

# Reanimating Audio Art: The Archive as Network and Community

Lewis Kaye

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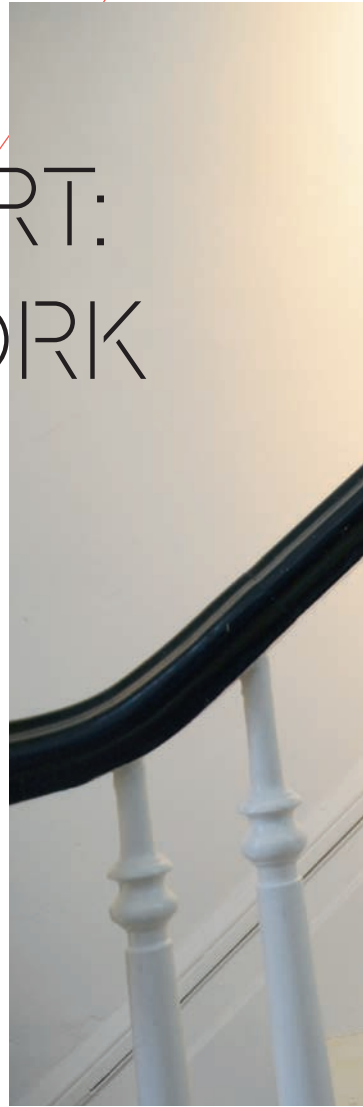
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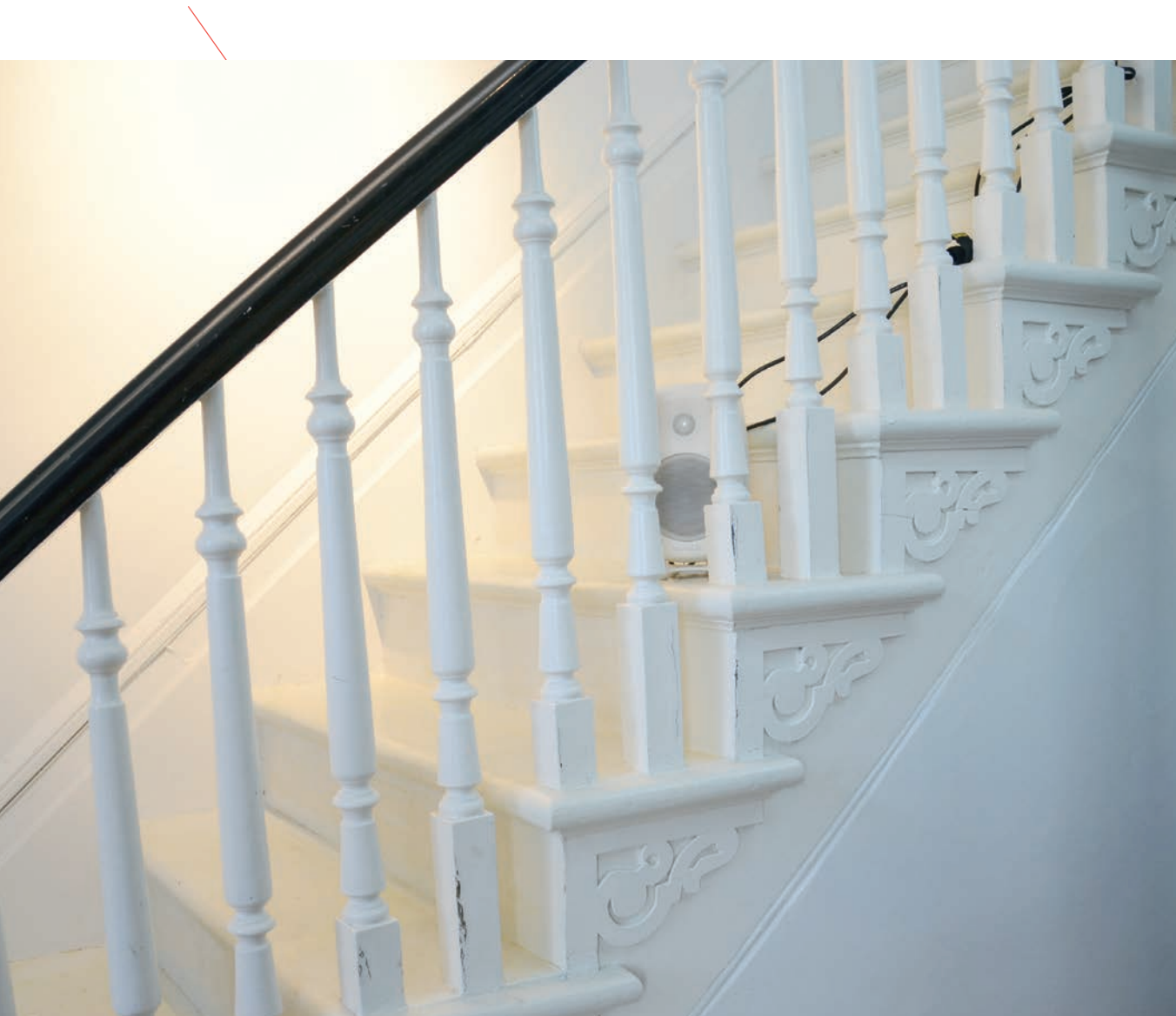
# REANIMATING AUDIO ART: THE ARCHIVE AS NETWORK AND COMMUNITY

