

# Creative Agencies in Participatory Sound Art: Two case studies

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**This article explores the distribution of creative agency between artists and audiences in participatory sound art through the lens of perspective theory. In contemporary creativity studies, perspective is taken to mean the way in which an actor's perception of the environment is structured by their intention to act. According to Vlad Glaveanu, constructing and taking new perspectives constitutes a necessary condition for creative acts as it reveals new affordances of the creator's materials. In this article, I investigate the perspectives of sound artists and participants through ethnographic case studies of Katrine Faber's participatory performance *Let Us Sing Your Place* and Benoît Maubrey's interactive *Speaker Sculptures*. In Faber's performance, the participants use their voices to recreate the soundscape of a place described by one of them. Maubrey's sculptures are large structures built out of loudspeakers through which the participants can play their own sounds via Bluetooth, phone lines or directly plugged-in microphone. Analysing ethnographic observations and interviews with artists and participants in the two case studies, I discuss how their perspectives are constructed and communicated through artwork's materialities. Exploring the particularity of perspectives induced by participatory sound art, I show how it challenges a number of conventional ideas about sound and auditory culture.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sound art has a long history of inviting public participation. In their statements and interviews, sound artists often profess an intent to elevate their audiences to the role of co-creators – but what does this mean exactly? What kinds of creativity does participation in sound art inaugurate and what is the extent of the participants' creative agency? Even aleatoric music – the phenomenon that inspired Umberto Eco's (2006) poetics of the open work – has already raised concerns as to whether 'the liberation of sound' means the enslavement of 'composer, performer, and listener alike', as the chance operations override human creativity (Taruskin 2010: 62). Not surprisingly, participatory art proper is likewise met with critique of its ethical ambivalence towards the issues of 'labour, exploitation and custodianship' (Bala 2018: 85). At the same time, both participatory art and sound art have been criticised for their avoidance of authorship, leaving them aesthetically impotent in

the eyes and ears of the critics (see, e.g., Kim-Cohen 2009; Bishop 2012). Finally, a strong speculative realist trend in recent aesthetics brings attention to the non-human agencies of artworks and materialities that compose them (Felski 2017). My goal in this article is to examine how the participants' creativity in sound artworks is facilitated and exercised, and how it interacts with the artist's creative agency and the work's materialities.

In the following discussion, I will combine artwork analysis with ethnographic observations and interviews with artists and participating audiences to trace the tangled networks of creative agencies in two participatory sound practices: Katrine Faber's performance *Let Us Sing Your Place* and Benoît Maubrey's *Speaker Sculptures*. In *Let Us Sing Your Place*, audience members took turns describing places that they hold dear – remembered, longed for, or dreamt up – and their soundscapes. The rest of the audience would then try to recreate these soundscapes with their voices. *Speaker Sculptures* are large-scale structures built of repurposed loudspeakers, through which the participants could sonically express themselves via Bluetooth, phone, or plugged-in microphone. For this article, I have observed two such sculptures, *Obelisk* and *Speakers Arena*, installed in public spaces in Berlin and Potsdam in 2019.

These two practices represent antithetical but complementary approaches to participation in sound art. One is an indoor performance with minimal technological setup and a ritualistic sensibility. The other is a public space installation relying on an extensive technological apparatus. Thus, while these two approaches do not exhaust the field of possibilities for sonic participation, they provide useful points of reference, from which its characteristic traits can be induced.

## 2. CREATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Participatory and open art forms present strong evidence in favour of distributed, intersubjective and socially embedded models of creativity (Amabile 1983; Montuori and Purser 1999; Lebeda and

Glaveanu 2019). Irrespective of its ideological framings, sharing creative agency between the artist and the participants is incompatible with the idea of a singular creative genius. In this article, I will thus approach creativity as a collective process, following Vlad Glaveanu's pragmatist theory of creativity.

Glaveanu (2010) approaches creativity as performative – as an act in the world, which necessarily happens in interactions between a multitude of agents, both human and non-human. To address this performativity, he proposes the '5A' framework of creativity: a model of creative *acts* performed by *actors* who create *artefacts* influenced by material and social *affordances* of their environment and with a view of potential *audiences* (Glaveanu 2013). In a later article, however, he further complicates the model by introducing the notion of *perspective*, borrowed from G. H. Mead (Glaveanu 2015). In Mead's (1938) ontology of acts, perspective refers to the way in which an individual's perception of their environment is contingent on the individual's acts, whether remembered or intended. In contemporary Meadian psychology, which directly informs Glaveanu's approach, perspectives are then regarded as action-orientations, as 'perceptual and conceptual orientations to a situation with a view of acting within that situation' (Martin 2005: 231).

