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A walk of art: the potential of the sound walk as practice in cultural geography

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Some of the most experimental and exciting work using sound and spatiality has come from the art world. This essay traces how an exciting hybrid of sound art and walking – the sound walk - has evolved over the last century. Examining the latest examples of sound walks in London and New York, and reflecting on the author's experience of creating a sound walk route, this essay focuses on the potential of this medium to create flowing, multi-sensory and embodied ways for social and cultural geographers to research the outside environment. The essay concludes that the medium could also be useful for presenting site-specific cultural geography to the public in an accessible and inclusive way.

Keywords: sound art walk landscape memory

Sound walks – by which I mean walks in the outside world guided by recorded sound and voice, usually using a personal stereo – have developed from a number of areas including oral history, museology, sound art and sound ecology. There has been some geographical work on the geographies of sound, concentrating particularly on music (Leyshon, Matless et al. 1998; Smith 1997); some theoretical ideas on the benefits of embodied, sensory, dynamic ways of experiencing and thinking about the world such as non-representational theory (Thrift 1996; Thrift 2000; Thrift 2004), but relatively little literature directly concerned with sound art practitioners, despite their

attempts to encourage multi-sensory and embodied experience and contemplation of place and space (McLaren 2002; Pinder 2001). This might not be surprising, given the vast array of concerns that cultural geography encompasses, and the multi-disciplinary nature of sound art which makes sound artwork difficult to categorise epistemologically. Sound art does not fall wholly in the realm of music, oral history, fine arts, drama, recorded sound production or museum curation. In many respects, the broad concerns of cultural geography make its practitioners uniquely qualified to appreciate sound artwork, particularly in relation to its interpretation of space and place.

Throughout the 20th century musicians and artists in particular have been concerned with the multi-sensory experience of life and they have attempted to pioneer new ways communicating with audiences in such a way. In this paper I will try to draw some conclusions about of the development of sound art over the last century, concentrating particularly on how its relationship to place has emerged as an area of enquiry for some sound art practice. I will then look in detail at some relatively recent works of sound art that use walking as a major part of their practice, including my own work in this field. My aim is to suggest that experiments in combining walking, sound, memory and artistic practice could be useful tools for the geographer to research, apply and present site-specific cultural geography.

Sound art and the geographies of noise

Sound art is a vast area of different practices and in many respects defies generalisation, although an attempt to map out the history of the sound art movement have now been made (Kahn 1999). Today there are a whole host of genres: turntablism, for example, works with existing recordings (looping random records simultaneously on numerous gramophones); a long tradition of recording everyday

and unusual things has brought us audio ecology and plunderphonics (sampling sound sources for audio collage). The sound art movement – and sound art is so diverse that the term movement should be used with care – has its roots firmly in the 20th century, and really gained momentum in the latter half of the century. There are two major reasons why sound took off in this period as opposed to any other; technology and the changing character of everyday noise.

Recording technology enormously shaped the evolution of sound art; radio, phonograph, and cheap tape recorders meant that performance could escape the shackles of fixed place and time. More recently computers have brought complex sampling and editing techniques out of the studio to become an common sound artist's tool that have even made it possible for artists like Jem Finer to create music that will not repeat itself for a thousand years (Poole 2001). The availability of recording technology to a mass market has increased as prices have been driven down, and a thriving amateur community of people experimenting with sound sampling and mixing is now well established, to the extent that it now has its own radio station in London (Resonance FM).

It also seems that artists and musicians have produced work in response to the rapidly changing character of modern, urban life. Modern life, with its multi-sensory bombardment of car engines, fans and motors progressively transformed the soundscape of everyday life in all but the most remote areas. It has been argued that this change in amount and type of sound (or noise, a more disparaging word for sounds that are judged to be unpleasant) has accumulated steadily since the early modern period, and has had subtle but major effects on conceptions of place and identity. A whole semiotic system, based primarily around the church bell, which created 'auditory communities' and helped to construct identity and structure relationships, was ultimately overthrown (Garrioch 2003: 5-25). In its place, the noise

of factory whistle, the motor and industry; and now the television, the radio, the i-pod. Aldous Huxley declared the 20th century the Age of Noise: 'Physical noise, mental noise and noise of desire – we hold history's record for all of them,' he declares (Huxley 1945). Little wonder that there were some major reactions to this new, predominantly urban soundscape, ranging from noise abatement societies to the invention of new, sound proofing materials and techniques that have greatly shaped modern architectural and building practice. Yet it would be a mistake to regard the historical changes in everyday sound as simply a destructive process of urban noisiness destroying traditional harmony. As Thompson has demonstrated in *The Soundscape of Modernity*, there was also a creative side to this process - musicians and engineers constructed new cultures out of the noise of the modern world inside offices, music halls, cinemas and across airwaves (Thompson 2003). Artists also began to try to incorporate these powerful, auditory aspects into their interpretations of the world: they simply could not be ignored.

