FORUM

Soundmarks as Objects of Curatorial Care

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Abstract In the 1991 book *Exhibiting Cultures: The poetics and politics of museum display*, Stephen Greenblatt introduced the concept of a museological 'resonance': the idea that objects on display within a museum exhibition 'resonate', or generate new meanings, via their relationships with the visitors who observe and interact with them. This approach to meaning-making has since impacted greatly upon the strategies museum curators follow when selecting and juxtaposing physical objects. This paper explores how Greenblatt's notion of museological resonance could be applied to the display of sounds themselves as cultural objects within a museum context. A mixtape or playlist-inspired approach to constructivist learning is proposed to re-imagine how sounds might be able to function within traditionally object-based museum exhibition. Soundmarks – sounds that reoccur within local communities which help to define their unique cultural identity – are presented as a potential area of research and collection by museums, while post-industrial soundmarks such as traffic signals for the visually impaired and the interface sounds of public transport systems are suggested as deserving of curatorial care via an expanded notion of intangible cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

> A handful of MPs gathered by the members' entrance to the Houses of Parliament on Monday to mark the occasion of [Big Ben's] final chimes.
>
> In New Palace Yard, 200 parliamentary staff watched the bell bong, with the jocular Labour MP Stephen Pound wiping a tear from his eye. "Bong-o gone-o, that's so wrong-o," Pound told reporters as he arrived in the courtyard. As the final bell rang, Pound called the sound "misery in the key of E". (Elgot 2017)

When the 13-tonne bell inside the clock tower in central London known as Big Ben was silenced for at least four years in August 2017 due to a large-scale renovation project, bells were already in the local London news that year: the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, the oldest manufacturing company in the U.K. (since 1570 CE) – and the one responsible for casting the Big Ben bell – went out of business. The Foundry cast one final bell, donating it to the Museum of London, then closed for good, to be replaced by a block of luxury flats.

In his genre-defining work *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World,* Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer identified *soundmarks* – site-specific sounds which, once noted, become identifiers of a community – as markers of human culture. Schafer felt it was a moral imperative to preserve soundmarks: 'Once a soundmark has been identified, it deserves to be protected, for soundmarks make the acoustic life of a community unique' (Schafer 1994: 10). As an artist who makes field recordings, I collect audio recordings of soundmarks from many countries, curating displays of these 'sound objects'

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(Kannenberg 2017) in the permanent collection of the Museum of Portable Sound (MOPS), where I serve as Director and Chief Curator. While the overall mission of MOPS is to collect, preserve, and exhibit what I refer to as 'the culture of sound,' it can also be viewed as an institution dedicated to raising awareness of the museological potential of soundmarks, as well as that of sounds in general, to act as examples of Stephen Greenblatt's notion of museological *resonance* – the idea that objects on display within a museum exhibition 'resonate', or generate new meanings, via their relationships with the visitors who observe them, as well as with the world beyond (1991). In this brief essay, I will discuss a handful of soundmarks currently on display in MOPS, and offer suggestions for how museums – now in the midst of a 'multisensory turn' (Levent et al 2014) – might begin to consider soundmarks as heritage to be preserved and displayed.

THE MUSEUM OF PORTABLE SOUND AND A MIXTAPE/PLAYLIST-INSPIRED APPROACH TO CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING

The Museum of Portable Sound displays audio recordings as sound objects, categorised according to various taxonomies and organised into galleries (see Figure 1) which function similarly to playlists or mixtapes – collections of sounds organised into meaningful sequences to communicate ideas generated by the mix maker (Jansen 2009). The museum currently displays 200 objects in its Permanent Collection Galleries; these galleries are grouped under four broad topics: *Natural History*; *Science & Technology*; *Space & Architecture*; and *Art & Culture* (A complete object list can be found at <https://museumofportablesound.com/collections/>). The sounds are primarily recordings I have personally made, along with a handful of contributions from other recordists. MOPS opened to the public in November 2015, annually updating the sounds on display. Although the sound objects are digital audio files playable on a multitude of personal audio devices, they are deliberately not distributed online. Instead, they exist only on a single mobile – an iPhone 4s that has not been connected to a network or WiFi since opening to the public as a museum – and can only be accessed by arranging a meeting with me, the MOPS Director, in order to listen to the objects via my own mobile phone; there is no app to download.

