Blitz: discursive bombardments in 'the war on terror'

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Blitz

Discursive bombardments in ‘the war on terror’

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EXEGESIS SUPPORTING AN INSTALLATION OF SOUND ART
SUBMITTED TOWARD FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
OF THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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**Preverberations**

The intended outcome of this research through creative practice is to present a sound account of an unsound\(^1\) era. Working with discourses sampled in audio from Australian public broadcast media, my project is to develop an oeuvre with which to represent the ethos of early 21\(^{st}\) century politics – the zeitgeist reflected in political discourses of Australia in ‘the age of terror’. My purpose is to devise an apparatus with which to capture the rhetorical excess of prevailing narratives of security and danger and to render them available for critique. The commonly conflated twin figures of the labyrinth and the maze are enlisted as tropes for teasing out clarities and obfuscations, fluidities and fixities, within an increasingly restrictive political climate.

In constructing a soundscape of narratives of a nation, I confine my scope to a specific time period, the pre-election months of 2004, when political campaigns to activate public fears around terrorism seemed to reach a particular crescendo. That enterprise continues, albeit somewhat abated, in the lead-up to the 2007 federal election. I use media voices in the installation, as well as other voices and sounds that support the composition/ construction of a surreal space, dimly lit and defined by the figure of a large labyrinth laid out on the floor. The visual elements in the space are minimal and attention is directed downward to maintain focus on the experience of walking and listening.

This exegesis is structured into four parts supported by opening and closing comments: ‘Preverberations’ and ‘Reverberations’. Part 1 sketches a series of three ‘auricles’ that introduce core themes or ‘conversations’ that define the research journey: listening as an active bodily experience that seeks out relationships with sound and concepts of ‘silence’; powerful potentials in the interplay of art and politics; and the multifarious resonances of the labyrinth and the maze. Part 2 sets a context for the project as a whole by exploring theoretical writing on sound and the unsound in relation to art, voice and politics. A short history of electrifying voices acts as a bridge between sound and its Other – the ‘unsound’ discourses informing contemporary cultural relations. Part 3 sets a context for practice based research in experimental electrovocal art in Australia by reviewing some of the key ideas, artists, movements, technologies and approaches that have emerged over the past four

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\(^1\) In all its senses of diseased, decayed, impaired, defective, infirm, fallacious, weak, unreliable, rickety, flimsy, wobbly, unstable, crumbling, damaged, rotten, ramshackle, shoddy, insubstantial, unsafe, dangerous, untenable, flawed, defective, faulty, ill-founded, flimsy, unreliable, questionable, dubious, tenuous, suspect, disordered, deranged, disturbed, demented, unstable, unbalanced, unhinged, addled, insane.
decades. Part 4 documents and reflects on the research methodology and the genealogy of the project, initially conceived as a computer-based multimedia work but taking the final form of a sound installation titled *Blitz: Discursive bombardments in ‘the war on terror’*. The conclusion, *Reverberations*, is a reflections on the nature of the research process itself and the significance of this particular enterprise of practice-based research.

The body of work submitted for examination is a sound installation and exegesis that provides a theoretical and historical framework for the research journey as well as reflections on its challenges, methods and outcomes. Included with the exegesis is a CD demonstrating a draft of work-in-progress (*Besieged*, 2004). Other earlier multimedia works referred to as background to this project can be reviewed online.²

² See the *MouthWorks* site at http://www.jenbrown.biz/soundscapes/mouthworks/index.html
Preverberations

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Abstract

This is a composite thesis realised in a sound installation titled *Blitz: Discursive bombardments in ‘the war on terror’* with a supporting exegesis. The exegesis offers a context for the project in sound art theory and practice, focussing specifically on the history of experimental ‘electrovocal’ expressive forms. It provides an account of the artist’s perspectives on the topic itself: contemporary political discourse on themes of security and danger. The exegesis also defines the scope of the project and documents the creative process undergone to realise its outcome: an installation apparatus capable of folding visitors into a heightened sense of the zeitgeist of early 21st century Australia. The genealogy of the project is described in terms of pivotal decisions and insights, technologies and techniques used, and aesthetic and ethical concerns. The nexus of voice – its material and metaphorical resonances in public discourse – and technologies for recording, manipulating and circulating sound are central to the development of this apparatus.

The core body of sounds used in the installation are the voices of politicians, media presenters, members of the public and ‘experts’ and are presented in the form of short sound bites. These were sampled from many hours of recordings of news and current affairs material captured from Australian public broadcasters (radio and television, the ABC and SBS) over the pre-election months of 2004. The voices extol and debate diverse ‘angles’ on the so-called ‘war on terror’ and its physical enactments and outcomes in the war on Iraq. Other sounds offset the voices to enhance a sense of surreal ambience and introduce meanings through metaphor; children’s voices; rhythmically dripping taps; footsteps; ticking clocks; the drone of planes overhead. Various sound processing techniques are applied to samples and a sonic montage is created through random juxtapositions of sounds played synchronously from an assemblage of iPods.

The figure of the labyrinth is central to the work on many levels, materially and metaphorically. It is used to structure movement through the installation space, a dimly lit ‘black box’ studio of ten by eight metres. Against the traditional practice of silently ‘walking the labyrinth’ as metaphor for a ‘journey within’, the *Blitz* labyrinth invites walkers to fold themselves into a dynamic field of allusions and aural messages and thereby to warp and shift the emerging play of meanings. The walk wends in and out of proximity to seven iPods set in small portable speakers and dispersed around the floor of the installation space. The ‘pods’ broadcast playlists of sounds bites that play randomly in ‘shuffle’ mode – against one another and against silences – to convey a sense of immersion in the discursive blitz of messages about
terrorism and war from the media. The labyrinth is drawn out across the floor in
dashed lines – made from small reflective rectangles that light up as visitors move
around the space with torches – and is designed to suggest the feel of a road or a
landing ground at night. The meandering trajectory of walking bodies around the
curves of the labyrinth creates a choreography of audition, of moving and listening
strategically to a barrage of sound from ever shifting perspectives. It invites walkers
to listen for possibilities that may lie between and beyond the dominant narratives of
western political leaders, to locate the gaps and silences. Beyond the pervasive noise
of discourse normalised by politicians and the media, what is it that we might
otherwise wish to hear and to speak?
Declaration

The content of this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university, nor is it being currently submitted for any other degree. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself. I certify that any help in its preparation has been acknowledged.

Jennifer Brown
1 November 2007
Acknowledgements

I wish to express appreciation and gratitude to my supervisor, Rebecca Coyle, for her unfailingly patient support and critical perspectives in assisting me to complete this project. Special thanks go to Ros Mills for her encouragement and cogent interrogations at many points over its timeframe.

Heartfelt thanks also to family members, friends and colleagues who have continually ‘egged me on’ and helped maintain a sense of balance and lightness of being on this journey through a somewhat grim topic. Foremost in my thoughts at this moment of completion is Kris Latona whose wry humour and wisdom have enlivened many conversations about life, politics and art over the course of this project.
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See also multimedia compositions, particularly *Besieged* (2004), available on the author’s website at [http://www.jenbrown.biz/soundscapes](http://www.jenbrown.biz/soundscapes)
Part 1. Auricles

Listen_Silent

There is a place I go often, close to my home in northern Tasmania, where you can visit the idea of silence solidified in stone. Deep in a gorge that carves through the ancient territory of the Letteremairrener people is a large oval boulder placed there in the late 20th century by a visiting artist from an immigrant culture. Richard Kelly Tipping seems to have sliced cleanly through the centre of his boulder and pulled the halves apart to reveal something extraordinary within: an inscription in gold letters that reads ‘listen – silent’, both words written forward on one smooth polished surface and mirrored backward on the other, the same set of letters differently arranged to make each word. I stop often in this place and fold myself down into a rocky crevice to be still, to be silent, to open my ears and wait for insights into questions just forming. The place is, in fact, never silent and the sound mix is always changing. There are the soothing cadences of water-flow, sometimes roaring white noise from a furious turmoil churning down the narrow gorge after rain, and a polyphony of small sounds of passing life – birdsong, fish plopping, ducks paddling and quacking, a hum and whirr of insects, fragments of human conversation from a nearby walking track, breathing, gusty leaf rustles, distant laughter, running footsteps. Beyond all that, are the living resonances of a culture from which much has been lost and taken away, my memory of a local elder speaking a welcome to country in the old language of this place.


Listening to this swell of sound, immediate and imagined, I am reminded of John Cage and the profound shift in his thinking that occurred as a result of a visit, around 1950, to an anechoic chamber at Harvard University. Cage was seeking the experience of utter silence but, once settled in the chamber, he was surprised to hear

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1 Photo taken in Launceston Gorge by Jen Brown
two sounds, one high and one low. The engineer afterwards told Cage that he had heard the sounds of his own nervous system in operation and his blood circulating. This led him to the startling realisation that the world is actually teeming with sounds, that silence is an impossibility and that only death is silent (Kahn 1999: 191). For Cage, this led to years of inquiring into and manipulating relationships between sound, noise, music and silence.

Cage’s experience resonates for me through a vivid memory of my youthful forays into the underworld of caves. With a handful of other young adventurers, I once found myself entering a cave system by inching down an almost horizontal crevice between two rock masses in central Queensland. The space was less than sixty centimetres high, not big enough even to crawl through, and we sidled on our backs between the two pressing surfaces like upturned spiders. On impulse, I asked my companions to continue while I waited, curious to see how long it would take them to move beyond my audible zone. I switched off my torch as their banter and grunts and shufflings gradually subsided. Solitary and still in utter blackness, I lay on the cool hard limestone and was gripped by an intense sense of the place and the time, my warm body held within the land itself, embedded in a deep earthly silence. In the absence of sound I became all ears. Yet, like Cage, I soon became aware that I myself was not silent... was indeed not capable of being silent. In the absence of extraneous auditory distractions, the noises of my body labouring on its customary daily business could not be ignored. Blood thudded softly through veins; the latest meal travelled along intestines in loud gurgles; air hissed in and out of a nose with steady persistence; eyelids swished softly; a throat swallowed, coughed, chuckled. It was a moment of immense awe for that younger self to realise that these rhythms had always been the accompaniment to my daily thoughts and activities, had indeed been the very condition of life itself, and yet I had never paid proper attention to them before. I had never actually listened to the sounds of my own being.

Like the piano in Cage’s famous silent work 4’33” (first performed in 1952), Tipping’s *Sounding Stone* (1998) serves as an instrument, playing the idea of silence as an invitation to attend to the aesthetic qualities of an immediate environment. For Cage, a musician, this is a riff on the mannered formality of the concert hall; for Tipping, a poet/sculptor, it is wild resonances from a deep rocky gorge in the heart of a modern city. Such reminders of the pleasures of stilling the tongue, of holding ourselves within an ongoing symphony of sound-surround, offer pivot points of calm within the business of life. The piano and the stone are ‘hotspots’, apertures, auricles into our storied selves, to the labyrinthine veins of meaning that sinuate our inner
archives of memories and imaginings, those databases we draw on for the making of dreams and art… and nightmares.

**Blitz**

Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937) is a painting that bombards us with the noise of modern warfare, an assault from the sky exploding into the bodies of a civilian population. The stark images evoke a cacophony of human and animal sounds: the last cry of a woman falling from a burning building; the frantic calls of people searching for loved ones in the chaos; the agonised wail of a mother holding a lifeless child; the death rattle of a man whose severed arm clutches a broken sword; the screams of a horse impaled by a metal pole. Only the bull is silent, transfixed, gaping at the scene of terror unravelling before him. Beyond the frame is the drone of planes overhead, the deadly whine of falling bombs, deafening explosions, the roar of flames and the shattering staccato of machine gun fire. As citizens of the 21st century, we know these sounds much too well: for the more fortunate, simply via media reports; for others, by the direct experience of bodies blown apart and the disintegration of the world around them.

Guernica, a small Basque town in northern Spain, was bombed and machine-gunned from the air in 1937 by German Fascist forces supporting Franco in the Spanish civil war. It was a target ill-equipped to defend itself and of no strategic significance, so it seems likely that Guernica was simply used for military training purposes. It was the first sustained aerial attack on a civilian population and three hours of constant

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bombardment left 1600 people dead and a town in smouldering ruins. In terms of the scale of aerial slaughters enacted since 1937 Guernica was a minor event, but it marks a turning point at which the world was profoundly changed and would never be the same. The bombing of Guernica marks the beginning of a new era of warfare in which killing on a massive scale is possible and civilian populations as well as soldiers are considered ‘legitimate’ targets (Van Hensbergen 2004).

The original of Picasso’s powerful painting of Guernica resides in a Madrid gallery, but a large tapestry replica dominates a wall on the second floor of the United Nations building in New York, backing the space where media conferences are held. Its presence at that particular spot in the UN is designed to act as a reminder to all nations of the horrors of war and the kinds of atrocities the UN was created to prevent. On January 27, 2003, the week before the US Secretary of State was scheduled to announce America’s plan to initiate a new war in Iraq, the tapestry was covered over with a large blue drape. A spokesman explained that the UN had chosen blue as an appropriate backdrop colour for television cameras rather than Picasso’s visually confusing mass of blacks, whites and greys (van Hensbergen 2004).³ Australian Labor MP and UN delegation member, Laurie Brereton, was in New York at the time and his comments were reported in the Toronto Star:

There is a profound symbolism in pulling a shroud over this great work of art. For throughout the debate on Iraq ... there has been a remarkable degree of obfuscation, evasion and denial, and never more so than when it comes to the grim realities of military action. We may well live in the age of the so-called ‘smart bomb,’ but the horror on the ground will be just the same as that visited upon the villagers of Guernica ... Innocent Iraqis – men, women and children – will pay a terrible price. And it won’t be possible to pull a curtain over that.⁴

The shrouding of the Guernica tapestry was an especially poignant act of elision. Its references to the terror and violent resonances of aerial bombardment could so easily be a direct rendering of the 9/11 attacks. The talking head of a US general advocating war against the background of Picasso’s falling screaming woman on fire and New York’s high-rise buildings would clearly have evoked a potent and unstable field of meanings. Weapons of mass destruction were about to be unleashed on yet another civilian population. The world was on the brink of another deliberately engineered descent into the maze of chaos, pain and confusion that is war.

³ There was much speculation at the time on where the order for the cover-up had originated.
⁴ Toronto Star (9/2/03). Cited on CommonDreams.org in http://www.commondreams.org/views03/0209-04.htm
Labyrinth_Maze

On a wide grassy flat by Mole Creek in northern Tasmania, a man has mowed a classic Cretan labyrinth. I walked its folded pathways on a crisp sunny day after rain, accompanied by the reassuring sounds of fast-flowing water and birdsong, the grass a brilliant winter green and cushiony beneath my feet.

Stretching for miles underground through that country is a vast maze of caves. Some of these have been commodified for passing tourists and accessorised with guides, tour times, electric lights, concrete steps and viewing platforms in prime spots. Others are sculpted in pitch darkness, elusive mythical spaces of vast proportions that can be accessed only with extreme bodily effort: abseiling down sheer cliff faces, crawling through muddy tunnels, diving deep through black icy waters. The biggest is Kubla Khan, two-and-a-half kilometres long, with a stream that flows through deep pools and gargantuan chambers glittering with an excessive beauty of limestone formations: flowstone, dripstone, rimstone, curtains, columns, crusts, pendulites helictites, stalactites, stalagmites, shawls, straws, crystals and crystal pools. It is estimated that Water, the indefatigable architect of these intricate forms, took some 350,000 years of patient dripping and flowing to achieve the effect.⁵

Images 3/4. Labyrinth at Wychwood Garden and a Mole Creek Cave⁶

Words, too, can flow and drip in relentless patterns to wear away at what once seemed solid or carry matter to build new cultural forms on vacant ground. In the early 21st century, the dark and torturous discourses of western political leaders can seem inexorable in their power to wear away at sense and sensibility, to erode trust and goodwill between neighbours and nations, to spin labyrinths of fear.

⁶ Photos of Wychwood Garden labyrinth and cave decoration at Mole Creek by Jen Brown.
My research journey has taken me through the sounds of contemporary politics. This trajectory has been characterised by an ongoing oscillation: on the one hand, walking the clear and focussed path of the labyrinth across a bright soft surface; on the other, falling through into the deep rich confusion of the underground maze with all its convoluted tangents, jutting corners, dead-ends and unspeakable treasures. The experience of walking a labyrinth, of listening to the sounds around, of knowing the maze lies close beneath, is offered to visitors who enter into the sound installation that has become the final outcome of this project.
Part 2. Un/Sound Matters

Positioning Sound in Art

The choice of sound as a medium with which to make art is, in itself, political in the context of a western culture that historically privileges visual experience over the aural. Priest (2005: np¹) claims that artists who work with sound as their primary mode of expression “spend a lot of time defining and claiming ground, snatch[ing] priorities back from a visually focused culture”. Yet despite its dubious status within an eye-oriented arts hierarchy, sound-centric experimental art has been gaining traction in Australia since the 1970s. This is evidenced in the growing body of documented works and performances in the collections of the Australian Music Centre² and the National Library³ as well as the Sound Design Project⁴, an online database of sound artists, works, festivals, and articles produced by the University of Melbourne.

Coyle (1995) gives an overview of the early development of sound art in Australia in a curatorial perspective on the exhibition Sound in Space: Adventures in Australian Sound Art at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art. She comments on the paucity of formal documentation and critical engagement with the work and histories of sound artists and practices in Australia. Coyle identifies a need for scholarly work that addresses the diverse social, political and historical elements of sound art practice; notions of sound as a medium; techniques and technologies of production; and philosophical and conceptual matters. These comments are still pertinent over a decade later for, despite growing academic interest in theories and practices of audio art, there is still no comprehensive published account of its development in this country. Bandt (2001b) goes some way to addressing this gap in her illustrated text Sound Sculpture which gives a descriptive account of the scope and diversity of Australian sound art.

Sound itself contains and alludes to an array of transgressive possibilities, both material and metaphorical. In a talk given at the Tate Modern, one of a series aimed at ‘challenging ocularcentricity’, Connor (2003) enumerates ways in which the articulation of sound as art transgresses established arts practices premised on the

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¹ The notation ‘np’ is used wherever online articles do not provide page or paragraph numbering.
³ MusicAustralia, National Library of Australia, Canberra: http://www.musicaustralia.org/
⁴ Sound Design Project, University of Melbourne: http://www.sounddesign.unimelb.edu.au
visual. The expansive leakiness of sound, like a gas or an odour, he says, defies enclosure within the angular walls and perpendicular logic of the conventional gallery space. And, rather than travelling from source to destination like a letter or a missile, sound defies linearity by diffusing in all directions at once. By escaping and resisting the invisible force-field or glaze of ‘aestheticality’ that is bestowed on objects by virtue of their (normally stationary) positioning within the gallery, sound introduces a sense of relief and invigoration from formality and fixity. As well, a great deal of sound art has escaped the gallery enclosure entirely and circulates freely outside or, by virtue of its superb powers to evoke, has brought the outside in.

Connor suggests that sound’s ability to seep and leak through walls and floors and from around corners is ‘extramural’ on two counts:

… first of all in the disciplinary sense… it adds to art a dimension that has traditionally been left to other, more temporal arts and secondly in the more immediate or phenomenological sense… it introduces timely events into the permanent, partitioned world of art… Perhaps the greatest allure of sound for artists more than ever convinced of their libertarian vocation somehow to go over the institutional wall, is that sound, like an odour or a giggle, escapes. (Connor 2003: np)

Aside from its claim as the Houdini of art forms, works in sound are relational and performative in that they tend to focus on the connections and disjunctions between subjects and objects and to invite exploration of the tensions of social reality. From the early performance art of the 1960s (such as Fluxus and Happenings) onwards, sound art has been raising concerns over “the relational intensities of subjects, objects, and the social and political spectrum in which they are necessarily positioned and through which they come to perform” (LaBelle 2006: 101). LaBelle suggests that a unique quality of sound art is ability to draw subjects and objects into a conversational exchange “so that art objects do not so much contain or embody meaning, but are given meaning through performative exchange” (2006: 101).

Sound has the capacity to infuse, colonise and define an enclosed architectural space, to bring the outside world into a volume of density and intensity for critical appraisal. Sound is immersive, surrounding an audience with an experience that brushes across the surface of the skin and penetrates in through apertures, tweaking bodily boundaries and resistances. Unlike relationships wrought through the distancing mechanism of the eye, sound is unavoidably relational. LaBelle reminds us it “emanates, propagates, communicates, vibrates, and agitates” as it leaves and enters bodies, a process by which “it binds and un hinges, harmonizes and traumatizes; it sends the body moving, the mind dreaming, the air oscillating” (2006: ix). Sound yields nuances of detail about objects and their relationships with bodies in space in a way not possible by a visual scan across a spatial field; the eye operates
from a trigonometric logic, estimating distances, angles, areas and contours. Listening is exploratory, Connor suggests, because “sound does not give us just the outline or contour of things – their size, shape and position – but also gives us the sense of their quality or their relation to us: their texture, density, resistance, porosity, wetness, absorptiveness” (Connor 2003: np). This information is delivered to the amenable ear in a composite mix of large and small details, all at once.

A distinctive quality of sound art is its ephemerality: unlike the prized objects in the realm of the visual arts, there are no sound objects as such – only objects that can be activated into producing sounds through physical disturbance. The transient nature of sound makes particular kinds of demands on a listener in terms of alertness and presence. An appreciation of sound as art adds yet another layer to this demand for immediacy: readiness to respond to sonic allusion. As Coyle puts it:

Neither visual nor tactile, allusive rather than expository or descriptive, sound art requires the visitor to listen rather than merely hear, and to ‘read’ allusions from a series of sonic signifiers and sensations. Sound artworks there represent the original ‘virtual medium, regardless of their links to visual components. (1995: 5)

Sound’s ephemerality is diverted somewhat by the capacity of recording technologies to capture and repeat transient experience. Eno (2004) suggests that recording technologies have taken audio out of the time dimension and into the space dimension. The invention of tape recording was highly significant because, once captured, sound “becomes a substance which is malleable and mutable and cuttable and reversible… making it possible to squeeze the music, or expand it” (Eno 2004: 128). With digital technologies, audio editing is achieved through visual representations of recorded sound, even further conjuring the illusion of sound as object rather than event. Yet recording can never properly reproduce the spatial resonances of ‘live’ sound, its actual ephemeral resonances in space. As Coyle (1995) points out, this means technologies used for sound storage and reproduction cannot be culturally neutral and can only partially represent sound in the environment. She notes that sound recording requires making numerous decisions about the inclusion or exclusion of various elements of the sound to be captured and reproduced, and in what manner, with the implication that recorded and post-produced sound is actually an entity in its own right, rather than an accurate copy of an originary sound event.

While sight restlessly scans and selects and focuses in its measuring of distances, contours and spatial relationships, there is a sense in which ambient sound, the sounds from around and within the body, simply happens to us. Yet much of what
we could actually hear at any moment we may choose not to. The selecting out of segments and moments from the whole ever-shifting sonic ocean in which we are immersed has been called the ‘cocktail party’ effect (Coyle 1995). This effect has been translated by sound artists into a compositional strategy through the use of sampling, which cuts specific sounds out of their original context and places them in a new context within a sonic work so that they are likely to call attention to themselves.

Connor (2003) draws attention to a strange paradox in the transgressive mannerisms of sound as art. Despite its capacity to turn the gallery inside out, to make walls permeable, to turn objects into events, to possess a potent agency for dissolving or surpassing objects (a project of the visual arts since dadaism in the 1920s), sound is still commonly housed within a gallery or museum. This traditional institutional framing appears to be deemed desirable by sound artists as “a habitat or milieu in which art can fulfil its strange contemporary vocation to be not quite there” (Connor 2003: np). Sound’s opposite ability to fully ‘be there’, to not only fill but to colonise space with its volume (in the sense of loudness), is in itself an expression of power and lends sound a certain authority as a medium with which to explore transgressive themes in art. Such power is often deployed through the amplification of human voices asserting themselves – voices that insist on being heard at the cost of others.

There are political ramifications attached to creating work in sound in the academy as well as in the world of contemporary art. Belfrage (1994) suggests that the historical assimilation of ‘knowledge’ to writing has produced cultural deafness at an epistemic level. Since ancient Greece and Plato’s reference to ‘the mind’s eye’, she says, western cultures have allowed visual metaphors to serve as the dominant way of representing the language of knowing.

As a knowledge practice in western epistemology, listening has an almost non-existent status. Western epistemology is dominated by the discursive practices of printed texts. In mainstream [sic] Australian culture – indeed in western cultures – a knowledge must eventually be authorised to have the status of ‘knowledge’. Educational institutions discursively produce what counts as ‘knowledge’ in the form of printed texts. In this culture the written word has greater status than the spoken word; speaking has greater status than listening. (Belfrage 1994: np)

That western universities remain highly print-oriented in terms of how knowledge is constructed and legitimated is ironic in the context of an increasingly multi-literacy world that communicates daily via a plethora of networked devices. Even in their uses of the uniquely multi-mediated World Wide Web, universities have commonly reinscribed a print focus, replacing oral lectures and terrestrial tutorials with print-
based online study notes and ‘discussions’. Humanities and Media departments continue to emphasise the primacy of the written text in scholarly enterprise and, while the textual components produced through multi-literacy engagements may be acceptable within the overall structure of a report, they tend to be relegated to the illustrative or decorative and positioned at the margins of the authority of the written text. Australian universities do not yet seem to be responding to contemporary convergences – not only in new media, but in the various ‘ways of knowing’ they facilitate. As Threadgold points out: “There is still felt to be a real disjunction between the ‘verbal’ – even logocentric traditions – of the universities – and the visual, corporeal, spatial and other semiotic languages, and alternative theories, of the performing arts” (1999: 63-4). This inquiry contributes to a growing body of research in the arts and humanities that responds to the epistemological challenge identified by Threadgold.

