

Reflections on *over ride* - an experiment to interrupt sensorial interaction in audio-visual relationships

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Abstract

over ride is a series of two experimental works for mobile phone designed to investigate creative ways in which the experience of audio visual relationships may be interrupted in order to facilitate a more considered encounter with the senses. The project is being developed as part of a practice based PhD, which investigates how multimodal artistic practices prevalent at the beginning of the 21st century affect sound artists and their work. *over ride* presents part of a research strand that explores how sensorial experiences encountered in creative activity in turn impact on the individuals engaged in such activity.

This paper describes the nature of the work and the difficulties encountered in achieving the project aims. It also provides a theoretical context, including Michel Chion's notion of *synchresis* and Niall Moody's thesis that the motion inherent in sight and sound acts as a connecting device between the senses.

The paper concludes with a summary of initial findings and implications for continuing research.

Introduction

My research at London College of Communication is primarily concerned with the process of *sound art* practice and how it is affected by multimodal practice. It arose out of a trajectory that merged discrete interests in music and image, and the experiences encountered in this process prompted the question as to how do artists integrate the sometimes unremitting experiences and influences they encounter, and how does this intricate interplay transcribe itself into the work produced.¹

One of the realisations arrived at is that sensorial experience lies at the base of creative production. *over ride* presents an experiment to gain a visceral understanding of how the senses of sight and sound work together through an interruption of how these senses are customarily experienced.

Before discussing *over ride* in more detail, I shall outline the reason for using the term *multimodal*, followed by a brief introduction of the research methodology to provide a context. Additionally, after a consideration of *over ride*, I will examine some of the theoretical concerns that emerged through working on *over ride*.

¹ For those interested in my previous practice, most can work be found at www.irisgarrelfs.com

Notes on *sound art* context

The use of the term *multimodal* arose out of a dissatisfaction with current uses of the term *sound art*, some of which allow for music to be included, whilst others do not. This debate has been of relevance to my work as my practice includes the established aspects of art and sound, the latter however with a distinct 'musical sensibility', a notion borrowed from Alvin Lucier (Aldrich, 2003)².

Frequently *sound art* is viewed as a compound discipline combining visual art and sound. Max Neuhaus for example defines *sound art* as a synthesis specifically between the fine arts and sound (Neuhaus, 2000). However, this delineation is not at all clear cut when looking at current state of practice and the surrounding discourse. Philosopher and theorist Christoph Cox for example counts film maker Luke Fowler amongst sound artists such as Christina Kubisch on account of Fowler considering sound 'aesthetically' (Cox, 2011).

Cox's view, unlike that of Neuhaus, considers the approach to sound, rather than an object that includes sound, as the defining factor. I would like to offer a further example in support of this expansion: in the early 1960s, improvising tabletop guitarist, painter and founding member of influential improvising group AMM, Keith Rowe, mapped a then emergent painting method that discarded the easel and involved painting on the ground onto music making. The result was a tabletop electric guitar, which he first used in November 1965. Rowe reflected on this approach as follows: 'There appears to be music, well, maybe, but the process is painting' (Rowe, 2010). Many other fine art processes have also been used in the creation of *sound art* works, for example a collage/montage technique, a method that is relevant to myself both as an artist and a researcher, which will become apparent a little later.

In addition to such difficulties in clearly defining the parameters of *sound art*, the discipline derives further complexity from ever changing mostly digital tools, the media used, senses employed and addressed, or the diverse venues such as galleries or pubs *sound art* takes place in. All these situations generate experiences and potentially leave their mark on the artist and her work.

In an attempt to capture this complexity and to circumvent difficulties of definition, I have adopted the term *multimodal*, understood in terms of a definition put forward by cognitive linguists Charles Forceville and Eduardo Urios-Aparisi in their jointly edited book *Multimodal Metaphor*:

However, multimodal discourse is a vast territory, comprising a multitude of material carriers (paper, celluloid, videotape, bits and bytes, stone, cloth ...), modes (written language, spoken language, visuals, sound, music, gesture, smell, touch), and genres (art, advertising, instruction manual; or at a more

² Alvin Lucier commented on the nature of his work with this statement: 'I did retain, somewhere in the work, the "musical" sensitivity, timing, and so forth, I had developed in years of more conventional composing.'

detailed level, say, "comedy," "film noir," "Western," "science fiction"), many of these being further categorizable. (Forceville and Urios-Aparisi, 2009, p.5)

over ride embodies this extended view of *sound art*, firstly by employing different media (mobile phone with a recorded version of reality in combination with actual 'reality'), but also focusing on sensorial experience with an emphasis on sound (participants³ are asked to focus on sound).