The sound objects are displayed via the 'Music' app standard to all iPhones; each 'gallery' is an 'album' in the Music app's collection, and the sound objects are sequenced within each gallery on the MOPS iPhone (see Figure 2). Object labels and didactic information that would normally be on the walls in a traditional museum exist on the pages of a printed Gallery Guide, which is provided for visitors during our meeting. This social experience makes the phone a portable 'contact zone' (Clifford 1997: 192–3), a site where meaning is made as visitors inevitably discuss their own memories of sounds with me. The meeting between MOPS and visitor is, in essence, a collaborative performance between myself, the mobile phone, and the visitor – where we silently agree to 'perform the museum' together (see Figure 3).

This performance, as well as the visitor's conversational engagement with the MOPS Director, can be seen as evidence of the project's constructivist approach to learning. Constructivist learning – centred upon the learner's own experience and constructed reality which requires their active participation in the process – has long been accepted as a valid approach

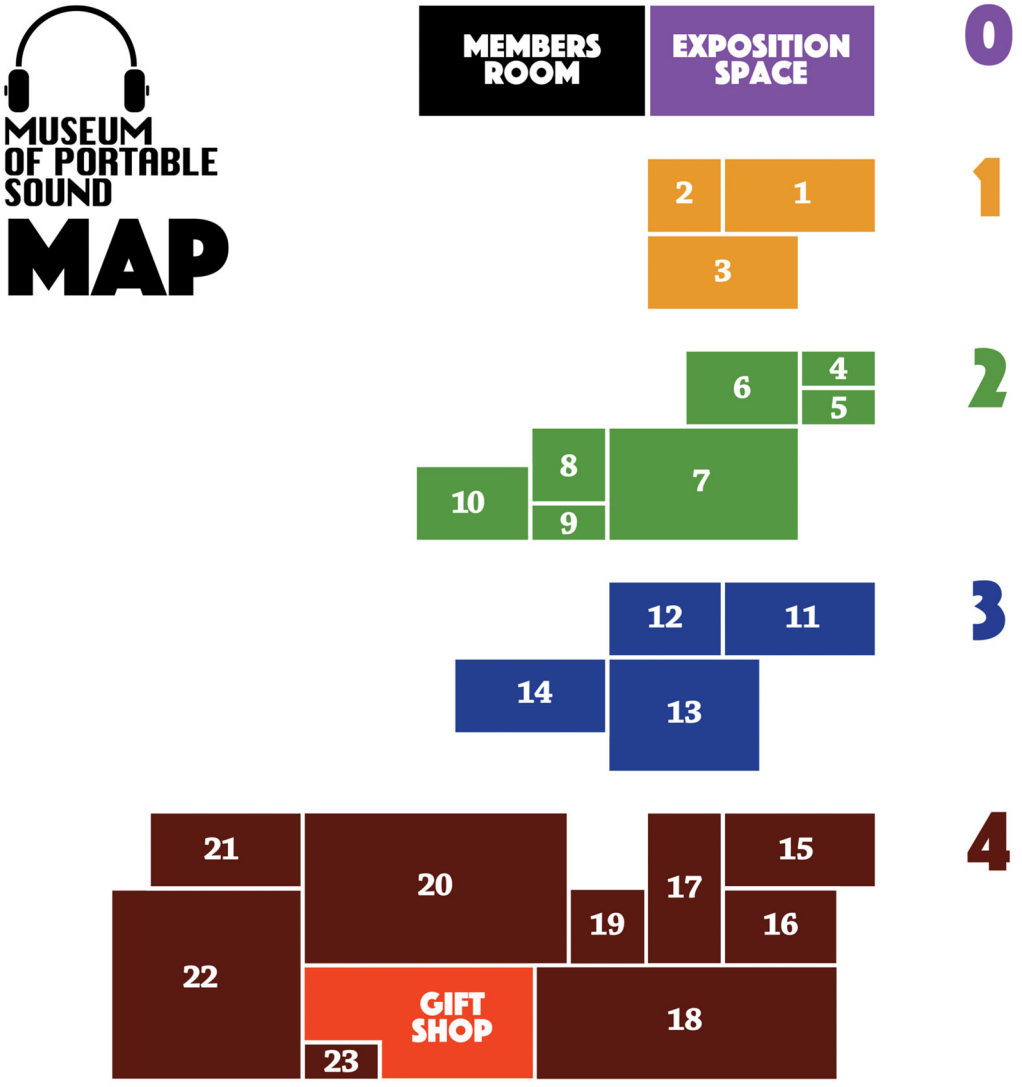

Figure 1. Map of the Museum of Portable Sound, 2018. Designed by author. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

