
Embracing Death and Error:

The Cyberpunk Sound Art Scene in Mexico City

Mortimer Hays–Brandeis Fellowship Final Report (July 2016–August 2017)

Juan Eduardo Flores



When the time finally came to be talking and working with sound artists and musicians in Mexico City, I had no idea how welcoming the community would be to a fresh young face making science fiction looking gadgets to wear and produce electronic sounds. It would eventually become clear to me that in these circles there is no such thing as something that is too experimental. Despite it seeming eccentric and intimidating, I would be repeatedly blown away by the incredible support that the artists would have for each other especially when it was in the form of advice directed at me. They would show me again and again to "Surrender control and expectations. Embrace the moment when



Tlate/oleo, Mexico City. April 2017.

things go wrong. Take advantage of the situation. Adapt." This would become the central lesson.

Of course the year would consist of many more things to learn about especially when studying the rich topic of the use of indigenous tools and instruments in the modern day. Most sound enthusiasts in Mexico are no strangers to the animal effigy whistles and noise makers, and for the first time I was able to hear and use them in person. Like a child I was fascinated by the colorful visual representations of jaguars, owls, eagles, and frogs accompanied by a produced sound emulating their calls. It

confounds me to imagine the type of advanced understanding of acoustics one would need to mold out the chambers that cause the desired variety of oscillation and timbre. Somehow the air streams succeed in capturing specific essences. This proposes the inspiring idea that sound is just as malleable as clay.

Today these replicas are not that rare and can be easily acquired in pre-Hispanic locations like Teotihuacan. Just around the pyramids and along the avenue of the dead one can find vendors with artifacts of vibrant colors. It is important to note that they often target tourists to sell them to. While probably not comparable to the originals and perhaps glanced over by residents, I believe there is still authentic value in examining them. Much about the ancient civilizations who built the pyramids is still yet a mystery, but it is still worth investigating how what is known and what remains is used by artists in their creative work. These artists sometimes search these objects for their sonorous potential.

With that being said, I knew that if I wanted to get an honest reading of this topic that would conclude with a more wholesome end-of-the-year reflection, I would have to examine these objects and their history within my own personal context. I could not with good conscience use these symbols and claim them as my own, because I had to remind

myself that despite being of Mexican heritage, I was still an expatriate from the US. Things like these I grew increasingly more sensitive about, and would make me more careful when thinking about my perspective as being somewhat of an outsider. Thankfully my mind was put in more ease when I had the pleasure of meeting other young Mexican artists wrestling with the same existential dilemmas relating to a search of identity out of an ambiguous past. The connections I made with people became a reliable primary resource to inform me. Most importantly, they laid out the foundation for one of my main goals: collaboration.

I first arrived in the neighborhood of Napoles in a rainy July when I made it to the apartment of my first host. He is a journalist who actively writes about the political issues in Mexico. Just after a few chats with him many of the things I already knew were reinforced, like how in terms of being politically involved, it is not safe to be a journalist, artist, or a student in this country. I remember the moment around the end of my fellowship year when I heard about the murder of Mexican journalist Javier Valdez who was killed in broad daylight, making him the 6th journalist targeted that year just barely in the month of May. The idea of freedom of speech has a different meaning to those who see these stories not just in TV screens indoors, but on newspaper stands outdoors on every corner of every block. Avoiding these gruesome images is unrealistic in the city and therefore the residents quickly become desensitized, restless and aware, since very young. Fear plagues the mind when one knows that people get murdered for being too outspoken about the wrong people, or for being of the wrong gender or sexual orientation. That is without mentioning that one could meet an unfortunate end simply for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. I knew when writing the proposal for this fellowship that the themes influencing the worries and anxieties present in the restless Mexican population would be important to think about. This is understandable when many see their government as corrupt and untrustworthy while constant violence persists in many forms outside as well as inside their homes. It is important to me to include this context in my reflection after all the conversations I had with people painted a clear picture of a worry that is always present. Nevertheless, I met generous and inspiring people along the way that strive forward in their work. Many of which, are not shy about what they think, and are prime examples of artists who voice their expressions of anguish, fear, and anger through the effective medium of sound and noise in a schizophrenic and chaotic city already plagued with never ending amounts of it. The medium while effective in

expressing emotion, is just as effective in dealing with too much it. For many artists in Mexico, sound is a way to escape by using it as a means for diversion, distraction, meditation, and healing.