Importantly, the actor is not limited to their own perspective, but can assume, with a degree of success, the perspective of another. Glaveanu (2015) describes the creative act as a dialectical iterative process of 'taking perspectives'. Interacting with the affordances of their material, the actor – the artist – discovers and assumes new perspectives (including that of a prospective audience) that 'make previously unperceived affordances salient' (Glaveanu 2015: 170), which in turn produces new possible perspectives.

The notions of affordance and perspective provide useful tools to analyse how agencies of artists, audiences, and other actors converge in participatory creative acts. However, the structure of the creative acts themselves becomes much more complicated in this case. First, creative acts are now performed by both the artist and the audience, which means that both sides engage in perspective-taking. Participants have to assume the perspectives of art (co-)creators, which presumably are different from their everyday perspectives of art consumers, while at the same time bringing their skills, experiences and worldviews into the frame of the artwork. Second, the 'material' that the participants' creative acts transform is not raw material, but rather the 'open work' in itself – something that was designed with an artistic intent and for that very purpose.

Thus, creative agency in a participatory art situation emerges at the interplay between the artist's perspective – manifesting in the designed affordances

of the artwork – and the perspectives of the participants, which may reveal a completely different set of affordances, unforeseen by the artist. Moreover, the relationship is further complicated by what frames the art situation: curation, its institutional or public space context, larger cultural tendencies, as well as the material agencies of the artwork's non-human mediators.

In the following two sections, I will use the notion of perspective to analyse the complex network of creative agencies in *Let Us Sing Your Place* and *Speaker Sculptures*. I will base my discussion on my observations of the participants' actions in these two artworks and on-site blitz interviews with them, as well as artist interviews and artwork analyses, to examine the different aspects of agency in participatory sound artworks.

### 3. LET US SING YOUR PLACE

*Let Us Sing Your Place* is a participatory performance with an elegantly simple cycle at its core. One of the audience members volunteers to describe a place that has an importance to them, then the rest improvise a one-minute soundscape of that place with their voices (Figure 1). This cycle continues for as long as the timeframe of the performance allows. The staging is decidedly minimalistic to foreground this interaction. The audience is arranged in a circle, facing a solitary chair at its centre that is reserved for the person sharing their place. Faber controls the temporality of the performance, marking the beginning and end of each singing segment with a 'ding' on crotales, and joins the impromptu choir as one of the voices, but otherwise does not interfere in the proceedings. No other set decorations, costumes or props are present.

*Let Us Sing Your Place* is part of Faber's larger project *Singing Our Place*, which has so far resulted in several productions by her theatre company Teater Viva (e.g. *The Camp*, 2015; *Tales from the Trash*, 2017) and a festival of music and performance art. The initial inspiration came from the United Nations's Sustainable Development Goals programme and the Paris Climate Summit in 2015. Faber's ambition was 'to investigate what it means to be human within a particular environment, to be connected or not to nature, both the nature around you and the nature of your body', relating the 'stories about global climate change to the individual's perception of place and nature' (Faber 2019: 8–9).

For the purposes of this project, I have attended *Let Us Sing Your Place* twice in Denmark: first, at *Sjón* anthropological film festival in Copenhagen in March 2019; second, at the *Singing Our Place* festival of vocal music and performance art in Aarhus in June



**Figure 1.** Katrine Faber, *Let Us Sing Your Place*, June 2019, Aarhus, Denmark. Photo by Franseska Anette Mortensen. Courtesy of the artist.

of the same year.<sup>1</sup> Different disciplinary and thematic framings of the two events attracted tangibly different audiences. *Sjón*'s audience was smaller in size (approximately 20 to 25 people) and consisted of mostly younger people of all genders. The audience at *Singing Our Place* was larger (45–50 people), predominantly female or female-presenting, had more age diversity, and included a number of professional and amateur musicians. I interviewed three of *Sjón*'s attendees and six more at *Singing Our Place*. Despite the small size, this sample covers a range of participation strategies, including those who volunteered to describe a place as well as those who did not, and those who participated in singing as well as those who did not.

### 3.1. Inviting noises

As discussed in the previous section, participatory art requires the participants to take the perspectives of both *the* artist – to appreciate artistic intent – and *an* artist – to assume creative agency delegated to them. But since established protocols and conventions

<sup>1</sup>I have also had previous experience with the performance, attending it during the Sound Forms symposium in Copenhagen in October 2018.

of participation do not exist, these perspectives need to be communicated to the participants in some way. In other words, perspectives being action-orientations, the participants need to be oriented, first, to act (rather than receive); and second, to act in an appropriate way.

