

# **AMBULATION**

Exploring Listening Technologies for an  
Extended Sound Walking Practice

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*Ambulation* has been publicly performed 17 times to international audiences in the United Kingdom, across Europe and in Australia.

These performances consisted of a variety of different venues including art galleries, music venues, concert halls, universities, conferences, heritage sites, and art and music festivals. In doing this a wide range of audiences have engaged in the work.

Here are some of the places *Ambulation* has been performed:

- Walking Festival of Sound, Newcastle, UK
- Sonica Festival, Ljubljana, Slovenia
- Walking Festival of Sound, Stockholm, Sweden
- CAMP, Aulus-les-Bains, France
- Brighton Dome, Brighton, UK
- Middlesbrough Art Weekender, Middlesbrough, UK
- Dorothea Quarry (with James Davoll) in North Wales, UK
- SPAN at BALTIC (with Its Nice That and Google) in Gateshead, UK
- Piksel Festival, Bergen, Norway
- Compass Festival, Leeds, UK
- FACT (Foundation for Art and Technology), Liverpool, UK
- Sonic Environments, Brisbane, Australia
- Culture Lab, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK
- Tender Buttons, Holy Island, UK
- Research Through Design, Cambridge, UK
- The Newbridge Project, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK
- Musée Imaginaire, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK

Image: Jonathan Turner



Ambulation at Compass Festival, Leeds, UK (2016)

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Ambulation at Compass Festival, Leeds, UK (2016)

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Image: Simon Bowen



Ambulation at FACT, Liverpool, UK (2016)

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Ambulation with Musée Imaginaire, Newcastle, UK (2015)



Image: On The Norway



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Ambulation with Brighton Dome and Royal Pavilion, UK (2018)





Ambulation at BALTIC with Google Design, Gateshead, UK (2018)

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Ambulation at Sonica Festival, Ljubljana, Slovenia (2019)

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# Ambulation: Exploring Listening Technologies for an Extended Sound Walking Practice

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## ABSTRACT

*Ambulation* is a sound walk that uses field recording techniques and listening technologies to create a walking performance using environmental sound. *Ambulation* engages with the act of recording as an improvised performance in response to the soundscapes it is presented within. In this paper we describe the work and place it in relationship to other artists engaged with field recording and extended sound walking practices. We will give technical details of the *Ambulation* system we developed as part of the creation of the piece, and conclude with a collection of observations that emerged from the project. The research around the development and presentation of *Ambulation* contributes to the idea of field recording as a live, procedural practice, moving away from the ideas of the

## 2. A TYPICAL PERFORMANCE

Each *Ambulation* event responds to and engages audiences with the interplay between sound and space in a particular location. The performance supports a collective listening experience and the research we conducted through *Ambulation* considers how recording and performance exist as shared listening practices.

During the forty to eighty minute walk that is the performance of *Ambulation*, a variety of listening technologies are used which have been adapted to record and manipulate the sounds of the immediate context in real time. The sounds 'collected' during the walk are broadcast live for the duration of the performance to wireless headphones worn by participants who are walking alongside. With this set up we walk together

*Ambulation* was accepted as a paper for the New Interfaces for Musical Expression Conference (NIME) and will be presented in Birmingham in June 2020



## Research Contributions of *Ambulation*

*Ambulation* has been developed through multiple public presentations in a variety of settings.

These are the upshots:

## *Liveness*

The liveness of *Ambulation* means that the making is not separated from the performance event. Rather, performer and audience are simultaneously part of the unfolding of the improvised composition, which responds to the immediate sound environment. Making, and the thinking that it entails, occurs through the walk itself, in the use of the pre-built system, in the shaping and collective experience of the pre-planned route, in the interventions with materials encountered during the performance, the dipping of hydrophones and the induction of electromagnetic energy. *Ambulation* creates an arena for action and listening, a situation that allows for outside factors to influence the outcomes of the walk. The making happens with the audience as a live and public process.

The making does not all happen in advance, there is no complete composer privilege, rather the composition unfolds in time and space during the performance event. Though led by the performer, the activity of thinking through making is done collectively with the audience. As each iteration of *Ambulation* is improvised, each walk is uniquely responsive to site, time, situation and audience attendance. The experience of working on *Ambulation* suggests strategies for conducting performance walks of this nature. These strategies are open and flexible to different performance scenarios: technological, environmental, cultural and otherwise.



## *Improvisation*

The uncertainty of the sonic urban environment and its potential for artistic expression is communicated and reflected through the *Ambulation* sound walk. Approaching the walk through an improvisational practice allows for the uncertainty of the sonic world to be tied into versions of *Ambulation*. Unlike the sound walks of Janet Cardiff for example, which draw on fixed recorded audio and linear narrative structures, *Ambulation* works with the immediate soundscape as a creative material. Approaching media through an improvisational practice allows for complex and unpredictable elements to occur. As Bowers explains in his monograph *Improvising Machines*, he approaches electroacoustic improvisation through “responsive action”, highlighting activities that accept place, structure and technology as productive features of performances and not “problematic obstructions”. *Ambulation* accepts these unpredictable features and uses improvisation as a thinking through making process, extending Bowers’ account of electroacoustic improvisation to the form of a performative sound walk.

## *The Aesthetics of Interfacing*

Making artworks this way, whereby the characteristics of site, technology and situation are integral parts of the creative material and presentation, is an approach I believe to be of value to the sound and media art community. It offers an alternative to some of the more traditional engineering orientations to making new interfaces we sometimes see. For me, thinking, design, making, public performance and perceptual-aesthetic experience are intimately entwined rather than strictly iterated concerns. This leads to an appreciation and engagement with 'site' which is rather different from those applications in 'locative media' which, say, associate pre-made sounds with pre-identified and bounded locations. While the walk route gives an indicative guide to what might happen, what is actually heard on-site is thoroughly made in the moment. Our approach also leads me to rethink what can count in such domains as 'the interface'. Neither performer nor audience have a fixed resource which serves as the focus for their engagement with *Ambulation*. The perceptual-aesthetic affect of the work emerges out of many resources in juxtaposition: the site, its sounds, how the performer records them, the juxtapositions he performs, how the audience's attention has been shaped, and so forth. In a significant sense for us, the extended sound walking that *Ambulation* exemplifies is a kind of *aesthetic interfacing* – between performer, technologies, audience, site and whatever unpredictable elements come their way.

## Video Documentation of *Ambulation*

Ambulation at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK

<https://youtu.be/4sWb2P54rv8>

Early Development of Ambulation, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

<https://youtu.be/5WTFBPyGf5E>

Ambulation at Compass Festival, Leeds, UK

<https://vimeo.com/206206875>



*Ambulation* elsewhere in the world

Feature in a-n

<https://www.a-n.co.uk/news/walk-this-way-compass-festival-brings-live-art-to-leeds-streets/>

Feature in Leeds Expired

<http://www.leedsinspired.co.uk/events/ambulation-tim-shaw>

Feature in Its Nice That

<https://www.itsnicethat.com/features/newcastle-gateshead-googlespan-event-241017/>

Feature in Google Design

<https://design.google/library/revealing-invisible/>

*Ambulation* has been kindly support by:

Creative Exchange and the AHRC

Arts Council England

SHAPE Platform EU

Brighton Dome

Newcastle University Institute for Creative Arts Practice