

"Resonant Resistance : Sound Art as a Political Tool

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“In order for me to write poetry that isn't political, I must listen to the birds. And in order to hear the birds, the warplanes must shut up.”

- Marwan Makhoul.

ABSTRACT:

This essay explores the relationship between sound art and politics, focusing on how sound becomes a medium for resistance and activism. Through its intangible and ephemeral nature, sound has the power to bypass censorship, evoke emotional responses, and create shared experiences. A specific focus is given to drone music—its minimalist and continuous tones challenging traditional musical structures and offering a sonic metaphor for endurance, resilience, and defiance. By analyzing works such as Lawrence Abu Hamdan's sound-based investigations, the Polish Radio Experimental Studio's experimental defiance of authoritarian control, and the participatory practices of Fluxus artists, the essay examines how sound art has confronted power structures, amplified suppressed voices, and built spaces of solidarity. It also reflects on the challenges sound art faces as a political tool: its fleeting presence, limited reach, and the difficulty of provoking concrete political change. Against the backdrop of war, displacement, and global crises, the essay considers how sound art engages with urgent questions about power, oppression, and the role of art in shaping political narratives.

Introduction

Throughout the past century, sound art has emerged as a powerful unconventional tool for political expression. Unlike visual art, which directly engages audiences through images and symbols, sound art relies on the fleeting, immersive nature of auditory experiences, subtly yet powerfully stimulating the receiver offering wider possibilities to consume an artwork. One frequent visitor within sound art is drone music, or just 'drone' which consists of sustained, continuous tones and minimalistic structures offering it as an alternative composition. To some, the drone acts as a meditative experience that can achieve deeper levels of focus, and to others it conceptually resonates with endurance, resistance, and a collective rejection to musical traditions. For several decades, it has served as a form of protest and a reflection on socio-political topics usually connected to authority -- not just political but also musical authority. Artists have used this medium to push against norms and boundaries by utilizing sound to reclaim individual artistic expression agency. This essay will examine how drone music-- in detail- and sound art-- in general- have functioned as political tools, delving into specific examples demonstrating the several ways in which sound challenged power hierarchies, exposed injustice and created collective experience. The first section will consist of the personal motivations behind following this topic and a reflection on the query of "is art political". The second part will discuss in-depth one aspect of sound art which is the drone and its political implications that have taken place over the past decades.

Sound art

Sound art as we understand it today is an artwork or artistic practice where sound is the main medium of expression, and is often perceived as a material and a tool for site-specific experiences. In sound art, artists use various elements—such as field recordings, drones, synthesized sounds, spoken words, ambient noises, while often emphasizing the *conceptual* over the *musical*, making it interdisciplinary and connecting with fields like sculpture, architecture, and performance art. It is important to note that the distinction between sound art and music is primarily a Western construct, rooted in its specific historical, aesthetic, and institutional traditions that led to the separation and exclusion of any non-traditional and non-western forms of sonic expressions and understandings of music from what is considered ‘music’. Artist and writer Seth Kim Cohen summarized this complicated relationship between the two terms by stating that sound is ‘Music's other’, and in this case “music” being a composition that is structured through melody, harmony, and rhythm, while sound is what does not fit within this criteria or chooses to reject it in an attempt to prioritize the conceptual element of sound . Another major difference between music and field recordings is that musical works fully exist as original human artifacts before they are reproduced. In contrast to this, field recordings and what could be named as sound journalism are original artifacts themselves. “Only through recording do parts of the sonic continuum acquire the possibility of becoming aesthetic objects to be passed on through time and bear witness to a recordist’s presence at a certain place and time in history. (Fiebig, 2015).

