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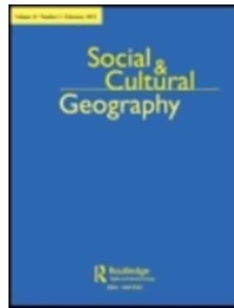

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Sound art and the making of public space.

Journal:	*Social and Cultural Geography*
Manuscript ID	RSCG-2018-0021.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Paper
Keywords:	sound art, non-representational theory, public space, museums, sacred, decolonising

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Sound art and the making of public space.

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Abstract

This paper draws on a collaborative sound art project that aimed to explore how sound art as a non-representational method might attract and produce new publics and re-signify iconic public spaces[i]. We describe how the project, AGORA, proceeded and to what extent it transformed the spaces it was performed in and made new, if transient, publics in the moments of performance. This paper focuses on the British Museum and St George’s Church, Bloomsbury. In the Museum the contemplation and resignification provoked by the intervention enlivened the sacred character of the museum. We argue that this (re)sacralization can be experienced as a practice of decolonization, albeit perhaps limited to the space and time of the performance. The Church, already signified as a sacred space, provoked another kind of encounter with the sacred and the colonial. The extended period of reflection provoked by the performance made visible the etchings of colonialism in the fabric of the building. Our contribution is primarily to the geographic literature on non-representational theory in relation to sonic geographies and music geographies. This paper points to the potential of sound art to make us listen to spaces more attentively.

Keywords: sound art, non-representational theory, public space, museums, sacred, decolonization

Introduction

Non-representational and more-than-representational theory has argued for the necessity of developing methods that capture our more than textual social and cultural worlds (Anderson and Harrison, 2012; Hill, 2015; Lorimer, 2005; Thrift,1996; Thrift, 2008). Despite the resonance of non-representational theory with sonic geographies the methods used in researching the relationship between sound and space continue to be dominated by language and text-based methods in both research and dissemination (Gallagher and Prior, 2014; Revill, 2016). AGORA, the project described in this paper addressed this gap through sound art that recorded public space when it was empty of people, composed music from these digital recordings and then performed these compositions in the spaces that the raw material was recorded in. We wanted to explore how this sound art might affect how publics interacted with two iconic buildings: the British Museum and St George's, Bloomsbury. We chose these sites principally for their importance as public spaces in London. In this paper we describe how the project proceeded and to what extent it transformed the spaces it was performed in and made new, albeit transient, public spaces in the moments of performance. We also reflect on how the experience of immersion in and attention to iconic public spaces produced a new awareness of the political histories of these spaces and, perhaps momentarily, re-signified them. In developing this analysis we point in particular to the ways that the sound composition re-sacralised Room 33 in the British Museum and drew attention to the colonial histories unexpectedly inscribed in the Church as well as the networks of

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colonialists that connected these two spaces historically. This paper therefore points to the potential of sound art to make us listen to spaces more attentively.

Cultural and sonic geography

Cultural geography has long been attentive to the relationship between sound and space, and a body of research exploring this relationship has steadily increased over the last 20 years (Anderson et al, 2005; Hill, 2015). In the following sections we discuss the main themes in this research before moving on to describe the sound art project AGORA in detail and our responses to it.

Sound mapping

The kind of electroacoustic sound composition described in this paper has a history that is conventionally dated to the World Soundscape Project (WSP) that was started at Simon Fraser University in the early 1970s (see Truax, 2002). In the foundational text of that project, *The Tuning of the World* (1977) R.Murray Schafer offers a system for the classification of all sounds to enable the discovery of 'similarities, contrasts and patterns' (Schafer, 1977/1994, p.133). This system can be used to map the soundscape. However, it also raises for us the question of to what extent the soundscape has an independent reality, which is implied by a system of classification, and to what extent it is always an interpretation of the listener. Rodaway in his *Sensous Geographies* (1994) argues that 'one cannot "map" a neighbourhood soundscape' (Rodaway, 1994, p.87) because it changes as people move through it. Schafer says that '[t]he soundscape is a field of interactions...[in which] sounds affect and change one another (and us)' (Schafer, 1994, p131). This is also reminiscent of Max Neuhaus' *Drive in Music.* This

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sound installation from 1967 consisted of seven radio transmitters located along a half-mile stretch of road. The sound was specific to each section of the road but also how the car radio picked up the sound depended on the speed of the car and the distance of the car from the transmitters. The sound was therefore different for each driver who 'assembled it for himself [sic] as he passed through it and for himself only' (Neuhaus,1994, p.64 cited in LaBelle, 2015, p.164). This dialectic or tension between the objective acoustic properties of a space and the subjective experience of the listener in contributing to the mapping of sound is also present in AGORA. There is an implicit assumption in Ain's strategy of recording buildings when empty of people that the building has an objective soundscape that is captured by the recording equipment and that her composition, in responding to that recording, offers listeners one interpretation of that space and invites them to create their own interpretation by asking them to sit and listen to the room while listening to the composition.

Geographers have also mapped sound in ways analogous to landscape maps but that enliven the map by making the environment audible. Thulin, for example, describes how image-based cartography can be combined with, supplemented by, or replaced by sound recordings in 'blends of cartographic and sonic activities' (2017:193) that he calls cartophony. Combining sound with 2D visual representation in cartophonic mapping heightens or recognises the multi-sensory experiences of being in space (2017, p.206). Sound walks also combine cartography with sonic methods, often evoking the hidden, haunted or lost qualities of the landscape. Pinder (2001), for example, gives an account of how listening to the Canadian artist Janet Cardiff's Whitechapel walk, '*The missing voice'*, lent a haunting quality to his walk around this part of East London. Similarly

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Gallagher describes how listeners of his 'audio drift' become acutely aware of the 'haunted, uncanny qualities' (2015, p.477) of a ruin. Butler describes a sound walk created by the artist Graeme Miller that uses fragments of interviews with people displaced by the construction of a motorway to 'sonically recreate a lost community' (Butler, 2006, p. 891). AGORA also evoked a sense of the haunted and uncanny, as we describe later in this paper.

