The word has turn

CrossMark

Kevin Logan[*]

CRiSAP, London College of Communication, University of the Arts London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article positions and expands my ongoing research. This research has emerged from a cross-disciplinary practice; its purpose is to posit an intrinsic 'performativity' of the sonic within a contemporary art framework, offering new ground for an understanding of the agency of audio-works. This paper comprises a short artist statement, describing and critically situating the incorporated performative writing. The 'sonic-turn' has in recent years gained considerable purchase within broad-field humanities and contemporary art practices. This writing seeks to ally this model for theorization with a somewhat earlier conceptual paradigm, that of the 'performative-turn'. I suggest that his superimposition of the so-called 'sonic-turn' onto that of the 'performative-turn' does not merely draw attention to their close similarities, but also identifies the negative spaces and cavities left by disparity, or simple differences of form. It is this liminal space where affect, feeling, and emotion engages the quotidian through the sonic-event.

Crown Copyright © 2016 Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction: How to do things with sounds

The title for this writing, if mumbled, recounted in a noisy environment, or spoken with a strong regional accent for that matter, could be mistaken for a well-known idiom.

The use of this purposefully playful wording may seem to endorse an oft-expressed opinion within contemporary sound studies. I refer to the notion that the sonic underdog is now 'having its day'. This suggestion pervades many of the collected essays, readers and exhibition catalogues published in the last two decades in response to a perceived trans-disciplinary sonic turn.

"Since the beginning of the new millennium, numerous historical and critical works have established Sound Art as an artistic genre in its own right, with […] disciplinary classifications that effectively restrict artistic practice to particular tools and venues" (Press, 2016). The sonic, it seems, still feels the need to fight its corner.

My title, as the opening lines indicate, introduces the idea of the troublesome audition as a slippery sounding. Moreover, if it does elicit a sounded response from the reader, it should not be a sympathetic "aww". A disapproving tut-tut, tsk-tsk, or any demonstrative dental click for that matter can only act as a sonification of separatism. I have no desire for the audience to emote a sharp

sibilant hiss as wicked ocularcentrism enters stage sinister.[1] I will leave that binary sound and vision squabble for the promoters of discipline-specificity. The title for this writing is a teasing provocation of sorts, one that makes use of its own materiality as an actant.[2] The materiality is that of the sound, pronunciation, and typography of the written word, which I will further employ in the text that follows.

Although the sonic is central to my practice-led research, I rather shy away from the title of Sound Artist, preferring to consider my work as infra-disciplinary, a prefix that indicates both below and further on.[3] This is not to deny sound the status of a field in its own right; rather than suggesting that the sonic is less than a singular area of study, I would propose that it is *more*.

Disciplinary fields are curious entities; they have no physical

* 7 Thurstan Dwellings, Newton Street, London, WC2B 5EP, UK.
E-mail address: k2.logan@yahoo.co.uk.

---

[1] This refers to the Latin origin of the word sinister as meaning left-handed. "The tradition of Evil ente ring from the sinister side goes back to the mystery plays … (a) nd seems to echo medieval times, when the entrances to heaven and hell were placed on these sides." http://www.limelightscripts.co.uk/history.html.

[2] Actant here denotes human and non-human actors. In accordance with actor-network theory, an actant is anything that "… modif[ies] other actors through a series of …" actions. (Latour, 2004. p.75).

[3] Here the prefix infra also makes reference to the following two quotes: "The banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual [...] How are we to speak of these common things?" (Perec.1973. pp. 205-7). "[T]he sound or the music that corduroy trousers, like these, make when one moves, is pertinent to infra-slim." Marcel Duchamp, Notes on the Infra-Slim. c 1945.

borders or actual geography, but are as fiercely contested and passionately protected as any tangible territory. Sound, in this respect, is an anomaly. Sound can scale partitions, permeate walls, and pop over parapets. Barriers to sound tend to be ineffective obstacles.

In this respect, I am in agreement with Brandon LaBelle: "Sound art as a practice harnesses, describes, analyzes, performs, and interrogates the condition of sound and the processes by which it operates" (LaBelle, 2006. p. ix). Sound has the capacity to be speculative and contingent; it is relational. Sound has agency. Just as sound skips across borders and defies perimeters, so too as a study it transcends.

Paradoxically, this transcendence also embodies immanence. It goes beyond, while creating action and results. As such sound both performs and is performative. Quoting the philosopher and affect theorist, Brian Massumi regarding this transcendence/immanence dyad, "the trick is to get comfortable with productive paradox" (Massumi, 2002. p.38). Sound has the potential to be a form of thinking and as a practice a kind of doing-thinking. To borrow a term from Massumi, the "thinking-feeling" of sound is causal, and as such rather than just spectate, the sonic articulates and participates. (Massumi, 2008. p.6). Thinking-feeling "… is a thinking of perception in perception, in the immediacy of its occurrence, as it is [heard]" (ibid. p.6).

