

Composing With

Composing With Sound

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Often when rhetoric and composition scholars talk about composing with sound, it is with the assumption that sound will be used to create linear, narrative-driven texts like audio essays or musical soundtracks. In contrast, the following two projects offer ideas for assignments that make composing with sound open to greater material and spatial opportunities. We share these abbreviated examples in an effort to further discussions about the possibilities of sonic composition.

The Sonic Object (Steph)

To defamiliarize the usual ways of working with sound in multimodal composition courses, such as recording and editing scripted podcasts, I have been experimenting with assignments that encourage students to approach their interactions with sound holistically—to pay attention to how sound shapes and is shaped by different contexts, material objects, and embodied, multisensory experiences. One assignment, based on what I call a “Sonic Object,” focuses on an object that uses sound to enhance a user’s overall experience. This project requires students to design their own sonic objects by sketching a model and talking through how it would work, as well as creating the distinct sounds for their object in an audio editor.

At CCCC 2014 in Indianapolis, I had a chance to test run a version of this assignment during a Sonic Pedagogy Workshop (due to time constraints, the workshop only dealt with the design phase of the project). One of the many interesting sonic objects designed in the workshop was a “Toy Fruit Basket.”

Christopher Potts and Lisa Phillips invented a baby toy they described as “a fruit basket that comes alive” (see fig. 1). They explained that each piece of toy fruit in the basket would respond sonically to touch. Each unique kind of touch—rubbing, scratching, squishing—would trigger a unique corresponding sound. Their design plan indicated that the pieces of fruit would be white to start, and then, as the baby interacts with them, the fruit would become colorful, make sounds, and release smells. Compared to simplistic kinds of children’s toys (e.g., press a button on the toy and hear the same sound every time), the toy that they imagined integrates sound with visual, tactile, and olfactory elements of the design in complex ways. In short, the fruit basket uses sound as a key part of the immersive, holistic sensory experience of the toy.

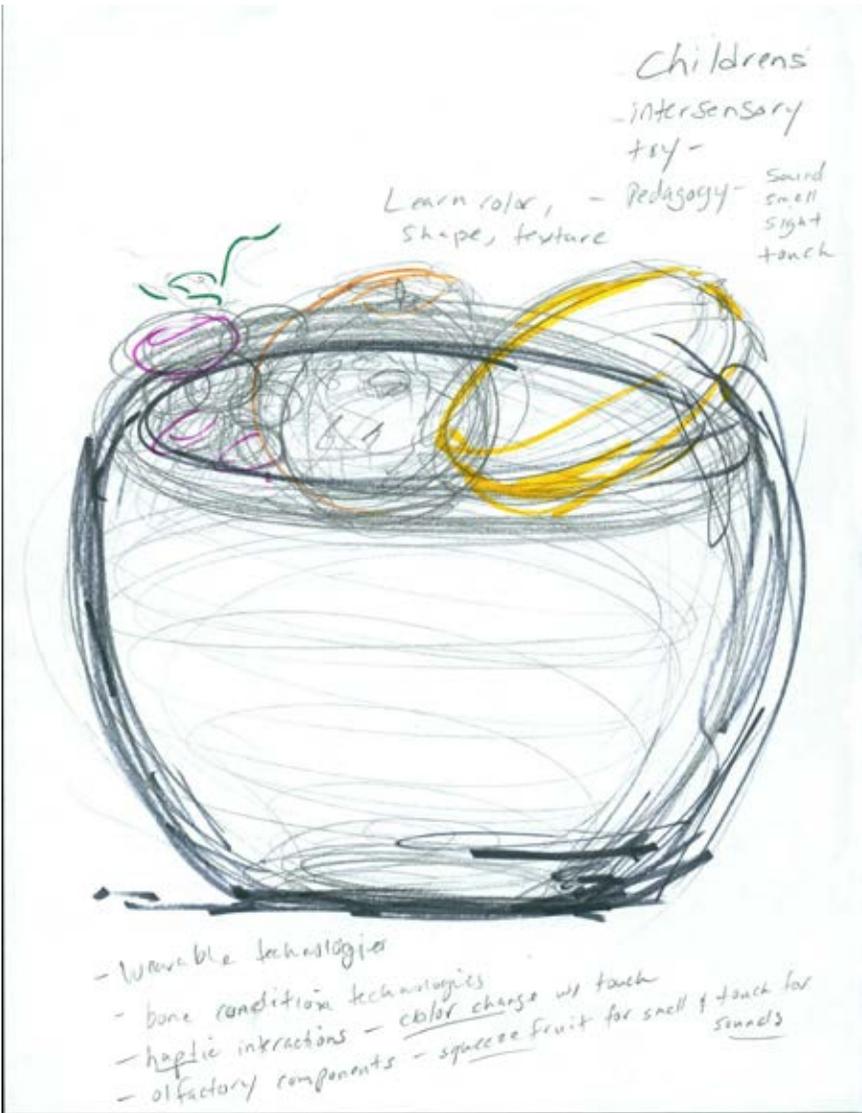


Figure 1. Toy Fruit Basket.

What I found most interesting while listening to workshop participants talk about and develop their sonic object designs was how different their approach to this assignment was from how my students typically talk about planning a podcast. Rather than asking themselves questions about the structure and meaning of their sonic compositions, participants wrestled with another set of questions: How does the use of sound make me feel and behave? How does the sound contribute to my experience as a whole? What are the various

possibilities and limitations of sound in this situation? How does sound work with other material and sensory elements of the design?

