

SOUND-LINES

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Abstract

Sound-Lines is an interactive sound sculpture composed of sensors that trigger archived sounds and animated words. Our collaborative project, supported by e-MobiLArt (European Mobile Lab for Interactive Media Artists), invites the visitor to engage in a playful exploration of shifting perspectives and perceptual discovery. The collaborating artists are Cliona Harmeay (IR), Christine Mackey (IR), Nita Tandon (AU), and Lorraine Walsh (US).

New Media/Old Media

We (the collaborating artists) consider interactive new media as a reflective and recombinant mode of historical interfaces in *Sound-Lines*. We investigate how records, in our case archived sounds and text, are at the core of humanistic understanding, often collected for information and identification. Hence, one aspect of this multilayered project is our observation on how cultures throughout history have devised tools and databases to collect and preserve their heritage. As succinctly stated by Lisa Gitelman: "Cultures save themselves" [1].

Cultures continue to save, record and archive, while new technology enables us to create innovative tools and databases. New media tools bridge old media, inheriting traditional media for multifarious expressions. Therefore interactive new media is hardly ahistoric. Rather, it works with old technology to open ways of thinking with multisensory interfaces. We accordingly sought to create a hands-on interactive experience

with traditional forms and digital media in an attempt to bring forth new perspectives and frames of reference.

We were inspired by an ancient database referencing a specific historical artifact called the Khipu or Quipu (a 13th century Incan device used for recording data). "The Khipu (from the Quechua word for 'knot') was a knotted-string device made of (usually) multicolored strings of wool or cotton that were knotted in a very complex pattern." [2] Our inspirational database, the Kuipu, has yet to be fully deciphered. One theory is that it was used to store numerical information regarding amounts of crops, livestock, or stored provisions for the Incan society. We selected the Khipu because of its significance as an ancient database and unique aesthetic string structure. We aspired to unravel the Khipu's mysterious role with our own 21st century interactive database.

Sound-Lines is a digital database; a collection of recorded sounds and words. (Also yet to be fully deciphered.) Furthermore, like the Khipu, *Sound-Lines* has a series of strings. These strings emanate from a sculptural structure (scaffolding) with suspended paper for projection. *Sound-Lines* utilizes traditional media, i.e. steel, paper, and rubber strings alongside digital media. The interface and text animation are created in MAX/Msp & Jitter. The sounds, individually recorded by the artists, include rural and urban noises ranging from street sounds in Buenos Aires to insects in the mountains of North Carolina. The identifying words are titles named by the artists recording the sounds. Additionally, we placed touch sensors at the end of various strings. A sound and associated word/phrase, coded to be drawn at random from a database, is triggered

each time a visitor touches a sensor. This animated word/phrase is projected on the paper screen. Over time the word/phrase diminishes and evolves into a single line. Thus each visitor leaves a mark. If the sensors are not engaged, the viewer will see a series of white lines, the visitors' marks, on the paper.

Collaboration/Interaction

We collaboratively sought a mixture of old and new media in *Sound-Lines*. We worked to create a project that speaks to drawing, sculpture, animation, and sound, emphasizing the process itself over object making. From the outset, we decided that sound was an integral component and envisaged a compelling yet playful idea. The significance of the animated text revealed itself as we worked on the project. *Sound-Lines* thus began with process in mind and was not object-oriented. We created and collected images, drawings, and ideas via a blog while working remotely from our respective locations. Two of the artists were in rural environments, and two were in urban environments. We engaged in an artistic discourse with an exchange that was deliberately indeterminate. We trusted Gilles Deleuze words: "The essence of a thing never appears at the outset, but in the middle, in the course of its development, when its strength is assured." [3]

Always key to our collaborative endeavor was the visitor's interactive participation with the installation. (The word "visitor" being a term that may be interchangeable with viewer, user, or even player.) Each time a visitor touches a sensor, it interrupts the current sound and word/phrase being heard and projected, and replaces it with a new sound and animation. The experience here is one of play, anticipation, and discovery. The visitor engages the sensors, seeks to fill the projection with lines, perhaps awaiting for something new. *Sound-Lines* is a simple yet poetic engagement with words and sound and line.

References and Notes

1. Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New; Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 2006).
2. Jeffrey Quilter and Gary Urton, *Narrative Threads*, (Austin, TX.: Univ. of Texas Press, 2002).
3. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: the movement image*, H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam, trans. 7th Ed. (Minneapolis, MN.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003).
4. Special thanks to the e-MobiLArt team, facilitators, artists, all participants, and to the external collaborators and expert technical assistants who made this project possible: Lei Han, Jeremy Bernstein, Peter Ceglavek, and Elliot Sinyor.

Fig. 1. *Sound-Lines*. e-MobiLArt Exhibition, State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, Greece, during the 2nd Greece Biennale, 2009. © Cliona Harmeay, Christine Mackey, Nita Tandon, Lorraine Walsh. Photo © Christine Mackey.)