One of the elements of Schafer's system of classification is keynotes. We found this concept useful in thinking through audience responses to the soundscape of AGORA. Schafer says 'keynotes are rarely listened to consciously by those who live among them…[they]are, however, noticed when they change, and when they disappear altogether' (Schafer, 1994, p.60). One keynote of the London urban soundscape, at least in some neighbourhoods, is the ubiquity of police sirens. One of the listeners in the Church specifically identified this sound as something that she could hear in the composition. In fact, although there were sirens in the original recording the extent to which the sounds had been processed meant that this identification of sirens was something the listener heard because of her assumption of what should be present in a London soundscape. Interestingly, Schafer specifically mentions sirens as signals or foreground sounds (in contrast to the background sounds of keynotes) because they '*must* be listened to' (1994, p.10), but the ubiquity of this sound in parts of London means that it only becomes signal when it is pertinent information (for example when driving). It is more as keynote than as signal that the siren was assumed by the listener to be present in the composition.

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Communicating sound

Although interest in non-representational theory has burgeoned in cultural geography (Lorimer, 2005, 2008; Morton, 2005) and sound offers great potential as a mode through which to understand and apprehend the more than textual experience of life, the actual deployment of methods for doing so are still under-developed. A central concern is how to turn the aural into the textual without losing the quality of music (Smith, 1997, p.503), a point which resonates with the claims of non-representational theory that the textual loses the aliveness of the world (see also Wood et al, 2007 on how to think and write about musical methods without losing the experience of listening to music).

The problem of how to write about aural experiences and, especially, affective and embodied responses to the sonic is compounded, George Revill argues, by the failure to engage with 'the sociomaterial processes and practices which facilitate the specificity of sonic spatiality' (Revill, 2016, p.241). This might include who comes into a sonic space, who is invited in, who feels at home there as well as the materiality of the space itself. With a similar emphasis on sound and music as event, Anderson et al advocate a 'shift towards the manifold and unpredictable entanglements of musical practice and performance rather than focusing on music or sound as textual objects' (2005, p.640). AGORA engaged with these issues through the practices of recording, composition and performance and also in our analysis of the project and our attention to who came to AGORA and how they responded to it.

What sound communicates.

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Smith investigates how attention to music can deepen geographical analysis of political economy. She argues that 'because sound penetrates forbidden spaces, expresses the unspeakable and offers a style of communication quite different from the written or spoken word, it might be a useful – even indispensable – route into an appreciation of the geographies of racism, resistance and ethnic identification' (Smith, 1997, p.515). Her account is interested in 'listening to black America'. Since music of black origin has a long history of articulating experiences of racism and expressing resistance to racism while forging a specific African-American cultural world, it is perhaps uncontroversial to argue that listening to black music might be a way into understanding geographies of racism and resistance. In our project this relationship between music and politics is less obvious but what we want to argue is that through the kinds of deep listening (Bull and Back, 2016) demanded by the site-specific music composed for a series of performances, new ways of apprehending the spaces of performance were made both audible and visible. In this sense we address Smith's questions, responding to Attali (1985) to ask 'What would happen to the way we think, to the things we know, to the relationships we enter, to our experience of time and space, if we fully took on board the idea that the world is for hearing rather than beholding, for listening to, rather than looking at?' (Smith, 2000, p.615). In developing her response to this question, Smith insists on the importance of performance of music over interpretation of musical texts in finding new ways of knowing. This concurs with Pocock's early paper on geographies of sound in which he explores the neglect of sound in geography and the discipline's highly visual character. He asserts that, '[i]n broad terms, the world of sound is an event world, in contrast to that of vision which is an object world…: it is a world of activities rather than artifacts, sensations rather than reflections' (1989, p.193).

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Rodaway makes a similar claim that 'Auditory geography is therefore time-space geography, a dynamic geography of events rather than images, or activity rather than scene' (Rodaway, 1994). This separation of the event and the object may be questioned given that sound always reverberates in object-laden space and that music is often a highly contemplative practice. Indeed, we want to argue in this paper that activity and sensation demand reflection of the sentient listener and in doing so enable us to apprehend artifacts and buildings in new ways of knowing. Our suggestion of a dialectic between the aural and the material is perhaps echoed in Pocock's recognition that

> 'The general presence of sound contributes to the process whereby environments become places, places with particular atmosphere, feeling, ambience. Then, sound not only surrounds but can penetrate to the very core of the sentient. This primitive power, which bypasses the cerebral and directly addresses the heart, elicits an emotional response: we are 'moved', perhaps elated, perhaps disturbed. It is this ability which gives sound its symbolic qualities, able to conjure up a whole world, previously known but best-part forgotten, from the 'trigger' of perhaps but a few notes' (1989, p.195).

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Although Pocock is alluding here to how hearing a few notes of a song can place the listener back in a space and a set of relations which they may have all but forgotten, we want to suggest that sound made in and about a space can also animate and conjure new worlds.

