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PERCEPTUALLY DIVERSE INCLUSIVITY IN MULTIMODAL INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTS PRACTICE

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Introduction

This paper explains how a sequence of two art projects moved towards a position of greater perceptual inclusivity, and how their broader artistic context and theoretical frameworks reflect notions of and justifications for inclusivity. With a focus on participation and accessibility, it considers how multimodal and interdisciplinary arts practice supports and responds to the realities of perceptual diversity, aural and otherwise.

John Drever (2019) has argued the case for aural diversity in sonic arts practice through a critique of the ‘idealised composer/listener’ entrenched in electroacoustic and modernist musical traditions of the 20th century; he convincingly advocates for “hearing as a highly complex spectrum of human experience, not a fixed entity that a series of received metrics can contain.” (92). Reflecting on this article led me to recall personal experiences from the early 1990s when, as a music student, I would supplement classical music concerts with visits to the night clubs of Sheffield’s then vibrant dance-music scene. The contrasting frequency range and dynamic (narrowly acoustic to full spectrum amplified and embodied) and behaviours (sit still, don’t talk or cough, to active engagement through movement, vocalisations and social interaction) created an awareness of how my hearing, and the kind of listener I could be, was context driven and multifarious. Furthermore, wearing earplugs while clubbing, a habit learnt from sound-engineer friends, taught me about bodily listening and ‘sound as touch’ (ibid. and see *Touch the Sound: A Sound Journey with Evelyn Glennie*, 2004). Drug technologies too, revealed how hearing, even consciousness, could change and modulate what I typically understood as ‘normal’ and everyday.

At the time, the historical context for these contrasts and their political dimensions weren't completely lost on me. Involvement in free improvisation, experimental music and fine arts practice, led me to question the role and dynamic of the composer-performer-listener matrix. Over time, this led to creative projects drawing on installation arts practice as well as performance and participatory art, taking advantage of blurred boundaries between composer and performer, performer and audience, production and reception, art and the everyday, and so on (see Bishop, 2006 and 2010). At its root, harking back to my student experiences, was a politically and ethically informed desire to allow visitor-participants to determine their own path through a work; specifically, especially where sound or music were involved, to be free to determine their own interaction with and experience of the work. On this basis, such works, with their open-ended timeframes and modes of engagement, can be understood to accommodate participants with varying preferences and/or needs arising from perceptual difference.

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Park Bench Sojourn [PBS]

It is from this general background, albeit several years later, that Park Bench Sojourn arose. PBS is a multimodal art work that has its origins in my practice as a phonographer. Looking for ways to work more conceptually and contextually, the idea was to curate audio recordings made from park benches. Later, once work began and the project's identity emerged more fully, additional media began to be included; as well as content provided by participants, other artists and friends.

The project's website and home states that sojourns "are experiential and require participants to find a bench to sit on for the purposes of the sojourn. [...] You are invited to participate in the project through the selection of sojourns available, any number and type, as appropriate, per outing." (Sansom, 2019). Sojourns vary in nature, with each one emphasising a particular sense and kind of experience. For example, 'audio sojourns' comprise listening to audio recordings made from other benches while 'sight sojourns' invite you to watch video recordings that replay silent views from other benches. Choose a 'voice sojourn' and you listen to a narrator describing what they see, hear and experience from yet another bench. (Thanks to this conference, I'm considering a text-based version). The various kinds of content are available via mobile phone by downloading or streaming. Other iterations of the project (currently nine), have included: a

multimedia gallery installation juxtaposing content from a variety of sojourns; a VR-version, replacing VR's more typical stimulation and interactivity with something more minimal; and geographically-located audio versions using a mobile app (one of which has been designed for benches around the George Davies Centre).

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Regardless of the format, context or specific content, all sojourns have the same goal — to provide a bench-based aesthetically reflexive moment-in-time. Simply put, the project is about awareness. In detail, sojourns augment experience in ways that combine and contrast the present and embodied, with the absent and virtual. In doing so, PBS questions what it means to be human; surrounded, as we are, by computer technologies and digital media, living lives that are perpetually 'connected' and dispersed through the cloud. It reflects on how technologically determined lives and lifestyles can conspire against us to find opportunities to stop, reflect and be witnesses to lived experience.

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Participation and Perceptual Inclusivity

PBS, followed the two-year long project Landscape Quartet [LQ]. Informed by recent environmental and eco-critical thinking, its remit was to explore the creative and theoretical possibilities afforded by working in direct dialogue with the environment. At its heart was a critique of conventional post-Enlightenment mechanisms of representation, which, as Bennett Hogg the project's PI puts it, serve to perpetuate the ideological blind othering of 'nature.' (Hogg, 2013). Advocating philosophical positions that argue for the 'interconnectivity of things' it explored sonic and musical arts practices that were participative and eco-systemic in approach. Integral to this was a relational epistemological emphasis, which focused on modes of knowledge accessible to us as involved participants, situated performers working in and through the environment. (Borgdorff, 2010). In parallel with the critique of the idealised listener already referred to, and taking in Non-Representational Theory and the work of Tim Ingold, we sought to counter a reductivist mindset and move towards more practice-orientated and processual ways of understanding.

