JEAN MARTIN AND JULIAN WEAVER

SOUND LITTLE ISLAND

The use of soundscapes to support engagement with questions of national identity and habitation after Brexit
Sound Little Island was a live-streamed sound translocation from England to France. This sonic installation work transmitted live soundscapes from two locations in southern England, a pub in Brighton and a viaduct, to the ancient harbour tower Tour Saint Nicolas (Tour de la Lanterne) in La Rochelle, France, alongside pre-recorded sounds and statements. Through the installation, Martin and Weaver investigated how sonic environments might challenge social and political preconceptions and beliefs.

The pre-recorded sounds and statements were taken from French people living in the UK, identified through contacts or selected at random. The sounds were diffused in a 12-channel sound installation in order to create a hyperreal soundscape of England as a sonic presence in the iconic building in La Rochelle.

The piece was presented in April 2017 as part of the ZERO1 festival of digital art and culture in La Rochelle in collaboration with Professor Diego Jarak, l’Université de La Rochelle.

Two versions of the soundscape were recorded for radio:


Sound Little Island

Locations for Sound Little Island
(above)
Tour de la Lanterne, La Rochelle, into which the soundscape was introduced
(left)
The Heart and Hand, Brighton from which some of the live sounds were taken
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The installation of ‘Sound Little Island’, and its process of development, investigated the relationship between everyday acoustic environments and the ways in which national identity is shaped and may be challenged.

It asked in particular what sounds might be selected, and how these might be delivered through a sonic art installation, in order to produce a soundscape that reproduced quotidian experience of a recognisably national character. It further considered how incongruities of location and juxtaposition of sound ideas might accord with the political context of Anglo-French understanding at the time of the debate around membership of the European Union.

Grounded in a context of film studies, experimental composition and soundarts, Martin and Weaver’s research articulated three primary questions:

1. How do artificial sonic environments use metaphoric, evocative or social dimensions to challenge an audience’s perceptions?
2. What day-to-day sounds can be collected and delivered to elicit an experience resonant of national identity and supportive of cross-Channel interactivity?
3. How does sound installation help an audience recognise characteristics of difference and similarity, especially where contextualised by political and social debate?

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Martin and Weaver research through techniques of sound design and soundscape composition, practices that developed through the 1970s and 1980s, and may be exemplified in works such as Hildegard Westerkamp’s ‘Kits Beach’ (1989).

Informed also by the work of Bill Fontana, who demonstrated the critical potential of sound translocation and sonic interventions worldwide, ‘Sound Little Island’ proposed the political dimension of soundscapes to evoke both the similarity and difference between two countries and places, joining current investigations into the impact of soundart on installation audiences (Voegelin, 2014) and earlier work by Martin on sonic experience in film (Martin and Butzmann, 2012).

It was commissioned by the ZERO 1 Festival des Arts et Cultures Numériques in La Rochelle, France, a festival created by l’Université de La Rochelle and set up to explore digital arts and culture. The work was installed for the public to visit between 13–16 April 2017.

The public vote in the United Kingdom had been held in June 2016 resulting in a move to leave the European Union, and ‘Sound Little Island’ was contextualised by an ongoing period of uncertainty for French nationals living in the UK. Publicity for the installation pointed to the reminder of the UK’s splendid isolationism at the end of the nineteenth century, and noted the work was a subversion of that trend aiming to make connections with those who had made homes in other European countries.
Sound Little Island

Jean Martin & Julian Weaver

Sound Little Island est une installation sonore qui transmet des sons en direct de deux lieux à Brighton jusqu'à la Tour Saint-Nicolas, dans le port de La Rochelle. Ces sons sont accompagnés de plusieurs pré-enregistrements dans le but de créer une présence sonore de l'Angleterre à La Rochelle plus vraie que nature.