Sound Composition

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Gallagher and Prior note that sonic geographies have largely been methodologically conventional and suggest that phonography as 'performance and the arts may offer ways to engage with the intangible, imperceptible, ephemeral, and affective dimensions of life' (Gallagher and Prior, 2014, p.277). They use phonography to mean recording sounds with 'audio technologies, and the associated practices of listening, editing, playback, performance, distribution and broadcast' (2014, p.280). Sound art and sound composition are related to Gallagher and Prior's phonographic method but insists on the creative dimensions of editing. Sound art is not only concerned with the relationship between space and time, which arguably is characteristic of all music, but also to the social nature of these processes. (Born, 2015, p.19 – 20). Sound art departs from 'Euclidean and Cartesian understandings of space in/and music' (Born, 2015, p.19). This fits well, as Born notes, with geographic understandings of space as relational rather than as a pre-existing container. The connections between these conceptions of space and non-representational geographies is particularly apt for thinking about sound art, since the practice of composition does not often intend to simply capture and re-present an already existing representation of space, for example in the composer's mind, but instead aims for a non-representational and essentially intuitive, subjective, response to a space which it also then participates in remaking through the practice of performance.

Sound compositions are one way of engaging in more-than-representational approaches to understanding how people engage with their environments, and with the histories inscribed in place. Sound compositions and other site-specific art practices 'explore the fluid, performative and sometimes fleeting connections between environment, place,

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identity and meaning' (Cant and Morris, 2006, p. 859 cited in DeSilvey, 2010:, p.492). Hildegard Westerkamp emphasises the dialogic nature of the relationship between the composer and the recorded materials, and insists that the materials themselves impose on the composition so that '[n]o matter what the composer's intent may have been from the start, the materials inevitably speak with their own language, whose deeper meanings may only emerge with repeated listening and sound processing' (2002, p.54), see also Truax (2002).

The sound art project: AGORA

The sound art project that this paper reflects on was funded by a Leverhulme Trust Artist-in-Residence grant in which an academic and a practicing artist collaborate on research through artistic practice. The first author, Karen Wells, had previously done academic research through the close analysis of material and visual culture and wanted to extend this by incorporating sound into an appreciation of the multi-sensory character of people's engagements with public space (Wells, 2007, 2012). The second author, Ain Bailey, is a sound artist. Her compositions encompass diverse mediums, such as field recordings and found sounds, which are inspired by ideas and reflections on silence and absence, architectural urban spaces, and feminist activism. Her electroacoustic compositions are created for a variety of forms, including multichannel and mixed media installations, moving image soundtracks and live performance.

The project name was Acoustic Geographies Or Reflections on Assembly. This spelled out the acronym by which the project was known, AGORA, the Greek word for public square. At the heart of this project was the proposition that the 'distinguishing feature of

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auditory experience…[is] its capacity…to reconfigure space' (Conner, 1997, p.206 cited in Born, 2015:3). Our interest was in seeing (hearing) how a composition that was developed from the underlying or barely audible soundscape of the space of performance might shape the audience's experience of these spaces.

Three sites were initially chosen for this project, the British Museum, St George's Church Bloomsbury, and Kings Cross St Pancras concourse. In the event, it was not possible to negotiate access to St Pancras concourse and so the third event in this series was done at an independent cinema in East London, the Rio Cinema, Dalston. All of the compositions were also played on a loop at an installation in the Peltz Gallery, Birkbeck, University of London during a three week exhibition period. This paper focuses on the British Museum and St George's Church recordings, compositions and performances. Interested readers can find some material on the other events at the AGORA tumblr http://agora-geds.tumblr.com/ .

The emphasis of the WSP composers on listening was a key influence on Ain's approach to this project. In particular Westerkamp's attention to the inherent rhythm of environmental sound was an important reference point in developing the composition.

The relationship between acoustics, architecture and assembly was explored through the digital recording of these spaces from which Ain made a series of compositions. In a gesture reminiscent of John Cage's 4:33, the strategy she used was to record the buildings when they were empty and to then use this material to create digital

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compositions, and perform them to audiences at the same site where the recording was taken.

Sound art working with or on barely audible sounds often takes Cage's 4.33 as its touchstone. Laura Cameron and Matt Rogalsky's paper (2006) on Cage's collaborator David Tudor's *Rainforest 4*, although not on barely audible sounds, also shows this longstanding fascination with how to make compositions from objects and in buildings in ways that compel the listener to attend to the specific rhythms of the space they stand in. Japanese Onkyo experimental music performances involve audiences listening, or demonstrating through their stillness and attention that they are listening attentively, to compositions that are barely audible (Plourde, 2008). Alvin Lucier's 1969 composition *I Am Sitting In A Room* worked with the recording and repeated playback and re-recording of a text in a room until the words ceased to hold meaning and only the harmonies of the room itself could be heard by the listener (see Rogalsky, 2010). Similarly, Joseph Kirkegaard's 2008 composition *4 Rooms* recorded four rooms in Chernobyl's zone of exclusion that had been meeting places for the community and then played back these recordings into the room. He recorded them again to capture the playback, repeating this process ten times until the dense layers of sounds revealed the 'underlying acoustic shape of that otherwise empty space' (Gaboury, 2016). AGORA's compositions made from recordings in empty buildings to capture the sonic echo or aural architecture of the space gestures to these same interests. The compositions were intended to compel the audience to listen attentively to the sound of the composition but also the sound of the space and to reflect on the space as much as, if not more than, the composition. In this sense AGORA takes the impulse in works like Nicolas Collin's

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curated book and audio tracks 'A Call for Silence' (2004) to attend to the rhythms of the barely audible and reworks it to heighten 'soft sounds' to make them more audible to listeners. The 1998 exhibition 'Incredibly Soft Sounds' at Gallery 101, Ottawa, Canada 'presented sound environments that are so quiet as to necessitate that the listeners stop everything else they are doing in order to hear anything at all' http://www.g101.ca/exhibits/incredibly-soft-sounds . AGORA wanted to draw attention to the rhythm of space, its sonic echo, and its aural architecture by getting audiences to attend to the barely audible by listening to the compositions that were made from capturing these sounds. [ii]

The recordings were made with a pair of Naiant Omnidirectional microphones attached to a T shaped microphone stand at a height of 1.6 metres with the microphones spaced a metre from one another (50 centimetres to the left and right of the upright). These were fed into a Sound Devices Mix Pre-D and recorded on a Tascam DR-100 MK2. Recordings were made at several points in the rooms: the centre, and either end of Room 33 in the British Museum, and the altar, pulpit, nave and first floor gallery in the Church. These captured the room tone (Kroon, 2015) of the church and of Room 33. A total of 40 minutes of sound was recorded in each space.