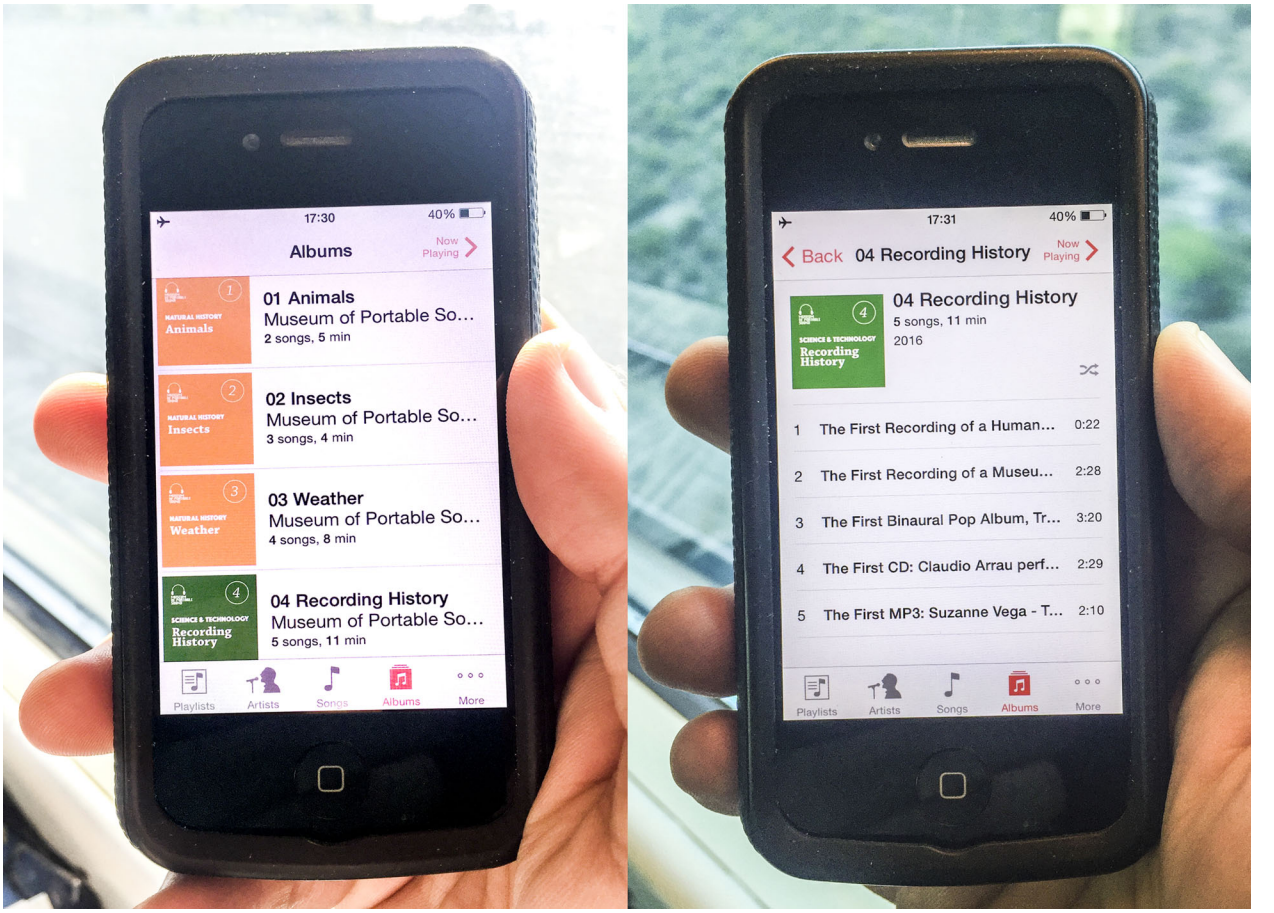

Figure 2. Museum of Portable Sound gallery display within the museum iPod's Music app. When sorted by 'album', the visitor sees an ordered list of each gallery (left). Tapping on a gallery displays the track list, in this case an ordered listing of the gallery's sound objects (right). Photos by author. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

within museum learning (Hein 1998). A constructivist exhibition, according to Hein,

- will have many entry points, no specific path and no beginning and end;
- will provide a wide range of active learning modes;
- will present a range of points of view;
- will enable visitors to connect with objects (and ideas) through a range of activities and experiences that utilize their life experiences (Hein 1998: 35)

