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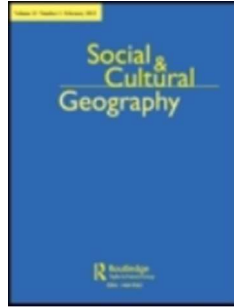
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### Sound art and the making of public space.

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**Sound art and the making of public space.**

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**Abstract**

This paper draws on a collaborative sound art project that aimed to explore how sound art as a non-representational method might attract and produce new publics and re-signify iconic public spaces<sup>i</sup>. We describe how the project, AGORA, proceeded and to what extent it transformed the spaces it was performed in and made new, if transient, publics in the moments of performance. This paper focuses on the British Museum and St George's Church, Bloomsbury. In the Museum the contemplation and resignification provoked by the intervention enlivened the sacred character of the museum. We argue that this (re)sacralization can be experienced as a practice of decolonization, albeit perhaps limited to the space and time of the performance. The Church, already signified as a sacred space, provoked another kind of encounter with the sacred and the colonial. The extended period of reflection provoked by the performance made visible the etchings of colonialism in the fabric of the building. Our contribution is primarily to the geographic literature on non-representational theory in relation to sonic geographies and music geographies. This paper points to the potential of sound art to make us listen to spaces more attentively.

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4 Keywords: sound art, non-representational theory, public space, museums, sacred,  
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6 decolonization  
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## 10 **Introduction**

11  
12 Non-representational and more-than-representational theory has argued for the necessity  
13  
14 of developing methods that capture our more than textual social and cultural worlds  
15  
16 (Anderson and Harrison, 2012; Hill, 2015; Lorimer, 2005; Thrift, 1996; Thrift, 2008).  
17  
18 Despite the resonance of non-representational theory with sonic geographies the  
19  
20 methods used in researching the relationship between sound and space continue to be  
21  
22 dominated by language and text-based methods in both research and dissemination  
23  
24 (Gallagher and Prior, 2014; Revill, 2016). AGORA, the project described in this paper  
25  
26 addressed this gap through sound art that recorded public space when it was empty of  
27  
28 people, composed music from these digital recordings and then performed these  
29  
30 compositions in the spaces that the raw material was recorded in. We wanted to explore  
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32 how this sound art might affect how publics interacted with two iconic buildings: the  
33  
34 British Museum and St George's, Bloomsbury. We chose these sites principally for  
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36 their importance as public spaces in London. In this paper we describe how the project  
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38 proceeded and to what extent it transformed the spaces it was performed in and made  
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40 new, albeit transient, public spaces in the moments of performance. We also reflect on  
41  
42 how the experience of immersion in and attention to iconic public spaces produced a  
43  
44 new awareness of the political histories of these spaces and, perhaps momentarily, re-  
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46 signified them. In developing this analysis we point in particular to the ways that the  
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48 sound composition re-sacralised Room 33 in the British Museum and drew attention to  
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50 the colonial histories unexpectedly inscribed in the Church as well as the networks of  
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4 colonialists that connected these two spaces historically. This paper therefore points to  
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6 the potential of sound art to make us listen to spaces more attentively.  
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### 10 **Cultural and sonic geography**

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12 Cultural geography has long been attentive to the relationship between sound and space,  
13  
14 and a body of research exploring this relationship has steadily increased over the last 20  
15  
16 years (Anderson et al, 2005; Hill, 2015). In the following sections we discuss the main  
17  
18 themes in this research before moving on to describe the sound art project AGORA in  
19  
20 detail and our responses to it.  
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23

### 24 ***Sound mapping***

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26  
27 The kind of electroacoustic sound composition described in this paper has a history that  
28  
29 is conventionally dated to the World Soundscape Project (WSP) that was started at  
30  
31 Simon Fraser University in the early 1970s (see Truax, 2002). In the foundational text  
32  
33 of that project, *The Tuning of the World* (1977) R.Murray Schafer offers a system for  
34  
35 the classification of all sounds to enable the discovery of ‘similarities, contrasts and  
36  
37 patterns’ (Schafer, 1977/1994, p.133). This system can be used to map the soundscape.  
38  
39 However, it also raises for us the question of to what extent the soundscape has an  
40  
41 independent reality, which is implied by a system of classification, and to what extent it  
42  
43 is always an interpretation of the listener. Rodaway in his *Sensuous Geographies* (1994)  
44  
45 argues that ‘one cannot “map” a neighbourhood soundscape’ (Rodaway, 1994, p.87)  
46  
47 because it changes as people move through it. Schafer says that ‘[t]he soundscape is a  
48  
49 field of interactions...[in which] sounds affect and change one another (and us)’  
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54 (Schafer, 1994, p131). This is also reminiscent of Max Neuhaus’ *Drive in Music*. This  
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4 sound installation from 1967 consisted of seven radio transmitters located along a half-  
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6 mile stretch of road. The sound was specific to each section of the road but also how the  
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8 car radio picked up the sound depended on the speed of the car and the distance of the  
9  
10 car from the transmitters. The sound was therefore different for each driver who  
11  
12 ‘assembled it for himself [sic] as he passed through it and for himself only’  
13  
14 (Neuhaus, 1994, p.64 cited in LaBelle, 2015, p.164). This dialectic or tension between  
15  
16 the objective acoustic properties of a space and the subjective experience of the listener  
17  
18 in contributing to the mapping of sound is also present in AGORA. There is an implicit  
19  
20 assumption in Ain’s strategy of recording buildings when empty of people that the  
21  
22 building has an objective soundscape that is captured by the recording equipment and  
23  
24 that her composition, in responding to that recording, offers listeners one interpretation  
25  
26 of that space and invites them to create their own interpretation by asking them to sit  
27  
28 and listen to the room while listening to the composition.  
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34 Geographers have also mapped sound in ways analogous to landscape maps but that  
35  
36 enliven the map by making the environment audible. Thulin, for example, describes  
37  
38 how image-based cartography can be combined with, supplemented by, or replaced by  
39  
40 sound recordings in ‘blends of cartographic and sonic activities’ (2017:193) that he calls  
41  
42 cartophony. Combining sound with 2D visual representation in cartophonic mapping  
43  
44 heightens or recognises the multi-sensory experiences of being in space (2017, p.206).  
45  
46 Sound walks also combine cartography with sonic methods, often evoking the hidden,  
47  
48 haunted or lost qualities of the landscape. Pinder (2001), for example, gives an account  
49  
50 of how listening to the Canadian artist Janet Cardiff’s Whitechapel walk, ‘*The missing*  
51  
52 *voice*’, lent a haunting quality to his walk around this part of East London. Similarly  
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4 Gallagher describes how listeners of his ‘audio drift’ become acutely aware of the  
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6 ‘haunted, uncanny qualities’ (2015, p.477) of a ruin. Butler describes a sound walk  
7  
8 created by the artist Graeme Miller that uses fragments of interviews with people  
9  
10 displaced by the construction of a motorway to ‘sonically recreate a lost community’  
11  
12 (Butler, 2006, p. 891). AGORA also evoked a sense of the haunted and uncanny, as we  
13  
14 describe later in this paper.  
15

