

Cultivating Activist Lives in Sound

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ABSTRACT

The author discusses political dimensions of electronic music and sound cultures in the historical present, critiques various ways that neoliberalism inflects and constrains creative practice, and outlines cultural and political aspirations that sonic activists might pursue.

An activist life in sound [1] cuts across various realms, such as the social structures and modes of time and feeling that make creativity possible, the communication networks and means of music production and distribution that articulate individual efforts to collective consciousness, and the ecological impacts of electronic technologies. The propagation of sound waves across space and time is a useful metaphor for thinking about relations of individuals and collectives: consider a sonic-political act at the center, with its ripple effects as the various social, political-economic and ecological impacts that resonate from that act locally and in more far-reaching scales. Myriad acts overlap, while collective social organization enables multiple sonic-political acts to be amplified or rendered more powerful. As Doris Sommer asserts with regard to the civic value of the arts and humanities: “All of us would do well to consider art’s ripple effects, from producing pleasure to triggering innovation” [2].

Sonic-political acts that generate ripple effects may encompass various forms and practices of doing, researching or advocating creative work in sound or music. Or, they may be composed of more explicitly political actions that employ sonic metaphors or aural performances, such as when Occupy protesters innovated the “human microphone” to amplify public speech [3] or when activists interrupted the bourgeois comfort of a St. Louis Symphony performance by

singing a requiem for Michael Brown, the unarmed Black teenager killed in Ferguson, Missouri, by a white police officer [4]. I write this essay with artists, arts educators and arts collectives in mind, with the assumption that art is inherently political in the many ways that it modulates, and is modulated by, relations of power. At the same time, I argue that feminist, antiracist, anticapitalist political activism are necessary for the survival of artistic expression as the province of all people, rather than only a privileged few.

INHABITING THE HISTORICAL PRESENT

The historical present in electronic music and sound cultures is full of contradiction. Some progress has been made on the question of gender. Books such as *Pink Noises* and Pauline Oliveros’s *Deep Listening* are showing up on course syllabi, and community-based projects such as Bonnie Jones and Suzanne Thorpe’s *Techne* initiative and the Women’s Audio Mission are changing the ways that electronic music composition, audio engineering and sound histories are taught in university classrooms and community workshops [5–8]. And yet some of the same problems that existed in electronic music and sound cultures decades ago persist, from the lack of gender and racial diversity in music and technology classrooms (in terms of both students enrolled and artists discussed) to concomitant disparities in professional opportunities and pay. The Female Pressure collective has launched important efforts to document the widespread marginalization of women on electronic music festival line-ups and record labels with statistics and infographics and to organize collectively voiced calls to action [9].

What is behind this one-step-forward, two-steps-back progression? First, deeply entrenched patriarchal histories of music, technology and creativity make structural change in the present difficult to achieve. In my research on the history of synthesizers, for example, I draw upon feminist scholarship in the history and philosophy of science, which has shown how Western technoscientific discourses align with Judeo-Christian narratives of creation and salvation and how the subject of science is normatively white, Western and male

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[10]. This alignment manifests in audio-technical discourses when the male composer or audio technologist assumes a kindred subject position to that of a creator/God—a seemingly natural inheritance from foundational, gendered and imperialist creation myths in Western history and culture. Race-based expectations operate in tandem with gendered assumptions about creative authority and technical skills, and with sexualized assumptions about bodies in performance. Overall, the very notion of who is legible as a “creator,” an “innovator,” a “composer,” a “producer” or an “experimental musician” in the present is up against longstanding mythologies that articulate socially and culturally differentiated bodies and subjects to particular social roles and expectations [11]. Second, neoliberal forces are bearing down on artists and arts organizations in strikingly difficult ways. Arts education and arts programming are profoundly underfunded. Arguably more devastating, and harder to quantify, is the erosion of creative spirit and capacity that occurs when freedom of artistic expression is relegated to the sphere of free-market economies and hitched to profit-minded notions of entrepreneurialism. We need to meet and counter these trends with a sense of urgency in our local communities as well as through the strength of international networks.

