

# *Listening In / Listening Out:* Reflections on A Certain Geography Workshop Held at the University of Hull

by Dr Maria Papadomanolaki, Senior Lecturer, University of Brighton

## Abstract

'A Certain Geography' is a listening workshop in the form of a telematic soundwalk. A roamer sends a live audio stream from a remote location to an audience listening in a different space. The transmitter and the receivers listen in collaboration, often communicating their experiences via twitter. The experience is further supported by a text score created in response to the site of the workshop which is projected in the space where the audience is located, functioning both as a prompt for the audience's listening and as a score for the roamer's soundwalk. The workshop poses questions about listening to in situ and remote soundscapes: How do we listen solitarily and in collaboration? What is the role of the body (or the absence of it), memory, conversation, text and writing in enacting critical forms of listening to the environment? This essay reflects on observations gathered after a workshop developed in response to the University of Hull campus as part of the 'Sound + Environment' Conference (University of Hull, 2017) by taking the above questions as a framework for highlighting and contextualising the process.

## Beyond the Acousmatic

'Chemistry 14:23

Pure argon a door locks

Rust and spider webs

Private land

Whistling

Pebbles won't bring the sea'

*Excerpt from text score written in response  
to the University of Hull Campus*

'A Certain Geography' presupposes a certain kind of agreement between the remotely transmitted and the received through the absence of the roaming body. This absence is not to be confused with the disassociation of meaning from the source.<sup>1</sup> The absent body of the roamer is not intended to be removed from the context entirely. It is, on the contrary, a transmitter of the 'making of' the roaming subject.<sup>2</sup> This absence therefore is not rigid and non-transparent but hopes to rekindle our making as listening with that of others through a process of exploration. It creates a framework for listening together.

This absence is filtered through the actual site and the roamer's own interpretations of it, as experienced on the written score used to geographically and temporally mark the trajectory walked (this is also projected on the wall inside the space where the audience is located). The score reflects a variety of sensory and critical responses to the site, making audible the 'making' of the site, the signs, writings and slogans on the walls, the edges and cavities of the buildings, the thresholds of accessibility around the campus, the weather conditions, the real and symbolic features embedded in the experience. It cohabits in and out of sync with the transmitted sound. It is there to be accessed by people who cannot hear or sense as others might do. It is there to be read or ignored, or both. The absence of the body and the presence of the text hence exist at the core of a 'sensorial materiality in its contingent context.'<sup>3</sup>

Participants have commented<sup>4</sup> on how the sounds of footsteps and bodily actions have made them think about and remember their own bodies through imagining the roamer and her environment, guessing where she could be: walking on grass, a wooden floor, an open space, inside a building. For other's the presence of text created a sense of anticipation, of listening out for a certain sound that might happen, making their own associations between the read and the heard.

The live transmitted sound was commented to offer an engaging and enriching experience as the soundwalk involved spaces, environments and activities that were at various degrees visited and experienced already by the group. Balancing between 'profound' and 'casual'<sup>5</sup> explorations through sound, the site was sounded through all the imperfections and transformations that took place beyond the acousmatic topography diffused through the speakers in the room.

The campus at the University of Hull is manufactured using building materials often encountered in many newly refurbished and regenerated sites across the UK<sup>6</sup> and globally. Steel and Glass, highly reflective surfaces, small and enclosed courtyards, fencing and signposting to mark private zones and cordoned off building sites are all part of the experience. Logos and slogans decorate the walls and windows across different areas to highlight and empower the communities living, studying and working there. The wind and rain, prominent during the workshop, provided additional layers

and all these together were present in the listening room through the speakers: remote, off-site, off-screen but vibrating through the listening community that was tuned in, listening in and listening out.

## Listening In

‘Getting closer to my reflection

Until it is lost

Reflect and conquer

Focus on off

Beach pebble

The kingdom of iron never fails

falls

Interzone

Hello?

Cave 14:42

Together we shine brighter’

*Excerpt from text score written in response to  
the University of Hull Campus*

‘A Certain Geography’ uses the Locus Sonus Locustream Global Soundmap<sup>7</sup> to make its stream available to its audiences. The map provides a platform of open microphones from around the world. These microphones are a combination of permanent and transient streams. It provides an opening to listen in to human and non-human activities that would not be accessible otherwise<sup>8</sup>.