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We sought to communicate proximity and interconnections with each other and the environments we worked in; to bind together feelings of place and self across the varying registers of multisensory awareness. Significant to this discussion, we were concerned to go beyond privileging any one sense or kind of experience, and to be inclusive also of, for example, memory, imagination, pre-cognitive and pre-conscious intuition, encounters with animals and vegetation, and so on.

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A personal tension with the Quartet's approach, that PBS is, in part, a response to, was a cautiousness towards field recording; a cautiousness due to its historic associations with objectification through documentation on the one hand, and the fetishisation of the captured sound-object on the other. Although a simplification, it is a useful shorthand to understand how such practices and their philosophical roots serve in the objectification of experience towards a non-participative distancing (in parallel again with the 'idealised listener'). PBS speaks to this simplification and offers some critique of the Quartet's characterisation of participation.

PBS is arguably more transparent in its commitment to the Quartet's methodological and theoretical basis, and as a result widens its potential for inclusivity by more directly incorporating our existential status as 'lifeworld participants' (see Ingold, 2000).

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It is concerned less with directly interventionist modes of artistic participation and turns more explicitly towards commonplace activities such as walking, stillness, watching, listening, feeling and reflecting, with the possibility of field recording and other kinds of documentation included within this. As such, PBS locates its practice in more plainly accessible and universal qualities of experience: practices that by virtue of their embodied immediacy and inherent reflexivity are arguably just as environmentally participative. PBS' interest is not to recover and affirm the connections we share through overtly participative and specifically artistic activities. In contrast, it seeks to facilitate a more essentialist and open mode of contemplative witnessing that affords access to the relational and unitive qualities of experience commonly shared. Its emphasis is on

our dwelling as part of, and participants with, nature and the lifeworld as it unfolds around us; as part of this it acknowledges the complexity, perceptual and otherwise, of the individual sojourner. This is reflected in the project's practical flexibility: for example, an audio sojourn can be conducted using any kind of headphones, the mobile phone's internal speaker, or any other playback device in ways and at levels comfortable for the listener, at any pace, with or without repetition, changes, breaks, and so on, as necessary.

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Multimodality and Perceptual Inclusivity

As well as the Quartet's efforts to explore interconnections between each other and the environment, the multimodal scope of the project extended to include the spaces, places and resources lying beyond initial locations (that is, moving from the countryside to gallery, concert venue, fixed media compositions, video works, and so on).

In order to interpret and understand how subsequent artefacts connect with the project's participative agenda it was suggested that subsequent works exist in ongoing relational processes (Sansom, 2015). Cultural geographer David Crouch makes the argument that such representations, themselves born of the performativity of living, are in no sense fixed or closed to change but rather 'remain open too, "available" for further work' (2012). This, along with Barbara Bolt's view of art's performative potential as a dynamic material exchange, rather than merely a signifying representational act (2010), helped position the Quartet's 'after-the-event' artefacts as reconfigurations of the constitutive and constituting relations of performative participation; a dynamic reaching back to the 'original' explorations as well as forwards to subsequent artefacts.

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In spite of this, participative engagement remained very much wedded to the performativity of the Quartet, with our audience rather too distant from and outside of the heat of our creative process. The epistemological potential of participation, where, to quote Brian Haseman, "the knower and the known interact, shape and interpret the other" had limited reach beyond our own, admittedly rich, experiences (see Haseman 2006 and 2010).

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PBS, addresses this by reconfiguring artist/performer/audience roles, a reconfiguration activated through the project's range of sojourns, flexible modes of engagement, use of ubiquitous mobile phone technology, and participatory and performative expectations. Furthermore, its quotidian directive and reciprocal simplicity, allows for a levelling out of agency and aesthetic experience, with little distinction between my own involvement, or other contributors of PBS content, and those of any sojourner. The performativity of PBS is grounded in walking to and sitting on a bench with some combination of sojournic content; participation shapes this further through a range of activities and kinds of engagement towards, ideally, some configuration of reflexive awareness. It opens out, in accessible ways, an encounter between knower and known; an equitable and embodied approach that affirms the non-specialist and diverse realities of existence, experience and perception. It flattens out the politics of listening and conventionally defined arts-related subject positions. PBS is distributed through a range of possible kinds of experience, aesthetic encounter, media, and participative engagement: relational epistemology shaping both content and form. As such and in a general sense, PBS is an example of how multimodal interdisciplinary arts practice can be inclusive of perceptual diversity; specifically, it seeks to open out accessibility by activating individual experience through a context that is universal and shared. Finally, in as far as this potential is unwitting and latent, there appears to be a valuable and needed opportunity for arts practitioners, echoing Drever (2019), to deliberately devise works that savour and celebrate the perceptual spectra that humanity has to offer.

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