



## Reframing the Class Divide: Art that Challenges Poverty and Economic Injustice

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### Relevant terms

The socio-political dimensions of sonic spaces; The role of sound art in transforming a sonic space; Radical listening; Socio-economic exclusions in relational aesthetics

Key Words: Aesthetics, Listening, Equality

N19 - TS 13.08

### Abstract

Reframing the Class Divide: Art that Challenges Poverty and Economic Injustice is a practice based PhD project that investigates if it's possible to use attentive and political practices of listening to successfully challenge contemporary arts exclusion of working class subjects, audiences and experiences, and if so, to what social and political affect.

My practice as research (PaR) responds to recent evidence that illustrates the scale of the exclusion of working-class people from the cultural industries in the UK (Brook, O'Brien, Taylor, 2018). In particular, *Reframing the Class Divide* evaluates attentive listening as a means of political enablement for those excluded from the social turn, and art world at large. Susanna Valimaki's defines attentive listening as an inter-subjective exchange, where assumptions are consciously left at the door (Valimaki, 2015), and two people enter into a process of co-production and exploration of meaning and action.

Further, the project builds on Jean Luc Nancy's distinction between listening and hearing (Nancy, 2007, p.6). For Nancy, listening is a process of inter-subjective interpretation, as a pose to a straightforward auditory transfer of information. Through my praxis-research, listening is evaluated as a relational exchange that gives voice to people from low-income backgrounds; a demographic frequently excluded and misrepresented by those working in the social and relational turn, and the art world at large (Brook, O'Brien, Taylor, 2018; Davis, 2012).

Central to this study are two key terms; relational aesthetics and political aesthetics (Bourriaud, 1998, p. 113). Relational aesthetics is defined as a

dematerialized art practice, that places social exchanges as its main medium. It offers a framework to examine a particular subset of the social turn, and explore its limitations, in particular its failure to define and differentiate the type of inter-class relationships produced by relational art. Political aesthetics is a term borrowed from French philosopher Jacques Ranciere who argues the interconnectedness of the domains of aesthetics and politics.

For Ranciere, art is inherently political as it affects what can be sensed; felt, heard, seen and smelt, which in turns shapes the possibility of thought and associated political action within art as a catalyst to think outside the box (Ranciere, 2004).

To help explore how listening might enable artistic inclusion of artists and audiences from low income backgrounds, and challenge the shortcomings of relational aesthetics, a PaR approach is used, in turn giving shape to a new methodological approach that is utilized in *Reframing the Class Divide*; the method-flow system. Through a range of activities nested within this system, primary research is conducted alongside an indepth context review of existing literature and practice that examines the political potential of listening in terms of rebalancing socio-economic exclusion in the art world.

Additionally, the research question is answered through praxis; the making of sitespecific audio installations, co-producing audio work with people from a range of locations, over long-term time-frame. Through making site-specific listening installations, primary data is gathered using semi-structured interviews with people that co-produce the artwork, and the audiences that end up experiencing it. The data is analyzed in attempt to describe and understand the political and relational affect of sitespecific listening experiences on those that encounter it. Analysis is currently taking place, and emergent findings will be shared in June.

### **Artist Biography**

Caitlin is an artist, writer and researcher concerned with making socially engaged sitespecific artwork. Using intimate site-specific listening encounters to explore personal stories of political systems, she uses conversation and sound recordings, editing and sitespecific sound installations as a means to explore themes of class identity and economic inequality, playing out within the contemporary relational art world. Her practice and research investigates how and if it's possible to challenge contemporary relational art's exclusion of working class subjects, audiences and experiences, and if so, to what social and political affect. By making space for everyday stories to be amplified and listened to, while situated in their social context, she attempts to challenge the exclusion of working class subjects (both as artists and as subject matter of artworks), within the context of relational and socially engaged art practices and their institutions. Caitlin is unit leader and lecturer in contextual and theoretical studies at London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. Artistic work can be seen below [www.caitlinshepherd.com](http://www.caitlinshepherd.com)

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