# AURALITY OF OBJECTS

'Residual Matter'

'Chair'



'Aurality of Objects' is an investigation into the aural history of objects. It questions whether or not being sensitized to the echoes of fabrication of an object fosters a more holistic understanding of, and responsibility for, the production of an object on a more visceral level. The work explores the dynamism between the physical and aural outcomes of objects.

## The Phases of the Project

Phase One of the research, 'Aurality of Objects - Residual Matter', took place in 2010, in collaboration with Justin Bennett, a British digital sound artist living in The Hague, and investigated this relationship specifically within a theatre context.

Phase Two of the research, 'Aurality of Objects – Chair', is the current research activity, explored in collaboration with Gregg Fisher, senior lecturer in Theatre Sound Design at CSSD. It explores the research question further by applying it more widely to objects that people in general interact with on a daily basis outside of the theatre context.

## A Starting Point

The catalyst for the research project 'Aurality of Objects' was the International Theatre Noise Conference that took place at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, London, 2009.

As a lecturer in BA Theatre Practice at RCSSD, Freelance Sculptor and Prop maker, I have spent much of my life working surrounded by the noise of production workshops. I was therefore acutely aware that the issue of noise in relation to Theatre, specifically in relation to prop-making, was relevant, and wanted to represent this aspect at the conference.

The workshop environment of the prop-maker, the place that the prop-making practitioner 'lives', is an environment subject to, the daily barrage of the production noises of manufacturing. Methodical pounding, searing grinding, rhythmic moaning and whining, occasionally punctuated by jarring shrieks at piercing pitch tearing through the workshop. Machines wrestle to cut and manipulate unyielding materials alongside the background hiss of compressors, groans of extractors and the occasional incongruous radio extracts looming out of the periodic lulls in production. In short, the workshop, the 'birth place' of objects, can be deafening.

I was aware that the research resonated with the work of Luigi Russolo, the

Italian composer and painter from the Futurist movement, now considered one of the first theorists of electronic music, who, in his excitement and enthusiasm for the new mechanical age at the start of the 20th century, designed and built his sound generators, 'intonorumori' that embraced and celebrated mechanical and production noise from the modern world.

In his 1913 manifesto, 'Art Of Noises' ('L'arte dei rumori') he stated the following:

> *We will delight in distinguishing the eddying of water, of air and gas in metal pipes, the muttering of motors that breathe and pulse with an indisputable animality, the throbbing of valves, the bustle of pistons, the shrieks of mechanical saws, the jolting of trams on the tracks, the cracking of whips, the flapping of awnings and flags. We will amuse ourselves by orchestrating together in our imagination the din of rolling shop shutters, slamming doors, the varied hubbub of train stations, iron works, thread mills, printing presses, electrical plants and subways*.

In developing the 'intonorumori', Rusollo was interested in recreating mechanical noise to create a new understanding of sound, music and composition. In contrast, 'Aurality of Objects' aims to create a new understanding of the object itself that created the sounds. It is the shared concept of recognizing and valuing and recycling 'industrial waste' noise that makes Russolo's work influential to the project. As a sculptor and prop-maker, the research possibilities of sound were relatively new to me, so I was drawn to the artists and to a period when sound was first being explored in this way.

In contrast to the sonic activity within the workshop's productive environment, the physical objects that emerge are conspicuously silent. They show no evidence of the extreme aural and physical journey they have endured to come into being. They emerge from the workshops silent, with no trace of what has become their now secret, hidden and often painfully loud, manufacturing process. They become the inanimate objects required for a production, their aural history a distant and secret memory.

It is the relationship between the objects' aural past and physical visual outcome that 'Aurality of Objects' explores.

## Phase 1: Aurality of Objects - Residual Matter

'Residual Matter' captured and recycled the raw noise produced in the manufacture of a 'prop object' for performance. It considered what value this previously wasted by-product might have. It questioned whether objects might carry within them some trace of their creation noise, perhaps as a memory, and whether this could have a bearing on the final state of an object's existence. It asked:

- Could the energy expended during their conception have any relation to how we perceive the objects?
- What if we were able, somehow, to become sensitized to this energy, and to be able to perceive it?
- What would each object's birth noise sound like and how would it offer us a more holistic understanding of the objects?
- Would being sensitized to these echoes of fabrication foster a responsibility for the object's manufacture on a more visceral level?

The work aimed to explore the dynamism between the visual and aural outcomes. In order to explore the questions raised, this practice-based research required the production of a prop object.

A prop would ordinarily originate from a text, and be created to support and further a narrative. It is often required to be a version of a real object, an illusion of reality, suggesting and convincing of its authenticity. In this case the research concept became the narrative, and the object took the form of a hand-held, mythical musical instrument, implying that it could be played, whereas in fact, as a prop, it was an inanimate, mute item.