Theatre scholar Gareth White (2013) calls this process 'invitation'. Invitation need not be explicit – it can operate as a kind of social affordance invoking creativity through, for instance, appealing to stable cultural forms and conventions – but it is crucial for the contract between the artist and the participants.

In a work such as *Let Us Sing Your Place*, where both the 'scripts' (descriptions of places) and vocal performances are created by the participants, invitation becomes the primary locus of artist's agency and, at the same time, responsibility:

I nearly thought it was too simple . . . Can you call this a performance? Because, as you say, it's mostly created with the people. But yes, I think you can call it a performance and I think it's not so easy-peasy thing to do. Because in this performance, I must use all my experience as an actress, as a performer, and as improviser myself, and as a psychotherapist actually – also as a teacher . . . – to have this respect [for the participants], so you



don't start to invade people. (Katrine Faber in interview with the author, 9 August 2019)

Invitation in *Let Us Sing Your Place* takes the form of an introductory part that Faber performs solo, aided by a real-time sampler, and that can take up to a half of performance's allotted time. It includes vocal improvisations, spoken comments on the theme and structure of the performance, and some vocal exercises for the audience. Faber also introduces a place and a soundscape of her own that she first sings herself with the sampler, then asks the audience to sing with her.

Reflecting on the composite character of this introduction, Faber notes:

I'm trying to open the space of sounding, so they're somehow aware of the possibilities that you can use all kinds of sounds. And then I know by experience – when I was younger, sometimes I insisted I didn't want to use words ... But I learned that it's good to just say a little bit about – what are we doing and why, so people relax a little bit more ... Knowing here that in a moment I will invite the people to participate themselves, I don't want to scare them, I want them to feel 'safe'. However, it's also about not to say too much because it's not to start to be the guide, to give the space – to say, I should not perform this, I open the space to the creativity of the group. (Interview with the author, 9 August 2019)

In other words, a significant part of the artist's perspective in *Let Us Sing Your Place* and of its contract of participation is communicated to the audience through non-verbal and sonic means. Faber's professed goal is to create an inviting sound that would relax the audience and make them feel safe. Conventionally, safety and relaxation are associated with harmonious, melodic, and not overly complicated or emotionally charged sounds, as demonstrated by Muzak and various other sonic mood control systems (see. e.g. Lanza 2016). However, Faber's approach is exactly the opposite:

I try to go in there, and be a little ugly myself, and be very human, not perfect. I'm not delivering a beautiful performance, I'm not singing opera to impress ... I try to create this atmosphere that – this is not about being perfect, or good, or fantastic. (Interview with the author, 9 August 2019)

As Chris Tonelli (2016: 2) argues, vocal performances that do not conform to the 'dominant forms of singing wherein melody and the production of "pure" pitch content predominate' often provoke an ableist reaction in the audience. In other words, the perspective of a typical Western concertgoer is shaped by established cultural conventions, which impel the listener to judge the artist on their virtuosity and technical skill (expected to exceed the abilities of a layperson). An experimental musician's palette of noisy, ostensibly mundane and ordinary sounds defies these conventions and is

therefore often judged as lack of ability and self-awareness. The sonic palette that Faber uses in her introduction – and that the participants will get to use thereafter – consists of sighs, coughs, whispers, yells and so on. Such sounds would probably be rated as outrageous in a vocal music concert – unless its audience consists of connoisseurs of extended vocal techniques. However, in the context of *Let Us Sing Your Place*, it is the lack of virtuosity and skill, of conventionally understood beauty, and the unfamiliarity of the sounds that are somehow soothing and inviting to the audience.

This acceptance is the result of how two perspectives are reconciled in *Let Us Sing Your Place* – those of a listener and a participant. The audience of the performance are both listeners and participants. Their potential reluctance to participate stems from the same assumed expectation that they will be judged on their technical skills. In rejecting virtuosity in her vocal performance, Faber gives up her power to judge the participants, levelling the playing field and assuaging the audience's anxiety. Her implicit invitation does not appeal to the participants' familiarity with cultural conventions, as in White's theory; on the contrary, Faber achieves her desired goal by breaking away from them. At the same time, by accepting this contract of non-judgement, the participants give up their own orientation to judge, allowing themselves to appreciate the 'unmusical' sounds aesthetically. Taking a new perspective does not just make 'previously unperceived affordances salient' (Glaveanu 2015: 170) – which it also does with regard to participants' own voices – but retunes their perception and aesthetic sensibility as well. As I will discuss in the following, this new sensibility emerges both in the participants' singing strategies and in their self-assessment of their performance.

### 3.2. How do you sing a place?

Participant perspective makes the audience appreciate 'unmusical' sounds as a medium for their creativity – but leaves the specific palette of these sounds intentionally open. In both performances I observed, the participants used several similar strategies of making sound, despite the differences in audience composition.