16  
17  
18 One of the elements of Schafer’s system of classification is keynotes. We found this  
19  
20 concept useful in thinking through audience responses to the soundscape of AGORA.  
21  
22 Schafer says ‘keynotes are rarely listened to consciously by those who live among  
23  
24 them...[they]are, however, noticed when they change, and when they disappear  
25  
26 altogether’ (Schafer, 1994, p.60). One keynote of the London urban soundscape, at  
27  
28 least in some neighbourhoods, is the ubiquity of police sirens. One of the listeners in the  
29  
30 Church specifically identified this sound as something that she could hear in the  
31  
32 composition. In fact, although there were sirens in the original recording the extent to  
33  
34 which the sounds had been processed meant that this identification of sirens was  
35  
36 something the listener heard because of her assumption of what should be present in a  
37  
38 London soundscape. Interestingly, Schafer specifically mentions sirens as signals or  
39  
40 foreground sounds (in contrast to the background sounds of keynotes) because they  
41  
42 ‘*must* be listened to’ (1994, p.10), but the ubiquity of this sound in parts of London  
43  
44 means that it only becomes signal when it is pertinent information (for example when  
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46 driving). It is more as keynote than as signal that the siren was assumed by the listener  
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48 to be present in the composition.  
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### ***Communicating sound***

Although interest in non-representational theory has burgeoned in cultural geography (Lorimer, 2005, 2008; Morton, 2005) and sound offers great potential as a mode through which to understand and apprehend the more than textual experience of life, the actual deployment of methods for doing so are still under-developed. A central concern is how to turn the aural into the textual without losing the quality of music (Smith, 1997, p.503), a point which resonates with the claims of non-representational theory that the textual loses the aliveness of the world (see also Wood et al, 2007 on how to think and write about musical methods without losing the experience of listening to music).

The problem of how to write about aural experiences and, especially, affective and embodied responses to the sonic is compounded, George Revill argues, by the failure to engage with ‘the sociomaterial processes and practices which facilitate the specificity of sonic spatiality’ (Revill, 2016, p.241). This might include who comes into a sonic space, who is invited in, who feels at home there as well as the materiality of the space itself. With a similar emphasis on sound and music as event, Anderson et al advocate a ‘shift towards the manifold and unpredictable entanglements of musical practice and performance rather than focusing on music or sound as textual objects’ (2005, p.640). AGORA engaged with these issues through the practices of recording, composition and performance and also in our analysis of the project and our attention to who came to AGORA and how they responded to it.

### ***What sound communicates.***



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4 Smith investigates how attention to music can deepen geographical analysis of political  
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6 economy. She argues that ‘because sound penetrates forbidden spaces, expresses the  
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8 unspeakable and offers a style of communication quite different from the written or  
9  
10 spoken word, it might be a useful – even indispensable – route into an appreciation of  
11  
12 the geographies of racism, resistance and ethnic identification’ (Smith, 1997, p.515).  
13  
14 Her account is interested in ‘listening to black America’. Since music of black origin  
15  
16 has a long history of articulating experiences of racism and expressing resistance to  
17  
18 racism while forging a specific African-American cultural world, it is perhaps  
19  
20 uncontroversial to argue that listening to black music might be a way into understanding  
21  
22 geographies of racism and resistance. In our project this relationship between music and  
23  
24 politics is less obvious but what we want to argue is that through the kinds of deep  
25  
26 listening (Bull and Back, 2016) demanded by the site-specific music composed for a  
27  
28 series of performances, new ways of apprehending the spaces of performance were  
29  
30 made both audible and visible. In this sense we address Smith’s questions, responding  
31  
32 to Attali (1985) to ask ‘What would happen to the way we think, to the things we know,  
33  
34 to the relationships we enter, to our experience of time and space, if we fully took on  
35  
36 board the idea that the world is for hearing rather than beholding, for listening to, rather  
37  
38 than looking at?’ (Smith, 2000, p.615). In developing her response to this question,  
39  
40 Smith insists on the importance of performance of music over interpretation of musical  
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42 texts in finding new ways of knowing. This concurs with Pocock’s early paper on  
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44 geographies of sound in which he explores the neglect of sound in geography and the  
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46 discipline’s highly visual character. He asserts that, ‘[i]n broad terms, the world of  
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48 sound is an event world, in contrast to that of vision which is an object world...: it is a  
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50 world of activities rather than artifacts, sensations rather than reflections’ (1989, p.193).  
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4 Rodaway makes a similar claim that ‘Auditory geography is therefore time-space  
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6 geography, a dynamic geography of events rather than images, or activity rather than  
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8 scene’ (Rodaway, 1994). This separation of the event and the object may be questioned  
9  
10 given that sound always reverberates in object-laden space and that music is often a  
11  
12 highly contemplative practice. Indeed, we want to argue in this paper that activity and  
13  
14 sensation demand reflection of the sentient listener and in doing so enable us to  
15  
16 apprehend artifacts and buildings in new ways of knowing. Our suggestion of a dialectic  
17  
18 between the aural and the material is perhaps echoed in Pocock’s recognition that  
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20  
21 ‘The general presence of sound contributes to the process whereby  
22  
23 environments become places, places with particular atmosphere,  
24  
25 feeling, ambience. Then, sound not only surrounds but can penetrate  
26  
27 to the very core of the sentient. This primitive power, which bypasses  
28  
29 the cerebral and directly addresses the heart, elicits an emotional  
30  
31 response: we are ‘moved’, perhaps elated, perhaps disturbed. It is this  
32  
33 ability which gives sound its symbolic qualities, able to conjure up a  
34  
35 whole world, previously known but best-part forgotten, from the  
36  
37 ‘trigger’ of perhaps but a few notes’ (1989, p.195).  
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43 Although Pocock is alluding here to how hearing a few notes of a song can place the  
44  
45 listener back in a space and a set of relations which they may have all but forgotten, we  
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47 want to suggest that sound made in and about a space can also animate and conjure new  
48  
49 worlds.  
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### 51 52 *Sound Composition* 53 54 55 56 57

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4 Gallagher and Prior note that sonic geographies have largely been methodologically  
5 conventional and suggest that phonography as ‘performance and the arts may offer  
6 ways to engage with the intangible, imperceptible, ephemeral, and affective dimensions  
7 of life’ (Gallagher and Prior, 2014, p.277). They use phonography to mean recording  
8 sounds with ‘audio technologies, and the associated practices of listening, editing,  
9 playback, performance, distribution and broadcast’ (2014, p.280). Sound art and sound  
10 composition are related to Gallagher and Prior’s phonographic method but insists on the  
11 creative dimensions of editing. Sound art is not only concerned with the relationship  
12 between space and time, which arguably is characteristic of all music, but also to the  
13 social nature of these processes. (Born, 2015, p.19 – 20). Sound art departs from  
14 ‘Euclidean and Cartesian understandings of space in/and music’ (Born, 2015, p.19).  
15 This fits well, as Born notes, with geographic understandings of space as relational  
16 rather than as a pre-existing container. The connections between these conceptions of  
17 space and non-representational geographies is particularly apt for thinking about sound  
18 art, since the practice of composition does not often intend to simply capture and re-  
19 present an already existing representation of space, for example in the composer’s mind,  
20 but instead aims for a non-representational and essentially intuitive, subjective, response  
21 to a space which it also then participates in remaking through the practice of  
22 performance.

