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Sound::Gender::Feminism::Activism: Research and Challenges to the Orthodoxies of Sound Arts

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Abstract

The previously anecdotal lack of a broad engagement by women in sound art and music technology in the UK has been confirmed by the statistical evidence and analysis undertaken by the MusDig project. Initiatives designed to widen participation through access to production resources, both inside and outside formal education, have proved to be qualitatively important but quantitatively ineffective with the figures for women's participation hovering stubbornly around the same percentages. In order for the situation to improve I argue that there needs to be a seismic cultural shift in the critical and contextual frameworks that surround sound art, contemporary music and music technology which will challenge existing orthodoxies and enable a wider range of diversity and of practices to be encompassed within the sounding arts.

Keywords: Sound art; education; gender; participation; feminist and queer theory; culture

The MusDig ethnography in the UK (Born and Devine 2015) has confirmed an existing anecdotally perceived lack of involvement of women in digital art musics, particularly with regard to academic courses in sound arts, music and music technology. In this short article I focus on gender and more specifically on female participation, particularly among young women, at undergraduate level as well as in more informal educational settings. I will also look at how the ongoing research into women's practices in sound arts and experimental music that are developing at London College of Communication (LCC) is informing the sound arts curriculum at BA, MA and postgraduate levels. The aim of this research is, in part, to help us, as staff and students, investigate the issues of gender imbalance within the wider field of sound arts, contemporary music and music technology, as well as to build a critical discourse and framework for the production and reception of 'gendered' work.

Despite the fact that there are many women working in the expanded field of sound arts—to mention some of the best known figures: Hildegard Westerkamp, Susan Phillipz, Pamela Z, Laurie Anderson, Maggi Payne, Laetitia Sonami, Brenda Hutchinson, Sue Tomkins, Cara Tolmie, Iris Garrelfs, Ellen Moffat, Katharine Norman, Jasmeen Patheja, Imogen Stidworthy, Viv Corringham, Salome Voegelin, Tara Rogers, Christina Kubische, Kaffe Matthews, Pauline Oliveros, Else Marie Pade—they are generally under-represented and less visible when it comes to how sound art is presented to the public, that is through histories, canonical texts, concert and festival programmes, in exhibitions of sound art and in university departments. This is of course in line with the way that women in all walks of life are less visible in the public domain.

The inaccessibility of knowledge and information about women artists and their work has further repercussions, not only is there a lack of visibility or recognition for these artists; but the themes, methods and contexts of their work—much of which challenges the current orthodoxies, theoretical underpinnings and aesthetic trends of various branches of sound arts practice—are not accommodated or not able to gain the agency necessary in order to widen

the existing range of contemporary sound arts theory and practice. These absences in turn influence the work that students learn about and, therefore, themselves develop in university courses, as well as the styles of practice that emerging artists feel they have to pursue in order to get their work into the public domain, as well as the choices made by curators, programmers, course tutors, interview panels and so on.

The ongoing research at LCC and beyond into women's practices in sound arts and experimental music aims to challenge this toxic lack of visibility. It is motivated by the desire to educate, create and activate ourselves and others to interrogate and postulate new framings of the histories, theories, orthodoxies and categories of sound arts practice as they are portrayed at the moment. It aims to bring about change. The precise nature and focus of the research varies according to the specific interests of individual researchers but has important elements in common. It focuses on practice—on the work produced and being produced. It uses theoretical frameworks that include feminist and queer theory to interrogate the unique and radical contribution that women artists are making to sound arts practice. Much of this research is also collaborative, informed by and benefiting from the input, work and ideas of many people. I have been working closely with Holly Ingleton, who has just completed a PhD on aspects of feminist sound art, and Irene Revell, curator at Electra¹ but I also want to acknowledge the contributions of Anne Hilde Neset and Lina Dzuverovic, the curators of the Her Noise exhibition². A widening network of researchers in this area is gradually forming as new PhD and MA projects start.

The motivation for the Her Noise exhibition in 2005 emerged from a perceived lack of representation of women sound artists and experimental musicians in the public sphere on the part of the curators. The exhibition was the result of a long process of attempting to redress that balance and make women's work in this area more visible. Once the exhibition ended the curators were concerned about the legacy of their research, as well as trying to maintain some sort of momentum for the project.

In 2008 I conducted a research project within the Sound Arts department at the LCC³, titled 'A suitable job for a woman? Using creative work to challenge perceptions of Sound Arts and Design at LCC and widen participation' (Lane, 2009). The project arose from my observation that, since the start of teaching Sound Arts at LCC in 1998, the type of work produced by female students was significantly different from that produced by male students. One of the overarching aims of the project was to use this research to inform and provoke discussion and debate, on the basis of which the Sound Arts and Design course team could begin to develop strategies through which aspects of equality and diversity might be further embedded into the experience of students on our courses.

