

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCING A COMPOSITIONAL MODEL FOR LIVE, SITE-SPECIFIC, SOUND ART PERFORMANCE

TANSY SPINKS

“Take a space, make a sound in it...”  
—Cornelius Cardew<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I shall introduce a new way of approaching site specific sound art practices, by offering practitioners a strategic model to approach and expand the parameters of the compositional process. In introducing this concept, I will allude to a number of my own sound works, undertaken over the six-year period 2008 to 2014, that have been informed by my accumulated experiences as a practitioner of site-specific, sound-making in live performance.

The practitioner, in the sense of this essay, is taken to be a multi-disciplinary artist, a sound artist, a composer, an improvising musician or simply someone who experiments with the possibilities of live, performed sound in an art context. The site, can be considered as a place, a building, a social space perhaps, in which to encounter sounds heard, almost in passing: an abandoned or derelict space, an outdoors space, a liminal (un-prescribed), or ‘guerrilla’ space, (used without permission), an unorthodox place, in other words, to find art or performance.

The site itself might be ‘found’, presented or offered; as an inspiration, by invitation or by commission for an event. It may be deliberately selected by the practitioner, as a site to explore, to respond to and in which

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<sup>1</sup> A quotation from Cornelius Cardew's *Improvisation Rites* from *Nature Study Notes* of 1969, written whilst working with the Scratch Orchestra at Morley College. (The author interpreted a small selection of these rites for *The Engine Room* festival, Morley College, December 9th 2011, mapping the space of the working canteen by pacing out the dimensions whilst using an electric violin and (school) hoops for bows. <http://www.tansyspinks.com/sound-performance/> or <https://vimeo.com/45501052>)

to provide sounds to be experienced by others. However, it is not a 'white cube' gallery space, a 'black box' rehearsal space or a 'shoe box' concert hall, with all the expectations that each venue might engender. This chosen site is another place altogether, encompassing aspects of social use, histories and narratives whose connotations are intangible and ephemeral.

How can this challenge be usefully approached? What are the essential elements to consider and how can a methodology of interrogation be best established to develop and steer the sound-making practices?

Arrived at through my own experiences, I now introduce a new tripartite model, to be employed as an aid or driver of this compositional process. This model identifies and clarifies the site-specific elements and opportunities within the given space, to enable a means of distinguishing between the distinct sonic and potential sonic properties of any site, and to establish the active role of the performer(s).

The model identifies three specific terms of engagement (referred to in this document as the three 'A's'), and asks what we should work at in identifying the *actual*, the *activated* and the *associative* sounds of the site. I will expand on this in due course.

In addressing the proposed project, the practitioner will arrange an initial site visit, where possible. This not only gives a physical impression in identifying a certain spirit of place, but provides an opportunity to listen, make sound recordings, test the acoustic properties, walk around, photograph, sketch, list the sounds heard and talk to any of those people involved with the place; as custodians, workers or temporary occupants. It gives an opportunity to consider what happens in the space now and what has occurred in the past. The building or host site then becomes the locus and the source of the enquiry. By taking stock of the sonic properties and the materiality of these surroundings, possibilities for devising a performance begin to be formulated.

Time will be spent walking around the place and its environs. Aspects of the emerging discoveries may now require, beyond the inevitable google search, a visit to a local museum or a specific library. Materials forming the fabric of the site or objects from the site, may be identified as sound producers or as having sonic potential. Speculative emails will be sent out - following a hunch - wanting to know more from a conservation group perhaps, or a local historian, an amateur enthusiast or an expert in the field. Conversations may evolve – taking trains of thought into hitherto unexpected regions: with a librarian, sociologist, historian, geographer and perhaps with the work of other artists or composers. Contextual references are raided. Have any other artist-musicians produced something like this before? If so, how, and can this be built on?

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There are several notable precedents to be cited in relation to sounds in space. For pioneering American artist-musician, Max Neuhaus<sup>2</sup>, sounds should emanate, and the affect, for the audience-listener, is contingent on being in the space itself to experience both the unseen addition and, in some cases, the mysterious removal, of his recorded sounds – made from material gained and recorded at source. His site-specific installations, such as *Time Square*, 1977, helped define our sense of place, through sound.