The trail that I wish to follow through the artistic and musical practice of 20th century is to consider attempts to use outside sounds or noises that were in some way located in the landscape. The trail begins with the Italian futurist Luigi Russolo who wrote the *Art of noises futurist manifesto* (1913) in which he declared: 'We delight much more in combining in our thoughts the noises of trams, of automobile engines, of carriages and brawling crowds, than in hearing again the Eroica or the Pastorale' and 'let us cross a large modern capital with our ears more attentive than eyes' ((Russollo, 1913: 25-26). Russolo delighted in the latest industrial noise and even the noise of war. His compositions were performed inside, with specially designed instruments to recreate this noise in his compositions. Russolo argued that listening to this noise could make you appreciate the music in everyday sounds – he said that after four of five rehearsals, his musicians 'took great pleasure in following the noises of trams, automobiles, and so on, in the traffic outside. And they verified with

amazement the variety of pitch they encountered in these noises' ((Russollo, 1913: 48).

This wasn't a sentiment shared by many people, some of whom actively campaigned against loud noise as being detrimental to health. By 1930 the noise abatement movement in had gained enough political momentum to set up a Noise Abatement Commission in New York, that began to measure outside noise with scientific instruments. It found terrific noise American cities from riveters on construction sites, subways, factories and the new amplified music. Zoning laws and public health acts were used to control some of this noise, but it seems that there was little impact overall. Instead, and partly because of this failure of city authorities to regulate noise, buildings were specifically designed to keep outside noise outside (Thompson, 2002: 168).

After Russolo, other composers (Antheil, Varèse) experimented with bringing noise into the concert hall, but it took American composer John Cage and his notorious work 4'33", also known as the 'silent piece' (1952), to introduce the concert hall to outside noise. The performance of this work was held in a concert hall with a performer sitting at the piano. The pianist would count the time in three movements, making absolutely no sound. It is customary for audiences to remain quietly respectful in concert halls for the duration of the performance and the performer is instructed to remain quiet in all respects. As the realisation dawns that the performer is not going to perform, the listening attention of the audience inevitably drew to the sounds around them; the movements and noises of the area outside the hall, and any breathing, coughing or shuffling that happened inside it.

There are some important features to this work that sets it apart from conventional works of art and music. The first is the way that 4'33'' exists in space and time – the

audience is forced to consider and appreciate, in real time, the real sounds of the place they in which they are situated – where the hall is geographically located becomes important to the experience. Another important element is the audience; Douglas Kahn notes that at all the performances of this piece that he has been to the silence is broken by the audience, which becomes 'ironically noisy' (Kahn 1999: 165). Even if a modern audience feels reluctant to meditate in a semi-silent atmosphere, by making noise they become a part of the live soundscape and co-creators of the artwork. It could be argued that listening has been transformed into a more active and embodied process, even if the audience as performers are severely restricted by habit, convention and fear of what others might think. As a site of meaning, the concert hall is transformed from highly ritualised and (self) controlled area into a dynamic, complex place where potentially anything could happen.

Since Cage's experiments there have been a myriad of practitioners that have developed attempted to use sound to draw attention to the urban landscape. After experimenting with bringing outside sounds into the concert hall, Max Neuhaus attempted to experiment with ways to make people appreciate their environment in a more nuanced way, and finally jettisoned the concert hall altogether. In Listen, a series of walks composed between 1966 and 1976, the audience would meet outside the concert hall where they would have their hands stamped with the word 'LISTEN' and they would then follow Neuhaus (who said nothing) around the nearby streets where they would be led to sonically interesting areas, like under fly-overs (Foundation 2005). This might be seen as a semi-derive; the local soundscape takes centre stage and potentially anything might happen, although the route is authored to increase the chance of an interesting acoustic 'happening'. Sound artists, as well as musicians, have continued to bring audiences outside conventional sites of cultural consumption to appreciate local and situated sound. Bill Fontana, for example, installed *Sound Island* (1994) in the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, in which he broadcast

live sounds from 16 places in the city to a platform above the monument. By treating the urban landscape as a living source of musical information, he tries to challenge old ideas of noise and encourage people to appreciate the sounds they live with every day in a new way. Fontana has found that he has had to work outside the museum or art gallery – which he describes as institutions devoted to the visual, retinal experience. ‘The idea of placing a sound sculpture inside a museum space, which cannot be seen with the eyes is an apparent contradiction, which is why so few museums have ever been interested in the type of work I am doing,’ he says (Fontana 2004).

From this short survey of sound art, it should now be clear that sound artists have attempted to overthrow an over-reliance on the visual and break free from the concert-hall conventions of the aural. Successful attempts have been made to move performance and display outside conventional cultural spaces which often deliberately insulate the visitor from their geographical environment, such as museums, art galleries, recital rooms and tourist sites. There has also been a movement to record and celebrate more contemporary, everyday sound, which has been hitherto overlooked or even resented as ‘noise’.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the meaning of noise – classical musicians have long asserted that music is harmonious, orderly and regular; noise was discordant, disorderly and irregular. Noise tends to bleed over boundaries; it is fluid and in its plurality uncontrollable. Clearly these definitions have been called into question by the composers above and others since the jazz age (Thompson, 2002: 132). I want to suggest that this movement of valuing the every day of sound in musical practice has some direct parallels with recent debates about place and mobility, history and memory.