Despite the dominance of the visual in western cultures, the past half-century has seen a strengthening consciousness of the importance of audio culture, particularly within academia and the creative arts. Sound art appears to be gaining ground as a viable field and the past decade has been marked by its increasing presence in galleries, museums and other venues around the world (Cox & Warner 2004). The development of accessible technologies for recording and manipulating sound have clearly played a major role in this turn. Cutler (2004) argues that audio recording technologies, from the advent of the tape recorder onwards, served to challenge and even depose the culture of the eye, the more so in fields such as the classic/’art’ music tradition of composition. He suggests that recording technologies opened up a whole new register of cultural production that signifies a shift away from dependence on visual notation and supports the conceptual embrace of sound/noise in experimental composition.

Yet the ideational ground for that conceptual embrace had been laid long before the machines themselves existed. Major shifts in the early years of the 20th century in relation to conceptions of music’s place in cultural life and its relationship to noise and sound was both supported by and instrumental in the development of new technologies for audio recording, manipulation and amplification. As Neumark (2006) points out, technology embodies and mediates social relations in all their varied manifestations across cultural, aesthetic, economic and political fields and technologies themselves are profoundly shaped by those relations. The human-technology interface can never be a culturally neutral arena, but is always positioned in and positioning the terms of the encounter.
What is possible in technology depends on the particular cultural imagination and individual subjectivities, while in turn cultural imagination and individual subjectivity are produced by these technologies. Further, technology itself can have an imaginary aspect, inciting metaphor, affect, and discourse. Technology can thus be a major cultural signifier, as it was for modernism and “the future” in the twentieth century. These cultural and “imaginary” significations of technology in turn inflect everyday and artistic experiences of technology. (Neumark 2006: 10)

The Italian Futurists of the early 20th century were extremely critical of established art forms of all kinds and advocated a total revision of aesthetic values in keeping with the ‘age of the machine’. Balilla Pratella (1911-12) wrote a series of manifestos in which he suggested, among other things, that music should “represent the spirit of crowds, of great industrial complexes, of trains, of ocean liners, of battle fleets, of automobiles and airplanes. It must add to the great central themes of the musical poem the domain of the machine and the victorious realm of electricity” (Pratella cited in Brown 1986: 2). Luigi Russolo reiterated Pratella’s sentiments in his The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto (1913) and insisted that conventional musical sound was far too limited in its variety of timbres. Orchestras, he said, could best be described as “hospitals for anaemic sounds” (Russolo 1913 in Brown 1986: 25) capable of producing only boredom in modern audiences. The raw material of the new Futurist vision for art would draw on everyday ambient sounds and rhythms from the modern city and spell a shift from the eye to the ear:

Let us cross a great modern capital with our ears more alert than our eyes, and we will get enjoyment from distinguishing the eddying of water, air and gas in metal pipes, the grumbling of noises that breathe and pulse with indisputable animality, the palpitation of valves, the coming and going of pistons, the howl of mechanical saws, the jolting of a tram on its rails, the cracking of whips, the flapping of curtains and flags… (Russolo 1913)

The role of the human voice in music making also came under scrutiny by the Futurists. Russolo was also very influenced by the ideas of fellow futurist F.T. Marinetti, a poet who had invented a new technique called ‘free words’ which he regarded as an attempt to liberate the sounds of poetry from restrictions of syntax and grammar through the use of onomatopoeia. The noises of machine guns, bombs, and shrapnel became the inspiration for a new use of language and a complex poetical vocabulary. This new use of language, fast and breathless, was designed to inject different rhythms and variety of sounds into aural poetry. The aestheticisation of the sounds of modern warfare in Futurist philosophy is an ancestral ghost which continues to haunt contemporary media practices that represent war as entertainment and spectacle. ¹ Brown suggests that Marinetti’s efforts in the new

¹ Much has been written about this phenomenon in cultural and media scholarship. See, for example, Marjorie Garber, Rebecca L. Walkowitz & Jann Matlock (eds.) (1993). Media Spectacles. Routledge;
idiom “managed to portray vividly the turmoil, speed, and confusion of modern warfare” (1986: 3). Russolo commends a text poem sent by Marinetti in a letter from the trenches of Adrianopolis as describing in “marvelous free words the orchestra of a great battle”.  

In the center of this hateful ZANG-TUMB-TUUMB area 50 square kilometers leaping bursts lacerations fists rapid fire batteries… Fury breathless ears eyes nostrils open! load! fire! what a joy to hear to smell completely tatatatata of the machine guns screaming a breathless under the stings slaps traak-traaak whips pic-pac-pum-tumb weirdness leaps 200 meters range Far far in back of the orchestra pools muddying huffing goaded oxen wagons pluff-plaff horse action flic flac zing zing shaaack (Marinetti)

Russolo based his aspiration to render ‘noise as music’ on Marinetti’s ‘noise as poetry’ and set about developing an array of instruments – intonarumori – with which to realise a new musical aesthetic. Human vocal sounds appear to have been central to this project. Russolo noted in his manifesto the important influence of environment on the sounds of the voice and hence on the articulation of language and song. He suggested on this basis that noise has become a vital element of language itself and is represented through consonants. Vowels, Russolo maintained, are strongly associated with conventional notions of (musical) sound. An important element in the extended sonic palette of noise as music is therefore language, particularly vocal sounds which foreground consonants. He saw these as being capable of “great efficacy and intensity of expression” (Russolo 1913 in Brown 1986: 60). Further…

Language has a richness of timbre unknown to the orchestra, which should prove that nature itself had recourse to the timbres of noise, when it wished to increase and enrich the timbres of the magnificent instrument that is the human voice. It is important in this regard that no noise exists in nature or life (however strange or bizarre in timbre) that cannot be adequately…imitated through the consonants. The only difficulty in this imitation is the shortness of the consonant itself, which would have to be repeated many times quite rapidly… to be able to produce a given timbre for any length of time. (Russolo 1913 in Brown 1986: 56)

This difficulty would be overcome some three decades later by technological advances that would offer future composers the tools with which to explore the

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6 From a website providing an English translation of the full text of *The Art of Noises*, as is the Marinetti quote below: http://www.obsolete.com/120_years/machines/futurist/art_of_noise.html

7 Marinetti cited in the website *The Art of Noises* as above. I take up such sonic tropes in my own work, albeit with ironic intent.

8 Initially in the form of tape recorders and later digital technologies with their capacity for cut and paste and extreme ease of creating repetitive sound loops
expressive possibilities of the rapidly repeating consonant. In the meantime Russolo built an extraordinary array of instruments which were the forerunners of electronic synthesisers. They were basically designed on mechanical principles, though some worked on low voltages produced from batteries. By the time The Art of Noises was written, Russolo (assisted by Piatti) had constructed 21 noise instruments - intonarumori - and designed many more, consisting of boxes of various sizes with a trumpet at the front end for amplification. Different kinds of sound producing devices were contained inside the boxes and were activated by the turning of an external handle. Concerts presenting the art of noises were somewhat ahead of their time in 1914 and received a mixed reception in both Milan and Paris. Joel Chadabe suggests that special honours should go to Russolo “first, for his dedication to Futurist music and, second, for his courage in facing the airborne vegetable” (1997: 2).

Ironically, none of Russolo’s intonarumori survived wartime bombing and the music itself was regarded as eccentric and not of merit in its own time (and never recorded). Yet the radical ideas of Marinett and Russolo remained influential on experimental art over much of the 20th century. They were incorporated into Dada and spread abroad through literary, visual arts and musical circles and were instrumental in producing an intellectual atmosphere conducive to such diverse phenomena as electronic and electroacoustic composition, musique concrète, performance art, text-sound poetry, extended vocal techniques (vocalise) and voice synthesis. It was nearly forty years after Russolo’s manifesto that his ideas truly began to bear fruit as new electronic technologies became commercially available and were taken up by artists in the buoyant intellectual atmosphere of the post-war years. A burst of experimental arts activity led to what Joel Chadabe describes as “the great opening up of music to all sounds” (Chadabe 1997: 21).

**Electrifying Voices**

We have also sound-houses, where we practice and demonstrate all sounds and their generation… We represent and imitate all articulate sounds and letters, and the voices and notes of beasts and birds. We have certain helps which, set to the ear, do further the hearing greatly; we have also divers strange and artificial echoes, reflecting the voice many times, and, as it were, tossing it; and some that give back the voice louder than it came, some shriller and some deeper; yea, some rendering the voice, differing in the letters or articulate sound from that they receive. We have all means to convey sounds in trunks and pipes, in strange lines and distances. (Francis Bacon, *The New Atlantis*, 1624)

Since ancient times, even before Bacon wrote his uncanny oracle of an electronic future, the ‘electrifying’ qualities of certain voices to summon the power of
persuasion or seduction, to dazzle with artistry in speech or song, to evoke strong emotions in listeners, have been working their particular ephemeral magic. Unexpected reminders of lost words are turning up in the changing climatic conditions of the 21st century: as global warming melts alpine glaciers and ice fields at an increasing rate, chance encounters with ancient bodies preserved in previously frozen ground offer tantalising visual details of vocal instruments whose resonances have long since faded to silence. We have recently been able to gaze into the face and observe the details of lips, tongue, teeth and ears, the shape and size of the chest of someone who lived millennia ago, but we can never hear the unique sounds projected from those tangible remains or tune in to what was heard by the ears, sense the vibrations that beat against the membrane of skin.

It is only relatively recently in human history that voices could, literally, be electrified and conjure a field of power in a very different sense. Prior to Edison’s achievement of the phonograph in 1877, our ability to ‘hear’ the voices of the past was confined to imagination and conjecture. This absence, this resounding hush of ancestral voices around all the other remnants of their lives, renders the electrifying of voices in present times a compelling field of research and production for those interested in new registers of culture, history and memory that play beyond the boundaries of the printed word. Now we are improvising multiple customised versions of the Baconion ‘sound-house’ for diverse disciplines and agendas. While historians may be primarily interested in how sound archives help reconstruct and interpret the past, the focus of sound artists is likely to be on the process of memory itself and on ways in which archival material may be used to transform the present, as well as to evoke the past (Lane & Parry 2006: 1). The histories of the future will be far less silent.

The capture of time in sound began in earnest from the early 1950s with the commercial availability of the tape recorder which was to become the first populist tool for audio recording and replay. The Futurist imaginary of an ‘art of noise’ could be brought to fruition and, with it, came radically new explorations of the place and form of the human voice in sonic arts. Bosma (1996) coined the term ‘electrovocal art’ to refer to the nexus of technology, imagination, voice and sound that emerged in

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9 Bodies and artefacts have melted out of glaciers on at least three continents and it seems likely that more, older and older ones, will follow (Sever 2004).

10 Although the tape recorder had a long gestation period, its appearance as commercial product in the late 1940s was a direct result of substantial advances accelerated by “the war effort” in the development of magnetic tape technologies in Germany and increased frequency range disc recording in the USA. Both had been used for intelligence purposes (Mackay 1981).
experimental composition over the latter half of the twentieth century. A sound technician and broadcaster, Pierre Schaeffer, set up the earliest electronic music studio at a Paris radio station in the late 1940s and coined the term ‘musique concrète’ to describe his compositional process of working with acoustic (‘concrete’) sounds. Schaeffer recorded environmental sounds and rendered them abstract through tape manipulations such as looping and splicing. Chadabe’s (1997: 26-28) account of musique concrète suggests that *Etude pathétique* (1948) may have been the first musical work to include recorded and manipulated sounds of the human voice (rather than speech or song) as an integral part of a compositional texture.

Schaeffer collaborated with Pierre Henry on *Symphonie pour un homme seul* (1949-50), the first extended work to make substantial use of electrovocal sounds derived from breathing, vocal fragments, shouting, humming and whistling. The mood of the piece is light and humorous and the rhythmic pattern of the spoken work or phrase (often in repeated loops) acts as a central theme (Manning 1993). *Symphonie* was performed live in Paris in 1950 with a system comprising several set of turntables, loudspeakers and mixing units. Schaeffer and Henry also collaborated in 1953 on a “concrete opera” titled *Orphée 53* which incorporated a fairly standard pair of arias in juxtaposition with tapes of thunderous, sweeping sounds and distorted human voices (Holmes 1985). This work received a hostile reception when it was performed at a prestigious festival in Germany in 1953. Henry’s tape piece *Vocalise* of 1952 is composed entirely of electrovocal material derived from the syllable ‘ah’. Griffiths suggests that this piece demonstrates how electronic vocalise can be “powerfully atmospheric” (1979: 36) and that this discovery has liberated composers to pursue textless utterance in works not only for tape, but for live performance (a mode of performance that became known as ‘vocalise’). Some decades later in 1980, Henry wrote a tribute titled *Futuriste* in which he acknowledging his debt to the Italian Futurists.

The compositional techniques and aesthetics of musique concrète were based on Schaeffer’s belief that any concrete sound could be rendered suitable for musical purposes by recording and isolating it from associations with everyday contexts and by altering it through electronic manipulation. The notion of collecting ‘found sound’ from the environment and rendering it abstract through electronic processing was in accord with and played out in parallel to the Dadaist visual arts project of working with ‘found objects’.¹¹ Schaeffer’s concepts were a starting point for the development of 20th century experimental music and sound art around the world, including in

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¹¹ Marcel Duchamp’s famous pipe, for example.
Australia. Compositions that prominently featured electronically processed voices began to emerge from the 1950s and gained momentum in the 1960s and 70s. Composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen (in Germany), Pauline Oliveros, Alvin Lucier, John Cage, Steve Reich, Daniel Lentz, Joan La Barbara, Paul Lansky, Roger Reynolds, Laurie Anderson (in the US), Trevor Wishart (in the UK), Henri Chopin (in France), and Chris Mann and Warren Burt (Australia) all pioneered aesthetics of working creatively with voice using tape manipulation. Standard techniques were repetitious looping, cutting up of tape into fragments and resplicing in a different sequence, time delay, pitch shifts, backwards play, sustaining of sounds, and the use of montage to create a thickening and thinning of textures.

Electrovocal art over the past fifty years has built on the foundations laid by Futurism and musique concrète and developed across the world in disparate and spasmodic movements that draw on a number of different areas including music, poetry, visual art, phonography, typography and literature (Lane 2006). Prominent in this work is the use of speech and other non-semantic sounds produced by the voice. Lane identifies three main sources of spoken material that are commonly used in sound art: readings from composed scripts; material gathered from conversations or interviews; and archival materials that are pre-recorded. There is a fourth category that can be added here, the one being used in my own project, encompassing works based on materials sampled from contemporary media, a tactic that is commonly referred to as ‘plunderphonia’. Within these approaches, Lane says, artists have worked with a broad range of specific compositional techniques and substantiates this claim with a taxonomy-in-progress. She details a number of strategies for “dissolution” or “accumulation” of semantic meanings through technological manipulations of various kinds from processes that radically modify to simple looping repetitions. Experiments with the place of speech in the text form another series of devices which utilise manipulation of narrative elements and style. Another group of strategies enlist wordplay that emphasises the semantic quality of words through juxtapositions and permutations, inclusion of nonsense syllables and invented words, new languages or metalanguages and speech synthesis and computer generation.

These intersections of voice and new media are polyglot convergences and mix-ups of languages that generate new arcs of linguistic and circa-linguistic meanings: speech spoken or sung from moist folds of cartilage and muscle takes on strange

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12 ‘Plunderphonic’ is a term coined by Canadian composer John Oswald to describe his creation of new works by electronically manipulating existing music recordings. See Cutler 2004: 139–143.
inflections in its encounters with the cut and dried machinic language of zeroes and ones. From the accidentals of this unlikely interface, artists can extract fragments and slabs of articulation and alchemise them into an impressive array of recodings and recontextualisations, a revoicing of lives. The electrified voice ripples through the ether as a metaphor for a postmodern sense of agency and becoming – multiple and malleable in its complexity of layerings, physically mobile and morphing through diverse contexts, oriented toward a narrative view of experience and imagination. The facility and speed of digital technologies aptly support this ethos of play on ideas of a vectored self navigating through the circuitries of contemporary life. It is so easy to draw the lines, colour in the planes, between life and the art of digital voice with its changing dynamics, modulating frequencies, shifts in pitch, duration and direction, breaking apart, splicing together, adding any number of special effects and embellishments (echo, reverb, flange, chorus), and mixing up sounds through complex algorithms (via the vocoder, for example) and thickening the textures or drawing them down into a thin tenuous membrane.

One might also consider how the recording, manipulation and storage of voices has contributed to a fixing of notions of the body and self. Dyson (1999) suggests that it has become increasingly difficult to think of sound in terms of fluidity, the here and now, flux or other metaphors that play on the notion of sound as unfolding in time and ‘natural’ space:

Through recoding, sound becomes dislocated and fragmented, it can be heard at any time, in any place, by any listener. The sound becomes, not a temporal phenomenon bound to the here and now of lived experience, but a pseudo-object. Like the visual object, it can be collected and stored, transported and transmitted and infinitely repeated. Like the visual sign, it circulates within culture accruing meaning and cultural value in the process such that it is heard (or ‘read’) differently than pre-recorded sound. (Dyson 1999: 136)

Young (2006) argues that the inscription of the human voice onto the recorded medium has changed our ways of attending to and understanding the human body. The ability to record and replay voices allows speakers not only to hear their own voice from outside the internal resonances of their bodily cavities, but have captured voices for posterity, hence leaving an auditory remnant of the body to circulate freely without the consent of its original ‘owner’. This means that voices/bodies are no longer rooted in a particular time and place and enter the social realm of commodification where recordings are bought, sold and privately controlled. With digital technology, Young says, the body is preserved for posterity in a material bandwidth that can be downloaded, sampled and remixed.
Kahn (1999) writes of technology’s capacity to shift perceptions of the relationship between voices and bodies in rather more dramatic terms. He points out that phonography did not just record (or ‘hear’) voices, but all the sounds of the environment in which they spoke, and therefore “wrenched the voice from its cultural pre-eminence and inviolable position in the throat and equalized it with all other sounds amid exchange and inscription” (9). He argues that because phonography introduced a focus on audibility and did not simply produce sounds or ideas about sounds, it enabled the ability to hear “past physiological constraints to the imaginary realms of conceptual sounds, ancient and future sounds, voices of inner speech and the dead, subatomic vibrations, and so on” (1999: 9).

The above discussion points to the realisation that voice and technology are each, in themselves, politically loaded terms and their intersection through the activity of composing in sound is always, inevitably, political. Voice is the primary mechanism of human agency, activating from the moment an infant first draws breath, and ‘having’ a voice is often used as a metaphor for franchise in all manner of sites where social relations and meanings are contested. As numerous writers have pointed out, technology is never neutral. Neumark (2006) suggests that technology not only embodies and mediates social relations in all their varied manifestations across cultural, aesthetic, economic and political fields but that technologies themselves are profoundly shaped by those relations. The human-technology interface is always positioned within and positioning the terms of an encounter including its imaginary dimensions:

What is possible in technology depends on the particular cultural imagination and individual subjectivities, while in turn cultural imagination and individual subjectivity are produced by these technologies. Further, technology itself can have an imaginary aspect, inciting metaphor, affect, and discourse. Technology can thus be a major cultural signifier, as it was for modernism and “the future” in the twentieth century. These cultural and “imaginary” significations of technology in turn inflect everyday and artistic experiences of technology. (Neumark 2006: 10)

The ostensibly mundane act of recording sound is, in fact, an exercise in a politics of capture and metamorphosis for, as Dyson explains: “The act of recording sound immediately introduces a perspective formed by the properties of the recording apparatus” (Dyson 1999: 136). The electronic systems used by sound artists, for instance, were devised in response to political (frequently military) and economic drivers rather than with creative ends in mind. This perhaps links to the politics of gender that have been implicated in electronic composition and, more specifically,
electrovocal experimentation throughout its history. In the mid 20th century, electrovocal composition was overwhelmingly the domain of white males of European origin – as are the written texts that document this history. By the late 20th century in Australia, the terrain was characterised by a strong female presence of radiophonic and installation artists, sound poets, performers, and multimedia collaborators. The work of artists such as Amanda Stewart, Virginia Madsen, Norie Neumark, Hazel Smith, Sherry DeLys, Ros Bandt and Sonia Leber has contributed a major part of the innovative electrovocal art being produced in Australia from the 1980s through to the present. This movement (if it can be called that) contrasts sharply with the far less balanced gender politics that play out around technology and voice in the popular music industry.

The quality of acoustic sound changes in the recording process because technologies are neither culturally neutral nor able to reproduce sound as it occurs in space (Coyle 1995). Sound recording is a process that involves numerous decisions about elements and qualities of sound and in what manner it is to be stored and reproduced. Ambient noise present in the recording process is usually minimised or discarded. Furthermore, recorded sound takes on its own distinctive attributes and can only be made to represent and interpret ‘live’ sound, rendering an entity in its own right (Coyle 1995). Electrovocal artists make decisions about the inclusion or exclusion of certain voices – speech or song or non-verbal sounds – and what content will be recorded and selected for use. Practices of editing, sculpting, modifying, and contextualising voices against one another or against other sounds are, likewise, all politically charged acts with calculated outcomes.

**Narrating Insecurity**

With its interest in that which goes through the wall, or that which can huff and puff and blow the house down, sound art might have been drawn more than it has to the explosive gesture, to the raucous ugliness of Marinetti’s sound events. (Connor 2003: np)

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13 The politics of race and class in electronic composition are less clearly delineated in the literature.

14 Part 3 of this exegesis looks at the scope of this work.

15 In Masters research, I established major gender inequities in relation to technology in the popular music industry and explored how constructs of masculinity and femininity contribute to maintaining women in the role of ‘chic singer’ with minimal traction in the ‘high-tech’ areas; these are constructed as male domains. See Jen Brown master’s thesis (1995). DeGendering the Electronic Soundscape: Women, power and technology in contemporary music. Available Southern Cross University Library, Lismore.
In 21st century Australia, artists seeking to mine the raw materials of the explosive gesture and the raucous ugliness of the sounds of war are well supplied, via the media, with the multifarious resonances of the ‘war on terror’. Wars are never palatable affairs and their enactment generally requires substantial government investment in public relations (PR) campaigns to aestheticise violence and to justify, convince and persuade civilians of its validity. Both the clamour and clash of real battle and the polyphonous cacophony of the ‘war of words’ have been prominent on Australian media since the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington 11th September 2001. Within this bombardment, the human sounds of lives impacted or lost by terrible acts of violence are largely silenced.

Prime Minister John Howard happened to be visiting Washington to consolidate the ANZUS16 agreement at the time of the ‘9/11’ attacks and immediately offered unqualified Australian support for whatever response the US might deem appropriate (Lee Koo 2005). In the ensuing years, Howard has repeatedly promoted the view that “the Americans were attacked without provocation, without justification”.17 In a 2005 interview for the Australian Army Journal18 he states that he was deeply affected by the 9/11 events and saw them “as much an attack on Australia as America because it was an attack on our way of life and at the end of the day we rely on American power for protection... and nobody can pick and choose too much on these points” (np). In reiterating the US’s own official view of itself as an innocent victim of terrorist attack, Howard deftly elides the history of US foreign policy over the latter half of the 20th century. As a strategy, this elision brackets out the possibility of contextualising the events of 9/11 within the project of US imperialism marked by violent US military interventions into the affairs of over fifty nations, including the aerial bombing of hundreds of thousands of civilians.19 Yet by directly predicated Australian ‘national security’ on US benevolence and protection, Howard directly undermines the credibility of the construct of wounded innocence and, rather, pays homage to the status of the US as an aggressive world super-power.

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16 The 50th anniversary of the Australia, New Zealand and United States agreement was the occasion of the visit.

17 *Four Corners* interview 2006, program transcript: [http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2006/s1738419.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2006/s1738419.htm)

18 Interview in the *Australian Army Journal*, June 2005: 12

President George W. Bush’s own discursive confusions in declaring a ‘war on terror’ added density to the haze that shrouded New York immediately following the 9/11 attacks. Despite the dubious feasibility of galvanising a military arsenal into combat against terror, a human emotion, Bush vigorously promoted in fundamentalist rhetoric the idea of “a monumental struggle of good versus evil”. In a speech on September 20, Bush warned Americans to prepare for a “lengthy campaign, unlike any we have ever seen” and issued an ultimatum to other nations that “[E]ither you are with us, or you are with the terrorists”. On September 25, Bush spoke of a “coalition of legitimate governments and freedom-loving people” who would “rout out and destroy international terrorism”.

The Howard government interpreted its re-election in the immediate wake of 9/11 in late 2001 as a mandate to progress Australian support of Bush’s concept of a global ‘war on terror’ and to forge a revised 21st century version of ANZUS. Lee Koo (2005) suggests that, whereas previous ANZUS relations had been framed in terms of pursuit of a broader globally-oriented good, the Howard–Bush ANZUS seems to have been reconceptualized (by Howard) as an end in itself: “For better or worse, Australia has hitched its wagon to the United States as the sole driver of its security policy” Lee Koo says (2005: para 18). Within this new and sycophantic ANZUS relationship, there would be no place for critique of the terrible pathology of Bush’s discursive and military responses to 9/11. Yet this unexpected turn toward terror as a prime driver of imaginaries of Australian national in/security sat with some degree of tension in relation to Howard’s earlier vision for a carefree (careless), docile and unimaginative nation, articulated in a 1996 Four Corners interview just prior to the Liberal-National Coalition being elected to government:

I would like to see an Australian nation that feels comfortable and relaxed about three things. I would like to see them comfortable and relaxed about their history; I would like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the present and I’d also like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the future. (Howard 1996: np)

Maintaining the support base of its constituency as he followed Bush’s vision of war of “unlimited means and no precise aim” (Buchanan 2005: np) would require the

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20 White House Press Release (12/09/2001)  

21 Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, Washington, D.C. 20/9/01  

22 White House Press Release (25/09/2001)  

23 John Howard speaking to reporter Liz Jackson on ABC Television Four Corners program, aired 19/02/1996.  
http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2004/s1212701.htm
Howard government to conduct a professionally orchestrated and sustained campaign of public persuasion.