The process of making the compositions from the recordings was immersive and intuitive. Ain says that 'play is my methodology' with playback, as in listening to sound, underpinning play, as in fun, creative, experimental. One constraint was that the three pieces (the two described here, and the composition on the Rio Cinema) had to be a total of 60 minutes to be played on a loop for the installation in the Peltz Gallery. B

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therefore took the decision to make three, 19:40 compositions. She imported the recordings into Ableton. The first step was to listen to the recordings intently and attentively to identity inherent rhythm in the recording. This is a strategy influenced by Hildegard Westerkamp's attention to working with 'what is already inherent in the materials' (McCartney, 2003, p.94), but Ain also creates her own rhythms that respond intuitively to the sound environment of the recording, for example fragile or gentle sounds might be a beginning and louder sounds could build towards a crescendo. The intention is to create an image of the room or to use her reflections on and feelings about the space as a point of inspiration for the sound compositions.

She listened to the recordings and the samples on Alesis monitors. The sound on the recordings was gentle, even fragile. To add weight to the sound or make it more substantial Ain layered the sounds on top of one another. This layering creates a kind of hyperrealism of the room sound. She then used a Roland PC 300 Midi Keyboard to process small sections of sound utilising the Simpler instrument on Ableton, changing the frequency of the sounds, creating loops and also using audio effects such as multiband dynamics, ping- pong delay and reverb. Through this playing with fragments she got a feel for the shape of the composition. She then sampled these layers into different sound events, often in loops, and assembled these sound events into a collage through repeated playing and rearranging of the samples.

To apply Schafer's typology we can say that the sound environment was doubled. On the one hand there was the sound environments heard by Ain in these two spaces, the British Museum and St George's Church. The sound environments were multiple and

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within each one were also multiple sound events, some of which were barely audible except through the recording equipment. Ain's recordings captured these multiple sound events and then used them to make a single composition which, when performed, produced a new sound environment where the dominant audible sound emanated from the speakers. Listeners experienced a new soundscape made up of a composition that reflects on the soundscape of the environment and the other soundfields that continue to persist during the performance and that, in a sense, belong to the space itself. The intention was that the audiences for these performances would be stimulated to think about the space and how it formed, or did not form, collections of individuals into a public in these contemporary agoras. Integral to this intervention was the proposition that buildings have a distinct 'aural architecture' or physical properties that shape the experience of being in space and have a sonic echo that persists after the 'congregation' departs because sound events continue to reverberate in space after the sound source has been removed (Blesser and Salter , 2007, p.5,16; see also O'Keeffe, 2017)

The British Museum is an exemplary space to explore the meaning of contemporary agora: it's great hall is described as 'the largest covered public square in Europe" (British Museum); it assembles a large public made up of a transient tourist population and Londoners which it describes as a 'global citizenship' (6.7 million in 2013); it wants to establish itself as the site of a material culture of multiculturalism and a meeting place for a diverse public. St George's Church, Bloomsbury is also both on the London tourist map and a meeting place for Londoners. Its acoustic properties are very distinctive. It is an Anglican Church and was built for the spoken word, music then considered to be a Catholic tendency. This is ironic since the architecture of the building

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does not allow the spoken word to reverberate and considerable adjustments have had to be done to improve the acoustics of the building so that the congregation can hear the sermon. In contrast to the scale and diversity of the British Museum, this is a space for a much smaller congregation and one that is less diverse in relation to faith and ethnicity. Visitors to the British Museum are unlikely to conceive of themselves as a public in the singular. In contrast, most visitors come to the Church either for worship or as tourists interested in the architecture of this building, one of only six Churches designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor in the early 18th century. The relatively small scale and Christian aesthetic of the building also contributes to the sense of a unified public space. We hoped that the compositions orchestrated from the soundscapes of this space when empty might offer audiences a space of meditative engagement with the building and on the relationship between sound, space and public assembly.

The making of AGORA

Responding to Gallagher and Prior (2014) and Revill's (2016) points that the actual materiality of the sonic event is more often left undescribed, we offer here a detailed description of how the compositions were conceived and made in these two sites.

We initially approached the British Museum to ask if they would be interested in allowing access to the building for the gathering of the acoustic raw material and subsequently for a series of performances. We were fortunate in that the Museum had recently launched a project to rethink the future of the Museum space, and they were excited about the focus of this project on the affordances of the space itself (in contrast to engaging with the collections) and how the public respond to that space. The

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Museum agreed to give Ain access to the Museum to record throughout the building, including in the Great Court. They also committed to staging a performance of the compositions.

