

Politics of Participation in Benoît Maubrey's Speaker Sculptures

Vadim Keylin

In this essay I will focus on the participatory processes which Benoît Maubrey's use of communication technologies brings about. My methodology is also borrowed from media studies rather than art studies, as I will be analyzing the affordances of *Speaker Sculptures*. Originated in James Gibson's ecological psychology project, the notion of affordance refers to an opportunity for agentic action that an artifact offers – in other words, the different ways an object can possibly be used (Gibson 1979). Applying the concept of affordance to sound art allows for an analysis that avoids two major risks in dealing with participatory aspects of sound art works. On the one hand, the affordance-based approach does not require limiting the range of possible audience experiences to a clearly verbalized artistic intent. On the other hand, it does not reduce sound art to “just” a social situation, emphasizing the connections between structural, perceptual and technological aspects of an artwork and the participatory processes involved.

Speaker Sculptures employ existing communication technologies – landlines, smartphones, wireless networks – as their “interfaces” for interaction. The primary affordance of these technologies is to allow communication without necessarily being present in the same space. In the case of *Speaker Sculptures*, the two spaces on the opposite ends of the line are of a different nature: one is public, and the other is, at least in some way, private – either the space of one's home, or the personal space of the participant.

Thus, the artworks extend the public space, making it accessible both to those who are present in it physically, and to those who are not. What is most interesting here is that they do it by the means of electronic media, whose relationships with urban space has been traditionally understood antagonistically. Prior to the mass mediatization of the late 20th century, city streets, parks, cafes etc. were the primary sites of social interactions. However, the electronic media stripped such places of their function. According to Richard Sennett, “electronic communication is one means by which the very idea of public life has been put to an end. The media have vastly increased the store of knowledge social groups have about each other, but have rendered actual contact unnecessary” (Sennett 2002, 282). While the introduction of online participatory media rekindled the need for contact, it now happens outside of physical spaces (Sennett 2010, 262). Together with growing mobility, this has led to the emergence of what Marc Augé calls “non-places”, public spaces that do not facilitate social interactions.

These are places one simply passes through, in as quick and uninvolved fashion as possible, on the way from one familiar – essentially private – place to another (Augé 1995, 77–81). Sound installations are often used to rejuvenate such “non-places”, as art infuses them with the “charisma” they lost and facilitates the public's engagement with them (Föllmer 1999, 226). However, *Speaker Sculptures* go further than this: they situate the interactions, happening in the electronic media, in the physical urban space, reconciling and merging the two. Maubrey's works subvert the antagonism of the physical public space and the public sphere of media. Instead of “stealing” the functions of public space, electronic media expand and enhance it, facilitating involved social encounters. By arranging loud-speakers in architecture-like forms, the artist makes the technologies “blend in” with the urban space, emphasizing their unity as the space of communication.

Through *Speaker Sculptures* the urban space becomes augmented, existing both in physical and virtual planes that become inseparably connected by the social relations that emerge between the participants situated on both ends.

In Hannah Arendt's concept of the public life, any public action is necessarily political – and vice versa, any political action is necessarily public. Political life is the life of the πόλις, the city, and therefore happens in its open spaces (Arendt 1958, 22–78). While for Arendt her approach to the political was necessary to extend the notion to include spheres outside of institutionalized politics, her insistence on the “public-ness” made it “non-inclusive” as well. Judith Butler in “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance” notes that “all public assembly is haunted by the police and the prison. And every public square is defined in part by the population that could not possibly arrive there; either they are detained at the border, or have no freedom of movement and assembly, or are detained or imprisoned” (Butler 2014, 9). The artist Joanna Hevda extends this category of those to whom the equating of the political and the public denies political agency, to people suffering from physical and mental disabilities that prevent them from leaving home (Hevda 2016). In Arendt's paradigm, political action requires a body to be publically present, however it is often the very same body that prevents one from political action.

In that regard, the most interesting aspect of *Speaker Sculptures* is that they permit performing in the public space without leaving one's home. They do not only merge the physical public space with that of electronic media, but also through their unity connect the public space with a multitude of private spaces. This offers a possibility of political presence that is both embodied and anonymous, thus expanding the reach and scope of possible political activities. Maubrey likens the space created by his sculptures to the corner of London's Hyde Park famous for its history of political debates and demonstrations (Maubrey 2014). Since the late 19th century, the park's north-western corner – the so-called Speakers' Corner – has been known as a place where everyone can speak their mind without fear of prosecution. However, unlike Speaker's Corner, *Speaker Sculptures* do not require the speaker to be present in the flesh, but lets his/her voice be heard from the safety of the private space.

At the same time, a question arises as to whether the presence of the voice in the absence of the body holds as much political weight. In *Speaker Sculptures*, this concern is addressed explicitly by the tangible physicality of the sculpture and its scale. The voice of the distant speaker is given weight by lending it the “body” of the sculpture, which is commensurate with its architectural surroundings. The voice thus becomes one with the space it fills. Moreover, *Speaker Sculptures* make up for the lack of bodily presence with electronic amplification. In any public event, the one with the megaphone is the one with power, as their voice can drown out the other voices. *Speaker Sculptures* give the participants a megaphone the size of a building, allowing those who are locked out of public discourse by their personal circumstances to be heard.