From the very beginning of his Prime Ministership in 1996, John Howard made highly strategic use of the media and has gained a reputation as a consummate media manager and performer. Senior newspaper journalist Paul Kelly comments that no Prime Minister has spent as much time on the media or on message as Howard does:

> Talkback radio of a morning, television interviews, newspaper interviews, he’s perfected the art of the permanent campaign, and he’s got enormous resources… The overall apparatus which the government has set up here in terms of polling, in terms of determining the message, the signals coming from the Prime Minister, the role of the Prime Minister in terms of setting the ground rules for the political debate, all this I think has been enormously important… And I think… to a certain extent, the government has really overwhelmed the media during the period of the Howard years. (Kelly 2006: np)

Yet Howard’s daily ‘live’ presence on various media channels is only the tip of a solid iceberg of media strategies astutely employed to further the agendas of a neo-conservative political philosophy. These strategies include: generous investment in a staff of media advisers and ‘spin doctors’ (Ward 2003, Barnes 2005); centralised control and constraints on the flow of information released to the media (Grattan 1998; Kingston 2004; Marr 2005; Oakes 2006; Ester 2007); voluminous daily release of government information that affords insufficient time for in-depth journalistic analyses (Pilger 2003; Kelly 2005); diminishment of journalistic independence on public broadcast media (ABC and SBS) through withdrawal of funding and appointment of government friendly personnel (Simons 2005; Dempster 2005; Ester 2007); advertising campaigns funded from the public purse to promote controversial government policies (Ward 2003; Bartos 2005); so-called ‘dirt’ campaigns to discredit those who publicly criticise government policy and conduct (Wilkie 2004); constant use of polling of public opinion as a basis for devising political commentary and policy statements ‘on the fly’ (Kelly 2005; Barns 2005); extensive personal use by Howard of commercial print media, news and current affairs television, and commercial and public talkback radio (Waterford 2005; Kelly 2005). A further recent development of this last strategy in 2007 is Howard’s use of Internet video (uTube) to extend political influence to youth. The past decade has also seen a softening of legislative guards on diversity of media ownership in Australia (Kingston 2004).

A feature of the broader media landscape in which Australian political discourse operates is widespread use on broadcast media of the short sound bite or ‘grab’, a short segment of speech that is used similarly to the quote of print journalism. A
grab is typically around seven to ten seconds long and used within political reports to lend authenticity to the presenter’s claims. The function of the grab in public discourse has come under scrutiny in recent years as politicians have increasingly invested in public relations agents to groom their images and sculpt their public pronouncements. Clare Kermond, journalist for Melbourne’s *The Age* newspaper, suggests that media access to the political landscape in Australia has become increasingly controlled since the early 1990s with interviews conducted largely on pre-arranged topics and in which politicians restrict their responses to brief, scripted sound bites designed to sustain a line or a message.24 Journalists are given little time in which to ask questions. “The snappy sound bite” Kermond asserts “has become the language of Australian politics, with the same short messages recycled in radio news broadcasts, talkback sessions and current affairs programs” (2004: np). She quotes Tim Marjorbanks, a senior lecturer in political science at the University of Melbourne, who says that the public has grown to accept brief, repetitive glimpses of political leaders and that their influence can no longer be gauged by the amount of time they spend in the public eye. The key message from Kermond’s article is that, whether or not the grab works effectively to increase politicians’ credibility in the eyes of the public, government public relations staff believe it does. The grab is an efficient way to maximise control over what information goes into public circulation, and minimises public exposure of the speaker with the concomitant danger of committing political gaffs that will be multiply repeated through media outlets.

Howard is clearly a devotee of the sound bite, the grab, rather than the considered political speech and in his live daily media performances is expert at providing suitable key grabs for media citation. Editor-in-chief of the *Canberra Times*, Jack Waterford, comments that Howard avoids press conferences, especially those involving the parliamentary press gallery which is likely to include questions from veteran journalists who are specialists in their policy areas. He says that Howard “recognises the need to serve up quotes for broadcast television, but will rarely submit to questions” (Waterford 2005: 167). Ester also comments on the high level of control that now characterises government press conferences, to the point that they have become “professionally stage-managed events” (2007: 117). She observes that the Prime Minister typically strides to the front of the room behind a lectern, utters five or six sentences and then leaves without answering any questions. The “mainstream” audiences that Howard is concerned to reach are more accessible through talkback radio, or other modes such as marketing and direct mail than

through the risky platform of the press conference. Commercial talkback radio is an effective means for putting a message out to the public and avoiding the probing and possibly difficult questions that come from well-informed journalists. Yet, as Ester points out:

The trend to devalue and avoid the critical expertise of the press gallery does not bode well for the future of political journalism in the federal parliamentary round, nor for public knowledge about the deliberative processes of policy-making in the parliament and the accountability of the executive. (2007: 123)

All in all, the Coalition government under Howard has assembled a generously resourced, highly centralised and sophisticated media arsenal with which to control the flow of information and political analysis and put it to the service of sculpting and directing community opinion. In the view of its many critics, this extreme level of media management has been produced by and is continuing to support a closed and increasingly authoritarian political culture with powerful mechanisms for silencing dissent (Manne 2006: ix).

Academics from various disciplines continue to dissect the historical and cultural conditions that allowed the Howard government to import the rhetoric and emerging policies of an American ‘war on terror’ into Australia with so little public resistance. One answer seems to be the success with which Howard had, already, in the years before 2001 used all the media mechanisms outlined above to promote a particular form of populist politics known as “Howardism”. This approach enlists a rhetorical trajectory that constructs and vilifies a particular notion of “elites” and sets them in opposition to a valorised notion of the “ordinary” or “mainstream” Australians, a fictional social group that is colloquially referred to as “Howard’s battlers” (Greenfield & Williams 2001). The principal idea informing this notion of an elite pivots not on the rich and powerful capitalist exploiters of the traditional left, but on the concept of knowledge.

The key point is the way in which “expertise” is understood in the rhetoric of elites. Attributed to the “café latte set”, the “chardonnay socialist”, the “chattering classes”, the “politically correct”, the “baby boomer collective,” expertise is not a specific and technical acquisition but knowledge moralised and aestheticised. It is knowledge seen in the charismatic terms of an essence that is (unfairly) given to certain groups of people, and not others, and therefore enables those groups (“the elites”) to unfairly manipulate and upstage others. (Greenfield & Williams 2001: 40)

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25 Ward (2003) suggests that Howard’s media assemblage amounts to ‘an Australian PR state’.
Howard’s rhetoric has targeted key social, political and cultural institutions as well as public intellectuals and ‘experts’.

Well informed criticism of government policy and performance from this sector can then be derided as idle negativity or even cast in malevolent terms.

The real pluralities and differences of society can be made to disappear under the fictional rubric of “ordinary people”, and against which various constructs of the ‘Other’ could be projected in sharp relief. The embedding of this discourse in the early years of the Howard regime from 1996 to 2001 had laid a solid platform from which to launch a brave new world of political control that deployed the spectre of a terrorist ‘Other’ as its lynchpin.

In the years immediately following 9/11, Australians were subjected to a regular flow – intensifying at times to a veritable bombardment – of stories about terrorist activities, about the imminent threat terrorists posed to every single Australian citizen both at home and abroad and about ‘counter-terrorism’ measures being adopted by solicitous and protective governments (federal and state). These served to normalise constructs of national security based on the highly militarised American model which emphasised the notion of ‘pre-emptive strike’ as a viable alternative to international diplomacy. Lee Koo (2005) comments on how this “intense normalising practice” has resulted in “an unquestioning acceptance that the changes in lifestyle, the deprivation of certain liberties and the lack of human empathy when dealing with others are necessary to ensure security” (para 2). She notes how a politically sanctioned vocabulary frames ‘war on terror’ discourse in order to establish the criteria by which to judge government policies and actions, however violent these may be. Constructs of the Other in terms such as ‘axis of evil’ and ‘evil doers’ are set against valorised terms of self-description such as ‘freedom-loving peoples’ as proxy justifications for violent conduct. Arguing for a retreat from the seeming omnipotence of this discourse, Lee Koo suggests that the politics of Australian security has become so captivated by the aesthetic of terrorism and so pre-occupied by the functions of counter-terrorism that it is forgetting to ask some important and fundamental questions:

> While we certainly need to critically reflect upon questions such as, ‘what constitutes terrorism? Who are the terrorists? Where do we confront them and how?’ we just as urgently need to critically analyse how we think about these questions. In particular,

26 Greenfield & Williams (2001) list ATSIC, the ABC, the ACTU, the Australia Council, universities, non-right wing public intellectuals, the High Court, and (the previous) Department of Social Security as among the targets of Howardism’s rhetoric against elitism.

27 The 2007 election announcement by The Prime Minister illustrates the Howardist rhetoric of anti-intellectualism in its cordonning off of his critics as “a narrow section” of his constituency: “The right leadership” Howard said “is a group of men and women who will govern for all Australians and who will not be beholden to a narrow section of the Australian community” (News broadcast, 14/10/2007).
we need to ask: ‘What is this discourse of terrorism? Who generates it? How does it enable the kinds of changes we are seeing in our society, and are they consistent with the broader notions of security to which we aspire?’ (Lee Koo 2005: para 3)

The discursive bombardments of terrorist-obsessed politics plays as a prominent riff within a broader orchestration of 21st century political registers that have come to be known collectively as ‘the politics of fear’ (Gale 2004, 2006; Lawrence 2006; Wright-Neville 2006; Furedi 2005). The essential tactic of all forms of public manipulation through strategic deployment of fear is to drive the political focus of constituents toward real or imagined threats and away from more positive and viable alternatives, so that political leaders can then position themselves as protectors and rescuers. Scare campaigns tend to used with particular intensity by governments in electioneering mode and leverage public anxieties so that the imagined threats are perceived as needing ‘strong’ leadership in the form of regulation, control and containment (Furedi 2005).

‘Counter-terror’ legislation and its successive revisions have led to increased capacity of the state to intrude into the lives of ordinary people, to waive basic rights that have been long-established features of life in democratic systems and to prosecute citizens suspected of terrorist-related activity (Wright-Neville 2006). Yet such exclusions of individuals from proper democratic processes of law do not apply to all Australians in the same way since the discourse of the Howard government strongly equates terrorism with Islam. This has led to the erosion of democracy in Australia and placed Muslim communities in jeopardy, forcing them into “a defensive posture that threatens to isolate them from their fellow Australians and complicate future counter-terrorism efforts” (Wright-Neville 2006: np).

Within a global context of increasing use of fear for political ends, Lawrence28 (2006) sums up some of the impacts of the Howard government’s uncritical adoption of Bush’s notion of a ‘war on terror’ and its concomitant message that ‘terror pre-empts everything else’.

[The Howard government] has used fear to legitimise questionable actions, to attack its detractors, and to foster a climate of timidity throughout the public service and among those in receipt of government grants. Its apologists have made an art form of vilifying critics, apparently hoping to muzzle them with abuse. Fear has proved a potent device for managing dissent and silencing those who object to government policy or who seek a greater share of power and resources. A drift toward authoritarianism has likewise been evident in many areas of government policy. (103)

28 Carmen Lawrence is the Member for Fremantle, WA, and national president of the Australian Labor Party. See http://www.carmenlawrence.com/
If, as the discussion above suggests, political oratory has given way to the seven second grab as the *lingua franca* of Australian political discourse and if the sound bite is now an artifice through which politicians can sway the course of the nation, then clearly it must, itself, be ‘up for grabs’ for political parody and creative transformations. This is the point at which contemporary political discourse and sound art converge. Since the tape recorder was first deployed into art by the practitioners of musique concrète, the creative use of sampled sounds has become a standard strategy that enriches a wide range of compositional oeuvres. The arrival of digital technologies served to facilitate processes of recording, replicating and editing sound sampled from other media – as well as from the environment – and led to the development of diverse expressive forms that incorporate elements of *previously recorded* speech, song and music: the art and craft of ‘plunderphonia’ (Cutler 2004). My project draws on the plunderphonic aesthetic to produce an exposé of the way in which the Howard government took up Bush’s blunt concept of a ‘war on terror’ and deployed it to reshape a sense of Australian nation and identity premised on a revised construct of a dangerous Other threatening “mainstream” Australia.29 My central strategy in this endeavour is to take a sampling of short citations from the heightened density and intensity of terror narratives in the pre-election months of 2004 and use this material to construct a soundscape representing the experience of being discursively bombarded by the ‘war on terror’.

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29 This trope is a well established in Australian history and politics (Burke 2001, Birmingham 2003, Maguire 2006).
Electrovocal art in Australia builds on radical new ways of thinking about and realising works in music and sound that emerged from 20th century Europe. To date there is no comprehensive account of how the voice/technology nexus unfolded within broader movements of experimental activity, either globally or specifically within Australia. Innovative composition with electrified voice has been documented within the larger narratives of electronic history or in relation to the work of individual artists/composers, rather than treated as a distinct genre with a matrix of theory, practice and cultural narrative of its own. Strangely, voice is often omitted as an indexed entry in scholarly books on the avant-garde and the experimental in audio arts and one is left to trawl through the body of texts in order to find discussion on the ideas and techniques that have informed electrovocal developments. One possible reason for this omission is that the associations of the voice with the everyday, the feminine and the bodily serve to position it as ‘Other’ and marginal to the important matter of technology which has, for much of its history, been a highly masculinised domain in audio culture.

It is not within the scope of this project to pursue such questions or to attempt to write a finely grained account of the electrovocal story or to redress the absence of formal scholarly accounts of this field. Rather, in this chapter I take the reader on a tour of some of the key artists, movements, moments, institutions and characteristics of the emergence of experimental electrovocal art in Australia. I do so in order to provide historical and philosophical contexts from which contemporary activity emerges and in which to locate my own work.

The online catalogues of Music Australia, the Australian Music Centre and the Australian Sound Design Project confirm the broad span of electrovocal activity in this country in terms of artistic intention, technique, structure, use of space and

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2 My Masters thesis offered commentary on the gender politics around technology and voice in the popular music industry in the mid 1990s. See Brown (1995).


aesthetics, and uptake of new technologies. Works encompass performance, studio-centric creativity with tape and later digital technologies, radiophonic composition, experimental music, sound sculpture, installations and multimedia. The diversity of activity in terms of geography is far more limited: the majority of exhibitions, performances, festivals and conferences are concentrated in the southern capitals of Sydney and Melbourne, with far lower levels in other capitals and almost none in regional centres. Clearly, electrovocal art continues to be a highly urban genre and artist networks, sponsorship and promotion centre largely in the two major southern cultural capitals.

Many early sound artists from the 1970s worked as radio broadcasters or producers – most commonly for the ABC - and thereby had access to quality studio tape recording equipment. From the mid to late 1990s, the rapid development of digital technologies has made it possible for artists to gain access high quality sound recording and manipulation facilities through the increasingly ubiquitous personal computer and a proliferation of software applications. Within the first decade of the 21st century, the increasing affordability of the home studio has transformed electronic arts practice into a thriving cottage industry. It is worth noting, however, that while sophisticated work with sound can be achieved with relative ease from virtually anywhere in the country and the Internet offers the possibility of global publishing, the cultural frameworks that motivate and sustain active arts practice tend to be undeveloped in regional areas.

In constructing a narrative of the emergence of experimental electrovocality in Australia I draw on diverse sources, many of them accounts by artists and curators that are available through websites and Internet archives as well as the library collections mentioned above. The narrative is structured around a series of headings, each of which refers to an arc of activity that has informed my own research and production in ways that are detailed in Part Four. By discussing compositional linguistics, sound poetry, radiophonic art, installations, multimedia and hybrid arts collaborations, I attempt to give a sense of how electrovocal sound art has developed from a confluence of diverse cultures and to track influences that continue to inform its presence on the contemporary arts stage. This account does not attempt to

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7 This has been a significant factor in my own development as a regional sound artist working in relative isolation from other artists and with limited access to festivals and exhibitions.
provide a detailed treatment of the work of any one artist nor even to cover all artists and works of interest. What emerges in researching this story is a lexicon, devised by sound artists and writers/critics over the past four decades in Australia, to name and discuss distinctive ideas, aesthetics, technologies and practices of electrovocal sound art. The story follows a chronological trajectory of sorts but takes a labyrinthine track of arcs and turns, tracing motifs and pursuing the ever-shifting listening perspectives available across this audible terrain.

**Compositional Linguistics and Sound Poetry**

Two key figures in the development of compositional linguistics and sound poetry in Australia are Chris Mann and Warren Burt whose influences date from the 1960s and 1970s Melbourne arts scene. Both collaborated with many other artists/musicians over a number of decades. Their spirit of playful experimentation with voice and technology quickly spread to Sydney and beyond.

A landmark in the emergence of experimental sound in Melbourne was the formation of the New Music Centre in 1972 by a group of young composers including Chris Mann. For some years, Mann had been composing and performing innovative works that explored the nexus between music and language, an interest that developed from his rather unusual family background with parents who were pioneer ethnographic sound recordists\(^8\) (Jenkins 1988: 129). Mann had been schooled early in life in the skills and potentials of recording and editing vocal sound. Together with his studies of Chinese language and linguistics at the University of Melbourne, this grounding equipped Mann with a strong consciousness of the rhythms and textures of the spoken word. His passion for poetry, linguistics and the philosophy of speech found expression in performances that were electronically manipulated readings from his own “complex and densely written texts” (Jenkins 1988: 125). Through this ‘live’ approach to completing a composition through performance, Mann explored the rhythms and flexible patterns of vernacular languages, particular Australian speech, and improvised freely from his written texts to allow a play of spontaneous wit and humour.\(^9\) Often his early compositions could only be fully realised through performance and systematic exploration of a particular idea. Jenkins says of Mann that he often:

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\(^8\) Mann’s parents were the first to record many notable local artists such as Barry Humphries.

\(^9\) See Mann’s bio on the website for Machine for Making Sense.
has little idea of the outcome and there is no guarantee the result will be interesting as
tart. If not, he will keep no record of the piece, and turn to a new problem. His work is
‘experimental’ in the sense of being motivated by curiosity, and because the aesthetic
and critical aspects are subservient to the exploration of an idea” (1988: 129).

Zurbrugg (1988: np) further explains Mann’s highly innovative approach:

Mann tries to deal with language as a popular social issue by inventing, or at least, by
refining, a quintessentially colloquial form of Australian diction in narratives
performed at maximum speed. In this way, Mann aspires to evade English literary
traditions, and to reveal or revive a more democratic, more authentic, antipodean
utterance. Mann’s performance often take the form of somewhat whimsical
monologues... (his) texts focus upon questions of linguistics and philosophy before
breaking into idiosyncratic semi-phonetic colloquialisms reminiscent of Joycean
wordplay in Finnegans Wake.

The exploration of ‘the idea’ (conceptualism) in new music and sound art changed in
Melbourne in the mid 1970s with the departure of New Music Centre composers for
various destinations abroad and the opening of the new La Trobe University
Department of Music. Warren Burt arrived in Melbourne from the US to teach music
at La Trobe and helped establish a strong commitment to electronic and
experimental music there. Burt became a “pivotal figure in the Australian new music
scene” – composing, organising, performing and broadcasting (Jenkins 2004: np). He
became noted for an eclectic array of approaches to composition, including extensive
use of tape manipulations of speech and vocal sound in English and other languages.
Burt and other experimental composers set up the Clifton Hill Community Music
Centre which, over a period of seven years, became a training ground for emerging
experimental composers. The Centre was run on anarchistic principles with shared
and shifting responsibilities for organization and a commitment to making
performance space free and accessible to everyone with no fees charged or paid and
no equipment supplied. Burt explains that the group saw “the removal of economics
from the equation as being of supreme importance in setting up a space with a truly
alternative set of values” (Burt 1991: 7).

In a 1991 article for the Leonardo Music Journal, Burt reflects on key factors in the
shaping of Australian experimental music and sound art in the early decades of its
development. Reflecting sixteen years later on the claims of that piece, Burt (2007:
np) suggests that important dynamics of the movement have continued over the
period since his initial observations. The ‘do-it-yourself’ ethic continues to be a
feature of sound art, he suggests, as well as the ‘outsider status’ of exponents. He
argues that radio and the visual arts communities have both been far more
supportive of experimental sonic arts than the music establishment in terms of
providing acknowledgement and resources, outlets and performance venues. Burt
argues that this has not only limited the contexts in which sound events and installations have been heard, but have profoundly influenced its resourcing and aesthetics; most work has been achieved, until recently he says, on minimal or non-existent budgets and that this has profoundly affected its aesthetics and produced an ethic of affordability in the equipment and material used. It has also, he says, fostered in composers an identification with the problems of poverty. Experimental composers have consistently shown commitment to making their music accessible to all sectors of the community, rather than targeting the largely middle class audience of classical and conventional ‘art music’ (Burt 2007: np). Burt suggests that Australian experimental music was, and continues to be, more politicised than its North American counterpart, albeit less accepted as a part of a ‘fringe’ than in Europe. Its outsider status, he suggests, is actually of positive value in that it has fostered a certain rigour and independence in promoting new ideas and forms.

‘Cut-ups’ and montage of original recordings and pre-existing audio material featured prominently in the early electrovocal works produced in Australia from the mid 1970s onwards. The earliest phase encompassed ‘compositional linguistics’, experimental music and performance poetry in the Melbourne arts scene, soon extending to Sydney and to the development of innovative radiophonic works and installations.

The practice of cutting-up, appropriating and re-purposing existing content in the creation of new artworks was central to 20th century artistic practice. From Marcel Duchamp’s ‘Erratum Musical’ (1913) which spliced together dictionary definitions of the word ‘imprimer’ with a score composed from notes pulled out of a hat, via William Burroughs’s and Brion Gysin’s ‘cut-up’ technique used to allow new meanings to ‘leak in’ by re-cutting existing texts, to John Oswald’s releases which mixed and altered several musical sources, the history of the 20th century avant-garde can be read as the history of appropriation. (Dzuverovic 2005: np)

Artists worked with their own pre-recorded voices (often reading poetry and literary texts) and/or with samples of other voices, recorded ‘live’ or from media or archival material. Tape technologies were used to manipulate acoustic sound and encompassed the modestly priced ‘lo-fi’ quarter inch tape recorders and, later, cassettes as well as the high quality tape-recording machines available in professional radio and recording studios.

Cassette tapes of original recorded works were exchanged around the world by networks of enthusiasts, a practice that became known as “cassette culture” (Kahn 2006: np). A pioneering exponent of cassette manipulation, Burt used this medium to create electrovocal works solo and also in collaboration with other musicians and
artists through the 1970s and 1980s. An early example is *Nighthawk* (composed between 1972 and 1976), captured as an 80 minute recording which includes spoken poetry, cut up and reassembled using cassette tape. The various tracks that comprise this recording are described by Burt as “classic lo-tech experimental poetry pieces”. Burt embraced the stance of working with cheap domestic-grade lo-fi tape technologies as part of an ethic of do-it-yourself independence (congruent with the punk ethos of the garage band) and says this practice was well developed in Australia in the mid-70s (Burt Archives). Burt worked closely with Ron Nagorcka – a key figure in the development of cassette culture in Australia – and describes the approach as one in which “with crummy little cassette recorders, we took material from the past or the real world and put it through a distorting lens and came up with a unique object.” Burt suggests critics have not understood the extent to which much of new music is “radically amateur” and antithetical to the “patina of professionalism”. In this vein, *The Smirking Haddock* – one of the tracks from *Nighthawk* - is referred to on the CD cover notes as a piece of “vocal multiphonics and cut up pulp literature”.

Radio stations, though traditionally the province of high fidelity production, have at times broadcast the creative underbelly of lo-fi sound produced in rudimentary home studios and improvised community spaces. The New & Experimental Music Show (originally titled Amputations) that ran from 1977 on Community Radio 3CR accepted lo-fi cassette recordings from the Clifton Hill Centre performances in its later years and a number of its active composers presented programs. This provided broader exposure for the Centre and its performers, but also satisfied the station’s 50% Australian content requirement (Althoff 2001: np).

Between 1977 and 1993, Mann and Burt collaborated to produce a series of experimental works that combined Burt’s cut-up/splice techniques with tape and Mann’s poetry performances. They recorded their own voices and worked with tape loops and multi-layered montage to produce a convoluted and evocative mix of vocals with other sounds. An early example is *Syntactic Switches* (1977) based on a live performance at La Mama Theatre in Carlton with forty members of the Astra Choir, and using an equal number of cassette recorders, to synthesize the sounds of

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10 See the ‘Warren Burt CD Archive Project’ which documents this artist’s prodigious output over forty years. [http://www.tropicapricorn.com/warren_burt.htm](http://www.tropicapricorn.com/warren_burt.htm)

11 Warren Burt CD Archive Project. ‘Recent Article’ page.

12 Warren Burt CD Archive Project. ‘Recent Article’ page.
Pidgin and the audience’s voices saying “of course” and “anyway”. A later work, *Subjective Beats Metaphor* (1983), was a manipulated performance piece that was first performed at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. Jenkins (1988) describes how work was created in real time to a live audience:

As Mann read a text into a microphone, his reading was relayed back to him via earphones connected to a delay switch and electronic equipment operated by Burt, who modified and distorted the delayed voice, as well as over-layering it with purely electronic sounds. The audience couldn’t hear Burt’s treatment - only what Mann read into the microphone. Conversely, Mann could only hear the treatment, and not what he was reading in real-time. This unusual feedback device determined that Mann was unable to intelligently monitor or be critical of his reading, except through a sort of residual muscle memory. The performer became, in effect, a biological vocoder, transmitting information with a neutrality that approached that of a piece of electronic equipment. Of course, it also forced an extreme (though unconscious) modification of the text Mann was reading. (Jenkins 1988)

Another of Burt’s collaborators in electrovocal experimentation was Ernie Althoff who, through financial necessity, had developed a taste for working on a cassette recorder using low budget and homemade instruments, found objects and cheap electronics – door buzzers and re-wired transistor radios, for example. Jenkins explains how, around 1978, Althoff “discovered a cheap and extremely portable instrument - his voice - by means of which he could investigate the sounds of Australian idiomatic speech” (1988: 4). *Accentuate the Positive and Eliminate the Negative* were vocal pieces performed live in 1979 at the Clifton Hill Centre with the use of variable speed cassette recorders. Jenkins (1988) describes how Althoff read a set of adjectives in a drawn out and highly inflected vocal style from two decks of cards, recording onto two cassette loops that he could then build up in layers over the duration of the performance into a complex vocal montage. Jenkins comments that Althoff was a relaxed performer and encouraged his audience to interject, question and generally take an active role in the performance.