Notes on methodology

With regard to the methodology employed in the research for my PhD, I would like to offer as starting point the following, at first glance perhaps incongruous, observation from the field of critical neuroscience:

This concept of the situated brain brings up a number of possibilities and challenges for critical neuroscience. First of all, it requires the critic (or critics in collaboration) to act as a bricoleur, collecting data at a number of different levels, layering phenomena, such as menopause or addiction, with these different strands of inquiry that ultimately serve to enrich one another in their explanatory value. (Choudhury and Slaby, 2012, p.34)

This statement expresses exactly my understanding of the researcher as a collector who both gathers and makes sense of information through doing, that is assembling and interpreting what has been gathered through the creative process.

This interconnectedness of activities and approaches is reflected in the development of two interrelated primary research procedures throughout my research, creative and discursive. The former encompasses observations and reflection on my practice history, my continuing practice viewed as laboratory and laboratories with fellow practitioners whilst the latter incorporates in-depth interviews with sound artists and fellow researchers, a curated online magazine plus a number of case studies.

over ride is part of the ongoing practice laboratory and encapsulates how considerations of theory arise out of practice and how theory in return clarifies and enriches practice.

Description of *over ride*

³ The term *participant* is used to describe a person who downloads *over ride* and experiences the project on the bus as set out below.

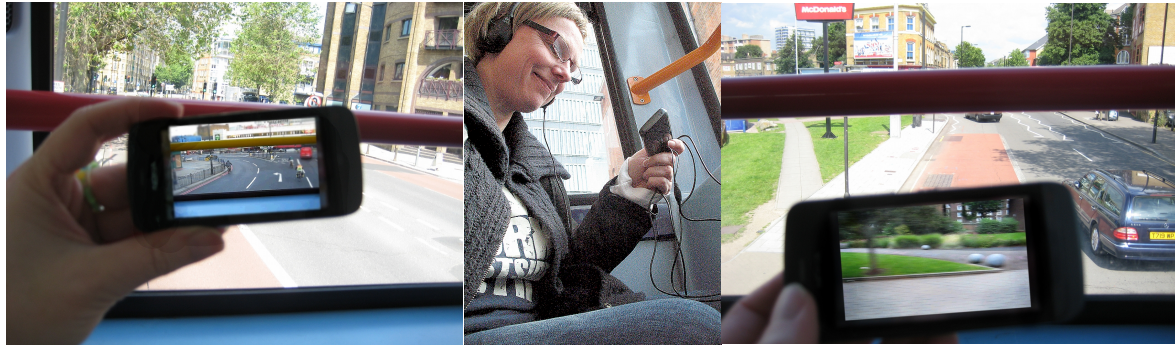


figure 1: *over ride* at play

over ride consists of two works to be experienced on a double decker bus with the help of a mobile phone, headphones and earplugs. They were made available for download to the public and are accompanied by the instructions set out below to facilitate the experience. Both pieces aim to create a sense of discrepancy between seeing and hearing with the help of the movement felt whilst riding on a bus in order to gain a visceral understanding of what it means to hear and see.

