

Eight retrofuturist scenarios for sound/performance art in pandemic times

Florian Cramer, 4-2020

1) Arseny Avraamov, *Symphony of Factory Sirens*, Baku 1922

Two years after the Spanish flu pandemic, this was a seminal, and monumental, piece of noise music and public sound art, exactly 80 years before DE PLAYER began its own program “Public Sound” in another harbor city. The instruments of the Baku symphony included ship foghorns, artillery canons, the machine guns of several infantry regiments, airplanes, twenty-five steam locomotive whistles and the sirens of all factories in the city, bands and choirs. Today, this symphony could be reenacted as a social distancing mass spectacle: listeners would be able to enjoy it without leaving their homes, or by keeping the epidemiologically advised safe distance of 1.5 meters from each other in the streets.

Inventing sound art as *proletkult*, the *Symphony of Factory Sirens* breaks with bourgeois aesthetics and its parameters of good taste. At the same time, it could have been criticized by fellow Marxists like Adorno and Debord as paving the way for the society of the spectacle. After 1990, the *Symphony of Factory Sirens* would have been a “creative city” spectacle designed to attract tourists and the “creative class” to the post-industrial chic of places like Rotterdam. In pandemic times, after the end of the art world as we know it, the end of tourism and of outsourced industrial production, the symphony would be for the domestic population again (if only to keep it entertained during unemployment).

Art performances for pandemic times are now mostly being imagined as Internet streaming events for isolated home listeners. Symphonies of factory sirens (or, in the Netherlands, the air strike alert sirens that are being test-run every first Monday of a month all over the country) demonstrate the alternative: mass events scaled up to monumental proportions, using every available sound-making machine, so that no listener will be able to escape from the spectacle.

Will spaces like DE PLAYER thus only have the choice between (a) reinventing themselves as boutique Internet streaming services or (b) scaling up to mass event proportions, with literally no space for anything in between?

2) Gertrude Stein, *If I Told Him, A Completed Portrait of Picasso* (1923)

Gertrude Stein ran her apartment in Paris as an early domestic artist-run space, anticipating DE PLAYER’s beginnings in Annemiek Engbers’ and Peter Fengler’s house in the early 2000s. At the height of the Spanish Flu pandemic, 1,200 people died in Paris each week. In those years, and the

aftermath of World War I, Stein phrased the famous term of the “lost generation” which she had picked up and adapted from her French car mechanic (and which Richard Hell turned into the “blank generation” for punk culture in 1977).

If I Told Him is a seminal early-20th century sound and language-experimental poem, written in 1923 and recorded by Stein in 1934. It became a point of departure for later sound poets including Gerhard Rühm and Monika Lichtenfeld, Hans Clavin, GJ de Rook, Sten Hanson, ARF ARF, Marc Matter and Duncan Harrison who performed in and published with DE PLAYER. To quote Duncan Harrison from his 2018 performance in Rotterdam, “sound poetry is embarrassing”. Embarrassment can only happen with other people present; it is the stronger the closer the proximity. In that sense, embarrassment is a contagion, and social distancing a way of avoiding embarrassment. What can sound poetry, what can performative art still be without opportunities for embarrassment?

Stein’s *Portrait of Picasso*, a gift-in-return to Picasso’s portrait of Stein from 1906, reinvents language as multi-layered, modulated, multi-perspective sounds and meanings, congenial to cubism’s reinvention of painting. As a portrait, Stein’s poem gets simultaneously closer to and farther away from Picasso than a conventional prose text would have; it radicalizes both intimacy and distance. Ultimately, it performs language as a self-replicating, mutating virus (decades before William S. Burroughs literally called language a virus).

In an interview on the Covid-19 pandemic, Dutch virologist Marion Koopmans defined viruses as follows: “A virus is a kind of shipping package with a single purpose: to protect a piece of genetic material, and transport it from a to b. [...] The only purpose of that genetic material is to make new virus copies. It’s the perfect parasite. Outside a body, a virus can’t do anything but stay intact.”¹

Stein’s poem newly imagines the spoken word as a viral shipping package and poetry as genetic material that has mutated from modern visual art. DE PLAYER got infected by both strands, sound and art, and mixed them to infect people. Would Stein ever have been able to write her “Portrait” if the Spanish flu had kept her and Alice Toklas quarantined in her Paris apartment till 1922? Or is it just that, a portrait crafted from radical distancing?