In 1982 Burt’s interest in cut-up techniques with voice as well as his considerable ability as a promoter led him to organise a concert series at La Trobe University. *Music/Language* was the first showcasing in Australia of a broad spectrum of work in the area of what was then known as ‘compositional linguistics’. Audiences were introduced to wide-ranging styles of work by American composers (Jackson MacLow, John Cage, Ned Sublette, Herbert Brun, Kenneth Baburo, Benjamin Boretz) and Australians (Chris Mann and Walter Billeter) (Jenkins 1988).

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14 Such was the standing of Australian experimental sound artists, that a group was invited to contribute to the Paris Autumn Festival in 1983 (Burt 1991: 8).
By 1980, experimental electrovocal art had become an active strand in Australian composition in both Sydney and Melbourne and continued its spread to other major centres in the early years of that decade. Jon Rose’s *Colony: survival in the right hemisphere* (1983) is an example of another voice active in cassette culture in the form of a multiple-media installation and performance at the Ivan Doherty Gallery in Sydney. Rose utilised two cassette tape loops of vocal improvisation on a text that he assembled from an arbitrarily chosen extract from writing by a well-known art critic who offered, in the opinion of the artist, “pretentious literary garbage”. Rose used “a system of substitutions” to create other stanzas which, he said, show that “every garbage tip can be packed with sublime profundity”. He used cheap and faulty cassette machines with “a market value of less than thirty dollars” to make a point about the quality of the content of his topic.15

The Loop Orchestra emerged from the ‘post-punk’ ethos of the late 1970s and worked extensively with quarter inch tape to create lo-fi installation works with multiple tape players that ran long synchronous loops of vocal and other sounds. Loops of differing lengths made for random and often humorous juxtapositions of sounds and words. As LO member John Blades explains, their music “incorporated the punk ideal with new elements such as electronic noise and rhythms, spoken word, dub, electronically processed voice and experimental acoustic and electronic sound.”16 Blades says that much experimental music at the time was heavily indebted to ideas borrowed from the visual arts (Dada, Surrealism, Expressionism and abstract painting, for instance) as well as forms emerging from performance and conceptual art. The widespread practice of audio montage is an example of a technique derived from the visual arts and adapted for sound.

The NMA Magazine (New Music Australia), edited by Rainer Linz, published ten editions from 1982 to 1992, each accompanied by a cassette showcasing featured experimental works. These covered a wide cross-section of new music and sound art produced in Australia over the period.17 Among these works were a number that incorporated electrovocal sound - realised, for the most part, via tape manipulations.

15 Comments by Rose come from a vinyl record titled *Radiophonic Tape Composition in Australia* (1985) which offers a talk on radiophonic composition. It was originally aired by Sydney’s 2MBS-FM and includes a collection of five works by Australian composers, including an edited version of *Colony*.

16 Blades’ comments appear on the ABC Website. Arts. *Australia Adlib*.
http://www.abc.net.au/arts/adlib/stories/s909510.htm

17 These works are available as free audio downloads, with permission from Rainer Linz of NMA Publications, from Shame File Music at http://www.shamefilemusic.com/nma.html
Many of the early tape works that emerged from Warren Burt’s collaborations with performance poets\(^\text{18}\) have now been collated in CD format. According to the accompanying notes to *Texts and Music 1987-1998*, this collection is “almost an encyclopaedia of ways the contemporary composer can deal with words.” The cover notes for *Parts of Speech (The New Consonants)* (1992)\(^\text{19}\) reveal some of the tape techniques Burt used to manipulate speech. In this 5.14 minute piece, consonants are stretched to many times their normal length into noise bands which sound like bands of multiple pitches played very fast. Burt sampled from a number of different languages as well as bird calls and used other manipulations, such as pitch shifting, to create specific fragments of sound which were then spliced together. Using such techniques, he suggests, can produce “a kind of speech melody impossible with normal voice.”\(^\text{20}\)

Since the 1970s, Warren Burt has continued to compose solo and in collaboration with voice and tape. In 2000 to 2002 he produced a series of works titled *Drawings, Voices, Splices and Fortune Cookies - A Dozen Assorted Pieces*. He describes these as a “highly varied assortment of noiseband pieces, concrete poetry, socialist realist poetry, drone pieces, and maniac splicing pieces that go right to the edge of perception.”\(^\text{21}\) Mann has also continued to perform solo and has worked in several different ensembles: The Impediments, Machine for Making Sense, The Use. He has composed works for specific media such as cassette tape and radio, and has collaborated widely with other composers, film-makers and electronics specialists.

Zurbrugg (1989) discusses in some detail the work of a number of sound poet/performers active in the 1980s, many of whom worked with Burt’s technological expertise: Vizents Terrier (American born), Chris Mann (German Jewish parents), Ania Walwicz (Polish born), Jas Duke and Amanda Stewart. Not included in Zurbrugg’s discussion is the work of English immigrant Hazel Smith who arrived in Australia at the end of 1988 and who worked with the composer Roger Dean. She describes her work as ‘sonic writing’, as a semiotic exchange between sound and words, and as revolving around the creation of ‘interlanguages’.

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\(^{18}\) Burt has worked, for example, with Amanda Stewart, Chris Mann, Howard Stanley, Susie Fraser, bernie m janssen and Ernie Althoff.


\(^{20}\) Burt on CD *Machine Messages* 1992

\(^{21}\) Burt CD cover notes in Burt Archives. [http://www.tropicapricorn.com/warren_burt.htm](http://www.tropicapricorn.com/warren_burt.htm)
where linguistic, sonic and technological experimentations converge (Smith 1999). Other artists who made significant contributions to experimentation with electronically processed voice were Rik Rue in Sydney and Philip Brophy in Melbourne in the 1980s and 1990s. Australian performances by the French sound poet Henri Chopin influenced the ideas of that generation of composers.\textsuperscript{22} Philip Brophy was involved in the band Tsk Tsk Tsk and went on to make experimental films for which wholly composed the sound tracks.\textsuperscript{23}

While cassette culture faded into obsolescence in the early 1990s with the onslaught of new digital tapes, technologies and techniques, facets of its ethos and aesthetics continued on into these new media forms. The realm of experimental radio is one instance and, as Kahn (2005: np) comments:

> Cassette culture was excellent for putting practitioners, collectors and interested others in touch with one another, but limited in its ability to expose those not already in the loop to new work. That's where radio came in. Some of the work did make its way onto the airwaves and there were plenty of people recording cassettes (and reel-to-reel before that) directly off the radio.

The Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) played an active role in presenting these innovations in sound art to its audience.

**Radiophonic Art**

Invited to be artist-in residence at ABC Melbourne, Chris Mann was quick to introduce the adventurous spirit of experimental vocal performance into the realm of public radio. *Quadrophonic Cocktail* (performed Australia Day, 1986) was a polyphonic work that was simultaneously broadcast over four ABC channels: two of the stereo FM network and one each on the AM networks (Burt 1991). Listeners were invited to assemble three radios and create their own mix by adjusting the relative volumes, rendering the work an early experiment in interactive radio art. The tracks were readings from four diverse texts, all written prior to Cook’s ‘discovery’ of Australia in 1770.

Clarie O’Shea, ex Tramways Union organiser, read Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* on one channel; Bruce Ruxton, RSL President, read Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* on another. Both texts were seen as political fantasies about Australia. On a third channel, *Vogue* magazine fashion photographer Polly Borland read the first of the scientific texts on Australia from the *Journal of William Dampier*; while on a fourth channel ABC

\textsuperscript{22} Rue’s cassette works from the 1980s include *Onomatopeia* and *Voice Capades*. These were influenced by the French sound poet Henri Chopin who composed through techniques such swallowing a microphone and recording the sound of his internal organs.

\textsuperscript{23} Brophy’s *Salt Saliva Sperm Sweat*, for instance, was a film with a soundtrack wholly composed from body sounds.
newsreaders rendered *The Antipodes*, a text Mann describes as "a 1637 sit-com written in London by Richard Broome". (Jenkins 1988: 128)

Jenkins notes the piece caused mild controversy in the ABC’s Department of Music on account of Mann’s notion that one could “compose” creatively for radio using voice (1988: 128). Other early radio art works with commemorative intent were also created from a montage of archival voices combined with ambient sounds. Paul Charlier’s *Remembrance Day*, produced prior to the large-scale Australian Bicentennial celebrations of 1988, celebrates “a poly-vocal anniversary of symbolic moments recalled publicly in the media” (McLennan, circa 1992). It includes a commemoration of events of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1945 (Armistice Day) as well as those of that same time and date in 1975, the dismissal of the Whitlam Labor Government by the Governor General. This particular event was also the subject of a radio work by John Scott and Robert Moore, media academics whose creative work generally focussed on the deconstruction of radio as a medium. Their sound collage “11/11/75” demonstrates how reportage of serious events can be trivialised by positioning it within the structure of commercial broadcasting (McLennan, circa 1992).

Possibly the most far-reaching development in sound art in the 1980s came from an initiative of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) with the startup of Classic FM’s radio program *The Listening Room (TLR)* in January 1988. *TLR* brought together a number of existing production units offering both expertise and facilities in the form of multi-track recording facilities and live-to air satellite technology. Presented by Andrew McLennan, the program became a collaborative hub for a core group of producers and sound engineers to collaborate with Australian and international artists on detailed and sophisticated works. The aim was to commission and present creative radio with possible convergences of drama, new music, performance poetry, documentaries, audio-biographies, ecological meditations, expositions on popular culture, as well as discussions on media and acoustic theory (Yencken 2000: np). *TLR* not only positioned sound art as a serious cultural phenomenon within Australia, but also opened up networks for international exchange and drew attention to the quality of work being produced here. It became, Yencken says, “as close to a contemporary sound gallery on national radio as one might imagine” (2000).

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24 See the archival website of the program at ABC Classic FM. *The Listening Room*. [http://www.abc.net.au/classic/listeningroom/](http://www.abc.net.au/classic/listeningroom/)
McLennan (circa 1992) suggests that the program revealed a distinctive quality in Australian radio art activity: the tendency for artists to come up with impromptu solutions designed to overcome the tyrannies of geographical distance and isolation. Much of the work of Australian sound artists, McLennan says, is characterised by the sense of “making do” with the available materials. This view supports Warren Burt’s reflections on the early years of the emergence of sound art in Australia.

Producers of TLR were able to break with established radio practices in program structure, presentation, use of interview material, density of sound texture, manipulation of sound and other stylistic elements. This radical approach invited a new way of listening to radio and hence a new concept of the medium (Coyle 1990).

The Listening Room is truly radical radio, causing friction within the conservative institutions that broadcasts it. It assumes that nothing is unchallengeable in production techniques or radio styles. It requires a new way of listening to radio and hence a new concept of the medium. (Coyle 1990: 4)

The TLR challenge to radio mores, like Chris Mann’s departures from convention in ABC Melbourne, attracted controversy and criticism from conservative ABC staff. An example of TLR’s promotion of explorations of electrovocality was its program of 30 August 1997 titled ‘Other Words’. The ABC website playfully promoted the program as “an evening in quote marks“ in which one would encounter:

Voices babbling, burbling and blathering - revved-up machines for making sense (and nonsense). A blarney-soaked show in which Chinese soap actors brush larynxes with ancient American beatniks; African comedians in Paris stand beside Australian auctioneers; and the late Mr Marshall McLuhan reminds us that the Medium is the Massage.

TLR would continue to run until the end of 2003 and was a matrix of ideas, collaborations, expertise, resources, networking and opportunities for promotion which supported the development of many successful sound artists / poets and producers including Virginia Madsen, Amanda Stewart, Sherre DeLys and Paul Carter.

Virginia Madsen’s Taken by Speed (1989) is an early example of how the TLR platform allowed producers to explore innovative approaches to style, format and content. Rebecca Coyle (1992: np) provides a detailed analysis of Madsen’s treatment of key contentions of the French philosopher Paul Virilio focussing, in particular, on his thoughts on war, speed and technology. Coyle analyses how Madsen translates into innovative radio art Virilio’s contention that “the city, politics, culture, human presences and values are disappearing due to the speed of life today”, an
acceleration he links to an arsenal of new media technologies that have been
developed in order “to build the global war machine”. Virilio’s mission is to alter our
perceptions of speed so that we can reclaim the time needed to make decisions. This
ethic informs the aesthetics of Madsen’s approach to working with sound, itself a
medium of timing and pace, and her adoption of a dense style of composition that
mimics the way Virilio himself writes. A sense of speed is conveyed through use of
short sound bites of recorded interviews, followed by an announced title, excerpt of
narrative or academic commentary, readings or sound effects. Voices are set against
an array of sonic effects and location recordings and Madsen uses contrasting vocal
and speech qualities – timbre, pitch, speed – to create a complex mesh of thematic
material. The ‘convocation’ of voices includes Madsen’s own voice directing and
questioning from the ABC Sydney studio as well as the voices of two children who
are positioned as ‘travellers’ on an adventure. The children’s voices play a significant
role in the work on various levels, Coyle suggests, by providing an ‘authentic’ quality
(rather than the voices of trained actors), conveying essential pointers in the radio
text to its layering of concepts, and directing attention to Virilio’s concerns with how
modern society is characterised by continuous movement. The children serve as
naive explorers as well as storytellers, questioning the meanings of all their
experiences and encounters.

The sense of convocation is created through an ever-changing montage of unfolding
meanings rather than through the construction of a linear trajectory of events, as is
typical in traditional radio narrative formats (an approach that can perhaps be
likened to the difference between an abstract and a realist painting). It is an
innovative use of radiophonic narrative in that it bends and twists the traditional
linearity of the medium in order to construct an essay in sound that aesthetises non-
linearity through dense textures, ever-shifting and unexpected rhythms and a sense
of randomness. As Madsen explains in an interview with Coyle (1992: np), she
designs with non-linear listening experiences in mind, using strategic use of
repetition, recapitulation and audio signposts. Her approach, Coyle suggests, typifies
much of TLR’s programming.

Amanda Stewart is another ABC radio producer and sound poet who has often
played with the aesthetic of tape cut-up and montage. Stewart, however, has
experimented with returning the effects of these techniques back into live
performance by setting them against her vocal improvisations and pre-recorded
sound loops. She observes that the audio editing process itself can provide excellent
training in observing the fine nuances of expression and meaning in speech: "When
you are cutting up voices all day, you hear different things. You notice how people can be saying one thing, but their voice [is] revealing something else."\(^{25}\) Stewart has made much use in her performances of the in-between sounds of speech – the "ums" and "aahs" and sighs that are often thrown into the scrap bin when ‘tidying up’ radio speech ready for broadcast.\(^{26}\) She incorporates utterances that shift between speech and song, stuttered rhythms of non-verbal articulations, short bursts of speech – single words or phrases. Critic Keith Gallasch describes her performance as one which her " multiplied voice is all edges, plosives, throat, pssssts running in quick breathless overlap like many persons in one."\(^{27}\) Many of Stewart’s performances are improvisations of live voice in counterpoint with soundtracks of her voice, prerecorded and re-constructed through cut-up and an array of audio manipulation techniques such as pitch shift, speed alterations, and the looping in fast repetitions of phrases, words and consonants against long drawn out vowels, breaths and coughs. Osborne gives a brief impression of the result:

Stewart’s interplay between the recordings of her voice and the live sound produced in situ was a dance between the left and right microphone. She teased out the narrative of the day, stuttering, masticating, spitting words or their sound parts to accompany or lead herself through inscrutable semantics that made perfect sonic sense. (Osborne 2006: 53)

Stewart’s poetry performances and radiophonic works featured consistently in TLR programs over its lifetime. One source was a 1998 retrospective of her poetry in CD/booklet format titled I/T. The notes for The Listening Room program (02/09/2002) on the art of audio montage, for example, state that “[t]he listener is kept on track by six poetic interludes from Amanda Stewart, instantaneously cutting up herself.”\(^{28}\) The Sinking of the Rainbow Warrior, an opera written by Colin Bright and Amanda Stewart, was aired on TLR in December, 1999. This work used a montage approach and numerous vocal artists (The Song Company) to unravel the politics and controversies around the bombing (in 1985) of the Greenpeace vessel ‘Rainbow Warrior’ in Auckland Harbour.\(^{29}\)

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Along with Chris Mann, Rik Rue, Jim Denley and Stevie Wishart, Amanda Stewart was a founding member in 1989 of the experimental Sydney ensemble Machine for Making Sense. The group were interested in exploring relations between linguistics, poetry, speech, music, notions of sound, science and politics and in “re-evaluating” boundaries between text and music, music and sound art, acoustic and electronic, improvisation and composition. Motet (1999) was a radiophonic representation of an elaborate performance/installation titled Sonic Hieroglyphs that ran over several days on multiple stages at the Sydney Opera House.

Sherre DeLys is another creative radio producer and sound artist and who made active contributions to TLR over a number of years. She is currently a producer for Radio Eye, a Radio National program showcasing documentaries that explore a variety of forms and styles and encompassing widely varied subject matter. A central focus of DeLys’s work is the shifting boundaries between electrovocal sound and language and she often produces sonically dense pieces in which vocal materials are mixed with environmental sounds and rhythms. DeLys operates on the premise that vocal sound itself carries meaning above and beyond language. Her work is described as distinctive in its ability to mix a variety of innovative vocal effects with “words spoken in an ingenuous streetwise dialect” (Broadstock 1995: 80). DeLys worked with the ensemble Mind/Body/Split in the late 1980s pursuing structured forms of improvising and assembling music from constructed and found text and sound. As well as her radiophonic works, DeLys has worked in collaboration with various artists to create installations for sites such as museums, aquariums, zoos, gardens and a children’s hospital. In a 2002 interview DeLys describes her process as one in which she begins with specific sounds, including recordings of language, and creates pieces around these using text to “to suture these sound objects – much like quilt making.” She explains how she “writes” with sound by “noodling around in the studio until stories form.”

31 See further details of Sonic Hieroglyphs in the section on multimedia and hybrid collaborations.
32 See, for example, Mind/Body/Split (1989). If it’s not on it’s not on http://www.newmusicnetwork.com.au/machine/split%201.htm
Sound is our medium... we’re not writing books here and so if you can let the sound lead you, it will. Your story will start to define itself. I never know where I’m going or, at least, I try not to because I feel if I knew what I was after... and if I had a very strong idea of what the story was about and if I was focused on text, I would miss things... but if you think of yourself as musical... To me part of good sound design within a piece is really listening, really being open, staying open to what’s around you and then selecting for that ... (DeLys cited in Shapiro 2002: np)

DeLys makes the point that the actual sound quality of archival recordings, apart from their content, can contribute a sense of authenticity and interesting layers of meaning to the composition of new works and illustrates this point in relation to her piece, Fidelity, made after the discovery of an old interview with Helen Keller and her helper Polly Thompson in the ABC Archives. DeLys plays on the ambiguity of Fidelity as reference to love and faithfulness as well as to the quality of a sound recording, using the crackle from the old vinyl recording as part of the soundscape. She suggests that audiences can appreciate such referential uses of lo-fi and enjoy the interesting qualities of it.

The technologies that we use are part of the fabric of our sound memories, they’re like the direct imprint, the kind of sensual reminders of our history. It’s like your old Beatles records – it’s that tight compressed sound that’s part of that feeling and when you hear a digital remastering, it’s not the same – it’s a different thing – that’s the main point about that. (DeLys 2002 radio conference: np)

DeLys, like many other sound artists, makes liberal use of montage of narrative voices as a means for exploring the textures and stories of places. One of the final programs from TLR (03/11/2003), presented a series of works based on the theme ‘The Americans, Baby!’ which explored “American themes, dreams, performers and places by American and Australian audio artists”. Sherre DeLys’s Back in the Saddle was a tribute to her Texan grandfather, Archie Jeffries, who had been a bandleader and radio show host. She has Archie telling of his world of music and story against references to the immensity of the Texan landscape. DeLys carries this story through to her own story, working in a radio studio in Australia far from the land of her origins, yet “appreciating the beautiful music of faraway voices and the myths by which we are formed”.

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35 DeLys 2002. Transcript from workshop at the Third Coast International Audio Festival, Chicago Public Radio (as above)


37 The Listening Room (03/11/2003)
Other TLR producers to experiment with montage and manipulation of voices to tell ancestral stories of migration and change are Virginia Madsen and Norie Neumark. Madsen’s *Dreams of Hesselmed* (aired 25/10/1999) tells the story of her great grandfather’s adventures of world travel in the 1860s, compiling fragments of the past and moments of imagination from an old family home and memories. She weaves these together with sounds of Australian landscape in an attempt “to uncover the silence of the dreams that are carried within the normal noise of a family”. Neumark’s work *Volcano*, created in collaboration with Maria Miranda, deals with themes of uprootedness and displacement, told over the noise of volcanic eruption (Stromboli) using the flinging out of elements as metaphor for diaspora and model for audio manipulations of voice.

The radiophonic compositions of Paul Carter, prominent scholar and sound artist, have frequently been aired on the ABC, particularly *The Listening Room*. Carter’s prolific writings – in text, sound and across visual surfaces – interrogate Australian understandings of history, space and culture. A major theme running through his multimodal approach to cultural critique is ways in which the material voice acts as a powerful vector in the formation of identity and space. *Mirror States* (1990) is both a site-specific public installation (Melbourne) and a radiophonic work commissioned by *The Listening Room*. It is comprised of seven voices and four environmental soundtracks which play with the evocative powers of sound to conjure up a feeling for the history of a place, not in a literal historical sense, but through an imagined space that can offer a radically different kind of historical account and understanding to that of established (printed text) tradition:

> Local history, like any other narrative history, is linear. It unfolds chronologically. It is a monologue in which one voice (the historian’s) dominates. Scored for seven voices and four sound tracks, *Mirror States* is clearly not ‘history’ in the ordinary sense of the word. Besides, history is concerned with written documents, not with spoken sounds and even less with ‘natural’ sound. (Carter 1990: np)

Carter positions *Mirror States* as a literary rather than an historical work, but one that offers a lens back through time to focus on a particular location in central Melbourne – the site of the installation. Carter (1990: np) argues that it is useful to consider how a place itself comes into being and acquires a name and identity through human interactions, specifically through language. “Suppose that we conceive places, not in terms of their physical properties (their topography, their buildings)” he says “but as

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39 Neumark & Miranda’s *Volcano* is given further attention in the section on installations.
zones of communication, 'places' only by virtue of the convergence of voices there and the repetition and dissemination of increasingly significant sounds.” He conceives *Mirror States* as a performance piece because it presents a history of voices and dialogue – precisely what is normally left out of formal historical accounts. He suggests that the economy of writing has a tendency to silence the individual differences of voices and the dialogic means by which meanings are formed and deformed. Alternate approaches, such as art and literature, may work on recovering “the network of sounds that constitute a place” and enable use to “listen to aspects of the language that the written records may contain, but which rationalising history leaves out because they appear irrational, inexplicable.”

Carter (1990: np) suggests that many of the ironies revealed in his explorations of the past continue to be played out in contemporary life, particularly in our propensity to relate via functional roles rather than through what appear to be nostalgic notions of self-expression. He says that to have a place in our culture we require an image that functions similarly to a file name “enabling the other to key into the illusory presence of your words.” The paradox that Carter explores through *Mirror States* is “that in a culture of coincidence a local history is always the history of a possible place, one that can boast no name of its own, only a rising tower of voices obliquely mirrored in quiet water.” This sense of a poetics of place, created from vocal human encounters – direct exchanges as well as those mediated by the technologies of different times in history – runs through a great deal of the electrovocal art produced in Australia over the past three decades.

**Installations**

Polyvocal installations, often incorporating elements of randomness, have enjoyed a vigorous history in Australian sound art. Artists have explored the distinctive characteristics of both inside and outside spaces as venues for works addressing a wide variety of social and political themes as well as the character of sound itself. Exploring a sense of place through a montage of spoken narratives, fragments of song or other more radical manipulations of local voices has been the theme of many sound installation works. In the place-based work of a number of artists we hear narrative voices speaking the many languages of Australia’s past and present. These works serve to conjure history and to remind us of how stories from the past continue to be played out in the present.
Indigenous artists have worked as collaborators on several major sound installation projects. *Scar: A stolen vision* (2001: np)\(^{40}\) is an installation designed for Melbourne City Square by Victorian-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists including Kimba Thompson, Karen Casey, Ray Thomas, Maree Clarke, Glenn Romanis, Craig Charles, Ricardo Idagi and Treahna Hamm working in collaboration with sound designer Peter Mumme. The installation comprised thirty-two reclaimed ex-pier poles that were carved, painted and decorated to explore and celebrate themes of Indigenous history, current issues and reconciliation. It “poetically symbolises the landscape, the scars of all Indigenous people and the ongoing process of healing.”\(^{41}\) Each pole was the source of a story of the sculptor’s experiences and influences delivered from CDs through speakers mounted beside and above the installation. The soundtrack incorporated voices in word, sound and song; it played around the theme of flow and referred to the Murray River and the sea as sources of influence on the artists. Sound was spatialised by beaming it in different directions to create a ‘walk through’ effect. As well, the sounds made in the process of sculpting of the poles - carving, sawing, burning, chiselling and grinding - were recorded by contact microphones, manipulated electronically and returned to the acoustic space of the wood yard where they were constructed.\(^{42}\) Sound here works to re-present and reify the cultural clashes and struggles of colonial history.