Le référundum nous rappelle la soi-disant politique du « splendide isolement » du Royaume-Uni de la fin du XIXe siècle. Sound Little Island est une tentative de subversion de ces tendances : en transmettant le quotidien ponctué par les vies françaises à l'étranger, nous tentons de créer une prise de conscience et de mettre en évidence les connections entre les gens ici et là-bas.

ENTRÉE PAYANTE

DU 13 AU 16 . 04
TOUR DE LA LANTERNE (SALLE JEAN MÉRICHON)
10H-13H . 14H-18H30

ZERO 1 Festival des Arts et Cultures Numériques,
La Rochelle, France
Publicity for the festival and for Sound Little Island
Sound Little Island

ZERO 1 Festival des Arts et Cultures Numériques
La Rochelle, France

(top) Festival schedule in magazine publication On sort!

(bottom) Facebook page showing Martin and Weaver, 11 April 2017

"Venez découvrir l'oeuvre sonore politique de deux artistes anglais à la Tour de la Lanterne, du 13 au 16 Avril!"
RESEARCH PROCESS

Using Raspberry-Pi mini computers and the Locusonus platform, the sounds from two chosen locations in Brighton were streamed live to the installation in La Rochelle. To this were added recordings of interviews with French people living in England.

Interviewees were approached and selected through expatriate communities and a developing network of recommendations. Recordings were examined for common patterns and statements that would have impact within the soundscape. The edited voices were allocated to specific tracks, each designed to be delivered through one of the 16 loudspeakers that were installed. These were punctuated by timed silences.

The destination was carefully considered from multiple aspects, and chosen for its acoustics, its status as a tourist destination and the potential impact of the soundscape on residents and visitors.

Through the combination of live-streamed soundscapes from Brighton and recorded interviews, the research gave a displaced experience to audiences, testing how a normalisation of imagined difference might be conducted through a constructed sound environment. That environment was deliberately fractured, bringing multiple voices to the space and juxtaposing the live conversations of British social life with sourced and recorded statements from the French community in the UK, and developing a challenging soundscape as a perspective for the ongoing social and political debate around Brexit.

RESEARCH INSIGHTS

‘Sound Little Island’ joined debates within installation and soundart as to how soundscapes might intervene in real spaces to support, enhance and alter ideas on major social and political topics.

Site-specific, live-streamed sound translocations constructed a virtual sound world that contrasted the visitors’ visual and physical experience in La Rochelle. Challenged experientially, the audience was compelled to reinterpret this unfamiliar surrounding, engaging with ‘sonic possible worlds’ (Voegelin, 2014).

By using multi-speaker interjections to deliver different voices, the research showed how speech characteristics support selected text to reflect the dual nature of the information source - a group and yet a set of individuals. Personal character was allowed to blend with community character by live-streaming the talk in a UK pub, and became in turn part of the sound world being co-created at the installation by the visitors’ presence. The multiplicity of the soundscape's elements reflected how the questions of residency, identity and national division were being discussed during the Brexit vote and its aftermath. The mix of live, dual-location sounds with recordings added further to the ways in which those discussions were preserved or lost, acknowledged or dismissed.

The digital sound technology enabled researchers to create new perceptual realities by combining a physical space with virtual, but equally real and live soundscapes. These heightened visitors’ awareness of their hardwired neurological sensing body and the constructed nature of reality. The experiment affirmed the use of environmental sound as an artistic tool that has its own specific effects upon participants and audience.
DISSEMINATION

Sound Little Island (2017) was commissioned by the ZERO 1 Festival des Arts et Cultures Numériques in La Rochelle, France and installed there 13-16 April 2017. [https://www.facebook.com/festivalzero1/photos/a.821272154684017/1086927528118477](https://www.facebook.com/festivalzero1/photos/a.821272154684017/1086927528118477)

A recorded and edited version for radio was broadcast by ResonanceFM on 21 April 2017, Resonance Extra on 23 April 2017, Framework Radio: (23 April 2017) and a version (with Jacques Sirot) on Framework Radio: 8 May 2017.


REFERENCES


Sound Little Island