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47 Sound compositions are one way of engaging in more-than-representational approaches  
48 to understanding how people engage with their environments, and with the histories  
49 inscribed in place. Sound compositions and other site-specific art practices ‘explore the  
50 fluid, performative and sometimes fleeting connections between environment, place,  
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4 identity and meaning' (Cant and Morris, 2006, p. 859 cited in DeSilvey, 2010:, p.492).  
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6 Hildegard Westerkamp emphasises the dialogic nature of the relationship between the  
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8 composer and the recorded materials, and insists that the materials themselves impose  
9  
10 on the composition so that '[n]o matter what the composer's intent may have been from  
11  
12 the start, the materials inevitably speak with their own language, whose deeper  
13  
14 meanings may only emerge with repeated listening and sound processing' (2002, p.54),  
15  
16 see also Truax (2002).  
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### 21 **The sound art project: AGORA**

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23 The sound art project that this paper reflects on was funded by a Leverhulme Trust  
24  
25 Artist-in-Residence grant in which an academic and a practicing artist collaborate on  
26  
27 research through artistic practice. The first author, Karen Wells, had previously done  
28  
29 academic research through the close analysis of material and visual culture and wanted  
30  
31 to extend this by incorporating sound into an appreciation of the multi-sensory character  
32  
33 of people's engagements with public space (Wells, 2007, 2012). The second author, Ain  
34  
35 Bailey, is a sound artist. Her compositions encompass diverse mediums, such as field  
36  
37 recordings and found sounds, which are inspired by ideas and reflections on silence and  
38  
39 absence, architectural urban spaces, and feminist activism. Her electroacoustic  
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41 compositions are created for a variety of forms, including multichannel and mixed  
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43 media installations, moving image soundtracks and live performance.  
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49 The project name was Acoustic Geographies Or Reflections on Assembly. This spelled  
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51 out the acronym by which the project was known, AGORA, the Greek word for public  
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53 square. At the heart of this project was the proposition that the 'distinguishing feature of  
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4 auditory experience...[is] its capacity...to reconfigure space' (Conner, 1997, p.206  
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6 cited in Born, 2015:3). Our interest was in seeing (hearing) how a composition that was  
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8 developed from the underlying or barely audible soundscape of the space of  
9  
10 performance might shape the audience's experience of these spaces.  
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14 Three sites were initially chosen for this project, the British Museum, St George's  
15 Church Bloomsbury, and Kings Cross St Pancras concourse. In the event, it was not  
16 possible to negotiate access to St Pancras concourse and so the third event in this series  
17 was done at an independent cinema in East London, the Rio Cinema, Dalston. All of the  
18 compositions were also played on a loop at an installation in the Peltz Gallery,  
19 Birkbeck, University of London during a three week exhibition period. This paper  
20 focuses on the British Museum and St George's Church recordings, compositions and  
21 performances. Interested readers can find some material on the other events at the  
22 AGORA tumblr <http://agora-geds.tumblr.com/> .  
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36 The emphasis of the WSP composers on listening was a key influence on Ain's  
37 approach to this project. In particular Westerkamp's attention to the inherent rhythm of  
38 environmental sound was an important reference point in developing the composition.  
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45 The relationship between acoustics, architecture and assembly was explored through the  
46 digital recording of these spaces from which Ain made a series of compositions. In a  
47 gesture reminiscent of John Cage's 4:33, the strategy she used was to record the  
48 buildings when they were empty and to then use this material to create digital  
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4 compositions, and perform them to audiences at the same site where the recording was  
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6 taken.  
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10 Sound art working with or on barely audible sounds often takes Cage's 4.33 as its  
11  
12 touchstone. Laura Cameron and Matt Rogalsky's paper (2006) on Cage's collaborator  
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14 David Tudor's *Rainforest 4*, although not on barely audible sounds, also shows this  
15  
16 longstanding fascination with how to make compositions from objects and in buildings  
17  
18 in ways that compel the listener to attend to the specific rhythms of the space they stand  
19  
20 in. Japanese Onkyo experimental music performances involve audiences listening, or  
21  
22 demonstrating through their stillness and attention that they are listening attentively, to  
23  
24 compositions that are barely audible (Plourde, 2008). Alvin Lucier's 1969 composition  
25  
26 *I Am Sitting In A Room* worked with the recording and repeated playback and re-  
27  
28 recording of a text in a room until the words ceased to hold meaning and only the  
29  
30 harmonies of the room itself could be heard by the listener (see Rogalsky, 2010).  
31  
32 Similarly, Joseph Kirkegaard's 2008 composition *4 Rooms* recorded four rooms in  
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34 Chernobyl's zone of exclusion that had been meeting places for the community and then  
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36 played back these recordings into the room. He recorded them again to capture the  
37  
38 playback, repeating this process ten times until the dense layers of sounds revealed the  
39  
40 'underlying acoustic shape of that otherwise empty space' (Gaboury, 2016). AGORA's  
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42 compositions made from recordings in empty buildings to capture the sonic echo or  
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44 aural architecture of the space gestures to these same interests. The compositions were  
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46 intended to compel the audience to listen attentively to the sound of the composition but  
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48 also the sound of the space and to reflect on the space as much as, if not more than, the  
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50 composition. In this sense AGORA takes the impulse in works like Nicolas Collin's  
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4 curated book and audio tracks 'A Call for Silence' (2004) to attend to the rhythms of the  
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6 barely audible and reworks it to heighten 'soft sounds' to make them more audible to  
7  
8 listeners. The 1998 exhibition 'Incredibly Soft Sounds' at Gallery 101, Ottawa, Canada  
9  
10 'presented sound environments that are so quiet as to necessitate that the listeners stop  
11  
12 everything else they are doing in order to hear anything at all'

13  
14 <http://www.g101.ca/exhibits/incredibly-soft-sounds> . AGORA wanted to draw attention  
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16 to the rhythm of space, its sonic echo, and its aural architecture by getting audiences to  
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18 attend to the barely audible by listening to the compositions that were made from  
19  
20 capturing these sounds.<sup>ii</sup>

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25 The recordings were made with a pair of Naiant Omnidirectional microphones attached  
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27 to a T shaped microphone stand at a height of 1.6 metres with the microphones spaced a  
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29 metre from one another (50 centimetres to the left and right of the upright). These were  
30  
31 fed into a Sound Devices Mix Pre-D and recorded on a Tascam DR-100 MK2.