Some of these strategies directly corresponded to notions of R. M. Schafer's soundscape theory. At both events, I heard the majority of the participants producing some kind of drones: muted, sustained tones or sibilant noises imitating the sounds of winds and waves or unidentifiable hums. While there might be a psychological explanation for this – such sounds allow one to fade into the background, to participate without putting themselves in the spotlight – this also

correlates well with the structure of natural soundscapes. Schafer (1993: 9–10) called the various drones present in an acoustic environment ‘keynote sounds’, as they glue the soundscape together and create a backdrop against which other sounds (‘signals’) attain their meaning.

The second strategy was imitating immediately recognisable, iconic sounds: animal and bird calls, human speech and non-verbal exclamations, artificial noises. In a natural soundscape these would qualify as signals. However, in the context of *Let Us Sing Your Place* they are closer to ‘soundmarks’ – sounds that give an acoustic environment its unique character (Schafer 1993: 10) – as they relate directly to the way in which a place was described and thus hold particular importance to its soundscape.

Two other strategies do not have direct correlates in natural soundscapes. Some sounds I have heard in both performances stood out against the drones but had an abstract character. At times they were closer to traditional singing, at times more experimental, but their implied sources were not immediately recognisable. These might be the participants’ failure to voice soundmarks, but they may also represent a more impressionistic approach to singing a soundscape, an attempt to express its mood rather than literal sound.

Finally, only at the *Sjón* performance have I observed the phenomenon of ‘chain reactions’ – when a participant would come up with a new soundmark (e.g., a particular birdcall), which would then be copied by more and more people until a saturation point is reached. Interestingly, none of the people I interviewed said they had been intentionally copying others during the performance.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, most participants at both events claimed they had been aiming for variety and completeness of the soundscape.

These singing strategies are the most direct expression of the participants’ creativity in *Let Us Sing Your Place*, and they make explicit the process of perspective-taking that Glaveanu talks about. In a sense, this process forms the core of the performance’s dramaturgy. The participants have to imagine themselves inside soundscapes conjured by their peers and partake in the other’s hearing perspective. This is further reinforced by the performance’s spatial arrangement: the participant who describes a place sits in the centre and the singers stand peripherally.

The reason these four singing strategies are so prominent can be attributed to the relational and fluid character of the singers’ perspectives. They are built from four principal sources – Faber’s invitation, the description of the place and its soundscape, the participants’ past listening experiences, and their non-verbal exchange with each other in the process of singing –

<sup>2</sup>This might have been due to the small sample.

glued together by the goal of reimagining and recreating a soundscape. Reassessing the affordances of their voices from this perspective, the participants start dissociating their vocal performance from the conventional singing practices. They conceptualise their actions not as singing but as ‘giving voice’ to a place or ‘getting [a] place alive with sound’. I will now discuss the mechanisms of this dissociation in more detail.

### 3.3. Sound, voice, singing

It was sound more than singing. I was mostly making other sounds, like birds.

This quotation from one of my interviewees is perhaps the most direct expression of the sentiment, shared by many participants. It clearly demonstrates a move away from the concertgoer’s perspective. Even though the title of the performance is *Let Us Sing Your Place*, my respondents often avoided describing their actions as ‘singing’, using variations of ‘making sound’ or ‘giving sound’ instead. In many cases, these expressions were explicitly or implicitly associated with rejecting not only sonic but also social conventions of music performance – the expectations to show off their skill and be judged aesthetically:

It was very personal in some ways because you can choose by yourself which kind of sound to make, and nobody says which is good or not, every sound could be. (Anonymous participant in interview with the author, 6 June 2019)

I was standing there, in this room, being sure that nobody made their sound to get forward on the stage and being listened to ... and that was very beautiful, and very different from normal concert or so. At least at a normal concert you can’t be sure if the artist is trying to show himself. (Anonymous participant in interview with the author, 6 June 2019)

The hesitance to show off might be attributed to a general reluctance of the participants in such projects to take the spotlight. Indeed, some of the people I talked to admitted to being shy or having issues with public speaking and performing. However, some of the participants at *Singing Our Place* were professional singers and thus less likely to have stage anxiety. Moreover, their training and professional experience would have made the expectation to show off their skill and be judged aesthetically an intrinsic part of their perspectives, yet they were even more determined to break away from the traditional modes of performing:

You have to actually rid ... empty your head from all the things you’ve learnt – what’s right and wrong, and stuff like that, so you have to be in another ... think

in another way. (Anonymous participant in interview with the author, 6 June 2019)

I tried to get the story out of my head and into my body and emotions. And then two of the times I just felt like giving no sound, just receiving and being curious of the other, of the audiences' pictures and sounds. (Anonymous participant in interview with the author, 6 June 2019)

In other words, in the participants' perspective, vocal sounds become dissociated from the normative practice of singing, which removes the frame of reference for aesthetic judgement, whether directed at others or oneself. In the absence of such a frame, virtuosic, self-expression-focused performance becomes impossible, opening the space up for more altruistic approaches to creativity. In that sense, the participants' behaviour and their perspectives in *Let Us Sing Your Place* unsettle not only the notion of singing but also that of voice itself.

