Fifty-one aural selfies (fixed media soundscape compositions)

Iain Findlay-Walsh, *University of Glasgow*

Abstract

The research statement that accompanies the soundscape project 'Fifty-one aural selfies' proceeds from a premise that listening may be understood and practiced as an embodied, embedded process of hearing-feeling connection with all that surrounds. While the term 'immersive audio' is often used to refer to spatialised sound media that affords a listener's sense of envelopment within vast spaces, I am interested in developing approaches to capturing and sharing a more mundane, proximate field of sonic experience, in order that spatial listening and immersive audio may be considered and felt from a different perspective. Using held or worn recording devices, utilising binaural and ambisonic recording formats, and employing compositional strategies of layering, filtering and audio transformation to render recordings more vivid, I use ubiquitous sounds of my everyday sonic encounters and close-at-hand interactions as a basis for sonic reimaginings of everyday listening. This combined practice of field recording and soundscape composition is presented here as one way to explore immersive audio practice as a creative domain for capturing and eliciting sensory immediacy, intimacy and self-reflection.

Soundcloud link: https://soundcloud.com/klaysstarr/sets/fifty-one-aural-selfies/s-BLrm317IR5u?si=21f9b2743b86457b9d5cba85765fa16c&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

Introduction

this audio collection nested problem self occupation form of dreaming…

i don't know why

i overproduce my focus

listening to solitary listening

doing the life world

at extreme proximity

the recording captures a listening process

body wired, restless

street sounds still

turn one inside the other

each in out to all

here

hearing

networks

feeling for

a now that sings

!_——————-!———————

- accompanying text for 'Fifty-one aural selfies'

This research statement proceeds from a premise that listening may be understood and practiced as an embodied, embedded process of hearing-feeling connection with all that surrounds. While the term 'immersive audio' is often used to refer to spatialised sound media that affords a listener's sense of envelopment within vast spaces, I am interested in developing approaches to capturing and sharing a more mundane, proximate field of sonic experience, in order that spatial listening and immersive audio may be considered and felt from a different perspective. Using held or worn recording devices, utilising binaural and ambisonic recording formats, and employing compositional strategies of layering, filtering and audio transformation to render recordings more vivid, I use the sounds of my everyday sonic encounters and close-at-hand interactions as a basis for sonic reimaginings of everyday listening. This combined practice of field recording and soundscape composition is presented here as one way to explore immersive audio practice as a creative domain for capturing and eliciting sensory immediacy, intimacy and self-reflection. As the title suggests, the series of fixed-media audio tracks presented in this special edition of IJCMR is conceived of as

a collection of 'aural selfies' (Findlay-Walsh 2018), brief audio snapshots that trace, extend and re-present personal listening encounters in quotidian spaces. As a present-day response to what David Howes has previously described as the 'commodification of experience' via omnipresent commercial media and advertising designed to appeal to the senses (2020/2005: 295), the capturing and sharing of proximate fields of sonic experience is practiced as a way to activate felt connections between listener, recordist and environment.

Building upon my previous introduction of 'aural selfies' within a wider practice of 'sonic autoethnography' (Findlay-Walsh 2018), here I draw further upon the form and concept of the selfie to highlight technological, experiential and relational aspects of sound recording and reception, in particular making an audio analogy with Hito Steyerl's 'poor image' (2012) to consider the capacity of internet and smartphone technologies for circulating compressed aural positionalities quickly online. I also propose the aural selfie as a concept and practice that demonstrates Salomé Voegelin's (2018: 132) notion of listening as a process of unfixing identity and subjecthood, making audible the recordist's agency in a participatory process of 'inter-being' with others through relational action-perception in and through spaces. On the face of it, nothing much happens during many of these tracks, however, in inviting listeners to attend to these relatively quiet scenes, they are encouraged to stay with the quiet and to listen in, to and through these first-person perspectives, establishing affinities with the environments and encounters they can discern. This strategy of turning field recording 'inward' is thus employed as a basis for composing and sharing 'sonic fictions' designed to elicit intense, intimate experiences of 'hyperembodiment' (Eshun 1998: -002). The following overview proposes that such a practice of making and using aural selfies constitutes a creative and aesthetic innovation in the fields of soundscape art and immersive storytelling, with transformative potential for immersive media production, including the production of XR experiences.