Personal connection to the topic

As a student of art during times of a war, a genocide and - according to some politicians - the verge of a World War III, I find myself repeatedly resorting to the recurring dilemma: "Should art be political?" "Is it inherently political enough as a practice?" "Can we make art that isn't political?" "If it is political, is it effective?". Going through all these questions have already influenced my artworks and how I perceive them in this time, and how I imagine I would look back at it retrospectively in 10 or 20 years time. In the 80th issue of Spike Magazine released in Summer 2024, the contemporary art magazine combined a selection of heavily political and sharp-aimed criticism at the current state of the art world in relation to global economic and political situations. The essays featured in this issue acts as reference points for their "clear perspective" as they *state in an opening statement to the magazine*:

"A sense of major flux is spreading in the art world – and not only among its pessimists. Under pressure from reactionary politics and its own "now more than ever" imperatives, so much in art is transforming: criticism into a flashy rubber stamp; art schools into trauma industries; fairs into 3D-PDFs; museums into everything for everybody; and art-making into a moral protocol. Some artists are responding by dropping out, going Web3, or protesting genocide; a few are launching their own galleries or wellness brands; plenty are still just painting painting." (opening statement by Spike)

One of the featured essays written by artist and writer Julia Scher titled "Has politics become an artist's must" unfolding this question in the context of current time. She explores the interplay between time and art, especially at such times referring to it as "the dangerous and beautiful machine of action, that is time."

She believes that “Art, in real time, is political. An event space of actions unbound by the future”. She believes that this query is what’s causing a change and is according to her a “workstation along the way” that shapes the road of the artists, writers, collectives etc and also shapes the technicalities of the market and the sales lists. “How we treat this moment is up to us” she confirms.

Personal Application:

“In order for me to write poetry that isn’t political, I must listen to the birds. And in order to hear the birds, the warplanes must shut up.” - Marwan Makhoul.

As a documentation of my position on this query and questioning I utilized a poem that was written by Palestinian Poet, Marwan Makhoul, in a sound installation exhibited at Saloun Villa in Prague, 2023. (featured on cover page) In this artwork, I used a magnetic tape loop of a recorded drone from surveillance airplanes above Gaza since 2007. The drones said hovering over Gazan skies have been causing lifelong anxiety and stress and fear. “Everytime you hear it you feel like something really bad is about to happen.” says one of the residents of Gaza in an interview by Middle East Eye in 2021. The installation has also included a live radio stream from where the artwork was presented, offering another form of “continuity” and ultimately a statement on the privilege charged in the question: “Can art be non-political”. The installation was visually accompanied by Marwan’s poem handwritten on the wall alongside the tape and the radio. This artwork formed a clear path in my head that I can follow and thus

build a research of the medium I use and its significant history and connection to political art.

Sound art as a political tool

There are many reasons that make sound art an inherently powerful political tool for political expression, especially where visual art is tightly controlled. First, its emotional impact and ability to provoke visceral reactions make listeners more receptive to political ideas. Sound also enables collective participation and shared experiences, building a sense of unity. Its ambiguity allows for coded messages that resonate with specific audiences while evading scrutiny.

Integrated seamlessly into daily life, sound art can appear non-political, while tools like silence and noise become powerful symbols. Additionally, sound provides anonymity, allowing for collective resistance without exposing individuals to risk. In restrictive environments, sound thus offers a resilient, dynamic platform for covert, impactful political communication. In the upcoming sections and through demonstrating specific -both historical and contemporary- examples that strengthened and regards sound art as a powerful political tool.

Fluxus and participatory art:

One powerful characteristic of sound art is its capacity to allow collective participation and create immersive listening experiences that redefine traditional audience roles. Sound art does not merely present a work for passive consumption but instead invites listeners to become active co-creators, blending the roles of artist and audience. This approach aligns closely with the experimental direction of the avant garde collective and network of artists, Fluxus movement which started in the 1960s. Fluxus aimed to challenge conventional art forms and restructure hierarchies and to 'promote a revolutionary flood and

tide in art, promote living art, anti-art' says the founder of Flux, George Maciunas (Fluxus workbook). The involved artists have extensively used sound and participatory practices to democratize art, often incorporating instructions, or "event scores," that encouraged audiences to shape the work itself. This anti-elitist approach opened up new possibilities for engaging everyday materials and actions, effectively breaking down the boundaries between artist and audience.

