SONIC FICTION - SONIC FUTURES
Amina Abbas-Nazari. Presented at Listening After Pauline Oliveros, Leeds, October 2017

1. This presentation is titled Sonic Fiction - Sonic Futures

2. "*Sonic Fiction turns your mind into a universe, an innerspace through which you, the headphonaut, are traveling. You become an alien astronaut at the flightdeck controls of Coltrane's Sunship, of Parliament's Mothership, of Lee Perry's Black Ark, of Sun Ra 's fleet of 26 Arkestras , of Creation Rebel's Starship Africa, of The jBs' Monaurail.*" This is a quote by Kodwo Eshun, he was the first to describe Sonic Fiction in his book More Brilliant Than the Sun where he focuses predominantly on an afrofuturist perspective.

I'm interested in how we can use sound as a medium to investigate and illustrate potential futures enabled by emerging science and technology. These sonic fictions or sonic futures are not intended to become reality, like science fiction, they are stories, cautionary tales, ways to critique and create conversation about our technological capabilities and their potential social, cultural and ethical implications.

In particular, I am thinking about vocal sound, how it can be affected by and / or interact with technology.

3. In 1939 at the New York World's Fair Bell Labs unveiled the Voder. A keyboard like device with a human operator that synthesizes human speech sounds. https://youtu.be/5hyI_dM5cGo

4. She saw me - In this instance the voder reveals the mechanics of voice, breaking the spell of expression, unraveling speech as tonal code that can be assembled into sense and substance by humans.

By exposing the sonic system of voice in language making we can understand voice as a material that can be shaped and sculpted. Therefore, can we exploit its forms for re-defined or re-imagined communication.

5. To conceptualize voice as material I wanted to explore and find a space ‹where speech meets sound' - through a series of works by the same name. One of which is this graphic score. It came about because of mishearing of just one consonant in a phrase of song lyrics that brought about a massive shift in perspective. http://www.aminanazari.com/Where-Speech-Meets-Sound

In an endeavor to find even greater significance from the verse I removed all the consonants. Also isolating the vowels to exploit their sonic qualities. The phonetics are intended to be sounded repeatedly until the performer feels disorientated in the semantic space between speech and sound - a space where an individual can potentially attribute new, alternate meaning to the experience. Equally it seems the stories we tell are limited to the capacity we have to describe them through the language we use. Might it be possible to tell new and unversed stories through trying to expand our vocal capabilities and aural perception.

6. These initial thought experiments were further developed in my piece Across the Sonic Border (Variations on 50Hz). http://www.aminanazari.com/Across-The-Sonic-Border-Variations-on-50hz

Accents and regional dialogues are already prevalent in most countries but what if speech were to diversify. We are so proficient at speech and the act of speaking, since we become accustomed to its fundamentals from a very young age. But Speech is an ever-evolving form, just like any other medium, through human manipulation and molding of its structure; but perhaps speech still has the potential to diversify further and come to more fully exploit human vocal sound. The majority of speech currently exists within a slim tonal range, especially when compared to that of a classically trained tenor; therefore, we can imagine alternate human societies with more elaborate vocal communication that utilizes our latent vocal ability?

What if the sound of our voices became a key marker for our identity and cultural heritage, more so than our visual appearance? Speech recognition technology is fast advancing and becoming more prolific and capable of producing very detailed biometric voiceprints that can describe many aspects of, not only people's identity but also lifestyle. Its evolution will soon provide the ability to signify your nationality but also describe where your parents were from and the different places you've lived throughout your life, with their associated chimes and inflections imprinted on your oration. Vocal sound, in this capacity, might also determine what countries you're permitted to visit, just as our passports currently function.

The technology may still be developing but speech recognition tech has already played a role in identification and immigration. Controversially it's starting to be used by the border agency of the UK and other countries as a way to ascertain the origin of undocumented asylum seekers and utilized to inform decisions about where those individuals can reside. - A highly contentious implementation especially with the voice being particularly fickle and malleable.

7. By extrapolating the current situation and technological landscape my project Across the Sonic Border (Variations on 50Hz) imagines speech has diversified and nations are split into speech communities, each with their own distinct ways of life as described and defined by their local, vocal dialogue (despite sharing the same language).

But what cultural trigger might influence us to start to become more experimental and radical with the tone of our voices, to potentially lead to the founding of ‹Speech Communities'. Currently society is organized around aesthetic appearance and the idea of ‹truth' is derived from materials in the visual realm. However, in a society defined and identified by voice the surrounding sonic environment and auditory architecture now become heightened in their cultural influence.