As Amanda Weidman (2015: 233) notes, the voice in Western culture has been traditionally seen 'as [a] guarantor of truth and self-presence, from which springs the familiar idea that the voice expresses self and identity and that agency consists in having a voice'. Faber frames her performance in similar terms: 'this is also about that we have to remember – we all have a voice, we all have an importance', although noting that 'maybe [we] also have a responsibility to use our voices ... for all other living things'.

However, what characterises the participants' action-orientations in *Let Us Sing Your Place* is precisely the lack of self-expression – the voice is freely given away, willingly subjected to execute the other's perspective. Moreover, the participants decided whether their place was worth sharing – whether it would be 'a funny thing to do for the others' or not – in a similarly altruistic way.

The association between voice and authenticity is also questioned, as it is used for imitation rather than self-expression, used for mimicking the elements of a natural soundscape, and shaped by other voices. The sonic content of the participants' singing emphasises what Roland Barthes (1991) called 'the grain of the voice' – its corporeality and imperfection – yet instead of attesting to one's identity, it becomes infinitely malleable in an altruistic gesture of subordinating one's voice to the other and the others.

#### 4. SPEAKER SCULPTURES

*Speaker Sculptures* is a series of large-scale outdoor artworks by the American artist Benoît Maubrey. The sculptures are built of hundreds of different loudspeakers – old and new, big and small – that are typically arranged into a likeness of various

architectural forms – such as gates, walls, shrines. The works are interactive, allowing the participants to speak or play their sounds through them in a number of ways.

This case study is based on two, most recent at the moment of writing, *Speaker Sculptures – Obelisk* and *Speakers' Arena*. *Obelisk* was commissioned by the *Intersonanzen* festival for new music. It was installed in the middle of Platz der Einheit public park in Potsdam from 30 May to 5 June 2019 (Figure 2). *Speakers' Arena* was independently produced by the *Zwitschermachine* gallery. It occupied a spot in a small square on Pallasstrasse in Berlin, next to the *Pallasseum* housing complex, from 1 July to 27 October 2019 (Figure 3). At each sculpture, I have conducted observations for five days starting from the opening and interviewing the participants on site. Owing to extended temporality of the works, my sample here is slightly larger than in the case of *Let Us Sing Your Place*, with 14 interviews collected across two works.

Both *Obelisk* and *Speakers' Arena* are among the most interactive of *Speaker Sculptures*. The participants could use a phone number to call the sculpture and have their call broadcast by it in real time, connect their smartphones via Bluetooth or a cable to play their music and other sounds, or use an on-site microphone. Additionally, *Speakers' Arena* would sonify via a text-to-speech software any Twitter post marked with the hashtag #speakersarena.

#### 4.1. Non-cochlear musicking

*Speaker Sculptures* are intermedia artworks that operate across two different media: visual (sculptural) and sonic. The former is stable and remains largely unchanged by acts of participation (unless we take this category to include vandalism),<sup>3</sup> the latter, on the other hand, is fully created by the participants. The artist's influence on *Speaker Sculptures'* sound is limited to designing technological affordances of the sculpture – such as ways of connection (Bluetooth, phone lines, Twitter), the number of simultaneous interactions, possible time limit on interactions. Thus, creative agencies of the artist and the participants are clearly split along the sculptural-sonic lines. Indeed, according to Maubrey, what drives his sound sculpture practice is not interest in music or sound aesthetics but the desire to work in outdoor spaces and shape them with sound, using it as a sort of sculptural material:

<sup>3</sup>In some cases, however, the creation of the sculpture may be influenced by participatory processes. For example, an earlier version of *Obelisk* in Cairo (2018) was assembled from loudspeakers and boomboxes provided by the city's residents.





**Figure 2.** Benoît Maubrey. *Obelisk*, *Intersonanzen* Festival, June 2019, Platz der Einheit, Potsdam, Germany. Photo by Benoît Maubrey. Courtesy of the artist.

