

The rhythm of the archive

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The allure of the archive

In the past two decades, institutional archives have begun offering residencies to artists, enabling them to produce work inspired by or in response to the documents in their repository. Artist residencies give artists and collectives the time, space and resources to develop aspects of their practice or works that require exceptional focus and reflection. In a sound archive, this becomes particularly poignant as artists engage with what I call the rhythm of the archive^[1], a living source of simultaneous notions of time as experienced through archival sound recordings, far from the immediacy with which the digital domain has accustomed us to consuming information. What is the attraction for an institutional archive in hosting artist residencies? And more importantly, what is the allure of the archive for the artist's creative process?

The so-called 'archival turn'^[2] in contemporary art alongside a 'thriving interdisciplinary and international preoccupation with memory since the 1990s'^[3] has made archives desirable sites for artistic creation and propelled institutional archives to create artist in residence programmes. In this way, institutional archives have actively acknowledged the value that

artistic practices have in 'situating archives as potent stimuli, conduits, and spaces for social, cultural and political productions that encourage dynamic cross-disciplinary and community interactions where new understandings about the past and present and possibilities for the future can emerge'.^[4] Artist residencies in sound archives can be grouped in with this tendency, though their proliferation is more recent. In the last five years, they have been offered by the Fonoteca Nacional de Mexico, the Norwegian Institute of Recorded Sound, The National Library of Scotland, The Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision and the British Library Sound Archive, to name a few.

As a curator at the British Library Sound Archive, with experience facilitating artist residencies, I have noticed recurrent creative strategies at play when artists engage with sound recordings. I critically conceptualise these approaches as 'extracting' and 'embedding' and explain how they both stem from a way of listening to historical sounds that falls short of accessing the world that these recordings can open up to. Though these strategies are not exhaustive, and there are surely many other forms of creative engagement, the question remains: what type of listening is needed for artists to creatively engage with the sound archive?

Sound archives: what now?

Digitisation has shifted public perception of institutional sound archives. Mass digitisation projects have released thousands of digital archival recordings online creating unprecedented opportunities to access historical sound on dedicated online portals. New audiences have been able to listen to collections of sound recordings, in some cases for the first time, and learn about their histories, from anywhere in the world. These spaces were once reserved for specialist

researchers: to listen to archival recordings required a certain know-how, institutional affiliations, bureaucracy and time.

These new online portals, or ‘sites of remediation’^[5] where the experience of old media is transferred to and mediated by newer formats, have afforded new ways of listening to historical sound and created opportunities for reconnecting recordings with communities, inspiring projects beyond scholarly research. Thanks to this, archival sounds have also reached the ears of more musicians, artists and creative practitioners. Despite their sometimes overwhelming magnitude, these digital repositories are eagerly sought after because sounds ‘(...) liberated from a specific time and place, offer themselves up to be recontextualized.’^[6]

What has been dubbed the ‘post-custodial’^[7] era of archives leaves behind the figure of the archivist as a passive gatekeeper of dusty boxes. In this new era, institutional sound archives have re-imagined their main activities by taking a more active approach to their collections: initiatives such as co-curating with the communities represented in sound recordings, repatriating recordings to their provenance countries and enabling artists and creatives to work with collections are a few popular trends. As sound curator and ethnomusicologist Noel Loble points out, ‘The role of sound archives today seems to be navigating a balance between preserving the sounds of multiple and diverse traditions, and exploring the most creative and ethical ways to promote the use of these fragmented archival sounds.’^[8]

Artist residencies were probably not anticipated by the first sound archives, like the Vienna Phonogrammarchiv, founded in 1899, or the Phonogramm-Archiv in Berlin, founded in 1900, which emerged as a response to the uses of the phonograph made by ethnographers,

linguists and anthropologists. What happens when artists ‘take residence’ in these century-old sound archives? For sound archives, artist residencies are a high-profile opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to innovation and creativity with sonic heritage as well as confirm the relevance and futurity of their sound recordings. When archival sound recordings are re-contextualised in new works, recordings ‘speak beyond the domain for which they were created: for instance, as songs, narratives, stories, accounts that carry meaning beyond that of grammatical or musical examples.’^[9]

If we examine the briefs issued for these residencies, we see the aspirations behind hosting them and the perceived value that the artist brings to the archive. Concepts such as ‘re-interpreting’, ‘re-viving’ and ‘opening up’ are recurrent tropes. The artist is an alchemist, capable of breathing new life into these sonic fragments, tracing a line that connects them with our present because in fact ‘their line with the present has been broken, lending them a rareness and antiquity, and a sense that online archives represent troves of long-lost treasure.’^[10] This long-lost treasure is what artists are invited to ‘explore’ and use as ‘inspiration’ or as a ‘catalyst’ for new works.

