

Broadcasts from Empty Rooms and the Edges of Radio

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Abstract

Radio is a kind of non-place that holds the potential for movements of presence: spurring encounters across distance and time. *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms* (Sasha Grbich with Heidi Angove, 2014) utilised the potential of live Internet radio broadcast as a porous boundary between places. The Broadcasts were a series of night-time, live atmospheric sound streams from empty urban buildings that created situations in which unpredictable connected moments between people and sound ecologies were possible.

This paper considers *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms*, alongside Jason Sweeney's *stereopublic: crowdsourcing the quiet* in a discussion about listening to quiet places, the unraveling boundaries between people, places and sounds, and the participatory potential of Internet broadcast radio. Making is also considered: both works employ quiet approaches to working with sound that sit between the poles of finding and composing.

Keywords: sound art, radio, back-pack broadcasting, Internet radio, silence, site-specific, urban space, place, participation, agency, listening, performative encounter, event, making, *stereopublic*, Jason Sweeney, Sasha Grbich, Heidi Angove

1. Introduction

In the worlds of commercial and broadcast radio prolonged silence is an undesirable event. Most radio stations have back-up systems that detect silence and switch to pre-recorded messages in cases where quiet begins to be felt. But what happens when silence becomes the deliberate content of a live broadcast, and what is possible in the fleeting points of connection between people, unpredictable soundscapes and communities of quiet seekers?

Writing (like art making) may be generative, affirmative and a process through which new realities are made (Massumi, 2002,18). Writing is an act of exploring, or of feeling ones way towards new knowledge. The approach taken in this paper is one of experimentation: mixing ideas and artworks in ways that may set knowledge in motion. This paper takes as its starting place two Australian sound works: Jason Sweeney's *stereopublic: crowdsourcing the quiet* (2013) and my own recent work, *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms* (2014) and examines the ways these works (and the urban sound ecologies they present) form connections with listeners through considering 'vital materialism' (Jane Bennett, 2010), quiet listening and visceral perception (Salome Voegelin), becoming (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980) and reciprocity (Miwon Kwon, 2010). I end with a discussion of found sound in order to describe a quiet approach to making that explores the potential between the found and the made.

2. Broadcasts from Empty Rooms

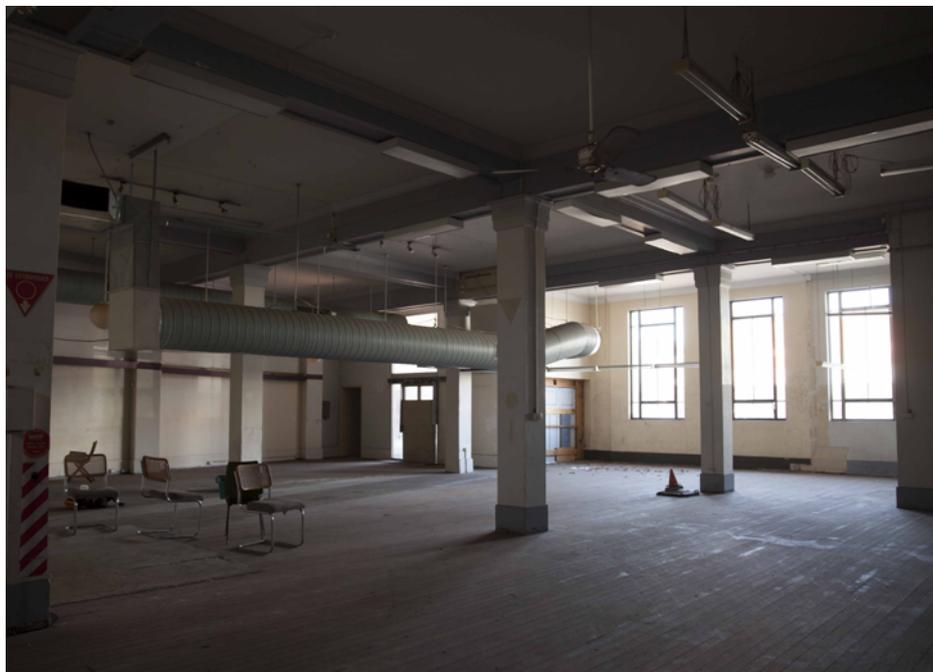


Figure 1. Broadcast location: The old Port Adelaide Post Office.

