

Listen, and Imagine: Speculative Soundwalking

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Abstract

This paper introduces Speculative Soundwalking, a format of interactive sound art that utilises embodied listening in place, exploring speculative realities of a particular space. Speculative Soundwalking taps into the co-habitation of past, present and future in a given place, offering listeners a narrative filter through which to experience this temporal layering. [1] As a step towards developing a creative framework for other artists to access, I present two example projects to demonstrate how Speculative Soundwalking can be realised in public presentation. I will further contextualise the format within the sound and listening practices it inherits, pulling them together to argue for Speculative Soundwalking's affective capacity to lead listeners in imagining and embodying diverging realities.

Keywords

Soundwalking; Deep Listening; Speculative Fiction; Acoustic Ecology; Embodiment; Public Art

Introduction

If you could listen in on the future of your home, would it impact how you relate to it today? How would your connection to community be altered?

Speculative Soundwalking is a format of interactive sound art that utilises embodied listening in place, exploring speculative realities of a particular space. As participants move along a designated path, they hear soundscape compositions that describe the past and possible futures of that space, and are asked to imagine these speculative realities by embodying them. Upon returning there in the future, they will remember their experience of the soundwalk, deepening their relationship with that place on each repeated visit. In this way, Speculative Soundwalking taps into the co-habitation of past, present and future in a given place, offering listeners a narrative filter through which to experience this temporal layering. [2]

In its most essential form, Speculative Soundwalking involves listening in place, while moving through it, hearing and imagining realities and ways of being that diverge from your own. The artist shapes the storytelling and invites the listener to question how their world could (or will) be different. The two examples presented in this paper explore speculation in the time domain on the theme of climate change, but there is every reason for Speculative Soundwalks to also explore other forms of speculation.

Speculative Soundwalking inherits concepts and language from Deep Listening, Acoustic Ecology, intersensoriality, listening as slow activism, hybrid technology and sound studies. I will further contextualise the format within these sound and listening practices, pulling them together to argue for Speculative Soundwalking's affective capacity to lead listeners in imagining and embodying diverging realities.

Listen, and imagine. Hear what we're in for.

Speculative Soundwalks

To paint a clearer picture of what a Speculative Soundwalk can be, I will introduce the two major projects I have created in the format.

Listening to Abu Dhabi

Listening to Abu Dhabi is a Speculative Soundwalk comprised of 13 short audio files. [3] It is hosted on GPS-based soundwalking app, Echoes, geolocated on Abu Dhabi's popular urban beach, the Corniche. [4] Participants are directed to move along a designated footpath, using their own device and headphones to listen to soundscape compositions that imagine life in Abu Dhabi's past, present and future, through the lenses of settlement, urbanisation and climate change.

Heavy traffic passes by on the left. Hum and clang of construction. Children shout and splash in water from the fountains. A bus passes, car horn honks.

Narrator: In the year 2025, urban planners begin to construct elevated buildings, in anticipation of rising water. Air is heavy. Traffic is thick. Fountains on the Corniche are made larger to cool the air and provide sonic relief from the city. [5]

Listening to the Port

Following a similar format, Listening to the Port is a Speculative Soundwalk based on Kaurna Yerta (Kaurna Country) comprised of a single 35-minute audio file hosted on my website and accessed via QR code poster. [6] Participants are asked to move along a defined path, using their own device and headphones to listen to soundscape compositions that imagine life in the past, present and future of the Port through the impacts of colonisation, industrialisation and climate change on the ecology of the Gulf St Vincent.

The low heavy hum of traffic. Thunder cracks, heavy rain. Seagulls squawk as an ambulance siren rings.