We had originally intended to have the Great Court as the site of the recordings and the performances. However, on visiting the Museum, both when it was open to the public and when it was empty, and only the low and droning noise of humming machines could be heard, it became clear that it would be very difficult to capture the room tone or room sound. The sound of the fridges overwhelmed all other sounds and was also unpleasant to listen to. What Ain wanted was to capture the sound acoustics without humans in the room and although it could be said that the sound of the fridges was part of that room tone it was both a dominating sound and one that is not specific to that room. In most other rooms in the British Museum the dominant sound was of air-conditioners which effectively smothered all other sounds. The sounds of the Great Hall, contrary to our expectations, were not adequate for a project of assembling a space of congregation because of the dominance of the mechanical sounds. As Ain notes on her blog: 'The sound of the museum almost breathing. In reality it was the sound of fridges, the overly bright lights of the bookshop, a strange intermittent beeping, the scratchings of the feet of birds hanging out on the glass roof - and that was just The Great Court'. After walking around several of the collections, including the Egyptian rooms, Ain decided that the China, South Asia and South East Asia gallery, Room 33, would be the best space to record and perform in. This was mainly because it was one of the only rooms without air-conditioning, a sound which would otherwise dominate and overwhelm the room sound. Ain also liked that it has a large space in the centre that

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opens to the rooms below so that it would be possible to bleed out to the rest of the museum. Ain visited the British Museum at 5 am on two occasions to make recordings.

Ain made recordings at three points in the room on the presumption that the room tone would be different at different vantage points. The room is a rectangle punctured by a central circular space engraved with the name of the Room's benefactor, the Hong Kong banker Joseph E Hotung. In one half of the gallery are a collection of artefacts, mostly representations of the Hindu pantheon, and at the other several large stone Buddhas, mostly Chinese. The description of the room on the British Museum website, although clearly attempting to give coherence and a rationale for the assembling of these particular objects, seems to suggest instead the rather random character of their assemblage (see http://www.britishmuseum.org/visiting/galleries/asia/room_33_asia.asp).

The performance at the British Museum was on a weekday in late November 2015. The loudspeakers were positioned at the South end of the gallery and played for 20 minutes repeating every 90 minutes. For the first performance the sound was very quiet since the staff at the British Museum who set up the sound system, clearly concerned at how visitors to Room 33 might respond to a loud composition, had set the playback very low. The sound barely travelled to the north end of the gallery and the effect was constrained and underwhelming. In discussion between Ain and the Head of Adult Programmes at the British Museum it was agreed that the piece could not do its work unless it was loud enough to carry to pervade the gallery. So, in the second performance we raised the sound. It travelled easily to the end of the gallery and had an immediate

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effect on visitors. Some people who had begun to walk towards the north before the music started turned and walked back and others, as they came into the gallery (the entrance is in the middle) were drawn towards the sound. As the sound reverberated the effect was to make the statues appear to vibrate and the music lifted the dead weight of the gallery and animated the objects. This affect resonates strongly with David Chapman and Louise Wilson's account of their sound art project on the Falkland Estate in Fife, Scotland in which they explore the haptic qualities of sound (2011). These multiple religious figures were they in their intended religious setting would be animated through music and performance. The statue of the Hindu deity Shiva dancing reverberated in the light from the gallery windows and demanded the attention of spectators. We might say that they had been, through the music, imbued with wonder, Stephen Greenblatt's formulation for 'the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention (Greenblatt, 1991, p.42)'.

At the last performance of the day a family group, tourists from Mexico, listened intently and with evident pleasure to the final composition. They discussed with Ain afterwards what they felt about the relationship between the music and the space and they explained that they had heard in the composition the four elements, water, fire, earth and air and where in the piece they had detected, for example, the sound of dripping water. This idea of a cosmology embedded in the music resonated with the gallery context, surrounded as we were by artefacts that represented alternative cosmologies. Yet the sound of water that had prompted this reading of the composition was an illusion: there was no water in the original recording, nor was there intended to

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be the sound of water in the composition. So, although the visitors were convinced that they heard the sound of water, in fact, they had not.

In developing the compositions for the St George's performances Ain followed the same method as at the British Museum: a series of visits without recording equipment to get a feel for the space, two subsequent visits to record the space, and a time of reflection and composing that resulted in the final piece. Her field notes from this process that she uploaded to the project's tumblr note that:

> Listening without the aid of amplification, the sonic quality of the church is fairly quiet. There is the rumble of traffic on three sides of the building, with a constant stream of vehicles along Bloomsbury Way being the most noticeable, as well as the rumble of the Central Line underground beneath. However, listening through headphones to the microphones as they recorded at a different frequency, it became clear that the church's apparent tranquility is an illusion. Once Naiant omnidirectional microphones and a Sound Devices Mix-Pre D capture every single movement, creak, rumble and siren, lots of sirens, the permeability of this apparently impervious building is highly audible. Despite the lack of extreme quiet for the recordings, it was interesting to navigate St. George's, Bloomsbury acoustic space and how the surrounding acoustic environment was mediated by it. This also gave rise to a haunting and spectral quality to the recordings, when things

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not visible in the space where nonetheless audible (http://agora-geds.tumblr.com/)

On the day of the performances the outside of the Church seemed uninviting: its classical design and large heavy doors doing little to beckon in the passing visitor. The outside of the building is dirty and grey. The restored steeple is not visible from the church itself and can only be seen from a distance. There are thirteen steps and then a wrought iron fence with a gate which is locked at night. On the first day of the performance, a rough sleeper had put down a large sheet of cardboard at the right hand corner of the front entrance with a rug on top, a suitcase, and a cigarette packet half open.

Inside the church there is a desk on the right hand side, a table on the left with photos of the Church and postcards and books. Beyond that the seats are laid out in a wide semi-circle facing the altar, with the preacher's pulpit off to the left. A table had been set up opposite the pulpit at which three women were siting, pamphlets and small objects for sale laid out on the table. They were raising funds for women who lost their livelihoods and homes in the Japanese earthquake and tsunami in 2011.