3) George Brecht, *Drip Music* (1959-62)

“For single or multiple performance. A source of dripping water and an empty vessel are arranged so that the water falls into the vessel. Second version: Dripping.”

This early Fluxus piece, printed as a score on a cheap business card, is the perfect sound art piece to be performed at home in solitary confinement, as long as tap water is still running. Years ago, Goodiepal (see entry #7) suggested to consider the water pipe system an artificial intelligence. Brecht’s *Drip Music* thus should be re-read as an early piece of mass-reproducible “media art”.

¹Translated from Bohlmeijer, Lex. “Viroloog Marion Koopmans beantwoordt de prangendste vragen over corona, de Nederlandse aanpak en wat je nu kan doen.” *De Correspondent*, 19 Mar. 2020. [decorrespondent.nl, https://decorrespondent.nl/11051/viroloog-marion-koopmans-beantwoordt-de-prangendste-vragen-over-corona-de-nederlandse-aanpak-en-wat-je-nu-kan-doen/779015402352-a0fedac2](https://decorrespondent.nl/11051/viroloog-marion-koopmans-beantwoordt-de-prangendste-vragen-over-corona-de-nederlandse-aanpak-en-wat-je-nu-kan-doen/779015402352-a0fedac2).

Performance and reproduction media have been at the core of DE PLAYER, mostly visibly, audibly and tangibly in its self-published, experimentally cut vinyl. These records are performative media, in the literal sense of media that do perform by virtue of their physical material qualities.

Does the next *Layer* need to be published as tap water?

4) La Monte Young, *Composition #10 1960 to Bob Morris*

“Draw a straight line and follow it”: today, a recipe for disaster, no matter whether one performs it at home in isolation or outdoors in violation of distancing rules. In the current situation, the piece raises the question: Who has the power to draw lines? Where, in between what and whom, when lines are no longer to be followed but avoided, and drawn to keep people away from each other.

La Monte Young was a classically trained composer before he became a conceptual artist, with compositions like this one. Nam June Paik, another artist trained as composer, performed it as “Zen for Head” by soaking his hair with wet paint and dragging it over the ground, thus turning the piece from abstraction to concretion, much like the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu who preferred to “drag his tail in the mud” to a high office at the emperor’s court. In their performance at DE PLAYER in 2015, Alexander Brener and Barbara Schurz continued this righteous tradition by live-painting their faces with their own fresh shit.

Is *DE LAYER* the (literal) disembodiment of *DE PLAYER*? And if so, can it still be place that drags conceptualism into the mud?

5) Alvin Lucier, *I am sitting in a room* (1969)

“I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now”: Lucier’s composition consists of a description of itself, beginning with this sentence and then explaining its own acoustic setup and process. That self-description gets replayed in the performer’s room where it’s being filtered through the room’s resonance. This process is being repeated until the spoken text has dissolved into unintelligible frequencies.

In pandemic times, “I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now” describes the so-called “new normal”; the piece as a whole the failing hope that its process will remove the distance between the performer’s and the listener’s surroundings. In the end, the remaining sound frequencies will always remain specific to the room of the performer, never to that of the listener.

In this sense, *I am sitting a room* was the first piece of domestic tele work in music. It even told its listeners so in its first sentence. If social distancing will continue for another five years, a predicted by Harvard researchers in *Science*,² then *I am sitting in a room* is poised to become proverbial. The piece could become a classic of a genre that many are now busy establishing, art that can be made and experienced within the confines of one’s domestic space through remote instruction.

²Kissler, Stephen M., et al. “Projecting the Transmission Dynamics of SARS-CoV-2 through the Postpandemic Period.” *Science*, Apr. 2020. [science.sciencemag.org](https://science.sciencemag.org/doi/10.1126/science.abb5793), doi:10.1126/science.abb5793.

Such art doesn't need spaces like *DE PLAYER* any more. Since *I am sitting a room* is a classic of sound art, one could argue that sound art can be auto-destructive in respect to its performance spaces, in the sense of an "art which contains within itself an agent which automatically leads to its destruction" (Gustav Metzger, *Manifesto Auto-Destructive Art*, 1960).

