

RESEARCH INTO/AROUND SOUNDS IN POLAND:
AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAŁ LIBERA
AND DANIEL MUZYCZUK

by Benjamin Cope

Beneath is a transcript of an interview held with two researchers from Poland working in innovative ways at the interface of sound, art and research. Michał Libera is a sociologist working in the sound and music field mostly as dramatist, producer, curator and writer. He runs the conceptual pop label Populista, which is dedicated to the mis- and over- interpretation of music, and experiments with various modes of sound narration, such as tape music, installations and opera. Daniel Muzyczuk is Head of the Department of Modern Art at the Muzeum Sztuki (Art Museum) in Łódź, where he works with histories of audiovisual art in Eastern Europe. The aim of the interview, held on 25.07.2017, was to explore the configurations in which research in and around sound is being developed in Poland.

Interview

BC: Can we start with a biographical question, of how you both became involved in projects connected with sound?

ML: I have been always interested in music, but it wasn't until I completed my studies in sociology and started doing a PhD when I decided that I cannot afford to spend my life in libraries trying to read things that I am only able to scan with a partial interest. For as long as I can remember, I had been collecting cassettes and CDs and was crazy about music. So more or less when the first crisis in my professional life as a sociologist appeared, I had some area to turn to, which actually was the area that I had turned away from when I decided to study sociology. And then, really by accident, I just went to a festival and met a musician, and we had a beer and he proposed that I organise something for him in Poland. And then one thing led to another, and I decided to be fully engaged in music and sound. And, coincidentally, I realised that I can also develop the studies in which I was already involved, in the direction of having some cultural studies of music under the umbrella of sociology. And so, on the one hand, I was organising concerts and festivals and, on the other, I was writing about sound and music, and I was trying to theorise it somehow. And that was more or less the beginning: it was about 15 years ago.

In terms of how things developed, it all seemed quite organic to me. It started with organising concerts and festivals, and writing about music. And this led me to turn from an organiser

into what people call a curator. And then from a curator, to a person who not only writes about sound, but who also tries to include some knowledge about sound in my writing and change its style. And then finally to become a kind of dramaturge, or music producer who is working both in the studio setting and also sometimes live, let's say designing the outline of music performance. And these activities have developed in connection with all the research I have been doing over the last years.

DM: My background is in art history. But, as I reconstruct the trajectory, I came to be an art historian because I was exposed to some of the writings around the Fluxus movement, in a particular issue of the journal *Literature around the World* (*Literatura na świecie*) that covered John Cage. I was always interested in music, but always treated it as more of a hobby than a main vocation, until I realised that my interests in neo-avant garde art had emerged from interests in experiments in art that were media based. Or what I call audio-visibility, being a breakthrough in the field of the visual arts that suddenly opened up towards film, theatre, sound performance, you name it. So dealing with music became part of my daily routine of dealing with visual arts. I have now been a curator in the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź for 7 years, and have been developing exhibitions that were dealing mainly, if I was to generalise, with questions of the social impact of sound cultures.

BC: The next question is a question of terminology. How do you both define the field that you work in for yourselves, and how does this relate to how work with sound is termed in Poland more widely?

DM: I've already put a label on what I'm doing: I'm dealing with audio-visibility, which is kind of a loose term I would say. It's not something fixed, as sound art would be for example. For me, sound art is a term that comes from the division of fields of research: a very specific, sometimes too narrow category that speaks about, I will be ironic now, the amazement of a sound or visual artist at the sole fact that a voice can be transported or transmitted through a loudspeaker into space. I was always more interested in the interrelation between different media: of how sound is being used and is being introduced into a larger cultural field. So audio-visibility is, I wouldn't say neutral, but it underlines a very specific point in the history of media when exhibition making changed rapidly because of the introduction of sound into exhibition spaces. This created the effect that all the pieces had to be removed from one another in order to make an empty space in which for sound to roam. And this set of phenomena is not necessarily connected with a kind of ghetto that sound studies or sound art studies sometimes tend to condemn themselves to, I would say. And sound art, or «Klangkunst» in German is usually really blind, or deaf to use another pun, to the social level of being involved in sound production.