I got involved in music because I wanted to work outdoors, not because I wanted to make music. Because I wasn't making music. I don't know any notes, I can't write any notes ... And that's what my main thing is, I don't care about improvisational music or any of that kind of stuff, I just care about rooms and spaces, outdoor spaces, and how to make the air vibrate inside them, and build structures so that they can exist outdoors ... But I'm interested in this kind of interaction, in letting the people say what they want to say ... You can still say you're composing because you set up the system and you let the people talk. I mean, I'm sure that works also in the way of John Cage, about letting sounds happen as opposed to composing yourself. (Interview with the author, 18 August 2018)

Glaveanu (2015: 168) notes that a perspective 'effectively "bridge[s]" difference by relating two previously separate positions', one new and one familiar. The preceding quotation reveals Maubrey's artistic

perspective to extend from the position of a sculptor, perhaps also in the figurative sense of Joseph Beuys's (1974) 'social sculpture', towards that of a composer or a soundmaker. This perspective highlights material rather than aesthetic affordances of sound: its ability to 'sculpt' the air, to create and arrange invisible volumes through vibration. Similarly, participation itself becomes an affordance for generating sound as well as for sculpting a social situation in a way that evokes playful Dadaist noise practices. It is aimed at upsetting the order of the everyday through unrestricted and undirected soundmaking, 'making a small revolution in the street', as Maubrey puts it. This playfulness is shared by the participants as well, with some likening the sculpture to a playground to explore and experiment with, either for themselves or for their kids.

This approach to sound evokes Seth Kim-Cohen's (2009) notion of non-cochlear sound art. In his book



**Figure 3.** Benoît Maubrey, *Speaker's Arena*, July 2019, Berlin, Germany. Photo by Daniel Kupferberg.

*In the Blink of an Ear*, he contrasts two artistic perspectives that he associates with sound art and contemporary visual – though ‘non-retinal’, as he calls it – art. He is critical of the former’s alleged indulgence in the perceptual and sensory aspects of sound, which he traces to John Cage’s (1961: 10) call to ‘let sounds be themselves’. Kim-Cohen calls instead for a kind of

sound art that would rethink sound and auditory practices from a poststructuralist perspective, as performative and discursively framed.

At first glance, *Speaker Sculptures* can be described as non-cochlear sound artworks. As discussed previously, for Maubrey, sound is primarily a means for sculpting physical and social space – a goal which



takes precedence over how exactly his sculptures sound. But at the same time, this non-cochlear quality is achieved precisely by ‘letting sounds happen’ through participation. Moreover, participation and liberation of sonic expression are crucial for the political and discursive functioning of *Speaker Sculptures*. Maubrey uses the metaphor of Speaker’s Corner in London’s Hyde Park to describe his work – a place historically reserved for free speech and self-expression.

The participants themselves approach their sound-making with *Speaker Sculptures* largely in a non-cochlear manner. The three kinds of interaction that I have observed most frequently also prioritise performative gestures over sonic content. First, especially in case of *Obelisk*, the passers-by often stopped by the sculpture only for a couple of seconds to say or sing a few short phrases into the microphone before moving on. Second, some people brought their children to the sculptures to sing, recite a poem, or just play around. Finally, and most frequently, the participants simply played some music from the smartphones – typically described as their favourite music or whatever they had in their playlist. Occasionally, some of the approaches were mixed together – for example, one couple played some electronic music tracks produced by their adult son.

I am not arguing that sonic content of the participants’ actions was irrelevant. On the contrary, their favourite music, their children’s creativity, their own singing clearly held importance to them. The intention to have a listening experience was a necessary part of their participant perspectives. However, as listening experiences, these interactions did not radically differ in their sonic quality from the participants’ everyday listening practices. The acoustic characteristics of *Speaker Sculptures* are different from those of a consumer sound system, but not different enough to alter the sounds coming through them in fundamental ways. It is the context of participation – the fact of interacting with this particular sculpture in this particular time and space and its mediation of the musicking act – that makes it meaningful.

#### 4.2. Sound art, mediation, participation

In Glaveanu’s (2013, 2015) ‘5A’ model, a creative act is necessarily mediated by the affordances of its material and social conditions. Furthermore, this mediation is central to the cycle of perspective-taking: acting upon these affordances reorients the actor’s perspective, revealing previously unperceived affordances. In actor-network theory, mediation is also the means by which non-human actors express their agency. According to Bruno Latour (1994), they do so by modifying – mediating – human acts, their goals or their expressions – in other words, their perspectives.

While Glaveanu’s concern lies primarily with human creative agency, this process opens up the possibility of looking into non-human agencies and their role in participatory creativity.

At the same time, as discussed previously, mediation – both the process and the experience – forms the core of participants’ perspectives when interacting with *Speaker Sculptures*. It makes sense then to examine the role of mediation, non-human agencies and their influence on the artist’s and the audience’s perspectives in more detail.