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34 Recordings were made at several points in the rooms: the centre, and either end of  
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36 Room 33 in the British Museum, and the altar, pulpit, nave and first floor gallery in the  
37  
38 Church. These captured the room tone (Kroon, 2015) of the church and of Room 33. A  
39  
40 total of 40 minutes of sound was recorded in each space.

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45 The process of making the compositions from the recordings was immersive and  
46  
47 intuitive. Ain says that 'play is my methodology' with playback, as in listening to  
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49 sound, underpinning play, as in fun, creative, experimental. One constraint was that the  
50  
51 three pieces (the two described here, and the composition on the Rio Cinema) had to be  
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53 a total of 60 minutes to be played on a loop for the installation in the Peltz Gallery. B  
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4 therefore took the decision to make three, 19:40 compositions. She imported the  
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6 recordings into Ableton. The first step was to listen to the recordings intently and  
7  
8 attentively to identify inherent rhythm in the recording. This is a strategy influenced by  
9  
10 Hildegard Westerkamp's attention to working with 'what is already inherent in the  
11  
12 materials' (McCartney, 2003, p.94), but Ain also creates her own rhythms that respond  
13  
14 intuitively to the sound environment of the recording, for example fragile or gentle  
15  
16 sounds might be a beginning and louder sounds could build towards a crescendo. The  
17  
18 intention is to create an image of the room or to use her reflections on and feelings  
19  
20 about the space as a point of inspiration for the sound compositions.  
21  
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24

25 She listened to the recordings and the samples on Alesis monitors. The sound on the  
26  
27 recordings was gentle, even fragile. To add weight to the sound or make it more  
28  
29 substantial Ain layered the sounds on top of one another. This layering creates a kind of  
30  
31 hyperrealism of the room sound. She then used a Roland PC 300 Midi Keyboard to  
32  
33 process small sections of sound utilising the Simpler instrument on Ableton, changing  
34  
35 the frequency of the sounds, creating loops and also using audio effects such as  
36  
37 multiband dynamics, ping-pong delay and reverb. Through this playing with fragments  
38  
39 she got a feel for the shape of the composition. She then sampled these layers into  
40  
41 different sound events, often in loops, and assembled these sound events into a collage  
42  
43 through repeated playing and rearranging of the samples.  
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49 To apply Schafer's typology we can say that the sound environment was doubled. On  
50  
51 the one hand there was the sound environments heard by Ain in these two spaces, the  
52  
53 British Museum and St George's Church. The sound environments were multiple and  
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4 within each one were also multiple sound events, some of which were barely audible  
5  
6 except through the recording equipment. Ain's recordings captured these multiple sound  
7  
8 events and then used them to make a single composition which, when performed,  
9  
10 produced a new sound environment where the dominant audible sound emanated from  
11  
12 the speakers. Listeners experienced a new soundscape made up of a composition that  
13  
14 reflects on the soundscape of the environment and the other soundfields that continue to  
15  
16 persist during the performance and that, in a sense, belong to the space itself. The  
17  
18 intention was that the audiences for these performances would be stimulated to think  
19  
20 about the space and how it formed, or did not form, collections of individuals into a  
21  
22 public in these contemporary agoras. Integral to this intervention was the proposition  
23  
24 that buildings have a distinct 'aural architecture' or physical properties that shape the  
25  
26 experience of being in space and have a sonic echo that persists after the 'congregation'  
27  
28 departs because sound events continue to reverberate in space after the sound source has  
29  
30 been removed (Blessner and Salter , 2007, p.5,16; see also O'Keeffe, 2017)  
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36 The British Museum is an exemplary space to explore the meaning of contemporary  
37  
38 agora: it's great hall is described as 'the largest covered public square in Europe'  
39  
40 (British Museum); it assembles a large public made up of a transient tourist population  
41  
42 and Londoners which it describes as a 'global citizenship' (6.7 million in 2013); it  
43  
44 wants to establish itself as the site of a material culture of multiculturalism and a  
45  
46 meeting place for a diverse public. St George's Church, Bloomsbury is also both on the  
47  
48 London tourist map and a meeting place for Londoners. Its acoustic properties are very  
49  
50 distinctive. It is an Anglican Church and was built for the spoken word, music then  
51  
52 considered to be a Catholic tendency. This is ironic since the architecture of the building  
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4 does not allow the spoken word to reverberate and considerable adjustments have had to  
5  
6 be done to improve the acoustics of the building so that the congregation can hear the  
7  
8 sermon. In contrast to the scale and diversity of the British Museum, this is a space for a  
9  
10 much smaller congregation and one that is less diverse in relation to faith and ethnicity.  
11  
12 Visitors to the British Museum are unlikely to conceive of themselves as a public in the  
13  
14 singular. In contrast, most visitors come to the Church either for worship or as tourists  
15  
16 interested in the architecture of this building, one of only six Churches designed by  
17  
18 Nicholas Hawksmoor in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The relatively small scale and Christian  
19  
20 aesthetic of the building also contributes to the sense of a unified public space. We  
21  
22 hoped that the compositions orchestrated from the soundscapes of this space when  
23  
24 empty might offer audiences a space of meditative engagement with the building and on  
25  
26 the relationship between sound, space and public assembly.  
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### 32 ***The making of AGORA***

33  
34 Responding to Gallagher and Prior (2014) and Revill's (2016) points that the actual  
35  
36 materiality of the sonic event is more often left undescribed, we offer here a detailed  
37  
38 description of how the compositions were conceived and made in these two sites.  
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42

43 We initially approached the British Museum to ask if they would be interested in  
44  
45 allowing access to the building for the gathering of the acoustic raw material and  
46  
47 subsequently for a series of performances. We were fortunate in that the Museum had  
48  
49 recently launched a project to rethink the future of the Museum space, and they were  
50  
51 excited about the focus of this project on the affordances of the space itself (in contrast  
52  
53 to engaging with the collections) and how the public respond to that space. The  
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4 Museum agreed to give Ain access to the Museum to record throughout the building,  
5  
6 including in the Great Court. They also committed to staging a performance of the  
7  
8 compositions.  
9

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11  
12 We had originally intended to have the Great Court as the site of the recordings and the  
13  
14 performances. However, on visiting the Museum, both when it was open to the public  
15  
16 and when it was empty, and only the low and droning noise of humming machines  
17  
18 could be heard, it became clear that it would be very difficult to capture the room tone  
19  
20 or room sound. The sound of the fridges overwhelmed all other sounds and was also  
21  
22 unpleasant to listen to. What Ain wanted was to capture the sound acoustics without  
23  
24 humans in the room and although it could be said that the sound of the fridges was part  
25  
26 of that room tone it was both a dominating sound and one that is not specific to that  
27  
28 room. In most other rooms in the British Museum the dominant sound was of air-  
29  
30 conditioners which effectively smothered all other sounds. The sounds of the Great  
31  
32 Hall, contrary to our expectations, were not adequate for a project of assembling a space  
33  
34 of congregation because of the dominance of the mechanical sounds. As Ain notes on  
35  
36 her blog: 'The sound of the museum almost breathing. In reality it was the sound of  
37  
38 fridges, the overly bright lights of the bookshop, a strange intermittent beeping, the  
39  
40 scratchings of the feet of birds hanging out on the glass roof - and that was just The  
41  
42 Great Court'. After walking around several of the collections, including the Egyptian  
43  
44 rooms, Ain decided that the China, South Asia and South East Asia gallery, Room 33,  
45  
46 would be the best space to record and perform in. This was mainly because it was one  
47  
48 of the only rooms without air-conditioning, a sound which would otherwise dominate  
49  
50 and overwhelm the room sound. Ain also liked that it has a large space in the centre that  
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4 opens to the rooms below so that it would be possible to bleed out to the rest of the  
5  
6 museum. Ain visited the British Museum at 5 am on two occasions to make recordings.  
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8  
9