The evolution of the object's form and aesthetic explored, referenced and collaged together images from the anatomy of the inner ear, elements of musical instruments and aspects of Victorian hearing devices. The resulting 'instrument' comprised of a 'furred, toothed bag', reminiscent of a hair cell, feeding a ceramic horn via brass tubing, with strings spanning across its curved form.

Due to the illusionary aspect of the prop as an object in performance, and the aim of the research to explore the objects' hidden 'aural life', an influence in its design came from the Surrealist aesthetic of the 1920s. This seemed suitable as the work of the Surrealists resonated with previous imagery and research I had undertaken, and because of the conceptual similarities between the notion of 'residual matter' revealing an object's secret emotional and aural history. It was their interest, in the then new and groundbreaking work of Sigmund Freud, and his theories relating to the subconscious, that had led the Surrealists to explore the concept of revealing the unconscious and integrating it with the rational world.

Another influence that resonated with the research questions being raised was the novel *The Famished Road* by Nigerian writer Ben Okri, which explores the parallel worlds of existence, through a child who sidesteps death, and exists both in the physical world and the spirit world simultaneously.

## Process

During the manufacturing of the object the noises produced were chronologically recorded and logged. When the fabrication was complete, the raw noises pertaining to each process were passed on, with an image of the

object, to the digital sound artist Justin Bennett, in the Hague, who was then invited to respond to the object by interpreting and composing a 'birth soundtrack' for it from the raw noise collected.

Due to the variety of materials and processes that are used in the production of an object, the raw noises will vary, as will the response that the digital sound artist has to them, and therefore the resulting birth composition of an object will vary and be unique to that object.

Justin was given free rein to respond to the sounds and object in any way he wished. It was an important part of the collaborative process that he brought his own creative process to the project and offered an individual response. It also meant that the resulting 'birth symphony' would be unknown to me, until its completion in The Hague and return to London. It was intriguing to not know what was going to be returned and what the object was going to sound like.

The object's physical form was delicate and feminine. The horn and toothed bag had sexual undertones, whilst the overall aesthetic was suggestive of having come from the Victorian period. Despite having, in some respects, a sinister edge to its visual language, the object remained quite beautiful and with a sensitive fragility.

The soundtrack returned. And for the first time the object and its birth track were together. The results were extraordinary.

The soundtrack started out with quite a literal interpretation of the sounds, and one could pick out certain process noises. As the composition progressed it became increasingly complex and somewhat ominous. At times it became almost unpleasant and at other times entered a primordial, animalistic world. On occasion it became threatening, and as its intensity grew, so did the contrast between the aural outcome and the visual outcome of the object.

In terms of answering the research questions 'Residual Matter' had raised, it now seemed that by considering the previously wasted aural by-product of production and becoming aware of the object's aural history, it could offer us a more holistic understanding of the object and how we perceive it. After experiencing the object along with its birth symphony it did alter one's relationship to it, and gave a sense that, having now become sensitized to its creation noises, the object did contain a memory of its previously subconscious creation sounds.

## Outcomes

The work was presented in its first form in March 2010 at Shunt, under London Bridge. It was important to ensure that the object's visual allure didn't overpower the soundscape, and so it was decided not to have the object fully on show, but to present a suggestion of it within the aural outcome.

The object was hidden within in a black cylindrical hood and suspended high from the apex of one of the underground arches in the vault spaces. It was

back-lit so as to partly obscure it and to project the object's shadow onto the ground, within a circular pool of light, created by the hood. The birth track was played over four carefully placed speakers to envelop the space.

The installation at Shunt also included the development sketches and other preparatory work leading up to the creation of the object, so one could experience its physical journey of coming into being in conjunction with the aural journey.

In its second incarnation at the Theatre Noise Conference at CSSD in April, the installation became more minimal. The preparatory work explaining the physical development of the object was put to one side, and the object was once more placed in the hood, which was now cocooned in a black synthetic fur, so as to produce a feathered edge to the shadow. The shadow was projected onto the floor and on this occasion the space was blacked out completely. It was only accessible by first traveling round a dark curtained corridor which skirted around the central area containing the shadow. One could hear 'something' ominous on the other side of the curtain as one traveled round the labyrinthine passage, but had to endure the suspense and intrigue of the journey before being able to engage with the full experience of the installation. Surprisingly, once in the main space, despite the sounds being quite loud and uncomfortable on approach, the experience became for many an immersive and contemplative experience.