6) Sex Pistols, *God Save the Queen* (1977)

To promote the Sex Pistols debut album *Never Mind The Bollocks*, Sex Pistols inventor and manager Malcolm McLaren teamed up with Virgin Records owner (and later billionaire) Richard Branson, renting a boat on the Thames two days prior to the Queen's river procession. They had the band play "God Save the Queen - She ain't no human being" and "Anarchy in the U.K." on the boat's deck until the police came and stopped the cruise, arresting, among others, McLaren and Vivian Westwood (but not the band). In my opinion, this performance - plus Westwood's fashion design and Jamie Reid's graphic design - was much more interesting than the band's rock music.

To get oneself arrested in times of social distancing, the effort of singing is no longer necessary. Aside from that, the Sex Pistols enacted a now-classic Public Sound piece, demonstrating that sound performances can not only be embarrassing, but also offensive. The Sex Pistols went beyond making words viral - such as "no future", an early meme -, but performed as contagious agents themselves, with the word "punk" and their Westwood-designed looks suggesting filthiness, parasitism and risk of infection.

DE PLAYER merged the two genres of the punk club and the performance art space, being a deliberately filthy venue. This filthiness is even preserved in its name, which was simply taken over from an organized crime-run brothel and gambling bar called *DE PLAYER*. That bar had gone out of business, an artist collective moved in and continued the affairs.

Brothels were among the first venues that got shut down in the pandemic. How can a filthy space with brothel DNA survive the 1.5 meters distance society?

7) Goodiepal & Pals

In his work and life, Goodiepal has periodically reinvented himself as - among others - a hacker, commercial ring tone composer, teacher of electronic music composition, inventor of a graphical score notation system, cabin bike cyclist, mechanical clock builder, person who publicly gave away money (among others, at *DE PLAYER* in 2009) and his personal belongings, storyteller, Nordic mythologist, founder of a band-commune-collective, smuggler of refugees in Serbia and now family man in the Free State of Christiana.

But if there's a leitmotif in this music of changes, then perhaps: community exchange. Whatever Goodiepal does happens in direct interaction with other people, drawing energy out of their spontaneous reactions, improvising and ad-libbing himself through the situations that ensue.

How can this still be done in pandemic times? Do Goodiepal & Pals have to withdraw to their own commune and turn into a cult? How will he/they reinvent themselves this time?

8) Tara Transitory, //gender|o|noise\\ (performed, among others, in DE PLAYER in 2015)

To continue the story of punk and its viral body performances from the second-last entry: noise musician Tara Transitory collaborates with people who have been pushed to the margins of society, transgender dancers and fire-eaters in Hanoi, for example, who perform their acts on main roads in between traffic jams, living from cheap self-cooked candy they sell to the car drivers who watch them. More recently, Tara's sound performances have reflected on diasporas and involved local immigrant co-performers at each place where she and her partner Nguyễn Baly have toured.

In quarantined societies, the marginalized get pushed even further to the margins: in the best case, surviving as low-paid service workers without the privilege of working home but taking all the health risk, or worse, as street people who lose their last means of existence in the lockdown. The current situation of many freelance artists and gig economy workers is structurally similar.

Under these circumstances, the transgender street performers and candy vendors do not merely represent the margins, but they are today's avant-garde. In this present and future, Tara Transitory's noise music simultaneously continues and overturns the white, male, European, even fascist affair begun in Italian futurism.

If there's a common denominator in Futurism, Fluxus and //gender|o|noise\\, then unsafety: as heroic militarism in Italian Futurism, as "Danger Music" in Fluxus ("Scoop out one of your eyes 5 years from now and do the same with the other eye 5 years later", a score of Takehisa Kosugi from 1964), as infusing and infecting art spaces with the precariousness of marginalized milieus.

How will that still be possible in sanitized environments? Tara Transitory emerged from a sanitized environment, Singapore, herself, the city-state that is now on the forefront of containing the pandemic, and thus likely one of the 21st century powers to emerge from it.

(with thanks to Peter Fengler)