

SoundEffects



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Editorial

Sound and Participation

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The rising prominence of interactive media and technologies has brought about an increased scholarly interest in participatory phenomena. This issue of SoundEffects aims to put a sonic spin on participation studies and emphasize the dialogic and participatory aspects of auditory culture. Remaining a primary medium of human communication, sound carries with it an urgency to be heard and answered, offering rich possibilities for participatory processes, whether technologically mediated or not.

As an academic term, “participation” in Humanities and Social Science is associated with the development of digital and social media. But as shown in this issue, sound encourages many different and also analog forms of participation that still, in one way or the other, resonate with the present digital age. Concomitant to the term participation is also the idea of social change. To quote from the Introduction of *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age*:

Participation is not only a concept and a set of practices; fundamentally, it is the promise and expectation that one can be actively involved with others in decision-making processes that affect the evolution of social bonds, communities, systems of knowledge, and organizations, as well as politics and culture. (Barney, D. et al. 2016, p. viii)

It is in this broad social sense that the studies of sound and participation are framed in this issue.

Nowadays, the easy availability of open-source software for sound editing and synthesis as well as online sharing services are drastically changing the cultures of sound production and distribution, creating a new type of acoustic communities variously dubbed “producers” or “prosumers”. One such community is the subject of Farley Miller’s article “Co-consuming a ‘fun addiction’: Buying, desiring and using Eurorack together online.” Miller analyzes the re-emergence of once obsolete modular synthesizers, particularly those of Eurorack format, owing to the new forms of community and scene building afforded by the internet. While the process of building a modular synthesizer is seen by their users as a form of artistic self-expression, the process is at the same time underscored both by the marketing strategies of the modules’ producers and the “wisdom of the crowd” of the synthesizer-building scene. Focusing on this gap, Miller explores the paradoxical entanglement of the digital and analog technologies and of the creative and consumerist logic in the Eurorack culture.

Similarly, Jason W. Luther and Patrick Williams’ article “Noise over signal: Phonography culture as participatory” deals with the re-emergence of an older, analog media – the vinyl record. Foregoing the debate over the differences in the quality of sound between analog and digital music, the authors choose to focus on differences in social practices that the streaming and vinyl cultures bring about. They cite the participants’ fatigue with online participation, often co-opted by the industry, as a

major reason for shifting towards the analog formats and associated forms of low-tech face-to-face social interactions. The centerpiece of the article is an autoethnographic case study of Record Nite – a series of thematic LP-focused house parties initiated by one of the authors. Tracing the participants' experiences in preparing for and participating in the parties, Luther and Williams show how “noise” – the particular materiality of vinyl and the sociality built over shared listening – becomes just as important in phonography culture as the musical “signal”.

Where the first two articles consider past sonic practices that are making a comeback, in “Strategies for algorithmic interactive music generation and implementation in videogames”, Alvaro Lopez looks to the future. Lopez reviews the concept of algorithmic generative and interactive music and discusses the advantages and challenges of its implementation in videogames. The article combines Noam Chomsky's linguistic models and Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff's generative grammars for Western tonal music with Artificial Neural Networks models. From this basis, Lopez develops a compositional tool design, an *Algorithmic Music Generator*, based on modular instances of algorithmic music generation and featuring stylistic interactive control in connection with an audio engine rendering system. The article ends by suggesting that the idea of a machine that is producing music material interactively is an opportunity for involvement, re-creation, appropriation and even democratization of art generation processes beyond videogames with the potential of nurturing a wide range of aesthetic auditory experiences.

The interplay of the old and the new in sound culture gets a markedly different reading in the context of contemporary African culture in Piotr Cichocki's article “Sound production as a cultural practice: Recording studios in the Northern region of Malawi.” Cichocki questions the practice of music production outside the technological centers of the global North and uses ethnographic field work to trace relations between the global standards of studio work and the case of “record culture” in Mzuzu, Malawi. Based on regular participant observations in several music studios during 2016, the article argues that sound production is a way of performing authority and identity and takes place in a combination of tangible and intangible elements. Spatially, the sound production combines local aesthetics with globally unified technologies. This mediation gathers different temporalities, such as old, “tribal” rhythms and digital sounds, with cosmologies such as invocation to holy ghosts with gospel music, in contrast to local possession cults.

Similarly, Lea Borcak's article “Community as a discursive construct in contemporary Danish singing culture” deals with the transformation of traditions, however, in a Northern European context. The Danish tradition of *fællessang* – joint singing at social gatherings – harks back to the 19th century, yet according to Borcak, it has undergone a significant change in modern times. She shows how the value of community singing is no longer seen in the propagating of the political, social or

religious values expressed in the song texts, but in the act of singing together *per se* – a phenomenon she dubs “the melocentric turn”. Borcak thus investigates how community building occurs through community singing under this new condition – no longer mediated by text, but by the singing act itself.

Participatory sound art is another venue where community building can occur through sonic mediation. In the article “Crash, boom, bang: Affordances for participation in sound art”, Vadim Keylin develops a pragmatist framework for the study of participation in sound art – a theoretical approach that reestablishes soundmaking as an integral aspect of the practice. The framework is rooted in Dewey’s idea of art as experience happening in cycles of doing and undergoing, which is expanded to the contemporary pragmatist trends in creativity studies, ANT and affordance theory, by introducing the concepts of *we-creativity*, mediation and affordance. The article pays special attention to the concept of affordance and differentiates between low-level affordances and high-level affordances in the relationship between a sound art work and its audience. With this theoretical framework, Keylin goes beyond the subject- or object-centeredness of phenomenological or object-oriented methodologies, bringing to the foreground the relational and social character of sound art.

Where Keylin’s article approaches participatory sound art from an overarching theoretical perspective, Susana Jiménez Carmona in her article “Silences and policies in the shared listening: Ultra Red and Escuchatorio” offers a detailed analysis of the practices of the two art groups mentioned in the title. Juxtaposing their creative strategies, Carmona asks the question *whom* the invitation to participate is addressed to – whether it is to particular communities or “anyones”. She shows how listening, sound and silence can be used both to accentuate difference and to encourage communality. Not proclaiming one strategy as being better than the other, she instead explores the possibility of political meanings and actions that both strategies present.

The question of political possibility of sound takes center stage in Nil Basdurak’s article “The soundscape of Islamic populism and its auditory publics during a discordant defense of democracy.” However, unlike Carmona, Basdurak focuses on sound as an instrument of power rather than resistance. Drawing on both ethnographic material and discursive analysis, she discusses how sound – particularly in the form of prayer calls – forms an important part of the Turkish Islamic identity, and how it was co-opted by the populist state during the events of the 2016 coup to simplify and radicalize the complex political landscape of modern Turkey.

With these eight perspectives on sound and participation we welcome our readers to SoundEffects, vol. 9, no. 1.

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