A foundational influence on this participatory shift was John Cage's Experimental Composition course at the New School for Social Research in the late 1950s. The course brought together future Fluxus figures—such as George Brecht, Dick Higgins, Allan Kaprow, and Toshi Ichiyanagi—who began experimenting with sound as an accessible, interactive medium. One of the prominent figures within this movement was the Czech artist Milan knížak, known for his provocative works like Broken Music. Fluxus artists embraced an everyday aesthetic that turned mundane actions and common sounds into art, and often invited audiences to interact with and influence the experience. Rather than relying on trained performers, Fluxus encouraged participation from non-specialists, often staging pieces where audience members could take up instruments, contribute sounds, or perform everyday tasks as part of the artwork:

"The audience is invited to come to the stage, take instruments that are provided to them, sit in the orchestra seats, and play for 3 minutes. If the audience does not respond, instruments should be distributed among them." (The Fluxus performance workbook)

By blurring the lines between composer, performer, and audience, Fluxus artists transformed sound art into an egalitarian space that empowered audiences to become essential to the artistic process, exploring sound as a tool for social engagement and collective experience. This redefinition of audience participation created a foundation for sound art's role in fostering social and political dialogues, where sound became both a communal medium and a form of subtle resistance to traditional artistic hierarchies.

In Richard Maxfield's *Mechanical Fluxconcert*, for instance, microphones were set up outside or within the audience to amplify environmental sounds, blending them with the performance. This approach invited "unwanted" sounds into the performance space, while ordinary actions with common objects replaced specialized musical techniques and instruments. Redefining, restructuring, and breaking down traditional norms and hierarchies have only added to the power of sound art and its ability to expand and exist as a medium for resistance.

Early Polish Radio Experimentations:

Eastern Europe' and specifically under the Soviet-influenced regimes, "All public forms of musical expression – commissions, concerts, broadcasts and recordings – were expected to serve the project of 'building socialism' by conforming to the official doctrine of Socialist Realism". In rejection and attempts to find ways and loopholes within this forced narrative of state control and censorship, sound art emerged as a potent form of artistic resistance. Many artists in countries like Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the former Yugoslavia began experimenting with performances, sound installations, ambient recordings, and abstract audio-visual projects that challenged state-prescribed narratives and embraced personal and collective memory. One prominent example of such

attempts was done by the PRES or the Polish Radio Experimental Studio started by Jozef Patkowski in the late 1950s. PRES was a statement to claim and own 'the right to experiment' (Quietus) and the main motive behind it. The soon infamous 'ultra avant-garde studio for creating abstract, experimental contemporary music in the middle of the Eastern Bloc' (culture.pl) was essentially conceived merely as a playground or a "a kind of laboratory where a composer, working closely with a skilled engineer, could manipulate sounds materially (by editing and joining tape) and electronically (using oscillators, filters and a ring modulator).

"Sound and static generators, filters and modulators. This is the set of instruments operated by Józef Patkowski and his colleagues at Polish Radio Experimental Studio. This is where the boldest ideas of the creators of concrete music come true. Right now, we can hear one the recording ... Stereophonic tape recorders and clips of tape used for sound illustration for radio, film and television. Some call it a cacophony of decibels. Others, a joyful song of the future. But that is what the right to experiment is about" (a newsreel presenting PRES)

As avant garde and playful the PRES experimentations were as political and essential space and practice for claiming ground and stretching these loopholes within the strict communist regime that only allowed a certain agenda to be created.

Contemporary applications:

It's one thing to present archival works of past events, allowing viewers to reimagine the severity and complex conditions of history, but it's entirely another to engage with a topic that remains ongoing, severe, violent, and sensitive.

Addressing a current issue that continues to impact lives requires a heightened

level of sensitivity, as those affected are still enduring the realities depicted.

Often, the artist is in a position of relative privilege, distanced from the suffering at hand. This distance—both physical and experiential—can be a driving reason for artists to highlight such issues, hoping to draw attention and foster empathy.

However, it simultaneously demands a cautious, ethically responsible approach, ensuring that the work honors the gravity of the subject without inadvertently exploiting it.