Narrator: By the middle of the 21st century, extreme heat has visibly damaged roads and buildings... Emergency

services are stretched to their limit, trying to respond to floods and fires across the country.... Low oxygen levels in the water overnight mean that at dawn we regularly wake up to see schools of juvenile fish floating, dead, until they are picked up by seagulls.[7]

Passage of Time

Both of these projects blend research with imaginative storytelling, utilising field recordings, first-person narration, and sound design to create a sense of realism. Descriptions of the past are based on local history of each area, and descriptions of the future are based on climate projections under the business as usual model, following threads that link each era (for example: water fountains, relationship with the ocean as a resource, mangrove habitat health, presence of dolphins). Participants are explicitly invited to listen and imagine the reality described and evoked by the compositions, highlighting the temporal interplay between their embodied experience in the present day and the imagining of their own possible experiences in the past and future of that place. Both projects aim to synthesise and communicate complex, emotionally difficult data in a direct, experiential format. This allows listeners to become acquainted with, and begin to process the reality of the climate crisis in a way that enables them to form a relationship with the idea of the future. The passage of time is inevitable, but the ecological breakdown and catastrophic impacts caused by climate change may yet be subject to change.

Embodied Senses of Place

As a conceptual framework, Speculative Soundwalking draws on the work of a number of writers, activists and artists. Fundamentally, Speculative Soundwalks facilitate a layering of sensory experience for listeners: the physical environment they move through, and the audio work guiding them through it. Speculative Soundwalking is thus grounded in intersensoriality, the idea that we “relate to and create environments through all of our senses.” [8] Taking this idea into the dimension of time, I draw on Setha M. Low’s concept of embodied space, that repeated sensory and embodied engagement with spaces allow us to create relationships with them, in an ongoing process of emplacement. [9] Tying in with Stephen Feld’s notion of acoustemology, knowing the world through sound, Speculative Soundwalks offer a way to shape emplacement through listening, adding to a participant’s repeated engagements with a particular space to enrich their relationship with it. [10]

Naturally, Hildegard Westerkamp’s practice of Soundwalking is central to my exploration of emplacement through embodied listening. Soundwalking emerged from the Schaferian idea that the relationship between humans and our environment is mediated through sound and listening. [11] Westerkamp’s Soundwalks evolved as a method for experientially understanding one’s lived environment through an aesthetic engagement with the soundscape. [12] This process of encountering and relating to space allows

the listener to expand their awareness to “varying subjective experiences of places” and understand themselves as a sounding part of the soundscape itself. [13] The point of difference between traditional and Speculative Soundwalking is the intervention of the artist, who mediates the encounter through instruction, composition and storytelling, thereby seeking to shape or frame the listener’s understanding of their place in the ecosystem.

Transformative Listening

The invitation to listen as a form of emplacement is not offered with an detached, neutral perspective: it carries with it the intention and biases of the artist. Listening to Abu Dhabi and Listening to the Port both aim to provoke listeners, pull them into reality and propel them to consider an alternative path than the one we have put ourselves on. In this way, Speculative Soundwalking is predicated on the understanding that listening has the capacity to be an active, transformative process. It borrows this idea from Deep Listening, a meditative and creative practice developed by Pauline Oliveros which intends to “expand consciousness to the whole space/time continuum of sound/silences.” [14] Deep Listening practitioners expand awareness to allow space for connection to their environments, to arrive at compassion and understanding of the full soundscape, “not just what one is presently concerned about.” [15]

Throughout her Sonic Meditations and Text Scores reverberates the instruction to give and receive sounds, including imagined sounds, inaudible sounds, remembered sounds, and sounds that respond or reinforce those around you. [16] These weave together with the goal of keeping awareness and attention in balance. [17] The sound-making explored in this practice is typically of the body - vocal, body percussion - and instructions given through metaphor, but she also notes that “it could be helpful though to actually be able to hear the real sound as an example.” [18] Speculative Soundwalking takes this suggestion literally, offering sounds outside of the normal range of human hearing, that is, crafting speculative soundscapes so that listeners may hear and imagine realities other than their own.

This resonates with Deborah Kapchan’s concept of listening as slow activism; listening asks us to “linger in the space of discomfort, where otherness is experienced empathetically as one’s “own” and where ownership itself is put into question.” [19] She proposes that “acoustic phenomena have the potential to integrate bodies, nervous systems, and affect”, listening is “de facto empathic,” and a sound creates a space in which the rational is intertwined with empathy. [20] By weaving emotive storytelling with empirical research in the form of embodied listening in space, Speculative Soundwalking asks listeners to linger in the discomfort of imagining, and therefore bearing witness to a reality that diverges from their own in some way. In Listening to Abu Dhabi and Listening to the Port, they imagine a familiar space across time, bearing witness to a speculative future self who will

have to grapple with life impacted by climate change. Other Speculative Soundwalks may explore a different mode of speculation, asking participants to listen through diverging spaces, diverging perspectives, or diverging states of consciousness, prompting them to bear witness to and empathise with those realities.

