

## LOUDSPEAKERS CAN SHOUT TOO

**Alejandro Brianza**

*Soundscape Study Group, CEPESA, National University of Lanús /  
[alejandrobrianza@gmail.com](mailto:alejandrobrianza@gmail.com)*

**Agustín Guaraz**

*Soundscape Study Group, CEPESA, National University of Lanús /  
[agustinguaraz@gmail.com](mailto:agustinguaraz@gmail.com)*

Translated by Alejandro Brianza, Agustín Guaraz and Nicholas Callaway

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### Abstract

This article reflects on a performance by the Soundscape Study Group [GEPS – Grupo de Estudio en Paisaje Sonoro], made up of students in the BA program in Audiovisual Studies [Licenciatura en Audiovisión] at the Universidad Nacional de Lanús (Argentina), carried out at Feria Futuro, an on-campus event promoted by the National Secretary of Labor and Employment on 8-9 November 2018. The artistic action, carried out in protest against precarious employment opportunities being promoted within an under-funded public institution, consisted of playing recordings of demonstrators chanting and police repression from the years 2001 and 2017 over portable loudspeakers. This intangible interference produced through sound as an element of protest produced an unusual disruption of the event: the small number of performers stood in marked contrast to the amplified magnitude of their presence.

Here we problematize the evocative qualities of the sound, and how its proposal of a new symbolism translates into provocation. The construction of meaning appeals to memory in order to delegitimize the festive atmosphere of a fair that touts retrograde phrases in the guise of modern design.

### Keywords

Sound; performance; political action; listening; low tech.

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### Introduction

It is past noon but the November sun still hits the industrial roof with the same fury. The light penetrates through the cracks, illuminating the interior of the José Hernández building's main hall. It is a large building, the largest at the Universidad Nacional de Lanús, and at the same time the least

empty. An agglomeration of people forms, their chatter spreading out in multiple directions before reaching the flat plane of the ceilings and bursting into an unintelligible but imposing mass of sound. It is a familiar scene: where the solitude of an old abandoned railway workshop once resided, today life and movement abound.

However, this time something different is happening in the hall. Fences encircle the Public University, while inside a job fair called FERIA Futuro unfolds amidst retrograde slogans made sleek through modern design: "Armá tu CV" [Put your resume together]. "Acercate a las empresas" [Get closer to the companies]. Today, a fair put on by the National Government invites young people to come to the Public University and cast their lot behind precarious jobs at multinational corporations. At the beginning, the Argentine national anthem played: "*And the free people of the world reply: 'We salute the great people of Argentina!'*".

After noon, the heat makes the scene increasingly unbearable. It is the second day of the event, and the resistance of the university community begins to manifest itself sporadically. Small groups of students go through the fair shouting protest songs; a woman delivers an speech against the event; the student centers publish a communiqué and raise a banner that, without directly mentioning the event, gets its point across. For FERIA Futuro, though, life goes on; resistance is sporadic and its manifestations inconsequential.

Like the other demonstrators, our group has decided to do something about the fair. In organizing, we face the same obstacle as the rest: you could count all of us on the fingers of one hand. Some of us gather at the entrance to the fair with portable wireless loudspeakers hanging from our bodies, while others wait inside, gathering an audiovisual record of the event. Once we have all reached our agreed-upon positions, we decide to commence.

The first step is to turn on our devices. There are just three of us walking around the fair. Our cell phones determine what blares out of the loudspeakers, disorienting the attendees. And thus, FERIA Futuro is met with the memory of the people singing in Plaza de Mayo (Buenos Aires) in 2001 against the IMF's intervention in the Argentine economy. "*Que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo*" [Get them out of here, get every last one out of here!] rings out in the main hall of the José Hernández building. There is also a song chanted by the workers' movements protesting the 2017 pension reform: "*Unidad de los trabajadores, y al que no le gusta se jode, se jode*" [Workers united, and if you don't like it fuck you, fuck you!], which in that instance was cut short the bullets of the repressive State apparatus<sup>1</sup>.

The security guard in charge of the entrance does not know how to react. He is not sure whether he should stop us, chase us or hold his position, until finally he chooses to report our presence over his radio. Barely a minute in, our performance has started to make us uncomfortable. The lines of young people, those in charge of stands, the students who are out on their break, come out to hear what all the noise is that has drowned out the official background music and pervaded the atmosphere. Workers' marches are heard. Police gunfire is heard. Some people murmur amongst themselves, others offer supportive laughter.

