The Spectral Artist in the Academy

Dr Joseph Young

This is an essay about the artist in the academy, framed as it is by my own experience of a recently completed practice-based PhD in Ireland. It is also about the spectrality of a certain type of artistic practice as it relates to that research, and how the figure of the artist continues to 'haunt' the hegemonic structures of academic culture. The research was undertaken late in my career as a visual artist working with sound; I hesitate to use the shorthand 'sound artist' to describe myself, as this is a contested and often misunderstood term (Cox, 2018).

Throughout the PhD process, I often felt that I was haunting the academy as an outsider, a creature between being and non-being, neither there and neither *not-there* — a knowledge maker whose knowledge is not really 'concréte' enough, or as Derrida, the godfather of hauntology would say *"One represents it to oneself, but it is not present, itself, in flesh and blood."* (2006)

As I journeyed, I also came to think of my research as a kind of ghostly presence emanating from a parallel demesne of knowledge in which *"(t)he spectre of sound unsettles the idea of visual stability and involves us as listeners in the production of an invisible world". (Voegelin, 2010)* Here, Voegelin describes a specifically aural way of knowing that I fundamentally posit as the key to understanding my own practice-as-research, one which is often 'overlooked' in a predominantly *visual* arts culture. It is a coming-to-form of formlessness, the invisible and (in)audible production of sound-as-knowledge, one in which an intuitive and emotional understanding of art and practice is gained through a process of subjective listening.

In order to develop my arguments, I am first going to offer a set of questions which I will attempt to answer in the following paragraphs, introduced in the manner of an artist manifesto.

Three Provocations:

- How can we protect and promote the role of practice-based artistic research with its notions of complexity and doubt, whilst stressing its trans-disciplinary nature and demanding a different way of seeing, listening and knowing?

- Can we 'de-instrumentalise' the practice of the artist in the academy so that their work can fully engage with ambiguity, difference and diversity?

- Can art, as argued by the Frankfurt School scholar Herbert Marcuse in his final work *The Aesthetic Dimension*, still occupy a privileged space in which "*(t)he truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality to define what is real."*? (Marcuse, 1979)

To address these questions I have attempted a bricolage of some of the thinking that occurred during my PhD journey, in the hope that by sharing these personal insights I can shed some light on the process of undertaking artistic research in the academy and an artist's place and role within that infrastructure. There are a number of key themes that emerge that I have underlined as headings to frame the narrative, which unfolds in the manner of a personal story, interwoven with some theory and a more traditional third person academic analysis.

I will begin with a bit of background. My PhD at University College Dublin took place under the auspices of SMARTlab, a digital media research institute, part of the Inclusive Design Research Centre (IDRC) Ireland, which is embedded in the Engineering Department. It was supported by an Enterprise Partnership Award from Irish Research Council. SMARTlab's PhD programme in

'Inclusive Design and Creative Technology Innovation' plays host to a large and diverse, global cohort of artists, designers, makers, technologists, social scientists and activists (even actual engineers). Inclusive Design principles sit at the core of all of the research being done across XR and mixed realities, immersive and assistive tech, social coding and pedagogy.

Their website states that:

> *"Inclusive Design begins and ends with people and the need for equity, diversity and radical inclusion. It insists on a 1-size-fits-1 model of inclusion in society, technology, pedagogy, engineering and all domains."*[1]

This notion of 'radical inclusion' is at the heart of everything I do as an artist, and has led me, perhaps surprisingly, towards a *poetic* approach to research. As an outlier in the academic system, my PhD was driven by the excitement and possibility of making new work, supported by a generous offer of funding, rather than the need to gain a qualification in order to advance my academic career. It meant defying expectations sometimes in order to protect what I understood as the most important voice in the research process, that of the artist.