Lewis Kaye

La publication de ce texte est une collaboration entre esse et OBORO dans le cadre d'une résidence d'écriture sur l'art sonore. L'auteur choisi bénéficie d'un séjour de recherche et rédaction à OBORO pendant lequel sont mises à sa disposition les archives audio du centre, conservées depuis l'ouverture de son Laboratoire nouveaux médias.

The chosen author was invited to take part in a research and writing residency at OBORO in which the centre's audio archives were made available. The archives contain materials collected since the opening of OBORO's new media lab.





Lewis Kaye, *Nanocuratorial event*, Flevoland, Montréal, 2012.  
Photo: Tanya St-Pierre, courtesy of OBORO

What is an audio archive? At first glance, this seems like a straightforward question. Our minds turn to collections of recorded sounds of historical or documentary relevance, perhaps tapes or vinyl records, kept and managed by libraries and used for historical research. This traditional notion of the archive still informs much of the thinking behind how audio archives are constituted, maintained, and used. Notions of heritage and cultural preservation are often the rationale that underpins the existence and operational philosophy of many contemporary sound archives. Of pressing concern for such archives today is how to preserve and make available the analogue recordings of the past given a rapidly changing digital and networked technological environment. A second, related issue is the preservation of the actual analogue technologies themselves, as this is what facilitates access to the recorded media.

While no doubt important concerns, implicit in this approach to audio archiving is the treatment of technology as a value-neutral, discrete, and ancillary element there to support the process of archival research. In other words, audio recording, reproduction, and diffusion technologies exist as things apart from the sound itself; it is the sound alone that is of primary concern. What goes unconsidered in this view is that technological systems used to record, store, and reproduce sound are inevitably implicated in the experience of the recorded sound. This omission allows assumptions of fidelity—the idea that recorded and reproduced sound should strive to

match, as closely as possible, the original sound—to dominate technical debates over audio archiving, thus limiting the consideration of technology to its role of adding or reducing noise. This desire for fidelity, and the subsequent abstraction of technology and denial of the spatiotemporal context of listening, is a belief forcefully countered by sound studies scholars such as Jonathan Sterne (2003) and Aden Evens (2006). Nevertheless, it is a tendency that, while problematic, is not terribly surprising given the documentary and preservationist thrust of much archival work. It belies a bias towards what McLuhan might call the “figure” of the recording—the texts, words, songs, or objects being recorded—whereas the argument here is that attention must also be paid to the formative “ground” of media technology itself, and how such ground refigures the text.

These are the premises upon which my *Writing Audio Art* residency project at OBORO was founded, and they are questions that remain even though the project has finished. This is not to say that no progress has been made towards addressing this question. Rather, the work done during this residency—the conversations with artists and curators, and the audio artworks that have been reanimated and experienced—has simply highlighted the fact that there are no fixed and firm definitions of what a sound archive is. This answer is, perhaps, as fluid, ephemeral, and context-sensitive as the experience of audio artwork itself.



Lewis Kaye, *Nanocuratorial event*, Flevoland, Montréal, 2012.  
Photo : Tanya St-Pierre, courtesy of OBORO



The question of technology and infrastructure figures large in this debate. Technical details are central to the very experience of audio art in particular, a practice in which questions of documentary fidelity tend to take a backseat to those of aesthetic experience. The very specific sonic quality of the system OBORO provided for my research, for instance, raised questions about how the technical infrastructure needed to reanimate an audio art archive inevitably influences the sound that will be heard, and therefore how a different infrastructure would necessarily lead to a different sound and different experience. The archived audio artwork, unlike an archived photograph or written document, is in a state of perpetual becoming; it exists in a form of suspended animation, requiring a kind of technical resuscitation to live again.

