how the sounds of Music for Airports developed and I invited sound recordist Chris Watson into the university to run master classes for visual art students to advance an understanding of pressing RECORD. I was drawn to the fluidity of his activities that included founding avant-garde Sheffield band Cabaret Voltaire and wildlife sound recording work for Sir David Attenborough. Watson also records as a solo artist and his CD El Tren Fantasma/Ghost Train (2011) was recorded in Mexico while working on a BBC programme. It included the track El Divisadero (2011) that evoked the early industrial sound of Cabaret Voltaire; it shifted between foreground and background, dropped out like the heaviest dub and returned as heavenly choir over industrial drone. It was underwater. It was the Doppler effect. It was machine and, in my opinion, in the background of El Divisadero could be heard master class recordings that Watson, myself and students made under the rail bridge by the Leeds & Liverpool Canal. Together, we listened to late-night rolling stock and captured a rhythm of Leeds from new perspectives.

In an excerpt from a 1962 lecture included in the archive and on Artists' Uses of The Word Revolution Aldous Huxley says: 'all revolutions have essentially aimed at changing the environment in order to

Figure 3: – Chris Watson and students recording from a microphone inside a chicken carcass, Roundhay Park, Leeds, 2011, image: Elisa Grasso.

change the individual' (Huxley 1962 cited in Dunn 2009). In inviting Watson to Leeds, I wanted to change the art school environment. Students had worked with sound prior to 2009 but it had been directionless and not rooted in any critical understanding. In the art studios, Watson taught staff and students how to record, why to record, how our ears work, how to listen to backgrounds and the importance of both the popular and the avant-garde. El Divisadero took the prosaic and transformed it into the abstract. He shared with us a tale of recording the sound of his fridge using a 50p contact microphone and selling it to an international games company as the accurate sound of a nuclear reactor. He recommended recording and playback equipment for the University to purchase, including binaural microphones, WAV recorders and surround-sound Genelec speakers, and he returned each year to work with staff and students.

When Chris first started visiting, I put together a CD of artists and students recordings of the sound of the word 'revolution'. The CD was a complex artistic form with a tight quality control, a black humour and a broad curatorial range. It also credited university administrators and finance workers who had assisted with some of the more prosaic curatorial activities. Formed in, and emerging from, an art school in transition with new tools and insights into the recording process, the CD was also a powerful message about pedagogic possibilities. Chris' master classes sat within the undoing of an overtly modularized curriculum and sound enabled me to work with students from a much broader range of disciplines and chosen courses. In June 2012, Amy Leech and Joe Finister, both participants in two master classes and contributors to A History of Background (2011), graduated with first class Honours degrees for their work in sound. Finister's pieces were rooted in his passion for dubstep that Watson encouraged him to develop into surround soundscapes. Leech created intimate recordings for her animations, including some recordings of fishermen's maggots. These so delighted Watson that when appearing on Bang Goes the Theory (2012) and asked to demonstrate the quietest sound he could record, he chose maggots.

Bishop is scathing of the current state of universities in which 'the administrator rather than the professor is the central figure' and that '(e)ducation is increasingly a financial investment, rather than

a creative space of freedom and discovery' (2012: 268). My research demonstrated the opposite. That is, there are methodologies for working within such systems and collaborating with administrators on artworks that seek out spaces of freedom and discovery for students as well as staff. Bishop questions projects whose 'dominant goal seemed to be the production of a dynamic experience for participants, rather than the production of complex artistic forms' (2012: 246) and asks what it means to do education as art. This is a key question as it addresses both the process and product. My research was concerned with the act of recording sound as well as recorded sounds. We learned about tools and processes from Watson while locating artefacts in high impact contexts. Both were of equal importance. Specifically, students were made aware of different microphones, editing software and playback devices. They were also introduced to dissemination contexts such as the CD, the art gallery, radio broadcast, soundtrack or surround-sound installation.

Thus The Sound Art Archive became a pedagogic model and, in 2014, a REF submission. This was the archive with a purpose beyond preservation and an archive that presented itself across a number of platforms in various shapes and forms. It was finite but also self-contained, housing examples of the learning of the processes that lead to recording as well as recorded sounds themselves. It was an archive that replaced questions around definition (archive, artwork or pedagogic tool?) with questions and answers regarding the inherent processes. And in the next stage, in its dissemination, the archive began to create feedback loops with the society from which it emerged (see Figure 4).

Where might we encounter such an archive? While considering the place of my research within education, the everyday and the (sound) art world, I asked Fluxus artist Robin Page what Leeds College of Art was like when he brought George Brecht to the city to lecture part-time in the late 1960s. Not surprisingly he claimed that it was a wild and free experimental performance art mêlée of improvised sound, drinking, nudity and a 'we just did stuff' mentality (Page 2013). We cannot go back to those days, but what is important within doing education as art is first, to recognize the particular set of circumstances. Models can then be constructed for the development and presentation of content in specific contexts, both inside and outside the pedagogic walls.