Installation artist Maryanne Amacher<sup>3</sup> plays with our experiences of sounds in similar but differing spaces, by manipulating our expectations of their acoustics and challenging our psychological responses. Janet Cardiff, working with G. Bures Miller<sup>4</sup>, takes a more sociological approach by inviting us to engage with closely recorded binaural recordings that have an often uneasy, implied and manipulative narrative. John Cage of course drew our attention to the very notion of ‘silence’ in his piece 4’33” of 1952/3, during which our expectant role as an audience member is undermined and extended, into the spaces beyond the concert venue.

In the late 1960s, Meredith Monk<sup>5</sup> used staged versions of site-specific works to inhabit atmospheric, liminal locations in New York, whilst Susan Phillipsz’s *Artangel* commission of 2010<sup>6</sup> explored locations in the City of London in order to play out a lone voice or instrument – used to evoke the ghosts of presences past. David Byrne’s<sup>7</sup> 2009 work devised for the Roundhouse in London, is of particular significance as an example of building-as-instrument, for which he encouraged the audience to individually ‘play’ the building by attaching motors to the fabric of the building itself, linked to an organ keyboard.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.diaart.org/program/exhibitions-projects/max-neuhaus-collection-display> (accessed 20.09.18)

<sup>3</sup>As referenced in Stefani & Lauke (2010)

<sup>4</sup> Cardiff, Janet and Miller, G. Bures, <http://www.cardiffmiller.com>, (accessed 20.09.18)

<sup>5</sup> Monk, Meredith, <http://www.meredithmonk.org>, (accessed 20.09.18)

<sup>6</sup> Phillipsz, Susan, *Surround Me*, a song cycle for the City of London, (sound work) an Artangel commission, <https://www.artangel.org.uk/project/surround-me/> (accessed 20.09.18)

<sup>7</sup> Byrne, David: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/rockandpopfeatures/6004403/David-Byrne-on-playing-the-building-at-the-Roundhouse.html>, (accessed 20.09.18)

On considering the site for which to devise the possible sound work, the practitioner may identify a number of inherent sounds. For example – the ongoing sound of traffic, the whine of an internal light-fitting or fan, the wind through the crack of a window, distant birdsong, the acoustic property of the space, distinct voices, running water, distant traffic. Sociological implications then become apparent as the human presence surfaces, (perhaps virtually or metaphorically) and as possible collaborators come to mind. Contexts expand and narratives begin to develop as ideas coalesce.

Dates and times of performances approach, timings and durations are considered. Initial impressions have become lines of inquiry with firmer intentions. Technical and physical means of sound making become more tangible as specific technical requirements, requiring testing. Extra performers are brought in as required. A plan has now been formulated, if a little circuitously and discursively.

To expand on the model offered, I suggest that:

the *actual*, sounds of the site, are those one could describe as inherent to the place. The *actual*, is perhaps self-evident as being those sounds particular to the site, which can be defined differently of course according to how and when one listens, (according to time of day, in a market, for example). Can we distinguish between foreground and background sounds? These *actual* sounds heard, and their sources, can then be further identified as having specific characteristics in the way of mechanical, natural, human, or animal elements with rhythmic qualities which are continuous, have a pattern or are intermittent. Can the volume, pitch, grain and timbre be described? Identifying *actual* sounds, could in some way be considered analogous to how we approach what composer and writer, Michel Chion calls the *reduced* form of listening (Chion 1994).

The *activated* element, which introduces a less passive role than that of listener, asks the performer(s) to intervene in some way, in order to engage with the physicality of the space. This second ‘A’, deals more specifically with allowing the objects of the site to have a sonic voice through manual activation by the performer(s). Where this differs from Chion’s second listening stage, of the *reduced*, is in the agency of the performer: no longer a passive listener but now an active participant within the space. It is in the physical, gestural actions, or oral ‘soundings,’ made *as* activations, that the sounds occur. Again – a rhythmic pattern may be established or a drone-like sound built up which can be explored further with the use of contact microphones in direct contact with physical objects, (hit percussively), materials or the fabric of the building. Aleatory methods and improvisation, a key element in its own right – (but not within the scope of this essay) - are important components. In noticing, identifying and experimenting with

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these, the activator becomes a composer of sorts, able to ‘play’ the site, or an aspect of the site, to others.

