TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANTAGE FOR THE SOUND ARTS: BORDER POLITICS FOR A SOUND INSTALLATION AT THE TIJUANA/SAN DIEGO TRANSNATIONAL REGION

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ABSTRACT

This work explores the problems presented by the notion of technological ‘advantage’ as it applies to Sound Arts and Computer Music at the border region of Tijuana/San Diego. It demonstrates the use of local knowledge from the city of Tijuana, Mexico through a site-specific installation presented at the end of 2009 at the Gallery @ Calit2 in San Diego. Certain strategies common to Latin-American countries, as represented by the unique case of Tijuana, are offered as to contrast with the developed countries understanding of current technology as the essential element in the construction of interesting and advanced philosophical models for the Sound Arts and technology-based musical production in general.

1. INTRODUCTION

Musical development, production and performance and the technology that accompanies them are undividable, and music making has been a machine-ridden enterprise since humans ceased to make music exclusively with their voices [1]. While skepticism and suspicion normally accompany the use of new technology, more often than not new developments conquer with time the sympathy of the general population to become new standards for popular music and related arts. In the case of Computer Music, for instance, the initial control of the discussion by academics during the 1950s has shifted to a mixed crowd of both academics and untrained users as technology becomes available to the general public. However, an aspect that is, on average, not explored is a different kind of skepticism and suspicion: that of the academic world and the technologically ‘advanced’ environments towards those worlds unable to keep up with the speed of scientific research or that have been left behind (or denied) by socio-economical or political situations, access to technological tools. This work attempts to help balance the equation by both: (1) presenting alternatives to a general view that is based on exclusion and (2) confronting traditional views of technology and music in San Diego and their comfort zones. The installation presented here (24x24) attempts to bridge the technological gap in a different direction. It presents a Glocality that reinforces the need of participation and inclusion of innovation and creativity as essential partners in the construction of environments for technology based sound arts.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Developing countries have a particular relationship with technology. Wide-ranging assumptions can be extrapolated from specific study-cases for a general understanding of the basic similarities between the countries that fall under this category¹ including, for instance: the presence of informal economies and of survival measures for the appropriation of technology and copyrighted materials. However, in order to avoid the dangers of overgeneralizing and going beyond the scope of this work, we will only discuss the way relating to technology affects the Tijuana/San Diego transborder region.

Figure 1: Informality right at the San Ysidro port of entry into the U.S.

As I mentioned in my Artist Statement of the installation we will discuss:

“The city of Tijuana represents in the mind of many

¹ For more detailed information, earlier discussions and study cases on my research see references [2], [3], and [4].
San Diego residents a door to all sorts of illegal and unhealthy activities, including the smuggling of immigrants and drugs to the United States. In front of the problems caused by economical inequality and the dark reputation of Tijuana as portrayed by the media, it is difficult for some to envision this border city as a source for cultural enrichment or as a living and essential part of our transnational border region. San Diego and Tijuana form a unity that goes beyond the limits of the official border. While the last decade has seen an effort to understand the conditions of border existence beyond traditional discrimination and nationalistic views, these conditions remain and power relations permeate artistic output".

On the other hand, San Diego represents a series of values that help develop its own mythology. San Diego is, in this vision: clean, organized, advanced, civilized, and economically successful (even as part as a bankrupted state and in the middle of a national economical crisis). Music technology in San Diego as represented by the academic environment produced inadvertently a power relation in which technological currency coming from the north becomes a norm the south hopes to emulate.

### 3. 24X24: A SOUND INSTALLATION FROM TIJUANA SMUGGLED TO SAN DIEGO²

The 24 Speakers, 24 Sources sound installation explores this problem of accessing technology in developing countries, and how the notion of technological ‘advantage’ plays a role in the construction of identities south of the U.S.-Mexico border. A border situation, in which the public displays of technological development become part of the language of domination and control, generating a social tension in which, while marketing strategies create an artificial craving, political forces randomly deny access.