10 Ain made recordings at three points in the room on the presumption that the room tone  
11  
12 would be different at different vantage points. The room is a rectangle punctured by a  
13  
14 central circular space engraved with the name of the Room's benefactor, the Hong  
15  
16 Kong banker Joseph E Hotung. In one half of the gallery are a collection of artefacts,  
17  
18 mostly representations of the Hindu pantheon, and at the other several large stone  
19  
20 Buddhas, mostly Chinese. The description of the room on the British Museum website,  
21  
22 although clearly attempting to give coherence and a rationale for the assembling of  
23  
24 these particular objects, seems to suggest instead the rather random character of their  
25  
26 assemblage (see  
27  
28  
29  
30 [http://www.britishmuseum.org/visiting/galleries/asia/room\\_33\\_asia.asp](http://www.britishmuseum.org/visiting/galleries/asia/room_33_asia.asp)).  
31  
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34 The performance at the British Museum was on a weekday in late November 2015. The  
35  
36 loudspeakers were positioned at the South end of the gallery and played for 20 minutes  
37  
38 repeating every 90 minutes. For the first performance the sound was very quiet since the  
39  
40 staff at the British Museum who set up the sound system, clearly concerned at how  
41  
42 visitors to Room 33 might respond to a loud composition, had set the playback very  
43  
44 low. The sound barely travelled to the north end of the gallery and the effect was  
45  
46 constrained and underwhelming. In discussion between Ain and the Head of Adult  
47  
48 Programmes at the British Museum it was agreed that the piece could not do its work  
49  
50 unless it was loud enough to carry to pervade the gallery. So, in the second performance  
51  
52 we raised the sound. It travelled easily to the end of the gallery and had an immediate  
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4 effect on visitors. Some people who had begun to walk towards the north before the  
5  
6 music started turned and walked back and others, as they came into the gallery (the  
7  
8 entrance is in the middle) were drawn towards the sound. As the sound reverberated the  
9  
10 effect was to make the statues appear to vibrate and the music lifted the dead weight of  
11  
12 the gallery and animated the objects. This affect resonates strongly with David  
13  
14 Chapman and Louise Wilson's account of their sound art project on the Falkland Estate  
15  
16 in Fife, Scotland in which they explore the haptic qualities of sound (2011). These  
17  
18 multiple religious figures were they in their intended religious setting would be  
19  
20 animated through music and performance. The statue of the Hindu deity Shiva dancing  
21  
22 reverberated in the light from the gallery windows and demanded the attention of  
23  
24 spectators. We might say that they had been, through the music, imbued with wonder,  
25  
26 Stephen Greenblatt's formulation for 'the power of the displayed object to stop the  
27  
28 viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an  
29  
30 exalted attention (Greenblatt, 1991, p.42)'.  
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36 At the last performance of the day a family group, tourists from Mexico, listened  
37  
38 intently and with evident pleasure to the final composition. They discussed with Ain  
39  
40 afterwards what they felt about the relationship between the music and the space and  
41  
42 they explained that they had heard in the composition the four elements, water, fire,  
43  
44 earth and air and where in the piece they had detected, for example, the sound of  
45  
46 dripping water. This idea of a cosmology embedded in the music resonated with the  
47  
48 gallery context, surrounded as we were by artefacts that represented alternative  
49  
50 cosmologies. Yet the sound of water that had prompted this reading of the composition  
51  
52 was an illusion: there was no water in the original recording, nor was there intended to  
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4 be the sound of water in the composition. So, although the visitors were convinced that  
5  
6 they heard the sound of water, in fact, they had not.  
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10 In developing the compositions for the St George's performances Ain followed the  
11  
12 same method as at the British Museum: a series of visits without recording equipment to  
13  
14 get a feel for the space, two subsequent visits to record the space, and a time of  
15  
16 reflection and composing that resulted in the final piece. Her field notes from this  
17  
18 process that she uploaded to the project's tumblr note that:  
19  
20  
21  
22