Place, mobility and memory

In the case of place and mobility, Tim Cresswell has explored the rooted and bounded ideas of home and sense of place that is pervasive in academia and beyond in his book about the Tramp in America. He argues that the powerful sense of being 'rooted', having connection with home, is inextricably entwined with identity. This way of thinking, something that anthropologist Liisa Malkki has described as 'sedentary metaphysics', underpins much geographical and cultural thought, territorializes identity into commonplace assumptions about property, region and nation. This in turn seems to produce dualistic thoughts about people that are mobile, or displaced such as tramps, travellers or refugees as pathologically dangerous (Cresswell, 2001: 14-19). In his forthcoming book *On the Move* Cresswell develops this argument to also look at the positive valuation of mobility. Just as the world has become noisier, it has also become more mobile and nomadic thought has gained currency - a 'nomadic metaphysics' has evolved. Said, de Certeau, Thrift and Guatarri are martialled to demonstrate how mobility is borderless, ever-changing, flowing and playful – the sedentary metaphysics seen in this way becomes redundant and illusory.

This playful mobility was famously celebrated by the situationists, who were interested in the material and psychological patterns of the city street and their effects on the individual, a psychogeography. Significance came from the 'dérive', literally a 'drift', an apparently aimless wandering that nonetheless revealed the psychic undercurrents of the city. In *Theory of the Dérive* Debord outlined the idea:

'In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for work and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. The

element of chance is less determinant than one might think: from the derive point of view cities have a psychogeographical relief, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes which strongly discourage entry or exit from certain zones.' (Debord 1956, quoted in Ford 2005: 34).

So Debord firmly rejected the idea that such a technique was random or only applicable to each individual in their own way – the psychogeographical terrain was real enough for Debord to propose the introduction of psychogeographical maps where the currents and vortexes could be placed and a more dynamic, embodied way of experiencing a city could be encouraged (Pinder 2003). For Debord's nomadic metaphysics, the enemy was 'habitual influences' and the worst of these was the guide book. Just as the Baedeker is symbolised as the silent enemy of feeling and passion in EM Forster's *A Room with a View*, Debord urged people to see the urban world in a fresh, new innocent way to appreciate the nuances of psychic atmospheres. In some respects the situationists were echoing the musical movement of sound ecology, which was moving away from the well-trodden musical paths and trying to encourage people to listen in a fresh, vital way, and applying it to the urban street.

Michel de Certeau extends this idea that walking in the city is an acting out of place – he explains it in terms of direct comparison to language; walking, like language, are both creative acts where you can improvise, make connections, take short cuts, take thousands of decisions in the present (Certeau, 1984: 97). I would like to suggest that spoken memory can also be seen in these terms. In once sense, memory is the home of the sedentary metaphysics. In remembering his childhood, the poet Seamus Heaney writes:

‘I would start with the Greek word omphalos, meaning the navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world, and repeat it, omphalos, omphalos, omphalos, until its blunt and falling music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door.’ (Heaney, 1980: 17)

In his writing, Heaney uses his memory to go back time and time again to the place where he grew up, so in that sense his memory is located in time (his childhood years) and space (a house in Ireland). Yet the memory of his childhood starts with the sound of a pump, and in his poetry the pump becomes a powerful metaphor, or symbol, for the place he goes for inspiration and understanding. It is so entwined and bound up with place that memory as we know it can’t exist without the anchor points or references of place. This is a point that Michael Curry forcefully makes in his recent essay on space and place in which he is critical of debates about spatiality that, he argues, are actually debates about place and their construction (Curry, 2005: 691). Memory has long been intimately related to topography and place. Curry describes the ancient practice, described by Cicero, of memorising complex speeches without using notes. The speaker would create an imaginary palace and fill it with scenes and objects relating to the speech or list to be memorised. In their minds eye, the speaker would move through the palace of imaginative associations, each encounter reminding them of the next thing to be remembered. At first, this might seem to be entirely imaginary exercise, but it entirely relies on symbols, senses and associations with place.

Yet the experience of remembering, which Heaney’s poetry and writing embodies, can also be seen as performative, changing and fluid. Like the water in the pump outside his house, or the movement of the orator through his memory palace, memory is dynamic, it is ‘unmoored, mobile, lacking any fixed position… it is formed (and forms its capital) by *arising from the other’ (Certeau, 1984: 86).* The ability of

spoken memory to make connections with other times, symbols and places make the act of memory a nomadic process – like our consciousness, it is always a work in progress. It can therefore present a multifaceted, nuanced way of seeing the world. It is also fiercely independent, sometimes affirming dominant collective memory, but often opposing it. To take an example which has become well known to oral historians, *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, Alessandro Portelli (a trained lawyer) explores a violent episode in the Second World War where a group of Fascists were killed by Italian anti-Fascist partisans (Portelli, 1997). Portelli compares the memories of the partisans with the dominant post-war interpretations of the event. Because the participants draw on emotions, empathy and individual circumstance Portelli argues that they are more articulate and credible historians compared to the historians who constructed a collective myth of a pacified, almost non-violent resistance. Portelli gains a more sophisticated idea of that time and place by paying attention to messy, confusing and contradictory voices to find out how people actually negotiate competing ideas, beliefs and other, collective memories (Green, 2004: , 41-43). Rather than disregarding memory as subjective and therefore fundamentally flawed as evidence, historians like Portelli show us that the fluidity, the messiness, the 'noisiness' of the memories can be noted, embraced and celebrated as offering insights far beyond what exactly did or didn't happen at a certain time and place.

