TIJUANA SOUND ARTS PROJECT: A NOMADIC STUDIO REPORT

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ABSTRACT

The Tijuana Sound Arts Project is a nomadic laboratory for sound arts based on the city of Tijuana, Mexico. This paper evaluates the work done by the lab during the last ten years, focusing in recent activity. It also points out the importance of developing new contextually based models for computer music experimentation and creative application of media, other than the traditional studio. It argues for the need of a democratization of knowledge, critically examining how the persistent inequalities in education pose a challenge to the development of a community of sound artists and the construction of local narratives for the application of technology to music and sound.

1. INTRODUCTION

The traditional notion of a digital divide does not quite reflect the educational problematic in Tijuana, as it refers to the needs for hardware and software implementation. Schools, Universities, and other educational institutions in Tijuana include physical access to computers and connectivity. Alternative mechanisms to access computers like public cyber cafés are also common. What is normally not taken under consideration is the social and human systems that need to change for the technology to became meaningful [1]. In the case of technology based sound arts in Tijuana, if we stretch the notion of the digital divide to encompass a broader array of factors and resources, we find that issues of educational content, community and social resources for technology are not taken under consideration. For instance, no university in Tijuana offers basic training on the area of technology and sound. The city also lacks people trained in computer music, sound arts, digital signal process and other related areas, capable of training a generation of artists on the implementation of technology and sound as elements in artistic production. While the proximity to the United States and therefore a mayor access to consumer tools for digital musical composition have generated a wide interest in technology-based musical production, the lack of educational support has disabled the development of more complex levels of technological implementation and creative use of technology.

2. RESEARCH STUDIO AND COMPUTER MUSIC COMMUNITIES

Many traditional studios and research centers depend on a physical location, equipment, university or institutional support, faculty positions, researchers, residencies, visitors, and in some cases a performance space. Sophisticated control rooms, state-of-the-art recording studios and acoustically treated theaters permit for the exploration of certain aspects of computer music realization. Even though the traditional studio is an important element of the development of computer music, and sound arts in general, it is not the only possibility for creative technology-based art production. Electro-acoustic music, electronic music, and computer music have developed in the last years strong communities outside of the academic environments. Both the situation of these communities within the world of popular (non-academic) arts and the particular characteristics of the Tijuana case, require a contextual understanding and new solutions tailored to the needs and possibilities of the particular communities.

3. STRATEGIES

3.1. Temporary Allies

During the last ten years, and under the name of Discos Invisibles, I have been implemented series of strategies for the generation of a culture of the sound arts in the city of Tijuana. During this process I took advantage of as many institutions and resources as possible. This has included so far: the Universidad Iberoamericana, the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, the Colegio Bilingue Anglo-Español. La Casa de la Cultura, the Instituto Cultural de Baja California, and the Centro Cultural Tijuana. None of this institutions has a complex knowledge of the field of Computer Music, and took the opportunity to implement spaces for this 'new arts' as a novel and temporary enterprise. While the negative part of this relationships is the impossibility of generating long term institutional commitments, I think this can be taken as an opportunity to
broaden the possibilities for information access to various sectors of the population while helping to configure an independent community of people interested in the sound arts.

3.2. The Government's Point of View

This project operates in the Latinamerican traditional fashion of working without institutional support. Ironically the local government acknowledges the importance of independent cultural projects, as it states in the Primer Informe de Gobierno Municipal in 2008. In a small section of this report the municipal government acknowledges the important role of independent cultural projects, even mentioning them as a counterpart to the ‘black legend’ of violent Tijuana.

What the municipal government is referring to, in this case, is a wide variety of actions taken by artists in Tijuana to cover the wholes left by educational and governmental institutions. Rather than develop conceptual discussions about the arts, this efforts focus on finding practical solutions to the problems of production, circulation and consumption of art.

3.3. A Nomadic Laboratory

The nomadic nature of workshops and formal classes has a common denominator in the process of generating access to the sound arts in Tijuana. The need to avoid the obstacles presented by institutions and administrators under different concerns including lack of interest, or knowledge of the field has produced as a natural result different scenarios for workshops and classes:

- ephemeral configuration: workshops and classes appear and disappear from the official curricula as specific units, under general topics and responding to specific junctures.

- modular design: even though the courses are on specific topics and are self-contained, We can group a series of them in order to generate a more integral view of sound arts and computer music.

- joint ventures: all work is done in collaboration with institutions but without depending on them.

The nomadic nature of this work is not only related to negative economical or educational problematic of the region, but it works also as a network of useful resources in a flexible system of relationships. It allows for the generation of workshops and classes in direct response to the needs of the prospective students and in many cases as flexible additions to an invisible program that connects the different independent modules. New students can take self-sustained classes and prior students can add new information and topics to their prior knowledge. As part of the contract with institutions of education, the workshops are normally under the condition that external students can also participate.