Many of the projects featured on the map, similarly to ‘A Certain Geography’ are available to be listened in to, and are respectively informed by and inform a durational exchange between the streamer and their tentative audiences. As with ‘A certain geography’ an open microphone on the map exposes a series of technological, social, geographical and aesthetic choices made by the streamer to a wider framework of known and unknown receivers/listeners and it therefore poses questions about privacy, vulnerability and ownership. In an era where technological advances allow smart assistants to listen in to our lives and to breach our privacy for the sake of aggressive capitalism<sup>9</sup>, we can think of these projects as a necessary counter-action; reverse-engineering ‘listening in’ to generate intimate, delicate translocal transmissions<sup>10</sup>, ecologies<sup>11</sup> and networks commoning<sup>12</sup> through sound.

One of the participants commented<sup>13</sup> that they felt as if they were eavesdropping to a very intimate, private walk. In fact, the comparison or association to ‘eavesdropping’ has been mentioned in many different contexts where this piece has been presented, but such a comment often oversimplifies the scope and purpose of the project. As already explained, a gesture of ‘listening in’ here refers to a notion of listening together or expanded listening where the intimate and ubiquitous<sup>14</sup> is shared openly and accounts for different kinds ‘making’. Echoing Alarcon’s<sup>15</sup> and Schroeder’s<sup>16</sup> ideas on networked listening, the workshop uses remoteness as a process of establishing a transient and in-between space where the roamer and the audience transcend the boundaries of their own bodies and selves to create a shared experience.

## Disruption

The roamer uses a pair of binaural in-ear microphones, a microphone pre-amp, her mobile phone connected to a 4G network and an open source app developed by Locus Sonus<sup>17</sup> to stream the sounds to the Locustream server from where the sound is picked up and played out through the speakers of the auditorium at the University of Hull. The room itself is not the perfect environment for such an intimate listening experience. The amphitheatric and quite



Image 1: Leah Barclay interacting with the roamer via twitter using the #locustream hashtag

noisy seating, the dimmed but present rows of lights and the two big projection screens already amplify the disruption between the inside and the outside, making reception of the transmission inside the building quite difficult.

As explained earlier in this essay, the whole idea behind this workshop is the exploration of the creative tension between presence and absence. That heightened sense of remoteness, as already argued, can help establish an enriched understanding of our environments but one has to also account for the fact that this sound is mediated and is prone to self-noise and interference, to drop-outs in the signal, to buffering, latency and to complete disruption of the transmission.

The workshop at the University of Hull was prepared for a total length of 25 minutes of which the participants had the pleasure to experience only the first five. Using the #locustream hashtag the participants and the streamer exchanged impressions and interactions (Image 1) until the signal was lost. The roamer could not access updates on her phone and she could not be contacted as her phone could not receive messages any longer so the workshop resulted in a complete disruption between the roamer and the audience. The roamer did perform the full 25 minutes only to realise upon returning to the auditorium that the signal was down. Upon request, she had to repeat a 10 minute section of the trajectory, followed up by a conversation where members of the audience shared their thoughts, impressions and questions.

‘A Certain Geography’ has to incorporate these technologically mediated artefacts in how it is presented. It has to ‘play’ with the notions of latency, disruption, remoteness and listening in. But again, I would argue that this is one of the strengths behind the project as it doesn’t make any assumptions of an idealised or HiFi listening scenario or an ideal audience of listening experts or, for that matter, subjects that can hear<sup>18</sup>. As some of the members of the audience commented, it would be interesting to expand this workshop further by working with visually impaired people or people experiencing hearing loss. In such a context, how can this sense of disruption and the notion of absence be negated, sensed and shared?

MARIA PAPADOMANOLAKI is a Greek sound practitioner and researcher currently based in London. Papadomanolaki has studied linguistics and literature at the Aristoteleion University of Thessaloniki before moving on to sound art and sound studies, having completed a PhD on the topic ‘Sonic Perceptual Ecologies’ at CRISAP, LCC, UAL. Her work and research focus

on the role of sound in the way we engage with our environments, with memory, placemaking and perception. Special importance is placed on the synergy of atmosphere, voice, text, experimental radio practice, live audio transmission, soundwalking and the environment. Papadomanolaki is a member of the London-based artist collective 'SoundCamp'. She is a Higher Education Academy Fellow and she is currently working as a Senior Lecturer/Course Leader at the University Of Brighton's Digital Music and Sound Arts course. <http://www.voicesoundtext.com>

## Endnotes

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