SUSPENDED IMPRINTS: A CREATIVE EXPLORATION
OF SOUND, SPACE AND THE INNER MONOLOGUE.

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ABSTRACT

This paper documents the creative processes involved in the sonic art installation, Suspended Imprints. It explores the links between theoretical research into our interior monologue and the topological figure, the Möbius Strip with the creative processes and final artistic form of the work. Furthermore, it considers practical implications of the installation process and the resultant questions raised regarding issues of perception, scale and ontology in a wider sonic arts setting.

1. INTRODUCTION

An increasing presence of interdisciplinary artworks can be seen as symptomatic of the pluralism which characterizes the current contemporary arts climate and as a researcher in the field, I have become fascinated with the resultant implications for the identity of the sonic artist and the perceptive processes of their audience. The crux of my research is concerned with the dialogue occurring between the sonic artwork and its audience. It considers the possibility that following a revelatory narrative between self, sonic and physical environments, the artwork becomes redefined within the liminal spaces in which this dialogue operates. A recent portfolio of creative works has focused on conceptual topics resonant to these themes, with both theoretical texts and creative output symbiotically informing the other.

Suspended Imprints is a mixed-media sonic art installation that premiered in January 2010 during the GEMdays Festival of sonic explorations at the University of Huddersfield. It is both temporally and site specific, documenting the thoughts of people traversing a popular thoroughfare during a specific period of time.

2. SUSPENDED IMPRINTS:
CONCEPTUAL THEMES

2.1 The Inner Monologue

Suspended Imprints is resultant of an ongoing artistic exploration into the notion of a personal, interior monologue: the private, communicative vehicle often operating in the mediation between ourselves and the spaces we occupy (whether artistic or otherwise). In terms of phenomenology, it is possible that one’s interior monologue could be seen as a kinetic and expressive form of what Edmund Husserl describes as ‘the act of objectivating’ as discussed by Christopher Macann [3]. Furthermore, when placed in the context of sonic art, the idea of the objectivating act (as implemented by the interior monologue) is of great significance to my creative research. Macann’s suggestion that, ‘the objectivating act is the primary bearer of matter’ [3] resonates with the idea that within the process of artistic mediation, an individual makes kinetic the signifying potential held within an artwork. Whilst Husserl discusses the idea of an objectivating act in reference to the physically deliberate act of articulated utterance or written text, it may be viewed that his arguments are still applicable to the more ephemeral existence of the interior monologue in this particular context. This is due to the deliberate cognition often employed by an individual when invited to consider interdisciplinary artworks.

The interior monologue holds further significance in terms of providing a mediatory outlet between what may be regarded as the physical bodily confines in which it inhabits internally and the exterior art object. If we were to consider Martin Heidegger's notion that our 'bodilyness' extends beyond our 'bodily limits' [2] then perhaps it could be argued that the interior monologue is an example of this possibility in real time. And so, it could be seen that it is not only our physical presence that articulates the spaces we inhabit, but there exists a second, projected presence via an interaction between our interior and exterior environments.

One artwork of particular note that deals directly with notions of the interior monologue is Paul Rooney's 2009 work, Thin Air: a performative sonic artwork taking the format of a pre-recorded, fictitious academic lecture. Its subject matter focuses on the work of ‘Alan Smithson’, a sonic researcher who documents EVP recordings and correlates them to the real inhabitants and events of a former art studio. An excerpt from the lecture reads,

Smithson is not only saying that human thought waves expand beyond the human body into space. He is also claiming that buildings, or the H Building at least, can contain some kind of sonically audible data bank of these thought waves, formed from a conflation of fragments of the more charged human memories that have been sparked within the rooms. He at one point names this as “site anamnesis”.

On one level, the work is about the subject matter itself: the work of Alan Smithson, the fictional notion of site anamnesis and the consideration of its existence. On another, it is concerned with ideas of authority, formality, acceptance and truth. Interestingly, its fantastical nature was not widely publicized before its premiere during the Sonic Art EXPO 2009 in Leeds, leaving the audience unsure of the validity of the extreme content to which they had been subject. Perhaps most important however, is the question

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that arises when one takes into consideration both these facets: on discovering the fictitious nature of the work, does the subject matter decrease in impact? As Suspended Imprints is a sonic artwork dealing with such intangible concepts, this work was important to me regarding both the actual subject matter and ideas of credibility and truth.