I hope that these debates about music and noise, space and place, collective history and individual memory might guide us towards a way of creating more nuanced, embodied, complex, multi-sensory ways of experiencing and representing or surroundings. Traditional ways of seeing and listening to things have been challenged by people who have experimented with being sensitive to the noisy, everyday or individual. In particular walking, sound artwork and listening to memory have all been areas that could be seen to be part of the 'nomadic metaphysical' school of thought that is excited by the possibilities of seeing the world in a fluid,

transitory way, although I would argue that experience of place, however subjective and partial, inevitably plays an important role in that process. For the rest of this paper I want to look at some recent experiments in combining these elements (experience of place, memory, walking and sound).

Linking landscape, time and voice

Linked is a sound walk devised by London based artist Graeme Miller, subtitled ‘a landmark in sound, an invisible artwork, a walk’. It is also an outdoor exhibition, a journey into the past and present and an extraordinary use of oral history recordings. The work consists of 20 transmitters, mounted on lampposts along the borders of a recently built six-lane motorway in East London. The M11 link road was opened in 1999 - not long before a system of congestion charging was introduced to keep traffic out of London. It was a controversial road scheme that displaced a thousand people, including the artist. Many locals and road protestors put up a fight which turned into the biggest road protest that the UK had ever seen. The transmitters continuously broadcast recorded testimonies from people who once lived and worked where the motorway now runs. The broadcasts can be heard by carrying a small receiver which is available free of charge from local libraries. For this work, sixty people who lived in or near the houses that were destroyed were interviewed at some depth for the project. Through the words and emotions of the speakers, you are receiving vivid experiences from the past. Meanwhile as you walk through the landscape you are visually and, next to busy roads, aurally confronted by the present.

Miller’s way of sonically recreating a lost community isn’t always straightforward. Although you hear from a great number of people, at times it is as though all meaning has been pulled out completely; interviews are cut up, mixed and diced; excerpts are repeated; bells, chords and sounds are added. For the most part stories are

coherent; some touching and funny anecdotes survive in tact, but periods of the broadcast seem anarchic and even unfathomable. I have discussed these aspects of Linked in detail elsewhere (Butler and Miller 2005:77-88); in this context I just want to suggest that the opaqueness of *Linked* has much in common with the work of another sound artist, Canadian Janet Cardiff's *The missing voice.* The missing voice, a walkman guided walk around the streets of Whitechapel, does not use oral history interviews but presents a series of observations, unanswered questions, bursts of music and elusive fragmentary stories (Cardiff, 1999). Discussing Cardiff's work, David Pinder has argued that the effect is to heighten your senses and the stories mix with your own thoughts and memories as you wander the streets. The sound creates ambiances and effects the senses of self through what Pinder terms urban space-times. He notes that the 'melding' between the artwork and the consciousness of the participant also means that the walk is a highly specific experience that will differ according to the mood and circumstances of each listener on a particular day; 'it will clearly not be experienced by people in the same way' (Pinder 2001:1-19).

Cardiff's work is deliberately confounding, very much a personal exploration of her own psychological response to a strange (to her) environment. The elusiveness of Cardiff's work is, perhaps necessarily, shared by much experimental work from the sound art world. Artists dependent on peer and critical review do not have to appeal to a wide demographic; the pressure to push the boundaries of a medium and break new ground can also serve to make sound artwork quite inaccessible. Until very recently the sound walk concept has mostly remained in the domain of artistic circles.

In New York, however, an interesting has been made to make sound walks more accessible - and commercially viable. Oversampling, Inc. was established by conceptual artist Stephan Crasneanscki. Dubbed 'Soundwalk: audio guides for insiders', the company has produced a series of CD guides exploring different

neighbourhoods in New York. The sound walk concept crosses many spheres, and the difficulty in describing it succinctly is revealed by the concept description on the Oversampling website: ‘a self guided audio walking tour for city neighbourhoods… a new form of entertainment – a cross between music and audio books… Oversampling Inc. has developed a unique palette of sound tracks for public and private space to be experienced on location’ ("Soundwalk" 2005). The walks are all in urban locations. There is a bias in favour rapidly gentrifying artistic districts that the authors knew well, but there are sound walks for other kinds of areas such as Wall Street, Little Italy and Chinatown.

The walks have been a critical and a commercial success and the Soundwalk series has recently developed internationally; there is one for the St-Germain-de-Prés district in Paris and work is almost complete for a boat-based exploration of Varanassi in India. Walks are for sale in New York museums and art galleries such as the Museum of Modern Art and the walks have an unashamedly ‘hip’ profile which has attracted interested from companies like Adidas, that sponsored three sound walks in the Bronx, New York on the subjects of baseball, graffiti and hip-hop. Unlike Linked the walks are continuous, in real time and you literally follow the footsteps of a local ‘insider’ who gives a carefully scripted tour of their neighbourhood. Sometimes other voices are introduced (these are excerpts from genuine interviews with local people), there are sound effects and music plays a very important part of the walk – at times it is much more than a sonic backdrop to the narration. The music also gives a cinematic feel to the walks. This is the introduction to the Bronx graffiti soundwalk, which starts from an overground metro station (figure 1).