Extracting and embedding

The overwhelming nature of the sound archive – both as an online repository and a physical storehouse – requires a directed and consistent approach. There is so much to listen to and though it may sound obvious, sound recordings can only be experienced in real time. This means that engaging with the archive can be a very slow process.^[11] Visual aids like scanning audio waveforms for meaningful events or reading through transcripts of interviews or field notes may assist our listening, but to work with sound in a meaningful way, artists will want to listen, and even re-listen, in real time.

In the context of an artist residency, an artist usually begins their experimentation in the sound archive using the catalogue. Key words, specific categories found in ‘advanced search’ function or clever Boolean searches will bring up sounds, some of which are available for immediate listening (others require digitisation). The metadata that describes the sound recording in the ‘catalogue record’ indexes the sound itself and though it may be sparse and even erroneous, it is the most evident way of finding and setting aside what to listen to.

Artists might choose to instead use (the generally simpler) search functions of online repositories, which though also relying on key words and categories, guarantee an immediate listening experience. If artists then engage with these recordings through what Annette Hoffmann calls ‘close listening’, or the ‘attempt to know by ear, that is, to grasp as much as possible of the audible features of the recording’ this engagement reveals the recordings as much more than what they are described as in the catalogue and ‘makes audible that archived sound files often speak beyond the object status attributed to them by the recordists and in the archival documentation.’^[12]

Commonly an artist will select recordings based on themes or concepts laid out in the residency brief, or that they have proposed to activate the archive with. In this initial research phase, ‘close listening’ may reveal that the sound recordings do not neatly map on to an artist’s intended use because their content overflows and surpasses what the catalogue professed them to be. If catalogues are the entry point to sound and tend to index sound based on the field notes of the recordist, minimally enhanced by the cataloguer, listening to recordings will uncover sounds which were hidden from discovery. In the case of ethnographic sound recordings produced in colonial or ‘asymmetric

situations of knowledge production’^[13] this is often the case. For example, when an anthropologist sets out to collect dialect samples and catalogues them as such, listening (and translation) opens up a world of meaning. Through speech and language, a recording catalogued as a dialect sample might reveal otherwise unrecorded cultural or musical knowledge.

In light of this, I suggest residencies and artists create and take time to listen in an open mode, without any anticipation of what will be encountered and how it can be used in compositions or art works. Sound recordings should not be subordinated or made to fit with an artist’s plan or intentions but should be listened to. In this way, the world unto which they open us should guide and inform the process of creation. New creations inspired in this way by the sound archive, can transcend the recurrent practice of embedding, in other words, borrowing a portion of one recording and incorporating it into another, which groups practices such as sampling, re-mixing and collaging.

Although this artistic strategy has been used by many artists in residence and is deemed by institutional archives as a forward-thinking way of using sound recordings, there is a risk these recordings will be listened to and used in an instrumental or even extractive manner where their meaning in context is obliterated. While, as Chattopadhyay writes, ‘the assemblage has psychoacoustic connotations where mutual identities and temporalities of sounds constantly collide to demand new interpretation,’^[14] ignoring or erasing the world the recordings were borne from can replicate the process by which some of these collections were assembled in the first place: through the violence and extraction of colonial and imperial enterprises justified by scientific, anthropological, and ethnographic research.

‘It is safe to sleep to a sound that time brings back’

Whilst artists working with the sound archive acknowledge the potential for hidden stories and worlds to be revealed through listening openly and learning with a recording’s context, recordings are still listened through pre-set themes or agendas because what is prioritised is the final work itself. Often sound recordings or fragments of them are selected and used for their sonic and rhythmic potential – because they sound good – without questioning how these creative decisions are informed by one’s positionality.