SUSTAINING CREATIVITY

What conditions make it possible to do creative work in sound and music at this moment in the twenty-first century? “Artistic subjectivity and aesthetic labor . . . in the digital age” [12] unfold in the long shadow of neoliberalism. This set of values includes the privatization of public institutions and services, deregulated free-market competition, a generally upward drift of resources to the privileged few, and increased individual responsibility for employment, health and overall welfare. Public funding for the arts has been decimated, and jobs in affinity areas such as higher education are few and ever more precarious. The draining of support for arts education in public schools at all levels positions the arts as a superfluous indulgence that cannot be accommodated in tough economic times, while a narrow focus on quantifiable outcomes and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields in higher education is deemed most prudent. A 1977 essay by Audre Lorde is prophetic on this subject. Claiming poetry’s usefulness in accounting for Black women’s lives within a Eurocentric, white-supremacist and patriarchal culture, Lorde wrote: “Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” [13]. Without diminishing the powerful specificity of Lorde’s intervention in its original time and context, I argue for the clarion resonance of her words in relation to artistic and activist lives today—especially for those for whom creativity is an absolute lifeline for excavation of, and testimony to, the felt effects of racism, sexism, classism and other interlocking modes of oppression. The suppression of feelings—even sometimes their partial dilution into “like” and “share” gestures on social media—is

an operation of power [14]. In the context of institutions and technological platforms that are oriented toward profit and sustained by the production of inequalities, as Lorde pointed out, “our feelings were not meant to survive” [15]. So, to advocate art-making and arts education is to advocate the survival of feelings, their radical and diverse expressions, and their proliferating translations into social action.

CRITIQUING DIGITAL CULTURES

I want to unpack certain media rituals that have become familiar in the day-to-day work of many artists and cultural producers at this moment—to cultivate what Cynthia Enloe has called a “feminist curiosity” that exposes and critiques ideologies that support everyday norms [16]. I am especially interested in accounting for how technological platforms that are presented as neutral or, at least, inevitable choices for artists and arts professionals are both problematic and not the only available options. We are intimately familiar with implicit expectations that artists and arts organizations will brand and market themselves, fundraise for their projects by crowdfunding (tapping into their social networks) with tools such as Kickstarter, and sell their work directly to the public—or, more commonly, distribute much of it for free through online platforms such as SoundCloud and YouTube. These practices are not necessarily all bad; nonetheless, it is timely to reflect on the structural and political dimensions of our complicity with these trends.

Web 2.0, the now-familiar structure of the World Wide Web that emphasizes user-generated content and interactivity, is an economy that relies on the unpaid labor of users who are also producers of content, as well as on the affective labor of distributed social networks to “like,” “share,” comment on and otherwise hierarchize and circulate that content. For artists, for whom art-making likely already unfolds in “spare time” outside other employment, this economy demands increasing time for acquiring and cultivating the skills necessary to maintain an online presence and for doing the continual work of scanning, making and uploading media assets to serve a perceived need. To be sure, many of us have embraced this work as a welcome dimension of our creative process, and we benefit from learning from one another via social media networks and from expanding the audience for our work to new communities online. At the same time, the clear, material beneficiaries of our time and labor are large corporations such as Facebook and Google that acquire rich troves of data and freely supplied content from our use of their platforms. Another corollary of this “prosumerism” or “produserism” (i.e. when users become producers of the content they consume) is that it participates in a larger economy that has rendered interconnected occupations and public services obsolete over time. From the museum guide who has been displaced by downloadable audio files, to the skilled graphic designer whose work now seems too expensive if we can do a halfway decent job ourselves, to the small record labels whose relevance has been diminished amid the dominant online distribution networks, neoliberal social organization tends to encourage and reward

competition among individuals at the expense of a more robust and egalitarian community structure [17].