The third so-called ‘A’ element, the *associative*, offers a more expansive and particularly leading strategy by informing the content of the sounds to be heard. The term I use here, the *associative*, reflects in part Michel Chion’s notion of *semantic* listening, or listening *for* meaning. However, more proactively, it defines and describes how research into the site, undertaken previously in the run up to the event, as a kind of sonic ‘mining’, can now convey to the listeners, something historical, sociological and even musical about the site, through the act of compositional transcription in the context of a live performance. The *associative* allows for a truly site-responsive approach.

The *associative* is the most extensive and open-ended term of the three, encompassing sounds that have come about through research into the site itself. These might engage metaphorical, or indeed remembered triggers as references. Even sounds that could well have occurred on the site in the past, may be imagined and evoked. Chion’s *semantic* listening is perhaps recalled, in this context, as a kind of Peircian *interpretant*, but here my development takes the *associative* into a more expanded form. This category can be sub divided again into the following:

*associative-historical*  
*associative-sociological*

*associative-musical*  
*associative-mimetic*

*associative-metaphorical*  
*associative-remembered*  
*associative-imagined*

The terms have been developed through the experience of devising sound works for what might be deemed ‘alternative’ sites. I have considered many different given spaces and how the materiality of each might be activated whilst also reflecting on what could be brought to the site additionally, through this *associative* term which can be expanded further to describe what I have come to call the unique, physical and conceptual *material of the site*, to be explored later with reference to specific works.

Michel Chion continues to be influential to this way of thinking. Inspired by the earlier theories of Pierre Schaeffer, in his *Traite des objets musicaux*, (Schaeffer 1966) Chion’s own definitions, of the *causal*, *reduced* and *semantic* modes of listening are perhaps not dissimilar to

Peirce's<sup>8</sup> concept of the semiotic triad in terms of meaning. In the *causal*, Chion introduces the notion of what it is that is making the sound and reassures us that this may not always be specifically definable or located. By encouraging a *reduced* form of listening, he then suggests that the listener should put aside consideration of the sound source and attend rather to objective definitions of the nature and the state of the sounds heard in and of themselves, whether natural, man-made or machine made. When dwelling on the *semantic* however, the listener is encouraged to think beyond the accumulation of information provided by these causal and reduced forms of listening and to consider the connotations of the sounds heard. This may of course, include language, but could also invoke personal, sonic material, triggered through the evocation of memories.

It may be useful here, to consider advice given to the art student on how to 'read' an art object, in terms of ways of looking and thinking. This is an encouragement to think *from*, *around* and *into* the object, or art work. In other words, to notice what the object initially suggests or conveys, (as in my *actual*); to notice what you, the viewer and listener, (but also in this context, the performer), actively and consciously bring to it, (as in my *activated*), and to consider the meaning of other contextual material surrounding it, (as in my *associative*). The notion of 'site' could be substituted here as a form of 'art object,' of course.

To summarise: in this exercise there are three stages of awareness and action, involving for the creator, crucial elements of preparation, involvement and reflection, including the use of documentation, regarding the sound-as-art-event, in performance:

- 'from' - 'causal' – identifying the *actual* within the site
- 'around' – 'reduced' – identifying the *activated*, or *activate-able*, as performer
- 'into' – 'semantic' - identifying the *associative* as the contextual *material of the site*.

The first in my series of twenty sound works cited, was performed on a gantry above Deptford Creek, South London. *Henry's Ballad at Harold's Wharf*, (2008)<sup>9</sup>, alluded to the use of a building, previously standing on the site, as a slaughterhouse. The imagined sounds of distressed, braying

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<sup>8</sup> Peirce's semiotic triad defines a relationship between signs, signification and meaning, summarised as: the sign, the object and the interpretant: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce-semiotics/> (accessed 05.02.18)

<sup>9</sup> *Henry's Ballad at Harold's Wharf*, 2008. Author's work can be seen/heard at: <https://vimeo.com/17884431>

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animals were conjured mimetically on the instrument, (a violin) and combined with the fragment of a rediscovered melody, *Pastime in Good Company*, written in the early sixteenth century by Henry VIII, whose palace had dominated the waterside at Deptford. In this work, the *associative-imagined* is tackled through *associative-mimesis* which then evokes an *associative-historical* reference combined with an *associative-musical* one. The sounds, played out on a violin through an amplifier and a looping device, mingled with the layers of *actual* sounds at the site, provided by passing docklands trains, water sounds from boats on the creek and a hubbub of voices on site. The *activated* element in this work deals, not so much with the fabric of the site itself, but in how the played sounds mingled with voices and the site's unique outdoor acoustic properties of complex brick walls, concrete pillars and water surfaces.

