

Media Encounters in Dark Ecologies: Soundscapes and Solar-powered Sound Circuits.

Dr J. Milo Taylor

University of Brighton
j.taylor3@brighton.ac.uk

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Extended Abstract

This paper reflects upon recent creative practice, and seeks thereby to discuss contemporary systems of digital sound practices and technologies, a reflection upon encountering digital art in outdoor environments and a consideration of the variable durations experienced by various entities around the work.

Most prominently, a porosity is recognised between humans and contemporary ubiquitous digital media, as and in, ecologies.

Bracketed, for the sake of argument, as cybernetic systems, with inputs, outputs and feedback mechanisms of various forms, systems such as these can also be imagined as spatio-temporal assemblages within behavioural/informational, organic/inorganic and biotic/abiotic flows. A ubiquitous digital artefact, a MacBook for example, while seemingly discrete and sovereign, can also be conceived of as a slowing of material and informational materials, a coagulation of diverse elements into specific forms with more or less temporary durations (De Landa).

Jane Bennett writes of the “life” of rubbish dumps – their oozing, their breathing, their odours and their insensible gaseous emissions. Bennett’s “vital materiality” seeks to draw together people and things more equitably by expanding notions of affect and agency to such assemblages as the previously imagined on-flowing agency of my old laptop as its screen shatters, its ferric components rust and it, in other multifarious other way, is gradually decomposed.

The creative sonic practice provoking these remarks involved the presentation of an outdoor sound installation *Encuentro Electronico (Electronic Encounter)* in Coyoacán, Mexico City 2015. It was presented as one of four works by U.K. based media artists in the group exhibition *Soundscapes UK-MX*¹.

The installation was conceived as a pseudo-ecology enacted in real-time by synthetic agents. To achieve such ends, in the first instance, a collaborative workshop took place wherein participants as co-producers each created a small solar-powered electronic circuit that beeped and chirped in response to light, shade and darkness. These abject electronic devices were consequently partially animated by these ambiently derived behaviours and became uncanny “life-like” sonic characters. 15 very different versions of these were produced collectively forming an environmentally bound collective of digital sounding bodies. Once manufactured, these circuits were

¹ Nicola Woodham, Scanner (Robin Rimbaud) and Richard Crow. Curated by Laura Plana Gracia and hosted as part of the Fonoteca Nacional’s (National Sound Archive) active program of public engagement.

distributed around the historical gardens of the Fonateca and left to fend for themselves, left to their own devices as it were... These 15 circuits were the first set of sounds added to the existing acoustic ecology of the Fonateca.

The second set of sounds were generative - programmed and spatialised according to circadian rhythms. These utterly artificial sounds were produced algorithmically in real-time in open source software. Although derived from computational / behavioural processes, they yet enacted water-like effects, footsteps, electronic birds and insects all being synthetically produced and stochastically composed in time and space.

The sounds were mixed into the ambient level of the gardens and the effect of combining these two sets of sound into the everyday soundscape of Coyoacán was a synthetic sonic syncretism. The installation served to augment the sonic environment with small, “virtual” sound behaviours. Experienced as “as ifs”, these sonic simulacrum – ambient, behavioural and sounding, subtly altered perceptions of place – the synthetic water sounds creating the illusion of trickling streams and water features, which in actuality, were non-existent.

Paper Overview

After providing a more in-depth discussion of the themes introduced above, a conceptual and technical background is introduced discussing Farnell’s influential work on procedural audio and Ralf Schreiber’s work originating cheap and accessible solar sound circuits.

The paper will provide a little background on the contemporary context of Mexico. While the economic, political and social challenges facing the country will be touched upon, the main focus is 4 case studies of related and contemporary Mexican artists: Juan Jose Rivas’ work in the field of hardware hacking and circuit bending, Archangelo Constantini’s media/sound art works, the installation and urban interventions of Marcela Armas and the recent bio-electronic systems of Gilberto Esparza, winner of a Golden Nica (Hybrid Art) Ars Electronica 2015.

A brief description of the works by Woodham, Crow and Rimbaud will then be made and the paper concludes with a collective reflection upon the experience, our work together and thoughts about future projects.

Note to Selectors

While this submission is intended as a formal academic paper containing theoretical discussion around, and critical reflection upon, *Encuentro Electronico* and the *UK-MEX Soundscape Exhibition*, it would be entirely possible to create second iterations of both the circuit building workshop and 8-channel outdoor sound installation for DHRA2016.

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Documentation Examples



Figure 1: Panorama of the garden of the Fonateca Nacional.

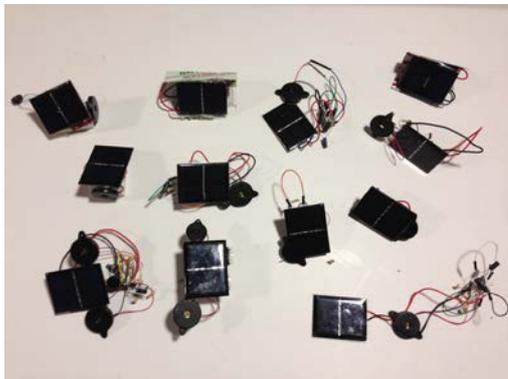


Figure 2: Solar sound circuits co-produced with workshop participants



Figure 3: Photographic documentation of workshop activity.



Figure 3. Collaborative Performance

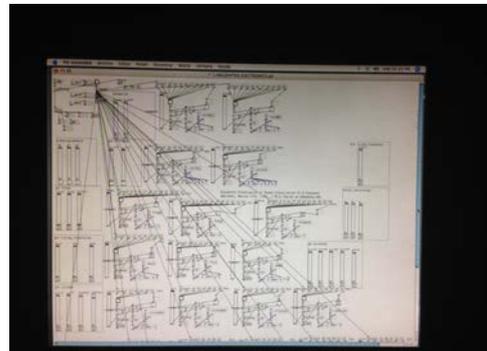


Figure 4: Graphical Programming in Puredata



Figure 5a, b, c, d: Views of the installation installed in the garden of the Fonateca Nacional.