The security personnel do not take long to appear. There are six or seven of them who surround us menacingly. They ask us to turn off the device and invite us to leave the premises. They push us along with subtle hostility, while we respond quietly. Suddenly we are just three students quietly attending the *Feria Futuro*, sipping *mate*<sup>2</sup> and engaging in friendly conversation. The good manners with which we address the security personnel continue the series of disorientations. Our provocation transcends the corporeal, and that causes them discomfort. We walk slowly and attempt to strike up a conversation, which they in turn do their best to avoid. They want to speed up the procedure because they are aware that their actions only make things look worse as everyone around looks on intently. They act aggressively, we act calmly. So who is being violent? The scene is witnessed by all, up to the exit. Finally, orders come from above: we are students, we are not acting violently, we must be allowed to continue.

The walk through the fair maintains the same dynamic: we drink *mate*, talk and hand out pamphlets. Some people come to congratulate us and others display the pamphlets at their stands. From time to time, those in charge of organizing the event come over in an attempt to convince us to leave. They question the legitimacy of our act, and label us as selfish, rude and so on. From time to time, people come to participate in the debate and argue in our defense. The loudspeakers keep blaring, and the *mate* keeps flowing.<sup>3</sup>

### Intervening without the body

The intrusion described above was planned around two main themes: field recordings, and cheap and accessible playback technology.

This is related to an idea put forward by William S. Burroughs (2013) in which he maintains that playing the sound of a disturbance can in turn produce a real disturbance. He explains this in the following way:

Here we have a common pre-disturbance situation. [...] Ten recorders tied with straps under their bags, playback, and recording controlled by buttons on the flap. They have pre-recorded sound effects of riots in Chicago, Paris, Mexico City, Kent/Ohio. If you adjust the sound volume of the recordings to the volume of the surrounding sound, they will not be detected. The police confront the demonstrators. Operators approach, turn on the Chicago recording, play, move to the next skirmishes, play the recording, keep moving. (Burroughs, 2013, p. 42)

These people, whom the author calls *operators*, are the ones who carry out the action of intruding into the natural sound environment of the space in question, in order to reproduce field recordings from other contexts, which are striking and disruptive because of their content.

We can also think of this action as a performance as understood by Diana Taylor:

Performance, as an act of ephemeral intervention, can interrupt the circuits of capitalist cultural industries that limit themselves to manufacturing consumer products. It does not depend on texts or editorials (and thus evades censorship); it does not need a director, actors, designers, or all the technical apparatus that theatre requires; it does not need spaces designated to exist. As art of rupture, performance questions the modernist convention that art is autonomous from social life. (Taylor, 2012, p. 67)

We could thus, by analogy, say that those people whom Burroughs calls "operators" are also "performers" who, without necessarily being actors or experts in this type of disruption, put into motion an act of intervention and rupture.

Aiming to reproduce this logic, we decided to think of ourselves as performers – the ones who would burst into the hall of the building during the course of the fair. As mentioned above, and in relation to Burroughs's perspective, we selected field recordings from conflictive situations: two protest chants, one from the Plaza de Mayo in 2001 and the other from the workers' movement protests prior to the pension reform of 2017, the latter also including the shots fired against the group by the security forces. According to the second premise, it was still necessary to design how these recordings were to be played. Since the disruption was supposed to be surprising and momentary, it was out of the question to have equipment that needed to be plugged in, since the planning and setup required would largely dampen the surprise factor. We thus thought of using portable wireless speakers connected via Bluetooth to different cell phones that would play the recordings, which were hung ("installed") in the performers' backpacks.

This kind of intervention mediated by a speaker, without directly using the body, was a key element in the response elicited from the security staff at the fair, who were baffled by the presence of the dissociating element: at no time was there an aggressive attitude from the body; on the contrary, one of the first actions was for the performers to get in place and start serving a round of *mate*.