Old buildings are never silent, particularly those old buildings that are in the city, comprise the city and are themselves ecologies of life and sound. Each place generates a different and changing soundscape: a unique, fluctuating acoustic ecology.¹ Initiated as part of FELTmaps, a site-specific art project,² *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms* was a series of weekly live night-time atmospheric sound broadcasts (every Saturday night for a month) from different empty buildings in Port Adelaide, Australia. The project developed and utilised a small portable Internet radio transmitter.³ Listeners accessed the soundscape as a live Internet radio station (via a webpage or an Internet connected radio) and could tune in from their own places: the unpredictable night sounds from empty buildings intermingled with their homes, selves and their evenings.

1. Studies of acoustic ecology consider human actions as intrinsic to a soundscape, see *An Introduction to Acoustic Ecology*, Kendall Wrightson, in *Soundscape*, Volume 1, Number 1, Spring 2000.

2. FELTmaps took place in Port Adelaide March 27- April 26 2014.

3. The small portable Internet radio transmitter was made from a raspberry pi, combined with professional sound equipment and powered by a golf cart battery. Technology developed by Heidi Angove (eatmorecode.com) specifically for the project.

An acoustic ecology is an assemblage: a whole system of relations and movements that are inexorable from materials, people, economics and politics. *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms* was situated in Port Adelaide, where the silence has a pertinent political aspect. Once a busy port to the city of Adelaide serving vast outback farming communities; industrial, economic and social change came with the introduction of mechanised loading and container related shipping practices. A tide of people abandoned The Port, leaving decaying commercial, municipal and domestic buildings. There have since been attempts to jump-start its economy, with demolitions and developments commenced but not often completed. The empty buildings chosen as broadcast locations were vacant (sometimes dangerous) places with uncertain futures.

3. Listening to quiet sound

In *The Aesthetics of Silence* Susan Sontag points to an aestheticism around silence; there is a power, she suggests, gained by the choice not to speak (Sontag, 1969). Within the context of modern art she also notes that silence denotes a denial of audience: through a 'chronic habit of displeasing, provoking, or frustrating its audience ... the ideal of silence... has been elevated as a prime standard of seriousness in the contemporary scene.' (Sontag, 1969, 3).⁴ Sontag's description of silence provides a useful foil for the quality of experience to be found in *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms*. Although audiences listened to very quiet sound, the work-side-stepped the politics of refusal to which Sontag makes reference. Human hands did not design the broadcast soundscapes. Rather than being led by an artist (who might reveal or withhold information at whim) the experience of listening to *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms* was more like taking a tentative step towards a skittish animal. Listeners made approaches toward kinds of (predominantly) non-human presence.

4. A similar argument has been made more recently by Grant Kester who describes the operation of contemporary art via the tactics of shock and alienation (Kester, 2004). Kester brings attention to the kinds of art encounters privileged as modernist rhetoric recedes.

Broadcasts from Empty Rooms forms part of practice-led postgraduate visual arts research at the University of South Australia. As such, listener responses were sought and recorded from the postgraduate cohort; their voices demonstrate the diversity of experiences generated.

I am reminded of being in the womb. At first I thought of just being submerged in the water but later it seemed that there is more to it. It is not about feeling safe though. Definitely more like being very vulnerable, hidden but on the brink of being exposed all the time.⁵

The artwork existed in the encounters between people and places, between listeners and sounds. The relative agencies and effects of people, things and places become rhizomatic. As an artist, my direct control ended with switching on the radio stream at the commencement of a broadcast. In most situations, the buildings were completely inaccessible at night and I assumed the role of listener throughout events. The withdrawal of my 'artist's hand' was a deliberate tactic enacted to facilitate the unpredictable performances of places.

Radio is a non-place: dispersed to the homes, cars, back sheds, lounge rooms and the headphones of its listeners. It is perhaps an example of a heterotopia, the non-places neither here nor there, temporary and transient (places without anchor such as boats) as described by Foucault in *Of Other Spaces* (Foucault, 67). The work 'ungrounded' the viewer, mixing them with another place. One listener described the experience as that of being in a dark, fragmented place, neither at home nor 'out there'.⁶

Perhaps the complex networks of quiet sounds into which people leaned and listened were not static and did not end 'out there'. Salome Voegelin suggests that silence implicates its listeners in an act of perception through its quiet demand to be heard (Voegelin, 2011, 82). Silence produces its subject via anticipation: in the potential and tension between each small shuffle and click. In Voegelin's reckoning, perception is active, creative and even tactile: the touch of sound might also have physical effects. Tiny sounds might be felt through the skin and jolt the listener, or 'contingent ephemerality ... becomes material through my fleshy encounter' (Voegelin, 2011, 90). Bodies register sound, are affected by it and take it into their sprawling physical system at the peripheries where they sense and mix with the world.

5. All listener responses were captured through the Postgraduate Research Critique Program, University of South Australia (April, 2014).