Taking up similar political themes, Indigenous visual artist Fiona Foley worked with sound artist Chris Knowles to create *Lie of the Land* (1997), installed permanently in a courtyard of the Melbourne Museum. Commissioned by the City of Melbourne in conjunction with the National Aboriginal Reconciliation Conference, the work plays from CDs (in an invisible sound system) through speakers situated on the ground between seven large sandstone pillars and from speakers in the wall of the car-park to the rear. One set of tracks are readings of a quote from John Batman spoken in seven languages: Wurundjeri, English, Indonesian, Dutch, French, Portuguese and Chinese. Another set of tracks play repetitions of words from the quote: 'blankets, knives, looking glasses, tomahawks, beads, scissors, flour.' Further tracks play the sounds of two bird that are the totems of the Port Phillip Bay area - Waang (Crow) and Bunjil (Eagle). As the artists explain:

> These sounds will be distributed through an array of small speakers located around the site of the artwork, allowing any sound to appear at any location and move around

\(^{40}\) See the entry for *Scar - A Stolen Vision* on the Australian Sound Design Project website: [http://www.sounddesign.unimelb.edu.au/web/biogs/P000263b.htm](http://www.sounddesign.unimelb.edu.au/web/biogs/P000263b.htm)

\(^{41}\) See the entry for *Scar - A Stolen Vision* on the Australian Sound Design Project website.

within the defined area. Controlled by computer, the sounds can be additionally shaped and moved in space. They can be made to murmur, chant, and sometimes shout, or burst into gradually diminishing choruses of crows and voices. The installation will be programmed to respond differently at night, and at other times, to suit the requirements of the environment.43

Though born of the impulse toward reconciliation, the work has become a memorial to the stalling of that process by conservative government policies. Indeed, at the National Aboriginal Reconciliation Conference for which it was launched, Indigenous participants and their supporters stood and turned their backs in silent protest at the opening speech of Prime Minister John Howard.44

Many non-Indigenous sound artists have also taken up themes of place and identity in their work. Ros Bandt is a Melbourne sound artist who has made substantial contributions, not only through her own innovative compositional projects over many years, but also through her academic work, illustrated publications on sound art45 and the online database of the Australian Sound Design Project.46 Bandt’s *Voicing the Murray* (1996) was an installation that explored lives defined by their proximity to the river. Commissioned for the Mildura Arts Festival, it was designed to interpret the impact of technology on the Murray River and to “give [it] a voice, a voice derived from all the voices impinging on its banks and surfaces” (Bandt 2001a: np). She recorded stories and perspectives of people living near the river as well as an array of environmental sounds to create a multi-channel mix in an inside installation space. Reflecting on how sound can contribute to the construction of Australian identity, Bandt seeks out relationships between place, voice, story and time. Each site (along the river), she points out, houses multiple intersecting stories that emerge and dissolve, and change in different contexts of time and space. Bandt is interested in ways in which sound carries layers of meaning beyond those available through the written word:

>The breath, the timbre, the speed and the intonation of each authentic voice influence the content and meaning of the spoken word. Each voice has all these qualities, which are further shaped, by the acoustic space of the place of utterance, and the background soundscape, be it outdoor bushland, city street scape, public meeting room, coffeehouse, or tropical rainforest. All of these features are embedded in hearing. Together, they are powerful agents of meaning such as unwritten codes of class,

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44 *Lie of the Land* entry on the Australian Sound Design Project.


46 The Australian Sound Design Project was sponsored by the University of Melbourne and constructed with the assistance of an Australian Research Council grant: [http://www.sounddesign.unimelb.edu.au/](http://www.sounddesign.unimelb.edu.au/).
pleasure or displeasure, emotional orientation, group alliance, attitude, confidence of a situation. (Bandt 2001a: np)

Bandt argues that sound as a medium surpasses the limitations of the written word by virtue of its ability to convey a gamut of social, political, historical and cultural meanings not only through the nuances of individual voices but also the ability of sound to set multiple voices together in synchrony. Sound installations are capable of delivering “an ever-changing polyphony of multiple voices, which can also be made to change constantly as a living sonic tapestry of an acoustic space” (Bandt 2001a). Each voice carries its own distinct story and their juxtapositions can represent diverse cultural locations and narratives of a place, openings for new forms of social consciousness outside of the entrenched political contexts.

Bandt is raising here an aesthetics and a politics of polyphony that has informed, indeed has often been central to, the work of electrovocal artists over the decades. Individual voices within the polyphony may run in linear sequence, as in a conventional narrative, or they may play synchronously against one another as in works designed to convey a sonic field of unexpected and unpredictable juxtapositions and rich textures. But, as Bandt points out, the particular characteristics of voice – their pitch, age, accent, speed, dynamics and timbre informs how the listener will interpret their discourse (Bandt 2001a online: np). Bandt constructs the installation space as a kind of democratic platform that can give each voice equal weight – unlike the politics of life itself – and allows us to hear a voice in the context of other discourses that support or run counter to its position. She performs a kind of affirmative action in her installation by programming the cycle of narratives so that “Aboriginal stories, often not heard, and too often silenced, could be played in the space as a solo group, and the aggressive voices could be silenced at this time” (Bandt 2001a: np). The voices play against a range of environmental sounds which bind them to the Murray River as a location. Six large ceramic urns distributed around the space house the sound sources and serve both as material and metaphorical resonators, amplifying Bandt’s expressed concern for endangered lives, species and languages. Playback proceeds with a random element so that, over time, “the voices will have varying and unpredictable meetings with each other” (Bandt 2001a: np).

Another of Bandt’s installations is designed to evoke a sense of the multicultural history of Australia. *Listening Place* (2003) is a permanent outdoor installation centring on a Melbourne park bench that has the word ‘listen’ inscribed around the base of the bench in six languages. A seated listener will hear a continuous loop of
stories told in many different languages from current and past users of the park. This work was the result of an oral history project in which stories of hundreds of local people were recorded. Bandt says the work is a reminder of the importance of listening to one another’s personal stories and has set these against the quiet sounds of the park which are “not quite the sounds of silence, but the whispers made by leaves rustling and dogs barking in the distance.”

Melbourne artists Sonia Leber and David Chesworth began working together on major public installation projects in the 1990s and, since 2000, have completed a series of commissioned works in their distinctive polyvocal multi-channelled style. Leber and Chesworth have devised customised computer programs with which to create soundscapes, built from hundreds of individual samples, that change over time and present ever-shifting sonic juxtapositions and combinations. They confess to being fascinated with vocality itself, with the immense range and subtlety of the expressive capabilities of the acoustic voice and the extension of its possibilities through electronic manipulation:

> We have long been fascinated with the acoustic texture and the dynamic range of the human voice - beyond the speech content - its rhythms, sounds, shape, tone and frequency. We are particularly fascinated with the many 'proto-linguistic' vocalisations that people make. These are the sounds we make prior to - or instead of - articulating through language, where meanings are made without recourse to semantics or syntax. Where communication is through the 'shape' of speech, rather than speech content.

Commissioned by the Victorian Government to celebrate the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games, *Proximities: local histories/global entanglements* (2006) is set within the structure of the William Barak Bridge near Federation Square. It functions as a “sonic corridor of human voices” with recordings representing people from the fifty-three Commonwealth nations now resident in Australia. The voices of the local Wurundjeri people, the traditional owners the land around the city of Melbourne, are central in the voicescape. The piece changes through time and across space - as you walk along the bridge, new voices arrive, migrate, entangle and disentangle. As described by Leber and Chesworth: “Each individual voice contributes a distinctive

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51 Wurundjeri welcome to country includes the voices of Joy Wandin Murphy, Kim Wandin, Lewis Wandin-Bursill and Dion Bender with clapsticks by Ron Murray and Dion Bender.
singing style with specific melodic and rhythmic ornamentation shaped over centuries of cultural tradition. The artwork can be seen as an imagined crowd through which actual crowds of pedestrians pass for a time between destinations.”52 The work is delivered via twenty-four channels fed through fifty-six loudspeakers that are triggered by bridge walkers via four sensors.

Adopting a very different style from Proximities, but also working from an interplay of voices and exploring the notion of Commonwealth for the Melbourne Games, Leber and Chesworth created Reiterations (2006), a piece commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.53 The voices of seven African immigrants to Melbourne singing traditional songs were installed on iPods and the audience could listen to these through earphones as they walked around the city, using Elizabeth Street as a starting point. The iPod tracks contained many repetitions of musical phrases that played like mantras and represented the diaspora of the African continent around the world. Chesworth described this work as providing an experience that “allows you to be someone else, as if you’ve jumped bodies – eavesdrop and listen, quick body switch.”54 It conveys a sense of Melbourne as a city of migration and incessant movement “providing a non-stop mobile listening perspective that has a sense of urgency about it.”55

The powerful effects of working with extra-linguistic vocalisations is exemplified in 5000 Calls (2000), a work installed for the Sydney Olympics around Stadium Australia. Through this work, Leber and Chesworth pay homage to physical human effort, not just in an athletic context but also in an array of other challenging situations, by presenting a morphing soundscape of short vocal fragments captured from people performing many different kinds of physical tasks: the calls of weightlifters, gymnasts, footballers and cricketers; fragments of Vietnamese river chants; the singing of Aboriginal children; the Maori haka; stockmen herding cattle; the slow breathing of a dancer. The artists travelled to over a hundred locations to record raw material and focused on capturing each voice ‘close up’ by attaching radio microphones while people were engaged in activities. In working electronically with the material, they sought to preserve the original qualities of the voices and to

52 See Proximities on the Wax Sound Media website.
54 Chesworth from the +plus factor interview.
55 Chesworth from the +plus factor interview.
remove only extraneous sounds so that the listener would feel in immediate proximity to the vocalisers with an “almost uncanny sense of clarity.”

We digitised these large chunks of location recordings, for the painstaking process of isolating the short expressive vocalisations that we were looking for – vocalisations which often occur in-between the words (gasps, sighs, different weights of breath) and the involuntary vocalisations made as a result of physical action. We used a number of techniques to then further refine these short moments, isolating the individual voices from the often noisy and complex acoustic environments of the original recordings.  

The field recordings were then processed to remove the ‘sense’ of speech and reveal simply the sounds of effort or a “sonic inscription of the body: stressing, straining, singing, exclaiming” in an ever-shifting aural experience as “the different vocalisations ‘rub up’ against each other in different ways, in different densities and patterns of distribution.” The 5000 individual sound items stored on a computer are orchestrated through a customised program and broadcast in a crowd-like effect through twenty-four channels to eighty loudspeakers distributed around the site.

A mid 2007 installation by Leber and Chesworth at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne invites visitors to explore the theme of surveillance, a particularly cogent topic in an era where ‘counter-terror’ initiatives have resulted in ongoing erosions of human rights through legislation. Titled Almost Always Everywhere Apparent, the installation beckons visitors in through an ordinary white door in the gallery, leading to a white antechamber, then through another door. Via a maze of rooms and corridors with peepholes, the audience takes a listening walk through “all manner of sounds of the human voice” that fill the space. The artists describe the piece as a “polyphonic phantasmagoria” contained within two architectural structures: the church with its connotation of the all-seeing eye of God; and the prison, in particular the panopticon design where a central surveillance room leads off to all the cells in such a way that a guard can see all the prisoners all the time.

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57 5000 Calls on the Wax Sound Media website
58 5000 Calls on the Wax Sound Media website
60 Leber and Chesworth’s comments in the website commentary of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA, Melbourne). http://www.accaonline.org.au/SoniaLeberDavidChesworth
61 The panopticon was conceived by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham late in the 18th century and made famous in the 20th century by the French philosopher Michel Foucault.
Another Melbourne installation that deploys the aesthetic of polyvocality for political critique is Roger Alsop’s *Rice Paddies* (2001). The rice paddy is coopted as a site on which to stage political debates about Australia’s immigration policies and fear of overcrowding is the theme of work. The artist used recordings from Parliament and speeches from politicians in the period immediately after the Tampa incident of August 2001 when four hundred and thirty-three asylum-seekers rescued from a boat sinking in international waters between Australia and Indonesia were refused entry into Australia. Included was a speech by Green Party Senator Bob Brown asking how Australians could behave in such a way towards other human beings. There were also excerpts from SBS News in languages other than English, played at random, to create a sense of the broader world both within and beyond Australian shores. Birdsong was looped through the soundscape to evoke a sense of early morning and, against this backdrop, musicians improvised with a rain tank, simultaneously a reference to an Australian icon and to the Asian Taiko drum.

The installation work of Norie Neumark (sound) and Maria Miranda (visuals) explores the strong sense of (dis)place(ment) that can be felt by all immigrant Australians, not just those who arrive in the extreme circumstances of needing asylum. *Volcano* (2001) is a multimedia installation addressing themes of memory and the sense of destabilisation and uprootedness that often accompanies migration. The story of Miranda’s grandfather, who migrated to Australia from the volcanic island of Stromboli in Italy, provides a starting-point and becomes one strand that weaves through the final work. Neumark’s soundscape is composed from readings, using the local dialect, and sounds from the island and the Phlegraian fields near Vesuvio. Neumark explores how such localized voices and environmental sounds can be used to create a sense of intimacy for the audience and also how the placement of sounds can serve to move people around in the installation space. The noise and blur of the erupting volcano was an aesthetic that shaped both the images (video) and sounds in the work. Using Pro-Tools, Neumark developed her own ‘granular synthesis’ techniques to fragment voices to convey the sense of language blown apart in a volcanic blast and mixed these with electronically manipulated sounds from field recordings at volcanic sites. Neumark has said that, for her, *Volcano* involved a new way of working with sound, a more abstract approach that responded to the movement of Miranda’s animated images. She draws on the powerful imagery of Stromboli’s origin mythology – the notion of a god becoming

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angry and plucking up an island and throwing it like a stone into the sea – to create a particular kind of aesthetic “both within the sound itself and in its movement.”

I wanted to work with non-immersive sound, with sound that was thrown like a stone, to disrupt and move the listening subject - just as the images were working to move the viewing subject - with no single ‘right’ place to view. The sound jumped between (4) sets of stereo speakers. It was relatively soft and invited people to move close to the speakers, to hear it. It was elusive yet intimate. Sometimes quiet and delicate, sometimes noisy, the sound kept drawing people up to the speakers, around the room, and into the work.

Where Neumark’s sound conjures memory and dislocation through the spectacular metaphor and aesthetics of volcanic eruption, other artists compose with the micro sounds of everyday life in modern urban Australia. Electrovocality has been deployed not only to evoke a sense of place, but also to explore the significance of bodily sounds themselves in relationship with their surroundings. Sherre DeLys, for instance, began collaborating in the mid 1990s with sculptor Joan Grounds to create site-specific interactive sound sculptures in botanical glasshouses, galleries and hospitals to explore the notion of ‘embodied sound’ – sounds that emerge from the body and/or sounds embodied in objects. Their purpose was to offer an audience opportunities for active listening. In their ‘glasshouse’ installations, for example, the artists employed sounds from ‘nature’ to encourage visitors to enter into playful mimicry through ‘call and response’ interactions with recordings of human bird-callers triggered in response to bodily proximity to objects that resemble plant forms. “The result was not only fun for adults and children, but also an extension of glasshouse metaphors to include the cross-fertilisations of sonic practice, an introduction to the varied cultures of imitation of nature in Australia, and a highlighting of endangered cultural practices and species.” The audience is encouraged to immerse themselves sonically in order to engage with multiple layers contained in the work. DeLys and Grounds point out that for an installation to be effectively interactive, it needs to be “rich with meaning and open-ended”. One way the artists achieve this is by making use of the capabilities of digital technologies to embed randomness into the design of their projects. They use infrared technologies to enable interactive triggering devices in order to create “more sophisticated layers of unfolding, based on user choices.”

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56 Neumark’s notes for Volcano on the Out-of-sync website.
64 Neumark’s notes for Volcano on the Out-of-sync website.
66 See the notes on DeLys and Grounds on the Australian Sound Design Project website: http://www.sounddesign.unimelb.edu.au/web/biogs/P000336b.htm
57 Notes on DeLys and Grounds on the Australian Sound Design Project website.
66 Notes on DeLys and Grounds on the Australian Sound Design Project website.
This ‘unfolding’ of layers of meaning through chance coincidences and juxtapositions of words and sounds is an aesthetic trope that has been central and recurring throughout the history of Australian sound installations. The devices by which this has been achieved – repeating loops of differing lengths, for instance, or the triggering of sounds at random through motion sensors that respond to audience movements – are now also incorporated into the complexities of multimedia and hybrid arts design.

**Multimedia & Hybrid Arts Collaborations**

While much of the discussion above ‘tunes in’ to work produced by individuals, partnerships and ensembles working in different oeuvres, it is important to note that the history of sound art as a movement in Australia has been significantly defined by a perennial spirit of collaboration, transient in some instances and, in others, sustained and productive over a number of years. This ethos is perhaps strengthening in the flux of emerging multimedia and hybrid art activities in the early 21st century where teams of artists and technicians pool skills to create works with a sophistication that would not be achievable by individuals or small clusters alone. *Dead Centre: the body with organs* (1999) is an exemplar of how creative collaborations of diverse artists and technicians can work ‘on the ground’.

Commissioned by the Performance Space, Sydney, and conceived and written by Norie Neumark it is a collaborative project which aimed to create a balance of ‘live’ performance, audio and visual design elements:

- Amanda Stewart (performer) brought vocal sounds, poetic fragments, and her interest in inscription to the work.
- Maria Miranda (digital visual artist) brought to the project her interest in the ‘ground’ of the image-making process both theoretically and practically. Greg White (composer and programmer) created the pulses which hold the room/machine-organ together and designed special software to enable the complex sound design. Neil Simpson designed the lighting and collaborated on the ‘set’ design. David Bartolo generously made available his hardware interface box.

The work explores ways in which changes to constructs of subjectivity are emerging in digital culture and plays with the notion that bodily organs are being reconfigured to bear a relation to the inner ‘organs’ of the computer itself. Computers are

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69 Albeit through the use of new set of tools and techniques.

70 See the website for *Dead Centre: Body without organs* on the ABC website archives: [http://www.abc.net.au/arts/headspace/special/deadcentre/collab.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/arts/headspace/special/deadcentre/collab.htm)

71 See the website for *Dead Centre: Body without organs* on the ABC website archives.
conceptualised in the work as, themselves, taking on the semblance of organic
encounters. As we digitise and process images or sounds, the artists suggest, we
subject them to a kind of digestion process, carried out as a collaboration between
computer and user: “As digestion it can be messy, noisy and undisciplined and it can
produce unexpected eruptions. Its transmissions and excretions can appear
anywhere - downloaded and projected onto unexpected surfaces, transmitted
through the Net, pulsing through a space.”72

The ways in which specific cultural markers are carried and transmitted by the voice
is a central area of exploration in Dead Centre. Amanda Stewart, brings pre-composed
and improvised performance into the installation in innovative and experimental
ways and these continue to re-sound in the installation space even when she is not
there, partly in response to audience movements.73

Working as the duo Out-of-Sync since the early 1990s,74 Neumark has completed
numerous multimedia arts projects with visual/new media artist Maria Miranda.
Their work explores intersections and tensions of sound, imagery and sensation.
Shock in the Ear (1998),75 an award winning CD-ROM, offers a model by which to
engage an audience in new media experimentation with an interactive live mix of
sound. Neumark says that the work was designed around the artists’ interest in how
“sound plays into the very body of the listener” and in exploring “the coming
together of visceral sound with haptic image and touch during the gestural moment
of desktop interaction – a moment of intimate intensity”.76

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, Machine for Making Sense77 performed
within Australia and toured internationally, created site-specific events and
installations, recorded, broadcast and engaged in collaborations that crossed
different art forms. A major focus was finding ways of integrating old and new
technologies to create new hybrid electro-acoustic instruments. They explored multi-

72 See the entry for Dead Centre: Body without organs in the Australian Design Project website:
http://www.sounddesign.unimelb.edu.au/web/biogs/P000568b.htm
73 See the entry for Dead Centre: Body without organs in the Australian Design Project website.
74 The Out-of-Sync website provides access to an online gallery of multimedia works: http://out-of-
sync.com/
76 Commentary from the Out-of-Sync website.
77 For current information on MFMS, see the NSW Government Department of the Arts, Sports and
speaker and multi-mike arrangements, sonic transparency and noise, beats and time, notions of composition re social ethics, the body and what it does to words, and theories of neurology.\textsuperscript{78} They functioned as an improvising music collective who liked to conduct simultaneous performances to an audience with fast timing and intuitive development of the work itself. In recording sessions, they would do only one take. According to Aldrich (2003), Chris Mann explains how the group much preferred working to a live audience than simply in a studio or for broadcast and was primarily interested in composing spontaneously for real time listening.

The only prepared material was the vocabulary that any member brought to the proceedings. Rehearsal consisted of deciding where to eat ... For MFMS, I bring text which is to say a bunch of words in a particular order. Amanda brings a bunch of words, some in order. Jim and Stevie bring instruments which are usefully played in a restricted number of ways and Rik has a bunch of tapes and CDs and a pause button. We all bring muscle memory and a collective history. These constitute a vocabulary of sorts. All decisions or realizations otherwise are improvised. It's the only way I know to set about a conspiracy. (Aldridge 2003: np)

When Chris Mann moved to New York in the mid 1990s the group continued as a quartet, further exploring its collaborative innovations. An example is a performance and installation at the Sydney Opera House, \textit{Sonic Hieroglyphs} (1999)\textsuperscript{79} (Aldridge 2003). The work was a collaboration with artist Joan Grounds and involved a stream of improvised sound, speech, text and visual notations projected onto the Opera House sails. There were multiples stages, spaces and a time-span lasting several days. Sound events moved through spontaneous chaotic systems to highly prepared sonic hieroglyphs. Audience members were encouraged to mix their own version of the installation with the use of a large suspended mixing desk and MFMS later created its own radiophonic mixdown \textit{Motet} referred to above (played on \textit{TLR}). Along with several other major performance works by MFMS, \textit{Sonic Hieroglyphs} was designed as a breakaway from the highly formal environment of the concert hall and with conventional uses of the voice associated with the Opera House:

Talk is the noise of talk, its musicality, its chance capture, words gulped and kicked out, guttural, barked and screamed. Therefore the Machine's talk becomes all the more important for being and around and about talk that you ignore in the usual give and take of conversation. You hear snatches of talk, you hear the voice as a musical instrument.\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{78} Notes from the Australian Music Online entry on \textit{Machine for Making Sense}.\textsuperscript{http://www.amo.org.au/artist.asp?id=1676}

\textsuperscript{79} See program notes on the ABC FM \textit{Listening Room} website archives: \textsuperscript{http://www.abc.net.au/classic/lroom/stories/s141165.htm}

\textsuperscript{80} See discography notes: \textsuperscript{http://www.discogs.com/artist/Machine+For+Making+Sense}
In 2000 Machine for Making Sense toured Europe, performing in Germany, France, Belgium, Holland, Italy and in New York. In 2005, the group decided to stop performing as an ensemble and focus on producing events in Sydney. Members now support the development of emerging artists through initiatives such as the Now Now festival\(^81\) and a bi-monthly night of sonic improvisation.

AustraLYSIS is another Australian ensemble committed to performing new composed and improvised music/sound and to collaborating in intermedia work. Sound, text and performance art around vocal performance and manipulation are a key aspect of their sound. Hazel Smith and Roger Dean of AustraLYSIS have also created a number of text and sound pieces in response to commissions from the ABC including *The Erotics of Gossip* (2001), *Returning the Angles, Nuraghic Echoes* (1996) and *Poet without Language*.\(^82\)

Tess De Quincey’s *Nerve 9 :: the flesh of everyday speech* (2001)\(^83\) is a performance work that exemplifies the 21\(^{st}\) century move toward hybrid art collaborations by artists working in diverse creative fields. *NERVE 9* crosses scholarly philosophy (in offering a response to writings by Julia Kristeva), dance (Tess de Quincey), poetry and vocals (Amanda Stewart), digital video and soundscape (Debra Petrovitch) and “subversive text” (Francesca da Rimini). Other women contribute elements from Turkish, Iranian, Indian, Chinese, Arabic, French, Chilean and Balinese female forms. *Nerve 9* had successful seasons in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, and was chosen to represent Australia at the Biennale de Danse in Paris, 2002. The description of the work in the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts archives conveys a sense of a fine play of vocality across sonority and semantics.

Created from sound, light, space, movement and words - languages of the mind and the body … the performer moves through a world of shimmering sonic and visual poetry. Finely textured and expressive of human frailty and sensibility, de Quincey’s performance is mesmerizing … *NERVE 9* evokes a sense of our lived experience that is about language, yet beyond words.\(^84\)

*Nerve 9* was launched at Sydney’s Performance Space and is described as a “multilayered, intensive collaboration” of de Quincey as dancer/choreographer with Amanda Stewart, visual artist Deborah Petrovich and writer/new media artist

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\(^{81}\) See information about the Now Now Festival at [http://www.thenownow.net/](http://www.thenownow.net/)

\(^{82}\) See the AustraLYSIS website at [http://www.australysis.com/](http://www.australysis.com/)

\(^{83}\) See notes for *Nerve 9* on Tess de Quincey’s website” [http://www.bodyweather.net/mainframe1.html](http://www.bodyweather.net/mainframe1.html)

Francesca da Rimini. The performance is described in Real Time events notices as “hypnotic, gloriously abstract and curiously sensual... De Quincey moved as if on a different plane to audience mortals, her elliptical trajectory intersecting with projected images and texts and aural worlds.”85 The interplay of diverse elements in the work is complex and speaks to the intimacy of relationships between the moving body, imagery and sound:

Nerve 9 is hybrid in essence... creating an intellectual arena within which all its ideas can grow and mingle. It synthesises some quite rarefied elements — Stewart’s shimmering sonic and visual poetry and De Quincey’s enduringly watchable portraits of attenuated human frailty. The different sounds (both text and soundscapes) and movement are entwined, as if De Quincey’s body can be shot through with those textures, human and electronic, structured and hanging on shafts or webs of sound, animated sometimes entirely by those vibrations. (Brickhill 2001: 35)

The turn towards multimedia and hybrid electronic arts continues to gain momentum and has opened up a proliferation of experimental collaborations between Australian and international artists, as well as among artists, scientists, humanities academics and technicians. Aesthetics and techniques developed in experimental sound and music have also been appropriated into ‘mainstream’ pop culture. In the contemporary music industry, for instance, it is de rigueur to incorporate samples, cut-ups, looping to produce repetitive phrasing and rhythms, radical alterations to acoustic sounds through a huge variety of different modulators, and pitch and time shifts. Facilitating mass access to creative play with sound are ever-more ‘user-friendly’ and affordable digital technologies. These have led to a proliferation of amateur domestic studios and rich opportunities for communicating and collaborating across different arts forms using a common language of zeros and ones.

