Zoë, Sonic Relationality and Posthuman Urban Sound Art

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Posthuman theory questions traditional concepts of the human subject by challenging each of us to adopt a planetary consciousness. It achieves this by breaking down dualisms that separate body and mind, and society from nature. It instead preferences a monist understanding of the real as a tireless “self-organising force of living matter”. This force is described as the vitality of matter, or zoë. Sonic practices have much to offer this emerging consciousness, in particular the concept of sonic relationality, which considers how listening interconnects bodies within a vibratory field of soundings. Three sonic interventions, realised through a recursive process of creative practice research, illustrate the connection between posthuman notions of zoë and emergent theories of sonic relationality. They are: Noise Transformation, which sought to reveal the aesthetic potential of traffic noise; Fielding, which explores the potential of sound art to inform new approaches to urban greening programs; and, Touchstone, which collapsed a sonic community into a performative digital sculpture marked by the Earth’s rotation. Each of these interventions reveals methods by which sound art installation practices and soundscape design are able to create new relations between bodies, by augmenting the vitality inherent to everyday materialities.

Artistic practice, soundscape design, sound art installation, posthumanism, new materialism

1. SOME INSIGHTS FROM POSTHUMAN THEORY

Posthuman critical theory questions the meaning of being human, by asking each of us to reflect on the question – “who and what do we want to become?” (Braidotti 2013, p.12). This paper is an account of how my own artistic research into the creation of urban sound art installations has begun to position itself in relation to this question. The arguments developed in this paper rely on the ideas of two key posthuman theorists, Rosi Braidotti and Francesca Ferrando; primarily, two texts by Bradiotti, *The Posthuman* (2013) and *Nomadic Theory* (2011), and Ferrando’s *Humans have always been posthuman: a spiritual genealogy of posthumanism* (2016). I acknowledge that this provides a limited range of posthuman thought; for instance, Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, amongst others, are not accounted for in this paper. However, I have specifically targeted the works of Braidotti and Ferrando due to their focus on the “zoë concept”, which, I contend, holds considerable relevance for urban sound installation practices.

Below, I present five interrelated themes that articulate arguments presented by these two theorists, which directly relate to the zoë concept. The themes are not intended to be a summary of posthuman thought; rather, they are a theoretical distillation which helps articulate the posthuman qualities of the three discussed installations. The three installations were realised through a recursive process¹ by which zoë, as both concept and living vitality, could be apprehended (see conclusion for further discussion). The five points are as follows:

- Humanity exists at the nexus of the fourth industrial revolution and the sixth great extinction. The fourth industrial revolution is a biotech revolution responsible for the fusion of flesh and technology. We see this with prosthetic legs, mobile devices, microchip insertions etc. The sixth great extinction is a function of the Anthropocene, in which human intervention has become so great as to cause planetary scale change.
- Posthumanism positions itself as an alternative to transhumanism. Transhumanism believes technological development will overcome the various

crises of the Anthropocene, by transcending the weaknesses and limitations of the flesh. Posthumanism also embraces the development of technology in that it has “altered dramatically our understanding of what counts as the basic form of reference for the human today” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 40) but maintains the importance of the human body, the *flesh*, and the question of what humans are and should become.

- Posthumanism presents the idea of *vitalist materialism* or *zoë*. *Zoë* is the life-force present across, and exceeding, all matter, and is responsible for its unfolding and evolution. By bringing our attention to the vitality of the everyday, we no longer look to transcendental ideas or external forces (such as God or Reason) to guide us. Instead, posthumanity is defined by an immediate relationship with surrounding bodies – living and non-living – and the relentless pre-personal drive of *zoë* that shapes, and exceeds, all matter.
- The posthumanist theorist Francesca Ferrando suggests that *zoë* is equivalent to a spiritual force, making specific mention of Tantra, a meditation practice in which “the practitioner’s body became identified with the entire universe, such as all the processes and transformations occurring [in the] body in this world are occurring to a world inside [the] body” (White, cited in Ferrando, 2016). This forms part of Ferrando’s claim that humans have always been posthuman, citing ancient practices that direct the individual self towards an interconnected, planetary consciousness. Ferrando uses the term *spirituality* to describe this process (see below for further discussion).
- To become posthuman we are required to challenge the enlightenment principles of progress, reason and their attendant anthropocentrism. And instead turn our attention to new ways of understanding and being in the world, as we each embark on a process of becoming the planetary citizen, who thinks globally and acts locally. The various entries provided in the Posthuman Glossary (Braidotti and Hlavajova, 2018) suggest the multitude of ways we can begin to imaginatively rethink our existence, and our relationships with the world around us.ⁱⁱ