In response to the general idea of a need for technological currency that comes from the north, 24 Speakers, 24 Sources ‘smuggles’ materials and knowledge from the city of Tijuana in the ‘wrong’ direction, from in order to generate a multichannel, interactive installation for spatialized sound constructed with available materials and as a representation of strategies common to Latin American countries. 24 Speakers, 24 Sources discusses the production and distribution of both cultural and technological musical products in a border region where post-national globalized and post-colonial systems coexist. Latin American populations are both participative and deprived of the wonders of a globalized world. The sound installation is a reflection of the technological limitations facing sound artists in economically challenged environments and how this condition can be turned into a genesis of creative output. ‘Glocality’ in Tijuana also underscores the city’s dual nature – one of accessibility at the same time as one of economic and social disadvantage.

24 Speakers, 24 Sources represents the passive invasion of Tijuana’s street knowledge into technological paradises of San Diego, and ‘smuggling’ becomes a theme for exploration with multiple shades of meaning. 24 used speakers and 24 used sound generators bought in the streets of the city of Tijuana and ‘smuggled’ into San Diego were installed in the space at the Calit2 art gallery. The 24 sources of sound were mapped to the speakers generating a ‘sound architecture’ controlled by the quality of the sound generators and the inequality of the speakers being used. The sources of sound are placed at the center of the space, so that people entering the installation have access to all the sources of sound and are able to control the sounds being generated in the room. However, they were constrained by the nature of the sources of sound and the speakers used that are deployed in a half-circular mesh superstructure (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Initial diagram for 24x24 by Melania Santana.](image)

Engaging technology is always dependent on access. In the ‘developed’ world, access to technology is taken for granted and the problems of democratization of knowledge, information, and hardware become irrelevant. In developing countries the use of the means at hand is a natural strategy for the integration of technology. With 24 Speakers, 24 Sources, the goal is to reflect on socio-economic conditions outside of the ‘developed’ world by turning economic obstacles (used speakers and sound sources) into creativity and experimentation with spatialized sound and a sound architecture that can be controlled using resources native to social interaction in Tijuana.

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² Parts of this section belong to my original Artist Statement for the installation and are part of the gallery’s catalogue for the exhibition Tijuana/San Diego: Cooperation and Confrontation at the interface.
Figures 3 and 4 show part of the work done at the street markets of Tijuana, as I requested local help in the construction of the structure. The structure was first assembled at a street market in the Zona Norte neighborhood of Tijuana and is a two stories variation of the standard structure used at the market.

**Figure 3:** Don Jesus helping me build the structure in Tijuana.

**Figure 4:** building the original structure in the street in Tijuana.

4. RESULTS

The installation was placed at the UCSD/Calit2 Gallery’s main space from October 5 to November 25 of 2009. The initial intent of using Calit2 to show the contrast between the two cities of Tijuana and San Diego did not go unnoticed. Katherine Sweetman of the San Diego Visual Arts Network commented:

“Imagine this ultra-clean, high-tech building. Attached to the white, grey, metallic architecture is a white cube gallery space complete with one engineering undergrad-student working as a gallery sitter. Everything is perfect: right angles, white walls, and then there is this spider web of mismatched, aging speakers. AV wires surround a table with some small, outdated, TV equipment. Wires run everywhere. Everything is messy, organic, loose, open, mismatched, and everything is “Tijuana.”

The campus newspaper The Guardian explored a more sensationalistic title to fit the needs of journalist writing: Lopez Drops Tijuana Dirt in Pristine San Diego.

Both reviews of the installation point at the obvious representations of Tijuana and San Diego.

**Figure 5:** 24 Speakers 24 Sources at Gallery @ Calit2

5. CONCLUSIONS

To understand the value systems behind the access and use of technology as ‘advantage,’ and how they affect the border condition, requires further investigation. What is clear is that identity construction at both sides of the border involves confidence in their technological symbolism, a rhetorical system that is not directly related to technological achievement or application. Technology is frequently used as a symbol of status at both sides of the border. This is not necessarily reflected in useful or interesting applications in the Sound Arts. Turning our eyes to low-fi worlds could enrich our perception of the tools we develop and help as produce a more inclusive and participatory environment which in turn will let us produce a more efficient use and take real advantage of technological developments.

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7. REFERENCES