In the considerable body of literature concerning art & design practice-based and practice-led research (Biggs, 2002; Hannula, Suoranta and Vadén, 2005; Haseman, 2006; Mäkelä and Routarinne, 2006; Mäkelä, 2007; Biggs and Karlsson, 2010; Mäkelä *et al.*, 2011; Mäkelä and Nimkulrat, 2018; Skains, 2018) there is surprisingly little written about the nature of artistic practice itself - the *iteration and reflection* of making. Put simply, a piece of work begins with doing, followed by a period of thinking about doing, and then doing again and thinking about doing again, until it is over... It is only over when the artist decides it is over, not before; when what has been accomplished either produces a sense of personal pride or at the very least, the

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1   https://www.ucd.ie/idrc/about/ (accessed 23/05/2024)

absence of significant criticism. Put another way, when the niggling inner voices stop and there is no further compulsion to change things, then the work is finished. That intuitive process of making is something I will discuss a little later as it connects to the academic research process and how each artist has to construct a personal methodology based on their own working practices in order to successfully carry out the task of artistic practice-based or practice-led research.

My PhD, *Killruddery: Listening to the Archive. Sonic hauntings in a Big House* was an exploration of the post-colonial archives of an historic house in Ireland, using *listening* as means to complexify the public narratives of a private archive. The aim was to show how the story of the Earl of Meath and the Brabazon family on the Killruddery estate relates to a wider social history on the island of Ireland. *The Ancestors*[2] soundwalk, produced as the main artistic output of the research, is published on the Echoes.xyz audio geo-location platform, and proposes new ways and means for heritage storytelling, enabling the listener to personally encounter the *sonic revenants* of the archive as they wander the grounds of the estate.

The work accomplishes this through four distinct modes of engagement: The first is a series of verbatim and improvised re-enactments from archival records which seek to dramatise and bring to audition selected stories from a centuries-old archive of land deeds, ledgers, maps, photographs, diaries, to place the listener in direct phenomenological contact with the revenants of that archive. It accomplishes this through recording actors in situ in the grounds of the estate using the binaural dummy head technique[3]; the encounter with the listener through geo-location then creates a slippage of time and space as they witness and sense the presence of an unseen voice in that place. The second is a series of *enchantments*, voiced by *The Keeper of the Archive,* a fictional figure who comments on the nature of the archive in elliptical terms, accompanied by field recordings, ambient drones and sonic manipulation.
The character was created as a way for the voice of the artist to be heard, gently guiding the

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2   https://explore.echoes.xyz/collections/y4SIsHeeHBtRGVe1 *(accessed 01/05/2024)*

3   The binaural Dummy Head technique uses two discrete condenser microphones placed in the ears of an artificial dummy head to emulate the way that humans listen and perceive sound in binaural stereo.

Drawing Rooms

listener in their explorations. The third mode is a series of (hidden) contemporary field recordings recorded on the estate, which are threaded throughout the walk. These ghostly sounds are not indicated on the app interface, and trigger automatically in response to the position of the listener.

The fourth and final mode is explored in a work entitled *Between & Among,* which is a fully interactive experience in which the listener creates their own soundscape through movement. It features the voices of the Earl and Countess of Meath accompanied by shifting ambient musical textures and further field recordings, suggesting the multi-layered and dense layers of history present on the site.

The whole experience takes approximately 90 mins in total and is accompanied by a limited edition publication, 'Mapping the Ancestors',[4] produced in conjunction with the Mermaid Arts Centre in Bray and the release of a vinyl album[5] on Farpoint Recordings, supported by funding from The Arts Council, An Chomhairle Ealaíon. Together, these two publications offer alternative ways of increasing the public impact of the research, moving away from the digital and the site-specific, and disseminating knowledge beyond the immediate boundaries of the estate.