<u>Why selfie?</u>

In developing a conceptual and technological framing of aural selfies, perhaps it is useful to begin by asking what a selfie is. Simply put, a selfie can be defined as a 'self-portrait photograph of oneself (or of oneself and other people), taken with a (phone) camera held at arm's length or pointed at a mirror, that is usually shared through social media' (Diefenbach & Christoforakos 2017: 1). From this, we might consider a selfie as a type of photographic content. According to Senft and Baym, we might also consider selfies as a type of activity or behaviour, a mode of communicating between the selfie-taker and real or imagined others, facilitated by and enacted through digital media and technologies. They write,

> ... a selfie is a photographic object that initiates the transmission of human feeling in the form of a relationship (between photographer and photographed, between image and filtering software, between viewer and viewed, between individuals and circulating images, between users and social software architectures, etc.). A selfie is also a practice - a gesture that can send (and is often intended to send) different messages to different individuals, communities and audiences (2015: 1589).

This notion of a selfie as a communicative gesture and practice enacted via digital media platforms helps us to focus on the activity of selfie-taking, and on both the performative and performance-based aspects of the activity. We could consider the selfie gesture as one of a kind of self-situating in relation to a particular location. Selfies capture and fix a subject's presence in a specific situational context - at times relating to environment ('I am at the Niagara Falls'), or proximity to other people ('I am standing here with Jeremy Corbyn'). However, when considering the communicative gesture of selfie-taking, and indeed the 'selfie behaviour' (Diefenbach & Christoforakos 2017: 6) captured and circulated through such images, we might detect or recognise a rather extreme mode of 'looking' on the part of the person taking the photograph. Thus, a selfie can be considered as a name for a picture of a person looking at an image of themselves taking a picture of themselves in a particular place. Such an act of self-conscious looking can also be understood to be simultaneously directed towards the gaze of others, real and imagined, dispersed and deferred, across the expansive, virtual timespace of the internet. The situated selfie-taker looks at themselves looking back at themselves looking, their gaze seemingly returned by a virtual audience, who, in the (future) event that they too look back, are folded into this reflexive, trans-temporo-spatial gazing. In such an image, the person taking the selfie can be seen not only to be looking at themselves looking, but to be looking at an image of themselves engaged in a performance of an act of looking, often displaying an overt and rhetorical expression of self-awareness that they are capturing themselves looking at themselves engaged in this performance of an act of looking. We may also note that the person taking the selfie is usually holding the camera that takes the picture, or at least is situated in close proximity to the camera. And so, we could describe what we see when we look at someone's selfie as an unusually proximate, even intimate, tracing of the embodied, performative gesture that signifies an act of looking at oneself looking at oneself in a specific physical location while simultaneously gazing out across the internet.

Selfies can also be counted as one genre of photographic media framed under Hito Steyerl's category of the 'poor image', a low-resolution, compressed image file that can be shared and transformed quickly and infinitely on the internet. For Steyerl, the 'poor image' (and in this case, the selfie) can be regarded as an indicative symptom of a 'global information capitalism whose audiences are linked almost in a physical sense by mutual excitement, affective attunement, and

anxiety' (2012: 43). For Cambre and Lavrence, selfies are 'deeply social, and, as such, invoke broader, stratified patterns of looking that are occluded in discourses of empowerment and visibility', while they also 'generate forms of visual immediacy and feeling' in those who look at them (2023: 5). Turning our attention, or opening our ears, to practices not of photographic, but of audio self-recording, what social behaviours, power relations and ways of listening might be activated through making immersive, first-person environmental recordings, and what might the consequences of such practices share with those of photographic selfie-taking?

