

## Experimental Audio Tours: Activating the Archive

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In June of 2017, Heather Warren-Crow and I, working as the collaborative team warren-crow+warren-crow, completed an artist residency at The Museum of Performance + Design (MP+D) in San Francisco, California. The project began with an initial research trip to the museum in January of 2017, continued as further research, planning, and content creation (at a distance) during the spring semester, and culminated in our launch of an experimental audio tour called *Performance Alive (Earmark)* on June 17<sup>th</sup>. *Performance Alive (Earmark)* debuted as part of the Yerba Buena Art Walk and remains part of MP+D's permanent collection. The tour was our contribution to an ongoing series at the museum called *Archive Live* that commissions artists and performers to find creative ways of activating and engaging with the museum's 3.5 million-item collection, which documents Bay Area theatre, music, and dance history.

Our aim for the project was threefold: **1.)** to showcase some of the incredible (and, at times, odd) holdings of the MP+D, **2.)** to address the relative neglect of sound in the documentation of live performance (photography still dominates theatrical documentation, for example), and **3.)** produce a work of sound art. In the end, we created an amalgam of a museum audio guide, an experimental sound walk, and a site-specific live performance accessed through headphones and MP3 players. Credit must be given to (now former) MP&D executive director Muriel Maffre for embracing such a peculiar hybrid.

According to Loic Tallon in the book *Digital Technologies and the Museum Experience: Handheld Guides and Other Media*, the first visitor technology used in a museum was invented and employed in 1952 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Tallon goes on to explain, "from its origin as an analogue radio tour at the Stedelijk Museum... its subsequent adoption by nearly every major museum by the end of the twentieth century, and to its establishment at the forefront of in-gallery interpretation innovation, handheld technology is today an established companion of the modern museum" (Atkins, xiv). The early developers of audio tour technology, Tallon claims, were "drawn by its unique potential to mediate an experience individually controlled by each visitor, which was content rich, which was personal to them, was available at any time, and suited learning styles not suited by catalogue, text panel, or label." (Atkins, xiii) The audio tour not only continues to be standard in museums, theme parks, and other institutions, but has rapidly expanded (largely on the wings of the internet and GPS technology) into smartphone-accessible audio guides for tourists in most major cities, national parks, and even (in *Rick Steves' Audio Europe*) Amsterdam's red light district.

In an era that many would argue is characterized by increasingly blurred lines between entertainment and education, contemporary audio tours can be very richly produced and designed. Many will present their material in a way that could even be described as theatrical in the manner in which they employ environmental sound effects (conjuring historical pasts), quotes read in character (conjuring historical personas), and even musical underscoring (dramatizing the narrative). That said, the overall goal of such tours tends to be keeping participants from straying from a prescribed path as they absorb factual information that may aid in helping them interpret the work itself and the socio-cultural moment it arose from. While museums are exploring new possibilities for what a tour can be and increasingly incorporate GPS

tracking to give participants greater freedom in determining their own path and sequence of discovery, I contend that the aim of most museum audio tours is still the transmission of objective information about their collections in an entertaining but ultimately educational manner.

Our project played with the format of the museum audio tour by combining it with another artistic format: that of the audio walk, a genre of sound art (itself a subset of visual art). Canadian-based artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller are the best-known practitioners and were an important point of reference for our project. Since I was not the one writing our script, we agreed that only I would listen to recordings of their audio walks. This allowed us to learn from this rich history of artist-driven sound walks without exactly replicating them.

The audio walks of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller are certainly not audio tours (indeed, they are only occasionally situated in museums). They are not concerned with a straightforward transmission of facts about objects or places. Participants are generally asked to follow the directions of the narrator's voice (Janet Cardiff) regarding where to go, how fast to go there, and even what to think about along the way. All of this is done poetically and impressionistically, without clear objectives. You may be guided to look at and consider specific aspects of the environment, and you may acquire historical information about your location(s), but you may also feel implicated in strange (film-noir-esque) meta-narratives, be asked confounding philosophical questions, and be immersed in a sea of unidentified voices and sounds. Nina Simon, the author of *The Participatory Museum*, writes that even though she took the Cardiff audio walk *Words Drawn on Water* with friends, they all experienced the piece differently, "lost in the minutiae of [their] own augmented experience" (Simon, 169).