Haunting the Archive:

The notion of "haunting the archive" (Young, 2023) came to me over time as both a means with which to interrogate the archive, and an expression of my creative response. It is tangentially related to Derrida's notion of 'archive fever' (1996), but is concerned primarily with examining how I constructed a particular artistic research methodology and a mode of audience engagement. It was developed initially during the Covid-19 pandemic when the site of my research became inaccessible for a period of time, and I was forced to *haunt* the site remotely via a library of recordings that I had previously gathered on the estate. As I wandered the spectral grounds of my imagination in the studio at home in Brighton, this ghostly relationship

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4   https://www.mermaidartscentre.ie/whats-on/events/ancestors-map *(accessed 01/05/2024)*

5   https://ofnoises.bandcamp.com/album/sonic-hauntings-in-a-big-house *(accessed 01/05/2024)*

to site set me thinking about the haunted nature of sound reproduction as proposed by David Toop[6], further complicated by my own use of the binaural recording technique.

Binaural microphones capture a 360-degree soundscape as heard through the ears of the recordist, or as mounted on an artificial dummy head. The listener recreates the spatial relationship of the recording when listening back on headphones, entering a virtual aur(e)ality in which space and time collapse, conjuring a phantasmic present moment. I have seen listeners startled by the realisation that what they are hearing is not happening outside of the headphones, but is in fact a 'spooky' digital simulation. This sense of *being there* and *not-there* became a critical component of how I came to understand my relationship to the archival, and was central in unlocking a creative response to those particular heritage narratives, in order that I might challenge and augment them.

In my discussion of *soundwalking* as a research methodology, I explored the spectral notion of how to soundwalk a literature review:

> *"(T)o soundwalk a literature review means to listen and to follow the theoretical pathways as they occur out of practice and to immerse oneself in the sonic environment of the written word. The aim is to produce a new mapping of the (sonic) terrain..."*

> (Young, 2023)

This novel approach to theory emerged from a close examination of my own established artistic practice which revealed intuitive methods of listening that I had honed over many years; methods which I then codified and documented for the purposes of the research. I was then able to map this form of sonic understanding onto my investigation of the existing literature.

My supervisor, Prof Lizbeth Goodman was adept at helping me to navigate the requirements of my programme of studies whilst maintaining artistic independence. She also assisted me in identifying salient arguments to support and inform the research, in an improvised dance of practice and theory. Much has been written in recent decades about the practice-based or practice-led form of knowledge making, in which the artist uses their own artistic practice to embody and represent theoretical ideas and where "the making of the artefact, even if intuitive, (...) determines the direction of the practice-led research process". (Mäkelä, 2007) This notion was taken even further in Nelson's definition of practice-as-research (PaR) whereby the artistic outcomes don't just function as an illustration of the research but are its principal output. (Nelson, 2013)

In Kodwo Eshun's landmark book, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (1998) he advocates for what I referred to in my thesis as *"a new kind of intellectual writing, one that is rooted in remix culture, sampling sound-as-text to produce a sonified intellectualism" (Young, 2023).* This genre of sound-as-writing-as-sound has been given further expression in recent years by Salomé Voegelin and others, utilising sonic metaphors to move Sound Studies discourse away from the language of the visual, whilst exploring aural archaeologies through a form of textual free improvisation, with words and ideas intertwining and combining like players in a jazz ensemble.

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6   Toop argues that "sound is a haunting, a ghost, a presence whose location in space is ambiguous and whose existence in time is transitory." (2010)

Sonic Hauntings in a Big House
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The act of inscription lies at the heart of what is referred to as sound-writing or *phonography*, whether gouging the groove of a vinyl record, geo-locating sound in the built and natural environment, or playing with aurality in and through the written word.

Writing on the landscape via geo-location, and using a smartphone to search for sound trapped in the stones of an ancient estate was always going to be a difficult task to write about in the context of an academic thesis, especially when that argument relied on the potentially misleading idea of *Stone Tape Theory,* which is not really a theory at all.

'Stone Tape Theory' seems to have emerged in various paranormal internet forums and was likely born out of a conflation of two cultural moments, a decade apart. The first was the publication of *Ghosts and Ghoul* (1961) by respected former academic, TC Lethbridge, who turned his back on a career as a Cambridge University archaeologist and moved to Devon to write about paranormal phenomena. His ideas were taken up a decade later and dramatised in *The Stone Tape* (1972), a BBC TV Christmas horror drama concerning a group of scientists in a country mansion, who summon the spectre of a murdered woman thought to be embedded as a kind of *tape loop* within the fabric of the building.