While a traditional mixtape may not have multiple entry points or specific path (other than the option of side A or side B), a playlist format allows for quick access to specific sound objects, the ability to 'shuffle' or randomise the objects on view, and also encourages the MOPS visitor to begin or end according to their schedule rather than the museum's own organisational

Figure 3. A selection of the more than one thousand visitors to the Museum of Portable Sound since its founding in November 2015. Photos by author. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

structure. Via the visual and textual information contained in the MOPS *Gallery Guide* as well as direct conversation with the Director, it encourages multiple modes of learning – visitors can choose to see or read more information about the sound objects, ask me questions, or simply sit back and listen with their eyes closed.

This sort of embodied listening experience, while acting as an analogue to the non-verbal approach of early museums that eschewed text labels instead opting to follow a philosophy of 'to look [is] to learn' (Hooper-Greenhill 2007: 270), also often allows the MOPS visitor to make personal connections between the sounds on display and their own life experiences – visitors often share anecdotes with me about important sounds in their own lives, memories that were triggered by listening to a similar sound in the MOPS galleries. Since beginning the project, I have elicited numerous examples of feedback from visitors who have never thought about the importance of sound in their daily life before who claim to have 'had their ears opened' by their visit, telling me from this point forward they will be more aware of the sounds around them, and their own connections with and reactions to them. This feedback has helped acknowledge that not only does MOPS succeed in its attempt to encourage active listening practices within a general audience, but that it also engages in a kind of postmodern approach to museum education whose role within the finding of the self is not predetermined by a set of (overwhelmingly white, male, Western, wealthy) ideals. Through its 'mixtape' or 'playlist'-centric approach to museum education, MOPS can be thought of as encouraging the development of an 'active self' that is fluid and prone to change, as suggested by Hooper-Greenhill:

> Identity, meaning and self-determination are key issues in the production of a powerful

> sense of an active self. Active selves are able to go beyond reactive responses to external forces. It is in the production of active, empowered selves that socio-cultural and constructivist ideas about learning are important. (2007: 372)

SELECTED SOUNDMARKS ON DISPLAY IN THE MUSEUM OF PORTABLE SOUND

The sound objects and soundmarks on display in MOPS are recordings that usually feature a primary sound within their culturally contextual acoustic environment – most sounds are collected *in situ* using microphones with a wide angle of stereo capture, so other concurrent sounds can also be heard in the recordings beyond the sound of primary focus (e.g. the sound of a public telephone in operation inside a telephone booth in Zagreb also includes the sound of rain on the phone booth's roof – MOPS *Gallery 7, Object 1*). This contextual approach to the presentation of sounds differs from other similar sound-based projects in contemporary museums, who often record sounds under strictly acoustically controlled conditions to focus only on a single sound related to a specific physical object, such as the recordings presented in the excellent online museum Conserve the Sound < https://www.conservethesound.de> (Chun and Derksen, 2018; Lindauer, 2007). While a clinical focus such as this can provide an effective archival aspect to the presentation of sounds in museum displays, it also continues the tradition of isolating an object (in this case, a sound object) from its own prehistory upon repositioning it within a museum (Alberti 2005: 562). My contextual approach towards sound recording – i.e. capturing a sound within its 'natural' acoustic environment – instead allows for additional experiential elements of a sound's original occurrence: in the case of my collection of the sound of Big Ben's final bongs, it includes the hush of silence of the crowd on the street followed by a raucous display of applause and cheers at the end, an indicator of the sound of Big Ben's emotional impact upon its community (a video is available on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/dyiQ5K_ElhA>). This sound is currently Object 7 in MOPS *Gallery 17, Bells* (A PDF of the MOPS Gallery Guide may be downloaded at < https://museumofportablesound.com/plan-your-visit/gallery-guide/>).

One of the best examples of soundmarks in the MOPS galleries is a group of objects on display in *Gallery 7: Audio Interfaces:* eight examples of street crossing signals for the visually impaired (see Figure 4). Below are brief descriptions of four of these objects.

- *Object 9.* Port of San Francisco, San Francisco, US, 5 July 2008

This signal is a combination of constant beeps (indicating the crosswalk's presence) and a grinding tone (when it is safe to cross). In the background, a street performer can be heard playing percussion.