BC: Just developing that idea, I guess in Polish «Sztuka dźwiękowa» or «sztuka dźwięku» sounds ok, but «Audio-wizualność» would rather just be a calque on the English term. Is there a Polish equivalent of the term, or is this not something that bothers you?

DM: Both audio and visuality, «audio» and «wizualność» have existed in Polish for quite a while now. While researching for the first historic show that I did together with David Crowley, «Sounding the Body Electric»¹, we were really enthusiastic about making an inventory of every single term that had been developed in Eastern Europe to denote something that we now know as sound art. Vladan Radovanović would say «tape art», and Zygmunt Krauze would say «spatial musical composition» to refer to something that we now know as sound installation. Indeed, «Spatial Musical Composition», a very specific sound piece by Zygmunt Krauze, Teresa Helm and Henryk Morel, was also a work that appealed to me in terms of the act of naming: because, on the one hand, it reached out to the spatial compositions of Katarzyna Kobro, while also being rooted in the contemporary practices of those artists working in 1968. Nevertheless, «audio-visuality» is a term that was really used constantly, for example by artists from the Warsztat Formy Filmowej circle or by composers connected with the Experimental Studio of Polish Radio. So, naturally, my interest drew me into an attempt to reuse it as something that again can be full of possibilities. But, primarily, my point in promoting this term is to say that disciplinary boundaries are something that is condemning a lot of us to existence in ghettos.

ML: Let me just say at the very beginning that, personally, I have absolutely zero issue with this sort of question about what kind of word or term would denote what I am interested in. You can call it air-art if you like. However, this reaction is partly because I am not fond of the discursive uses made of the term “sound art”, especially over the course of the last decade.

But I wouldn't fully agree with regard to what Daniel said about the term sound art originating from an attempt to divide fields of interest. Rather, I think it came into existence through the strange process of the institutionalisation of music, of experimental or weird music, that has been happening over the last 30 years. And I think this name simply came to be used as a term to denote music which is happening in galleries or, more precisely, to denote music which is not presented in music venues and thus needs to find new places to be heard: and one such place is in galleries. And this means that it is also a very strongly ideological term, for good or bad it doesn't really matter, but it has very direct consequences in some political and ideological discussions about what is happening with the field of music or sound over the last 50 years, let's say. The problem is that most institutionalised music you can imagine, not excluding what we call classical music, has been dealing with the

¹ See: <http://msl.org.pl/en/exhibitions/archive-exhibitions/sounding,56.html>.

problems of sound art for centuries now. So, it is very difficult, in my opinion, to come up with a definition of sound art as something opposed to classical or contemporary music and, therefore, because I don't want to be associated with this kind of «sound artish» shortcut, I tend not to use this term with regard to what I am doing.

What is interesting in Poland, I think, is that this term has not been translated so often. We would rather, especially on an everyday basis, simply say «sound art». Even the similar English term «video art» is, I think, more often translated to «sztuka wideo» than «sound art» to «sztuka dźwięku».

So I think in Poland, especially from the 80s and 90s, the more often used term was «audio art», which I think is quite interesting because, purely semantically, it means something else. Here the reference to audio serves to indicate the reproduction of sound, or all the technological tools that you use to reproduce, amplify or transmit music. Whereas sound art is supposedly more neutral. I think the best example of this notion is the fact that the longest running experimental music festival in Poland, which takes place in Kraków and is run by Marek Chołoniewski is called Audio Art. It seems significant to me that Chołoniewski proposed precisely this term to define the area of his interest.

BC: I think that the ways in which you have both argued your responses to the question about terminology, in terms of developments in artistic experiments with sound, brings us to a question about the institutionalisation of work around sound research in Poland. Can you say something about the institutional configuration of research on sound in Poland?