On the technological level, mediation affects the agencies and perspectives of both the participants and the artist. According to Maubrey, his creative development largely paralleled that of audio and interactive technologies, with *Speaker Sculptures* attaining new ways of interactions as technological means became available:

That’s also a very interesting phenomenon, that the electronics has moved along with me – or I’m just following the electronics ... Before that, it didn’t exist, all the electronics – now electronics is just a part of society. So, it’s also normal – not just normal – that artists also adapt and use new tools, but also why not? Here’s electronics, what is it supposed to do? Oh, it’s for communication, right. So why not build a sculpture out of it? (Interview with the author, 18 August 2018)

On the participants’ side, technologies play a somewhat ambiguous role, both affording participation and constraining it. On the one hand, they provide the means for the participants to interact with the sculptures. On the other, for some, they also hindered possible interactions, be it due to lack of technological literacy, habits or simply anxiety:

I used it via Bluetooth because I think Bluetooth is a nice piece to be interacting with it, yeah ... And I don’t trust [phone] numbers. That’s not my thing. There are some reasons for that – I need to know, need to see who I’m talking to. (Anonymous participant in interview with the author, 1 July 2019)

At the same time, mediational entities operate on different levels of emergence. Even though composed of many different technologies and materialities, a *Speaker Sculpture* as a whole functions as a singular mediator via a mechanism that Latour (1994) calls blackboxing. Since the artist is absent at the site of *Speaker Sculptures*, the work mediates his own creative agency with regard to the participants. It essentially serves as an invitation – a way of inducing a participant perspective in the audience, which in this case amounts to legitimising sonic practices that do not conform to the everyday auditory protocols of public spaces.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>In another article (Keylin 2020), I have dealt with the political aspects of such legitimisation.

Many participants admitted that they would not normally play their music or sing in public but felt empowered to do so in the context of the artwork. In other words, public soundmaking was not in their everyday perspectives, but entered their perspectives as participants through the sculpture's mediation:

I don't like it when people take their boomboxes or smartphone music and play it out loud. I don't like it in a park or something like that but here it's cool. Because it's a place where you can go and play some music. (Anonymous participant in interview with the author, 2 July 2019)

Furthermore, mediation does not stop with the sculpture itself. In their article 'Sound Art Situations', Sanne Krogh Groth and Kristine Samson (2017) argue that sound artworks necessarily become entangled in their spatial and social context, making it impossible to separate the artwork proper from the contingencies in which it operates. For *Speaker Sculptures*, these contingencies necessarily include the works' embeddedness in specific sites, their temporalities, and curatorial framings. Because of the difference in materialities and contexts between *Obelisk* and *Speakers' Arena*, the participants' perspectives and their behaviour also differed significantly between the two cases.

*Obelisk* was installed in the middle of a public park, at the crossing of two busy walkways. A festival worker was stationed nearby each day, actively inviting the passers-by to participate and explaining to them the way the sculpture operated. Additionally, in absence of participants, the festival workers often played their own music, possibly as a means of implicit invitation. All this resulted in most of the participant interactions being brief – most only played one or two songs, or said or sang a few phrases into the microphone. On the other hand, *Speakers' Arena* was situated in a relatively quiet site for several months, largely unattended, with the instructions printed on a poster hanging nearby. Most importantly, the sculpture made in the shape of an amphitheatre had seating rows embedded into it. Accordingly, on average, the participants spent significantly longer times with the sculpture, up to several hours.

Finally, the participants' perspectives are also at least partly mediated even before interacting with the sculpture, which is evident in the sonic content of such interactions. In my observations, it was relatively rare that the participants used their voices directly, be it through the microphone or the phone lines – most played music from their smartphones. When asked why not, most of the time they replied they had nothing to say or that they were not singers. Those who did sing (or in one case, whistle) did so in a karaoke fashion, singing to a simultaneously played track.

Here it is instructive to draw a comparison between *Speaker Sculptures* and *Let Us Sing Your Place*. Both works unsettle the connection between voice and identity or agency, but do so in opposite ways. In *Let Us Sing Your Place*, participants use their voices for goals that have little to do with self-expression. In *Speaker Sculptures*, conversely, participants do self-express sonically, but prefer to use means other than voice for that, building their identities and perspectives through reference to other sonic artefacts.

To sum up, the sound of *Speaker Sculptures* is a product of a complex interplay of agencies, perspectives and materialities mediating and transforming each other. The artist exercises his agency by initiating a situation that legitimises public soundmaking and delimits the field of sonic possibilities through the artwork's affordances. These affordances, together with artwork's curatorial framing and its embeddedness in a particular site and sociocultural context influence the participants' perspectives, making various interactions and behaviours more or less likely to occur. Finally, sonic content is then supplied by the participants but influenced by a number of external mediators and media.