23 Listening without the aid of amplification, the sonic quality of the  
24  
25 church is fairly quiet. There is the rumble of traffic on three sides of  
26  
27 the building, with a constant stream of vehicles along Bloomsbury  
28  
29 Way being the most noticeable, as well as the rumble of the Central  
30  
31 Line underground beneath. However, listening through headphones to  
32  
33 the microphones as they recorded at a different frequency, it became  
34  
35 clear that the church's apparent tranquility is an illusion. Once Naiant  
36  
37 omnidirectional microphones and a Sound Devices Mix-Pre D capture  
38  
39 every single movement, creak, rumble and siren, lots of sirens, the  
40  
41 permeability of this apparently impervious building is highly audible.  
42  
43 Despite the lack of extreme quiet for the recordings, it was interesting  
44  
45 to navigate St. George's, Bloomsbury acoustic space and how the  
46  
47 surrounding acoustic environment was mediated by it. This also gave  
48  
49 rise to a haunting and spectral quality to the recordings, when things  
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4 not visible in the space where nonetheless audible (<http://agorageds.tumblr.com/>)  
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10 On the day of the performances the outside of the Church seemed uninviting: its  
11 classical design and large heavy doors doing little to beckon in the passing visitor. The  
12 outside of the building is dirty and grey. The restored steeple is not visible from the  
13 church itself and can only be seen from a distance. There are thirteen steps and then a  
14 wrought iron fence with a gate which is locked at night. On the first day of the  
15 performance, a rough sleeper had put down a large sheet of cardboard at the right hand  
16 corner of the front entrance with a rug on top, a suitcase, and a cigarette packet half  
17 open.  
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30 Inside the church there is a desk on the right hand side, a table on the left with photos of  
31 the Church and postcards and books. Beyond that the seats are laid out in a wide semi-  
32 circle facing the altar, with the preacher's pulpit off to the left. A table had been set up  
33 opposite the pulpit at which three women were sitting, pamphlets and small objects for  
34 sale laid out on the table. They were raising funds for women who lost their livelihoods  
35 and homes in the Japanese earthquake and tsunami in 2011.  
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45 Just inside the entrance volunteers from the Friends of St George's greeted arrivals and  
46 were also caught up in managing the man who has been sleeping outside. He wanted to  
47 charge his phone. They seemed to be arguing with him. He left with a piece of cake  
48 from the Women's Institute (WI). It was all slightly surreal and theatrical.  
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4 Ain arrived and set up the first performance at 11 am. There were then about 10 people  
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6 sitting in the pews, they had come specifically to listen to the piece. They sat in twos  
7  
8 and threes on either side of the aisle, facing the altar, listening intently and for the most  
9  
10 part, silently. Some people walked around the church looking at the architecture and  
11  
12 listening in different places to the composition. The Church Warden walked up to the  
13  
14 altar and lit incense. Its pillar of smoke resonated with the music and the music itself  
15  
16 reverberated within the altar. When the piece ended, everyone applauded and Ain  
17  
18 asked people to write their reflections in the note book on the table. People responded  
19  
20 generously, engaged and surprised by this music in this space, both its discordance and  
21  
22 its unexpected resonance with the Church. The sound system was set up on the upper  
23  
24 floor with the speakers standing on either side of the altar providing a vector around  
25  
26 which the audience could orientate themselves. Throughout the day the room filled and  
27  
28 emptied as the four performances, spaced over five and half hours and each lasting 20  
29  
30 minutes were performed. A brief explanation of AGORA was set out on a leaflet which  
31  
32 was available as visitors walked into the Church.  
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38  
39 The audience was made up of a large number of queer people, which included many  
40  
41 women and people of colour. AGORA had brought a different congregation to this  
42  
43 Church, which is usually a predominately white congregation. It was especially,  
44  
45 perhaps, different in its queerness. Confirming the claim that space is above all  
46  
47 relational, Karen felt that the audience had changed the space, perhaps shifting it from  
48  
49 the religious to the artistic. The music is at times menacing, as if it is arguing with the  
50  
51 religious iconography that it circulated around. It heightened the prosaic character of the  
52  
53 space, making it more available to its' new queer audience who may feel alienated by  
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4 the strictures of religious practice and Christian artefacts. Through attending to the  
5  
6 sound of the composition we became more aware of the space and an initial impression  
7  
8 of darkness and stuffiness was replaced by an awareness and appreciation for the  
9  
10 shifting light and airiness of the Church.  
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14  
15 It was also Open House weekend (<https://openhouselondon.org.uk/>). Open House is a  
16  
17 festival of London architecture when over 800 buildings of special architectural interest  
18  
19 are open to the public. Many of the visitors (aside from those coming specifically to  
20  
21 listen to this work) had come for the architecture, these visitors walked around holding  
22  
23 information sheets and looked carefully at the architectural features. If the performance  
24  
25 was on when they entered, many of them sat down for a few moments, copying the  
26  
27 ‘congregation’ and listened. Most of these visitors, who had come for the sight rather  
28  
29 than the sound, stood up after a few moments and started to walk around the space. A  
30  
31 few people came in to sit and pray. The church was very ‘open’; its walls  
32  
33 accommodating the AGORA performance and its audience, but also the WI tea room,  
34  
35 the Japan earthquake fund, the Open House visitors, the homeless man who kept  
36  
37 wandering in.  
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### 43 **Contemplating space or what does it mean?**

44  
45 In her account of Trimpin’s sound art project, DeSilvey comments that ‘it is incredibly  
46  
47 difficult to access and articulate such experience unless it is your own’ (2010, p.502).  
48  
49 This was a difficulty that we also had: how to understand what this experience was for  
50  
51 our listeners. In this section we develop an account of how we experienced the  
52  
53 significance of the performances, how it remade the space for us, and what listeners  
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4 who responded said and wrote about the performances. We asked ourselves: what did  
5  
6 this sound communicate and how can we write about it without deadening the effect of  
7  
8 the aural as we render it in text? We reflect on how AGORA enabled us to rethink or  
9  
10 reimagine Bloomsbury, the British Museum, St George's Church and the historical  
11  
12 connections between them and propose that the AGORA project can be thought of as a  
13  
14 kind of decolonizing listening (Hemsworth et al 2017).  
15  
16  
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18