ML: I think the question of the institutionalisation of what's happening on the edge of the music field over the last 100 years is an absolutely crucial one. Because, to put it in the most general and slightly strident terms: it simply didn't happen. So, the music that doesn't fit on the one hand to the classical tradition and on the other to the rock and roll market has just never been properly institutionalised. What I mean by this is that no institution has been founded which would be dedicated to the development of this form of music. Or these institutions are not well-developed, state run institutions, of the likes of MOMA or many other art institutions, which I think are much more established than musical ones.

So I think the overall problem with this kind of, let's say, experimental music of the last 60, 70 or 80 years, is that this music just doesn't have its own place or area that serves as an institutional home. And this also leads to the fact that it just invites itself to different sorts of areas, which are much more established, one of which is art, or visual art but, on the other hand, it can also be theatre. We know that the history of experimental music has always been very tightly linked to the history of theatre and the history of the visual arts, and I would say that in many of

these cases it is also basically because this is where the money is, where the institutional framework is.

And still I think, in 2017, after so many books and PhD theses have been written on this topic, that we are still more or less in a world where this music between the classical tradition and the big commercial market is still sort of undefined in terms of institutions. If you think of Europe, there is barely any institution that would be a well-established state run institution dedicated only to experiments in sounds. There are quite a lot of them, if we are talking about festivals or about philharmonic orchestras that hire experimental musicians from time to time: these worlds are not exactly separate, so festivals and orchestras do invite experimental musicians to come and do rehearsals of, let's say, contemporary music. But there is nothing that would count as a long run, state funded project in experimental music. And this is not a judgemental statement: I have a very ambivalent feeling about this, I'm neither criticising this state of affairs or being an advocate of a sound field that should stand alone. I'm just trying to make a diagnosis.

DM: From my point of view, being an employee of an art institution, the embracing of experimental music by the art world is part of a larger movement that has been underway since the 60s, whereby the opening of the art field caused a moment where everything experimental landed in this warm ivory tower of art institutions. By everything experimental, I mean not only experimental music, but also experimental theatre, experimental filmmaking, experimental writing or, for example, radical politics. In today's world, the museums, the art centres are, or at least could be, still places where all of those things are happening, which is good or bad, or rather good and bad at the same time. It is good, because these are still places of intermedia practices, but it is bad because the institutionalisation of everything experimental in art institutions is a kind of pharmakon. This is especially visible with radical politics, which can of course develop, but which can't reach the social realm.

But then again, being more specific about experimental music and its place within art institutions, of course they have to land in this asylum as a semi-guest. By a semi-guest I mean that the institutions are interested in sound and music, but only as a distraction from the larger field. Because you usually hear the directors or curators of these institutions saying, «Look, we can't do anything more with sound, because we just did a sound art exhibition.» As if sound is something that is not integral to the contemporary visual arts themselves. By this, I mean that this visiting is constantly being subjected to schizophrenic moments: of being in love with sound art and trying to diversify by dealing with those practices only from time to time.

BC: Is it possible for you to mention a few institutions in Poland that seem to you important for work on sound here?

ML: If to be more specific about institutions, then I think it's worth mentioning that most of the institutions that are somehow important, or that to me stand for the development in sound and music over the last decades, are basically self-run institutions. They can formally be institutions, such as foundations or associations, but that does not mean they are institutions in the same sense as The Barbican, or anything that is really big and becomes a part of a state agenda of cultural policy. There's obviously plenty of institutions that I could mention, but for me as a person who was born in the 70s, I would say that the most important institutions were basically music labels, because it was these that gave me an insight into what's happening in music and offered me some basic knowledge by doing liner notes, through which I could jump into the topic and find ways of orienting myself in it.

And since then there have appeared a lot of institutions which are somehow research based, or they organise concerts on an everyday basis, or they do festivals, and are responsible for a lot of good stuff that is happening all around. And I think those institutions are somehow rooted in the idea of electronic music that needed some sort of independent space – maybe not independent in an institutional sense, but independent in the sense of a self-contained studio – and we know that this started to happen in Europe in the 1950s and that the Experimental Studio of Polish Radio was one of the first in this regard. But then again over the last period, I think there are still some institutions that are making quite vivid research into the relations between technology and sound: and a perfect example I think is Steim² in Amsterdam.