The Respondent at the conference, Bruce R Smith, Dean's Professor of English at the University of Southern California (USC) and professor in UCS's School of Theatre, made the following comments after having spent some time in the installation.

> *You come in at the furthest point from the door that you entered and what you see projected on the floor is a circle of light that is coming from above and the shadow of a very interesting creation … I thought about lying down and rolling across the floor into the light. I thought about just sitting where I was, and letting the sound fill me and then moving into the light. The point is it was moving out of the darkness into the light, I did feel there was something teleological about it, but I found myself moving, wanting to move, and allowing myself to do this around the edges of the light as I listened to the sound, so it was that kind of liminal space where that kind of fuzzy penumbra [is] that I found it very … comforting is not the right word. It was stimulating, inspiring, provocative, to walk that line.*

Much of the feedback regarding the installation at the conference discussed the relationships and potential dominance of visual stimuli over aural stimuli when responding to the work, and the delicate balance between them.

The third incarnation of the work was presented at Deptford X in London, as part of 'Corridor', a collaborative event with London-based artists Amanda Francis and Paul Jones. The work was situated within the lower regions of the old Deptford Library.

The interconnecting installations explored the concept of 'a corridor' as a 'passage, space or time between'. It became analogous with the contributing artists' creative journey of thought into matter. Unknown and filled with anticipation, it explored the darkness which envelops all that is usually seen, and allows those things often unseen and unheard to emerge.

In 'Corridor', the object and soundscape became housed and secreted within the walls of a newly created corridor that spurred off an existing corridor. On this occasion the darkness was all encompassing. The corridor itself, narrowing, twisting and turning, became disorientating and it was combined with industrial strip lighting from above which mimicked the otherworldliness of sodium streetlights, negating any colour brought into the space. The object was only visible through an almost imperceptible slit in the pitch darkness at the end of the corridor, and could only be fleetingly glimpsed by straining to see it as a dimly lit reflection. The aural experience whilst traveling along the corridor was so intense that some people didn't make it to the end of the corridor to see the object, and so only experienced its aural manifestation and journey.

Having explored the research questions via the installation works up to this point, it had become increasingly apparent to me that having an understanding and a sensitization to an object's aural history did provide a more holistic representation of its existence and more understanding of it. It led to questioning the production of objects outside of the performance theatre environment and so on to everyday objects. It led to 'Aurality of Objects – Chair.'

## Phase 2: Aurality of Objects – Chair

'Aurality of Objects' – Chair' is the current ongoing research activity, in collaboration with Gregg Fisher, composer and Senior Lecturer in Theatre Sound Design at CSSD.

### Origins

I had had the experience of sitting in a large reception area in a Central London hotel, with just the hushed voices of a few residents offering a low background murmur to a quiet, sedate environment. Placed around the lounge were a series of large-based, broad-shaded table lamps. They sat solidly and silently. They neither overstated, nor understated their presence acting, as required, as representatives of the bland acceptability of corporate style by their host.

Their consistent regularity and flawless symmetry suggested a root in the processes of mass production. I wanted to personally become, and have their environment become, sensitized to their genesis as organic material and manufactured production objects, with all of the history and even the political and social contexts implied by their existence (and materials) at that time and in that particular place. I wanted their 'birth symphonies', or perhaps some more encompassing and metaphorical sonic construct, to cry out through the lobby. After exploring the research questions and considering the outcomes of 'Aurality of Objects—Residual Matter' I longed for a more holistic understanding of what it was to share their environment and to share their being.

In order to examine the value and impact of an object's aural history further, Gregg and I decided to focus on an everyday object familiar in most contexts to most people. A chair seemed to be one of the most familiar, iconic and basic forms to explore. Rather than, as previously, creating an object to explore the research questions, we would now be applying the research questions to a commercially manufactured object.

For 'Aurality of Objects – Chair', we would be locating a manufactured oak chair and tracking it back to its origins, to the timber grown in the forest. Due to time and budget constraints, we required sourcing a chair that was manufactured in Britain, with the timber sourced from a British saw mill and woodland.

Not long into initial contact with the chair manufacturing industry in the UK, it became apparent that the entire industry had suffered economically, and the project was therefore becoming engaged with issues involving globalization, the politics of mass production and the decline of British industry. Many of the wooden chair manufacturers were no longer in business and those still functioning were now dependent on importing frames from countries such as Poland and Romania, and elsewhere around the world.