- *Object 11.* Munich, Germany, 20 October 2012

This signal features beeps loud enough to be heard on both sides of the street simultaneously regardless of traffic noise level. The beeps never change speed, pitch, or timbre, and only sound when it is safe to cross.

- *Object 14.* Zagreb, Croatia 26 September 2015

This signal uses two different sounds to indicate opposite sides of a street: an electronically generated click on one side, and a beep on the other. When it is safe to cross, the sounds on either side of the street quicken their pace in unison, and the difference in tones aides the perception of how far across the street the pedestrian has crossed as the sounds blend and shift focus depending on the listener's proximity.

- *Object 15*. Aarhus, Denmark, 5 June 2016

This signal uses the same tone on either side of the street, but the sound itself is a blend of a click and a beep. The slow pace of the sound makes it particularly lugubrious when compared to the signals from other cities.

Visitor feedback, particularly from residents of the cities included, has confirmed that the uniqueness of these traffic signal sounds do add to the acoustic identity of the places that contain them, with some Danish visitors expressing embarrassment that their home city sounds more laid-back than the others.

A soundmark example of another kind comes from MOPS *Gallery 20: Rituals & Events*. Object 15 in this gallery features a soundmark related to Lisbon, Portugal, contributed by Portuguese artist João Caldas. It is a sound made by *amoladors*, men who bicycle around Lisbon providing a variety of services, such as sharpening knives or repairing umbrellas, to local neighbourhoods. Amoladors play a specific short tune on a plastic trumpet to alert neighbourhood residents of their arrival. According to Caldas, he heard this tune often during his childhood in the 1980s, but the sound has since all but disappeared. It is the sound Caldas equates most with Lisbon – 'I hear an amolador song and I instantly know I am home' (Caldas 2017). In the corresponding label text in the MOPS *Gallery Guide* for this object, I ask the visitor: '[S]o what happens to people like João when the amoladors are gone? What will sound like home?'.

TOWARDS SOUNDMARKS AS INTANGIBLE INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE

People living in contemporary urban environments depend on many audio interfaces in their daily lives. Smartphones, microwave ovens, elevators, cash machines, and other

Figure 4. Collecting the sound of a street crossing signal in Aarhus, Denmark. Photo by author. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

devices are designed to sound in ways that convey information about their operation. Although the traffic crossing signal sounds described above are intended for people with a loss of sight, they are also heard by everyone capable of doing so. Their unique designs lend credence to their identification as soundmarks.

These are sounds that are the products of industrial heritage (Douet 2013: 232) – yet these are sounds of machines produced by industry that are actually used by the public in daily life. These sounds may be ephemeral interfaces, but they also function as part of a community's sonic identity; one only has to think of the marketing of a phrase like the London Underground's 'Mind the Gap' announcement to realise the power that sounds possess as symbols of a community. There exists a vast world of sonic cultural material that, if it is collected at all, is usually done so by libraries and archives rather than museums. There is a great difference, however, in accessing sounds in a library or archive versus encountering them on display in a museum – those interested in these collections must do their own digging to discover what might be relevant to their interests. Museums remain the world experts in the curation and exhibition of cultural heritage, and as such, could bring post-industrial sounds to new audiences who could subsequently be made aware of these sounds – intangible as they are – as objects themselves, representing their own cultural heritage.

What of sound's place within intangible cultural heritage? UNESCO's definition states that:

> [Intangible cultural heritage] includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our *ancestors* and passed on to our *descendants*, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts. (UNESCO 2017; emphasis mine)

This definition focuses on past and future; it acknowledges traditions passed on to future *descendants* by *ancestors*, yet overlooks the cultural practices of the present. Although it takes into account traditions that generate sound-related heritage, the sounds themselves are not earmarked for preservation – only the *knowledge* needed to re-create a contemporary facsimile of a previous era's practice is preserved. While this is intentional, perhaps the definition is due for a re-assessment acknowledging the importance of industrial heritage in light of the recent multisensory turn within museum practice.

What if there existed an 'expanded field' of intangible cultural heritage within museum practice that included post-industrial sounds? As museums seek to engage visitors in sensory areas beyond the visual, an expansion of UNESCO's definition of intangible cultural heritage could more fully integrate post-industrial sounds – both recorded and live – within museum practice. An expansion of UNESCO's notion of intangible cultural heritage could have a significant impact upon the world of museum practice in general: indeed, what kinds of stories could museums of all types tell if they prioritised listening to, and not just looking at, humanity's industrial heritage? END

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