The question of infrastructure and its effect on the experience of audio art is one of import to OBORO, where audio programming often plays with the possibilities inherent in different configurations of playback systems. This exploration, as I found in my conversation with Stéphane Claude, the head of OBORO's audio section, and France Jobin, one of the artists I interviewed, is informed in part by a dissatisfaction with the limitations—both for the artist and the audience—that come with the standard diffusion systems routinely deployed for live performance: large, often powerful, two-channel or multi-channel PA systems that position performers on a stage facing an audience. This is not necessarily to criticize such systems, but rather a recognition of how they constrain possibilities and limit artistic choice. As Claude eloquently put it, such routinization of formats means important decisions over the conditions of diffusion are essentially “subcontracted to a sound technician.”

But what of accessing work residing in an audio art archive? Was not the provision of a pair of high-end Genelec monitors and a Mackie mixer a similar sort of subcontracting, and hence a similar imposition upon the artist? If the mark of a sound artist is to thoroughly consider and specify all technical aspects related to the accurate realization of a work, how do we approach archived work that necessarily requires such decisions to be made on the artist's behalf if it is to be heard? This is especially the case when the physical, temporal, and perhaps institutional distance between the artists and their archived work means delegation of control to those who manage the archive becomes inevitable. This problem, it would seem, is intractable.

So how can the archival researcher be sensitive to this reality? In the case of this project, part of the answer came organically; we chose to engage the artists in conversation on this subject. These conversations proved to be wide-ranging, stimulating, and a personal highlight of the project. Above all, they emphasized to me that an archive is not simply a collection of objects. Archives are alive and constituted not only through the works they contain but through networks of community memory and community activity.

What is a “nanocuratorial event,” you might ask? It was the name we gave to the hands-on, semi-public listening event we developed in order to actively engage the work in OBORO's audio art archive, wherein the problem of technical reanimation itself became a point of departure and experimentation. Conversations with several artists, in reality, were starting points that led to an evening in which we played with, repositioned, reanimated, experienced, and discussed a number of audio artworks. As such, the detailed observations made from the experience of each piece, both individually and in interaction with each other, are important to the data in the formulation of possible answers to the questions at hand. The nanocuratorial event is “research creation” (Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk, 2012) in action, a form of creative action as primary research.

The event, graciously hosted by Stéphane Claude and Gisèle Trudel of ÆLab, took place Wednesday, August 15, 2012 at Flevoland, their Montréal studio. It was part experiment, part exhibition, and part social occasion. Several artists contributed work, and most were there to assist in its installation. The works were set up throughout the space in a way that not only investigated the problem of presenting archived audio art, but

also addressed the broader curatorial question of how to exhibit such work so that the sound of each piece complements, rather than interferes with, the others. We invited approximately twenty guests, all of whom had an interest in sound, art, or media archives, to listen, participate, and comment. My job was to act as facilitator.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, our nanocuratorial event was a tremendous success. The atmosphere was warm, convivial, and engaging. Discussion among artists, between artists and attendees, and amongst the attendees themselves abounded. New friendships were made, old ones rekindled, and existing ones strengthened. Technology was played with and a great deal was learned. All who attended contributed to bringing the artworks to life, a reanimation that sitting in a room by myself listening to recordings on excellent speakers could never hope to achieve. This, to me, is a model of what archival work can be: collaborative research based upon an understanding of the archive as network and community.

1. The contributing artists were: Stéphane Claude, Chantal Dumas, Philippe-Aubert Gautier, Steve Heimbecker, Anne-Françoise Jacques, France Jobin, and Jérôme Joy.

**Lewis Kaye** is a Toronto-based sound artist, media sciences researcher, and educator. His work explores the interplay between sound, technology and culture through both critical enquiry and creative practice. Often working in collaboration with other artists, Kaye's recordings of sound environments have been presented in various forms, including media installation, audio CD, video and live performance. Major solo works include *Through The Vanishing Point*, a multi-channel and podcast sound installation based on the ideas of Marshall McLuhan (exhibited in Toronto in 2010, and Paris and Berlin in 2011) and *YOU ARE HERE*, the official audio guide podcast for Toronto's first *Nuit Blanche* in 2006.