Performance [...] is always mediated. Acts always function within systems of representation, within which the body is yet another mediation, which transmits information and participates in the circulation of images. (Taylor, 2012, p. 75)

Taylor (2012) says that the strength and presence of the artist is felt, even at a distance. Here, analogous to the performer's body and the circulation of images in Taylor's view, are the playback device and the sounds emitted. In other words, the loudspeaker takes on the function of the body and participates in the circulation of sounds instead of images.

### Denouncing by listening

As the sound of the loudspeakers advanced down the main corridor of FERIA Futuro, our bodies retreated, pushed back by security guards in the direction of the exit. However, the organization gave up its methods of resistance after witnessing how the strong contrast between their body language and ours cast them as the violent party. Even so, this turning point in the performance invites us to rethink the different faces of the aggressiveness generated. The extracorporeal nature of our performance does not exempt it from being provocative, insofar as it alters – or seeks to alter – an established order that until that moment had remained invisible. The reactions to our discourse occurred only once our interference had become present, highlighting what had been a standardized sound environment. In this sense, our action was indeed an attack.

In a way, this type of protest pushes us to denature an established order in which certain sound sources must be listened to more than others. In relation to this structuring of the audible medium, Murray Schafer (1977) speaks of *sound imperialism*, in reference to the tendency to impose one acoustic profile over another, which is a characteristic feature of urban soundscapes. In an urban setting, increasing industrialization subjects the sounds of nature and individuals to those of machinery, forcing the former into a secondary role.

Through this distinction, Schafer allows us to appreciate an order that influences our reading of acoustic environments, the reasons for which are attributed exclusively to intrinsic qualities of sound, especially its intensity.

However, we can also recognize as an influential element for our perception the cultural construct by which we negatively categorize certain sounds as noise, classifying them as annoying, aggressive or unbearable. In pointing out this aspect, Bieletto (2018) introduces the notion of “politicization of listening” to refer to the existence of power structures that influence the possibilities of listening and help determine which sound-based discourses are worth listening to and which are not.

The disruptive nature of our walk through Feria Futuro was not only based on the power of the loudspeakers, but also on the discourse they amplified. It would have been different to meddle with music similar to that played over the event’s own sound system. The protests, the shouts and the shots make up a group of undesired sounds, and their use in the form of recordings implies provocation. Examined from this lens, they are nothing more than noises, resulting from a series of judgments of given values and indexes of a social conflict (Bieletto, 2018). We can therefore infer that such provocation exists in the face of the recognition of the intentionality behind the selection of these specific recordings: the sound of the demonstration or the thunderous shots of police repression fracture the joyful atmosphere of Feria Futuro by using a symbolic process that asserts, without resorting to any sort of text, that there is really nothing to celebrate. This process of symbolization was conceptualized by Jean-François Augoyard (1997 p. 213), who referred to it as “anamnesis,” which he defines as the evocations that a given sound can induce, based on experiences that make the perception of that sound an eminently unique experience. Even so, we could ask ourselves if there are, in the different individual interpretations, common points that allow us to speak of a collective perception. In reference to this, Herrero and Lutowicz (2010) point out that particular meanings of different subjects may be related via shared social and cultural experiences, which can include the acquisition of sounds that make up the “sound memory” of a community (Herrero and Lutowicz, 2010 pp. 172-173). Thus, the sounds of the demonstrations that took place during Argentina’s 2001 social and political crisis, and those of the recent persecutions by the repressive government apparatus, may raise the same questions for each of the participants in Feria Futuro, who, either with hostility or approval, cannot help but react to what is heard.

### Creating through technology

It is interesting to think of the mutations that have taken place in the central hall of the José Hernández building. Where today we see a bustling university pavilion, twenty years ago there were no people at all. As we have previously pointed out, from that abandoned railway workshop, a space suspended in absence, a public institution has arisen in which human



relations develop in various ways, and the uses of the place are continually reinvented. The individuals and groups that compose it are related through a process of reciprocity and consensus, in a kind of mechanic-less mechanics, resulting in a perpetually redefined and renegotiated space that instead of being, occurs (Delgado, 2007).