This notion of spectral recordings encoded into architecture has potential resonance for our approach to archival practice; imagining the archive itself as a kind of stone tape recorder, storing traumatic events which can then be recalled many years later as a visitation, or ghosting. Technology has a role to play in this with the audio recorder and the smartphone repurposed as futuristic divining tools, summoning the sonic spectre from within ancient documents.

My interest in the revenant can be traced back to Derrida's conception of hauntology in *Specters of Marx* in which he grapples with the simultaneous demise and immanence of Communism in Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Hauntology has been repurposed in many ways since Derrida's specific usage, with Mark Fisher famously taking up the cause in the late 1990s in relation to music and popular culture with his conception of musical and popular culture hauntologies being a response to a "failure of the future". (2012)

> *"As theoreticians or witnesses, spectators, observers, and intellectuals, scholars believe that looking is sufficient. Therefore, they are not always in the most competent position to do what is necessary: speak to the specter."* <sic>

(Derrida, 2006)

To (mis)quote Derrida then, if scholars will not speak to the spectral artist, then the artist's voice will remain unheard, and therefore ignored; or to put it more bluntly *"our systems of research, education, markets and mechanisms of value exchange are structurally biased against diversity and complexity."* (Treviranus, 2018)

Inclusive Design practice further testifies to the harmful impact of designing systems that exclude individuals whose needs are not catered for, warning that *"(e)ach decision made without their participation bolsters and entrenches the exclusion further, normalising their absence and making them invisible to the process." (Ibid.)*

What is required then, is a recognition of a process that I referred to in my research as *Sonic Agency,* after Labelle (2018), which "highlights sound's invisible, disruptive, and affective qualities, and asks whether the unseen nature of sound can support a political transformation". Labelle's text focuses on the role of sonic activism in effecting change, whilst my usage describes a more poetic process in which the sonic spectres of archive exert their agency on the narratives of archive through their inherent formlessness.

"Art Will Not Save The World"[7]

> *"Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to the consciousness and drives of men and women who could change the world". (Marcuse, 1979)*

To look at this in another way, it could be argued that the spectral presence of the artist is actually essential to the functioning of art in a liberal society, allowing artists to operate at the margins, sometimes barely audible, but nevertheless enacting a *haunting* sort of agency.

Currently, much contemporary art practice is framed as an act of 'artivism', whether that be protesting against colonial warfare, sounding the deafness of the ecological crisis or exploring the ethics and aesthetics of *alter-identities*. This movement towards a performative form of revolutionary aesthetics, takes me back to the work of my spectral mentor, Herbert Marcuse; his words threaded throughout this essay and whose final book was published in Britain in the year that I went to drama school in London, attending the legendary theatre school, Drama Centre, where we studied Marxist critical theory[8] in a series of 'voluntary' evening classes.

In *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse argues for the development of a revolutionary imagination. He clearly asserts that the artist's role is not to directly agitate for change, insisting that their primary contribution lies in stimulating the visionary power of the audience, listener or viewer. These words have literally *haunted me* for the past 45 years and continue to do so. If art is to have a purpose, it must be through its power to conjure alternative realms of being. Art cannot summon *"a utopia to be translated into reality (...) It remains a "fictitious" world, though as such it sees through and anticipates reality". (Ibid.)*

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7   The final line of *The Manifesto of Neo-Futurism* by Rowena Easton https://neofuturistcollective.com/manifesto-of-neo-futurism/ (Accessed 29th April 2024)