The research highlighted a number of interesting issues. While the percentage of female students taking the BA Sound Arts and Design course hovered stubbornly between 12 and 16% between 2004 and 2009, the one-year part-time diploma course in ABC Sound Design and Music Technology, now sadly discontinued, moved between 4 and 41% over the same period. The course team felt that this difference between the two courses was largely to do with age as well as gender, as an LCC Sound arts tutor explained:

Age has much to do with it, as well as gender; i.e. sound art is not on the radar for 18 year girls because of schools' gender bias, whereas it's close enough to 'music' for 18 year old boys to find us online—especially among parents of musical sons who think that sound for film might provide them with an actual job in the future, as opposed to

a straight music course. By age 25 both sexes are as likely as each other to have come across sound art. In fact we then get applications from more women than men, particularly those from a fine art background who have ‘discovered’ sound art, and want to come and study in order to explore sound further. The men seem more musicians turned artists.

This interpretation is confirmed by interviews conducted with students past and present as part of our research, and it correlates with the anecdotal evidence. The same gender imbalance has also generally been reflected in the teaching staff in the department.

Incidentally, the ABC Sound Design and Music Technology course, one year long and less ‘academic’ than others in our degree portfolio, had a more ‘diverse’ student cohort than the BA in other ways than gender. In general it had a higher percentage of students—between 22 and 31% between 2005 and 2009, compared with between 6 and 12% on the BA—declaring themselves ‘non white’. Additionally, a high proportion of ABC students already had a degree—between 10 and 43% over the same time period, as opposed to 0 to 15% on the BA. ABC students were also generally older than the BA students.

At the point of writing, little research in this area was available. One notable exception was Andra McCartney’s 2003 paper, ‘In and out of the sound studio’, which reported on a large research project studying the experiences and working practices of women sound producers in Canada. In this paper, McCartney writes that

As an outsider either “as a women” or “as a composer”, a woman producer or composer may “play” being the exceptional woman, or the stereotypical woman, and/or the “genderless” composer, the technical expert, the audio engineer, the macho technologist. . . . At the same time, not all roles are freely chosen. Sometimes a woman may play these roles “unconsciously”, as a defence, alienating herself from parts of her life experience, as well as from other woman creators.

(McCartney 2003, p. 90)

McCartney also found that although women were not denied access to university, some felt that ‘their compositional approaches were not valued’ in university electroacoustic music courses. This was indeed corroborated by my research.

The other significant finding that was shared by both McCartney’s research and my own was that many women working within sound art and electroacoustic composition seem to have had a significant positive experience with technology and access to role models from a relatively young age. In an earlier paper, McCartney (1995, p. 89) argued that the language women use to describe their work and the sonic discourses in their work ‘suggests some different conceptualisations and desires from those of the mainstream’. Similar observations have been made by Pamela Madsen (2006):

What I have found in the collected works from the Women’s Electroacoustic Listening Room is the trend towards what Barry Truax has sighted in his own works: contextually based compositions, as distinct from those that remain abstract. Many of the works I receive for the Women’s Electroacoustic Listening Room [are] often intimate, inner reflective soundscape compositions and text-based music theatre works.

One of the areas identified for further investigation and action within my department, which arose out of the research we have undertaken, is the development of Gender Studies as part of the sound arts curriculum. It has taken a long time to be able to instigate this move, but it feels like we are finally taking steps towards it. For example, the aforementioned ‘A suitable job for a woman?’ research project was one of the contributing factors to Electra choosing London College of Communication as a home for the Her Noise Archive⁴. At LCC we recognised that the acquisition of the Archive could provide both a context and material for ongoing scholarly and practice based research, teaching, curation, and other forms of dissemination in the broad area of gender and sound arts. We also hoped that this acquisition, and other initiatives of this kind, would ultimately both drive and legitimise the development of further practices, dialogues and public interventions related to feminism and sound arts. Since 2010 we have developed a website that offers an online portal into some of the original materials related to the Her Noise exhibition, including the curators’ own research and some unique video interviews⁵ The website, invigorated by contributions from a series of guest curators and works from students, provides a platform for ongoing, ‘living’ collection, dissemination and research—in contrast to the physical Her Noise Archive, which is essentially closed and finite.

For the last five years, we have made greater creative use of the Archive by asking students on the MA Sound Arts at LCC to produce work in response to the Archive in the initial part of their course. In order to do this they have variously to engage with the aesthetics, issues and politics of ‘orthodox’ sound art practices, archiving and feminism, positioning themselves as they develop their work. This has provided a political, methodological and aesthetic challenge that, in some cases, has changed the direction of their practice.