8. This sound surrounds us. You can hear it in this room. In any indoor space or exterior urban environment, in the UK, a faint hum can be heard – on, around, or a harmonic of 50Hz / G Sharp (60Hz in America) – this is the sound of the Mains Electrical Network Frequency, the persistent accompanying audio of the electricity powering and resonating around our everyday lives.

9. The frequency of the Electrical Network Hum is always oscillating on and around 50Hz and the Electrical Board keep a detailed record of this undulating data. It is therefore possible to take any audio recording, hone in on the Electrical Hum and cross-reference it with the compiled data to pinpoint the date and time

of the recording, to almost the exact second. In this way the Electrical Network Frequency Hum forms a watermark on any audio recording and this is already a technique employed by UK police authorities for use in forensics, providing evidence for court cases and upholding the law. We can imagine, in a society defined by their voices and therefore sonic culture, the pervasive Electrical Network Frequency Hum could become a highly significant, perhaps even authoritative body, where citizens are hyper-aware of its presence and also it's indicative temporal qualities. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electrical_network_frequency_analysis

10. Across the Sonic Border (Variations on 50Hz) is presented as eight audio clips that play through eight headphone jacks in a laser cut map, they can be listened to independently but also provide a linear or chronological narrative. Starting at the Dover border, in scene 1 the Electrical Network Frequency Hum is loudest and most potent in the speech community, but gradually gets quieter through the scenes and has less influence.

The scenes were developed with non-professional singers. The first two clips set the scene for the overall story. Scene 1 describes what might happen at the border where voice is used for immigration control and to ascertain identity. Next, two petty criminals are anxious that their voices might be recorded with the hum tracing them to the time of the house robbery they're committing. Scene 3 uses the electrical hum as a marker of the present moment, whereas in Scene 4 the hum marks time but also brings a notion of truth in collective decision making. By scene 5 the hum is not so potent however it is still prominent in collectively joining the community once a week, perhaps similar to the ritual of going to church every Sunday. In scene 6 the faint tone of the hum accompanies highly ornamented vocals for the now exhibitionist act of bartering (inspired by reality TV singing competitions!). Scene 7 describes how someone might receive prohibited speech therapy / vocal coaching for the benefit of code-switching to move across borders. Finally in Scene 8, this community have moved to a rural place to live without the electrical hum.

11. https://soundcloud.com/the-mass-ornamnet/decisions-council?in=the-mass-ornamnet/sets/across-the-sonic-border
This is in what I imagined to be a parliament or decisions council - individuals would use vocal sound instead of words to debate and the coming together and finding a harmonious sound would signify a collective decision had been made.

12. https://soundcloud.com/the-mass-ornamnet/unaccompanied?in=the-mass-ornamnet/sets/across-the-sonic-border
In Scene 8, this rural community live with no hum and have started to borrow from the sound of bird song, perhaps because they've forgotten what speech was like before the presence of the hum or perhaps to symbolize their emancipation from technology.

13. https://vimeo.com/145999838
I've been thinking about communication with inanimate objects or entities. Thinking about what are the components that make up conversation? What constitutes it? How can I use my voice as a vehicle to provoke an interaction with an inanimate being? Finding a resonance / a common language perhaps we could generate a kind of communication.

14. Now this experiment and attempt to talk with an object may seem a bit ridiculous but it's already happening in your homes.
https://youtu.be/t5bYtcjWcPQ
That was a Google banded speaking object conversing with Amazon's Echo. Not only speaking but listening and actually other objects do this in subtler ways, such as Samsung smart TV's that constantly listen, record and potentially transmit the sound from your living room, for third party analysis and utilization. The thing I find particularly strange about Google and Amazon's artificially intelligent objects is people ask them questions, they ask for advice and recommendations. The put their trust in and are surrendering their intuition to big corporations.

15. http://www.aminanazari.com/If-Objects-Could-Speak
This project is called if objects could speak…If objects could speak what would they say or what we want them to say and how could that become reality? This devices harnesses radio frequency identification (that's the technology you get in your oyster and access cards so that the systems involved know it's you) Using this technology it allows the narrative and oral histories of our lives to be told through the objects we own and the memories associated with them. Memories about the objects and their owners can be recorded and played back via the device and then also updated as new memories are formed.

16. This speculative device would allow us different ways of telling stories and cataloguing information about our family history and ourselves, to live on after we die, in the age of the internet of things. In a similar vein to Google and Amazon's devices this device could also potentially allow for people to have conversation and interactions with AI versions of family members, friends or even famous persona's via specially designed objects or just your kitchen microwave if you like…

http://www.aminanazari.com/