2.2 The Möbius strip
During the developmental stages of the work, I found a strong connection with the aforementioned concepts and the topological figure, the Möbius strip. The figure has been defined by Nathaniel Stern as,

... a topological figure that can be produced by twisting a strip of paper and looping and attaching its ends. It is thus a one-sided surface with only one boundary component, which is available in three dimensions. This means that it lives in both 2-D and 3-D space at the same time; it is greater than the sum of its parts. [5]

On initial encounter, the structure has an obvious edge or spatial boundary separating the interior and exterior spaces between what appears to be two separate surfaces – much like the boundary provided by our own physical body which allows for an immediate distinction between our personal, internal spaces and the exterior world in which we position ourselves. However, upon closer consideration one ascertains that this boundary - whilst clearly existing - no longer provides a clear distinction between these spaces. The same continuous surface exists in both interior and exterior states, accompanied by a considerable grey area as to when it can be considered one or the other. These topological properties of the Möbius strip have long been popular as a conceptual representation of the body and its relationship with the exterior world, having been exemplified by philosophers such as Lacan, Lyotard and Grosz among others. Resonating further with our prior discussion of the interior monologue is the notion that the properties of a Möbius strip are revealed as the result of a linear narrative of investigation. To those unfamiliar with it, what instantaneously appears as two surfaces is revealed as a singular, continuous surface after tracing the trajectory of the material. This could be seen as similar to the connections that occur between our own personal consciousness and the external spaces in which we inhabit - connections that exist liminally through the lived experience of a temporally linear narrative as expressed by the interior monologue.

3. Suspended Imprints: Documentation and Installation

3.1 Documentation
As mentioned prior, Suspended Imprints concerns the notion that our interior monologue holds a complex relationship with the spaces we occupy, articulating both spatial pathways and a narrative of encounter with our environment. As such, the installation itself is resultant of a documentary process in which the immediate thoughts of people traversing a popular thoroughfare in the Creative Arts Building at the University of Huddersfield were recorded on tape. Between the 11th and 16th January 2010, a temporary recording booth comprising of a microphone and a multi-track tape recorder was housed in this space. It invited people to record the thoughts in their head at the particular time at which they encountered the booth. There are several reasons behind my use of magnetic tape as a recording medium. Primarily, I was attracted to the ability of analogue recording to allow the transferral of a temporally ephemeral source material (in this case, utterance of the inner monologue at that specific time) into a physical material – perhaps tangible evidence of internal cognition in physical space? As a material itself, magnetic tape is delicate, pliable, thread-like and translucent. These physical characteristics resound clearly with the conceptual characteristics operating in the work. Upon completion of this documentary period, the sonic material was converted into a digital format for further processing, whilst the tape itself was used in the physical installation.

3.2 Installation
The installation structure was housed by a 4.5m³ scaffold from which a large number of Möbius strips were suspended at varying lengths using the magnetic tape from the documentary stage of the work (see fig.1). The strips themselves were constructed from pages of pre-owned topical books, such as architecture and geographical texts. Blue prints of the building itself, transcribed excerpts of the documented thoughts and original conceptual text were also layered onto the strips. As a result, each Möbius strip is unique, containing multiple layers of meaning and multiple ways with which they can be engaged and interpreted. And so, the information held on each strip has had previous meaning and previous history but still undertakes new meaning in the presence of a subjective individual. The work presents itself as a large sonic and physical cloud-mass summated by a multiplicity of small finite units, each containing its own unique display of topography and text.

The work of contemporary artist, Cornelia Parker often makes use of similar physical characteristics. Thirty Pieces of Silver (1988-89) and Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View (1991) both feature suspended objects in their design. Yet, it is the semantically multi-faceted quality of the work’s media that is of particular note here. Both artworks use many small objects as units that operate both individually as documentation of the creative artistic process and collectively to summate a complex whole. Personally, such complex layering of meaning and functionality provides a rich environment in which to engage with an artwork.
The physical components of Suspended Imprints are sonically paralleled by the sounds generated from the documentary stage of the work, creating together a cohesive artistic environment aiming to reach beyond the physical confines of the structure itself. The entire installation space was filled with low, resonant sonic material, evolving in timbre and harmonic density at an almost undetectable rate. The source material was processed using simple techniques such as low pass filtering, compression and modulation to achieve this. Simultaneously, metallic-like morphologies move kinetically within the structure itself, articulating pathways through the space aiming to highlight its visual intricacy. I wanted to create the impression of ephemeral trajectories of sound that appear to exist within - and perhaps become part of - the dense, low resonance encompassing the individual. The high, metallic timbres were achieved by processes of heavy spectral filtering and simple looping in order to allow the dynamic morphologies of the spoken utterance to only just articulate the timbral flux of the material. A Max/MSP patcher was then designed to randomly select these sound files and pan them around the four speakers suspended in the structure, at differing speeds and occurrences. This allowed for the possibility of both temporal and spatial overlapping. The aim was to achieve a balance between the sonic and physical elements of the installation, creating an atmospheric sonic parallel of the concepts operating in the physical structure rather than distract the individual from a personal dialogue with the work due to an explicitly transformative narrative in the sound world.

4. SUSPENDED IMPRINTS: AMENDMENTS, QUESTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

4.1 Amendments Incurred in the Installation Process

I would now like to discuss modifications that were made to Suspended Imprints due to logistical complications during the actual installation process itself. As a result, these modifications brought implications for the work's physical design and the relationships between its sonic materials, physical materials and the audience that encounters them. In considering these changes, important questions regarding the genre of sonic art as a whole are highlighted, providing new lines of inquiry in my research, both theoretically and practically.