Welcome. Now you are on the platform at Simpson Street. My name is BG183, representing Tats Crew in the South Bronx. I am a graffiti artist. Simpson Street is my home. You might even see me walking by and not recognise me, but I still live here. I

grew up here, this is my neighbourhood. I am going to take you on a tour. Enjoy. Now start walking towards the head of the station and remember to take the second turnstile. Remember, follow me, take your time, relax. Move with me. We are going hit the whole neighbourhood; we are going to see the best artists in the world. Tats Crew (music) ("Bronx Soundwalk: Graffiti" 2003)

Although the narration is actually very carefully scripted, the voice – and the narrator – are real, and the experience of a walking in a neighbourhood in someone else's shoes – or trainers - is very powerful. It is powerful because it is multi-sensory and all embracing; moving to the footsteps you can hear, the narrator guides you along platforms, through doors, across roads, in real time as the CD is never turned off. The narratorial style is very warm and embracing – any fears the listener might have about walking through what is often believed to be one of the most notoriously dangerous parts of New York, are quickly dispelled. It is hard to imagine a more embodied way of experiencing someone else's perception of the urban landscape. It is also worth noting that the visual on walks such as these still plays a very important role – it is not jettisoned, but becomes a part of a more combined sensual experience.

Active listening – or interactive listening?

Headphones immediately create a barrier to outsiders and can absorb the listener to such an extent that they can seem like they are in a trance. The Walkman has been described as the ultimate object of contemporary nomadism, a portable soundtrack which gives an intensely private – and therefore removed experience in a public place (Chambers, 2004). Yet time after time this sound walk connected me to my surroundings, rather than set me apart. As I looked at the graffiti above a woman passed by and said to me, 'It is incredible art, isn't it?' I just heard her over the sound

track and had time to reply that it was – reassuring her, perhaps, that I was a graffiti fan rather than the vanguard of some wall cleaning campaign by the city authorities. Or perhaps she was proud of the artwork her community had created, and pleased to see it appreciated. In any case, something remarkable had happened. The recording had encouraged me to stare at a specific wall, to connect to the locality to the extent that my walkmanesque, nomadic, individualistic, isolated journey could be interrupted. By taking me into an unfamiliar territory and deliberately locating the experience, the sound walk had brought about meaningful interaction.

Perhaps the most powerful experience of cultural work in the field is meeting and interacting with other people. A sound walk that uses different voices can go some way to recreating the sensation of a conversation, but of course the communication is only one-way, from the (edited) speaker to the listener. Opportunities for a greater level of interaction with the cultural landscape are present, but latent – very much depending on the inquisitiveness and the courage of the listener. This was one of the comments written on an evaluation questionnaire for Graeme Miller's Linked walk:

Whilst listening to transmitter by the bus stop, a very elderly lady got off a W15 bus. She was scared because she could feel her heart pounding and asked for help carrying her shopping home. My friend and I helped walk her home and met her cat Ginger. She has lived in area for years. It was a wonderful connection of what I was hearing with her current life, and really made the experience much more live and poignant. She was 92. She gave us a huge bar of Cadburys as a thank you. She called us a pair of angels.

If the listener is open to the possibility of this kind of interaction, the result can be this kind of wonderful, unplanned and unplannable experience. On most sound walks they are unusual, but well within the realm of possibility.

The New York sound walks take this latent opportunity to actually interact with local people in a neighbourhood to an even greater level, by trying to plan for it. The sound walk designers deliberately guide you into certain shops or buildings, advising you to be brave and go in, but leave quickly if anyone objects. After doing ten New York walks, I had been led into a hairdressing salon, a gym/boxing ring, onto the roof of some artist's studios, into a butcher's shop, a Chinese medicine shop, several cafes and a very expensive restaurant. On the Bronx walk I was led to Big Daddy Audio, a shop that installs extraordinarily loud car radio systems. Nalasco, the owner, warmly received me. After being given five-minute demonstration of how loud the bass could get, we ended up discussing graffiti memorials and the cleaning up of the Bronx over the years with Nalasco and his partner, who had been long-time residents (figure 2). We had a good chat and the chance to ask some deeper questions about the area and how it had changed was a privilege, and I think Nalasco enjoyed being the host to his neighbourhood too. Of course, I could have wandered in to the shop without a sound walk, but I would have had no other reason to be there. The sound walk acted as a kind of letter of introduction and also served as a useful starting point for conversation. The place of the Bronx, the place of Big Daddy Audio, had been honoured – and as Laura Cameron says, when places are honoured, an opening is created for interconnected and engaged history (Cameron 1997: xv).

Occasionally it is even possible to engineer a meeting between the listener and a recorded voice. On a tour of the meatpacking district in the lower east side of Manhattan (Soundwalk: Meat Packing District 2004). I was instructed to press a buzzer, ignore the incoherent reply and go up three flights of stairs. Opening a door, I found myself inside someone's apartment/art studio – and in a real instant of life becoming art, I found myself face to face with Eve, none other than the narrator of the sound walk I was listening to (figure 3). I took the opportunity of meeting her to

find out about the construction of the walk from her point of view; she said hated the sound of her voice and couldn't listen to it, but enjoyed other sound walks and liked meeting sound walkers. She had a fairly steady flow of people coming in over the last year and enjoyed showing them her artwork. She once had a group of seven German tourists turn up, each with their own headphones – the soundwalk, it seems, doesn't have to be a solitary experience for the walker, or even the narrator. After we spoke, I sat on a cushion and listened to the recorded Eve, from a year ago, describing how she came to move into this apartment and the different kinds of neighbours she has had. While I heard about the intimate detail of her micro-locality, her life, I watched the present Eve move around her apartment, make coffee, answer the telephone. Like at other places on the walk, my senses were delivering information from one place in two times – but this time Eve was there, to help me with my synthesis of it all if I could only ask the right question.