On a deeper level, an argument can be made that the speaker's presence in *Speaker Sculptures* is not entirely ephemeral, but embodied. In his analysis of telephone communication, Barthes notes that “the order of listening which [it] inaugurates invites the Other to collect his whole

body in his voice” (Barthes 1991, 252), which is then transmitted through the cable to the listener, or in the case of *Speaker Sculptures* – into the urban space. Media scholar Frances Dyson calls this phenomenon telepresence: while the speaker is not physically on site, their body is present in “the grain of the voice” – tone and cadence of speech, idiosyncratic noises, breath – carried through technological channels and made tangible by sound waves (Dyson 2009). *Speaker Sculptures* provide the caller with the opportunity of remote, but nevertheless embodied engagement with the space and all who are physically present in it. In other words, they afford performing politically – performing in public – without leaving the safety of a private space. The body is present in the voice, but it is absent in the space and therefore cannot be removed from that space, ostracized or harmed. The anonymity of telepresence in a public space makes communication across class, race and gender barriers, that Arendt envisioned as possible (at least to a certain extent), while at the same time not requiring one to forgo one’s identity.

Moreover, the audio channels do not discriminate between voice and other sounds. This allows for a new, acousmatic mode of self-presentation in public space that previously has only been possible in electronic media. One’s musical preferences are as much a reflection – and a part – of one’s identity as visual features, such as fashion and hairstyles. Nevertheless, this part is usually reserved for private spaces – sometimes all too private, like the space of one’s head enclosed in headphones. Music in headphones serves to dissociate the listener from the surrounding space, escaping engagement with strangers and encouraging perception of the public space as a “non-place”. *Speaker Sculptures* allow the participants to share publicly what has usually been shared privately, through compilation tapes and online playlists. Music contextualizes the voice in the same way clothing contextualizes the body, thus making a “telepresent” self-presentation as comprehensive as one performed in public space in the flesh.

It is interesting to contrast Arendt’s approach to the political to Barthes’ understanding of the term “as describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world” (Barthes 1972, 143). The urban space as a site of human relations has been redefined not in terms of physical structure of space, but as a structure of relations that form and inhabit it, as “a space of flows” (Castells 2004). Sound being a relational phenomenon (LaBelle 2015, xi–xiii), this relational structure finds a parallel in a certain kind of sociality specific to sound art – one that relies on sound being heard and answered. The agoras of *Speaker Sculptures* act as hubs where relations that form the public space intersect with those happening in the space of electronic communication media, forming a new kind of relational topography that transcends the boundaries of physical space.

In that regard, they can be described in terms of Nicolas Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics. For Bourriaud, art objects in the contemporary world have no intrinsic value and serve only as a catalyst for a certain kind of sociality. The true matter of relational art is the system or relations emerging between the participants as a result of this sociality of art (Bourriaud 2002, 107). *Speaker Sculptures* fit this narrative perfectly. Their impressive gargantuan forms aside, their primary function is precisely to facilitate social encounters in this newly created augmented space of relations. Thus, another political aspect arises to *Speaker Sculptures*. As Bourriaud puts it, the role of relational art is “no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist” (Bourriaud 2002, 13). *Speaker Sculptures* offer new modes of social interaction and connect many private and public spaces into a relational structure, thus providing a means to overcome the atomization of urban life.

However, as far as adopting this strategy to urban acoustic design goes, the downsides of having such sculptures as permanent features of urban space must be considered. Critiquing the concept of public space as open to all, Butler points at its gatekeepers – the police and the authorities – that decide who gets

access (Butler 2014, 9). In the case of *Speaker Sculptures*, access to public space is exercised through technological channels, thus making the technologies themselves the gatekeepers. While the volume of one’s voice passing through audio channels can exceed that of those physically present, the speaker has no control over it. *Speaker Sculptures* give a lot of power to those who operate the technologies – not only to increase or decrease the volume, but also to disconnect the caller completely. I would speculate that a solution to limit this power might lie in further automation, relying on distributed peer-to-peer computing rather than the human factor. Moreover, the idea of technological expansion of physical public space into a virtual one does not account for the accessibility of required technologies, thus putting up a class-and-income barrier for this kind of political participation. Many of those whose voices desperately need to be heard, are locked out not only of the public space, but of communication channels as well, and *Speaker Sculptures* cannot do anything to remedy their situation. Their political effect transcends some barriers but not others.

Another aspect to be considered is the effect such works have on everyday functioning of the local soundscapes, which can be rather disruptive. As Christabel Stirling notes in her article “Sound Art / Street Life”, sonic interventions in public space, contrary to their supposed mission of bringing communities back together, often bring about conflicts and discontent. To Stirling, however, this is a positive effect, as such conflicts bring to the foreground “the existence of resilient personal, social and cultural differences”. She refers to the political theorist Chantal Mouffet’s belief that “the social world [...] consists of conflicts that cannot be suppressed, and for which no rational solution or consensus would ever exist” (Stirling 2016). Making these conflicts explicit, sound art in public spaces makes the inhabitants reassess their claims to the city.

Here, a peculiar dialectics emerges. On the one hand, the function of sound art in public spaces is to break the routine of the everyday to force the inhabitants to engage with the space and each other, i.e. it needs to be disruptive to be effective. The same can be said of political actions, such as demonstrations or protests: to be heard one must generate enough noise. On the other hand, demonstrations and sound art projects have an end, while the long-term effect of breaking the established sonic routines is uncertain. Urban ecologies will have to restructure themselves around these new conditions, and not necessarily in the desired way. Changes in urban space always walk a fine line between gentrification and ghettoization, and acoustic design is no different in that regard.

Another metaphor Maubrey uses to describe the participants’ interactions with *Speaker Sculptures* is “oral graffiti” (Maubrey 2014). In my opinion, this metaphor perfectly sums up the diverse participatory aspects of *Speaker Sculptures*. Just as city walls provide a canvas for graffiti artists, Maubrey’s sculptures serve as a means for anonymous acoustic self-expression in urban space. And just like graffiti, the result of this self-expression can be as much art as vandalism – often at the same time.

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