6. Listener response (April, 2014).

'Becoming', to Deleuze and Guattari, is not a matter of metaphor or imitation, not an action of 'being like' a thing, but rather one of entering the movement of, and moving in time with, another being or thing (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, 305). This way of understanding relations between people and other matter again shifts the possibilities at points of connection with quiet places. To co-opt Deleuze and Guattari's 'becoming' to the experience of listening to *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms* might mean we move with the silence and become (for a fleeting moment) silence through the experience of it. Neither Voegelin's or Deleuze and Guattari's theories are metaphorical, they are grounded in the substance of molecules and flesh, and position the body and self as permeable: constantly changing in relation to the lively ecologies into which we enter.

4. Listening to lively places

Cultural theorist Jane Bennett's enchanted or vital materialism is useful for examining the unique liveliness and agency of the urban sound ecologies in *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms*. Bennett explores the force of things and the agency of objects (Bennett, 2001, 2010). "By vitality I mean the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals... to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities and tendencies of their own" (Bennett, 2010, vii). A vital materialist view employs a heightened awareness of the lives of non-human things and acknowledges the (political) agencies of materials, places, animals and other life forms. This adjustment in point of view shifts agency from the assumed power of a central human figure to the field surrounding it, and sees humans acting with their environments rather than acting in mastery over them.

I noticed that there was some occasional snapping sound as if coming from the building itself and this put the strange twist to the broadcast as I wasn't just

concentrating to hear the outside sounds but was also very aware that I am listening with the Post Office.⁷

Awareness of the unique liveliness of materials, places and things might, in turn, affect human behaviour (Bennett, 2010, xi). According to Bennett, enchantment might offer a solution to the problem of how to enact a shift in the human to non-human power balance, tipping the scales towards appreciation of the vitality of things and places. “Enchantment is the feeling of being connected in an affirmative way to existence” (Bennett, 2001, 156) and a sensibility attuned to moments of enchantment might motivate ethical behaviours. *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms* facilitated points of connection (perhaps enchantment) between humans and the complex ecologies of places. To follow Bennett’s logic, it was a gesture that might make ethical shifts in human to non-human relations possible.

5. The edges of radio

Radio listeners form anonymous, ephemeral social networks that gather and disperse unpredictably or “radio generates an invisible social network that weaves and bounces on the silent airwaves towards a shared sense that can only ever be a passing moment of coincidence.” (Voegelin, 2012, 114). Quiet, unobtrusive kinds of participation, and the creation of anonymous, temporary communities are possible via radio. While Internet radio stations can be accessed via an Internet connected radio and other screen-less devices, they are mainly accessed through webpages. By locating radio broadcast within the Internet, the way is opened for artists to decide to what extent they might utilise more directly participatory approaches and address global communities within radio and sound art projects.

7. Listener response (April, 2014).

6. stereopublic: crowdsourcing the quiet

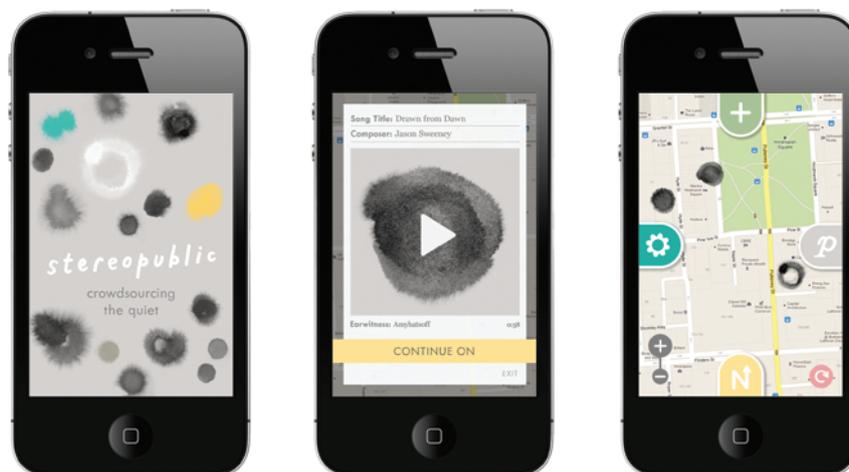


Figure 2. Screenshot from the *stereopublic* iPhone app.