I want to imagine what might happen if we shift the focus of these artist residencies from producing to listening. Instead of remaining at safety with forms of creative production where the world of the sound recordings, the context of the archive, the history of the institution, and the inherent extractive practices in some of these collections remains dormant, as in Wallace Stevens’ verse from which I borrow the title to this section,^[1] I propose instead that artists listen out to the archive in a cross-temporal and poly-rhythmic exercise that gathers listeners, recordists and performers in overlapping timeframes. The importance of the artist’s time in residence would no longer be measured through how ingeniously their final work incorporates or draws on archival sound recordings. The focus would instead shift to spending time ‘listening out’ to sonic possible futures, following Paul Basu and Wayne Modest’s proposition of what archives can be:

‘Such resources are themselves legacies from the past, and thus, in a commonplace yet complex temporal conjunction, the past (or, at least the present past) provides an important reservoir of possibilities informing the construction of future imaginaries.’^[2]

Through artist residency programmes, the sound archive is able to support the creative

process of contemporary artists, acknowledging the ways in which past works can be explicitly influential in constructing futures. As the sound recordings in the archive are re-contextualised into new events and compositions, their meaning is extended and their historicity brought into the present. As curators and artists, we should think of how we are complicit in replicating and sustaining the existing power relations embedded within sound recordings. For curators, like myself working in sound archives, it raises the question: how do we foster other ways of listening to the rhythm of the archive, and if so, what do we hear?

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[1]

Gaining access to the actual sound may be a slow process because the analogue carrier needs retrieval and digitisation. This journey can be as long and circuitous as the initial route taken to make the recording. When accessing via an online archive, you cut straight to the present, real-time experience listening requires and within that real-time, is contained the experience of time past, to which the sound recording belongs i.e. it was recorded on November 20, 1975. The provenance of each recording thus opens a broader historical moment to the listener through historical references or contextual information.

[2]

The phrase ‘archival turn’ was first used by media arts scholar Cheryl Simon at a conference in 2001, to ‘make reference to the increased appearance of historical and archival photographs and artifacts, and the approximation of archival forms, in the art and photographic practices of the 1990s.’ Cheryl Simon, ‘Introduction: Following the Archival Turn’, *Visual Resources* 18, no. 2 (2002): 101.

[3]

Kathy M. Carbone, 'Archival Art: Memory Practices, Interventions, and Productions', *Curator: The Museum Journal* 63, no. 2 (May 2020): 258.

[4]

Kathy M. Carbone, 'Moving Records: Artistic Interventions and Activisms in the Archives' (PhD diss., UCLA, 2017), iii.

[5]

Tom Western uses 'remediation' (Bolter and Grusin) to describe how in the online spaces where digitised archival field recordings 'make themselves heard anew', we listen to two formats at once: the digital and the analogue. He insightfully points out that 'the discourse of these online archives as 'windows to the past' maps neatly onto theories of remediation, involving twin, contradictory but mutually dependent, logics of immediacy and hypermediacy.' Tom Western, 'National Phonography. Field Recording and Sound Archiving in Postwar Britain' (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2015), 224-227.

[6]

Ken Jordan and Paul D. Miller, 'Freeze Frame: Audio, Aesthetics, Sampling, and Contemporary Multimedia', in *Sound Unbound: Sampling digital music and culture*, ed. Paul D. Miller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 104.

[7]

The *Dictionary of Archives Terminology's* entry for 'postcustodial' states that the term was thought up by archivist F. Gerald Ham, in 1981.

[8]

Noel Lobley, 'Sound Archives, Ethnography and Sonic Heritage', in *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music History and Heritage*, ed. Sarah Baker, et al. (London: Routledge, 2018), 276.

[9]

Annette Hoffmann, 'Introduction: listening to sound archives', *Social Dynamics* 41, no. 1 (January 2015): 74.

[10]

Western, 'National Phonography', 230.

[11]

Listening also takes time because of the emotional and

psychological effect it may have. This was acknowledged in a blog post by Awate, who was the Artist-in-Residence at the British Library Sound Archive for Unlocking Our Sound Heritage: 'This listening process took longer than I had anticipated, simply because I needed to take the time to properly recover from hearing people talk about such things, even when they had an indefatigable spirit or sense of humour about it.'

<https://blogs.bl.uk/sound-and-vision/2020/10/making-of-the-unearthed-odyssey.html>

[12]

Annette Hoffman, 'Close Listening: Approaches to Research on Colonial Sound Archives', in *The Bloomsbury Handbook on Sonic Methodologies*, ed. Michael Bull, et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2020)

[13]

Hoffman, 'Close Listening'.

[14]

Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, 'Orphan Sounds: Locating Historical Recordings in Contemporary Media', *Organised Sound* 23, no. 2 (July 2018): 181-88.

[15]

This verse is taken from the poem 'Certain Phenomena of Sound' by Wallace Stevens which can be found online: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=61&issue=1&page=19>

[16]

Paul Basu and Ferdinand De Jong, 'Utopian archives, decolonial affordances: introduction to special issue', *Social Anthropology* 24, no. 1 (February 2016): 9.