A quality of inevitability makes the contours of digital cultures very hard to challenge. An example is the widespread enthusiasm for “freely available” Web content. Under what conditions might artists support offering content for free or pursue alternatives? On the one hand, knowledge sharing and open access to information are crucial educational and political initiatives that we need to figure out how to do in better ways. On the other, content creators need to be paid for their work and we need not groom future generations to expect that creative labor will always be provided for free. Organizations such as Working Artists’ and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), and Canadian Artists’ Representation/Le Front des artistes canadiens (CARFAC) offer resources such as cumulative statistics on artistic labor that is done for free, as well as proposed rates of pay for various roles and tasks in the arts [18–19]. These are helpful starting points for artists negotiating pay for themselves and for curators lobbying institutions about payment for visiting artists. We need to push back on this expectation of free or low-paid creative labor each time we have an opportunity to do so, raising it for public debate and collective advocacy rather than letting compensation issues get buried within the realm of individual negotiations.

If artists must compete in a marketplace with a glut of freely available online content, what are the implications for the work that they will and will not make? Thet Shein Win raises key concerns about this issue, asking: “If the [online] marketplace [is] the hub” that determines the success of a work—for example, by whether it “goes viral” (a phenomenon that we know is contingent on proprietary algorithms), is successfully crowdfunded or is shown to be viable by Web analytics—“what projects will forever remain on the table or in the studio?” [20] There are also temporal pressures on creative output, given expectations that new content will be continuously available. I joke that every time I log into my Facebook account, it reprimands me that “*Pink Noises* fans haven’t heard from you in 14 days!” But art and critical thought take time. The performance artist Penny Arcade recently addressed this phenomenon, urging young artists not to succumb to external notions of “success,” but rather to “honor [their] own trajectory” and rededicate themselves to the long “developmental arc” that constitutes an artistic life and career [21]. The science fiction author Ursula Le Guin likewise has observed that now more than ever we need writers and artists “who can see alternatives to how we live now, and . . . who can remember freedom: poets, visionaries—the realists of a larger reality” [22]. My position (and provocation) is that artists have an expansive mandate in the arenas of aesthetics and politics to depict and bear witness to the social, cultural, political and economic systems and times in which they are enmeshed—in Adrienne Rich’s words, “to be a voice of hunger, desire, discontent, passion, reminding us that the democratic project is never-ending” [23]. Artists’ capacity to fully inhabit this crucial social role can be compromised if there is noncritical acceptance of technolo-

gies, practices and timeframes for producing work that are in fact deeply in service of capitalism. To be clear, I am not advocating for wholesale abandonment of social media and other new technologies, but rather for critical consciousness of their political dimensions and for the avid exploration and invention of novel, better, community-based alternatives.

COLLECTIVE ALTERNATIVES

The expansion of networks that make artists’ lives and work sustainable through the collective distribution of knowledge and resources is the antithesis of an individual-centered, competitive-market, entrepreneurial culture. What would happen if large, brave, brilliant groups of artists flatly refused to distribute their work freely through existing channels and created new, collectively owned online distribution networks and/or novel modes of, say, handcrafting or hand-wrapping sound and music objects, calling attention to this innovation by sheer means of its countercultural stance? There is little to lose in pursuing such alternatives: the value of digital music downloads to most independent artists is effectively nil, and fees for performances and exhibitions not much better. There are certainly some who have begun to innovate in these ways. For example, the new wave of “boutique” synthesizer and effects-pedal designers represent a kind of reaction against the dominance of multinational corporations in mass-producing electronic music instruments in the 1980s and 1990s.

