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Sensing Vulnerability, Listening to Urban Atmosphere

The Political Possibility of Participatory Sound Art Practice Within Palermo's Suburbs

Nicola DI CROCE¹

***Abstract.** The article discusses how the sonic environment reflects and shapes the atmosphere of vulnerable urban areas. It aims to investigate the potential of critical listening as a tool for attuning and exploring everyday public feelings, and it seeks to engage collaborative sound-art practice as a relevant means for empowering local communities. The contribution provides the outcomes of a case study developed in Palermo at “Quartiere San Giovanni e Paolo” where the author was involved in a public art process as researcher and sound artist, and developed a participatory project named Voci Fuori Campo. The action-research uncovered unprecedented perspectives on the relationship between vulnerable neighborhoods, power hierarchies, social inequalities, and gender issues.*

***Keywords.** Sonic Environment, Social Vulnerability, Participatory Sound Art Practice, Policy Analysis, Design*

Social Vulnerability and Collaborative Design Processes

The term vulnerability, used in social sciences in opposition to resilience, describes the exposure to adverse impacts and triggers including social exclusion and natural disasters (see Alwang et al., 2001). In particular social vulnerability deals with the incapability experienced by individuals and communities to endure problematic issues (such as poor living conditions, racial, religious, and gender issues) that are not easily addressed by institutions. Particularly, it spreads in areas undergoing transformations, affected among other factors by depopulation, segregation, and expiration of local identities.

By acknowledging the urban atmosphere of a vulnerable neighborhood, the contribution shows how the sonic environment serve to make an area attractive, as everyday sounds are crucial for the proliferation of urban vibrancy and livability (Atkinson, 2007). Therefore, it seeks to demonstrate how climates of tension and social exclusion could be sensed (and specifically listened to) within a vulnerable area, for “affective atmospheres” reverberate in public space and influence its pleasantness (Thibaud, 2015). In this regard, the investigation of everyday sound-related public feelings (Gallagher and Prior, 2013) is presented as the core of the participatory sound art intervention Voci Fuori Campo (namely “voices out of bound”), which points at the empowerment of local communities, and aims to impact on the urban policy level (see Davies et al., 2013).

During fall 2019, Palermo-based cultural association “Sguardi urbani,” together with a team of artists, researchers and designers, launched the project “Riconessioni” in

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the framework of the Italian Ministry of Culture's funded action "Creative Living Lab." The project specifically aims to deepen the social vulnerability of Palermo's suburbs, and concentrates on "Quartiere San Giovanni e Paolo" (usually named as CEP). CEP is a public housing neighborhood located in the outskirts of the city, which suffers from poor living conditions, illegal occupation of public properties, and a high rate of criminality. All these issues result in a mostly abandoned and underused public space, which the project intended to revitalize through a collaborative process and a series of public art interventions. The cultural association assumed the bocce court situated in the middle of the abandoned main park - entitled to Peppino Impastato, victim of the mafia, and surrounded by unused greenfield and illegally occupied buildings - as the symbolic center of its revitalization process.



Figure 1. The bocce court situated in the middle of Peppino Impastato park, Nicola Di Croce, November 2019

Sguardi Urbani's approach makes use of collaborative design as it addresses to engage local communities by: listening to their expertise (Rohe, 2009), and implementing place-based knowledge (Deakin and Allwinkle, 2007), thus building collectively a shared image of vulnerable areas. On this basis the sound art project *Voci Fuori Campo* acknowledges that public relational art supporting participatory practice has proven to strengthen inclusiveness within wider processes of urban regeneration² (Sharp et al., 2005). Likewise, it recognizes to what extent the contribution of a collaborative approach to urban planning through sonic environment's analysis and sound art practices has recently increased (Claus and Pak, 2019; Lappin et al., 2018). Specifically, collaborative sound art practices have demonstrated the capability to deepen the

2. *Voci Fuori Campo* was the first of three different workshops developed in the framework of the project "Riconnessioni." For further informations visit *Sguardi urbani* cultural association's website. See at: <https://sguardiurbani.com/riconnessioni/>

social and cultural basis of vulnerable communities (Ultra-red, 2012), thus contributing to re-orient future urban interventions.

Collaborative sound art practice's focus is the empowerment of citizens and local institutions through the raise of critical listening, as a crucial device for community building (Farinati and Firth, 2017), then for the enhancement of social coexistence (LaBelle, 2018). Accordingly, the action-research and participatory sound art project *Voci Fuori Campo* promotes the development of listening awareness as a political possibility for citizens to enhance a deeper understanding of the social dynamics entangled within a vulnerable area's sonic environment. By focusing on listening practice, the project establishes a new connection between citizens and their everyday sonic environment. Such engagement is assumed as the starting point of a collaborative debate that addresses local development, as it prioritizes a place-based approach, it invites non-experts to contribute in decision making process, and it constitutes an essential preliminary step toward sustainable and inclusive urban regeneration.

Voci Fuori Campo: a Participatory Sound Art Project

The project *Voci Fuori Campo* took place during November 2019 and used a mixed-method approach that included: informal group interviews, soundwalks, field recordings, roundtables, collaborative design, and a final participatory sound performance.

The first workshops were open to youngsters at different ages (14-16, and 16-18) all attending the cultural association "San Giovanni Apostolo" sited in the local parish, which offers playgrounds, security, social services, and organizes classes dedicated to younger affected by learning issues, and/or coming from difficult family situations. The workshop proposed soundwalks and open discussions aiming to raise youngster's sonic awareness, and reached very interesting findings. It asked them to critically engage with their everyday sonic environment, and encouraged to acknowledge their public feelings connected to the area. In particular the teenagers noticed how the neighborhood's pedestrian streets were very often populated by local inhabitants (exclusively men) enlivening public space through their talking and particular tones of voice; while the most silent and out of the way areas were perceived as potentially dangerous, for they were used as gathering places by other (not recommended) groups of people. Close to the busier roadways the group noticed how the sonic environment was dominated by scooters' engines - often souped up by their owners in order to be as loud as possible and drawn people's attention. Another characteristic sound coming from the roadways was the car stereo's music, which was often diffusing "neomelodico" throughout the neighborhood: a style originally coming from Naples and widespread in Palermo.