Then there are some musicians or artists who are basically themselves becoming some sort of institutions, since around them knowledge accumulates that in a variety of ways addresses the most interesting topics in music making. A good example of this for me was always the collective Ultra Red,³ which was a sound/theory collective that was working on the edge of sociology and audio discourses, and audio performances.

So there's plenty of these emerging institutions, or I wouldn't say institutions even, maybe some kind of hubs that are coming from sometimes very individual practice and this practice enlarges itself to become maybe a small unit or a small movement. But then, on the other hand, over the last decade some things are changing, and there are more and more sound studies in universities, there are more and more improvisation courses at music academies. So obviously change is underway. But still, if we are to speak specifically about Poland, if you take an overview of what's happening in this country in terms of research and development of sound and music, it's still centred principally around people. I mentioned already the festival Audio Art, and this is basically under the charge of Marek Chołoniewski, who also runs the Electronic Acoustic Studio at the Music Academy in Kraków. And around him there is a

² <http://steim.org>

³ <http://www.ultrared.org>

group of people who are constantly working on some area of contemporary music.

DM: Amongst the art institutions that are doing projects that can be considered as being of research value for sound and art, we should of course mention Muzeum Sztuki⁴ where I am working in Łódź, or a few institutions in Warsaw, like the Museum of Modern Art, Zachęta or the Centre for Contemporary Art, Zamek Ujazdowski.⁵ But maybe the most consistent source and hub would be Glissando magazine, that for about 12 years and 30 issues now, is still working and involving new writers to enlarge the field for this kind of research.⁶ And I think Michał is just too humble to mention Bolt Records, which is run by Michał Mendyk, and where Michał is involved in the Populista sub-label. Bolt was instrumental in drawing international attention to the Experimental Studio of Polish Radio, issuing something like 20 records with extensive liner notes that really served to bring to light previously unknown or untold stories of sound art in Poland.

BC: How are the activities that you both describe connected to academia, or academic research on sound in Poland?

ML: Well, I think if we are to be honest, there is very little of it. When I was still doing my PhD ten years ago, I can assure you that there was literally no place in Poland for me to do my thesis, which was about mnemotechnics and sound in the last 50 years. So I think it's a shocking delay. Even musicology in some of the major universities in Poland has some kind of stunning problem with the history of the last 50 years.

BC: Do you think this delay in academia responding to artistic and social change is something specific to work on sound or is this something that we can observe more widely in academia in Poland?

ML: I think it's worse in sound than anywhere else, albeit I imagine it has probably changed over the last ten years. However, I also remember that studying sociology ten years ago didn't mean reading a lot of really contemporary texts: what was known then to us as contemporary sociology came mostly from the 60s and 70s. And in the studies of sound and music ten years ago, something contemporary in fact could refer to anything from the last 100 years. I know for sure that it's obviously changing over recent years and there is some research done in a couple of institutions in Poland, like the University of Wrocław, where there is the Soundscape Research Studio, named themselves in English, in the Institute of Cultural Studies, and there is also something called the Audiosphere Workshop, at the University of Arts in Poznań, which is more

⁴ <http://msl.org.pl>

⁵ <https://artmuseum.pl/>, <https://zacheta.art.pl/> and <http://u-jazdowski.pl> respectively.

⁶ <http://www.glissando.pl>

art oriented. But, in terms similar to what I was saying before, if you follow individuals and not institutions, then we can see that there are quite a number of people in Poland who are doing academic research, such as Dariusz Brzostek who is a perfect example of this in the University of Toruń, but it's not a gigantic movement that you can find in universities in Poland.

DM: It's characteristic also that *Glissando*, the magazine I mentioned previously that gathers musicologists, is not rooted in any scholarly or academic institution. So, the most forward-looking magazine is being developed by enthusiasts rather than by academic researchers.