Reflections

In a consideration of the distinctive features of experimental Australian sound art over the past four decades, Burt (2007) suggests that different artists and movements have tended to develop their own contexts, rather than work within previously established areas and notes that these new contexts emerge from ideas embodied within the work itself. Burt emphasises the socially and politically engaged nature of much experimental sound art in Australia. Ideology, he suggests, plays a major role in the shaping of both the work and the environment in which it is presented; artists are inclined to think critically about the implications of the particular contexts they

http://www.realt imearts.net/article/issue68/7942
choose or reject. Experimental sound artists in Australia, he says, also tend to be intensely aware of the history and aesthetics of their field, both locally and internationally, and view their work as a conscious attempt to extend and redefine elements of that tradition.

The past thirty-five years have reverberated with radical and adventurous projects generated from venues dedicated to new music and sound performance, numerous major exhibitions and events, conferences, festivals and media showcases. Sound has also moved more insistently into galleries and universities in variety of forms. There is a growing proliferation of Internet sites offering access to databases of sound art history and culture, files of works, theoretical articles, chat groups, gallery showcases, promotion of special events and festivals, and the sites of artists themselves.

The narrative of artists and works I have constructed in ‘Voicing the Circuitries of Australian Sound Art’ provides some sense of the history of electrovocal art in Australia over the past three decades. It reveals how artists from diverse fields of experimental activity at the intersection of voice, sound, philosophy, politics, art and technology have improvised a lexicon with which to imagine and realise the emerging possibilities of electrovocality as a distinct form of creative endeavour. It is this arc of culture that inspires and informs my own work and provides a language with which to speak about it.
Articulating *MouthWorks*

I embarked on doctoral research with a clear plan in mind, based on prior explorations of electrovocality and composing with interactive multimedia. My intention was to record and sample from media discourses and embed these samples in interfaces for delivery to an audience via the Internet. Ultimately, in the process of moving through the dilemmas and influences of the research process, the form of the work morphed into the different, albeit related, medium of a sound installation. I begin this account of my methodology by discussing those early explorations with voice, digital processing and multimedia as the basis for the development of *Blitz*.

I began experimenting with digital manipulation of vocal sound in the late 1990s and became fascinated with the cornucopia of sounds that could be created from even a single voice. From computer recordings of my own voice – non-linguistic sounds, speech and singing – I manipulated samples with software filters\(^1\), a basic effects unit and a vocoder. Altering the frequency, pitch, duration, density and directionality of sounds, I created strange rhythms that resembled the phrasing of language, yet were devoid of linguistic meaning, and combined these with fragments of speech or song. My primary interest at the time was in the sensual qualities of the sounds themselves and the virtually unlimited palette that could be improvised quite readily using digital devices. Research led to the discovery that electrovocality was a field with a vibrant history and a body of work in its own right within the broader movements of experimental sound art. I gained ideas for my own creative practice in listening to the works of early artists working in Australia.\(^2\)

This interest in electrovocality was deployed from 2000 onwards into multimedia compositions that took the form of interactive polyphonic soundscapes embedded in web pages.\(^3\) I published online a series of pieces collectively titled *MouthWorks* that explored a range of ideas, techniques and aesthetic approaches. In creating these pieces, I drew on ‘traditional’ approaches that had been used by experimental tape

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1 I worked on a Mac using software audio editing programs – SoundEdit and ProTools – that had built-in effects such as echo, pitch and time shift, reverse, flanging, eq, compression, noise reduction.

2 Hearing the work of Chris Mann, Warren Burt, Amanda Stewart and Machine for Making Sense, for instance, led me to experimenting with ‘decomposing’ words and phrases into their parts and recombining them in different order, looping phonemes to make rhythms, speeding language up.

3 This work was done using Adobe Photoshop and Macromedia Flash and Dreamweaver to create small ‘movies’ with sounds attached.
artists in the musique concrète tradition from the 1950s: cut-ups and splicing, repetitive loops, pitch and time shifts, multi-tracking, recording and re-recording. Digital technologies made it easy to execute these traditional techniques and also to explore new approaches to composition based on the notion of interactivity.

Devising design strategies for creating sonic pieces with an open compositional structure was a particular challenge that I took up in this period. I was interested in how new media enabled enactment of a piece in the space between composer and audience. The first piece composed – *Sitting at a Computer* (1999) – was a play on Alvin Lucier’s seminal piece *Sitting in a Room* (1969) and used a version of his original spoken text adapted for the digital age. This piece took the theme of the resonant frequencies of cyberspace to play with the idea of endless layered repetitions of the same segment of text to produce a wash of crowd sound all made by the one voice. In three of the pieces – *U and I* (2000), *Folds in the Circuitry* (2000) and *Flight* (2001) – I constructed polyvocal works in which numerous sounds embedded in an interface could be triggered in varying combinations (through mouse clicks and rollovers) to produce a shifting soundscape. *Flight* (2002), for instance, was created from sounds inspired by my hang-gliding experiences off Byron Bay with recordings made by equipment zipped into my clothing.\(^4\)

\(^4\) Four pieces of *MouthWorks* are online at: [http://www.jenbrown.biz/soundscapes/mouthworks/index.html](http://www.jenbrown.biz/soundscapes/mouthworks/index.html)

\(^5\) Screenshot by Jen Brown.
These works were informed by debates at that time on the cultural significance — some saw it as radical liberatory potential — of new media’s capacity to deliver interactivity in the construction of new forms of narrative. Peacock (2000), for example, describes interactivity as more than simply a mode of accessing content or information, but as an integral element in the meaning-construction of the text as a whole:

In their structure those stories contain and reflect cultural myths, broader understandings of the way the world is or can be. And particularly, interactivity contains and reflects our (cultural) relationship with information. If the medium is the message then CMT [computer-mediated technologies] interactivity, as a narrative medium, is sufficiently different from what has gone before to carry a message about cultural change, about a shift in our relationship with information. Indeed some theorists argue that ‘[it] represents a shift in human consciousness comparable to the shift from orality to print’. (Peacock 2000: 22–23)

Other writers are more cautious in their assessment, especially of the notion that a democratic ethic could somehow be inherent in interactive works, and are critical of attempts to position it as a rupture with past (linear) media forms. Marsha Kinder points out that even writers who “fetishize” the notion of interactivity6 acknowledge that it generally works by creating an illusion for the user that s/he is accessing an infinite database of options from which to make particular choices in constructing a narrative.

While all narratives are in some sense interactive in that their meanings always grow out of a collaboration between the idiosyncratic subjectivities of authors and audiences and the reading conventions of the respective cultures they inhabit and languages they speak, all interactivity is also an illusion because the rules established by the designers of the text necessarily limit the user’s options. Interactivity thus tends to function as a normative term — either as the ultimate pleasure or demonized as a deceptive fiction. (Kinder 2002: 4)

Kinder argues that, rather than perpetuate this deception, it is more useful to conceptualise the actions of the new media audience as a performance, similar to the interpretive engagements of an actor with a script or a musician with a score. In my own work, I focus on techniques that make explicit the interagency between my role as composer and that of the performer/interpreter of the works: an unseen person seated at a remote computer. Kinder’s view resonates with meaning-based communications theory and locates new media encounters as a flexible interplay of subjectivities that are partly structured by a text presented by the composer, artist or

writer and also, to a significant degree, activated and shaped by the experience and context of the user.

As well as thinking critically about the limits to interactivity, I developed an appreciation of the aesthetics of minimalisation required in producing work for the online environment where image and sound file sizes must be kept as small as possible for fast delivery. The loop aesthetic has now been coopted from experimental music and sound into the mainstream of linear compositional forms and has virtually become a cliché in popular music. Audio artists working on the Internet tend to make much out of small repeating ‘loops’ (often attached to visual animations as they were in MouthWorks) as a means for maintaining sonic flow. Loops can be set up to play in layered synchrony to create changing textures and rhythms and a spontaneous mix of sound. In the MouthWorks series of pieces I experimented with composing entirely from a database of loops that played in seemingly endless combinations to build a kaleidoscopic mix of sounds controlled by ‘users’ of the works. Each loop could be mouse-clicked on or off to vary tempo, rhythm and texture of the overall performative flow and each encounter with that same piece would, inevitably, unfold in a different and unique way through changing user choices over sequence and combination. They were explorations of the aesthetics of chance, the pleasures of the unexpected, produced by the user’s active engagement in a performance of fluid convergences of sounds and meanings.

The development of my creative practice through MouthWorks laid a foundation of compositional approaches, aesthetics and techniques with which to launch into my doctoral research, anticipating that I would consolidate and carry them forward into a more sustained, complex and socially-engaged project. In this new enterprise, I intended to work with samples of diverse voices from the media – rather than just my own voice – and to take up contemporary cultural and political themes. This was motivated by my growing unease at the turn of world events, particularly the Australian Government’s unconditional support for US military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the experience of feeling ‘blitzed’ by media discourses on security and danger. The aesthetic territory of ‘plunderphonic’ composition presented itself as an appropriate approach to working with these themes since it implies the direct engagement of the artist with audio/media material that has already been recorded, edited and released into the public realm.

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7 See further notes on plunderphonics on p.19 and a discussion of the politics of copyright on p.72–74.
Besieged (2004) is a draft of work from early in the research process, developed using sound bites recorded from public broadcast media and embedded in a multimedia interface (see attached CD-ROM). As in earlier MouthWorks pieces, it is performed in a space of interagency between composer and audience. Samples of voices giving accounts of the various forms taken by ‘the war on terror’ are set to play in a polyvocal montage against one another in rhythmic loops and one-offs, creating random juxtapositions and the sense of a dense storyspace. The sounds are released by clicking and rolling the mouse over objects in a surreal landscape, a visual montage of suburban houses and telegraph poles. Over fifty samples are available for play in endless combinations, although the software used (Flash) limits the actually number of sounds playing at any given moment to eight. The audience is taken into a space of competing voices and invited to take an active role in orchestrating the performative interplay of those voices. As a draft piece created early in the research process, Besieged served as one design model with which to engage an audience in the vagaries of contemporary discourse.

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8 Photos of houses were sampled from real estate sites from all capital cities to give a mix of architectural styles and represent Australian suburbia. Telegraph poles are collaged from my own photos taken in central Australia.

9 Screenshot by Jen Brown.
While working on Besieged, I began to experience a sense of disenchantment with composing for the Internet. Countering the advantage of being able to deliver creative output direct to virtually anyone in the world was the unappealing certainty that my audience would consist of isolated stationary bodies seated at computers. At the time, I was working long hours by day as a multimedia developer and doing more of the same kind of work evenings and weekends on my doctoral project. The concept of engaging with art by sitting still at a computer became increasingly unappealing. I began to consider radically redirecting my arts practice in order to offer an audience far more active forms of bodily engagement with the ideas. Added to that factor, Internet delivery placed strong constraints on the size and number of audio files that could be embedded in a multimedia work. Using CD-ROM as the delivery platform would have solved that particular issue, but did not address the mobility issue.

Inspired by research into Australian installation art, I devised the concept of working with multiple laptops in an installation space. A series of seven separate multimedia pieces that could be played simultaneously by visitors using an assemblage of seven laptops became a blueprint for the project. I imagined these arranged in a close inner circle and wired out to a much larger outer circle of speaker sets, creating an expansive field for audience movement through the resonances of the work. The audience would be free to manipulate works from the laptop interfaces and also to move around within the circular space to gain different listening perspectives. This concept may have worked effectively, but the expense of assembling such an array of equipment was prohibitive. The need to improvise in the face of such financial constraints has often characterised the history of experimental art in Australia. This factor, combined with commitment to a populist ethic in technological creativity, has led to the production of works on cheap ‘lo-fi’ equipment and the development of aesthetics around distinctive characteristics of the resulting sound.

My quest for a viable apparatus with which to construct a polyphonic installation space took a new direction as I began to realise the potentials of software that came supplied with Apple computers. In assembling and selecting sound samples ready for inclusion in Besieged, I had begun to use Apple iTunes as a software database for storing, organising and reviewing my sound bites. This choice, serendipitously, came

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10 For example installation projects of artists such as Sonya Leber and David Chesworth, Ros Bandt, Sherre deLys and Joan Grounds, Norie Neumark and Maria Miranda.

11 Burt (2007) comments that experimental sound artists are marginalised in Australian arts funding.
to have a major impact on the design and development of the work and provided the idea for a viable alternative to the laptop design for an installation. iTunes makes it very easy to keep track of audio files, to attach detailed information to them, and to create ‘playlists’ of ‘tracks’ (individual sound files of any length). It is essentially a database for audio files, each of which is referred to as a track. Audio can then be listened to either directly from the computer or exported to a small mobile listening device – most commonly an iPod for Mac users. Devices play either through earplugs or speakers and the popularity of iPods has spawned a wide range of small portable speakers into which they dock directly.

The iTunes/iPod system offers the capacity to store a large amount of audio material on a small mobile device as well as flexibility in customising its organization. It is a simple matter to generate any number of personalised playlists comprising any number of tracks of any length. The system also offers an outstanding feature for audio artists interested in working with the element of chance in composition: playlists can be set to play either in a fixed sequence or randomly in ‘shuffle’ mode and to play through tracks just once or in endless repeating cycles. It occurred to me that an assemblage of iPods, docked into speakers and all set to play simultaneously, would constitute an affordable multi-channel mobile apparatus for an installation that could be programmed to present a shifting and unpredictable play of sounds.

As well as its technical suitability, the iPod was an appropriate choice in terms of the time-focus of the project. Clever marketing of the iPod in 2004 rendered it prominent as a trend-setter in the portable digital music player market. In a December 2004 review, the *Macworld* computer magazine suggested that 2004 had been “the year of the iPod”.

If anything characterized the world of digital music in 2004, it was Apple’s iPod... By the end of the year, the word “iPod” had become nearly a generic term for a digital music player, much as Walkman described portable music players 20 years earlier. (Breen 2004: np)

My reconfigured vision for the project became a polyphonic sound installation to be delivered via a suite of seven iPods distributed around a large inside space. I chose seven on the basis that that number would provide enough scope for building interesting variations in the flow of sounds and silences, the density of the texture, yet not present an overwhelming cacophony. Over a period of time, I acquired a set of refurbished iPod ‘minis’ – 2004 models – and seven speaker sets, capable of running on mains or batteries, and small enough to pack into a suitcase for travelling
between installation sites.\textsuperscript{12} The iPods were a ‘lo-fi’ solution to content delivery, requiring my original high-resolution files to be compressed down to AAC format. This constraint, partially imposed by cost considerations, sat comfortably with me as an ethic and aesthetic with a history in Australian sound art.\textsuperscript{13} The iPods constituted a suite of elegantly designed audio instruments in five sleek metallic colours. I began experimenting with iPod compositions, placing the devices at distributed points around a space, setting them in shuffle mode to create an aleatory play of sounds and meanings.

\section*{Sampling a Zeitgeist}

Early in 2004, I began to take advantage of the public intensities of an Australian federal election year to record media discourses on ‘the war on terror’. The sense of a blitz of stories on themes of security and danger was heightened in that year. From February to September, I recorded many hours of material from ABC and SBS radio and television. The decision to restrict my sampling activity to public broadcasters was designed to highlight how unbalanced public discourse had become at that time. It is mandatory on the ABC and SBS to provide informed and balanced reportage. The constancy of their output of terror narratives throughout 2004 demonstrates very well how difficult it became in that period to speak beyond and/or counter to the neo-conservative political ideology and policies being advanced by western political leaders. A great deal of the material I sampled, particularly sound-bytes from politicians, was played across all media outlets on account of deriving from common news syndicates such as Associated Press, American Press, Reuters, Agence France-Presse and Al Jazeera. Commercial broadcasters could, by tradition, be expected to capitalise on the sensationalist nature of government generated discourses on war and terror to engage the attention of their audiences. However, I personally found it far more insidious to be constantly subjected to the well modulated and ostensibly reasonable voices of ABC journalists reporting and repeating narratives that seemed so clearly designed to manipulate Australian public opinion for political gain through the use of fear. Even critical analysis from the legions of seasoned ABC journalists seemed oppressive in that, by engaging seriously and in a sustained way with the political rhetoric of ‘the war on terror’ they added further weight to the hegemony of the language itself.

\textsuperscript{12} A challenge presented by my circumstances of working in Launceston and studying in Lismore.

\textsuperscript{13} In ‘cassette culture’ projects, for example, by Warren Burt, Jon Rose and others in the 1980s.
My sources were a mix of political reportage, electioneering rhetoric, critical discussion by ‘experts’, community opinion and journalistic commentary drawn from news and current affairs programs, featured interviews, talkback radio, and parliamentary sessions. I sampled regularly by convenience, in accord with my habitual viewing/listening patterns. Each week, I went through the recorded material, culled out segments of interest, edited them down into short sound bites, and sorted these thematically into desktop folders. I recorded on mini-disc, transferred files to an Apple computer and used Amadeus as the primary editing tool. Initially, I cast my net wide and included a range of issues under the umbrella theme: events, policies and practices giving rise to fear and insecurity for Indigenous Australians, for example, and the detention of refugees in the name of ‘border protection’. As I began to work with the recordings, it became clear that a far stronger focus would create greater coherence for the project: there were simply too many diverse sub-plots within the thematic expanse that I had initially set out to cover. Consequently, I decided to confine my scope to the so-called ‘war on terror’. This war, as conveyed by the media, encompassed a wide array of stories on terror, terrorism and terrorists at home and abroad, as well as the Iraq war which was cast by political leaders as a proactive strategy within the broader ‘war on terror’.

Election years tend to produce intense political and cultural debate with a polarising of opinions and 2004 was no exception. Public broadcast media presented a plethora of narratives spelling out all the possible forms a possible terrorist attack might take and detailed at length the possible preventative measures and responses that could be made by governments and civil bodies. Early in the year, a flurry of speculation and debate erupted over the implications of the Madrid train bombings for involvement of Australian forces in the Iraq war. Throughout the year, many smaller stories of terror congealed into larger plotlines that played out over extended time-frames and spanned dispersed locations: the arrests of young Australians suspected of plotting attacks in major cities; the ongoing detention in Guantanamo Bay by the US of two Australians, David Hicks and Moundu Habib, held without charge or trial but accused of being terrorist supporters; the sudden focusing of government anxieties on maritime security and Australian ports; the banning of ammonium nitrate, an agricultural fertiliser that could potentially be used to make explosives; the realistic rehearsals in central Sydney for a terrorist attack; the call-back of an international flight out of Melbourne because a short note, scribbled on a scrap of paper, was thought by pilots to have sinister overtones; the instalment of incognito armed sheriffs on the airways, ready to tackle hijackers or indeed anyone behaving in a way that could be construed as irregular.
Also featuring daily on the media were stories of ongoing violent engagements in ‘the war on terror’ in Afghanistan and Iraq. Homeland resistance to foreign activities was reported as ‘terrorist insurgency’ and violent methods were portrayed as irrational and extreme, perpetrated by a dangerous foreign Other. Acts of aggression by the US military and its allies, conversely, were represented as peacekeeping strategies that were rational and courageous, based on ideals of a greater (global) good. Even when evidence mounted of the unlawful abuse of Iraqi prisoners by the US military in Abu Ghraib prison, such violent acts were constructed as the aberrant behaviour of a small handful of renegade soldiers rather than acknowledged as a systemic practice condoned by the highest levels within the hierarchy of power.\(^{14}\) I recorded many hours of material in capturing such stories, then began to sample key segments from them.

In general, samples are used for their specific associations or the timbral qualities they add to a music or sound piece.\(^{15}\) They may represent recognisable linguistic meaning through speech or song or more ambiguous sounds derived from music or noise. Sampled materials are often inserted into or layered over an existing compositional structure to add to the matrix of meanings of a piece. Hedges (2002) describes a sample as a clear and distinct “sign-unit”:

> This unit may itself be a small semiotic structure, but one that has a unit enabling it to be removed from its original context by the sampler, and inserted into a new work, where it can take on new meanings, add meaning to the new text, to other samples. It can also stand more or less independently… Music is a very non-disruptive environment for the use of samples in this way: they can be layered on top of rhythm-based music, and so long as they match the rhythm in some way, they will not sound out of place. (2002: 1)

Samples are commonly used in popular music, for instance, to substitute for acoustic percussion and drum sounds or to add to existing lyrics or ambient sounds. However, in much experimental composition, as discussed in relation to the work of artists represented in the previous section, the whole work is constructed with nothing other than original samples recorded by the artist and/or plundered samples, materials pre-recorded by someone else. The 20\(^{th}\) century notion of ‘found sound’ that rose to pre-eminence through musique concrète made innovative use of original samples recorded from the acoustic environment. In the 21\(^{st}\) century, it has

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\(^{15}\) Samples used in music composition are typically between 2 and 8 seconds but I include some longer samples of up to 30 seconds.
become *de rigueur* for artists to ransack media and popular culture in search of interesting sonic materials with which to generate new sounds and recycle them in entirely new compositions. Current popular forms are “mashup” (typically a combination of lyrics from one work with music from another) and “remix” (radically editing and rearranging content from an existing work). These forms are, in a sense, practices of radical interactivity with existing works of art:

We now inhabit a ‘remix culture’, a culture which is dominated by amateur creators – creators who are no longer willing to be merely passive receptors of content. Instead, they are demanding a much broader right, a right to mashup and remix materials – to take on the role of producers – to cut, paste, sample or jam with content, in order to produce something which is distinctive of their own social and creative innovation. (O’Brien & Fitzgerald 2006: 17)

Working within this tradition, one that has now broadened to include diverse strands of music and sound composition, my works are composed entirely from sampled sounds, some recorded ‘raw’ from the environment and others from ‘pre-processed’ media materials. In assembling narratives on ‘the war on terror’, I made recordings from a wide range of public broadcast radio and television news and current affairs programs. Such material is already highly distilled from journalistic field recordings produced into new configurations that ‘fit’ the narrative being constructed by journalists and producers. Working at the intersection of the political grab and the compositional sound sample, I culled and whittled down many hours of original recordings into key ‘nubs’ of narrative or opinion. The outcome of this process was a total of about forty minutes of short sound bytes, each one ranging in length from three to twenty seconds. Digital effects were then applied to improve clarity, maximise volume and remove extraneous noise as far as possible so that each voice would play with an immediate presence in the final mix. Some use was made of filters to modify particular samples and create expressive effects. Directional reversal is employed, for instance, as a device that evokes the voice of the Other (apparently speaking a foreign language) and also alludes to the directional shifts of the labyrinthine walk that is a defining element of the final installation. Processing techniques also included the application of echo and reverb, repetition of consonants, words and phrases, and alterations to pitch and duration. Aesthetically, these grabs represent the minimalist philosophy of ‘less is more’ and are designed to achieve the sonic equivalent of a blitz of hailstones rather than a deluge of rain. *Blitz: Discursive bombardments in ‘the war on terror’* became the title of the project.

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16 Sources I used most commonly were ABC Television News, *The 7.30 Report*, *Lateline* and Radio National *Breakfast* and *AM* and *PM* since these provided comprehensive daily coverage of political affairs.
The legal and ethical implications of plunderphonic art are complex and hotly contested with occupants of the moral high ground polarised at either end of a spectrum of views. At one end are those who see creative works as property or commodity and the role of copyright as laws and policies designed to grant a “limited trade monopoly in exchange for universal use and access” and to govern the conditions of “fair use” of content (Collins, 2006: 9). Clearly, major recording corporations who see ownership as the foundation on which to generate profits are proponents of this position. A more moderate approach sees reforms to copyright laws as essential in redefining fair use so that it includes transformative appropriations by artists. Collins (2006) argues, for example, for new legislation that supports democratic intent in copyright provisions and balances the competing interests of all parties with an open-ended fair-use defence to replace the existing array of closed, category specific exceptions. As a result of the widespread take-up of digital media, the Copyright Amendment Act of 2006 sets in place a range of major reforms to the old 1968 Act and addresses some of the challenges to ‘fair use’ and ‘fair dealings’ posed by changing patterns of production and consumption.¹⁷

At the radical end of the spectrum on copyright debate is an anarchistic commitment to free and open access to all forms of content for creative and critical purposes. An excellent exemplar of a work created out of the radical anarchistic position is Negativland’s No Business who state that every image and sound in this multimedia work are “resolutely illegal” and constitute “a kind of audio-visual sit-in against the transnational media corporations” (Zimmermann 2006: 316). Negativland’s position is that “digital technology has rendered copyright as an outmoded legal form” with resulting tensions amounting to a “high stakes civil war” that “pits the ever-expanding proprietary commercial music industry empire against the file sharing, grassroots freedom fighters who transform old sounds into new ideas (Zimmermann 2006: 316). My own position on copyright is toward this end of the spectrum, favouring open access to material for transformative use in creative arts projects. As a postgraduate researcher enrolled in an Australian university, my sampling and remixing activities are, at any rate, legitimate under the amended Act in sections on fair dealings for parody or satire (s 41A and s 103AA). My practice-based research ‘plunders’ political discourses and showcases these in a parodical way to reveal their excess. The Blitz installation features an extensive array of brief citations sampled from the larger narratives circulated through the mediasphere within the chosen timeframe.