Finding a route through a city

My own research is focused on using oral history to gather experiences and memories of people at riverside locations along one of the most famous landmarks in Britain, the River Thames in London. The presentation of oral history tends to be limited to publishing extracts from transcripts, or playing extracts in a museum context. I wanted to experiment with presenting memories coherently in a spatial context, using some techniques borrowed from sound art practice, and in the process encourage people to encounter parts of the river – and its culture – that they may not have considered exploring before. Nigel Thrift has argued that human geography students should have to make something, and not just write, as human geography is a spatial, as well as cursive activity (Thrift 2004: 98). My research, which was a collaborative PhD studentship between Royal Holloway and the Museum of London, has given me the opportunity to do just that – with funding from the museum, I

recently published two sound walks on 1,000 double CD sets with accompanying walking maps, which can be ordered and downloaded (in MP3 form) from a website (memoryscape.org.uk).

My intention was to try and apply the situationist notion of the ‘derive’ and the alternative pedestrianism suggested by de Certeau to the riverscape, but by incorporating memories of many different people, avoid the isolated observation of the classic flaneur. One of the first hurdles to constructing a walk is to decide on a method of choosing a route – through the landscape as well as the subject matter. After working on the Linked project, I was heavily influenced by Graeme Miller’s approach of using a route way – in his case a motorway – as a way of linking a series of ostensibly unrelated places; an idea that has also been adopted in literature. Authors have made many creative attempts to treat transport routes as destinations in themselves, worthy of comment and study. Edward Platt’s *Leadville: a Biography of the A40* using interviews with residents who live in houses along the road. He knocked on doors along Western Avenue with his tape recorder, catching the words of anyone who was willing to discuss the road and their lives next to it. The kaleidoscopic, even chaotic accumulation of impressions gives us many takes on reality; cumulatively we feel that we somehow ‘know’ the road by the time we reach the end of the book. Iain *Sinclair’s London Orbital: A Walk Around the M25* (Sinclair 2003) and Patrick Wright’s *The River – the Thames in Our Time* (Wright 1999) both use a route to organise reflections. Using the conceit of a journey is a quickly understandable way of organising narrative; it has an aesthetic of its own that can embrace the unusual and the unexpected in a creative way. As it is easily understood, it also lends itself well to research that is constructed for a public audience – something that was very much a part of my brief.

Lefebvre has argued that ‘abstract space’ produced under capitalism is homogeneous and fragmented, whole and broken. (Lefebvre 1991 [1974]) The river Thames certainly seemed to be. Having lived on the Thames in a houseboat for ten years, I was acutely aware that the river in London was an entity in itself with a culture of its own, yet many Londoners seemed to see it as a border, an administrative and cultural dividing line between north and south. Conservation areas and borough boundaries often ended up in the middle of the river. The London Rivers Association (LRA) has been at the vanguard of this movement to give the river a more important and coherent role in urban planning. To quote from a recent LRA report:

‘The opposites that structure the mindsets of the planning and built environment sectors, local/strategic, natural/urban, brownfield/greenfield – and even water/land – seriously handicap our ability to think about urban water spaces and their relationship with the city and beyond. The zones, hierarchies (of policy, plans and strategies), sectoral boxes and checklists that result from, and reinforce this approach effectively undermines the spatial configurations and naturalness of rivers which refuse to conform to the socially constructed lines on plans and in strategies (as many of the annually flooded towns and cities now contend).’ (Munt 2002: 75)

With this in mind, I wanted to find a way of acknowledging the spatial and natural dimensions of the river by developing a more artistic and intuitive approach to structuring my field work. I developed a method of using the current of the river to find my ‘sample’ of river interviewees and physically link their lives up. A float was made out of driftwood and other river-carried material, using a design borrowed from hydrologists that use floats to track currents in rivers and oceans (figure 4). I followed the float for many days, tracking its route through London, and noting where it collided with the bank (or any other interesting thing). In this way I wanted to

experience London from the river, feeling its flow and using a natural phenomenon as a memory path through the modern city.