As an aside, I wonder; can the *associative-imagined* approach be feasible? Can one 'mimic' something imagined? If 'to mimic' suggests an attempt at mirroring, how can this be regarded as possible if the 'original' is only projected or envisaged? Research, but also experience and memory come into play here in our ability to build and retain a bank of images (as described poetically by artist John Baldessari in relation to his own work) but equally, a kind of 'audiobank' of sounds. The mimetic can be considered in the wider sense as an act of simulation in the form of sonic evocation.

A distant memory of an aural event has triggered two of the later works in the series. *Leeds, Leeds, Leeds*, 2013<sup>10</sup> and *Echo Lake*, 2013<sup>11</sup>. Both recall the sounds and physical sites of events and incidents in my own aural history. The sound of thousands of voices in a football crowd, impinging on a small domestic space in a back-to-back house in Leeds in the early 1980s, prompted the making of a contemporary sound work in which a lone, singing female voice is heard recreating and layering forty football chants. *Echo Lake* revisited a childhood game exploring the phenomenon of a haunting echo of a returning 'shout', experienced across an expanse of water beneath a mountain, in Snowdonia, North Wales. In both works, the female voice travels across space and time to re-imagine and represent past sonic memories of place.

"A sound imagined but not actually heard" is the description of the term *phonmnesis*, described by Augoyard, in *The Sonic Experience, a Guide to Everyday Sounds*, as a mental activity recalling sounds from

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<sup>10</sup> *Leeds!, Leeds!, Leed!s*, 2013. See article in *Nparadoxa* Vo37, Jan 2016, <http://www.ktpress.co.uk/article-abstract.asp>. Author's work can be seen/heard at: <https://vimeo.com/98810940>

<sup>11</sup> *Echo Lake*, 2013. (Author's work).

memory, not through stimulation of the memory to prompt a past sonic event, but as a means of conjuring up internally heard sounds stimulated by the imagination. The device of evocation forms an important part of my *associative-imagined* approach to a sound work that delves into the personally interpreted realms of the *associative-historical*. Janet Cardiff and G. Bures Miller's work is often notable in employing this method.

The parallel concept to the common notion of envisaging, is the notion of 'audiation', which is dependent on experience and memory of sounds. Defined by music educationalist, Edwin Gordon in 1975, as both a term and a process, the concept is similar to composer and educationalist Kodaly's description of 'inner hearing,' suggestive of a means of envisaging sounds internally.

Imagination was employed in the sound work *Seaforts* (2010)<sup>12</sup> (see: Figure 1-1 and Figure 2-2). A live performance was enacted eight nautical miles off the North Kent Coast, on one of the historic structure's gun platforms; the sonic characteristics of surfaces and objects offering rewarding sonic material. By using contact microphones applied directly to the Seafort's iron structure, a metal ordnance container betrayed its rusty iron properties, a pile of seagull bones was manipulated to make a dusty rattle whilst a steel pylon was tapped to give a taut metallic ring. Looped, the circling rhythms began to suggest distant guns. In this work, the instrument (violin) was added, to bring in another, mimetic sound layer to the proceedings. By introducing a rhythmic 'scurrying' sound as a jumble of fast, sotto-voce notes, a suggestion of past human presences on the gun platform was conjured.

Here, the method acknowledges the *actual* and the *activated* in combination with the *associative-historical*, the *associative-imagined* and the *associative-mimetic*, simultaneously attempting to form three layers of the real (or actual, as the sounds of wind, waves and gulls), the evoked (or activated, by the two performers), and the imagined (rapid action gunfire). The hazardous nature of the site and rapidly encroaching tides, introduced a certain urgency to the setting up of equipment and the segue into performance. The piece was devoid of an audience, aside from two participants, a fisherman and numerous seagulls and was consequently only ever experienced through documentation.