Within the magnitude of this philosophical discourse, considerations of the role of a single practitioner/practice may seem mute. However, it should be remembered that posthumanism does not ask the human to locate, or subjugate, one’s own capacities in the context of dominant

superstructures (such as God or Reason) but instead values localised, planetary-conscious action. And so, in keeping with this provocation, my question as an installation artist, or someone who thinks about installation art, or the placement of sound in public spaces is, how can I contribute to answering the question, “who and what do we want to become?”. And, is it possible to speak to the posthuman, or perhaps, to design for an emerging posthuman world? The authors, Brandon La Belle (2006) and Salomé Voegelin (2014) have articulated the unique role sound has to play in this discussion – its fluid materiality and relational affectations enables it to instantly transform spaces (real and imaginary) and to form new connections between bodies. It is this *relational quality* of sound that enables the sound installation artist to contribute to the posthuman project, particularly by tailoring their practice towards the *redistribution of sonic flows* for the expansion of perceptual experience. This will be articulated in the three case studies below, in which both the act of creating an artwork, and its post-installation existence, can be shown to have augmented the sonic relations of everyday life.

2. VITALIST MATERIALISM IN PRACTICE

Central to the posthumanist project, and the installation practice discussed in this paper is the *zoë* concept. Rosi Braidotti’s *zoë* concept is traceable, via Deleuze, to Spinoza’s “substance”, which was Spinoza’s term for God and/or Nature: an all-encompassing force that transverses and exceeds all material existence. *Zoë* is an ancient Greek word for life or life-force, which is a type of pre-personal force or energy responsible for the emergence of all living things. Braidotti states posthumanism “proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism (with) an affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others”. Braidotti refers to this as “expanding the notion of Life towards the non-human or *zoë*” (2013, p. 50). *Zoë*, in the hands of Braidotti, and also the works of Francesca Ferrando, is considered an intensity or force that imbues matter with vitality and which simultaneously exceeds all matter. This description might be considered synonymous with spirituality, in so far as spirituality is understood (via Ferrando) as the process by which humans seek to interconnect with something that is outside of, or other than, the self. Thus, an awareness of *zoë* – as equivalent to spirituality – equates to an everyday awareness of expansive, non-human, vital energy.

The *zoë* concept is similar to my own description of *affect* as a “creative press” that is continuously and

tirelessly transforming matter into new states of expression (Lacey, 2016, p.5). This knowledge acts to remind the artist, or creator, that their practice exists at the interface of practical realisation (actual) and creative potential (virtual). Zoë, thought of as a creative press, reminds us that even in the face of the sixth great extinction the creative vitality of matter ceaselessly ‘presses’ (reconfigures) it into new forms. This abundance of life energy is to be found everywhere and exists in excess of everything. It is a reminder that even in the most challenging urban conditions the vital qualities of matter are abundant. As such, the zoë concept acts as a reminder of the innate creativity of the real, and the capacity of the artist to interface with this vitality in the creation of new forms and experiences. My sound installation practice considers zoë to be the driver by which sonic materiality produces new affectations in the human body through the redistribution, diversification and/or transformation of sonic flows. The three case studies demonstrate that the malleability of sonic materiality readily enables a diversification of relations between bodies – human and non-human, living and non-living – which demonstrates ways in which sonic practices are able to translate posthuman thought into tangible and accessible everyday occurrences.

3. THREE SOUND INSTALLATIONS CONSIDERED IN A POSTHUMANIST CONTEXT

Following are three recent urban sound installations I completed, titled *Noise Transformation*, *Fielding*, and *Touchstone*. References provide comprehensive discussions of how each installation was created and received by the public. For the purposes of this paper, I discuss them to illustrate points raised about the relationship between sound art installations and posthumanism, with a focus on the role of the artist in redistributing sonic flows to shift human perception and enable new relationships with the immediate world.

The three works are part of a recursive research process that continues the practice-led research I describe in *Sonic Rupture*, a practice-led research project that discovered new knowledge in the urban sound design domain (Lacey, 2016). Typically, the recursive process is iterative, wherein conceptual and material outcomes of works feed into the realisation of later works. In the case of this paper, the projects are not presented sequentially. Rather, they are presented in relationship to the zoë concept. The intention is to demonstrate how posthuman insights are able to reframe the affectivities of sound installations as acts of redistributing everyday sonic flows, for the diversification of sonic relationalities.