Based on this appreciation of the ephemerality of space, we might think of Feria Futuro as an unusual event for the history of past configurations of the hall. From this history, we can infer a certain redundancy regarding the enclaves and displacements of the individuals who frequent the place. On the other hand, at Feria Futuro the people in charge of the stands, the young visitors, the organization team, and the university community interrelate in a novel flow, with a constancy that was kept in balance until the onset of our performance. As the loudspeakers came on, many people stopped in their tracks in order to understand what was happening; people began to congregate around the sources of the new sounds. The festive atmosphere changed abruptly, as all eyes concentrated on one point. To what do we owe this imbalance? What triggered it? These questions invite us to highlight the technological device as an indispensable element that is truly responsible for the redefinition of the rest of the actors in space.

We can affirm that, in contrast to the parsimonious presences of our bodies, the presence of portable speakers alters and challenges, thus proposing a new relationship between the actors present. Can we then venture that technology possesses intrinsic values, beyond the specific task that its users intend to assign it? This brings us to McLuhan's (1996) famous affirmation that in encounters with technology the medium is the message, i.e. the meanings that structure social relations reside in the machine itself, beyond the use that is made of it. In principle, this statement seems stand in opposition to the importance we have attached to the sound of protests and their symbolic connotations, which we consider to be a valuable complement. Even so, based on McLuhan's argument we can still assert that, even in the face of atrophied communicational content, the machine "models and controls the scale and form of human associations and work" (1996, p. 30). This way of perceiving technology separates it from functionalist notions that define it as a mere instrument, and that only allow us to consider it in terms of its conditions and characteristics, in relation to how efficient it is for an assigned task. In an artistic occurrence such as our performance at Feria Futuro, which lacks a strict utilitarian purpose, how can the efficiency of technology be measured?

Emancipating technology from a subordinate role as a mere instrument implies rethinking whether the political fact should be strictly credited to humanity, with technology occupying an external position. Understanding the individual-machine relationship as a binomial in which the initial

intention is transformed or enriched, allows us to think of the technological medium as one political agent among many. This point is developed by López, who remarks that:

Individuals and their ends are not the starting point of politics nor is technology their mode of execution; on the contrary, they are the result of a series of technical, and therefore poetic, operations whose meaning and management is the task that defines a new way of understanding politics. Political technology is, therefore, the production of subjectivities. (López, 2005 p. 33)

In the process, López reexamines Bruno Latour's anthropological view of technology as the "art of curvature" (Latour, 2002, in López, 2005, p. 30), detaching it from its rigid role as an insignificant stage between the user's intention and the final materialization. Understanding it as an instance that generates links between ontologically different actors, as a creator of relationships and sensations, brings it more closely in line with McLuhan's modeling machine. Thus, thinking of performance from this perspective, we could distinguish our portable loudspeakers from the amplifiers of the event's official sound system. Although both share a utilitarian purpose – as transducers manufactured to reproduce an audio signal – they act as mediators of very different types of encounters. On the one hand, the sound system of the event comprised heterogeneous agents: the loudspeakers, the technicians, the event workers and the people immersed in a fluid wandering, connected by space, but subject to individual routes, separated by their personal intentions and distanced from each other. On the other hand, the portable sound system used in the performance broke this relationship, which involved the same agents but adopted an alternative model. Here it was the fair attendees who redirected their wanderings towards the sources of the new sound, their individual routes converging out of a collective intention: to understand what was happening. Distances were shortened, and the austere epicenter – the portable loudspeakers – concentrated the intentions and bodies of the security personnel and passers-by. As Taylor (2012) suggests, both, merely by approaching, became participants, as the witnesses and audience of the performance.

If we compare the two sound systems based on their utilitarian efficiency, the fair's amplifiers come out on top. Compared to portable loudspeakers, they produce higher sound pressure and have better frequency response, among other superior technical audio parameters. On the other hand, when analyzing the sound systems as modelers of the agents present, we find that these technical distinctions did not bar the small portable loudspeakers from altering, however momentarily, the order proposed by the official sound system, whose music was immediately relegated to the background.