*Brixton Market* (2010)<sup>13</sup>, performed live within the arcades of a large, multi-cultural South London market, set out to suggest once more, the

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<sup>12</sup> *Seaforts* (2010), devised for the Whitstable Biennale Fringe, performed with Antoine Bertin. Author's work at <https://vimeo.com/17884661>

<sup>13</sup> *Brixton Market*, 2010. (Author's work)



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bustling element of a site as an actual, not imagined one. As a form of ‘affrettando’ perhaps, in combination with mimetically referenced sounds, the banter and cries of the street traders, the inflections of voices, the squeak of the trolleys, the chopping of meat and fish, distant beat-boxes, the drone of a forklift truck – all coalesced into one received soundscape. The emphasis here tended to feature more prominently what I have called *associative-sociological* mimesis, by which I mean a direct listening and evocation made in situ on the instrument (looped violin), of the many different human voices and presences in the daily situation of the market. As Walter Benjamin noted:

“These arcades... are glass-roofed, marble-panelled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of the corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the arcade is a city, a world in miniature, in which customers will find everything they need.”  
(Benjamin 2002)

*The Laboratory of Sonic Possibility*, 2014<sup>14</sup>, undertaken as part of *Acts ReActs*, took place in a large performance space at Wimbledon College of Art and brought the environment into the space by referring to a local figure of historic significance, Joseph Toynbee, an English otologist and philanthropist, who specialised in diseases of the ear. The final work invited the participatory audience to get involved in their own sound making and sound questioning activities by amplifying objects that would normally be considered to have no intrinsic sound. Large cardboard ‘ear trumpet’ cones were provided, to enhance the act of listening.

Other sites explored in the author’s practice have included such extremes as a goods lift, an art school library, a canteen, the top of a windmill, a beach and a Masonic chamber. Sound making devices have included objects and surfaces ‘played’ using contact microphones or vocal microphones, an electric violin, amplified pens and wires, and a multi-layered voice. Later works include *Sonic Activations of The Rake*, 2014<sup>15</sup> – a version of Hogarth’s *Rake’s Progress* told through objects and contact microphones, performed at Pitzhanger Manor in Ealing, the house of the

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<sup>14</sup> *The Laboratory of Sonic Possibility*, 2014, a collaboration with Iris Garrelfs. The residency took place at Wimbledon College of Art, UAL as part of *ActsReacts 1, Performance Lab*. Author’s work can be seen/heard at: <https://vimeo.com/91650127>.

<sup>15</sup> *Sonic Activations of The Rake*, 2014, at Pitzhanger Manor. Author’s work can be seen/heard at: <https://vimeo.com/121158054>

collector of the works, John Soane. The work embraced liveness, in performance, as a form of embodied activation whilst the activation of 'stand in' objects themselves, (metal chains, crumpled paper, a dice in a cup, a wine bottle and glass, a dance master's small pochette violin, a metal bucket), gave a visual focus to the significance and potential sound of the objects seen in the paintings. The audience stood around and within the performer's space, who then 'activated' the objects before them.

What defines this process of composition? Within all the sound works in the series, the act of transcription is key: the act of turning one thing into another, with information becoming sound, in a new act of 'setting down'. In all the sound works, the 'existing motifs' here could be regarded as the physicality and the historiography of a site, whilst the 'arrangements,' to borrow the musical sense of a transcription, or the devised sounds heard, lead to a different or new understanding of place, through a heightened awareness of experiential listening.

To reiterate, sounds can be devised and performed in numerous ways, including the use of conventionally notated musical composition, but in this context, overwhelmingly prompted by the site itself: location is key as instigator and host.

Where does this strategic *AAA* model fit, for practitioners? Why should anyone use it? Can it be treated as a set of guidelines or even as some kind of loose, instructional score perhaps? Does this new tripartite model offer an inter-disciplinary or trans-disciplinary practice, free from the constraints of established disciplines, or does it suggest perhaps a wholly new mode of practice? I suggest that this unique fusion, borrowing from and building on the many affordances of art, site-specificity, site-responsiveness, music, composition, improvisation, sound art, acoustics, architecture, studio and performance practices, allows for a new and vital mode of experiencing performed sounds; as both material and compositional events, in alternative, egalitarian spaces.

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