Originally, the work was designed to be suspended 1.5m above head height. This would have created a blanketing cloud-mass of Möbius strips occupying the upper strata of the installation space, creating the impression of a cascading freefall suspended in motion with only some of the strips hanging low enough to be read. It was during the installation process itself that problems with the scaffold and health and safety forced a loss of 1.5m in structural height. As a result, the Möbius strips could no longer be suspended above the audience as previously described. The work was redesigned as a rounded cloud-mass of the Möbius strips suspended at eye level.

It may be useful here to question the benefit in comparing the perception of Suspended Imprints with its originally intended, non-existent predecessor. I am not wishing to use this exercise as a critique of the work itself, nor as an exercise to provide you (as the audience member) further insight into my creative intent. When considering texts such as Roland Barthes’ 1968 text, The Death of the Author [1], it may be argued that the success of a work may never be ascertained from the limited position of an author (who is invariably informed of the aesthetic propulsions in the choice and use of creative media). It is not my view that the existent work was inferior to the proposed one or is it my wish as an artist to dictate the experience of the audience. Instead, I see this as an exercise to study the creative expression of my conceptual intent from the position of a creative practitioner as a useful tool in refining my methodology and also to highlight questions regarding the genre of sonic art as a whole in order to forge further lines of creative enquiry. Furthermore, before discussing the implications these developments may have incurred on the perception of the work, it must be stated that they are based on purely anecdotal evidence. They are accounts of my own experience and those reported by others. The notion that the meaning and experience of a sonic artwork is specific to each individual is central to my research and so for me, conclusive, quantitative evidence of this is an impossibility. However, on this particular occasion it should be noted that reported accounts of experiences from visitors of the exhibition were wholly congruous.

Visually, the most impactive change to Suspended Imprints was the exchange of an installed environment inhabited by the individual with an art object contained in the space and beheld by the individual. There is no doubt that this had implications on the aesthetic appearance of the work but more importantly, it meant that the suspended mass of Möbius strips became a focal point with which to engage. Had the original design of the work come to fruition, it may be argued that the dialogue between artwork and individual would have been more focused on the relationship of self and space, how and why the individual physically investigates the installation and the interior, mental navigation of sonic and visual environments. As it was, the structure provided a strong visual feature directing, via its very presence, the likely pathway of space to be taken around it and also allowing for an increased engagement with the text on the Möbius strips. In both outcomes, mediation of the work can be seen as the completing act of the artwork but could it be argued...
that with the changes made, there occurred a shift in the potential signifying weight of the physical structure? Consequently, it may be argued that the physical properties of the installation now occupy a focal point in the work, in turn affecting the relationships between perceived physical and sonic elements. Experientially, sight is an instant phenomenon. Whilst it may occasionally take time to fully understand, mediate and decipher what we see, a linear temporal experience is not a pre-requisite of its sensory perception, unlike the process of perceiving sound. As a result, it was reported that the sound occupied a subordinate role compared to such an impactive object. Some visitors reported the sensation that the resonant sonic material was emanating from the structure itself. The functionality of the sound now seemed to be perceived as heightening the presence of the cloud-like mass rather than defining and encompassing an environment in which to be inhabited and aesthetically considered. With the signifying balance between physical, sonic and self now appearing to be skewed in favour of the visual structure, I found myself questioning the ontological properties of the work. Did my work change from what was personally intended as a sonic art installation piece to a work of art that included sound within its media? If so, what are the differences between the two and are those differences important? Of course, the definition of sonic art has long been in debate among contemporary circles but in what way has the position of my work on the plural interdisciplinary arts spectra changed? It is interesting to note that many visitor expect the structure to be interactive. Although it cannot be said whether this was due to an expectation for further stimulus from such a strong visual presence or because many sonic art installations are interactive in general. It is also of note that some visitors viewed the work lying underneath the structure, exploring the originally intended viewing perspective, with no previous knowledge of this information.

4.2 Future Research

Whilst the questions highlighted by my experience of installing Suspended Imprints have no definitive answer, they have sparked new lines of inquiry in my creative and theoretical research. In the creation and execution of Suspended Imprints, my attention was drawn to the physical scale of the work and the important role it seemed to play in its perception, both in relation to the individual and the perceived scale between the sonic and physical presences in the work. I am currently exploring the role of scale and self in a series of works, each taking the same artistic concepts and material yet manipulating their format in terms of scale and proportion: works in the dis:ORDER series all focus on research into the perceptive processes of the sonic art audience. There are several conceptual notions represented in the installation, all working cohesively to provide a commentary on the sonic artwork experience, namely: the use of perceptive footholds as a means of navigating a linear pathway through the complex, multi-faceted nature of the sonic artwork and the exploration of the presence of dialect between artistic disciplines devoid of a formalized syntax or language. All installments of the work hold a linear text displaced systematically. Between the visual and sonic material, the invitation exists for you to consider, explore and decipher, finding points of synchronicity between yourself and material.

The installation process is a learning curve from start to finish. In discussing the interpretation, criticism and analysis of a creative project it is not only possible to shed light on the subject matter in hand, but may also fuel important questions regarding sonic art as a genre and its place within the wider artistic community. Suspended Imprints provided me with this opportunity and has consolidated my own practice as one hinged on a symbiotic relationship between theoretical thought and creative output.

5. REFERENCES