BC: This leads us onto the next issue I wanted to ask about, that of media. You've mentioned *Glissando* and the Experimental Studio of Polish Radio, but are there any other media that seem especially important for the development of this kind of work in Poland?

ML: Yes, sure. Perhaps let's start with magazines. There have been many magazines dedicated to art and music, especially to experimental arts and music, starting from *Res Facta* that has been published from 1967 and which to this day has preserved the status of a more academic oriented magazine; then *Jazz Forum* was a very good magazine for a long time, I would say up until the moment of the arrival of the internet... Definitely, we should also mention *Antena Krzyku* which was among the first established magazines dedicated more to counter-culture, and then through to *Glissando* to *M/I* which are still being issued.

DM: These days of course a lot of this kind of activity moved to the internet, but when I was developing my interest in these kind of studies there were a number of magazines that were still around.

BC: Do I detect in your tone of voice, a nostalgia for this age of magazine culture?

DM: Perhaps a bit. I'm not sure the tone is really nostalgia, but the type of writing was different.

BC: I guess this also opens up the question of the internet and how it's impacting on writing about and research into sound, and on soundscapes...

DM: I think the moment when we had a profusion of blogs with reviews of records, etc., has come to an end. Now a lot of these activities are being channelled not through individual blogs, but more through the internet sites of magazines, like *Glissando* that we already mentioned. But I must admit that a lot of this activity escapes my attention, as my research is principally about history. So these days I'm more involved in

source materials than in reading day-to-day reviews of what's coming up.

BC: With your historical perspective, I'm not sure how relevant next question will be, as I wanted to frame it in the light of current events. Politically speaking, we're going through a difficult moment in Poland, so it seems like a good time to ask a question which is always there, more or less explicitly, about the relationship between sound, or sound research, and society.

DM: Yes, over recent months Poland has been undergoing a moment when protests and manifestations are occurring on an almost daily basis, and this leads many of us to reflect on the sounds of the protests. A few activists were really interested in how the sound qualities of a protesting crowd can be amplified, in order to create a new commonality of people's interests and become more of a sounding weapon than just an ornament. On the other hand, I remember some of the early demonstrations, last year, had sounds of «Imagine» by John Lennon being played, which of course embarrassed me and a lot of others around, especially since Lennon sings, «Imagine a world without religion» and I could see all those catholic liberals singing along, without fully understanding the lyrics.

But then again there is this Sirens group, which are really developing ways of amplifying the human voice so that it reaches farther and farther. But as a curator producing exhibitions of historical material mainly, over the last few years I've been researching mainly the notion of underground music and underground cultures in the Eastern Bloc, and the societies that are being produced around musicians and visual artists that object or try to find alternative spaces of expression in authoritarian or simply totalitarian societies, like the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, or the GDR, for example.

I'm of course not interested in this straightforwardness of putting a protest as a song and then fighting with a song against the system, because it's still the system that allows a song to happen. But a certain sociology of bodies that are moved by a song is still a mystery. Recently, the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź acquired a juke-box full of protest songs that Susan Hiller built out of the songs that she calls her "madeleines", after the Proustian notion. These are songs that are both social, like "The People United" or "Warszawianka", in other words they are songs that form a collective around them, but they are also really personal. And the convergence between the personal-ness of sound production and the experience of a body that is being collectively moved by a song or sound is something that is being repeated over and over when you read a lot of accounts from civil protests, riots, etc.

ML: To me the symptomatic thing is that there is indeed now a bit of interest in sound and demonstrations: demonstrations are events, which in a pretty agitated context, clearly show some aspect of the connections between sound and society. I do think that this is very important