I have discussed our work as site-specific performance, and have suggested an inherent theatricality to both conventional museum audio tours and the sort of artist-driven audiowalks discussed above. It may not be clear exactly why I am describing any of these works as theatre, or what definition of theatrical I have in mind. In the book *Theatre Noise: The Sound of Performance*, Misha Myers addresses this line of questioning in relation to similar kinds of audio walks and states "it could be argued that the central criteria of the medium of theatre are no longer present: co-presence of performance and audience in shared time-space (Kendrick and Roesner, 70)." But she then goes on to summarize the thrust of her article "Vocal Landscaping: The Theatre of Sound in Audiowalks" by saying that rather than negate the liveness and immediacy of performance in more traditional spaces, "the use of technology in the audiowalk expands the phenomenological space in which theatre happens and the sensory modes of audience engagement within that space (Kendrick and Roesner, 71)." She goes on to describe how the recorded voices in such projects often come to feel as if they are the inner-voice of the listener/participant, and since the listener/participant is often following (embodying) the instructions of the narrator, there is a sense that the performers in these productions *are* the participants themselves. Participants are co-present as audience and performer in the same unfolding time-space. "It is not enough" Myers claims, "to say that the performer is not present in this theatre of sound (Kendrick and Roesner, 76)." Furthermore, she suggests that another common attribute of such pieces, the environmental sound/noise "increases the sense of immediacy that is central to the theatrical experience." The noise she speaks of tends to be (as it was in our piece) a blend of the real-time atmosphere (bleeding through headphones),

environmental sound recorded earlier from the precise locations that participants travel through, and any sounds (stepping, breathing, clothes-rustling etc.) made by the movement of participants. The inevitable sensation participants experience from constantly negotiating which environmental factors are real and in real time (seen and heard in the present) and which are fabricated (recordings from the past heard but not seen) has the overall effect of a kind of hyper-awareness of the senses that I would argue we constantly strive to evoke in conventional theater audiences. Myer concludes, “the audiowalk anticipates the contingency and uncertainty of ambient sounds encountered in the landscape, and the particular gait of the walker into its composition. In such case, noise is no longer a distraction of unwanted sonic debris, but rather an element of the composition that enhances and augments the theatrical experience and space (Kendrick and Roesner, 78).”

Heather and I were interested in how both audio walks and museum audio tours allow visitors to curate their own personal experience to a certain degree AND also proscribe, regulate, and even synchronize bodies in space. We felt compelled to tease out some of the tensions – between freedom and control, improvisation and choreography, open scores and closed scores – inherent in these formats and in (or rather, especially) in theatre and dance, themselves. We kept all this in mind while collecting audio and textual source materials from the MP&D’s collection. Paying special attention to the audio tracks of performance documentation, oral histories taken from performance practitioners, and textual descriptions of the sound of live performance, we found content that helped us dramatize these tensions while honoring the integrity of the MP&D’s commitment to its holdings.

*Performance Alive (Earmark)* leads participants through the interior of the small museum space and outside, around a long city block. Like both conventional museum tours and artist-driven sound walks, participants listen to a carefully designed track on a personal playback device with closed-ear headphones. In our piece, a fictional tour guide named Valerie at times gently, and at times urgently, dictates the path and pace of participants and asks them to engage with a variety of archival materials in the form of books on tables, videos on monitors, and installations on floors, *none of which is in fact visible*. We conceived of the piece as a guide of an imaginary exhibition, an idea that solved the problem of what would happen when the museum replaced the current wall displays with those of another exhibition.