Cases like this, as well as other artistic precedents, make us ask ourselves:



are some technologies better than others? Until now we have defined the importance of technology based on an inevitable contribution and added value that surpass the normal reach and resources of an individual. In this regard, Latour points out:

If we do not recognize to what extent the use of a technology, however simple it may be, has displaced, translated, modified or deformed the initial intention, it is simply because we have changed the purpose by changing the means. (Latour, 2002, in López, 2005, p. 31)

Likewise, the performance at Feria Futuro serves to exemplify that this contribution does not depend exclusively on the technical qualities of the technology involved. We can therefore call into question the supposed superiority of high tech over low tech. Nowadays, the unequal distribution of technology, which has led to a gap between those with access to high-tech devices and those without, imposes the insidious conception that improvements in technology will necessarily bring about improvements in esthetics and politics (Alonso, 2002). The recognition of this problem is a necessary step toward claiming the poetic capacity of subaltern cultures and the potential of low tech, which for the capitalist system is often as good as obsolete. In relation to the individual-machine relationship in subaltern cultures, Rodrigo Alonso affirms that "a discourse generated from a periphery is not necessarily a discourse on the periphery, much less a peripheral discourse" (2002, p. 1). The conscious choice to use low tech demands a process of self-recognition, more than resignation, as a necessary step towards recognizing its generative capacity:

It is time to refer to low tech as a legitimate practice whose discourse is just as committed to the philosophy of cutting-edge technologies as the discourses formulated in the places where such technologies are born. Low tech raises equally valid aesthetic and philosophical questions to arrive at a multi-dimensional understanding of the status of art, and even of humanity, in contemporary para- and post-industrial societies. (Alonso, 2002 p. 2)

Regarding the emerging aesthetics that Alonso mentions in his article, the author highlights this aesthetic development's tacit responsibility in the task of subverting the relationship between technological and political power, highlighting the possibilities of a counter-cultural orientation capable of intervening from the periphery in the global meta-culture.

## Conclusion

Our passage through Feria Futuro ended just as it began. The "on" and "off" of the power button constituted the bookends of an experience in which the performers and others present were exposed to the unpredictable. In a day

that abounded with episodes of student resistance against the event, the novel and surprising factor of our intervention elicited a broad range of reactions. There was the physical aggression of the security personnel, but also the reflexive act of defending or supporting us on the part of some of those present, as well as comments seeking to delegitimize our actions. Among these comments, the label "selfish" stands out, which we earned by sabotaging an event that proposed a set of employment options for young people that, from our perspective, only served to further deepen and normalize the precariousness of Argentina's labor force. In the heated arguments that the event organizers tried to instigate, there were repeated attempts to reduce the performance to an immature and irreverent act on the part of a small group of young people. In the eyes of some, the actions of the three people who made up the visible face of the intervention – without counting the people in charge of recording it – were illegitimate, a stance which overlooked the political character of our performance. Can we even use the term "political organization" to talk about a mere two or three people? In the foregoing sections we went through the key points that can enable us to regard devices themselves as political agents that allow us to broaden – and transform – our communicational capacities. This fact invites us to devise new mechanisms of expression that little by little alter the foundations of political action. Even from our peripheral geopolitical position, we have within our reach numerous resources that can be used as new shortcuts between a message's sender and recipient. There are alternative ways to mobilize and question that are unhindered by the number of participants or the price of a speaker. The emergence of renewed conceptualizations such as "sound imperialism" or "anamnesis" seems to indicate that such approaches are gaining strength, as we politicize the act of listening and focus on a sound memory that is attentive to social injustice and the need to think in collective terms.

Conceptions of sound and technology today take on a different hue in light of the possibilities within our reach here in Latin America. It is up to us to understand our position within this context in order to generate, from an artistic perspective, necessary and enriching debates aimed at providing solutions to everyday problems.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The chosen sounds portray social manifestations against antipopular measures taken by neoliberal governments of Argentina, after their bonding with the International Monetary Fund [IMF]. The archives of 2001 refer to a manifestation against the corralito, an economic resolution whereby the people were restricted from freely using their banked money. This revolt became the establishment of a state of emergency in which thirty-nine victims of the repression died. Later, President Fernando de la Rúa signed his resignation.

The phonographic material of 2017 reproduces the social claim against a budget cut of social security. This initiative was consigned in agreement with the IMF by the government of Mauricio Macri, in whose management the Future Fair was created.

<sup>2</sup> Mate is a popular drink originated in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay. It is made by an infusion of dried leaves and small branches of yerba mate plant. It is served in a hollow calabash and drunk by a straw.

<sup>3</sup> The performance record can be consulted at [ <https://youtu.be/Ry2mOXmIado> ].