We did, however, locate a company, Stewart Lindford, in High Wycombe, UK, that still manufactures timber chairs. High Wycombe itself has been synonymous with furniture and specifically chair manufacturing since the start of the 19$^{th}$ century. Furniture factories were set up all over the town and by 1875 it was estimated that there were 4,700 chairs made per day. High Wycombe was surrounded by forests of beech, elm and ash trees, and was ideally suited to the production of simple chairs for domestic and public buildings. The surrounding forests were also home to the Bodgers, highly skilled itinerant wood-turners, who worked in the beech woods on the chalk hills of the Chilterns. They worked traditionally on ancient pole-lathes, worked by a foot treadle, and specialized in turning wood to produce legs for chairs. The Windsor chair being most well known. Their equipment was so easy to move and set up that it was easier to go to the timber in the forests and work it in situ than to transport it to a workshop. The legs were transported by horse and cart to local furniture factories where the seats and backs were

added. They were then packed for delivery to London.

On visiting the company we were able to select an oak chair to base the project . Stewart Lindford produce high quality chairs of various designs, and it was hard not to be seduced by the more ornate pieces. However, we required a simple iconic chair aesthetic and settled on a simple ladder back chair with an adzed seat. The style of chair a child might draw.

We were very fortunate that Stewart Linford engaged with the project unreservedly, and we were then able to make contact with and visit Vastern Timber, the saw Mill that had processed the timber, and subsequently the forest in Wiltshire, where the oak tree had grown, to collect the sounds and images required.

Gregg is now working with the archived sounds and is composing a piece of work from the aural material collected in response to the objects journey. The physical archive of collected materials will also manifest itself as sculptural artifact. We have recently been joined by Pavel Legankov, London based Russian photographer who will retrospectively photographically archive the workforce of the individuals who have been involved in the chairs production process.

In answering the research questions, the projects strongly suggest that there is value in the wasted aural energy expended in the production of objects, and that exposure to that energy – or interpretations of that energy-- does have an influence on how we perceive them and our understanding of them. Becoming sensitized to these echoes of fabrication does foster a responsibility for the object's manufacture on a more visceral level, and being exposed to the aural histories of objects does make our interaction with them very different.

'Chair' lives within a relatively traditional and environmentally friendly world. The manufacturers of the chair work to support sustainable forestry, a fairly paid workforce and a high quality product, and to perpetuate and preserve traditional craftsmanship and techniques. However this very particular approach raises other questions about objects we use and interact with daily. It seems appropriate for 'Aurality of Objects' in future incarnations to explore the darker world of the mass production of objects, the environmental impact of production and the impact of globalization on industry. The intensity of the aural histories of objects can be extremely powerful, as we have discovered, and entering the less environmentally friendly world will be interesting and allow us to pursue the research question more extensively.

Having explored the research questions within 'Aurality of Objects', up to this point, it has become virtually impossible to enter a room without being aware, that despite the presence of the objects within it being apparently silent, each contains their particular 'voice' that is imperceptible to the human ear. Potentially the room is ringing with a symphony of aural histories. To fully

develop the ability to sense these 'voices' would make most contemporary environments unbearable to inhabit.

**Composer's Notes.**

The collection of natural found sounds and their manipulation electronically into building blocks for compositional or theatrical use has been a tool of experimental and avant garde composers at least since the late 1940's. As technology has progressed, so has our ability to theorize and realize the granular substance of noise and sound, working almost at a molecular level to deconstruct the substance of our aural worlds. Deconstruction of collected sound samples, and reconstruction within a dramaturgical/compositional framework forms the theoretical basis of the current work and, ultimately, it is anticipated that all sounds in the final composition will have been derived from the field recordings. This is not to say that the final sound palette will be 'representational' or even recognizable as having been thus derived, nor is the work presently conceived as some sort of linear 'narrative' of the object's life cycle. As a theatre sound designer and composer for performance, I always have the aim to propel (or sometimes frame) the dramaturgical intent of the work both through the use of sound, soundscape and music (content design), and careful consideration of the way in which the audience experiences the work (production design). From my perspective, the dramaturgical intent (indeed the 'research question) of 'Aurality of Objects – Chair' is to attempt to aurally convey some truths about the innate energy force, histories and contexts of objects, thereby altering the relationship between object and the observer/user. The first step is to select and capture certain sonic elements of the object's forest origins, milling and fabrication. Those collected elements, much like the chair itself, will be manipulated and fashioned into a 'score' which will reflect my personal dramaturgical interpretations. I am mindful of the possibly analogies between the chair as 'object' and the soundscore as 'object' and this, in fact, becomes part of a secondary research question for consideration, particularly in terms of the 'detritus' of the compositional (read 'fabrication') process. The 'production design' of this project remains open, but the technical manner of the recordings (Ambisonic/ Soundfield) lends itself to discrete soundsource considerations and the creation of an immersive sonic environment, possibly becoming 'interactive' through proximity triggering.