A remarkable example of this nuanced approach was seen in the Polish pavilion at the 2024 Venice Biennale with installation by Ukrainian Open Group collective, titled "Repeat after Me II". The installation features two videos of various refugees from Ukraine in Poland, who recount their war experiences by recalling the sounds of weapons, and bombs inviting the audience to join in through placing several microphones in front of the projection screens. The artists employ a karaoke-style format, but instead of pop songs and hits, the soundtrack consists of sounds of gunfire, missiles, explosions, and other destructive noises, while the 'lyrics' consist of descriptions of lethal weapons. Here, the artists and curators navigated the delicate terrain of representation by embedding their work in deep, ongoing dialogues with those impacted by the war in Ukraine. Instead of solely depicting suffering, they aimed to provide a platform that empowered affected voices, acknowledging their agency and perspectives within the artwork. The installation balanced a raw exposure of harsh realities and sonic trauma the participants had to go through, with a sense of dignity and respect which is essential for working with such a subject. The Polish pavilion's approach demonstrates how sound art can create space for empathy and activism, while also being acutely aware of its limitations and responsibilities when addressing contemporary issues. The artwork also follows the path of interactive installations and performances that was adapted by Fluxus artists decades back, further

proving the impact of interactivity and collective perception within an artwork in the context of political art and displaying solidarity.

Amplifying voices:

One major factor that makes sound art a powerful political tool is its ability to amplify unheard voices and tell their stories. One example of this can be seen in the work of Lebanese Turner prize winner Lawrence Abu Hamdan. Despite the fact that he refrains from identifying strictly as an artist, in an interview discussing his practice, he states that “museums and art galleries offer a chance where you can experiment with the ways you can actually present a story”. One of the urgent stories he felt compelled to document and share was the testimony of political prisoners held in Al-Assad regime’s Saydnaya Prison, a notoriously secretive and brutal detention center in Syria. By working with, recording and reconstructing the prisoners’ auditory experiences, Abu Hamdan carefully transformed terrifying memories of confinement into sound installations constructed from an inventory of sounds, or a sample pack, that prisoners were able to distinguish and recognize. This is one example where Lawrence Abu Hamdan utilised used his expertise in sound and his experience in sound art to tell stories, investigate crime, and archive the pervasive violence around him in order to reveal what cannot be visually represented: the brutal sensory isolation, the sounds of torture, and the overwhelming silence in a prison where even speaking is forbidden.

The Drone

Appearing frequently in the sound art world and mostly in works that tackle topics such as surveillance, injustice, and sufferings is Drone music. It is considered a sub-genre of experimental and ambient music and it is identified by its often long, sustained and consistent continuous tones or chords with subtle variations to its texture, or timbre. The drone has centuries old history and its origins span traditional musical practices around the world, including early Gregorian chants, Indian folk music, and rituals where drones were used to create immersive soundscapes . The drone has been created using various instruments as well like the Tanpura string instrument originated in India, or the Scottish bagpipes, the Australian didgeridoo and more. Over time, the drone developed from a backing tone for a ritual or as a formation ground for other vocals or instruments to be constructed into a distinct minimalistic technique and aesthetic. It eventually evolved into an influential feature of experimental music and a frequent contributor to sound art with no restriction to a specific instrument; analog synthesizers, computers or simply a recording.

Drone music acts as a form of resistance by challenging artistic norms, fostering endurance, and amplifying marginalized voices. Its minimalist structure, characterized by sustained tones and subtle variations, defies the expectations of traditional Western music, rejecting the hierarchies of melody, harmony, and rhythm. This simplicity not only democratizes sound but also subverts the commodification of music by prioritizing artistic intent over market demands.

In an article on the Syrian independent Aljumiuriya, artist and writer Dana Dawood creates an overview of the drone as a 'concept' and how the sound drone overlaps with the filming drone and to other interpretations of this term. She says: "The drone is a politically charged and ambiguous concept. I'm calling it a concept, because the

drone hovers over many material and linguistic manifestations". From the sounds of humming bees, to a sub-genre of minimalist music, a part within the bagpipe instruments, a monotonous state of being, and a creator of images. "A drone is in the air, aerial and ethereal until it hits the ground. In the air, the drone is a humming monotonous sound that sends anxiety and psychological horror, so how does sound become a weapon?" (Dawood) she questions.