4. SOME INITIAL STEPS

4.1. First Years

In 1999 I started experimenting with sound art culture in Tijuana by creating Taller Cuerda Floja and the record label Discos Invisibles. Home made production was as much a survival measure as a conceptual tool, that directly reflected the socio economical conditions and resources at hand. In the following years many sound projects were realized including for instance: CD production and street distribution of audio projects, on-line festivals for electronic musicians from all over Mexico, sound installations and interventions in the city [see Figure 1].

Figure 1. Sound installation at CECUT, Tijuana, 2005.

4.2. Microsound Workshops and Curricula Changes

In 2003 I designed and proposed a class called Microsound Workshops to the Universidad Iberoamericana in Tijuana the teaching of a class called the. This was an strange proposition and while the university was not sure on how to define such a class as part of its general curricula the class was offer to the Graphic Designers. The class was offered twice and students learned about the history of sound arts, basic software and hardware tools for sound production and processing, and experimented with a basic notion of sound installation. Some of the sounds works of the students of the second class can be found in the Internet. This is as far as I know the first attempt in Tijuana to implement technology in the study of sound outside of the traditional realm of musical studies. The new

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1 http://www.tijuana.gob.mx/1erInforme/32_cultura.asp
2 http://vimeo.com/379094
3 www.electronicamexicana.org
5 http://www.discosinvisibles.org/esteparque.swf
6 http://www.discosinvisibles.org/microsonido002.html
curricula developed in 2006 includes a class dedicated to sound and while the language to define it is vague it now opens the possibility of proposing classes related to sound arts that will fulfill general requirements in the Arts and Communication area of the university.

**Figure 2.** High school students at the electronic music workshop in 2007 (Colegio Bilingue Anglo Español).

### 5. PRESENT

In 2008 and right after completing my Masters in Computer Music at UCSD I decided to open a bridge for the communication of my new learning and experiences in San Diego to the community in Tijuana In December of 2008 and with the help of School of Arts at the Universidad Autonoma de Baja California (UABC) an intensive workshop on sound arts and technology was offered to the students at the university. New themes were added to my original design for the Microsound Workshop including conversations on generative sound arts, compositional algorithms, history of electro-acoustic music, sound intervention, sound installation, circuit building and the use of micro-controllers and sensors. While the class was introductory it allowed the students to have an initial understanding of all the possibilities at hand as well as exploring the world of sound. This workshop also open the possibility to new more specific workshops in the future designed based on the needs and interests of the students [see Figure 3].

The practical aspects of the workshop included experimenting with phonetic poetry, composition with objects, radio orchestras [see Figure 4], field recording and digital sound edition. Part of the work done by the students, including video and sound, is available on the Internet.\(^7\) In the last day of the workshop the students presented each a site specific sound installation in the university's campus. The student selected spaces inside the university to intervene. This initial experiment was organized in preparation for a first Intervention 'exhibition' being prepared for 2009.

**Figure 3.** Students from the 2008 workshop at UABC.

**Figure 4.** Radio orchestra at UABC.

In this exhibition the students participating in the workshop will be able to develop their projects and came up with more conceptually complex versions of their original proposals as the information from the workshop settles in.

The workshop also included a visit to the Center for Research on Computer and the Arts (CRCA) and presentations by Miller Puckette and students from the Computer Music program at UCSD. This visit was essential to make the students aware of how close they can be to the professional environments for academic training in sound. While this option might be taken for granted in other countries, in Tijuana it falls for some of the students into the realm of the impossible.

\(^7\) [http://www.discosinvisibles.org/talleruabc1.html](http://www.discosinvisibles.org/talleruabc1.html)
6. NEAREST FUTURE

On march of 2009, while this paper was being prepared, a new workshop was taught at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Tijuana. This time the module focused on Pure Data: the open source graphical programming language developed by Miller Puckette for computer music interactivity and general multimedia application. The workshop was taught by Miller Puckette and myself. In preparation for the workshop the initial outreach produced a wide response including prospective students willing to travel from other Mexican cities in order to participate. The amount of requests for participation shows both a significant increase of interest in the sound arts among the region population during 2008 and 2009 in comparison to prior years., and the existence of educational needs not being fulfilled the official institutions.

7. CONCLUSIONS

While it is impossible at this point to predict the long term results of this nomadic workshops or to assess their efficiency in the promotion of sound arts in the city of Tijuana, I believe that the possibilities for creative output in the border region of Tijuana / San Diego have increased thanks to the conversation being established. A bridge of communication is being build between the two cities for the sharing of information and resources, and in a short period of time we will be able to report on the results and on the possibilities of taking this endeavours to higher levels of education and interaction. The initial objective of targeting students interested in the sound arts but without a knowledge of the range of possibilities that the sound arts can offer is being fulfilled. The range of activities under the umbrella of the Tijuana Sound Arts Projects will generate a mass of students critically and conceptually aware as well as technologically capable.

8. REFERENCES