Just inside the entrance volunteers from the Friends of St George's greeted arrivals and were also caught up in managing the man who has been sleeping outside. He wanted to charge his phone. They seemed to be arguing with him. He left with a piece of cake from the Women's Institute (WI). It was all slightly surreal and theatrical.

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Ain arrived and set up the first performance at 11 am. There were then about 10 people sitting in the pews, they had come specifically to listen to the piece. They sat in twos and threes on either side of the aisle, facing the altar, listening intently and for the most part, silently. Some people walked around the church looking at the architecture and listening in different places to the composition. The Church Warden walked up to the altar and lit incense. Its pillar of smoke resonated with the music and the music itself reverberated within the altar. When the piece ended, everyone applauded and Ain asked people to write their reflections in the note book on the table. People responded generously, engaged and surprised by this music in this space, both its discordance and its unexpected resonance with the Church. The sound system was set up on the upper floor with the speakers standing on either side of the altar providing a vector around which the audience could orientate themselves. Throughout the day the room filled and emptied as the four performances, spaced over five and half hours and each lasting 20 minutes were performed. A brief explanation of AGORA was set out on a leaflet which was available as visitors walked into the Church.

The audience was made up of a large number of queer people, which included many women and people of colour. AGORA had brought a different congregation to this Church, which is usually a predominately white congregation. It was especially, perhaps, different in its queerness. Confirming the claim that space is above all relational, Karen felt that the audience had changed the space, perhaps shifting it from the religious to the artistic. The music is at times menacing, as if it is arguing with the religious iconography that it circulated around. It heightened the prosaic character of the space, making it more available to its' new queer audience who may feel alienated by

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the strictures of religious practice and Christian artefacts. Through attending to the sound of the composition we became more aware of the space and an initial impression of darkness and stuffiness was replaced by an awareness and appreciation for the shifting light and airiness of the Church.

It was also Open House weekend (https://openhouselondon.org.uk/). Open House is a festival of London architecture when over 800 buildings of special architectural interest are open to the public. Many of the visitors (aside from those coming specifically to listen to this work) had come for the architecture, these visitors walked around holding information sheets and looked carefully at the architectural features. If the performance was on when they entered, many of them sat down for a few moments, copying the 'congregation' and listened. Most of these visitors, who had come for the sight rather than the sound, stood up after a few moments and started to walk around the space. A few people came in to sit and pray. The church was very 'open'; its walls accommodating the AGORA performance and its audience, but also the WI tea room, the Japan earthquake fund, the Open House visitors, the homeless man who kept wandering in.

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Contemplating space or what does it mean?

In her account of Trimpin's sound art project, DeSilvey comments that 'it is incredibly difficult to access and articulate such experience unless it is your own' (2010, p.502). This was a difficulty that we also had: how to understand what this experience was for our listeners. In this section we develop an account of how we experienced the significance of the performances, how it remade the space for us, and what listeners

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who responded said and wrote about the performances. We asked ourselves: what did this sound communicate and how can we write about it without deadening the effect of the aural as we render it in text? We reflect on how AGORA enabled us to rethink or reimagine Bloomsbury, the British Museum, St George's Church and the historical connections between them and propose that the AGORA project can be thought of as a kind of decolonizing listening (Hemsworth et al 2017).

It is hard to imagine that the colonial history of the British Museum can be ignored, and yet it frequently is. This quintessentially colonial space, one born from the imagination of those avaricious collectors of other people's stuff, the British Victorians, has somehow rebirthed itself as a postcolonial space. Both postcolonial in the sense of after the colonial but also, and more surprisingly, in the sense of a critique of the colonial project, the material artefacts of civilisations speaking back to the cultural arrogance of the British Empire and its discourse of colonised territories as spaces and people without culture. Although, as Duthie remarks, the British Museum remains 'a trope of empire' and 'an essentially imperialist institution' (Duthie, 2011, p.13) it has also succeeded in representing itself as a postimperial institution. It may well be an 'imperial archive' and 'the most spectacular repository of the material culture of empire.' (Duthie, 2011, p.15 citing Barringer and Flynn 1998, p.11) but its contemporary function as both conservation expert and London's foremost tourist attraction (and therefore, in fact, one of its most diverse spaces) has allowed it to reinvent its own imperial history and represent itself as a conservation space for the

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world's culture[1]. The British Museum describes its establishment as 'grounded in the Enlightenment idea that human cultures can, despite their differences, understand one another through mutual engagement. The Museum was to be a place where this kind of humane cross-cultural investigation could happen. It still is' (http://britishmuseum.org/about_us/management/about_us.aspx).

In this contradictory space the practice of recording the barely audible sounds of the room and listening to a composition that reflected on, in some sense, its aural architecture produced a new space. This space felt to us, and to some listeners, haunted and uncanny. Haunted by its disavowed colonial past that is literally all around the Museum and uncanny because the thing that everyone knows but no one acknowledges in the Museum is the violence of this history.

The choice of Room 33 in the British Museum for recording was primarily in response to the scale of the room and the relative absence of background noise, as we mentioned above. Room 33 is quiet, and has fewer visitors than the more 'popular' exhibits (for instance, the Egyptian rooms). Certainly it was not chosen for its sacredness. Indeed, although the room is replete with sacred objects, their sacred character is easy to overlook because of the scientific genre of the Museum as a space, the decontextualisation of its display, and the randomness involved in its colonial acquisition. Prior to the performances it was difficult to read this as a sacred space in any way. Indeed, when sitting in the middle of the gallery at 5 am Karen was struck, above all, by the apparent random nature of the gathering together of these objects

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[1] See, for example http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/tours_and_loans/international_exhibitions/treasures.aspx

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which, although they are ostensibly in this room because of their shared religious character seem to be gathered together only under the sign of colonial pillage. The cards displayed below each artefact do little to dispel this impression.

