

Sonic Casting

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When we think of casting, your most immediate thought may turn towards sculpture, something in the physical realm primarily for tactility and vision. So then, what is it to cast a sound, how can a sound become the aural persona of a site? Barry Blesser and Linda-ruth Salter discuss what it is to be an aural architect in their book 'Spaces speak: Are you listening?'. But what if sound doesn't need an aural architect, can sound act as an autonomous entity and still remain a companion to the vessel in which it escapes from? Perhaps sound has its own life and it is up to us to retain that life through a re-casting of its former presence. If we can care for sound in its dormancy, we can re-activate that aural presence and think of its presence in its dormant state, waiting patiently to be listened to or to be ignored. I am talking about a sonic ontology, but what if we were to think of sound in a relationship to its vessel, momentarily afforded escape and then snapped back, much like an elastic band, maybe its tied to its physical entity like a familiar.

The audio paper will draw together a discussion on sound's autonomy through a case study titled *Tracing Ghosts* in collaboration with artist Samuel Barry in which performances with gesso are used as tools to conserve and cast sound through a transference of vessels. Gesso as a material has a rich contextual history within painting but here gesso is being recognised for its aural allure and its behaviour as an organic material.

I think I should start with some stated definitions. The definitions of some key words that are relative to this discussion, definitions I wish to undefine and attempt to make fluid, rather than the static state they currently hold, are as follows;

Cast: In a noun form, cast is considered as 'An object made by shaping molten metal or similar material in a mould.' – Online at Oxforddictionaries.com
'bronze casts of the sculpture'

Gesso: A definition given by Julie Caves on Jackson's art, an online art materials retailer that also features a series of tutorials for techniques and material use states: "*Pronounced with a soft g like gypsy or George. From the Italian for gypsum, a major component. This thick white liquid is primarily used as a [ground](#) for painting but can also be used to build up areas for carving on frames and is used underneath gilding.*"

Ontology: Given as an answer to Fatimah Petra's question '*Can anyone define Epistemology/Ontology? I'm still puzzled on this. Can anyone define it in simple English*'? Which I found available on research gate.net. "*Ontology which indicates the study of how something existed, its nature, or being, usually answers the question 'what'*". Provided by Hatem Maraqa from Hebron University.

And I think perhaps the last definition that is relative to this paper is Aural Architect. An aural architect first termed by Barry Blesser and Linda-ruth Salter in their book *Spaces speak: Are you listening?* Refers to the experience of space in terms of behaviour and emotions received by

hearing as opposed to acoustic architecture which focuses on the physical effect of objects, people within a space received by sound.

Why these definitions may be important to note is due to the argument I will present through a case study of an on-going project between myself and the artist Samuel Barry titled *Tracing Ghosts*. The project's attempt is to find new methodologies and approaches towards the documentation and conservation of live art. If the sound I will be discussing here is considered 'live' although represented through this recording, then the argument I am pursuing through this project is for 'Sonic Ontology' as noted by Christopher Cox in his essay *Sonic Philosophy* and for the verb 'Sonic Casting'.

The most appropriate place to start is by dissecting the term casting. Given the definition I mentioned earlier, we may be prone to thinking of casting as relating to the physical realm inclusive of tactility and vision. 'To cast an object' 'She cast her eyes across the room'. If there are any medical practitioners' listening, then casting may be thought of as moulded to the shape of a limb that is broken. Used as a support to protect the damage of bodies. Perhaps, we should think more like medical practitioners, can a cast be considered as a support and if that is the case than the act or the verb of 'sonic casting' could be considered as a support for sound. I first began to think of 'sonic casting' much like the physical act of casting within which the 'sonic cast' would be a mould of sound within a space but I am now starting to think of this in terms of its medical definition: a 'sonic cast' being the act of a sound being supported through the vessels in which it is released from in a space. So then, the casting of sound may intend to actively consider its presence within a space and in this consider how the sound can be represented within spaces to sustain itself.

The act of this casting process is represented through, I believe, the aural architect whom casts sound not necessarily just for the bodies who experience that site but for the sake of the materials in which act as the vessels for sound's presence.

In myself and Samuel's 'Tracing Ghosts' project, we are using performance as a methodology to reconsider the documentation and conservation of live art. Perhaps worried of the implications of live art's documentation and conservation through static media one such example, being photographic material, remnants of performances and even video media as an access to performance through the past. We wish instead to explore an active documentation and conservation of live art through performance in the re-interpretation or re-configuration of its first instance. Of course, we understand the value of the static material and so have not stopped this process either, which is made more obvious on our on-going research catalogue, but we want to make sure that what we are presenting are not just traces of past events but diagrammatic structures that can spill off into new directions.

