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Sonic Art, Brain Injury, and Intimate Ethnography

A Review of *Reassembled, Slightly Askew*

Denielle Elliott
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Reassembled, Slightly Askew

Performance directed by Anna Newell and written and produced by playwright Shannon Sickels

It is hard to describe what *Reassembled, Slightly Askew* actually is. As an art form, it defies categories and definition. Since first viewing/hearing/participating in it, I have recommended it to dozens of people and each time I do so, I refer to it as something else. A sonic installation, an experiential sonic performance, sort of a play, an autobiographical art installation, or maybe a multimodal art production?

I was invited to see it in 2018 with some colleagues while on sabbatical in Vancouver, where it was part of the *PuSh Festival*, showing at The Cultch, an annual international performing arts festival. I did not know what to expect and, so was really excited to participate in the experimental installation. We were asked to show up a little early, at which time we were directed to sit outside the venue room. There are just eight chairs for eight audience members/participants. An actor playing a nurse arrived to take our information for our admittance (as if we were being admitted to the hospital) and we were given a medical wrist band. When everyone had completed their forms, we were taken into the venue. There we saw eight hospital beds, four lined along each side of the room. We were asked to pick a bed, take our shoes off, lie down on the bed, and wait for the attending nurse (Illustration 1). The nurse sees each “patient,” covers them with a blanket, asks them to put a blindfold over their eyes, and provides them with over-ear headphones. You are directed to continue to lie on the bed until the audio ends.



Illustration 1: The stage set at the Culture Lab, in The Cultch, 2018, East Vancouver.
Photo credit: Denielle Elliott.

This sonic art installation was directed by Anna Newell and written and produced by playwright Shannon Sickels [Yee]. It is based on her experience with an acquired brain injury in 2008. The aim of the interactive audio performance is to provide the sensorial experience of being inside the artist's head during the treatment and subsequent recovery. Her brain injury started with a sinus infection that went untreated and then progressed into her brain. Suffering from lethargy, intense headaches, visual auras, and then eventually finding her speech and balance affected, she was taken to the emergency ward, where they quickly diagnosed her with a dangerous bacterial brain infection. The infection had resulted in a massive buildup of puss that was putting pressure on her brain, so a neurosurgeon performed a craniotomy, draining the puss and removing a portion of the skull to alleviate the pressure.

The most compelling component of the performance is not so much the story itself (though of course one feels for the challenging emotional and physical journey that Sickels endured), but the use of three-dimensional sonic techniques that create the conditions which allow participants to feel immersed within Sickels' mind. Perhaps a perfect example of what Steven Feld has called "acoustic epistemology" (Rice and Feld 2020), Sickels' sonic performance allows for knowing through soundscapes. It is the work of Paul Stapleton, sound designer and Professor of Music at the Sonic Arts Research Centre at Queen's University in Belfast, that I find most intriguing. Through the use of binaural

microphones, Stapleton spatializes sound. When you put the headphones on, you hear what Sickels heard as she lay in her hospital bed during a coma and her recovery: the slow *drip drip* of the liquid in the intravenous line a few feet away from the bed, a doctor leaning over the bedside to talk directly into Sickels' ear, nurses talking on the other side of the room, and Sickels' delusional voices talking about her planned trip to Mexico. You can listen to a soundscape trailer [here](#). Be sure to wear headphones.

Though they have become increasingly popular in the last decade, binaural microphones have been around for a century, invented in 1881 by Clement Ader (Paul 2009). Placed in the ear canal of a dummy or the person doing the recording, the play is staged around the room in a way that the audio-recording represents the hospital soundscape. In the context of *Reassembled, Slightly Askew*, this technology demands that the attention of the audience/participants be directed away from the visual and images, to the act of listening to the sounds, silences, and voices that surround Sickels. What makes binaural microphone technology more popular today is the way of listening to the recording: good headphones are required for focused listening to rich sounds that move through space. In some ways, this sonic installation is the ideal complement to anyone teaching the work of anthropologist Tom Rice, who has written about the sounds of hospitals (including, for instance, education in the act of listening through a stethoscope) (Rice 2008, 2013). Though not defined as an ethnography of sound, it certainly could be (for more on sonic anthropology, see Boudreault-Fournier 2020). It speaks to the ways in which the intellectual interests of anthropologists and artists overlap and inform each other.

Reassembled, Slightly Askew excites me as an anthropologist interested in science, technology and society, sensorial ethnography, and the ephemeral, hidden consequences brain injuries (and injured minds more broadly). I have been thinking about multimodal storytelling and acquired brain injuries myself as I work to create my own multimodal ethnographic memoir account of an acquired brain injury. I draw inspiration from Sickels and Stapleton for their ability to unearth the hidden interiority, an intimate ethnography of the self, with an attunement to the senses, to the seemingly unconveyable. Those who live with the permanent effects of acquired brain injuries or degenerative neurological conditions experience a range of sensorial sensitivities that affect how we sense touch, smell odours, hear sounds and silences, taste flavours, and see the world around us. Sometimes they are seemingly magical visual auras, and at other times it might be an intense oversensitivity to touch. Those who suffer

from epileptic seizures often report smelling burning rubber or burning toast moments before they have a seizure (or they can also simply be sensorial seizures). The technological innovations in *Reassembled, Slightly Askew* offer inspiration to those working in sonic ethnography and arts-based ethnography for getting at those very specific but largely elusive sensorial experiences, whether neurological or otherwise (I imagine this technology would be useful for also making ‘real’ the ghosts and phantoms that haunt the spaces we work).

The sonic installation is followed by a 25-minute video where the various multidisciplinary team members (including a choreographer, sound designer, and dramaturg) talk about the process and expectations for the production. You can view a trailer online [here](#). The video component explains the use of three-dimensional sound technologies to create that felt, embodied, immersive experience for audience members/participants. It is that immersive quality that the team hopes will encourage or nurture a sense of empathy among audience members. Sickels reports, as do many others with acquired brain injuries, that she felt others could not understand what she was experiencing. The show is meant to introduce a deeper understanding of the felt experiences, and as such has been marketed to medical schools with hopes healthcare professionals working in neurology might participate to understand what their patients might be experiencing. Regardless of whether or not it can teach medical doctors empathy, it is very much worth seeing/hearing.

If you’re interested in hosting the show at your school, it is available (though costly). Information is on the webpage.

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