8   For clarity, I am not, and have never been, a Marxist.

This is not to argue for a depoliticised notion of art, but a plea to move away from the sloganeering of much contemporary art practice and instead to listen between the cracks to reveal "the beach beneath the pavement"[9]. The artist's role, as I conceive it, is to explore what is hidden and unheard, and to be guided at all times by aesthetics. The notion of 'beauty', which for much of the latter part of the 20th century was considered an outdated concept, has returned to haunt a world where ecological collapse is not some future scenario, but an ever increasing dynamic of instability and rapidly accelerating change; with artists increasingly using elegiac strategies of emotional identification with a collapsing planet to focus our ears on the need for immediate action. (Alec Finlay & Chris Watson, 2006; Peter Cusack, 2011; Winderen, 2020)

My question to myself is how I can amplify what is often silenced in these noisy times - the intangible sound of nuance, complexity and diversity (allowing for diverse opinions), whilst simultaneously challenging the status quo and advancing collective knowledge and cultural experience. Art does not need to take sides, and when it does, I would argue, it negates itself, harming its ability to communicate beyond the echo chamber of those who already agree with us.

The ethics of this kind of artistic ambiguity was something I explored extensively in my PhD, in which the contested archives of a post-colonial 'Big House' in Ireland were examined within a critical praxis, giving due credit and acknowledgement to the family who owned and cared for the archives, whilst pointing to the obvious fact of their wealth and privilege in the narratives of how those archives were publicly portrayed.

The Sound of Three Artists:

> *"Art breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle."*
>
> (Marcuse, 1979)

What would it mean to stand outside of an 'established reality principle'? Artist *Janet Cardiff* asks us to step outside of *what is real* when we don a pair of headphones and embark on one of her pioneering audio walks, which were made for early portable listening devices such as cassette and CD players. Using binaural recording techniques and multiple overlapping edits, accompanied by the positioning of sounds in relationship to the built environment, the listener is taken on a 'cinematic' journey guided by the artist as narrator who entices them to walk and to listen. In the parallel world of the mobile listening space, Cardiff, aided by the technical expertise of her partner/collaborator George Bures Miller takes us on a journey to a fictional realm, where lines between reality and aur(e)ality are blurred. Much has been written about Cardiff's innovative use of immersive audio in this respect, but little about the *hauntological* aspect of what she is doing, summoning ghostly sonic worlds within an everyday experience of walking the city.

Michael Bull's seminal work on personal listening practices (2012), enabled by the portable cassette, superseded by CD, mini disc and mp3 players, and now the smartphone, examines some of the issues that Cardiff interrogated in her audio walks. The creation of personalised

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9   Translated from an anonymous Situationist graffiti action during the May 1968 riots in Paris - "Sur le Pavés, la Plage"

soundtracks on our devices transport the listener to a spectral realm of being which alters their experience of the phenomenal world, looking outwards from the relative comfort and safety of an inner sound world. Do we hear this as a liberatory escape from the horrors of everyday neo-liberalism, or as *"an act of colonization, whereby users become increasingly dependent upon the use of these technologies in order to satisfactorily survive and manage their daily routines."? (ibid.)*

Prominent German artist and academic *Christina Kubisch* interrogates the unheard in the built environment through her 'Electrical Walks' where she provides the listener with custom receivers and wireless headphones *"which trace the electro-magnetic fields of urban environments in the form of city walks"*[10]. As we explore along prescribed routes suggested by an accompanying map, we hear the hidden sounds of the ever-present electromagnetic fields that emanate from our technological infrastructure. As we tune in and explore this parallel auditory realm, we experience it as an interactive musical composition, aestheticising it; and in so doing, we become aware of a challenge to our perception of reality that reveals the spectral world *as electricity and us a part of it.*

Susan Philipsz, the first ever artist working with sound to win the Turner Prize, describes herself as a sculptor. Her monumental sound installations activate public spaces and architectures through the use of her own singing voice, as well other singular elements such as war-damaged musical instruments, in which acoustic spaces are reconfigured and exalted to produce "poetic laments of loss, longing, hope and return"[11]. These alterations act as a rupture in the fabric of our experience, transforming the fragile air into *haunted spaces* where we become aware of the siren song of the dispossessed and the forgotten.