Transformative Listening

Speculative Soundwalks lend themselves well to small-budget, activist work exploring locally relevant issues, or global issues through a specific local lens. As participants are able to use their own devices and headphones, the works themselves inhabit public space with very little additional infrastructure, as small as a QR code sticker or a series of pins dropped on a digital map. Levy-Landesberg argues that the emergence of digital sound maps in urban environments uniquely allows for exploration and shaping senses of place, drawing on the existing hybrid space of the city. [21] Hybrid spaces, defined by de Souza e Silva, are mobile spaces that are created by the intertwining of users and their portable devices. [22] Digital maps, particularly digital sound maps blur binaries such as “public/private, remote/contiguous, and physical/digital.” [23]

By temporarily inhabiting hybrid space, Speculative Soundwalks create what LaBelle terms “auditory scaffolding.” [24] Auditory scaffolding refers to the way that pedestrians and drivers use the technology of portable music players to create a structure to associate with particular locations, moods, desires or experiences. Pedestrians, drivers, public transport users, cyclists, and anyone else moving through public space utilise technology of many kinds (digital maps, music players, Bluetooth headphones etc.) to provide “temporal and material support” to structure their experience of public space. [25] Speculative Soundwalking draws on this concept of auditory scaffolding as a structural model for mapping sounds to space, providing participants with a memorable sonic and narrative structure to shape their experience of the given environment. Upon returning there in the future, they will remember their experience of the soundwalk, enriching their relationship with that place going forward.

Speculation

The value of Speculative Soundwalking is in asking listeners to thoughtfully engage with their environment through listening, using sound to speculative realities and timelines over physical experience in the listener’s present day. By using sound to spark imagination and empathy, Speculative Soundwalks can provide audiences with a first-person glimpse into speculative realities, for example, Port Adelaide at the end of this century experiencing the full impact of heatwaves, ocean acidification and flash flooding. Listening to Abu Dhabi and Listening to the Port are examples of speculative climate fiction, imagining the future through the lens of climate change, and through embodied listening

offer an insight into the “experience of living in a changed world.” [26] Notably, while speculative climate fiction will likely have “relatively little impact on the global consumption patterns of the human species en masse,” the value of the work in this genre lies in the “metaphoric and analogical powers of speculation,” opening pathways for imagining “alternative ways of living with the catastrophe in the coming era.” [27] Expanding this idea beyond climate fiction and into speculation more generally, the power of Speculative Soundwalking is in gently asking:

What if something fundamental about your reality was different? How would you understand your life, your relationship to this place and the community around you? How would you move through the world?

Provoking listeners to wonder:

What must I change about my own reality in this face of this new understanding?

Diverging Realities

The two projects presented here follow similar blueprints, adapted to their unique social and environmental contexts. They explore speculation in the time domain (layering diverging time periods over the present day), and explore future realities by following the threads of climate change projections. Of course, Speculative Soundwalking can and should also explore other diverging realities: following other threads through time, diverging spaces, states of consciousness, perceptual apparatuses, etc. Listening to Abu Dhabi and Listening to the Port are both situated on land that I have a personal history and relationship with. Locality and emplacement are essential to Speculative Soundwalking, and thus it is important that I make it as accessible as possible to other artists who seek a framework to create work that explores their own acoustemologies and speculative realities. I begin with this paper, and intend to continue developing more accessible tools and resources in the future.

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Author Biography

Keira J. Simmons (she/they) is an emerging South Australian sound artist and sound designer based on unceded Kaurana Land. She creates projects that explore bodily engagement with place and sound, through Speculative Soundwalking and through performing meditative ambient sets. As a freelance sound designer, they work with local and global artists on creative projects focusing on queer-ness, ecology, neurodivergence and embodied theatrical experiences.