Artists might ask: How can we redistribute money to support our friends and colleagues if none of us has any funding and no one wants to pay for music? It is worth examining what small amounts of money we might personally contribute to the arts and where that money can best be spent, and, if fundraising for a project, seek approaches that are consistent with one’s politics. Josh MacPhee points out that Kickstarter, and its financial partner Amazon, take 10% off the top of funds raised from projects that meet their goals. There are also less well-quantified costs shared by artists and their networks, of gifts donated as fundraising perks, promotional expenses and hours of labor that are invested to make campaigns successful [24]. Whenever possible, we can be more mindful consumers in deciding where to invest even very small sums in the arts, and to deliberately and directly support other artists [25]. A useful analogy can be made to the local food movement: going to a farmers’ market rather than a chain store, and other small changes of habit among those with the means to make such choices, can make a big difference over time if adopted on a widespread scale. Artists might also organize music production collectives that pool instruments and tools for sharing among the community. Open-source software solutions are promising in this regard. Some of these approaches also offer ways to reduce electronics waste, running counter to dominant ideologies of planned obsolescence and individual ownership of electronic devices.

ASPIRATIONS AND ACTIONS

As is the case with other forms of activism, an activist life in sound must be made and remade through adaptive and renewable commitments to social justice. What might sonic

activists work toward? It can help to name some values and aspirations. I start with the following:

1. That people have the resources and time to pursue creative sonic or musical expression in ways that are unrestricted by gender identity, race, ethnicity, class position, sexuality, physical ability, age and other socially differentiating factors. This goal needs to be bolstered by a broad array of social services (e.g. access to education, employment, healthcare and family care), as well as through opposition to mass incarceration and militarization.
2. That such unrestricted creative sonic expressions foster:
 - diversity of individual expressions
 - senses of community or belonging
 - recognition of differences without insistence on their resolution or appropriation by those in positions of power
 - shared commitments to eradicating socioeconomic inequalities
 - consciousness of social and environmental interdependency
3. That creative lives in sound are personally and economically sustainable, through:
 - collective organization and/or ownership of the means of music production and distribution
 - societal recognition of art's inherent cultural, economic and civic value
4. That detrimental environmental impacts resulting from creative uses of electronics and audio technologies are minimized.

This list is designed for ongoing revision and to motivate artists to make their own. It emerges from my particular geo-political and social location, and it is not intended to be comprehensive, universal or prescriptive. While it has a utopic feel, it is also generative, like an instructional score: there are many possible ways to interpret it and turn the stated aspirations into actions. A single project might zero in on one area of the list very well: for example, Pauline Oliveros and collaborators' Adaptive Use Musical Instruments project implements the goal of expanding access to music-making to people with physical disabilities [26]. Or, an artist's entire career or the mission of an organization might focus on one area, such as an ecologically minded composer's ongoing uses of sound to raise consciousness about environmental sustainability; a music educator's lifelong project to teach younger generations about art's inherent values and meanings; or an antipoverty nonprofit's efforts to improve material living conditions for many, which can increase capacity for creative expression among a wider range of community members. Alternatively, a sonic activist might endeavor to do a small action in support of most or all of the above aspirations each day. For me, this list is a useful compass and practical guide, so that I can routinely ask myself: In what ways does my music-making today address X? How does my research further Y? If I'm not doing enough to support Z, what needs to change? It reveals how there can indeed be many approaches to cultivating an activist life in sound—many areas toward which we can direct our efforts—resulting in a proliferation of sonic-political acts that have local and far-reaching ripple effects.

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References and Notes

- 1 This essay addresses the organizing question of the 2014 "Sound::Gender::Feminism::Activism" conference: "What, in the historical present, might constitute an activist life in sound?" As indicated by the references, the essay is based on interdisciplinary research that centers on arts and cultural contexts in the U.S., Canada and the U.K.; while the arguments may be relevant in other contexts, they emerge from and critique these cultural locations in particular.
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 - 16 Cynthia Enloe, "Introduction: Being Curious about Our Lack of Feminist Curiosity," in *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2004) pp. 1–8.
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