

# Magazzino Brancaccio: Sound, Participatory Performance and Auditory Resistance in Confiscated Properties in Palermo, Sicily

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper presents and explores a series of sonic activities, maneuvers and approaches, which were co-devised and developed by the author for Magazzino Brancaccio, in Palermo, Sicily. This project, originated and presented by curator Valentina Sansone, aimed at the accessing and appropriation of properties confiscated from organized crime, and the repositioning of these as sites for the curatorial, as well as for community-based and experimental sound and music activations, and other forms of contemporary arts intervention. In 2018, the first of these initiatives took place, within a 2000 square meter confiscated warehouse, located in the Brancaccio area of the city. Through the efforts of the project, the space was opened and ultimately returned to its community. The paper reflects upon the central role that sound played in this process of taking possession and infiltrating the space, and the ways in which the inter-connected practices of listening, sound-making and musicking, were of central importance to encouraging members of the local community to re-discover, interact with and inhabit the space anew. I suggest that the call to creative action through sound and engagement with the local environment and materials to hand contributes to the social transformations that ensue, not only conceptually, but as a dynamic, embodied and lived condition.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The potentials for listening and sound making practices to infiltrate, resonate and thus take possession of contested space, within the public realm, became a key aspect of a series of experimental, community-based, and participatory performance activities, and other creative manifestations, which took place at Magazzino Brancaccio, a 2000 square meter, former warehouse, in the periphery of Palermo, Sicily, throughout 2018 [1]. The space was confiscated from organized crime, and legally held for almost twenty years since its seizure when, through a project initiated by Italian curator Valentina Sansone, the warehouse was accessed, opened to the public and permanently returned to its community in 2021.

Sansone's project stems from an Italian legislative framework, through which properties or assets confiscated from organized crime may be rehabilitated for social purposes. Magazzino Brancaccio is the outcome of a series of actions initially presented within the frame of the Manifesta 12 biennial of contemporary art that took place in Palermo that year [2]. In its first phases, the community-based and participatory events organized often involved or focused on experimental sound or music-based initiatives, which sought to engage a cross-section of the community in exploring the possibilities of the newly-accessed warehouse to function as a performance space. This being accomplished through the harnessing, deployment, and collaborative engagement of the space's architectural acoustical properties, and through the activation and energizing of objects, instruments and voices within its sonic environmental envelope.

Certain recent directions in the sound studies literature have pointed to the centrality of listening and auditory practices to evolving forms of political engagement and resistance [3, 4], and it is within such a context that these collective maneuvers and actions can perhaps begin to be read. This paper will briefly outline three such collective initiatives, each utilizing differing facets of sonic awareness and activity.

## 2. OPENING PERFORMANCE: 16<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2018

In developing the opening performance, in June 2018, I was invited by Sansone as sound curator for the project and as a member of *The Great Learning Orchestra* (GLO), to develop initial ideas in autumn 2017. GLO is an experimental ensemble which functions as a self-selecting network of musicians, non-musicians, and artists from a range of backgrounds, which performs exploratory music, where acts of listening – to spaces, to each other, and to the environment, are a central focus [5]. Founded in 1999 in Stockholm, Sweden, the music collective is partially influenced by the legacy of Cornelius Cardew and (as the name suggests) specifically by *The*

*Great Learning* (1968-70), the vast, seven-movement experiment in social music making, originally composed for *The Scratch Orchestra* in London [6].

I invited British community musicians and amateurs Barry Russell and Tony Harris to join GLO and run a series of participatory sessions, as a means towards communally devising the final performance. The essential aim of which was to mark the moment of access, re-appropriation, and reactivation of the space. Russell and Harris supplied a number of germination points for the process, including simple melodic fragments and generative rhythmical strategies, which were taken and further developed by workshop participants. These were deployed and presented through an array of performance stations and group actions, encompassing the whole space, and involving the activation of a number of different types of found objects and materials, readily available in quantity. These included: blue plastic, industrial chemical storage drums, broom handles, drumsticks, automobile brake drums, as well as voices and instruments (see Figure 1). Participants in the collective devising process, and resultant performance, were drawn from the local area, as well as students and staff of a public high school housed within the formerly confiscated compound. This process was further facilitated in collaboration with Palermo-based music collective *Curva Minore*, theatre students from *Teatro Atlante*, and students and staff from *Conservatoire Alessandro Scarlatti*.



**Figure 1:** The Great Learning Orchestra (feat. Tony Harris and Barry Russell), performance in collaboration with the participants, 16 June 2018, Magazzino Brancaccio, Palermo, Italy. Photo: Luca Savettiere.