<u>What is an aural selfie?</u>

Building on the above, and my previous outline of aural selfies as a form of 'self-conscious spectatorship' (2018: 91), an aural selfie might be understood as an activity and gesture of sonic self-situating, whereby a person makes an audio recording of themselves listening to themselves while engaged in the act of making an audio recording. As with a visual-photographic selfie, we can say that the person taking the aural selfie is, in a sense, performing - that they may practice a kind of extreme self-awareness that they are being recorded in their act of listening. And again, similarly, we can also say that the person taking the aural selfie usually holds or wears the recording device that captures the soundscape, so there may be a direct physical connection between the vibrating microphone capsule and the shifting body of the recordist. At the very least, the microphone is present in the proximate, personal space of the recordist's action and experience.

In this sense, we can think of aural selfies as a type of 'first-person field recording' (Findlay-Walsh 2019), that, rather than focussing on the capture of pseudo-autonomous documentation of the world 'out there', instead traces the close-at-hand, proximate, everyday sound of a listener self-consciously interacting with the world. As such, the practice of taking aural selfies can be explained, as one of, to quote field recordist and sound artist Lasse-Marc Riek, 'storing the listening process' (Riek 2013: 173), and can therefore be connected to a range of reflexive field recording practices, including Hildegard Westerkamp's personal and autobiographical soundscape compositions (e.g. Westerkamp 1996), and various examples of Christopher DeLaurenti's embedded and embodied 'activist sound' (e.g. Delaurenti 2015). As environmental recordings that capture the sounds of a listener's body acting in the field, this type of audio content can make audible an intimate trace of human agency, inscribing in detail the contingent and transitory process through which a subject perpetually negotiates their positionality with-in material and social space. The sounds recorded through these methods therefore resonate with Salomé Voegelin's suggestion that sound 'does not offer us a certain form, but is the moment of production of what the thing and the listener are...', and thus traces 'the improbable identity of their "inter-being"...' (2018: 120). Conceived of as a type of field recording that captures and shares the self-conscious, embodied sounding and listening encounters of the recordist, while the microphone is physically connected to, extending from, or

present with the recordist's body, aural selfies can be understood to trace something of the experience of a moving, sounding, self-conscious and environmentally attentive listening body, the intimate sound of personal listening as a recordist interacts with their environment. In my practice of capturing aural selfies, I make recordings using a combination of portable, worn or held devices, including smartphones, ambisonic recorders and in-ear, omnidirectional microphones, to generate materials that enable the presentation of such intimate sounds as a 360-degree immersive experience for subsequent listeners.

Making and listening to aural selfies

Conceived of and conceptually framed in this way, we can look for examples of what I am calling aural selfies in a range of contexts, variously in examples of artistic practice, in everyday audio media contexts such as smartphone use, or as content within popular media. The smartphone 'voicenote', often recorded while the recordist/speaker is 'on the move', is frequently characterised by high levels of microphone handling noise and often substantial levels of wind noise, but nevertheless traces the proximate bodily presence of the recordist as they self-consciously inhabit, navigate and interact with their shifting spatial context. Voicenotes can be understood to grant those who listen to them access to a kind of aural authenticity of experience, a chaotic-yet-intimate proximity, a connection not only with the mediated voice but with the mediated body acting in physical space, while simultaneously acting through a liminal space between physical and digital media environments, locations of sending and being received.