Although museums encourage a certain kind of aesthetic contemplation that shares with religious practice an orientation towards the ineffable, they have 'shunned particular and obvious expressions of religious devotion' (Buggeln, 2012, p.30). This may strike the reader as an obvious exclusion, and indeed, spectators who attempt to re-sacralize religious artefacts in museums are greeted with, at best, suspicion. In her 'Museum space and the experience of the sacred' Gretchen Buggeln notes that despite this prohibition or foreclosure of a sacred attitude in museums, the artefacts they display may undermine this prohibition. In the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, for example, designed by the Native American architect Douglas Cardinal 'there were multiple overt references to Native American religions and spirituality, and the entire museum presented itself as a kind of sacred space' (Buggeln, 2012, p.33).

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The composition created from the recordings in Room 33 and their performance in this same space generated a sense of sacredness that, however momentarily, could be thought of as a kind of decolonizing of the Museum. The performance emptied it, albeit briefly, of its association with the assemblage of colonial looting and re-animated the collection's original, sacred, properties. The performance animated a decolonial 're-thinking of the world' (Radcliffe, 2017, p.330) in centring the listener's attention on the origin of the artefacts rather than their presence in the colonial archive. Responding to the objects in a sacred register challenged the organisation of the archive, its practices of

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labelling, its imposition of a meta-narrative on a diverse region and its religions, and the boundaries between one room's collection and another that frames the archive within colonial epistemologies (Smith, 2005). Underscoring this re-sacralisation of the figures and objects and yet reasserting the meta-narrative of the museum's knowledge practices, the British Museum Head of Adult Programmes reflected with visitors after the performance on how AGORA, making sound out of nothing, resonated with the religious art, Buddhist and Hindu, in Room 33. He pointed out that many of the pieces in Room 33 and the cosmology of Hinduism and Buddhism are reflections on the relationship between being and nothingness, form and formlessness. In his chapter on 'Exhibiting the Sacred', in Crispin Paine's edited collection *Godly Things*: *Museums*, *Objects and Religion* Chris Arthur ((2000) mediates on the ineffable qualities of religious belief and the tension between the silence of religious discourse on its most crucial tenets – the nature of god, the purpose of creation - and the desire of the faithful to have objects to signify their belief. So Shiva, an aspect, like all the Hindu gods, of Brahman escapes the impossibility of representing Brahman. Arthur cites the Hindu philosopher Shankara's commentary on Brahman: 'it cannot be defined by word or idea, as the Scripture says, it is the One "before whom words recoil"' (Arthur, 2000, p.6). Although Arthur was obviously not signalling in this phrase the importance or necessity of non-representational theory, it does nicely capture the difficulty of capturing the ineffable in language which non-representational theory grapples with.

The initial hesitancy of the British Museum staff about the relevance of the piece to the space, and therefore insisting on playing the composition too quietly in its first performance of the day, gave way to a site-specific response that both shaped what was

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heard and encouraged visitors to engage with the artefacts as expressions of religious cosmology. Listening to AGORA created an impression of movement in the artefact, as described above, appearing to animate the statue of the dancing Shiva and, appropriately, making him appear to dance. This impression led to other conversations with visitors and museum staff about the effects on bodies and objects of sound vibrations and brought home the effect of sound which, 'is visceral and embodies space, despite being invisible' (Bandt, 2006, p.353). Our experience resonated with Chapman and Wilson's account in 'The caress of the audible' (2011) of the haptic qualities of sound.

The tendency of Christian colonial rule to reduce other religious practices to objects of the colonial gaze and/or to reframe religious practice as a distinct body of knowledge, a discipline, as one humanities subject among others (Srivastava 1998) is evident in the practice of the Museum. AGORA disrupted those practices, as we showed in the previous section. It is in this sense that we want to suggest that AGORA was a decolonizing intervention. Ain's compositional practice involves reflections on the space she records in. As a Black artist in the British Museum this included reflections on the colonial history of the building and its collection. Reflecting on this history and its contemporary significance she commented that she wanted to 'disrupt that space a bit'. Although this decolonizing desire was therefore present in the making of the composition, the way that the composition opened up a soundscape for a resacralizing and therefore, in our view, a decolonizing of the museum's objects was an unexpected revelation.

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St George's, of course, is already available to us as a sacred space and one that sits within its original context and has not been wrested and decontextualized to another space to signify something else altogether. Nor is Christianity in the Church only available as a discipline, the object of another's inquiry. If our intervention in the British Museum raised a set of questions about colonial acquisitiveness and colonial epistemologies, the Church raised other questions about who belongs in this Anglican, Christian space. The museum as a site of contemplation and the architectural neo-classicism deployed in 18th and 19th century museums gestures towards the sacred and ritual character of both St George's Church and the British Museum. As Carol Duncan notes, 'Once we question our Enlightenment assumptions about the sharp separation between religious and secular experience… we may begin to glimpse the hidden – perhaps the better word is disguised - ritual content of secular ceremonies' (1998, p.474) but we may also, we might add, glimpse the secular content of religious space.

A few people commented in the visitor's book on the uncanny and uncomfortable feelings provoked by this encounter with a Church. Neither the childhood memory of hours sitting in Church bored and restless nor the dissonance between being queer and sitting in an institutional space that has been far from welcoming of LGBTIQ people makes church an obvious or comfortable place for the formation of a diverse queer public. But then there was the new soundscape. The space filled with a composition (https://soundcloud.com/ain_bailey/sets/agora) that rearticulated the space as a space for this assembly, rearticulating the sacred although in a different register. Visibly, the audience took ownership of the space. People walked around the pews, stood on the first floor balcony, closed their eyes and listened, and even wrote poetry. When the

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piece ended, crashing to its final notes, a momentary silence was followed by spontaneous applause and amazement that a space that shortly before had felt so alien felt now so homely; so 'ours'. AGORA had created the church as a new kind of sacred space, both haunting and meditative.