Fifteen kilometers of bitumen road connect Port Adelaide to the Adelaide City Centre where Jason Sweeney developed *stereopublic: crowdsourcing the quiet* (2013) out of concern for the waning spaces of quiet in the city he grew up in.⁸ The project was designed to prompt one to find places of quiet in loud urban environments. Participants seek and record quiet sounds then upload them to an interactive global map. Sweeney offers to respond to each contributed recording with a sound composition. *stereopublic* (still live at the time of writing this paper) has become a global map of quiet places, an archive of field recordings, compositions, a community, and a conversation with Sweeney through sound.

stereopublic prompts one to navigate cities with heightened sonic awareness and to actively seek out moments of quiet amongst the hectic urbanity. There are quiet places in Adelaide where it is best to not walk alone. Giving voice to these places of (dis) quiet brings attention to both the politics of urban space and to the changing qualities of the city sound environment.

The experience of silence is highlighted and mediated by technology with the most common mode of interaction being through the *stereopublic* iPhone application. Once joined, the app automatically records and uploads thirty seconds of sound whenever the user identifies a new quiet place. During upload, users can opt for Sweeney to make a composition from

8. Conversation with Sweeney, April 2014.

(and for) their quiet recording. His composition is completed and returned to the participant (and added to the map) within 24 hours of their original quiet sound submission. During busy periods his adherence to this time restriction results in an endurance performance. Acts of work and reciprocity are key to the participatory approach taken by Sweeney.

Miwon Kwon explores complexities surrounding gift giving and receiving in her essay *Exchange Rate*, and in particular the power relations and cycle of obligation between giver and receiver. Referring to Marcel Mauss, she suggests that the giving of gifts is an authoritative gesture that might re-enforce the status of the giver (Kwon in Dezeuze, 2012, 92). However, Kwon also identifies the receiver as having power with regards to the retaining of a gift: the power of the receiver is located in the actions of accepting and keeping. The approach to participation in *stereopublic* embraces this right of refusal. Control of the cycle of reciprocity is placed firmly in the users hands.

7. A quiet kind of making

Both *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms* and *stereopublic* take a position (within the field of expanded spatial art practice) towards making that touches lightly, more akin to the acts of witnessing, shifting, arranging or context creation than to traditional making actions like forming or shaping. They employ an approach to sound that sits somewhere between the found and the made.

Perhaps a sculptural precedent for this approach can be found in *Involuntary Sculptures*, a series of photographs of objects published in the surrealist periodical *Minotuaire* in 1933. The works were photographed by Barassi and submitted for publication by Salvador Dali, but attributed to 'XXX' (Dezeuze and Kelly, 2013). The photographs (objects displayed in close focus, black and white) included what might have been a bus ticket folded and fiddled in a pocket, a curl of soap, a blob of toothpaste and a bread roll rising.⁹ These things were unconsciously formed by human hands or by the warmth of an oven. They were found and then re-presented via the filter of the photographic image.

9. Viewed in *Found Sculpture and Photography from Surrealism to Contemporary Art*, Dezeuze and Kelly (eds).3.

Chance, finding and creating a situation in which encounters might happen are significant to the processes employed by both Sweeney and myself. These quiet ways of making require a shift in language, which might hinge on the difference between ‘making-with’ a material / sound, as opposed to ‘making-from’.¹⁰ In our works, sound ecologies and places become active contributors, collaborators and co-authors. *Broadcasts* creates a platform for completely unedited live sound, while in *stereopublic*, Sweeney activates a community to find sound, then in his compositional responses, leaves the original recorded sound mostly untouched: composing by addition. He describes his approach to composition as ‘call and response’ whereby he adds his ‘voice’ via keyboard and a palette of drone sounds.¹¹

As with the original *Involuntary Sculptures* the attribution of authorship in *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms* and *stereopublic* is problematic. These works developed as unpredictable systems that grew to take in the contributions of participants and the unique liveliness of places. Both works are temporal events: each broadcast runs for one night, while *stereopublic* will stay online for as long as there is a community of quiet seekers participating, listening and recording.

8. Conclusion

Both *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms* and *stereopublic* are complex assemblages: acoustic ecologies that contain within their fluctuating entities, relations between people, places and things. These artworks were made with chance, open to potential, and move with their own particular momentums. Within such lively structures, the artist’s hand moves carefully, enacts a quiet sort of making: employing the actions of finding, witnessing and sharing. This lightness of touch opens spaces of potential for the agency of other people, places and things.

10. Bennett’s ‘Vibrant materialism’ also suggests an approach in which artwork might be understood as made-with place and things. “Vibrant material is not raw material for the creative activities of humans or gods” (Bennett, 2010, xii).

11. Conversation with Sweeney April 2014.

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Primary Evidence

- Conversation with Jason Sweeney recorded April, 2014.
- All listener feedback to *Broadcasts from Empty Rooms* was recorded through the Postgraduate Critique Program, University of South Australia, April, 2014.