



Mapping Sound: A Conversation with Anthony Kelly

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Lost Sounds

A Sound Map of Dún Laoghaire

The Office for Common Sound (OCS): How would you introduce the Dún Laoghaire sound map project that you and David (Stalling) are working on?

Anthony Kelly (AK): I tell people that I'm from Dún Laoghaire, and over the years I've become aware that its visual history is very well documented. But what I started to notice through my own practice as an artist using sound is that the sonic aspect of our environment is a little bit under-represented. So we decided to use contemporary technologies to create an archive of sound for people. The project currently exists as a website, and the beauty of it is that many people have the internet and a computer at home or at work so it's very easy to access. Over time the archive will grow into a sonic image of the borough of Dún Laoghaire. It's available to everyone with a computer and a decent set of speakers or a good pair of headphones.

OCS: Do you ever introduce it without referring to it as an art project? Is it possible to describe it more as a public service?

AK: I do. I know that sometimes I have made work that may not be immediately accessible, but this project is about trying to reach out to people, to let them know about something that I care about as an artist, as a listener, and as a person from a particular environment. Sonically speaking, towns like Dún Laoghaire and Bray are very rich in sound. With Bray it's amazing - because from the town you're so close to the countryside, and as a listener you have the environments of the seafront and the cliff walk. And for someone like myself - who enjoys going out listening and recording - there are great opportunities to do this.

Mapping Sound

A Sound that is Synonymous with the Seaside

OCS: If someone visits the sound map online, what sound would you recommend listening to as a starting point?

AK: That's hard! When we first started the project and were asking people to think of a sound that is synonymous with Dún Laoghaire, the foghorn was the sound that most people mentioned!

Sadly, they were decommissioned a few years back. Some members of the community really loved them. You also find people who say how glad they are that they're gone, that they found the sound to be terribly depressing, or that it would wake them up during the night. You get all of these different angles.

There's a very nice recording of the foghorns made by Fergus Kelly back in the late 80's. It's a very atmospheric recording. I think he made it onto cassette tape during January '87. He's walking the east pier, and you can hear the sound of the fog horn at the end of that pier and you can also hear the sound of the Kish lighthouse close by. It's not a very old recording if you are from my generation, but if you're 15 or 16, 1987 must seem like another lifetime! For me it's like yesterday.

In fact, we've put a call out to people who might have old recordings they would like to donate to be included on the website. For instance we had an incredible tram network - you can still find traces of it, but we don't yet have any recordings of the trams on the sound map. There is a recording on the sound map where a resident of the town recalls taking a tram to school. The description is rich with sound details including comparing the trams with the Luas - the screeching of the metal wheels against the rails as the car turns a sharp corner.

At Home Listening

OCS: Not to polarize sounds between the natural and the man-made, but where do you see Dún Laoghaire's soundscape within that spectrum?

AK: It has changed a lot. I grew up on George's Street in Dún Laoghaire. My parents' house was right on the main street - it's still there. There's no front garden - so you step out the front door and you're right on the street. My memory as a child was that it was always very busy. This was just before the shopping centre was built, and there were many small shops. There were traders, people going to the shops, buses, and generally much traffic on the main street. So there was a lot of sound. But then during the 90's it was decided to pedestrianise the main street, which changed things quite a bit for a while. Soon my parents' house was a lot quieter. It's an old house, so it doesn't have the insulation that you would find in a more modern building. So back in the 70's things did sound quite different when you sat in one of the rooms - we could hear the rumble of the passing buses, and we could tell by the sound if it was a single-decker or a double-decker. The heavy front door would shake, and the glass in the timber windows would rattle.

OCS: Your house was linked to the road!

AK: Yes. Those sound vibrations linked us to outside activities happening around us! We have lost a little bit of that physicality. I miss that and those sounds. I also remember the sound of the wind over the roof - I think that was a sound I recall from Bray as well, where we lived in an old council house near the railway, possibly built in the 30's or 40's. There was probably no felting under the slates, so it was a lot draftier. You know the way those timber structures move and creak in the wind: it's lovely.

Sound and Urban Change

Moving Between Bray and Dún Laoghaire

OCS: How would you differentiate between Bray and Dún Laoghaire, sonically?

AK: Having lived in both places - in Dún Laoghaire as a young boy and as an adult, and in Bray for a few years when I was a child - I would feel that (in the nicest way) Bray is a bit more like a country town. It's quieter but just as sonically rich as Dún Laoghaire. Sometimes when I'm in Bray I can imagine a window to the past. My earliest sound memories are from Bray. In Dún Laoghaire during the boom years, things changed quite a bit: many new developments (the ferry terminal, road improvements, and shopping centres) altered the sonic qualities of the town as new buildings replaced older ones. In Bray there might be a lot more of the original town intact, and perhaps many of the original families have stayed in the area, whereas in Dún Laoghaire some areas are modernised and cosmopolitan. That's fantastic as well - and it is a different experience.