19 It is hard to imagine that the colonial history of the British Museum can be ignored, and  
20  
21 yet it frequently is. This quintessentially colonial space, one born from the imagination  
22  
23 of those avaricious collectors of other people's stuff, the British Victorians, has  
24  
25 somehow rebirthed itself as a postcolonial space. Both postcolonial in the sense of after  
26  
27 the colonial but also, and more surprisingly, in the sense of a critique of the colonial  
28  
29 project, the material artefacts of civilisations speaking back to the cultural arrogance of  
30  
31 the British Empire and its discourse of colonised territories as spaces and people  
32  
33 without culture. Although, as Duthie remarks, the British Museum remains 'a trope of  
34  
35 empire' and 'an essentially imperialist institution' (Duthie, 2011, p.13) it has also  
36  
37 succeeded in representing itself as a postimperial institution. It may well be an  
38  
39 'imperial archive' and 'the most spectacular repository of the material culture of  
40  
41 empire.' (Duthie, 2011, p.15 citing Barringer and Flynn 1998, p.11) but its  
42  
43 contemporary function as both conservation expert and London's foremost tourist  
44  
45 attraction (and therefore, in fact, one of its most diverse spaces) has allowed it to  
46  
47 reinvent its own imperial history and represent itself as a conservation space for the  
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4 world's culture<sup>1</sup>. The British Museum describes its establishment as 'grounded in the  
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6 Enlightenment idea that human cultures can, despite their differences, understand one  
7  
8 another through mutual engagement. The Museum was to be a place where this kind of  
9  
10 humane cross-cultural investigation could happen. It still is'  
11  
12 ([http://britishmuseum.org/about\\_us/management/about\\_us.aspx](http://britishmuseum.org/about_us/management/about_us.aspx)).  
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16  
17 In this contradictory space the practice of recording the barely audible sounds of the  
18  
19 room and listening to a composition that reflected on, in some sense, its aural  
20  
21 architecture produced a new space. This space felt to us, and to some listeners, haunted  
22  
23 and uncanny. Haunted by its disavowed colonial past that is literally all around the  
24  
25 Museum and uncanny because the thing that everyone knows but no one acknowledges  
26  
27 in the Museum is the violence of this history.  
28  
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31  
32 The choice of Room 33 in the British Museum for recording was primarily in response  
33  
34 to the scale of the room and the relative absence of background noise, as we mentioned  
35  
36 above. Room 33 is quiet, and has fewer visitors than the more 'popular' exhibits (for  
37  
38 instance, the Egyptian rooms). Certainly it was not chosen for its sacredness. Indeed,  
39  
40 although the room is replete with sacred objects, their sacred character is easy to  
41  
42 overlook because of the scientific genre of the Museum as a space, the  
43  
44 decontextualisation of its display, and the randomness involved in its colonial  
45  
46 acquisition. Prior to the performances it was difficult to read this as a sacred space in  
47  
48 any way. Indeed, when sitting in the middle of the gallery at 5 am Karen was struck,  
49  
50 above all, by the apparent random nature of the gathering together of these objects  
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54 <sup>1</sup> See, for example  
55 [http://www.britishmuseum.org/about\\_us/tours\\_and\\_loans/international\\_exhibitions/treasures.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/tours_and_loans/international_exhibitions/treasures.aspx)  
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4 which, although they are ostensibly in this room because of their shared religious  
5  
6 character seem to be gathered together only under the sign of colonial pillage. The cards  
7  
8 displayed below each artefact do little to dispel this impression.  
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10  
11  
12 Although museums encourage a certain kind of aesthetic contemplation that shares with  
13  
14 religious practice an orientation towards the ineffable, they have ‘shunned particular  
15  
16 and obvious expressions of religious devotion’ (Buggeln, 2012, p.30). This may strike  
17  
18 the reader as an obvious exclusion, and indeed, spectators who attempt to re-sacralize  
19  
20 religious artefacts in museums are greeted with, at best, suspicion. In her ‘Museum  
21  
22 space and the experience of the sacred’ Gretchen Buggeln notes that despite this  
23  
24 prohibition or foreclosure of a sacred attitude in museums, the artefacts they display  
25  
26 may undermine this prohibition. In the National Museum of the American Indian in  
27  
28 Washington, for example, designed by the Native American architect Douglas Cardinal  
29  
30 ‘there were multiple overt references to Native American religions and spirituality, and  
31  
32 the entire museum presented itself as a kind of sacred space’ (Buggeln, 2012, p.33).  
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38  
39 The composition created from the recordings in Room 33 and their performance in this  
40  
41 same space generated a sense of sacredness that, however momentarily, could be  
42  
43 thought of as a kind of decolonizing of the Museum. The performance emptied it, albeit  
44  
45 briefly, of its association with the assemblage of colonial looting and re-animated the  
46  
47 collection’s original, sacred, properties. The performance animated a decolonial ‘re-  
48  
49 thinking of the world’ (Radcliffe, 2017, p.330) in centring the listener’s attention on the  
50  
51 origin of the artefacts rather than their presence in the colonial archive. Responding to  
52  
53 the objects in a sacred register challenged the organisation of the archive, its practices of  
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labelling, its imposition of a meta-narrative on a diverse region and its religions, and the boundaries between one room's collection and another that frames the archive within colonial epistemologies (Smith, 2005). Underscoring this re-sacralisation of the figures and objects and yet reasserting the meta-narrative of the museum's knowledge practices, the British Museum Head of Adult Programmes reflected with visitors after the performance on how AGORA, making sound out of nothing, resonated with the religious art, Buddhist and Hindu, in Room 33. He pointed out that many of the pieces in Room 33 and the cosmology of Hinduism and Buddhism are reflections on the relationship between being and nothingness, form and formlessness. In his chapter on 'Exhibiting the Sacred', in Crispin Paine's edited collection *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion* Chris Arthur ((2000) mediates on the ineffable qualities of religious belief and the tension between the silence of religious discourse on its most crucial tenets – the nature of god, the purpose of creation - and the desire of the faithful to have objects to signify their belief. So Shiva, an aspect, like all the Hindu gods, of Brahman escapes the impossibility of representing Brahman. Arthur cites the Hindu philosopher Shankara's commentary on Brahman: 'it cannot be defined by word or idea, as the Scripture says, it is the One "before whom words recoil"' (Arthur, 2000, p.6). Although Arthur was obviously not signalling in this phrase the importance or necessity of non-representational theory, it does nicely capture the difficulty of capturing the ineffable in language which non-representational theory grapples with.

The initial hesitancy of the British Museum staff about the relevance of the piece to the space, and therefore insisting on playing the composition too quietly in its first performance of the day, gave way to a site-specific response that both shaped what was