In both cases the visual aspect of the element supplied via mobile phone shows a journey made on a similar London bus whilst the sound is that of traffic recorded on a motorway. Participants are also invited to report back how *over ride* affected them. The images were filmed on the top of a double decker bus in South London, the recorded sound was that of motorway traffic (fig.2).



figure 2: stills from recording sound

In order to facilitate this situated experience the pieces were accompanied with the following instructions:

- download files to your mobile phone.
- make your way to a bus stop of your choice, preferably in London.
- don't forget to take headphones (noise cancelling if you have) and some earplugs. The more you can cut out the ambient sound the better.
- board a double decker bus.
- grab yourself a seat at the front on the upper deck.
- plug yourself in.
- if you can, focus more on the sound than the image.
- enjoy!
- please do let me know how it all worked for you. You can text me at (to come) or email converse [at] irisgarrelfs [dot] com

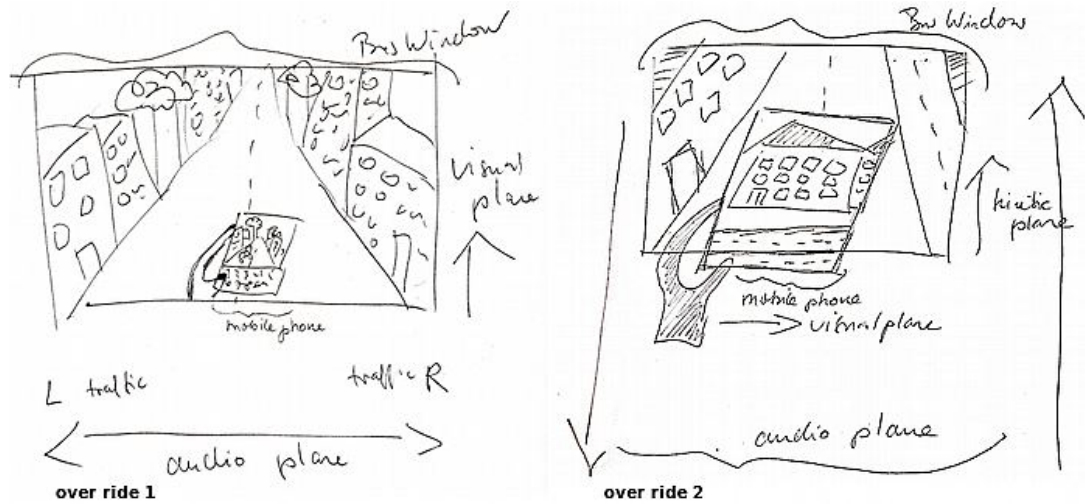


figure 3: *over ride* sketches, indicating how the visual and audio planes work in conjunction with the physical surroundings on the bus

Where do the two pieces differ? In *over ride 1* the visual movement of the mobile phone piece goes forward (fig 3 and 4), whilst the sonic movement goes sideways. In *over ride 2* visual movement goes sideways whereas sonic movement goes backward and forward (fig 3 and 5). Additional visual movement is derived from the movement of the bus when recording the original images. These intermesh with the actual movements experienced on the bus.



figure 4: *over ride 1* mobile phone piece stills, indicating visual movement



figure 5: *over ride 2* mobile phone piece stills, indicating visual movement

Emergent themes resulting from trying to achieve aims

over ride arose out of realisation that at the base of making and also making *sound art*, is the actual experience of making, and the experience of making is directly linked to our senses, to sensorial experience. My practice is primarily working with sight and sound, therefore my intention was to gain a visceral understanding of what

it means to see and to hear.

over ride also aims at interrupting the senses of an *audience* or *participants*, and through this, the project aimed at affording me, the creating artist, a visceral experience of the senses. During the making I had to continuously reflect on my own experience in order to create this piece.

Achieving these aims presented some challenges, as the senses of sight and sound are rather tightly interlinked: visual and audible events appear firmly joined together when taking place at the same time. Michel Chion called this relationship *synchresis* (Chion, 1994, p. 64).

However, the meaning of “at the same time” is experienced somewhat loosely as Chion himself realised, and which is also vividly expressed by the *Mc Gurk Effect*, a perceptual phenomenon that demonstrates an interaction between hearing and vision in speech perception, which allows film dubbing to work⁴. However looked at closely, lip movement and sound are not always close together, the mind “snaps” these two events together into one. Chion discussed this ‘... (in) this situation the sound becomes “spatially magnetized” by the image – that is the sound becomes attracted to the image’ (Chion, 1994, p. 70).