Ghosts, ghosts everywhere:

R Murray Schafer, the founder of Acoustic Ecology, observed that listening to the contemporary soundscape reveals valuable information about the health of the society from which it emerges. (Quoted in Eckhardt, 2022) In the field of bioacoustics, for example, specialist techniques used to record and analyse underwater sound have helped to highlight the urgent need to control the impact of human-made noise on vital marine habitats. Even the word 'spectrogram', a software tool for the visual representation of soundscape, contains the spectral.

The contemporary soundscape can also be explored through absence. Listening closely for what is *not heard* can reveal an echo of that which is *no longer* in the visible environment. In *What is the Sound of Protest?*[12] I investigated the hidden and the unheard in Berlin through soundwalking with local artists in areas associated with revolutionary activity and history, in order to try and perceive an echo of what had occurred there, buried within the contemporary soundscape. Utilising the techniques developed in *Killruddery: Listening to the Archive* it would now be possible to invoke those spectral worlds and to write their archives directly onto the city, using GPS and geo-location.

From the earliest days of sound recording when Edison, the inventor of the Phonograph, talked

10   https://christinakubisch.de/electrical-walks *(accessed 26th April 2024)*

11   https://www.tanyabonakdargallery.com/artists/52-susan-philipsz/ *(accessed 26th April 2024)*

12   https://artofnoises.com/2015/11/07/what-is-the-sound-of-protest-vernissage/ *(accessed 01/05/2024)*

of developing a 'spirit phone' to speak with the dead, we can observe a close relationship between listening and mediumship. Konstantin Raudive, a student of Carl Jung, claimed to have recorded the voices of spirits that he heard in between the static of shortwave radio broadcasts and a selection of his ghostly recordings have been recently republished with remixes by famous artists on the Sub Rosa label. (Konstantin Raudive, David Toop, DJ Spooky, Lee Ranaldo, Calla, CM Von Hausswolff, 2020)

Coda:

In a parallel demesne at the edge of audition, *the spectral artist* cuts a liminal figure, their mediumistic voice speaking the silence. Abandoned, troubled and restless, the revenant can nevertheless find peace, given freedom and the *space to haunt.* Out there, at the edges, they will devise *imaginary* insights into the challenges that face our fractious planet, using all of the infinite poetics they can muster; all the while leaving behind ferric traces in the architectural knowledge systems, for future researchers to divine, replay and record.

> *"Art fights reification by making the petrified world speak, sing, perhaps dance."*
> (Marcuse, 1979)

> *"(W)hen we reach the point where we have made room for and welcomed our full diversity, we find a deeper commonality."*
> (Treviranus, 2018)

The Ancestors is at Killruddery House & Gardens in Bray, County Wicklow, Ireland. The artwork is available to the public during regular opening times. Please check with the Killruddery website[13] and download the app in advance.

The Ancestors: https://explore.echoes.xyz/collections/y4SIsHeeHBtRGVe1
Sonic Hauntings in a Big House (album): https://farpoint.bandcamp.com/
Killruddery: Listening to the Archive (thesis): http://hdl.handle.net/10197/24803

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13 https://killruddery.com/

Biography:

Joseph Young lives and works between Brighton (UK), Berlin (DE) and Dublin (IE). He is an established artist and researcher working in sound, performance and inclusive design with an interest in using sonic methodologies to uncover what is often unheard, buried within the clamour and noise of the contemporary soundscape.

Recent exhibitions include: *Edges (2024)* Wexford Arts Centre, Ireland; *The Destruction of Language (after Le Madame),* Venice Architecture Biennale (2023); *Circa Regna Tonat,* SLEEPERTOWN, Ireland & Italy (2021-3); *Make Futurism Great Again,* Estorick Collection, UK (2018); *The Missing Paintings,* Towner Art Gallery, UK (2017); *Revolution #10,* House of Commons, UK (2015); *What is the Sound of Protest?,* Errant Bodies, Berlin (2015); *Growing Manual,* Seoul Museum of Art (2014); *Listening Ears,* Tate Britain, UK (2012).

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