In May 1972, such was the currency of Leeds' art education that the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London staged an exhibition of student works entitled 'Students at Leeds'. After 40 years I was commissioned by the ICA to create a 20-minute mix of The Sounds of Ideas Forming as part of their 'Soundworks' project within Bruce Nauman's 'DAYS' exhibition. In the upstairs gallery, a large black box housed an iPad with a series of audio works played through a central speaker. My piece included content from Leeds students, all of whom had worked with Chris Watson. By the end of the exhibition The Sounds of Ideas Forming was the eighth most popular of the 132 tracks with over 1200 listens. The Sounds of Ideas Forming at the ICA was a complex artistic form. It was a 20-minute mix curated from a ten-hour soundtrack that in itself was curated from every available recorded sound. It was also evidence of a part-time lecturer, freed from excessive administration, leading by example through experiential processes while producing artefacts that offered conceptual rewards.

In a variety of manners the archive can exist in contexts appropriate to its content. In relation to sound, the history of the recorded artefact is a gradual shift away from the concert hall into our everyday lives through wax cylinder, vinyl, cassette, CD and digital formats. Does a sound art archive then belong in everyday settings? One may argue that by being online, UbuWeb does exist in our everyday, but I was interested in strategies for taking the archive to a public rather than vice versa, acknowledging Kaprow's 'doing life, consciously' (1993: 195) or what Mauro calls 'artists constantly generating new "outsides" to capitalist production and reproduction' (2013).

The first CD, titled Soundtrack for a Mersey Tunnel, was given away free of charge from tunnel tollbooths. Other elements from the archive were left at tourist destinations, buried in beaches and left in phone boxes, with such decisions based on some of the ideas and sounds contained within each particular CD. The archive was part of my nomination for the 2012 Liverpool Art Prize and I further animated the collection with a live sound event of around 200 people and a museum display of associated artefacts on a train platform setting. In 2013 Deptford X was curated by artist Bob and Roberta Smith as part of his 'Art Makes Children Powerful' project. For the festival, I walked up and

down Deptford High Street in London handing out 21 copies of Artists' Uses of the Word Revolution (2009) to passers-by, creative workers and shopkeepers. Each recipient agreed to have his or her photograph taken with the CD. As the day progressed, the exchanges became lengthier. The Mayor of Lewisham accepted a copy and spoke of the housing revolution of the 1970s that gave birth to bands such as Dire Straits and Squeeze. The Deptford experience encapsulated many of my research interests. It was finding thematic routes through recorded sounds, drawing lines between this content and locating it within social settings to create discursive or creative feedback loops of varying cycles.

The Sounds of Ideas Forming was about creating moments of encounter with new audiences in everyday settings. It was about betweens, or as Obrist (1998) describes his own curatorial practice, 'a position of in-between-ness', the spaces between where we expect or hope to find content and where it is housed. Feedback on the archive may come immediately as in Deptford or twenty years later, using different sized cogs to gauge responses. I present The Sounds of Ideas Forming as an archive in a box that draws together obscure classics, familiar names and student works. As I listen back to John Peel shows and consider Deleuze and Guattari on rhizomes, so might creatives in the future who are interested in non-hierarchical non-gallery practices, explore The Sounds of Ideas Forming. Curating artist-student-archive material into one finite archive was a simple formula but one that captured the imagination of all the contributors. It was about sound, but equally about navigating through data, while producing even more. It was about a simple structure that looked back, surveyed the present but also projected forward to think about future roles. It was about the archiving but also about using the process of archiving to make new betweens, of in turn, locating the archive in the everyday, in Henri Lefebvre's phrase, that 'primal arena for meaningful social change' (Merrifield 2006: 10).

Figure 4: – Handing out copies of Artists' Uses of the Word Revolution, Deptford X, London, 2013, image: Alan Dunn.

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Dr Alan Dunn (b. 1967, Glasgow) studied at Glasgow School of Art and The Art Institute of Chicago. He was curator of the Bellgrove Station Billboard Project (Glasgow, 1990–1991), lead artist on the tenantspin project (FACT, Liverpool 2001–2007) and recently produced the 10xCD opus The Sounds of Ideas Forming. Through these projects Dunn has developed collaborative content with Bill Drummond, Douglas Gordon, Yoko Ono, Philip Jeck, Pauline Oliveros and Brian Eno. He lives and works in Liverpool and is a Senior Lecturer Leeds Beckett University where he co-runs the M.A. Art & Design course and has just completed a Ph.D. on sound art (www.alandunn67.co.uk/ADCD.html).

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