It is implied throughout that the means by which humans engage with processes of creation, and interact with artworks upon their completion, is reflective of Francesca Ferrando's notion that *humans have always been posthuman*. This reflects humanity's ancient spiritual desire to connect with that which lays beyond ourselves (real or imagined), understood as “a non-separation between the inner and outer worlds [...] a connectedness between the self and others” (Ferrando, 2016, p. 244). As such, each artwork – in its making and post-installation existence – attempts to connect listeners with new experiences that exceed typical everyday encounters.

4. NOISE TRANSFORMATION: DESIGNING MOTORWAY SOUNDSCAPES

The *Noise Transformation* project successfully discovered a means by which unwelcome motorway noise could be transformed into more desirable listening environments (for a full description of the installations see Lacey et al 2017; Lacey et al 2019). The project was funded by an international tollway corporation responsible for building motorways and charging commuters for their use. Tollway corporations can be considered exemplary examples of the homogenising force of capitalist globalisation. They emerge as multiple, repeating forces across the globe, able to subjugate landscapes through the creation of extensive transport networks and digital tollway infrastructures. This is an example of the “functionalist imperative” (Lacey, 2016, p.10) par excellence, whereby everyday life is consumed by those capitalist forces ensuring life's expressions are limited to a particular set of pre-determined forms and behaviours. The soundscapes of motorways well represent this homogenising force.

So, what role does the artist have to play in such a scenario? In my case – I became very interested in the non-motorway side of a noise wall. I spent two full days walking the length of two privately owned motorways in Melbourne. What I found was a series of neglected landscapes – small patches of green butting up against suburban housing; long, mainly unused, walking tracks; and, overgrown nature reserves. It was clear that very few of these spaces were being utilised. There could be multiple factors preventing people visiting these sites including the visual isolation created by the noise walls, and the sense of being in an abandoned space that doesn't feel safe. It is also the constant whirr of traffic that made these sites unappealing – monotonous sonic ecologies that felt changeless. The organising force of zoë is present in such spaces, as it is everywhere, but in this case the expression of sonic matter is fixed into repetitive and mundane forms. In response, a project was designed to deploy sound installations for the

purpose of redistributing these sonic flows into more diverse listening environments.

In two green spaces on the non-motorway side of noise walls (one in Melbourne, one in Sydney), I worked with a large team of creatives to produce new soundscapes via electroacoustic means. This was achieved by using microphones to capture and transform post-noise wall traffic sound, into more pleasing listening experiences.ⁱⁱⁱ These soundscapes shifted perception, such that the typical experience of noise wall environments was altered. Through an ethnographic study we discovered that the installations were able to improve environmental experience, in particular participants gave us a clear picture that the interventions made them feel less anxious (*qua* more relaxed). This manifested in two particularly significant ways: one participant who lived in an apartment facing onto an intervention site was more inclined to use their typically avoided balcony as a site of relaxation (Melbourne); and, a group of three local school teachers told us the transformations would encourage them to leave their staff and classroom windows open, due to the transformations producing a more relaxing atmosphere (Sydney). (For further details on responses to the installations see Pink et al 2019 and Lacey et al 2017.)

The noise transformation installations provide an excellent example of the benefits of following the affirmative zoë-centred approach favoured by posthumanism. Rather than neglecting these noise-dominated motorway soundscapes, the noise transformation installations found a way to redistribute these sonic flows into more positive human-environmental relationships. The project demonstrates that posthumanism, which considers a vital energy to flow through all matter, provides a powerful conceptual tool for thinking about urban sound as a wash of sonic flows that can be redistributed to diversify perceptual encounters.

5. FIELDING: BROKEN ECOLOGIES

Fielding, like *Noise Transformation*, sought to diversify the sonic flows of a localised urban space. The project engaged twelve sound artists, who submitted works in relationship to the concept of *broken ecologies*, which “rather than trying to emulate a speculative pristine wilderness, works with the maladaptive, mixed and complex ecological conditions that we have in our cities today”.^{iv} The twelve submissions were woven together into a three-channel soundscape composition, which integrated the works with the site-specific sounds of the installation site.^v The three speakers were embedded in a tessellated triangular structure housing soil and plants. Each piece was different, but all submissions included a

mix of urban-animal, technological and human sounds.

The most stimulating aspect of this project was to witness the people who gathered at the small secluded site to eat their lunch. Through emailing and private conversation, it was fed back to the artists that the installation sounds improved their experiences of the space, in particular creating more vibrant and eventful, though still peaceful, listening experiences. This is interesting as the broken ecologies concept doesn't try to re-introduce pristine nature as a remedy for fixing degraded urban soundscapes; but rather, embraces the mixture of industrial, human and non-human sounds as the real-world conditions of contemporary cities. And yet, the broken ecology soundscape design was able to elicit positive responses through the mixing of industrial, non-human and anthropocentric sounds. This is consistent with posthumanist thought that asks us to affirmatively interface with the real-world conditions of contemporary society, rather than escaping into fantasies of a perfect and pristine past.