OCS: Making a sound map over time is an interesting way to try to capture a perspective of urban change. Tell me about the future of the sound mapping project.

AK: Usually you do a project for a few months or a year, and then you put it away. I like the idea of creating a project structure that in theory - if I'm still around and healthy - I can still work on when I'm 80. I think it would be nice to have something that you can keep returning to. That's why we created different compartments within the sound map. There's a section where people can write (The Sound Journal), and a section for sounds you don't hear any more (Lost Sounds), and we want to keep adding to them in order to build different perspectives. Our plan is to develop it slowly over the coming years, as a slow arc.

A Listening Practice

Scale

OCS: You and David are focusing the project on Dún Laoghaire, and from the website, I sense a substantial relationship between you and Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council. Do you feel like there is an appreciation of the resource that you're developing?

AK: Absolutely. There has been really good support from them and DLR Lexicon are also allowing us access to their resources on a continuing basis. IADT plan to help as well. The response from the general public has also been great. We are keen to invite people to tell their stories so they become part of the project. We also want people to become guest recordists and contribute their personal sonic experience of place.

OCS: So it's an evolving platform, but you have naturally demonstrated a finite perspective for the project. There aren't 1000 sounds from last year: There's a finite set of sounds.

AK: That's right. We might go out together or separately and capture three or four recordings each, and when listening back critically we realise that perhaps just one really stands out, so we will only include that recording. This is important, to have a critical ear in regard to the recordings that we are making.

OCS: Do you feel a sense of stewardship with this project? Is there a formal commitment to its evolution in the future?

AK: Definitely. We have defined several phases that will take the project through the next five years, with a review in perhaps the third year to consider how it's all shaping up. It's great to have a long term plan: We were feeling that if we started this, it was going to take a lot of work and commitment to sustain.

The Parameters of the Sound Map

The Experience of Sound Recording

AK: Mobile phone technology has become so widely available and maybe we have become obsessed with documenting our lives. It's relatively easy to make good quality video clips and decent photographs. But I think that sound recording is still that little bit special: A practice that some people have picked up on as a frontier that can be explored further. Isolating and using sound as a way of documenting is a very special activity. And that might partner with how our culture tends to be more visual than sonic. Sound is so powerful on a subconscious level. You might hear a sound in the distance that doesn't register at the front of your consciousness, but it can trigger a memory (sonic or visual) which comes to the fore. By making sound recordings we hope to draw upon the diverse sonic environment of Dún Laoghaire Rathdown to capture how it develops over the years through changes in the seasons, the people who live there, the natural environment, and to include these audio findings in an accessible archive. Memories for the future!

OCS: When you're out making recordings for the map, are you responding to specific moments, or hunting for particular sounds that you know that you're after?

AK: It's a bit of both. Sometimes I have heard something that has really piqued my curiosity, and I research it by going back to the same place to listen more before recording. But that isn't always successful. Other times it's about being in the moment, making a recording, and bringing it back to listen to. You often discover little sonic dramas. An example is listening to the flag pole down at the ferry terminal, its metal cable rattling away in the wind, and then the town hall bell strikes, and the bus parked at the train station starts its engine, and these sonic activities unfold creating an unexpected narrative.

Sonic Dramas

Anthony Kelly

Anthony Kelly is a Dublin-based artist whose practice involves sonic and visual approaches to making his work. This includes painting, drawing, field recording, sculpture, sound installation, film/video, and improvised sound performance. Although diverse in construction, his work chiefly concentrates on the shifting and fragmentary nature of sensory experience. To explore this he uses the discarded or overlooked aspects of the world around us which he enlarges and amplifies to create his work. His work has been exhibited widely in Ireland and abroad.

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A Sound Map of Dún Laoghaire

A Sound Map of Dún Laoghaire is an ongoing project by Anthony Kelly and David Stalling, featuring an online archive of field recordings, lost sounds, and sound histories.

www.dunlaoghairesoundmap.com

The Office for Common Sound

The Office for Common Sound (OCS) is a nomadic public service that is open in Bray between May and June, 2016. Located at the top of Quinsboro Rd, the OCS is open to anyone with an interest in exploring the local sound environment. The OCS is a project by Sven Anderson, supported within the Strategic Arts Projects initiative by The Wicklow County Arts Office, Wicklow County Council, Mermaid Arts Centre, and The Arts Council.

office.minorarchitecture.org

Participants