¹⁷ For further details, see Amendments to the Copyright Act for 2007 [http://webpac.lib.utas.edu.au.ezproxy.utas.edu.au/e_reserve/AMENDMENTS2007.PDF]
Composing a Narrative Field

Artists working with sounds in space tend also to work with other expressive forms such as images and text to attract visitors into a space and structure their encounters with the ideas contained there. In orchestrating an array of sensory experiences, the strengths and limitations of each medium included in the mix must be understood and used to advantage. Visual metaphors, for instance, focus attention on “the edges or outward surfaces of things brought up against each other” and may not accurately represent the mixing process of sound that is “more akin to cooking and chemistry than to calculation” (Connor 2003: np). The permeable quality of the aural sets it apart from the visual in the way that their elements becomes compound and it defies the normal metaphors of conjoined elements – collage and juxtaposition, for instance – that make for ‘complexity’ (Connor 2003). Davidson & Desmond describe the importance of allegory and metaphor in this process of combining diverse elements:

Installation art is very much a collage of meanings: the conjunction of objects, signs or ideas constructed by the artist provides a rich, synthetic field of relationships, generating allegory and metaphors... Installation art is a metaphoric process – the combination of object and context diverts original meaning and intent. These tropes are unstable, however, as the resistant identity of the object asserts itself and creates a dynamic between literal and implied meanings. (1996: 6)

By setting sounds in contrived relationships with other elements in a multi-modal field of meanings, installations pose a disruption to everyday navigations through the aural environments we inhabit. It is possible to treat a great deal of the noise and sound that we might attend to in our daily activities as a backdrop, a kind of sonic wallpaper, and to become adept at bracketing much of it out. Like the ‘cocktail party’ effect in which the ears attune to only one or two voices against the swell of the crowd, we attend to and consciously process only a small fraction of what we actually hear. The silent airstreams we move through daily are saturated with radiowaves from broadcast media – a super-abundance of messages and meanings beamed from around the globe. We breathe in and push through, quite literally, a discursive soup with every movement. This inescapable immersion in a metaphorical and material ocean of words is revealed the moment we switch on an electronic receiver to render it audible. A vast array of technologies, channels and modalities facilitate these encounters with the mediasphere: radio, television, land phones, mobile phones, networked computers, various kinds of digital personal assistants,

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18 In order to denote active engagement of participants in the work, I use the term ‘visitor’ throughout this account of the development of Blitz rather than the more passive term ‘audience’. Visitors to this installation walk, pause, listen, reflect on, move toward or away from sounds, manipulate lighting and chat with other presences in the space.
laptops, cameras, camcorders and mobile music players. This renders particularly anomalous the marginalised place of sound in art.

The rendering of a soundscape through an assemblage of iPods, themselves icons of mobility, capture and stylistic rupture, effectively situates my work within the genre of database narrative. The term generally refers to non-linear and open-ended approaches to storytelling that are commonly associated with new media but, in fact, can be generated in any expressive form. Kinder explains database narrative as a genre whose structure “exposes or thematizes the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories and that are crucial to language: the selection of particular data (characters, images, sounds, events from a series of databases or paradigms, which are then combined to generate specific tales) (2002: 6). Database narratives make explicit the arbitrary nature of such choices and reveal that there are always options for generating alternative story lines. “By always suggesting a virtuality,” Kinder says, “and the wave of potentialities linked to the uncertainty principle, such narratives inevitably raise meta-narrative issues” (2002: 5-6). This observation on the problem of meta-narratives and their claim to authority underpins my motivation for working directly with samples from public discourse, rather than constructing some other form of commentary about the subject in my own voice. The samples I enter into my iTunes database and use to create a narrative field are fractals drawn from the much larger pattern of 21st century stories of in/security and danger constructed by political leaders and media commentators as part of the battle for legitimation of competing meta-narratives. Western political leaders, for example, engage massive public relations machinery to manufacture particular kinds of constructs of democracy and justice and to attach these to the fiction of an enlightened western civilisation offset against a barbarous Other.

Kinder explores the legacy of 20th century film-maker Buñuel for conceptualising interactive database narrative in new media and identifies a number of devices used in Buñuel’s films that, she suggests, foreground the “revolutionary” potentials of this medium through their formal ruptures with conventional practice. Such devices include reliance on incongruous objects or ‘hot spots’ as the primary means of navigating from one scene to another: the use of puppet-like and eccentric avatars who engage and illuminate; the creation of a narrative field “where story possibilities seem limitless, where randomness, repetition, and interruptions are rampant, and where search engines are motored by desire” (Kinder 2002: 8). I make use of all these devices in order to create a story-space that, like Buñuel’s films, warp the audience
out of their everyday lives as they enter through the door of the installation and set them unexpectedly within a terrain of the hyperreal.

The iPods act as hotspots, sonic apertures or perhaps time capsules, referring the listener to events that come and go around the installation space in unexpected ways. Voices speak from dispersed locations, against one another and against other sounds added into the mix, and offer visitors multiple listening perspectives as they move through this narrative field. Visitors interact with sounds by moving bodily toward or away from them and by selectively directing their listening attention, similar to the cocktail party effect. Davidson & Desmond (1996) point out that, in this sense of requiring active bodily engagement, installation art takes a converse approach to other expressive forms such as web-based entertainment, theatre and cinema which generally offer a parade of actions, actors and scenery to an immobile and complicit spectator. Installations are a form of hyperrealism, like theatre and cinema, but the bracketing out of the external world and the careful structuring of a chosen space render installations themselves as displaced objects that function as islands within the terrain of the ‘real world’ (Davidson & Desmond 1996). As such, installations offer a particular kind of vantage point from which to consider the excesses and anomalies of everyday life.

There is no singular coherent story held together by a narrator in Blitz. What is offered is a narrative field, constructed by diverse storytellers, of events and interpretations that create an illusion of an unlimited supply of sonic material from the iPod databases. Beyond the visitor’s arrival and departure from the space itself, there is no requisite entry or exit point to this narrative field. While it conveys no lucid story line, there is a sense of coherence in that the diverse narrative fragments all relate in some way to an overriding theme. As Kinder points out, the logic of database narratives works similarly to the fluid structures of dreams:

> For in dreams, we are nightly bombarded by a random firing of neural signals generated by the brain which the cerebral cortex must interpret. It performs this interpretive task by drawing selections from our internal databases of imagery, which contain virtually everything we have ever experienced and everything we have absorbed from our cultural dream-pool, and we reshuffle these selections to generate new combinations that we narrativize when we awaken. We frequently interpret those stories as strategies of survival for ourselves, our culture, and our species... (2002: 14).

The voices that speak in Blitz are often familiar and refer to the ‘real world’ outside. Yet, like the characters in Buñuel’s films, the personas they present are not three-dimensional people with whom one could have a relationship. Rather, they seem to be actors in a theatre of the absurd: extreme and often bizarre scenarios are routinely
enacted and narrated as if they made perfect sense. They present as ephemeral avatars that are authorised to represent us, yet rarely say what it is that we would like said. And, as Kinder says of Buñuel’s actors, “we clearly see that characters function not as individuals but as subject positions, which are defined by history, culture, and genre, and which are only temporarily occupied by individual players or actors chosen from a database by those in charge” (Kinder 2002: 11).

The subject positions that narrate the unfolding scenarios around national in/security speak with various kinds and levels of political authority bestowed on them within complex networks of cultural relations. Some voices speak with far more performative power than others. As President of the United States, George Bush, for example, regularly makes pronouncements that are not only instrumental (or transitive) in reshaping world affairs, but actually perform an event simply by uttering its term. In the days following the 9/11 attack, for example, President Bush announced that the America was engaged in a ‘war on terror’ and rendered it so from that moment. The effects of that simple statement from a simple man have been enormous: a huge toll of death and damage to human bodies, further destabilisation of delicate international relations and a redefining of democracy in all western nations that is ongoing six years later. In her analysis of injurious speech and its status as a legal entity, Butler (1997) interrogates the notion that individuals are primarily responsible – and therefore legally prosecutable – for their injurious performative utterances. She makes the case that the force of authority to enact performatives is always derivative “through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices” (1997: 51).

It is not simply that the speech act takes place within a practice, but that the act is itself a ritualised practice. What this means, then, is that performative “works” to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized. In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force. (Butler 1997: 51)

The discourses that play out in Blitz, then, do not refer just to that President or this Prime Minister who speaks to legitimise the current war in Iraq or Afghanistan or all the other forms of violence that have been enacted in the service of a ‘war on terror’. The utterances of political leaders, and their citation and reiteration by media newsreaders and commentators, effectively reinscribe the centrality in western cultures of the masculinist meta-narrative of just/ified war as a ‘normal and natural’ route to globally beneficial outcomes. The construction and demonisation of a barbarous

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Other who must be punished, controlled and even eradicated is essential to this narrative, as is the suppression of the feminine in the sense of that term’s associations with and privileging of affect, caring, cooperation and connectivity as desirable determinants of relationship. When political leaders cite from such historically entrenched meta-narratives and deploy the full power of modern media to engineer and manipulate public fear, paranoid discourse can become so monolithic that it becomes difficult to imagine and to speak outside of it, regardless of where one’s sensibilities lie. Its excess of self-righteous fundamentalism and repetition constantly saturates the mediasphere and hijacks the agenda for public debate.

Mikhail Bahktin’s analysis of discourse in the novel provides useful concepts for considering the dynamics of the installation as a citational space. In The Dialogic Imagination he puts forward a view of language as performative, socially located and permeated with ideology rather than viewing it as an abstract system of representation. Bahktin’s view of the novel as an art form that exhibits a diversity not only of individual voices but also of social speech registers and ideologies is transferable to other genres, and applies particularly to installation art that draws directly on a variegated sampling of human voices and perspectives. As Bahktin explains:

The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour, (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphases)… (1981: 262-263)

Amidst this diversity, Bahktin identifies a ‘monoglossic’ tendency – or centripetal force – that serves to regulate language use and ideology and to enforce discipline. The voices of political leaders in the installation, insofar as they commonly speak to reinscribe totalising narratives, demonstrate this impulse to occlude complexity and diversity in favour of simplistic generalised messages based on values that they assume as common to themselves and their constituents. Countering such hegemonic discourse are the centrifugal forces of cultural and linguistic diversity that serve to decentralise and democratise. Bahktin refers to the diversity of voices and dialects within the prevailing language of a complex modern society as

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20 A great deal has been written on this subject from a feminist perspective. See, for example, Cooper (1989) and Taylor & Hardman (2004).

‘heteroglossic’ and to the use of different languages with their concomitant diversity in ways of thinking as ‘polyglossic’. Implicit in these notions is the intense and ongoing negotiation of competing values, narratives, cultural positionings, disparate perspectives and claims to power. Bakhtin also introduces the concept of polyphony in referring to the use of many speaking voices – in the sense of quoted speech – in the novel. This term is especially useful for articulating the design concept of Blitz, quite literally a polyphonic assemblage, yet one that essentially expresses the triumph of the monoglossic meta-narrative in its reiteration of a worldview formed in the context of the US imperialist project.

Within Bakhtin’s terms of reference, the task of the creative artist is to appropriate and redirect the dialogic ferment of the polyphony to her or his own agenda through citing it. He suggests that “the word in language is half someone else's. It becomes “one's own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (Bakhtin 1981: 294). For artists and other social commentators, parody is the clearest way to achieve polyphony and to subvert and displace the ideational confines of monoglossic discourse. Bakhtin’s concept of parody is based on a form more common in the life of ancient and mediaeval times in which it was “a joyous, chaotic, subversive, energetic play with/play against the dominant language forms for the purposes of shaking free the mind and spirit, an energy and activity often officially recognized and sanctioned -- the Saturnalia, the bacchanal, the carnival, the holiday of fools, and so forth” (Lye 1998). Bakhtin refers to this form of parody as carnivale and sets it against the somewhat less vibrant concept of parody in contemporary culture. The messianic rhetoric of President George Bush on ‘the war on terror’ seem to express a sense of the carnivale in its simplistic promotion of American self-righteousness and willingness to revel in its military might. Bakhtin suggests, however, that parody is double-edged in the sense that it works by speaking with, but also against, that which it is parodying. It both presents and represents an image of the original (Bakhtin 1981: 51).

This form of parody is the crux of what I seek to achieve by working with polyphony in an installation that brings into play a fluid cacophony of competing narratives that depict an arc of contemporary life. To simply replay a sample of utterance recorded from a single voice would not constitute a parody. The parody lies in juxtaposing a host of different voices beside one another and in concert with other sonic allusions (discussed later in this section) that warp and shift their meanings in unpredictable and apparently chaotic ways. In setting up a dense citational space to parody the
excesses of contemporary discourse, my intention is not to create a comedic effect aimed at producing laughter in my audience but, rather, to portray a theatre of the absurd in which the hyper-reality of being bombarded by everyday discourse segues into a disturbing sense of the surreal. In seeking for mechanisms through which to orchestrate the elements required to produce this somewhat convoluted and perverse form of parody, I happened unexpectedly upon the device of the labyrinth.

**Walking the Labyrinth**

One evening while navigating through a maze of suburban streets with the car radio on, I heard a voice expound on the mysteries and benefits of the ‘ancient’ practice of ‘walking the labyrinth’ – a practice that is apparently enjoying a popular resurgence in many parts of the world. The voice explained how the twin figures of the labyrinth and the maze are often confused – indeed, have been for millennia – and described the distinction between them in terms of the very different trajectories they create within a defined space: “A labyrinth is a unicursal, or a single, path to the centre,” it said, “which is very different from a maze because a labyrinth is a single path that we can’t get lost on, whereas a maze was developed much later in history and it was designed especially to confuse people and to test the intellect.” The voice, identified as Canberra psychotherapist Elizabeth Grace, spoke of how the walk into and out of the centre of a labyrinth has taken on spiritual significance for many people and is often used as a metaphor for life’s journey through unexpected turns and ever-shifting perspectives so that “just when you think you’re getting somewhere you turn backwards on yourself and walk away from where you thought you were going”.

The intriguing illogicality of deliberately choosing a labyrinthine trajectory piqued my curiosity and sent me searching for more stories via that mega-matrix of mazes within mazes, the Internet. Labyrinth-walking has indeed become a popular 21st century pastime and all kinds of sacred and secular meanings have come to be attached to it. Mazes, too, are ubiquitous and seem to be associated with a sense of intellectual play. Labyrinth enthusiasts from Edmonton in Canada, for example, suggest that while a maze can encourage visitors to develop problem-solving skills,

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22 A Google search on “walking the labyrinth” returned 45200 hits on the 15/09/2007, for example.

sharper memory and tolerance for frustration, walking a labyrinth is conducive to meditation and mental relaxation.\textsuperscript{24}

Through that chance radio encounter and my subsequent investigations, the labyrinth and the maze entered into my thinking about the project and took on key functions and meanings as I created the installation. It seems serendipitous that they arrived via my inner ear – itself named the labyrinth because of its intricate apparatus of fluid-filled passageways and thus serving as an apt visual sign for the realm of aural experience, the primary medium of the work. As the organ that enables both hearing (the cochlea) and a sense of balance (three semicircular canals linked by a vestibule), the labyrinth of the inner ear is a vital tool for safe and stable navigation of bodies moving through space.

\textsuperscript{24} See the Labyrinth Society of Edmonton website: \url{http://www.ualberta.ca/~cbidwell/SITES/labwhat.htm}

\textsuperscript{25} Both images are from the homepage of the Labyrinth Society of Edmonton.

\textsuperscript{26} Image from the website Dizziness-and-Balance.com: \url{http://www.dizziness-and-balance.com/images/Membranous-Labyrinth-labell.jpg}
Yet the practice of ‘walking the labyrinth’ seems, perversely, to be designed to confound aspirations to forward movement and stability in its periphrasis of space. The constant turns and returns and circlings seem more likely to engender disorientation and dizziness – symptoms of an ailing inner ear that has been damaged or infected to produce a syndrome called labyrinthitis. The spectre of that particular pathology underpins the references in the installation to a highly destabilised world order where citizens are regaled by stories of insecurity, danger and distrust of the Other. In the early 21st century when such stories have become pervasive and normalised, is it possible, as a culture, to avoid the pathologies of hearing and balance that are brought on by such a concentrated discursive blitz?

As well as its physiological location and vital role within the human body and its appropriation as a device for promoting spiritual calm, the labyrinth has accumulated a rich array of associations over its long history. A seminal text by Kern (2000)27 provides hundreds of drawings and photographs of diverse designs and modes of constructing labyrinths and an account of mythological, historical, cultural and spiritual meanings that have been associated with them over a five thousand year history. Kern documents numerous findings of Stone Age petroglyphs depicting labyrinths from around the Mediterranean Basin to demonstrate the antiquity of the form which, he suggests, most likely originates in Minoan Crete where evidence has been found dating from the second to third millennium BCE. The classic seven-circuit labyrinth is found on Cretan coins from as early as the fifth century BCE. Kern speculates that the very earliest form of labyrinth was a dance and that the tortuous patterns found on coins and clay tablets are a form of choreography, a representation of the spiralling movements of a line of dancers.

I take this sense of the labyrinth as choreography into Blitz by using it as a device for moving bodies through the narrative field. A large labyrinth is drawn out on the floor of the installation, filling the space. This labyrinth creates a patterned pathway for walking in and out of proximity to all seven sound sources.

Image 8. Design of the Blitz labyrinth (8 x 10

27 Kern’s work was first published in German in 1982 and is now available in a revised English edition.
that, literally, blitz the ears of passersby with words and sounds. It invites walkers to continually listen to this blitz from shifting sonic perspectives and acute (critical) angles.

The association of the labyrinth with Crete is perhaps better known by virtue of its central place in the myth of the Minotaur, a fearful hybrid creature born of a union between Queen Pasifae and a magnificent white bull that had been gifted to her husband. The story unfolds through an eclectic cast of characters who play out extreme roles in a strange and convoluted tale of lust, power, slaughter, terror, miraculous escape and tragic death. The historical confusion between the labyrinth and the maze is self-evident in the myth: the labyrinthine prison of Crete must surely have been a maze in that its design confounded escape. As McCaffery (2003) points out, it is a convoluted figure that serves multiple functions in the story:

Choreography, allegory, architecture and celestial computer, the labyrinth is a complex notion, often misunderstood and misapplied in its multifarious resonances. The prototypical classic, Minoan, or Cretan labyrinth (from which all early labyrinths derive) functions equally as a kennel, the prototype of our contemporary zoo, and an architectural death-trap. Both a home and a feeding tract, it is a wrapped model that includes a labyrinth inside a labyrinth: the Daedalian construct per se plus the curvilinear anfractuosities called the minotaur’s intestines. (McCaffery 2004: 114-5)

Little wonder then that the labyrinth, supposedly a device for evoking a state of singularity and clarity, has gained popular currency as a metaphor for complexity, entanglement and polyvalence. Doob (1990) emphasises the usefulness of the labyrinth’s ambiguities in her exploration of how notions of the labyrinth serve to inform medieval aesthetics. They are included for instance in the design of many European cathedrals, notably Chartres in France. On the one hand, labyrinths provide a pleasing and coherent design when seen from a ‘bird’s eye view’ above and, on the other, a complex convoluted experience from the ground within. This ambiguity serves to avert the positioning of the labyrinth and the maze as a classic binary, a fate that would inevitably align them with other sets of well-established

28 Daedalus, an ingenious inventor and artisan, was commissioned by King Minos to build a labyrinth in order to imprison the Minotaur, the progeny of a union between his wife Queen Pasiphae and a magnificent white bull. As retribution for his son’s murder in Athens, Minos demanded from the royal family of Athens an annual sacrifice of youths to feed the Minotaur. Theseus, youthful contender for the Minotaur’s dinner plate, arrived on Crete and became the beloved of Ariadne, daughter of Minos and Pasiphae. Ariadne persuaded Daedalus to tell Theseus the secret of the labyrinth so that he could navigate the labyrinth, slay the Minotaur and find his way out again. Ariadne gave Theseus a ball of thread to unwind so that he would be able to retrace his steps. Theseus successfully slaughtered the Minotaur and escaped with Ariadne. Minos’ wrath was vented on Daedalus and his young son Icarus. Minos imprisoned them inside the labyrinth. However, Daedalus’ ingenuity came to the rescue and the pair escaped from the labyrinth and from Crete on wings made of feathers and wax. Daedalus warned Icarus about the dangers of flying too low over the sea in case the waves might dampen the wings or too high in case the sun should melt the wax. Tragically, Icarus forgot his father’s cautions in the exhilaration of flying and did indeed soar upwards too close to the sun. The wax melted, the wings fell apart and Icarus plummeted to his death in the sea. Daedalus did manage to escape and continued with his colourful career as an inventor.
oppositions such as left and right brain, surface and depth, diffusion and focus, complex and simple, male and female. Conflated conceptually with the maze, the labyrinth is able to contain multiple meanings and to represent a play of ambiguities despite its apparently singular meanderings.

The figure of the Minotaur, the monstrous Other constrained in the heart of the labyrinth, seems eminently transportable as a metaphor to the stage of contemporary political theatre. Who or what is represented by that part-human monster willing to devour the lives of innocent youth? Is it a President, a Prime Minister, a Chief of Armed Forces, an anonymous aerial bomber, a suicide bomber, a ‘Rogue State’, an ‘Axis of Evil’, an erosion of democracy and civil liberties through ‘anti-terror’ legislation, an avowed terrorist, an imagined terrorist, or perhaps even terror itself? And who in today’s world is enacting the flawed ingenuity of Daedalus, the destructive power of King Minos, the excessive masculinity of the bull, the perverse desire of Pasiphae, the unrequited devotion of Ariadne, the youthful courage of Theseus, the exuberant bravado of Icarus? The allusion of the labyrinth to this mythic tale of creativity, heroism and destruction engenders a sense of strangeness, of fantasy, intended to provoke visitors to Blitz to engage in a more oblique interrogation of current political circumstances than they might do otherwise.

The myth is introduced into the installation space in a number of ways. As visitors enter the annex to the studio they see on the left wall a large blue curtain. Behind this, in a simulation of events at the UN in early 2003, is a replica of Picasso’s Guernica with the dominant image of a white bull in the top left corner. The bull, icon of masculine virility and brute power, stares transfixed at the violent devastation of the scene before him. Below the bull is the image of a screaming mother holding a dead child in her arms. Collaged over that part of the print is a newspaper clipping of an Iraqi child, Ali Abbas, his face grimacing in unimaginable pain, body burnt and armless in the wake of allied bombing of Baghdad in 2003, the sacrificial youth of modern warfare, ‘collateral damage’ in the revenge for 9/11. The voice of Ali Abbas recorded in an interview in Britain in 2007 features in the installation soundscape.

An aesthetics of the surreal and strange is produced through lighting and ambience, as well as through the changing blitz of sound. The installation is housed in a ‘black-

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30 Ali Abbas lost both parents and fourteen other relatives in that same bomb attack that injured him. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/6458145.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/6458145.stm)
box’ studio space of about eight by ten metres. To intensify the presence of the auditory realm, visual elements are played down and the lighting is reduced almost to dark. The sweeping curves of the labyrinth pathways are drawn out on the floorspace in short dashes comprised of small rectangular plastic tags covered with reflective tape. They resemble in miniature the design of road markings or, perhaps, the tarmac lines that guide planes to terminal docks at airports. Like road or airport markers picked up by night headlights, the lines illuminate brightly in torchlight beamed from a point close to the eyes of a walker. Small torches, mounted on holders that make it easy to walk with them held at eye level, are given to visitors as they enter the installation space. The dim lighting of the space maximises the impact of the large reflective figure of the labyrinth and the effects of moving torchlight creates the illusion of it floating slightly above the ground. These elements support a sense of the installation as mythic space, clearly linked to and yet outside of everyday life.

Lighting is by small battery-run lights, several in the centrepoint of the labyrinth and the remainder placed to mark the site of each iPod. Hard plastic shells (plant holders) are used as housing for the iPod/speaker sets to protect them from stray feet and to serve as resonating chambers. A small pathway of reflective markers draws attention to the location of each one. The only other forms of lighting are small hand-held torches by which visitors navigate the reflective markings of the labyrinth. The torches define a unique perspective for each visitor with shifting visual reflections that echo the ever-changing field of sound. The downward direction of visual attention within the darkened space serves to focus attention on listening and renders the floor as a large horizontal canvas on which floats the image of the labyrinth, a plane of movement through the dispersed sound sources – the ‘podyglossia’.

This viewing of an ever-shifting reflective space from a mobilised perspective parallels the dynamics of the listening experience. Bandt (2001) comments on how sound installations as a form tend to offer fluid, possibly dislocating, perceptual encounters with the concepts embedded in a work:

The listener/perceiver observes the art from a particular location, a point in space which affects all aspects of the sensory perception of the work. Acoustically, it shapes the way events are heard and retained. If the listener moves around, the pathways chosen further shape the perception of that work. From the point of view of location, each perceiver has a unique experience of the work which cannot be duplicated. Sight and sound lines result from the fixed or moving point of the viewer/auditor in relation to the artwork. (Bandt 2001: 12)

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31 The plastic tags measure 25mm by 100mm and are spaced at intervals of 100mm.
In deliberately setting out to engineer a sense of disorientation and strangeness in the installation space, I am influenced by the philosophy of radical architects Arakawa & Gins who have used the labyrinthine designs in buildings as a means for deliberately engendering a sense of disequilibrium and imbalance. These architects view this design approach as an antidote to the complacency and conservatism promoted by banal functionalist architecture (McCaffery 2003). Arakawa & Gins suggest that taking people out of their functionalist comfort zones and placing them in strange and unfamiliar environments promotes self-awareness and creative engagements with one another and with their surroundings. They aim to promote spontaneity and emancipation through bold and convoluted design forms (McCaffery 2003: 123).