and useful to both sides, in other words to both – let me use this ironic division – society and sound. The question to me is: why is there even less interest in sound and society when no shouting on the streets is happening? Of course, I know that what I have said is too rough a way to put it and generally it is something that we are all on some level aware of. During my time in academia, I worked with students on exactly this topic of the relations of sounds and society during a year long course, so it is very difficult for me to nail this topic down in just one paragraph. So I started in this provocative way just to suggest that these relations also have a very everyday aspect to them: they are not only articulated by strong political stimuli. I think there is just the same amount of politics in the way we listen to each other on a daily basis – and this we already do in hundreds of different ways – and then in where and how we use our voice (and the range of tones, modes of expression and technologies through which we do so), when we turn the radio on and off, and indeed is it a radio or maybe a laptop, and where and how we listen to music... It really is a question comparable to: «What are the links between image and society?» At the very constitution of every society, there is some organization of sound, sound patterns, sound exclusions, of procedures of hearing, of giving voice and taking it away. Not only in authoritarian cases, which somehow seem to be the most discussed since there is an obvious tension, also a sonic tension, at demonstrations...

BC: I was at the demonstration in Warsaw last night, and it did seem a really interesting question about how the music was presented to the crowd. It seemed that this was connected to an imagined history of the Solidarity era impact of music, but that, at the same time, the current protest differed from this. What struck me was that the conceptions of music and protest embodied in the various musicians were actually quite different: and they seemed to suggest, in fact, how difficult it is today in Poland to use sound as a tool to bring together «the crowd» in a unifying whole.

DM: I also had the impression that this concert is something that is «imposed on», that it is something that the crowd should like, or be moved by. Whereas, far away in Baltimore, for example in the Black Lives Matter Movement, you can hear a grassroots movement of people singing «We're Gonna Be Alright» by Kendrick Lamar and, surprisingly of course, his record became one of those new civil rights' movement anthems.

BC: Could you mention any other themes that seem to you particularly important in the work currently being done on and around sound?

DM: I think a lot of what I'm doing, or what Michał Mendyk for example is doing, is the work of reconstruction: telling the untold pre-histories that need to be filled out. There is some basic historical research that still needs to be done on the origins of audio-visual practices,

the documentation of original moments or the reconstruction of pieces themselves. So a lot of what I'm doing is focussed on this.

ML: In my case, which is partly also the case of Daniel and Michal Mendyk's reconstructions, it is an ongoing process of trying to find aspects of music which show that music is not just music... or sound is not just sound: that there is always more. And at this moment in my life, I am mostly interested in trying to find music in speech, voice and in particular in literature, which is I think the very basic definition of what a music dramaturge can do... give words a body, a sonic body in my case.

BC: Finally, can I ask, as this issue of the journal is to be called *P.S. Soundscapes*, can you say anything about whether you think there's any features that might be characteristic of something that we might call a Polish Soundscape?

DM: I can't think about anything that would be really specific. In terms of historical research and how it affects today, Poland was a specific country within the Eastern Bloc, where a lot of things could happen, like the *Warsaw Autumn* festival of contemporary music, or the Experimental Studio of Polish Radio: so there is a rich history of sound research. But does this really affect contemporaneity? I think it does, but I'm not sure if there is a note that we can say is specifically Polish. The whole notion has a dangerously essentialist undertone.

ML: It is a very intriguing question to me. Somehow, the belief that each particular piece of space, each spot, each landscape has its own sonic identity seems appealing to me. It is almost analytically true, isn't it? The wind is always slightly different, the diffusion of sound is always particular, even the sound sources are unique... I mean – it's kind of obvious, isn't it? Just as any landscape differs a bit from all others, even a very similar one, this must also be the case with soundscapes: wouldn't you agree with such a theoretical statement? But then, of course, comes the question of the method of basic verification – if we trust that this is the case, then let's really test it. And then what...? You go out with an audio recorder to the field, you record a bit and...? Doesn't it just sound like everything else? And I am not just saying that you might mistake the sound of a Polish field with the sound of a Spanish field – I am saying that you would never be able to deduce which one is which if you were given a blind test.

So this might mean a few different things: either that our recording devices are very immature; or that our hearing is very immature and not developed; or that the initial hypothesis is wrong. But at this point in time, to me soundscape, a purely sonic representation of a given place is always a mystery: its primary characteristic is that of lacking something... And maybe this is what sound to me is all about and why it is so fascinating. It is this that makes me constantly willing to revolve around this area and try to get what I don't yet get...