St George's and the British Museum are not only geographically and temporally close: a conventional contrast of secular museum space to sacred religious space is undermined, on the one hand, by St George's traces of colonial history and, on the other, by the museums many sacred objects. Also connecting the two sites is that individuals connected with the British Museum are buried at St Georges, and the chief librarian of the British Museum, Joseph Planta and his wife Elizabeth (d.1821), and the Principal Librarian, Sir Henry Ellis, and his wife Lady Frances Jane (d.1854) have memorial plaques in St George's. Karen noticed these plaques while walking around the Church on the first scoping visits with Ain to think about the acoustic properties of the Church. During the two days of performances, the immersion in the space and the contemplation of it which was both demanded and made possible by the act of listening to Ain's compositions , led Karen to further contemplate the colonial history of the Church, and indeed of Bloomsbury, within which it sits.

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Interred in the crypt are 'the wealthy professional classes [who were] resident in the parish of Bloomsbury. This included numerous lawyers…doctors of medicine and surgeons, army and navy officers, imperial administrators, and curators and librarians of the British Museum' (Boston and Scott, 2009, p.74). Four other officers of the East India Army are interred in the vaults (see Boston and Scott, 2009, p.78 - 80 for brief

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descriptions of their colonial engagements). There are memorials on the walls of the Church to the colonial administrators and soldiers who were interred in the Church vaults or buried in the parish (Boston and Scott, 2009, p.66). These include a monument consecrated by the East India Company to 'the memory of Charles Grant' 'as an enduring memorial of the principles which they desire to render prevalent in the administration of the immense dominions which it has pleased providence to confide to their charge'. In another vault are interred the remains of the widow of 'John Williams Sanders, of the Island of Nevis'. An engraving to General Robert Bell, Commandant of the H.E.I. Company's Madras Artillery, who died 1844, 'Beloved and Lamented'. There is also a memorial to the director of the East India Company, Edward Parry 'in which capacity he laboured chiefly for God and for the establishment of Christianity in India' who died in 1827, and William Alexander, Provost Marshall General of St Vincent 'the duties of which office he discharged with honour to himself and satisfaction of the public'.

The contrast between the sacred space of the Church and the secular, imperial history of the Museum started to disassemble because of the affordances of listening to a composition that is itself a reflection on space. This non-representational reflection allows, perhaps even demands, an openness to the space in which the listener stands, echoing Blesser and Salter's (2007) statement and question: 'spaces speak, are you listening?'. The listener's experience of this soundscape is necessarily different to that of others sitting in the same room, since each of us bring to our listening a set of orientations and personal and social histories that make us more or less alert to different features within the space. In this sense, the distinction that Rodaway (1994) draws

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between the soundscape as object of aesthetic reflection and the soundscape as dynamic event that moves with the listener is collapsed. The soundscape is experienced simultaneously as an aesthetic object and a dynamic event. The traces of colonial history on the walls of the Church drew Karen into asking questions about how these two sites are connected, questions that can only be answered through further investigation of the archive: pointing towards the necessity of non-representational methods to be combined with textual methods if they are to address theoretical questions about how space is made and how it can be re-made (Nash, 2000). Although, in our interpretation AGORA heightened our awareness of the interconnected 'power geometries of global economic-modernity' (Radcliffe, 2017, 429) in these two iconic public spaces more archival work would need to be done to uncover precisely how these connections worked to provide a cultured and pious veneer over the violence of colonialism.

Conclusion

In this paper we have explored how an arts-based intervention in public space, sounds made from recordings of buildings when empty of people, can produce new reflections on the meaning of publics and public space. Through this intuitive, iterative practice we were able to pull at the fabric of the space, so to speak, to unravel their colonial histories and sacred properties and, in surprising ways, to reconfigure sacredness and to decolonise public space through sound art. It is important to emphasise that the interpretation offered here has emerged from the analysis of field notes in conversation with the material affordances and histories of the spaces. This sonic intervention was not an instrumentalist or a priori attempt to reconfigure the sacred or even to decolonise

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the epistemology of the Church or the Museum. It is rather that the premise of the intervention was that a composition that responded to a site could engage audiences, including ourselves, in contemplation of the significance of space to the formation of publics. In the interpretation offered here, that contemplation pulled us in the direction of uncovering the colonial histories that has underwritten the development of London's public spaces and a re-sacralisation of religious artefacts as a way of disrupting colonial epistemologies.

We took the words of Shankara's commentary on Brahman, the one 'Before whom words recoil' (Arthur, 2000, p.6) to signal that the practice of composition from silence and of listening to performances of those reflections are also events 'before whom words recoil'. We resisted the temptation to translate this sound intervention into the standard routines of social science data collection which might have involved, for example, interviewing audiences, and instead attempted to engage with the space and the objects within it in terms of wonder and resonance where resonance refers to the power of both the object and the space in which it sits to 'evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged' (Greenblatt, 1991, p.42), and provokes a desire to understand the 'dense network of evolving and often contradictory social practices' (Greenblatt, 1991, p.42) within which they continue to circulate.

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[i] This work was supported by Leverhulme under Grant 2014-AIR-067.

[ii] We are grateful to two anonymous reviewer's for pointing us to Onkyo experimental music, 'Incredibly Soft Sounds', Collin's 'A call for silence', Alvin Lucier's 1969 'I Am Sitting In A Room' and Joseph Kirkegaard's 2008 '4 Rooms'.

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