In deploying labyrinths for this purpose in their ‘reversible destiny’ architectural sites, Arakawa and Gins break with the classic unicursal model and work, instead, with multi-level labyrinths that deliberately create confusions and impediments to progress through a space. McCaffery notes that deployments of such complex labyrinthine figures actually “relate less to architecture *per se* than to orchestrated passage and choreographies” and that “it is the complications and impediments to normative movement of bodies in space that mark the essence of labyrinthine experience” (McCaffery 2003: 134). Arakawa & Gin’s designs make virtues of perpetual motion, dynamic change and insecurity. This ethos informs the *Blitz* project of facilitating a critique of normalising discourses of national security.

I appropriate these aesthetics as a basis for designing a choreography of walking and listening as bodies traverse the installation space. While there are no physical impediments to movement within the *Blitz* labyrinth, a clear unicursal path, the walker is constantly bombarded with voices and sounds that come from different directions and locations within the space. These propel and repel, provoke and evoke, call and recall so that it becomes difficult for the walker to progress smoothly through the site. Each individual experience of the labyrinth and its soundscape will be different, contingent on bodily response to the dispersed sound sources – the iPods – playing from around the space. The timing of a visit, the chosen trajectory and speed, pauses to listen to the installation sounds or communicate with other visitors, all combine to create a unique encounter with the narrative field.
Against the traditional practice of silently ‘walking the labyrinth’ as metaphor for a ‘journey within’, the Blitz labyrinth invites walkers to fold themselves into a dynamic field of aural messages, thereby to warp and shift the emerging play of meanings. The iPods work synchronously, sounding in random juxtapositions against one another and against silences, to recreate a sense of immersion in the discursive blitz of 21st century media messages about terrorism and war. The meandering trajectory of walking bodies creates a choreography of audition, of moving and listening strategically from ever shifting perspectives. It invites walkers to listen for possibilities that may lie between and beyond hegemonic Western narratives, to locate the gaps and silences. Emerging from the barrage of elements in the Blitz environment comes the question: Beyond the pervasive noise of discourse normalised by politicians and the media, what is it that we might otherwise wish to hear and to speak?

**Assembling a Listening Ground**

The final outcome of the research is the creation of an evocative space, a listening ground, that offers a dense and shifting field of polyphonic voices and sounds that play against silences. In walking a labyrinthine trajectory back and forth across the compressed time/space of this listening ground, visitors are immersed in a blitz of discourse that conveys a sense of the *Zeitgeist* of 2004.

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32 Photo by Sol Brown.
The space chosen for the initial showing of Blitz is a university photographic studio situated in a demountable building, a ‘black box’ space of about eight by ten metres. The building is steel-framed on stumps and freestanding, entered through a small annex with black walls. This leads in through a black curtained doorway to the main space with a high raked ceiling, grey-carpeted floor and white walls. It is a ‘live’ acoustic space that acts as a suitable resonating chamber for the mix of sounds in the installation. The qualities of the space itself – its appearance, noises, smells, temperature and humidity – will inevitably seep into the character and ‘feel’ of the work and become an integral part of the audience experience. Walking across the floor, for instance, produces a rather uncanny array of metallic creaks and groans – sounds that actually enhance the sense that, in entering the installation, one crosses into a surreal and shadowy domain. Sometimes wind gusts howl around the building and buffet in under the door to billow the curtain, letting shafts of light stream momentarily into the main room. Muffled voices of passers-by outside filter in through the walls. The proliferating cacophony of voices from within defy their designated spatial boundaries and spill out into surrounding areas and can be heard as visitors approach the building. As Canadian sound artist Christof Migone observes:

‘Exhibiting sound art poses challenges to the white cube, sound epitomizes leakage, sound confirms the porosity of space. Even prior to an intentional sound entering the equation, every space has its own soundtrack, its room tone. Every space is sonorous, every space has a breath.’ (Mignone 2003: 1)

Davidson & Desmond suggest that installations create ‘islands of experience’ by setting borders around spaces that separate them from the everyday world. “In mapping a place” they say, “the artist attempts to establish an environment that exists as a work of art itself… when the audience enters the gallery space, they also enter the work of art” (1996: 5). This observation only partially holds true for sound-centric installations, for the reasons discussed above.

A sound installation inevitably requires both artist and audience to enter into an intense relationship with various dimensions of time. To begin with, acquiring and working creatively with the sounds that emerge in the final work has taken an inordinate amount of time. I have listened to material many times over during the various processes of recording, transferring, selecting, sorting, processing, optimising, minimalising, testing, reviewing, revising, and so on. The editing process itself was directed to compressing time: many hours of recordings were reduced down to ‘nubs of meaning’ in stories or commentaries by shedding their padding, sometimes removing a speaker’s gaps and pauses to create a seamless flow of
narration. This creates a sense of collapsed, or compressed, time within the installation space. Narrative fragments and plotlines that play out over many months in ‘real life’ are represented in a matter of minutes in a vastly hastened sequence or even played synchronously. The sonic density of the work derives both from the character of the raw sound material and from techniques used in preparing it for exhibition.

Time is also compressed by how long visitors choose to spend in the installation space. Unlike other more traditional audio performances – music concerts or radio programs, for example – the timeframe for a visit to an installation is indeterminate and decided at the will of individual visitors. In this it resembles the mode of engagement traditional to the art gallery or museum, rather than to auditory venues. Bandt points out that it may be necessary to remain in an installation environment for some time in order to fully appreciate what the artist is offering and to grasp nuances of relationship between visual and sonic elements. She comments that listeners may be challenged by the number of different signals emanating from a work and the quantity of sensory information that may demand to be decoded simultaneously (Bandt 2001: 12). *Blitz* presents a aurally rich and dynamic environment with minimal visual distractions to invite visitors to engage in intense listening and reflection on their world. It offers a serpentine route through the space and visitors may choose to simply follow the choreography of the labyrinth into the centre and out again, perhaps with some pauses, and exit. A typical visit to the installation might perhaps span ten to fifteen minutes, though the extent of content cycling from the audio sources and its ever changing juxtapositions of meaning can accommodate a far more extended and thorough engagement.

The folding of past time in the present moment is also a form of time compression. This is achieved by representing the voices of familiar public figures – politicians, journalists and other commentators – telling stories that can be identified with a particular period: the post 9/11 years under Prime Minister John Howard. These voices may take on quite a different significance as time passes and changes occur in political leadership, events and circumstances. The voices and events represented in the installation may become more clearly marked as belonging to the past, perhaps even to a previous era, depending on the extent of the shift in characters, policies and national and world events. The passage of time is marked by continuities and ruptures. At the time of writing, for example, there is a strong sense of continuity from 2004 to 2007 concerning the conduct and representation of ‘the war on terror’. The political directions and discourses already established by 2004 have been
maintained and strengthened through, for example, further tightening of ‘counter-terror’ legislation, increase in police powers, further arrests of citizens and increasingly restricted security arrangements in areas of public passage. ‘The war on terror’ continues despite the fact that the term itself has fallen into disrepute among some US allies, if not with the President Bush himself. The forthcoming election may, perhaps, initiate a rupture with this era if a different government comes to power.

In designing the soundscape as a blitz of synchronous voices and sounds, I had imagined visitors moving through quite a dense narrative field in which they would be drawn to constantly shifting fragments of meaning that would surface and retreat from a swell of crowd-like sound, similar to the ‘cocktail party’ effect. Clearly, with seven iPods playing in synchrony, there would need to be some silent tracks mixed in among the sounding tracks to ‘aerate’ the density to the point of audibility. A kind of reversal was in order: having compressed my sound field down to an extremely dense form, I would now need to ‘aerate’ it, to expand it out again by punctuating the samples with silences and offset voices against other kinds of audio material to introduce a greater variety of pitches and textures and sonic allusions that would enhance the ‘listenability’ of the overall mix.

Digital media offer a unique capacity for generating total silence. It is a simple matter to use sound editing software to insert a specified period of silence into a soundtrack or even to create a whole track of silence. Assigned to a playlist, a track of silence becomes like an object that can be arranged among other sound objects in the formation of a sound field. In working with the podyglossia I moved constantly back and forth between conceptualising sound as an event (a function of time) and sound as an object (a function of space). As I further experimented with different mixes of sounds and silences, it became clear that the punctuation of my narrative field in time and space would be the key to its success as a compelling design. I generated silent tracks of different lengths – 7, 14, 21 and 28 seconds – and included these on the playlists of media narratives. I also experimented with integrating other kinds of sounds, as well as silences, into these playlists. Through trial-and-error, I decided to use four of the iPods to play a mix of narrative content – the grabs – with rhythmic sounds and silent tracks. This material is organised into approximately equal ratios of voice, sound and silence.

I use the other three iPods to introduce ambient sound into the narrative field to support and extend the stories told by the voices. The precise content of this material can be flexible and subject to ongoing input of new ideas simply by adding
alternative playlists and additional tracks. In the mix are the sounds of dripping taps, footsteps, a clock ticking, heartbeat and breathing, ambulance sirens, plane engines and children’s voices. Some of these sounds are recorded directly and others are samples bought from online sound effects stores.\(^{33}\)

While rhythm is by no means an essential element in creating a soundscape, it can greatly enrich the sonic interest of a work and enhance an indeterminate play of meanings through metaphorical allusions to the outside world. Rhythms layered against the flow and shifting intonations of voices are fundamental to our everyday experience of life and support a sense of hyper-reality in the installation space. I chose to include in the installation the sounds of a ticking clock, footsteps and dripping taps and to manipulate these so that they all played in aligned speeds of 60bpm or 120bpm. Each of these sounds is everyday and familiar, but can be heard ambiguously and may conjure quite different associations for different listeners.

Coyle (1995) points out that when sounds are places into new relationships with one another and divorced from the sonic ambience of their performative context, their meanings are likely to change – or at least to become less stable. I use a range of sound in *Blitz* that work to destabilize the sense of fixed meanings that can come to reside in monolithic discourses such as those constructed by political leaders around ‘the war on terror’. Ticking clocks, for instance, refer directly to the passing of time and may create a sense of urgency or, alternatively, of ennui. They may signal the comfort of the everyday and familiar – the innocuous tick-tocking of a kitchen clock in domestic space, say. Yet, in the terror-oriented consciousness of the early 21\(^{st}\) century, a ticking clock is likely to have more sinister overtones: an imminent detonation perhaps, an explosion that will rip flesh and rupture lives. Clocks may also remind us that voices, even powerful ones, are ephemeral and resonate only for a few passing moments before others take their place. In like fashion, walking footsteps may evoke the relaxed and comfortable rhythm of feet pacing along on a steady path through life or, with a heavy tread, a more sinister sense of oppressive control and surveillance, unwanted intrusions or imminent danger.

Dripping taps are generally an irritating sound and urge immediate action to either turn off the tap or replace the washer. In the current climate of alarm over climate change and global warming with the dire predictions of water shortages, a dripping tap can be an ominous sound – the slow steady rhythm of a precious and finite

\(^{33}\) Taps, clocks, footsteps and breathing are my own recordings. Sirens, plane sounds, heartbeat and children’s voices in a playground are from SoundRangers: http://www.soundrangers.com/ The voice of Ali Abbas is from a BBC News Online website as referenced.
resource leaking needlessly away. In the context of the installation the drip sound evokes a play of alternative meanings: loss, for instance, or the power of repetitive words and phrases to wear away sense and sensibility, to smooth and flatten resistance. Drip sounds also allude to the power of water to carve out intricate and beautiful underground structures that are transformed into a myriad of cultural meaning through the figures of the labyrinth and the maze. On a sinister note, we have seen dripping water implicated in admissions of torture against prisoners accused by western governments of terror related crimes.

A playlist of children’s voices in the iPod ensemble represents growth and emergence, a new generation with the potential to derail the discourses of fear, death and destruction established by preceding generations. They allude to the imaginary worlds of childhood, worlds that exist within, beyond and in parallel to the harsh realities of adult war zones. The lives of children are always imperilled by the militaristic mindset and its consequences. Sampled from the Internet, there are different kinds of allusions in the children’s voices: the high-pitched chatter and laughter of English-speaking children in a playground and the shouts and jostlings of Iraqi children playing more sinister war-games in a Baghdad street. There is the measured voice of one particular Iraqi child, Ali Abbas, interviewed in 2007 at the age of 16 years, the boy in the photo shown in the entry to the installation collaged with Picasso’s Guernica. Now living in England, he speaks of a reconstructed life, of how he manages to play soccer, ride a bike and paint despite the loss of his arms, and of his desire to be “something to do with peace” when he grows up.34

The podyglossia also includes a playlist in which all the tracks are much the same, just some subtle variations in the speed of the steady rhythm of breathing and heartbeat. These tracks simply recycle over and over again like a cushion of sound on which all the other sounds rest. They are not particularly noticeable in the mix, like ambient sound, but every now and then at random they are disrupted by sound of ambulance sirens. This playlist is a reminder of both the robustness and the fragility of human bodies.

The spectre of the Minotaur, the monstrous (or perhaps ‘monsterised’) Other, is embedded within and animates the discursive labyrinth of terror talk and wartalk in the installation. The Minotaur of the 21st century is a shifty hybrid beast whose image and voice may take many virtual forms, changing like a chameleon with the context

34 See a transcript online of the interview with Ali Abbas. BBC News Online (2007): http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/6458145.stm
of his representation. For me, at this point in time, the beast dwells in the vengeful ferocities and fundamentalist thinking of powerful and renegade western political leaders. Like the bull in Picasso’s Guernica, they seem mesmerised by the spectacle of violent power and strangely detached from its devastation. I have experimented with a variety of different approaches to representing the voice of the Other in the installation, including using my own manipulated voice. Finally, I applied labyrinthine processing techniques to the utterances of President George Bush himself and used this transformed voice to represent the Minotaur. This altered voice is achieved using reversals, echo effects and a downward pitch shift to produce speech that sounds like a strange foreign tongue that is then translated into English by the President. The technique of reversing sound and double-tracking it against a forward momentum is an allusion in audio to the ancient Greek writing practice of boustrophedon that follows a serpentine trajectory rather than moving across the page left to right as in modern English writing. McCaffery draws attention to the morphological affinities between the classical labyrinth and this form:

> Early Greek poetry was written in boustrophedon, with lines alternating direction from left to right and right to left, in imitation of the turn of the ox in ploughing. All writing in early Greece took the form of scriptio continua, a practice of undifferentiated writing without capitalization or word breaks. Both phenomena occasion a cancellation of space (respectively, the empty retinal movement back across a page and the meaningful differentiation between verbal units) and together bear a remarkable affinity to the unicursal labyrinth design. It might be said that the labyrinth precipitates a “baroque” embellishment upon an architectural boustrophedon. (McCaffery 2004: 113-4)

But whilst the singular trajectory of the boustrophedon results in the total tracing of a space, as does the labyrinth, there is a fundamental difference. The labyrinth walk enters and exits from just one opening, winding in and out by the same track – a device by which it alludes to both the centripetal and centrifugal forces of public discourse in the polyphony. The blanket coverage of the boustrophedon, heading only in one direction and leaving no gaps and interstices, is more like the monoglossia of the totalising and normative meta-narrative that leaves no space for diverse views, cultures, languages and lifestyles. It is this impulse toward fundamentalist ideology, the iron bars of totalitarianism, that surfaces persistently in the rhetoric of western political leaders in the years since 9/11. Such monstrous notions lurk in the heart of a contemporary narrative still unfolding.

Blitz is not a site-specific installation and, in that sense, will remain an ongoing ‘work in progress’ to be remade within its broad design parameters for each new iteration. The placing of iPods in the installation space, for instance, may vary to explore the effects of spacing, directionality and volume in creating different impacts of
‘bombardment’. In a preview exhibition, I asked visitors to comment on different sound levels. One suggested that lower volumes gave a sense of being deep underwater, immersed in a thick dark ocean of sound. Predictably, higher volumes served to induce a sense of being battered by the sounds but tended to reduce ability to engage reflectively with the content of the narratives. A cogent comment here was: “When the sound was softer, you could walk around amongst it and really listen and think about what the voices were saying. When it was turned up really loud, you couldn’t think any more – I just reacted emotionally to it”. This ‘tuning’ of the installation space in terms of relative volumes of each sound source is clearly a critical factor in determining its impact. Playlists and the sound tracks within them are an immensely malleable medium and alternatives are easily prepared and installed so that decisions about which to finally include can be made in situ. While Blitz is currently prepared in a ‘final form’ ready for presentation, its precise sounds and their organization are always contingent on the possibility of modification through fresh ideas and influences.

35 Comment from a conversation at the preview show for Blitz held in June 2007 in Lismore.
The opulent field of labyrinthine allusions that inform the subject of my research extend also to the inquiry process itself. The twin figures of the labyrinth and maze offer useful metaphors for reflecting on research as it is lived ‘on the ground’. Tafuri (1980), for instance, elucidates the notion of a labyrinthine path of historical analysis and its dangers in the introduction to his work on the ‘adventures’ of architectural language. He points out that when research is written up, it tends to be done in such a way that the process appears transparent, linear, logical and monolithically coherent. Yet, he says, this does not necessarily reflect the complexities of the ‘lived’ research journey. He cites Ginsburg and Prosperi’s exposé of the doubts and accidents that characterize much historical research, praising their “courage to describe, not the Olympian and definitive results of research, but rather its tortuous and complex iter” (Tafuri 1980: 1). Productive research, Tafuri suggests, may be characterised by fitful progress, meanderings, false starts and errors to be overcome (305). He summarises the intention behind his own project as “to present, not a piece of history complete in itself, but rather an intermittent journey through a maze of tangled paths, one of the many possible ‘provisional constructions’ obtainable by starting with these chosen materials” (Tafuri 1987: 21).

Tafuri’s insights resonate with my own research experience. Designing, creating and contextualising the work took me on an extended labyrinthine trajectory across disciplinary boundaries, exploring not only the theory and practice of sound art but also drawing on concepts from cultural and media studies, philosophy, politics, architecture and visual arts. I have followed conceptual tangents, become bogged down in complex philosophical theory and found myself stalled in a hiatus many times over. It was a rich learning experience, much of which is not evident in the final tangible outcome of the process. In my introduction I described this process as an oscillation between the labyrinth and the maze: between moving purposefully ahead on a singular and focussed path across a brightly-lit surface; and, on the other, falling through into the deep rich confusion of an underground cave system.

Another resonance arose in a recent chance encounter with radio voices being interviewed about an emerging ethos in political theatre.¹ The program explored how a new wave of theatre writers are engaging critically with concepts of nation

and nationalism. The emerging project of ‘critical nationalism’ works against the grain of an older form of 1970s and 1980s nationalism that attempted to construct a sense of nation through the creative arts by making pictures and telling stories full of recognisably Australian idiom and characters. Hilary Glow\(^2\) draws attention to how artists working within a framework of critical nationalism use theatre as a forum for public debate to interrogate contemporary cultural, political and economic life. Glow refers to Gassan Hage’s notion of ‘caring for’ the nation and the distinction he makes between that approach to nationalism and the form of paranoid nationalism that has been promoted by the Howard government. I agree with Glow’s view that if there is to be, as seems inevitable, an ongoing discussion about national values, then artists have a role to play as critical inquirers within the fray. Artists can, she says, be part of an enterprise “to keep notions of nation in play without necessarily acceding to the terms that have been drawn up by the current government” (Glow 2007). She commends the approach of a number of contemporary Australian playwrights who ask probing questions about where our values come from and how they are maintained. In this “theatre of deliberation” an audience is given material to “chew over” and are provoked into thinking in depth about important national issues such as race, class and national identity.

As an installation of voices, *Blitz* takes on some elements of theatre and indeed I have described it as a theatre of the absurd where extreme and often bizarre scenarios are routinely enacted and narrated as if they made perfect sense. *Blitz*, too, contributes to the larger project of critical nationalism by interrogating hegemonic discourses of ‘the war on terror’. Like theatre, the varied resonances of the human voice constitute the primary medium with which narrative and dialogue are constructed and engage the critical faculties of my audience. Unlike theatre, my work does not use ‘live’ actors but represents an array of human agents and perspectives through mediated voices.

This exegesis opens with three narratives, or ‘auricles’, that introduce the reader to major areas of concern of the project: sound and silence as material for eliciting bodily engagements with ideas through arts practice; the volatile power of art to expose and question the implications of seemingly persuasive political agendas and actions; and the defining of a space of passages and puzzlements through the multifarious resonances of the labyrinth and the maze. These distinct strands of the project are knitted together through the medium of my own (writer’s) ‘voice’ within

\(^2\) Interviewee and author of *Power Plays: Australian Theatre and the Public Agenda* (2007).
the exegesis and are integrated within the installation as an orchestration of sound, silence, voice, technologies, visual imagery, lighting and space.

My project contributes to the field of experimental electrovocal art in a number of ways. It identifies a gap in the literature in terms of marking this area as a distinct strand of activity with a history and culture of practice worthy of critique and documentation in its own right. It offers insights into the work of other Australian sound artists grappling with voice and technology on cultural and political themes. In resonance with one strand of this history of Australian electrovocal sound, in constructing the Blitz installation, I embrace an aesthetics of the ‘lo-fi’ in emergent media to deliver a polyphonomous (database) narrative apparatus. This takes the form of the ‘podyglossia’, a highly transportable and flexible technological assemblage that can be adapted for all manner of diverse content in sound installations. In the tradition of found sound and plunderphonics, Blitz deploys the sample as a grab from mediated life that can be put to the service of art and ideas and, in this instance, is deployed to parody the excess of political discourse in contemporary Australia.

Visitors to the installation are offered an experience of intense and active bodily engagement with the subject. They are literally immersed in a dark blitz of voices and other sounds that beat on skin and brain and are required to move through it, in the same way that we move through an ocean of radio waves streaming through the air in everyday life. This form of intensity is peculiar to sound and one cannot simply peruse the subject of the work, as one might browse the works in a visual art gallery – the force of the volume and its content demands attention as long as one remains within the installation space. Kahn (2006) cautions artists to take care in working with sound’s ability to colonise consciousness – to “annoy, antagonise and agitate” – yet it is precisely these capacities that I have sought to deploy in evoking critique of oppressive militaristic responses to dealing with world affairs.

These qualities are part of what sound offers. Thus, notions of “moving freely” are always countered by a work’s inherent abuse of such freedom – sound art not only incites the pleasures of auditory discovering, but the pain of having to compromise in the face of its own public assumptions. (Kahn 2006).

Cognisant of Kahn’s proviso, I construct the listening experience as labyrinthine and mobile, as movement through a narrative field with shifting perspectives and attention to alternative positions. The concept of listening as a potent form of political engagement is central to the work. As an activity it is, literally and metaphorically, a complex form of agency and intervention into cultural life. The structuring of the space of Blitz with its labyrinthine choreography and dispersed
sound sources offers an exemplar for a listening ground that demonstrates how new media may be deployed to offer transgressive political encounters in public space.

This project contributes also to the rapidly growing volume of research in Australian universities that acknowledges and embraces the import of multi-modal ways of knowing within the academy. Over a decade ago, Stone (1996) commented on the nature and implications of the shift toward a multi-mediated academia:

…the new formations of academic thought that emerge at the interface between scholarly reportage and the performative gesture hold significant and promising power for rethinking what a university is and ought to be, here at the close of the mechanical age… We no longer live in a world in which information conserves itself primarily in textual objects called books. In a world in which not only information but also meaning struggles to escape its customary channels, perhaps the best way to serve the scholarly muse may not be to continue to play out the moves that served perfectly in the age of the scriptorium and the inescapable facticity of data (Stone 1996: 177).

The timing of the first public showing of Blitz is significant in terms of its impact. It will be mounted about a week after polling day (24th November) for the 2007 Australian federal election.³ Again bombarded by the discourses of an election campaign, we are being subjected to scare-mongering strategies by the Howard government around many of the same issues, including terrorism. At the same time, the kinds of violent bombardments depicted in Picasso’s Guernica continue in Afghanistan and Iraq. Political obfuscations and denials, such as those leading to the shrouding of the Guernica tapestry in the UN in early 2003, seem deeply entrenched and normalised in the governance of ‘democratic’ western nations. Restrictions on access to information and interventions into free speech continue, reinforced by further amendments to counter-terror legislation introduced in 2005. In full page advertisements placed in major national newspapers the Law Council of Australia stated its opposition to that anti-terrorism legislation in chilling terms: "The Government is using the threat of terrorism to introduce laws that put our most basic civil liberties under threat. The ramifications have the potential to be as terrifying as terrorism itself" (cited in Grattan 2005).

In late 2007, five hundred police, military personnel and other public servants gather in locations around Tasmania to test out the State’s counter terrorism program.⁴ Police Minister David Llewellyn is reported as saying that “its resolution is likely to

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³ The durability of Blitz in future will lie in its significance as a work that represents a particular moment of political and media history.

include simultaneous tactical assaults on several remote strongholds” and that “such exercises are vital in ensuring the state’s counter-terrorist skills are maintained and honed”. The site of one of these “assaults” is the central highlands, only a few hours’ drive from the peaceful settings of Tipping’s Sounding Stone, the Wychwood Gardens labyrinth and Mole Creek caves. Given that one third of Tasmania is comprised of wilderness, one can only wonder at what kind of terrorists these forces are actually rehearsing for. It is hard to avoid the suspicion that the State government, determined to push ahead with the development of a pulp mill against massive public opposition, is preparing a forceful response to ongoing protest actions by its own constituents. These new millennium years of constructing the terrorist as foreign Other may be about to shift into a ‘post-terror’ era when such terms are turned back, like the bends in the labyrinth, against the Self. In a shifting convolution of emotions and debate around matters of resources, money and ‘strategic’ alliances, ‘enemy’ is a mobile term that may be attached to any one of us by governments now armed with all the weaponry of legislative authoritarianism. In the history of Australia since invasion there has perhaps never been a more urgent moment in which to deploy the licence of art to speak up against the discursive blitz of the state, to imagine a sense of world security Other-wise.

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5 Quote from the report above.


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