The following workshop engaged a group of woman attending the sport activities organized by the local association "San Giovanni Apostolo." Through an open discussion regarding the everyday sonic environment perceived by those women a strong feminine perspective emerged, and underpinned the rest of the research. In particular, woman reflected upon their habit to chat with their neighbors from window to window, and to rarely walk down the street except for shopping during the morning. By reflection on their everyday activities they realized how they normally perceive the neighborhood's sonic environment mostly from their homes. Since they constantly feel insecure about going out - due to frequent acts of intimidation - they contribute only in part to the area's everyday sonic environment, which is dominated by man's voices and activities over day and also overnight (for example through illegal car competitions).

After the first workshops a series of soundwalks (partly guided by groups of teenagers) contributed to critically engage with CEP's sonic environment. Widening the circle of the previous explorations, the soundwalks reached the borders of the neighborhood, where the shopping mall "La Torre" is located. Here it was possible to listen both to the music spread by the shopping mall's parking lot, and to the activities of many of those youngsters that were meeting and playing in a safer and more controlled area (compared to most of neighborhood's spots).

The following soundwalks reached CEP's inner roads, where street vendors usually pass by with their trucks twice a week addressing their distinctive call to housewife through loud megaphones. Again, street vendors' male voice explicitly refers to woman supposed to be at home, and remarked to what extent woman's role in public space's sonic environment is constantly rejected. Additionally, the residential inner streets were extremely quiet, and from the backyards it was possible to listen to watchdogs barking at passersby, caged birds, and chickens scratching and pecking on the ground. These elements stood for a resisting rural environment which permeated private spaces' uses, and contrasted evidently the massive gated complex built alongside the CEP. There, a privatized and surveilled open space discouraged any spontaneous everyday practice to take place.

Finally, a performance aiming at recomposing the archive or field recordings taken during the workshops and soundwalks was presented to the participants and to all the CEP's inhabitants. The bocce court turned into a sonic field in which a short description of every single sound of the archive - such as "street vendor" or "scooter engine" - was drawn on the playground through a collaborative design process. The idea was then to playback during the performance the field recordings through an audio system as soon as a bowl would reach the corresponding bocce court section.

Kids flocking and willing to help were involved in coloring the sections, all of which took a title and a number for a total of 33. Before starting, four simple rules explained the participants how to interact with the sounding bocce court: (i) one single player at the time can enter the field and cast the bowl; (ii) every section drawn on the bocce court corresponds to a field recording: the bowl entering the section activates that specific sound; (iii) the number of bowls playing simultaneously is limited to three, so if all the bowls have been already casted the player can select which one to withdraw from the field and cast it again; (iv) after casting the bowl the player is invited to leave the bocce court and listen to the sonic environment produced by her/his move. On the other end of the field I was monitoring the sections reached by the bowls, and I was ready to play back and mix the corresponding sounds through a computer connected to an audio system. The overlapping of field recordings was then resulting from three sounds at the time, that were changing one after the other throughout the performance. The event took place during the weekend and was advertised all over the neighborhood; in the end an open party provided music, free food, and beverages for all the participants.

Empowering Local Community by Raising Sonic Awareness

The performance lasted about half an hour and was enthusiastically received by the participants³. In particular, youngsters were fascinated by the way they could identify their everyday sounds or even their voices within the stream of sounds, and cast the

3. An excerpt of the performance is available at *Sguardi urbani's* webpage. See at: <https://soundcloud.com/user-244842146/performance-suoni-in-campo>

bowl few times in their favorite spots (such as those referring to the association playground or the pedestrian streets). More generally the participatory process succeeded at de-contextualizing and re-actualizing sonic fragments that represented some of the most critical issues concerning the neighborhoods: the polarization of public space uses, the ouster of the feminine presence within the sonic environment, the difficult relationship between teenagers and dangerous urban spots. By using the bocce court as the core of the event the performance also served to shift the neighborhood's image of abandonment toward a new collaborative re-appropriation of public space.

In summary, the overall project, and specifically the final performance, initiated a long process of re-signification of the neighborhood's commons. In fact, by raising inhabitants' sonic awareness and by stimulating a participatory approach to the critical engagement and recomposing of urban sonic atmosphere, locals were asked to confront each other and to imagine a future vision for CEP. Thus, the target was to challenge the sounds that were mirroring those social issues usually taken for granted by the inhabitants, yet strongly emerging during the sonic environment's investigation and the following discussions. From this perspective *Voci Fuori Campo* represented an empowerment device that understood listening practice as a powerful emancipatory tool. A device that contributed to raising consciousness and stimulating social change within a socially vulnerable neighborhood that (like CEP and many others) have long suffered the lack of social assistance, high school-drop-out and unemployment rates, and a regular absence of urban safety.

The process initiated by *Voci Fuori Campo* was, in conclusion, the first step toward a critical reframe of CEP's sonic environment. The sonic investigation shared with local inhabitants during the workshops and soundwalks underlined an environment dominated by a strong male dominance over woman and the most vulnerable. Therefore, the open discussions and the final performance intended to foster a "sonic possible world" (Voegelin, 2018) where the symbols and schemes of prevarication could first be re-oriented and then shared with the younger generations, which inevitably absorb and reproduce the detrimental mainstream narrative enacted by the neighborhood.

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