### 3. TOY PIANOS

In autumn 2018, a further sonic manifestation took place in the space, when Magazzino Brancaccio was approached by Piano City Palermo, a city-wide festival of piano music and performance, and a constituent part of the international Piano City platform of festivals staged worldwide. The Palermo event arranged concerts in a variety of venues and everyday spaces across the city, with Magazzino Brancaccio being invited to contribute to the program. The idea was again to present something

that could sonically encompass the whole space, whilst also coming into relation with the immediate sound environment, perhaps in unexpected or surprising ways. The performance was also to represent a departure from the standard classical/romantic piano repertoire (represented by much of the rest of the program), and furthermore open up a creative or devised process – with participation on this occasion, again coming from the students of the adjacent schools. For these reasons, the basis of the event was taken to be John Cage’s indeterminate composition *Music for Amplified Toy Pianos* (1960) [7], somewhat adapted and re-imagined as an open-ended performance environment. A quantity of miniature toy grand pianos, and attendant battery-powered miniature guitar amplifiers, were then duly sourced by the festival and delivered to the warehouse site.



**Figure 2:** John Cage, “Music for Amplified Toy Pianos”, 1960. A view from the performance at Magazzino Brancaccio, 6 and 7 October 2018. Photo: Magazzino Brancaccio.

The original score materials are printed on transparent film, consisting of a grid with superimposable sheets of points and lines, which are used as a means of devising the pitch content of a realization, together with how this is to be distributed in time. During an intensive couple of workshops, run by the author, these materials were presented to the students (some as young as 6 years old) and, working in pairs, they made different realizations of the score. They were then asked to color-code the pitch points in the realizations, which corresponded to similarly color-coded keys on a toy piano, for ease of performance. The pairs were then encouraged to perform their realizations, against cell-phone based stopwatches, carefully placing pitched and noise-based events, within a time-frame, manipulating the volume levels on the mini amps, and observing interstitial periods of silence.

For the performance, several realizations were performed simultaneously in continuous loops, with the toy pianos and mini amps arrayed in two groups across the space (see Figure 2). In this way, a perambulating audience could experience the performance as a spatial proposition, with a slowly shifting sonic atmosphere resulting from the cyclical recombinations of the layered realizations. There was no stipulated duration for the final

performance, and although it was possible that enthusiasm would not sustain, the participants in actual fact, kept the performance going for three hours. This brought a prevailing, yet uncommon stillness to the space, with the overall sonic effect of the performance existing only as a kind of subtle atmosphere or tint. Periods of silence further punctuated the soundworld throughout, offering the opportunity to apprehend the wider environment and the sounds around.

#### 4. INSTALLING RESONANCE

A final example of sonic intervention and envelopment of the space, amplifying its natural resonance and architectural attributes, can be found in the sounding elements accompanying a site-specific artistic installation, shown at the venue during September 2018. The work consisted, in the physical/visual domain of a 20-metre expanse of cotton fabric, extending diagonally across the space, and suspended from its load bearing columns. A simple geometric device in black acrylic on white substrate, also extended onto nearby columns, such that these extraneous markings would merge into the main image, depending on the position of the viewer in the space. As an additional component for this work, a sonic element was developed by Stockholm-based sound artist and researcher Ricardo Atienza, together with the author. This arose from an investigation of the warehouse's spatial acoustic properties, through the performing and analysis of simple impulse response operations and measurements within the space, akin to methods traditionally utilized by acousticians (balloon pop recording, and so forth), correlated to the space's physical dimensions. From this data, a series of algorithmically determined sonic textures were derived from the natural resonant frequencies of the architecture, and then calibrated for playback in the space. The efficiency of this procedure meant that only a single small, battery-powered portable speaker was enough to acoustically energize and induce the whole space into vibration [8]. The utilization of such a modicum of means was most important, not only countering the lack of electricity in the space, but also a reminder that, given the right conditions and acoustic calibration a small, single sound source can give rise to a powerfully immersive acoustic experience, thus embodying the action of the reclaiming and reactivation of contested space.

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS

The examples outlined here attest to a selection of activities and performative gestures which took place during the first stages of Magazzino Brancaccio, and the process of urban and communal re-appropriation and renewal at the heart of such a project. They also highlight the central and critical role that sound and acoustic engagement can play in political processes, such as those outlined above. This, in turn, emphasizes the interconnectedness of the social, political and sonic attributes of such a situation. Such an orientation has a demonstrably broad application and has been central to my wider practice within community arts over the last 25 years. As an extension of this, the specific examples outlined here, can be viewed as contributing to an evolving method of socio-acoustic exploration and engagement, through which contested urban architectures can be newly oriented, and newly heard.

#### 6. REFERENCES

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