So then, let's talk about gesso. I have used gesso in various ways throughout my practice as a primer for painting much like its considered definition. However, in using gesso for painting, I was always thinking of painting in terms of its aural value. Through my wanting to listen to the sound of paint drying. Probably like most artists that work with sound, I had a frustration against the visual and how it has permeated throughout art history. I even worked on a series of podcasts in the summer with other artists, researchers and writers entitled 'The Dominant Eye' to explore the hierarchies of the senses. It was through this project that I was able to come to terms with my visual awareness and not feel so guilty about my un-denying visual allure to materials. Instead, I now think of how all the senses can work together. This has brought me to my thinking and understanding of myself and Samuel's research now. We are still using gesso as a material to explore aural considerations, but it is no longer used as a support for painting, we

have been making casts of gessos that are like delicate pieces of porcelain paper and using our bodies to cast sound through the gesso. These gesso casts act as the vessel for sound to emit from, they are not the sound itself but the companion or home for sound. If we begin to think of gesso in these terms, then we cannot just regard its use as an artistic material but how the substance has evolved over time. Gesso, consisting usually of rabbit skin glue or hide glue and chalk which is formed from calcium carbonate is the hybrid of two organic structures. The body (being the rabbit) and the earth (being the chalk). Taking it further, calcium carbonate is a valuable element within a variety of material for example, the coating of tablets, an ingredient in cement, calcite (a crystal known for its properties in energy) and many forms of seashells. So, it is not implausible that gesso could be considered as a home for sound as its material structure has often been a home of sorts.

Which brings us to ask, how can sound be considered as a singular entity to be cast in the first place? As the familiar saying goes, the cast is only as good as the original? When we think of objects we often describe them in terms of their qualitative values such as; the cup appears white but when we describe objects through their conditional values things start to puncture the vessel. For instance, radiators are deceptive objects for we understand them for their warmth, but they appear as cold objects through their material presence. This is due to our collective history of materials and how our mind registers the feeling of materials and perhaps the sounds of materials through our eyes. However, unlike the material perception of an object, the object needs an action in order to punctuate and produce sound. This action does not necessarily need to be produced by a living entity it could be produced by other circumstances such as wind, temperature and so on. Tactility and the visual can be disrupted on an object (vessel) through an action but this does not exemplify their characteristics before the action. All objects have their own set of frequencies and timbres, but they remain mute until the action. Here we are discussing sound's sounding as a combination of two ingredients, the vessel in its mute form and the action which releases it, the role of the aural architect. But just before we begin to examine the aural architect's role and persona, let's mention how sound as a singular entity is received. As mentioned by Marcel Cobussen, Holger Schulze, Vincent Meelberg - The ear's focus is on process, on objects and events existing in time. A sonic materialism is a temporal materialism, grounded in a contingent encounter of listening – contingent, as Voegelin connects this sonic materialism or sonic reality to the invention and appreciation of possibilities (what things *could be* instead of what they *are*).

These possibilities or rather 'what things could be' could be argued as one of the many roles of the aural architect. As mentioned earlier, the aural architect unlike the acoustic architect is not concerned with the physicality of sound but the behavioural effects received by listening. The aural architect therefore does not try to state what sound is or does as that would deny its ontological status, instead they register sound's ability to cause behavioural effects. The aural architect is not termed by Blesser and Salter as strictly a person, the aural architect could also refer to other living and non-living entity's that could enact this behavioural response through sound. For example, the window act's as a divider or mirror for sound, and although usually described in acoustic values as a 'block' it could also be received as a device to accentuate quietness. We are two of the aural architects in our project Tracing Ghosts. Using the gesso in its solidified form, performing as we are performing now, releasing sound from its home to be received. The aural architect is the action, the second ingredient needed to release sound from its mute state. This transference of sound from the vessel outwards is then transferred to the listener whom creates another home for sound.

So then, to bring us full circle like the gesso in the ability to reconjure new forms of homes, to be re-liquified and sound's ability to transfer from vessel to vessel and then back again, let's end on sonic casting. If the cast is considered as a support for sound (the gesso or the home in this case)

and the aural architect is the action to release sound from its support, then ‘sonic casting’ is a consequence of the latter. An act of sonic casting is to accumulate fragments of a site through its reforming in the vessel.

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Biography

Siân Lyn Hutchings (b. 1994) is an artist currently completing her Master of Fine Arts at Northumbria University. Siân’s practice is grounded in understanding environments through ‘active listening’. Her work approaches experience through an equality of the senses, working on sites as an aural architect. Through her work, Siân aims to highlight the importance of sonic understanding, acoustic ecologies, the methods in which ephemeral work could be conserved and how we can navigate experience through a multitude of senses beyond the West’s ocular-centric lens. Her work is presented through performances, writings, workshops and discussions, a recent series of podcasts can be found on sonicstudies.org.

The on-going development of *Tracing Ghosts* can be accessed through this link.

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/520252/520253>

Samuel Barry (b.1989) is an artist currently completing his Master of Fine Arts at Northumbria University. Samuel’s work creates attempts to map conversations of diachronic structures versus episodic structures whilst also acknowledging notions of *slippage and* performed narratives of self. The notion of event structures and the formations of *ruptures* appear throughout the work too, this creates a space for dissemination of research and a closer inspection of both live institutional learning and its cross pollination with groups of bodies. A primary interest is in the behaviour, transfer and dispersion of arts-based practices.