However, the mediational networks – and thereby the process of perspective-taking – arguably extend beyond the moment of soundmaking, in the participants' documenting their experience and publishing it on social media for the secondary audiences. It is especially tangible in the case of *Speakers' Arena*, which is directly connected to Twitter by way of the #speakersarena hashtag.

On the one hand, posts marked with this hashtag both trigger an interaction with the sculpture and memorialise that interaction at the same time. They remain on the social network long after the sculpture is uninstalled from its physical spot. They extend its temporality, but they also extend its public reach. The statements in these posts are performed at the same time in the public space of the sculpture's site and in the public sphere of social media. While not reflecting the way these statements sounded, they attest to the fact that they sounded and were heard.

Furthermore, contemporary digital mobile technologies provide an easy way to document the sound of *Speaker Sculptures* as well. While not a part of the artwork as designed, mobile technologies and social media are a necessary part of most participants' lives and their perspectives. In the entanglement of agencies, materialities and mediation that is a sound art situation they become largely inseparable from the aesthetic experience and provide further ways for the participants to exercise their creativity.

This entanglement became particularly evident in one case that I have observed in my 'post-mortem' netnography (Kozinets 2009) of the #speakersarena

hashtag. A man in Berlin initiated a happening with some of his friends from other cities, who were interested in the sculptures, but could not travel to Berlin to experience it first-hand. He thus invited them to post on Twitter with the #speakersarena hashtag during a specified timeframe. He would then creatively videotape the *Arena* sonifying the tweets – choosing interesting angles and applying video filters – and post the videos back as a reply to the originators.

Such dynamic entanglement between the on-site functioning of the sculpture and its social media documentation extends the acoustic space of the artwork, making its sounds and soundmaking affordances available across distances. What is important, however, is that it is not a part of the artwork's design but is entirely facilitated by the participants. In other words, the balance of agencies gets reversed in this case, with the participants acting as mediators of the sculpture's sound.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Reflecting on his pioneering participatory radio works of the 1960s, Max Neuhaus remarked that in doing so he wanted 'to move beyond [being a musician] and beyond being a composer, *into the idea of being a catalyser of sound activity*' (Neuhaus 1994). My case studies of *Let Us Sing Your Place* and *Speaker Sculptures* have shown the centrality of this idea for the artists' perspectives in participatory sound art. Both Faber and Maubrey admit that their artistic goals lie outside of the actual sonorities of their works: in engaging the site and the environment for Maubrey ('making the air vibrate'), and in being (co-)present and facilitating connections for Faber. In a sense, this perspective aligns with Alan Licht's (2019) remark that a sound artist is more of a listener than a sound-maker. However, it also reveals a different modality of being a listener for a sound artist – listening *to* the public rather than *sharing the artist's own* listening with them.

As my case studies show, the artists' agency then becomes concentrated in the act of invitation – of taking the perspective of a listener and instilling in the audience the perspective of a co-creator, either verbally or through the mediation of the work's materialities – not least of them sonic, engaging with the sound's ability to evoke a response (see LaBelle 2015). This agency, however, does not fully determine the perspectives of the participants, who infuse the work with their listening experiences, musical tastes and sonic imaginations, but also their creative propensities, often uncovering in the works affordances unforeseen by the artists. Furthermore, in becoming co-creators, the participants remain listeners, the two perspectives fusing together and making the

participants reassess their attitudes towards sonic phenomena and experiences.

This fusion of perspectives reveals participation in sound art to be a form of art *reception*, a way of experiencing sound – as something we *make* rather than something we are subjected to. Approaching the sonic experience that way unsettles a number of conventional ideas about sound. Participatory context reveals a possibility for the aesthetic appreciation of 'ugly' and unusual sounds, often perceived as undesirable in presentational music performances. Dissociating soundmaking from music, participatory sound art liberates its audiences from the culturally entrenched protocols of aesthetic judgement, revealing its underlying ableism and exclusivism. It furthermore facilitates empathy and openness, manifesting in the altruistic performativity of *Let Us Sing Your Place* or in the chance social encounters that *Speaker Sculptures* encourages (see Keylin 2020). In that manner, participatory sound art further questions the connection between voice and subjectivity – both through the explorations of the constructed and mediated character of literal and metaphorical vocality and through offering horizontal and altruistic ways of exercising creativity, beyond the egocentrism of self-expression.

Having only two case studies and a relatively small sample of interviews limits my ability to generalise these observations to a broader context of sound art practices. However, they point to the urgency of reassessing and re-emphasising the aesthetic experience of soundmaking as something irreducible to musical creativity or perceptual auditory phenomena.

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