This sets up expectations as to how what is seen relates to what is heard, an expectation *over ride* plays with. However, this effect is not totally automatic as random sounds, divorced from their original sources, will not always combine with equally random visual events (Chion, 1994, p. 64).

In everyday life our senses mostly experience what we expect them to do. A bus drives past and we both see and hear its passing. However, there are well documented ways in which the senses can be tricked, for example through optical illusions such as the *Penrose stairs*, a set of ever ascending or descending stairs, or its auditory equivalent the *Shepard tone* which is experienced as an ascending or descending scale of notes.

More relevant for *over ride* is the experience of travel or motion sickness, where perceived movement diverges from the experienced movement. For example during a car journey the eye perceives the stable environment of the car interior, whilst the kinetic system responds to the car’s movement.

Niall Moody considered some of these ideas on motion in the development of an instrument for audio-visual interaction, *Ashitaka*. As part of his PhD he explored the phenomenon of *synchresis* in order to make use of it. He came to the conclusion that

⁴ The McGurk effect was first noticed by Harry McGurk, a senior developmental psychologist at the University of Surrey in England, and his research assistant John MacDonald, and reported in a 1976 paper entitled “Hearing Lips and Seeing Voices” in the *Journal Nature*

synchresis in fact relies on motion:

...the motion we see (e.g. a fist colliding with someone) is related in some way to the motion we hear (a sound with a sharp attack, synchronised with the point of collision), that convinces our brains to perceive them as a single, fused audiovisual event. (Moody, 2009)

This means that the motion inherent in sight and sound acts as what can be described as a connecting device between the senses.

In *over ride*, ideas of motion of sound and vision as a connecting device are made use of in reverse, as a disconnecting device: visual and sonic movements are made to diverge. An additional layer is added to the recorded movement, that of actual, physical movement, which is used to further derail the mind's attempt to fuse audio and vision. These experiences layer experiences of movement, and make use of the brain's difficulty in persuading the kinetic system it experiences something it does not, similar to the principle of motion sickness described earlier. The eye takes you in one direction so to speak, the ear in another, the kinetic system into another one again. In the space that opens up in-between is where we can find the visceral experience of sight and sound, which is the aim of this piece.

Initial findings

Although the linear presentation of this paper might lend itself to giving an understanding that the concerns discussed might unfold in a similarly ordered fashion, this is not so. The creation and reflection processes were layered and entwined as described earlier, the sense-making process is still ongoing with implications becoming clearer, and practice is indeed a laboratory.

What became apparent very early on is that interrupting audio-visual relationships is not an easy undertaking and the effect is only slight. Given the relatively unmovable nature of the images and their relationship to London's buses, getting the sound 'right' proved difficult. Initial recordings of London traffic supplied far too many events that could be joined with the images and which made the experience of discrepancy impossible. After many unsuccessful trials I used a binaural recording of a motorway, which provided a more continuous flow of traffic sounds, thereby avoiding 'magnetization' (Chion, 1994, p. 70).

Creating the mobile phone piece in the studio, and not inside a bus with its movement, also proved an obstacle. Furthermore, as work continued, my senses became attuned to the material, further reducing its impact. I will rely therefore on the feedback of others to continue shaping the pieces.

Additionally a link with previous work emerged: as *over ride* diverges from previous practice in as much as it contains no musical references, it revealed that some aspects of live performance work using voice also plays on expectations of sight and sound coming together as seen in the McGurk effect. This can be seen in an extract

from a recent life performance published on vimeo (Del Re, 2011).

Where to go from here

In this paper I have talked about the experience of the senses as a base for making. So far described was an attempt to generate and observe experience. However, if I want to make these essentially personal experiences relevant to the thesis and to others, I need to extract the principles of integration at play. To make sense of this integration I am currently looking towards cognitive models, for example the approach suggested by musicologist Lawrence M. Zbikowski in his book *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory, And Analysis* (Zbikowski, 2002)

Furthermore, in order to broaden the enquiry, the experiences of artists and researchers need to be included, through interviews, collaborations and curated articles on the subject of process.

With regards to *over ride*, a public feedback session is planned and results should be available shortly at irisgarrelfs.com

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