Many of these collision points became sound points on the walk, as more often than not a potential interviewee would become apparent – it would hit a boat or a property that was owned by someone, or a place where an individual was working or resting, and people were generally willing to be recorded. Usually this was an in-depth interview at their home or place of work at a convenient time. The method presented some severe challenges. Moving at the pace of the river, often in a rowing boat, took a great deal of patience (in some stretches it moved at less than 1/10th of mile an hour, or even flowed backwards with the tide). Some places the float hit seemed so barren that it became a real challenge to find a connection with human culture, but I found that if I waited long enough and looked hard enough a connection could often be made - an old outfall pipe of a disused waterworks led to an interview with a retired water engineer, for example. The flow of the river suggested culturally quiet and noisy points; turns in the river, usually presented me with more collisions, different vistas and encounters with whole families of other floating objects, each with its own unknowable source, story and trajectory. The landscape of the banks of the Thames in London contains some of the most imposing architecture in Britain, as successive political and economic powerhouses were built along the prestigious waterfront (palaces, bridges, parliaments, corporate headquarters). Many of these buildings have such strong historical and visual centres of gravity on the riverscape that they are all but impossible to ignore. Yet the float managed to do so. On long, straight stretches the float would move fast, disregarding royal palaces, whole industries, entire localities. The flow gave me a strange, unfamiliar structure to my beachcombing of river-related memories. It gave me a fresh set of memory places; the latest in a long line of practices that in some way challenge dominant cultural practices associated with national places of memory by providing an alternative;

neighbourhood tours, parish mappings, public art, gardening projects (Till, 2003: 294-296).

The result was a carefully constructed walk three mile walk with 12 different sound points along the route, containing a total of an hour of memories from 14 different people. The sound tracks were also layered with binaural recordings of the river bank – recordings made with a stereo two-part microphone that is placed in each ear of the recorder, which picks up sound in the exactly the same way as the human head. When the binaural recording is listened to with headphones, the result is a startling 'surround sound' – if footsteps are recorded behind you, it will sound as if someone is behind you when you listen. This gives the walk an added temporal dimension, as the listener is hearing the past of the sound recording along the route (complete with rowers, ducks, swans and pushchairs) along with the past of the memories that they are hearing. The idea was to sensitise people to every day sounds and remind the listener that their drift along the river would necessarily be completely different for each person that does it. The walk was also designed to allow time between sound points for people to reflect, listen and experience the river in their own unmediated way.

In artistic terms, this meandering method of collecting memories might be seen as an aural equivalent of American artist Mark Dion's Thames Tate Dig (1999), which witnessed the picking of rubbish on the Thames foreshore with archaeological care, and then its display in a curiosity cabinet in the Tate Modern (Dion and Coles 1999). Another practitioner of this found art is John Bentley, who collected fragments of discarded notes, letters and shopping lists from the pavement in Harrow in London, publishing them in a book which he likened to a museum-case containing a selection of recently excavated literary shards which, seen together, provide a 'tantalisingly incomplete glimpse into the lives of the citizens of Harrow.' (Bentley 2001: 1) In these

works, which are both highly place specific, the unexpected is sought out; the commonplace is dignified as worthy of contemplation; and the act of displaying it to a public becomes a symbolically important act.

Yet my ‘shards’ speak coherently for themselves, and for some the effect can be very powerful. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in any depth the reaction of the people who have tried my walks, but many particularly enjoyed the personal stories that made the landscape more resonant by listening to them in situ. The recordings slowed walkers down, gave people time to consider their surroundings and experience other people’s memories in a more sensitised way. Hearing authentic voices from local people also seemed to make people empathetic towards the community that they listened to, despite their prior assumptions or even antipathy towards, say, houseboat dwellers or West London bungalow owners. As one retired walker wrote in a questionnaire, listening to the voices added ‘interest; diversity; colour; personal perspectives. I learned! In listening, the giant at the core of our city acquired a human face for me’.

Bruce Chatwin’s celebrated book *The Songlines* explores the Australian aboriginal tradition of walking and singing mythic and actual topographies into being. Ian Chambers wonders:

‘Perhaps it still continues to echo inside the miniaturised headphones of modern nomads as the barely remembered traces of a once sacred journey intent on celebrating its presence in a mark, voice, sign, symbol, signature, to be left along the track.’ (Chambers, 2004: 101)

Listening to memories on a walkman in the outside world can actually give us a semblance of this feeling. The acts of voicing and listening to stories seem to easily

entwine with the rhythm of walking and the effect for some can be very powerful, a drifting kind of ompholos. After more than a century of recording the human voice, the stories and myths that have been passed down through generations don't have to be 'barely remembered': locating memories really can make the landscape sing.

The art of social and cultural geography: possibilities for the future

Just as artists have encouraged exploration away from conventional sites of cultural consumption, perhaps they can reveal some exciting possibilities for social and cultural geographers habitually familiar with conventional sites of discourse. At its most basic, a sound walk is a straightforward way of putting geographical information out into the field, to be understood in the context of a location. The idea can be applied to physical geography as much as human geography. Yet sound walks have an added dimension because they can be a 'live' embodied, active, multi-sensory way of understanding geographies in both time and space. The process of creating such work can be just as embodied and active - finding a route through space can be a particularly challenging and creative process, as can listening to the result.

I see no reason why this kind of sound walk work should be the sole preserve of the artist. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the breadth of geography that spans the humanities and natural and social science, geographers are generally very good at working with other disciplines. Some have already forged some inspiring links with artists to try more creative, practice-based endeavours (Battista et al 2005). At Royal Holloway, University of London for example, eight artists were paired up with geographers to work on collaborative projects for an exhibition in the geography department in 2002. Collaborations were not always easy, but sometimes it seemed that the imagined gulf between research/science and the artist was very slight – a description of ethnographic research was redefined as art by the artists, for example

(Driver, 2002: 8). In the longer term, I also wonder if such collaboration has led to more acceptance and encouragement of creative, experimental, even artistic research methods in the department, such as my drifting experiment. In any case, I found that creating a sound walk involved many well-established geographical skills (field work, historical and qualitative research, observation, even map making) and some easily acquired new ones (sound recording, editing, website design). With some creative thinking, I wonder if this work could be extended to become a series of cultural applications for 'hot' new technology (in-car satellite navigation, MP3 players, video playing i-pods, gps-enabled mobile phones and new generations of location aware palm computers) that could make exciting for projects for researchers, students, funders and even commercial sponsors. Cultural geographers are extremely well placed to create material for these new media.