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4 heard and encouraged visitors to engage with the artefacts as expressions of religious  
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6 cosmology. Listening to AGORA created an impression of movement in the artefact, as  
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8 described above, appearing to animate the statue of the dancing Shiva and,  
9  
10 appropriately, making him appear to dance. This impression led to other conversations  
11  
12 with visitors and museum staff about the effects on bodies and objects of sound  
13  
14 vibrations and brought home the effect of sound which, 'is visceral and embodies space,  
15  
16 despite being invisible' (Bandt, 2006, p.353). Our experience resonated with Chapman  
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18 and Wilson's account in 'The caress of the audible' (2011) of the haptic qualities of  
19  
20 sound.  
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26 The tendency of Christian colonial rule to reduce other religious practices to objects of  
27  
28 the colonial gaze and/or to reframe religious practice as a distinct body of knowledge, a  
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30 discipline, as one humanities subject among others (Srivastava 1998) is evident in the  
31  
32 practice of the Museum. AGORA disrupted those practices, as we showed in the  
33  
34 previous section. It is in this sense that we want to suggest that AGORA was a  
35  
36 decolonizing intervention. Ain's compositional practice involves reflections on the  
37  
38 space she records in. As a Black artist in the British Museum this included reflections  
39  
40 on the colonial history of the building and its collection. Reflecting on this history and  
41  
42 its contemporary significance she commented that she wanted to 'disrupt that space a  
43  
44 bit'. Although this decolonizing desire was therefore present in the making of the  
45  
46 composition, the way that the composition opened up a soundscape for a resacralizing  
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48 and therefore, in our view, a decolonizing of the museum's objects was an unexpected  
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50 revelation.  
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4 St George's, of course, is already available to us as a sacred space and one that sits  
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6 within its original context and has not been wrested and decontextualized to another  
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8 space to signify something else altogether. Nor is Christianity in the Church only  
9  
10 available as a discipline, the object of another's inquiry. If our intervention in the  
11  
12 British Museum raised a set of questions about colonial acquisitiveness and colonial  
13  
14 epistemologies, the Church raised other questions about who belongs in this Anglican,  
15  
16 Christian space. The museum as a site of contemplation and the architectural neo-  
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18 classicism deployed in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century museums gestures towards the sacred and  
19  
20 ritual character of both St George's Church and the British Museum. As Carol Duncan  
21  
22 notes, 'Once we question our Enlightenment assumptions about the sharp separation  
23  
24 between religious and secular experience... we may begin to glimpse the hidden –  
25  
26 perhaps the better word is disguised - ritual content of secular ceremonies' (1998,  
27  
28 p.474) but we may also, we might add, glimpse the secular content of religious space.  
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34 A few people commented in the visitor's book on the uncanny and uncomfortable  
35  
36 feelings provoked by this encounter with a Church. Neither the childhood memory of  
37  
38 hours sitting in Church bored and restless nor the dissonance between being queer and  
39  
40 sitting in an institutional space that has been far from welcoming of LGBTIQ people  
41  
42 makes church an obvious or comfortable place for the formation of a diverse queer  
43  
44 public. But then there was the new soundscape. The space filled with a composition  
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46 ([https://soundcloud.com/ain\\_bailey/sets/agora](https://soundcloud.com/ain_bailey/sets/agora)) that rearticulated the space as a space for  
47  
48 this assembly, rearticulating the sacred although in a different register. Visibly, the  
49  
50 audience took ownership of the space. People walked around the pews, stood on the  
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52 first floor balcony, closed their eyes and listened, and even wrote poetry. When the  
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4 piece ended, crashing to its final notes, a momentary silence was followed by  
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6 spontaneous applause and amazement that a space that shortly before had felt so alien  
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8 felt now so homely; so 'ours'. AGORA had created the church as a new kind of sacred  
9  
10 space, both haunting and meditative.  
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14 St George's and the British Museum are not only geographically and temporally close: a  
15  
16 conventional contrast of secular museum space to sacred religious space is undermined,  
17  
18 on the one hand, by St George's traces of colonial history and, on the other, by the  
19  
20 museums many sacred objects. Also connecting the two sites is that individuals  
21  
22 connected with the British Museum are buried at St Georges, and the chief librarian of  
23  
24 the British Museum, Joseph Planta and his wife Elizabeth (d.1821), and the Principal  
25  
26 Librarian, Sir Henry Ellis, and his wife Lady Frances Jane (d.1854) have memorial  
27  
28 plaques in St George's. Karen noticed these plaques while walking around the Church  
29  
30 on the first scoping visits with Ain to think about the acoustic properties of the Church.  
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32 During the two days of performances, the immersion in the space and the contemplation  
33  
34 of it which was both demanded and made possible by the act of listening to Ain's  
35  
36 compositions , led Karen to further contemplate the colonial history of the Church, and  
37  
38 indeed of Bloomsbury, within which it sits.  
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45 Interred in the crypt are 'the wealthy professional classes [who were] resident in the  
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47 parish of Bloomsbury. This included numerous lawyers...doctors of medicine and  
48  
49 surgeons, army and navy officers, imperial administrators, and curators and librarians of  
50  
51 the British Museum' (Boston and Scott, 2009, p.74). Four other officers of the East  
52  
53 India Army are interred in the vaults (see Boston and Scott, 2009, p.78 - 80 for brief  
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4 descriptions of their colonial engagements). There are memorials on the walls of the  
5  
6 Church to the colonial administrators and soldiers who were interred in the Church  
7  
8 vaults or buried in the parish (Boston and Scott, 2009, p.66). These include a monument  
9  
10 consecrated by the East India Company to 'the memory of Charles Grant' 'as an  
11  
12 enduring memorial of the principles which they desire to render prevalent in the  
13  
14 administration of the immense dominions which it has pleased providence to confide to  
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16 their charge'. In another vault are interred the remains of the widow of 'John Williams  
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18 Sanders, of the Island of Nevis'. An engraving to General Robert Bell, Commandant of  
19  
20 the H.E.I. Company's Madras Artillery, who died 1844, 'Beloved and Lamented'. There  
21  
22 is also a memorial to the director of the East India Company, Edward Parry 'in which  
23  
24 capacity he laboured chiefly for God and for the establishment of Christianity in India'  
25  
26 who died in 1827, and William Alexander, Provost Marshall General of St Vincent 'the  
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28 duties of which office he discharged with honour to himself and satisfaction of the  
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30 public'.  
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36 The contrast between the sacred space of the Church and the secular, imperial history of  
37  
38 the Museum started to disassemble because of the affordances of listening to a  
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40 composition that is itself a reflection on space. This non-representational reflection  
41  
42 allows, perhaps even demands, an openness to the space in which the listener stands,  
43  
44 echoing Blesser and Salter's (2007) statement and question: 'spaces speak, are you  
45  
46 listening?'. The listener's experience of this soundscape is necessarily different to that  
47  
48 of others sitting in the same room, since each of us bring to our listening a set of  
49  
50 orientations and personal and social histories that make us more or less alert to different  
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52 features within the space. In this sense, the distinction that Rodaway (1994) draws  
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4 between the soundscape as object of aesthetic reflection and the soundscape as dynamic  
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6 event that moves with the listener is collapsed. The soundscape is experienced  
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8 simultaneously as an aesthetic object and a dynamic event. The traces of colonial  
9  
10 history on the walls of the Church drew Karen into asking questions about how these  
11  
12 two sites are connected, questions that can only be answered through further  
13  
14 investigation of the archive: pointing towards the necessity of non-representational  
15  
16 methods to be combined with textual methods if they are to address theoretical  
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18 questions about how space is made and how it can be re-made (Nash, 2000). Although,  
19  
20 in our interpretation AGORA heightened our awareness of the interconnected ‘power  
21  
22 geometries of global economic-modernity’ (Radcliffe, 2017, 429) in these two iconic  
23  
24 public spaces more archival work would need to be done to uncover precisely how these  
25  
26 connections worked to provide a cultured and pious veneer over the violence of  
27  
28 colonialism.  
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### 34 **Conclusion**

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36 In this paper we have explored how an arts-based intervention in public space, sounds  
37  
38 made from recordings of buildings when empty of people, can produce new reflections  
39  
40 on the meaning of publics and public space. Through this intuitive, iterative practice we  
41  
42 were able to pull at the fabric of the space, so to speak, to unravel their colonial histories  
43  
44 and sacred properties and, in surprising ways, to reconfigure sacredness and to  
45  
46 decolonise public space through sound art. It is important to emphasise that the  
47  
48 interpretation offered here has emerged from the analysis of field notes in conversation  
49  
50 with the material affordances and histories of the spaces. This sonic intervention was  
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52 not an instrumentalist or a priori attempt to reconfigure the sacred or even to decolonise  
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4 the epistemology of the Church or the Museum. It is rather that the premise of the  
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6 intervention was that a composition that responded to a site could engage audiences,  
7  
8 including ourselves, in contemplation of the significance of space to the formation of  
9  
10 publics. In the interpretation offered here, that contemplation pulled us in the direction  
11  
12 of uncovering the colonial histories that has underwritten the development of London's  
13  
14 public spaces and a re-sacralisation of religious artefacts as a way of disrupting colonial  
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16 epistemologies.  
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21 We took the words of Shankara's commentary on Brahman, the one 'Before whom  
22  
23 words recoil' (Arthur, 2000, p.6) to signal that the practice of composition from silence  
24  
25 and of listening to performances of those reflections are also events 'before whom  
26  
27 words recoil'. We resisted the temptation to translate this sound intervention into the  
28  
29 standard routines of social science data collection which might have involved, for  
30  
31 example, interviewing audiences, and instead attempted to engage with the space and  
32  
33 the objects within it in terms of wonder and resonance where resonance refers to the  
34  
35 power of both the object and the space in which it sits to 'evoke in the viewer the  
36  
37 complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged' (Greenblatt, 1991, p.42),  
38  
39 and provokes a desire to understand the 'dense network of evolving and often  
40  
41 contradictory social practices' (Greenblatt, 1991, p.42) within which they continue to  
42  
43 circulate.  
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54 Soft Sounds’, Collin’s ‘A call for silence’, Alvin Lucier’s 1969 ‘I Am Sitting In A Room’ and Joseph  
55 Kirkegaard’s 2008 ‘4 Rooms’.  
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