Some of the clips that participants hear are in fact real documents from the museum’s collections, some are heavily manipulated assemblages, and others are taken from external sources. Regardless, participants are asked to *imagine* people, places, and objects while they deal with the reliability and stability of Valerie as a tour guide and negotiate environmental sounds that may or may not issue from their actual surroundings. We used binaural recording techniques to create the sense of environmental verisimilitude. The sounds we recorded really occurred in that place, although at a previous time. Leveraging the convincing realism of the recording, we also produced the feeling that participants were taking the tour with others: people speaking to each other and perhaps invading their personal space. During the course of the tour, participants find themselves in the middle of a domestic squabble, witness (by ear) the collapse and possible death of a bystander across the street, hear a heated philosophical dialogue between the tour guide and a synthesized computer voice, and experience Valerie’s near panic attack as a result of her

grandmother's memory of an historic San Francisco orchestral performance. All the while, they hear actual, real-time and -space sounds of downtown San Francisco.

The making of this thirty-minute experimental audio tour was a challenging but ultimately very rewarding experience. In equal parts, it managed to kick us I out of our respective wheel-houses and allow us to draw upon our areas of expertise. It was liberating (especially as sound artists) to create a site-specific, processional, theatrical tour with entirely imagined visual displays. It was taxing to work out the many kinks from conception to collection to content creation to precise timing and equipment selection. And despite our anticipation of the contingencies of a space constantly rotating its actual visual displays, we could not have predicted the magnitude of change that has occurred at the museum since we left. Not only has Muriel Maffre, the executive director that we worked with, moved on to another institution, the new administration has decided to physically relocate the museum. Clearly this presents problems for our site-specific audio tour. It's designation as "experimental" unfortunately does not imply a level flexibility that will allow it to simply migrate to a whole new location. We have already reached out to the museum about the possibility of reworking a new tour for the new space.

Of course, there were plenty of other challenges during the process. I will not forget the climatic physical challenge of running back and forth many times along a long city block to massage the timing of certain events within the audio track, less than an hour before launching. The only way to assure that certain events are falling in sequence properly is to go walk the appropriate sections of the tour and see for yourself – then walk (or in my case, run) back and edit the audio accordingly. I won't forget that despite such attention to the details of timing, certain participants would get totally lost even though the recorded tour guide is also very precise about where and when to proceed.

On the other hand, I won't forget the joy of watching participants visibly jump the first time a binaurally recorded voice, positioned in the stereo-field just over the shoulder and whispering like an unruly museum-goer, made a comment about one of the exhibits they thought they were contemplating alone. And I certainly won't forget the feedback from participants about simultaneously experiencing a new work of art while being exposed to a rich cross-section of bay area dance, theatre, and music history. It is gratifying to think that they were encountering, if only in a cursory way, items that would have for the most part remained in boxes on shelves for the better part of their lives.

The particular way that such a project can interface with, promote, and re-invigorate other art objects – and in particular neglected documents of live performance – is one of its redeeming qualities. Documents of live performance, to be frank, are often not very compelling. We have all seen single shot, un-edited video of a theatre show taken from the back of the house with poor audio. Documenting the complicated, immersive, multi-channel sound designs of more involved contemporary shows is still difficult despite advances in (binaural, ambisonic) recording techniques. There are many reasons for this lack of attention to archiving that could be (and have been) discussed in other articles. Not only are documents of live music, theatre, and dance (but especially the latter two) often less than compelling, they are rarely even accessed by the general public. It is no coincidence that all three mediums (but especially theatre and dance) constantly reinforce their ephemerality and liveness as major selling points. Do they do this at the expense

of better documentation? To be sure, those qualities not shared with mediums like cinema, are in fact unique and invaluable. But perhaps it is worth considering how keeping the history of these arts present and alive in a culture where they continue to struggle for legitimacy (read funding, confusion about Tony awards, etc.) might be a worthy pursuit. The format of the experimental audio tour, unique and rife with potential, is one possible inroad towards this larger, lofty project.

-Seth Warren-Crow, 2018

### **WORKS CITED:**

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