Considering the increasing popularity of sound design and “sonic branding” in the products we interact with every day—from household appliances to the packaging of food—such questions are critical for helping students understand how sonic composition works in a range of experiences beyond the classroom. Whether or not others choose to experiment with the sonic object assignment, rhetoric and composition scholars need to develop more sonic composing projects that aim to (1) enrich students’ understanding of how sound affects audiences in different contexts, not just digital ones; (2) teach students to attend to how sound works with and against other sensory modes and materials; and (3) create opportunities for students to explore and reflect on how embodied interaction figures into and shapes multimodal experience.

Embodied Soundscape Design (Kati)

I asked students in a spring 2014 digital writing and multimodal composing class to engage in an activity of embodied soundscape design in order to complicate their preconceptions of composing with sound. A soundscape can be defined as a landscape made of sound, a sonic “field,” or an arrangement of simultaneous and spatially situated sounds. Soundscapes can potentially draw together music, speech, and nonverbal sound. Because composing a soundscape involves situating sounds in spaces rather than on paper or in linear arrangement, designing a soundscape causes participants to attend to sound as a range of possibilities where sound is spatial, dynamic, situated, and involves an intervention not only in our lived-in spaces but also our presumptions concerning what it means to be a listener.

In this activity, students begin by choosing a sound to make in our classroom space and writing the name (or description) of that sound on a notecard. They then choose a point in the room to stand and begin making their sound (see fig. 2).

The notecards provide a way for participants to commit to a sound and to visually map the soundscape so that participants with listening differences can also experience the soundscape through a preferred modality. The combination of all the sounds being made in our space formed the first version of our soundscape design (listen to audio clip 1 at <http://bit.ly/1vIG0uA>).



Figure 2. Students arranged in classroom.

Next, I asked students to alter the soundscape by varying the pitch, volume, speed, and position of their sounds (and thus their bodies) by moving around the space (listen to audio clip 2 at <http://bit.ly/1F48TLq>). Audio clips 1 and 2 are meant to illustrate some of the differences in the soundscape as students alter their sounds, although listening to and producing a soundscape in a space is experientially different from listening to audio recorded from one vantage point. After engaging in the extemporaneous soundscape design, we designed a soundscape by creating a soundmap—a visual map of the room showing descriptions and drawings of sounds (see figs. 3 and 4 for soundmap variations).



Figure 3. Soundmap variation.

In order to create embodied soundscapes from soundmaps, students were each assigned a new sound, either to make or to find and play using YouTube and mobile devices. Each person was arranged in the room based on one of the soundmaps. In this way, we composed the newly designed soundscape, person by person, sound by sound (listen to audio clip 3 at <http://bit.ly/1DB6MSt>). In audio clip 3, students composed a soundscape based on a soundmap designed to make the classroom more tranquil through the arrangement of sounds of silence, birds, water, and wind.

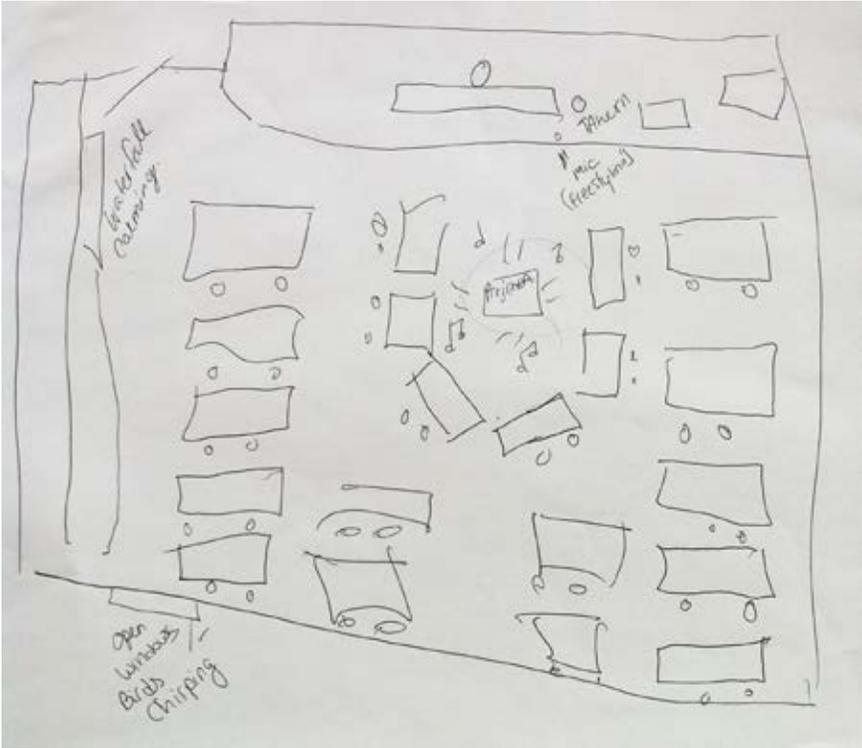


Figure 4. Soundmap variation.

This act of composing with sound may feel impermanent, but it allows participants to trace changes in arrangements of sound, become more aware of embodied, individual listening differences, and bring the experience of composing with sound into other acts of multimodal and material compositions.

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