We can use these kinds of recordings as core materials in creative audio practice, in sound art and soundscape art, in experimental and/or electronic music, generating virtual, immersive audio environments that seem to put a listener 'in the shoes' of the mobile sound recordist as they navigate everyday spaces of experience. On the title track of the audio release 'Nobody's Pushing You' (Losoncy 2017), sound artist Gabi Losoncy presents a long track of uninterrupted, lo-fi, phone-recorded audio, as a kind of sonic-kinaesthetic narrative of ambiguous personal agency, the microphone noisily tracing the detail of Losoncy's movements as she acts in and through her environment. On various tracks on the album 'cc' by composer, performer and producer Klein (2018), for example the opening track, 'collect ft diamond stingily', a similar kind of lo-fi phone-recorded content is used as a key compositional element, but this time folded into a fragmentary musical language of confessional songwriting and audio collage.

In the album-length collection of audio works that accompanies this commentary, 'Fifty-one aural selfies', I have employed various mobile field recording strategies using a variety of portable recording devices, ranging from mobile phone capture of body and fabric noise from inside a coat pocket, to driving while carrying a portable ambisonic recording device, which captures the 360-

degree soundfield using a four-microphone capsule. The aural selfies recorded using these various mobile devices and approaches trace the sounds of the recordist engaged in everyday activities including driving, listening to music on headphones, and shopping. As selfies, these recordings capture a reflexive, embodied process of listening to my own listening as I engage in these tasks and traverse these spaces. The range of tracks included in this collection use aural selfies in different ways, with some recordings presented in isolation and unedited, and others forming part of spatial audio collages that also include recordings of minimal music performance, captured using similar recording methods, an approach comparable to that of sound artist Claire Rousay (e.g. Rousay 2021). The approach to composing and editing these tracks begins with an attending to the internal dynamics and emergent forms of individual aural selfies. While some of these recordings seem to convey a situated 'moment' or encounter without any compositional intervention or sonic transformation, others resonate with contrasting audio materials or suggest spatial transitions that can be contrived and produced using a combination of editing, layering, audio manipulation and spatialisation processes, in this case, using the digital audio workstation, REAPER.

Listening back to this project, it is possible to hear representations, and in some cases creative reimaginings, of what the world sounded like from a listener's shifting point of audition. Aural selfies are used as a method both for tracing proximate space, and for activating a liminal spatiality between recordist and listener, between self-conscious experience and the subsequent engagements and imaginings of listening audiences. In this sense, they can be understood as core materials in a composed collection of 'sonic fictions', to borrow the term from Kodwo Eshun's landmark text on afrofuturism and electronic music, 'subjectivity engines' (Eshun 1998: 121) as audio narrative that 'blows up the existing locations of musical experience and sonic imagination' (Schulze 2020: 7), collapsing distance between sender and receiver. Each of the sonic-spatial fictions that comprise 'Fifty-one aural selfies' takes the self-conscious recordist-listener's point of audition as a point of departure, capturing, circulating and pluralising the intimate, embodied experience of personal listening, in the form of an immersive audio narrative.

A closing thought

In considering some of the wider aims of spatial audio production, and in particular, audio for immersive audiovisual XR experiences, a regularly cited aim in making XR media is the production of a kind of perceptual and experiential fidelity through the generation of content that chimes with a user's learned, everyday experience of spatial characteristics and cues - the making of a 'sensorimotor mirror', as Jaron Lanier has it (2017: 47). I will close by suggesting that what is often forgotten in practices of sound design and spatial audio production for immersive media is the simple fact that everyday listening experiences almost always involve a listener's hearing of their own sounding body as it interacts with their lived environment and its contents. We could say that

there is rarely an experience of environmental sound that is not imbued with proximate, first-person body sound. This then begs the question: how can sound design and production for immersive media elicit experiences of user-presence in virtual audiovisual worlds, if users cannot hear their own sounding body represented in the virtual environment? To put it another way, why is spatial audio content produced for XR environments almost always disembodied? Using simple recording strategies and technologies, and flights of imaginative sound design and composition, the concept, practice and category of aural selfies can connect listeners to the first-person auditory experiences of a recordist-listener, providing compelling, intimate, intense and personal points of audition for them to inhabit, and from which to experience self-presence in virtual worlds.

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