

## **On a Community of Auricular Praxis**

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Of all the activities necessary and present in human communities, only two were deemed to be political and to constitute what Aristotle called the *bios politikos*, namely action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*), out of which rises the realm of human affairs ... from which everything merely necessary or useful is excluded.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

The Borderline Ballroom collective formed around a kernel of like-minded sonic arts practitioners in Christchurch New Zealand c. 2007 in order to provide a creative outlet for sonic experimentation in Canterbury and beyond. Over the following 7 years the collective developed a community of praxis in Canterbury that became an active, regional locus in a nationwide sonic arts network that continues to support emerging and established, local, national and international sonic artists<sup>i</sup>. It is this enduring community of praxis, both pre and post the Canterbury earthquakes, that created the potential and formed the executive basis for the Borderline Ballroom's legal incorporation as the Cantabrian Society of Sonic Artists (CSSA) and the development of its Auricle Sonic Arts Gallery<sup>ii</sup> in 2013.

From the beginning of the CSSA the term 'sonic arts' was deliberately defined in the broadest sense as encompassing both performance and installation practice, where a sonic artist is simply anyone who works creatively with sound via the mediation of the ear and other organs of hearing. This rather open ended definition of what constitutes the sonic arts has provided for an eclectic approach to its practice organized around the Auricle's events, exhibition and festival programmes. In the case of performance practice this has ranged from free jazz to taonga pūoro along with electroacoustic improvisation, electronica, soundscape composition and extreme noise to whatever else the events committee decided to support. While Jazz, contemporary or western art music performance has not generally been supported in the gallery, their use of Occidental tempered scale and metric rhythm is merely one form of organized sound production within an eclectic range of performative practices that has depended on the preferences of the sonic artists involved. Through active collaborations across diverse practices the delineation between noise and music has depended entirely on where each artist prefers to place their performance practice, and whether or not one might consider that all forms of sonic performance are musical in the broad sense for which all music is noise and vice versa.

The Auricle's exhibition programme has been informed by contemporary sound art practice with exhibitions chosen by the curatorial committee on the basis of works that have a conceptual rather than a musical aesthetic and yet still retain an emphasis on producing sound in the gallery. This emphasis on the sonic aspects of contemporary sound art was chosen to contrast the work of the sonic arts gallery with other generally more visually focused contemporary arts galleries such as the Physics Room<sup>iii</sup> in Christchurch. Beyond these broad

practical concerns to do with varying performance and installation disciplines, the 'sonic arts' in 'CSSA' was primarily conceived as an open question to be answered in practice, and in this sense as a community of praxis the Borderline Ballroom's Auricle sonic arts venture has been first and foremost defined by its community of practitioners.

This 'community of doing' is perhaps a defining feature of the sonic arts as a historical discipline, where the artform has been defined by its cross disciplinary and hybrid approaches to sonic creativity, and where any disciplinary knowledge arises from the communal act of doing sonic arts rather than from the cultural constraints of a more pre-defined artistic tradition. The historical roots of sonic arts practice are now well over half a century old following on the rapid development of electronic technologies enabling hybrid cross disciplinary arts practices in the 50's and 60's starting with post-WW2 avant garde electronic music. From Cage's experimental composition lectures to Fluxus performance art, or Max Neuhaus' *Drive in Music* and Braxton's 'creative music' to Throbbing Gristle's *D.o.A: The Third and Final Report*, sonic performance and installation practices have been informed by an openness to experimentation and a deliberate confusion of traditional art categories. At very least, one might say that there is still today far more confusion in the general public about what might constitute a sonic as opposed to a visual arts practice.

The Auricle Sonic Arts Gallery has over the last two years provided the community venue and thus organizational focus for just such a confusion of sonic praxis along with the open ended question of its relation to contemporary and performance art practices as well as the wider community of the ongoing Christchurch rebuild. The definition of the sonic arts that has organically arisen from this Cantabrian community of praxis has as many facets as it has practitioners, and it is this community network with its recurring engagements that has fostered a collaborative sharing of skills and ideas while learning about sonic art by just doing it. The Auricle Sonic Arts Gallery has been actively supporting sonic arts events and exhibitions since it opened in October 2013, and to date the venue has hosted over 150 performance nights, workshops and artist seminars as well as 22 monthly sonic arts exhibitions by emerging and established local, national and international sonic artists<sup>iv</sup>. The Audacious Festival of Sonic Arts 2014 and 2015 have and will feature public sonic art installations by over 30 NZ, UK, US and Australian artists in multiple locations around the central city<sup>v</sup>. Over this time, more than 170 individual performances have been recorded in the Auricle's surround sound gallery representing a significant survey and archive of Cantabrian sonic arts performance over the last two years of the post earthquake rebuild.

If praxis has as its goal what is good for life rather than merely the preconceived production of crafted works, then it has become a vocational calling and an end in itself. The Auricle is just such a product of the artist's drive to live the good life, a communal effort to do sonic art for one's own sake and along with the others. As a community of praxis it has been organized around a dynamic artistic process of doing and reflection on doing for the sake of being. Reflection and action together are here the embodiment of writing around the doing of sound.

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<sup>i</sup> See <http://cssa.org.nz/category/events/page/4/>

<sup>ii</sup> See <http://auricle.org.nz>

<sup>iii</sup> See [physicsroom.org.nz/](http://physicsroom.org.nz/)

<sup>iv</sup> See <http://auricle.org.nz/exhibition-archive/> and <http://auricle.org.nz/archive/>

<sup>v</sup> See <http://audacious.org.nz>