Rosi Braidotti comments that the qualities of our contemporary acoustic environments are reflected in the technological sounds of contemporary musicians, who “map out the acoustic environments of here and now while undoing the classical function of music as the incarnation of the most sublime transcendent ideals of the humanist European subject” (2011: 107). This quote could also describe a new approach to the design of future urban soundscapes, which desires the redistribution of flows rather than the imposition of ‘superior’ sounds. This reflects the intention of the *Fielding* installation to work with existing sonic conditions to reshape the space's existing sonic flow, rather than imposing superior and/or more pure sound. Consequentially, a restful and reflective place was produced that provided new listening experiences, while respecting the immediate conditions in which the listeners were immersed.

6. TOUCHSTONE: THE ARTWORK REMEMBERS

Touchstone is an interactive public art sculpture located in the City of Casey, Melbourne that responds to touch through audible and vibratory feedback. Dependent on the number of touches the work broadcasts a short composition each dawn and dusk comprising ethnographic recordings of everyday life (see Lacey et al 2017 for a full description of the construction and installation of *Touchstone*).

Melbourne, like many global cities, is expanding outwards. As it does, rural and natural landscapes

are transformed into homogenous housing estates, with each reflecting the last in architectural form. Typically, public health issues such as isolation, anxiety and crime often proliferate in these areas (Frumkin et al 2004). These symptoms are often associated with urban sprawl, which exhibits characteristics of “monotonous architecture, exclusively residential land use, poor connectivity, and automobile dependence” (ibid., 4). This process is part of a broader problem identified by Rem Koolhaas as the production of “Junkspace”, which is defined as “the built product of modernization [...] or more precisely what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fallout” (Koolhaas, 2002, p. 175). I contend these qualities of outer suburbia are partly the consequence of ignoring the important contribution of culture and aesthetics to healthy human relationships. For humans are not merely an economic unit required to fulfil the needs of a functioning suburban landscape, but rather, a complex being whose potential relationships with the world should be accounted for in creative design and planning.

In the creation of Touchstone, I led a creative team of artists and designers who worked directly with one of the construction companies responsible for the building of these homogenous outer suburbs. This gave us the opportunity to be fully absorbed in the construction of junkspace. In this case, a construction company were commissioned by the local council to construct a new community centre. Our team were provided council funding to integrate an artwork into the design and building of the community centre plaza. The work is made of a central bluestone (roughly human-size) inlaid with four aluminium strips responsive to capacitance. When touched, two ground-level metal plates either side of the stone vibrate accompanied by two sympathetic sine-tone generators emitted from two perpendicularly located in-ground speakers. In addition to these immediate interactive responses, the work is programmed to play a short composition every dawn and dusk in relation to the amount of touches it received the previous day. As stated above these compositions are comprised of field recordings collected from the local community, which are accompanied by the deep metallic buzzing sounds of the adjoining vibrating plates.

What was most interesting for the artistic team was to work alongside the builders, who were a various assortment of tradespeople with exceptional skills. Their creative potential is typically determined by the limited building codes to which they are subjugated. Touchstone’s materials, forms and requirements were different to what the builders were used to implementing, which provided them with new challenges. The tradespeople worked with the artistic team to overcome each impediment. Given the very nature of an artwork to subvert

established codes, and the need of the artist to enable the artwork to produce its own character in the surrounding landscape, extra time and care is needed. As such, even before the artwork took form, it acted to rupture efficiency giving these workers a chance to express their skills in alternative ways. Of course, the unerring demands of Capitalism soon put the builders’ initial surge of interest to an end; slow, careful and thoughtful work processes are anathema to contemporary capitalist cultures which expect work to be completed in haste. Nevertheless, Touchstone demonstrates that artworks provide the opportunity for humans to enact their creative potential.

Given the loneliness of outdoor spaces in these vast stretches of suburbia, with most people confined to the motorcar as they travel to and from work, Touchstone’s enduring relationship with the community is yet to be determined. Presently, Touchstone acts as a type of symbol of the flow of zoë. Literally, in so far as the rock sits in stasis until it is touched, at which point it hums to life. And poetically, in so far as it can be thought of as a non-human body imbued with vitality actualised through physical interconnection with other bodies. As such, like the biotechnological posthuman body, this digital artwork is a hybrid form that acts to configure new connections between living and non-living bodies. Its very existence is a reminder of what is possible when public art is given a significant role in the planning and design of public places, and embraces both digital and aesthetic innovation as a means of reimagining human relationships with the built environment. It is part of imagining, and realising, what an interconnected posthuman city might look and sound like.