How does the fugitive nature of sound, both act through and act upon other ways of knowing? According to Alfred North Whitehead, writing in the 1930's, "[t]he basis of experience is emotional" (Whitehead.1967. p.176). The 'doing' that motivates my use of performative writing practice is a reciprocal experience, concerned with a sounding of the sonic subjective. It is here that affect, feeling and emotion are part of the same transformative force 'done' through sonority.

Originally produced in 2013, the prepared-text that follows was an attempt to exorcise something that at the time I considered to be on the periphery of my research. It since transpires that rather than being a marginal component, and of passing interest, it is central to both my making and my methodology.

The original version of the text had the title - 'On the use of the 'p' word in my research' (And, the pop filter as a compositional device). I subsequently decided to remove all the letter p's from the text; this elimination problematizes the writing, making its delivery and reception a troubled sounding. This typographic amender turned what had been a brief review of the word 'performance', its etymological derivative 'performativity', and its impact upon my practice, into an event score. The space left by the simple omission created a cavity to fill with action, gesture, and emotion. A space to be inhabited by a thinking-feeling-sounding.

I have used the following writing in a number of performed presentations. Although they have all included elements of the original text, they have been re-assembled and re-configured in various ways, all employing different performed 'deeds' to make the text 'do' and 're-do' something. These performative readings have varied in the severity of the sonic/physical intervention used. I have read the text and simply struggled with the pronunciation of incomplete words, or have used a variety of acoustic acts to stand-in for the absent 'p' sound. This has elicited a mixture of emotional responses from the audience, ranging from discomfort to hilarity, via incredulity.

Here I invite the reader to add to this roll call and perform the following text. The reader may substitute these missing plosives with asonic-event of their choice, filling in each blank with a prosaic sound producing deed. These could vary from the click of a retractable pen top, the tap of a finger on a keyboard, the crushing-crumple of a plastic water bottle, or some other equally quotidian noising. In this respect, this prepared-text is akin to a

performance script.[4] Of course, the reader may choose to do none of the above; however, I would challenge any person who would profess to read the text without the 'happening' of some sort of sonic-event. After all, even the inner voice of the reader is a sounding, albeit a non-cochlear one; this 'sonic-writing' is an expanded reading practice.

A short video entitled 'Doing Plosives' was made as a companion piece to this text; this is hinted at in the original text's secondary title, 'The pop filter as a compositional device'. A plosive is the speech sound made by a consonant produced by stopping the airflow using the lips, teeth, or palate, followed by a sudden release of air; the basic plosives in English are t, k, and p. The video comprises roughly edited close-up shots of myself, along with a microphone with pop filter on a stand.[5] In the video, I am repeatedly speaking the letter 'p' in a slightly exaggerated manner. The purpose of this video was to augment my writing practice through mediated performance.

The earliest iteration of the 'p' word text included a QR code on the printed page. This QR code, when scanned by a smartphone or tablet, would take the reader to the online video.

This additional moving-image work was a mischievous re-instatement of these lost plosives. However, I now feel that this video is somewhat redundant in regards to its earlier purpose. In my opinion, the writing performs itself sufficiently through the textual device employed, and hence through the reader. Nevertheless, I do continue to use this video in the context of my presenting about 'On the use of the 'p' word in my research', as I find it colludes with me as a co-presenter/performer.[6]

2. On the use of the '_' word in my research (and, the _o_ filter as a com_ositional device)

2.1. _-_-_-_icking a '_' word

My current research being _ractice-led, one would be forgiven for assuming the '_' word is '_ractice', it is, however '_erformance' and its derivatives that I am referring to.

I frequently describe my _ractice as being _erformance with a small '_'; this is to differentiate the low-key and lowercase sound-_roducing deed(s) that I am concerned with, from the added dramaturgy of what usually comes to mind when one considers _erformance art.[7] To be more _recise, the _articular '_' word that I am going to deal with briefly here is the term '_erformative'.

"You are more than entitled to know what the word '_erformative' means. It is a new word and an ugly word and _erha_s it does not mean anything very much. But at any rate there is one thing in its favour, it is not a _rofound word" (Austin, 1970).

The notion of _erformativity can be traced back to a series of lectures delivered by the _hiloso_her and linguist J. L. Austin at Harvard University in 1955, and _ublished _osthumously in 'How To Do Things with Words' (1962). Austin's develo_ment of 's_eech act theory' draws a distinction between constative and

---

[4] I use the term 'prepared-text' here in reference to the practice of altering the timbre of a musical instrument through the placement of objects in or about it. Although certainly not the earliest example, some of the better known are John Cage's 'prepared piano' experiments.

[5] A pop filter or pop shield is an anti-pop noise protection filter for microphones, designed to attenuate the energy of a plosive.

[6] I made another version of this video in which I played with the diegetic/non-diegetic nature of the sounding plosive. I feel duty-bound to cite my influence here as Norman Collier, a British comedian (1925–2013). He achieved popularity following television appearances in the 1970's and was best known for his 'faulty microphone' routine.

[7] Here I re-a ro_riate the term 'lowercase', as adopted by the sound and visual artist Steven Roden to define his _articular brand of ambient minimalism. The term has since become widely used in denoting a particular musical style.