Back to contemporary artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan, the drone, or the recorded hum, found its way several times in his sound-focused career as well. The first project titled The hummingbird clock is a permanent installation on the website www.hummingbirdclock.info and acts as a counter-surveillance artwork that focuses on the almost inaudible electricity and pipes hum in Liverpool and how the investigators in UK can forensically analyze any recording and "determine the time and date they were made, and as a result, whether anyone has edited the recording. In a ready-made approach, Abu Hamdan exposes this method and makes it openly available for the public as well, where visitors of the website can submit any video or audio recording and the hum would indicate when and where it occurred. The technology for that is simply by tracing and matching the subtle changes of the "hum" which according to a finding by Dr Catalin Grigoras in 1996, the electricity is not just making noise, it's in fact "singing"(hummingbird). The way Abu Hamdan highlights the drone as an oppressive surveillance tool displays its implications within the political context and his methodology attempts to reverse its effect.

Drawing a connection back to the tape-loop installation I have previously described in previous section, the same topic had been a major concern for Abu Hamdan as a sound artist and primarily as a lebanese citizen where 22,315

Israeli military aircrafts have violated Lebanese airspace over the span of 16 years. AirPressure became his next work that deals with the oppressive “drone”. Together with his team at Earshot, Abu Hamdan created a large-scale database of each aircraft model and a recording of its hum or buzz in the sky alongside its timestamp and exact path it took over the Lebanese skies. The project also features a participatory element where people can submit from the ground their reactions and write a comment to it, and it ranges from sarcastic comments to prayers of help and protection. The work of Abu Hamdan and Earshot have gained wide recognition and praise especially from the Lebanese government saying “it’s a tremendous work that even us weren’t able to conduct”. Such solidarity not only connects people and makes their struggle and anxiety from the enemy more collective, it also documents, records and amplifies the huge impact of sound on people’s lives, which could be simply overlooked in a time of war. As an answer to Dana Dawood’s question of “how does sound become a weapon?” Air Pressure answers it perfectly through this meticulously conducted archive and documentation. The website also features various studies and articles about the negative health effects from being exposed to these continuous drone sounds and low altitude military flights.

Obstacles

There are obstacles that face the arts in general from achieving a solid political change, however sound art -specifically- faces several hurdles that hinder its capacity even more. First, the difficulty of its ephemeral and intangible nature makes it challenging to document, share, or sustain impact over time, as sound installations or projects is transient and often site-specific. Previous examples mentioned have tried to overcome this aspect through translating these works into websites and accessible research facilities like Earshot’s practice, and some

embraced the ephemeral power of the experiments like the PRES radio streams. Second, sound art reaches only a niche audience due to its common presentation in gallery spaces, installations, or specialized festivals which limits its exposure to the broader public, including those directly impacted by the issues being addressed. Without greater accessibility, sound art struggles to reach the masses or influence widespread political discourse. Finally, as many still perceive art—particularly experimental sound art—as abstract, intellectual, or emotionally driven rather than as a form of activism. This perception can lead audiences to appreciate sound art aesthetically without feeling compelled to act, ultimately diminishing its potential to inspire tangible political change. While sound art can spark dialogue, achieving concrete political change requires it to overcome these significant barriers and find innovative ways to engage and mobilize a diverse public.

Conclusion:

Sound art, in its fluidity and method, defies the confines of conventional artistic practices. Its ephemeral nature, immersive depth, and participatory potential make it uniquely equipped to engage with political and social issues in ways that visual or textual media cannot. By bypassing censorship, stirring visceral reactions, and fostering collective experiences, sound art becomes a site of resistance—one that both challenges authority and amplifies the voices often silenced by it. From the playful ruptures of the Fluxus movement to the subversive experiments of Eastern Europe under communist rule, and the meticulous sound investigations of Lawrence Abu Hamdan, sound art proves its relevance as a tool for reclaiming agency and reframing power structures.

Yet, it is not without its struggles. Sound art's intangible, fleeting nature makes it difficult to archive or sustain impact, and its often-niche presentation limits its reach beyond specialized audiences. In a world increasingly marked by socio-political unrest, these challenges can be barriers—but they also underline the urgency of the medium and give space to rework around these limitations creatively. Sound art's ability to resonate within the gaps left by oppression and isolation makes it a powerful act of defiance. As one consistent note can echo long after it's heard, sound art reminds us that persistence—whether in endurance, resistance, or collective creation—can be both protest and promise in times of silence and suppression.

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