7. DISCUSSION

As stated, a sound installation practice that seeks to speak to posthuman theory, must attend to the question – who and what do we want to become? Should the installation, therefore, speak to a world that is yet to exist: a future world that fulfils the speculations of posthuman thought? Certainly, this is one potential approach. However, I agree with Ferrando that humans have always been posthuman, and as such, an installation practice that designs for a posthuman world need not be as speculative as it might seem. Humans have always been posthuman, in that it is in our nature to reach out with our senses and create new relationships with the world, or, as Ferrando (2016, p. 244) puts it “spirituality refers to the human tendency to conceive existence more extensively than individual perception”. It is all too (post)human to consider the possibilities afforded by alterity, and to expand our perceptions in the face of such mysteries. But in cities dominated by the functional demands of Capitalism, it is difficult for human

perception to connect with the world as something ambiguous, complex and mysterious – *the non-human*. The exact purpose of the discussed installations is to facilitate such expansive opportunities.

Zoë is a central concept of posthumanism, reminding us that the material world is vital, and is in excess of human knowing and perception. This vitalism is a type of force or energy that causes all matter to be in a state of becoming. Through the creation of an installation – what might be considered a new, non-human body – zoë is provided a new material form through which its vitalism can flow, giving Life (remembering zoë is the ancient Greek word for life or life-force) the opportunity to be expressed in ways typically prevented by the demands of the efficiently functioning contemporary city. As such posthuman installation practices seek to *redistribute the sonic flows* of cities that work with the here and now, rather than imposing external sets of values and/or sounds deemed superior to existing acoustic conditions. Redistributing flow means expanding sensory perceptions of the real and opening new possibilities for connecting with the world. Indeed, insights by contemporary sound scholars such as Brandon La Belle and Salomé Voegelin teach us that sound, when considered relationally, presents a tangible and affective means for transforming public environments and perceptions. These insights identify an important role for the sonic practitioner in the creation of the posthuman city, which considers the human as more than an economic unit contributing to the processes of globalised capitalist production. Instead, they speak to a collective of planetary citizens connected with the here and now.

The three installations are creative steps towards the realisation of a posthuman city: *Noise Transformation* sought to do this by calming the typically anxious spaces of motorway environments, thereby presenting new technological possibilities for improving experiences in neglected urban landscapes; *Fielding* demonstrates how thoughtfully placed sounds can merge with the soundscapes of 'broken ecologies' to create an enriched sense of place; and, *Touchstone* built an expressive body that vibrates and sounds upon being touched by other bodies – including human and non-human (i.e. roosting birds) and even non-living bodies (rain and falling leaves) – thereby revealing its hidden vitality. All three installations acknowledge our changing world and its attendant challenges, while celebrating the ability of affirmative posthuman practices to find meaningful connections in the here and now. They respond to the zoë concept, which reminds us that the material world is vital, and that our sensory perceptions enable us to manifest this vitality in extraordinarily rich and diverse ways.

8. FURTHER WORK

In keeping with the ambitions of *Sonic Rupture* (Lacey 2016) it is possible to imagine how a network of sound installations might rupture future cities. These act as a type of 'spatial music' in which discrete installations, by rupturing homogenous sound environments, redistribute sonic flows in localised spaces to facilitate new experiences and connections across a city. This type of practice has particular relevance for emerging megalopolises, where access to quietude and sonic diversity will become increasingly difficult as capitalist globalisation produces evermore densely populated urban centres. Just as pre-colonial indigenous cultures found (and continue to find) spiritual meaning in pantheistic landscapes, perhaps there is a way for posthuman societies to suffuse the land with encounters that extend our individual perceptions towards a sense of interconnection with alterity, the planet and the cosmos. Such a spiritual endeavour should not be too difficult, and perhaps even is imbued in our being, if we heed the words of Ferrando that *humans have always been posthuman*.

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ⁱ For further discussion of the employed creative practice research recursive process, see Lacey, 2016, p. 20-1.

ⁱⁱ There are too many examples to do justice to this glossary, which attempts to reframe the humanities in relationship to posthumanism. Two standouts are Steve Mentz's *Blue Humanities* and Felix Guattari's *Ecosophy* (summarised by Rick Dolphijn).

ⁱⁱⁱ For examples visit <https://sites.rmit.edu.au/transurbaninnovationgrant2016/audio/>

^{iv} For further information see: <http://www.ciclover.com/fielding.html>.

^v I am indebted to Sophie Gleeson for her assistance in shaping the soundscape design.