Working at the Museum of London I noticed that archaeologists at the Museum of London record all their finds on a GIS system. It was a snap to see all the finds in a particular street or riverbank you are interested in, or just the ones from certain period or a certain type over an area. Sadly objects in more recent social history collections, including oral history recordings, had not been put on the map. Cultural and historical geographers could do something like this with the more location-based memories, recordings, studies – it could be a kind of cultural GIS, linking maps, objects, thoughts, sights and sounds - simply to make all these things more accessible to any nomadic or sedentary metaphysicist interested in a particular area or place. Of course this work will be severely challenging: how do you document nomadic movements and flows on such a matrix? How can the individual meaningfully negotiate different memory paths? How can the author relinquish control yet design a meaningful experience? The idea of mapping experience or memory would probably make de Certeau spin in his grave – to him the act of map making was inevitably destructive, because it could never capture true experience of

the pedestrian, which was just too infinitely diverse to be simplified graphically. To him, mapmaking exhibited ‘the (voracious) property that the geographical system has of being able to transform action into legibility, but in doing so it causes a way of being in the world to be forgotten’ (Certeau, 1984: 97). But what if maps could be made that cause multiple and different ways of being in the world to be remembered? Could that time have come?

The sound walk is a very flexible conceptual basis for such a map, with a surprisingly long history, and it is likely to rapidly evolve as different disciplines and sectors explore its potential. Just as graffiti has been embraced by the mainstream art market, sound walks are already being jumped on companies interested in promoting brand awareness. As mentioned above, Adidas have sponsored sound walks in the Bronx and in Glasgow Tennents Lager recently commissioned a freely downloadable MP3 walking tour of Glasgow’s music venues, which has been dubbed an ‘iTour’, after the iPod player ("iTour website" 2005; Divine 2005). Computer manufacturers and software developers like Hewlett Packard are currently investing in research and development work for outdoor, mobile computing – including roaming, location-based computer games that can geographically locate players in real time using gps. Content will be varied according to other real-world sensors, such as heart rate, direction and light using bio mapping techniques (Nold 2006). Other companies will be close behind, using location-based media to promote anything from trainers to tourism. But the medium should not left solely for the market to monopolise. At best, this cultural GIS can be used to introduce multiple voices and conflicting readings of the landscape (and those that move and live in it). It can also be an empowering and expressive use of technology for the gazed at (or listened to). Just as simple websites can be constructed by individuals or small groups, sound walks can be made with minimal training and gain easy exposure on the internet. A walk has none of the practical problems associated with exhibiting landscape related conventional

art work or sculpture, because no exhibition space or planning permission is necessary. In the past this has proved to be a serious impediment to community based initiatives that do not stem from local government or the arts establishment (Brown, 2002).

Finally, it is my hope that sound walks, or something like them, could be used as one way to establish better communication between geographical research in the academy and the public. As a medium, the sound walk/wheel/cycle/drive could have an appeal way beyond academic circles. To take one small example, I made a particular effort to get my sound walks into the public domain, making sure that they were available on a website, in local bookshops, museums, libraries and tourist information centres, and publicising the walks in the local press and on local radio. In five months at least 3000 people have looked at the website in a meaningful way, 600 have downloaded or bought the CDs and at least 350 people have actually walked the two hour walks (as opposed to listening at home or online). These may not be enormous figures, but with no marketing budget and a small amount of promotional effort the circulation has grown far beyond the expected readership of most geographical journals or books.

I am quietly pleased that so many people outside the academy have been exposed to something that is definitively introduced as cultural geography. As one commentator put it: ‘In the popular mind it [geography] has almost been forgotten… in the past 40 years or so geography has changed profoundly, and the change has not been widely understood by non-geographers, or indeed even noticed.’ (McCarthy, 2004). The art world, and site-specific media, has the potential to inspire social and cultural geographers to communicate their work to a wider audience - in a way that will really make them notice. It is also an opportunity for social and cultural geographers to welcome and engage with new practitioners, who might experiment

with this kind of medium, into the fold – sound artists, community history and oral history groups for example. As Raphael Samuel has said of history, if cultural geography can be thought of as an activity, rather than a profession, then the number of its practitioners would be legion (Samuel, 1994).

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FIGURES

Figure 1: Tats Cru graffiti seen on the Bronx Soundwalk

Figure 2: Nalasco and his partner in Big Daddy Audio, a part of the Bronx soundwalk

Figure 3: Eve, the narrator of the Meatpacking District Soundwalk

Figure 4: Tthe memoryscape CD design for the ‘drifting’ walk shows the float that was used to find interviewees. It was constructed out of river rubbish found wedged behind my houseboat