Recently, from 2014, we have also developed a new curriculum for BA Sound Arts students. Undergraduates studying literature, sociology, anthropology or maybe even fine art are likely to have to engage with feminist theory and criticism. I believe that at present, we are alone in the UK in introducing these subjects into a practice-based sound arts course. We have also tried to develop and foster ideas, debate and discussion outside the LCC. In 2012 we collaborated with Tate to produce ‘Her Noise: Feminisms and the Sonic’ at Tate Modern⁶. This three-day event investigated feminist discourses in sound and music through a programme of talks, performances, discussions and film screenings. It was followed up in 2013 with ‘Vocal Folds’, an international symposium organised in collaboration with Ny Musikk and the National Museum of Norway⁷. The symposium was inspired by the Her Noise Archive, some of which was included in the Museum as part of the ‘I Wish I Were a Song’ exhibition, which explored the female voice through performances, talks and live music.

We have, then, introduced and led projects responding to the Her Noise Archive with fine arts students from Norway and Zurich. In 2012 we also initiated ‘Sound::Gender::Feminism::Activism’ a postgraduate event that focused on the role of gender in sound-based arts and experimental musics, with the aim of continuing and expanding the broad discussion and further research related to feminism and sound, as well as initiating a network of researchers and practitioners working in these areas. The event brought together a range of academics, artists, musicians, engineers and music journalists, who were invited to share their working interests and concerns. In October 2014 the second ‘Sound::Gender::Feminism::Activism’ (SGFA2014) research event at LCC stretched over

three days and involved presenters from four continents. All of these activities are archived on the Her Noise website⁸

In September 2014, with the aid of AHRC funding, we delivered a two-day workshop entitled 'Here are some scores for you to do'. This was an intensive exploration of feminist performance scores focused around three works: Pauline Oliveros's 'To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of Their Desperation' (1970), Annea Lockwood's 'Piano Transplants' (1968–), and 'Reverse Karaoke' by Kim Gordon and Jutta Koether—one of the original works commissioned for the Her Noise exhibition in 2005. Through a number of modalities, including reading, listening, watching, discussion, play and performance, we collaborated in order to try and understand and frame the feminist score as a social event.

The university curricula hosted by LCC, and the more public facing events we are engaged in, arise out of, generate and contribute to our research. Current research areas at LCC could be broadly identified to include: investigation of what makes a feminist sound art practice, with particular reference to experimental scores; notions of playfulness, embedded critique, and social and political comment; the creation of new and alternative realities, and the use of the artist's own voice in sound art and experimental music; the importance of the archive in feminist sound art; investigation of the technological discourses related to specific practices, including field recording and synthesis; and the contexts for the production of work by women composers and sound artists.

This research has moved the focus away from the Archive and its active curation. Although we do get asked to exhibit aspects of Her Noise at galleries and festivals, we are more concerned with developing the opportunity to create new work, contexts, exhibitions and formats for sharing and developing this research. Aims vary from researcher to researcher, but generally they include developing a critical framework, informed by feminism, gender and queer theory through which works can be made and understood in new and more radical ways, as well as developing perspectives that can challenge and enrich the common assumptions and orthodoxies of sound arts practice, history, theory and curation. Our common project will make the unique contributions of women in sound arts more visible and audible. It will create resources for further research and study, and empower women sound artists to develop work that reflects their lives and experience. It will prise open new possible spaces for that work. It will stimulate a rethinking of the existing histories and theories of sound arts practices, and in all these ways, hopefully, inspire a new generation of scholars and artists.

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Notes

¹ Electra is a London based contemporary art organisation which curates, commissions and produces projects by artists working across sound, moving image, performance and the visual arts. Electra was originally set up to curate the Her Noise exhibition (see note 2).

² 'Her Noise' was an exhibition that took place at South London Gallery, Tate Modern and Goethe Institute in 2005.

³ London College of Communication (formerly London College of Printing) is one of the colleges of the University of the Arts, London.

⁴ The physical Her Noise Archive is housed at the University of the Arts London Archives and Special Collections Centre at London College of Communication (LCC). It includes over 60 videos, 300 audio recordings, 40 books and catalogues and 250 fanzines as well as administrative records related to and collected for the Her Noise exhibition. An expanded online archive includes subsequent responses and curations and is available at hernoise.org.

⁵ <http://www.hernoise.org>

⁶ <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/eventseries/her-noise-feminisms-and-sonic>.

⁷ <http://nymusikk.no/no/artikler/foto-her-noise>.

⁸ <http://hernoise.org/interactions/soundgenderfeminismactivism/overview/>.