Inside the underground scene, what dominates is very raw, unstable, and striking forms of performance. Being present in these spaces instantly became doses of something I have been yearning for after spending four years in its antithesis. Instead of having to navigate a more institutionalized world of art full of white walls and large spaces, I was suddenly finding myself in the most intimate spaces that were at times in people's apartment living rooms, rooftops, or abandoned industrial buildings in the outskirts of the city. The spontaneous nature of it served as a strong contrast to what I was used to and somewhat tired of. Something about it felt more authentic and real. I was thankful that events like these were so plentiful that there was almost never a night without something. There were so many sometimes in one night that it would leave me hurrying all over different parts of the city. Each spot would have its own set of unique historical and social implications. Whether it be in proximity to Aztec ruins in the historical center, or in a house turned gallery in an area overrun by auto parts and scraps. Some scenes and locations would seem so much like a junkyard to the point of almost looking apocalyptic, but no matter the location, history and life finds its way everywhere.

The performances I witnessed felt primarily motivated by ideas of improvisation, error, randomness, and chance. This was something I had to get used to when thinking about my own contribution. To help, I eventually signed up for transmedia workshops focusing on this at various locations that would stress on participation. This was probably the best decision I could have made because it put me out of my comfort zone and it led to the connections that would provide great feedback. Some were principal characters of the scene and some continue to be lifelong friends and collaborators today. I met and befriended students from the National Autonomous University of Mexico in one of these workshops who then collaborated with me in my first events.

My creative time in Mexico City in the end was divided into two parts. The first half was focused on time based performances and introducing myself to the community, while the second was spent in a three month long sound artist residency preparing an installation for a group exhibition summing up some aspects of what I had learned in the year.



Tlatelolco, Mexico City. April 2017.

It was not until around the 4th month in when I started to jot down ideas for my first performance. By this point I was already working on a prototype of an idea I was inspired by seeing certain circular sequencers. I went and bought small speakers and cheap MP3 players from electronic stores to assemble them on a bicycle wheel. I rigged it up in such a way so that I would be able to upload up to 8 constant tones ringing constantly under placed electromagnetic pickup microphones. When spun, the wheel would cause a Doppler effect and at the same time provide a physical interface to send sound to any audio mixer. Naturally, I mention this when the time came to brainstorm ideas for a group performance. We honed in on mutual interests when thinking about a concept, but it quickly became political. The first performance I participated in was about the 43 students who were kidnapped and killed in Ayotzinapa in 2014. My collaborators had VJing¹ experience, and we worked together on sounds that would compliment with my self-made instrument. While in front of projected video clips of angry protesters, burning buses, and faces of missing students, I was spinning an electronic wheel that would output strobing hums as its eerie soundtrack to match the chaos.



There were several sound art conferences that I was aware of and in December I finally wrote a proposal with another student who would become my main collaborator. Musician and artist Isaac Medina and I clicked instantly when we presented our project in the *5^o Encuentro Internacional de Arte Sonoro & Exploración Audiovisual* (5th International Meeting of Sound Art and Audiovisual Exploration) in the Huehucoyotl auditorium inside the Music Department of the University alongside other experienced artists. I had

recycled an old idea of another instrument made out of an old small computer monitor, and Isaac provided his software expertise in creating an audiovisual atmosphere using Max MSP, Arduino, and Processing. I attached an accelerometer and contact microphone to the monitor so that the sounds and effects would depend on movement and vibration. Audio reactive visuals on many screens was something I liked and wanted to keep building on, so I later made a type of screen monitor goggles inspired by cyberpunk culture to add to later reiterations. The performances would keep piling up and we would get known for being a sort of cyborg hacker duo. While very fun, it was hard work to prepare and it gave me a lot of soldering and coding experience in creating physical electronic interfaces. It also gave me a lot of exposure to many techniques and styles. We played in bigger venues like in the stage inside of The Cultural Center of Spain in Mexico, right behind the Metropolitan Cathedral and next to the Main Temple. We also played in a festival called *Hysteria!* in someone's house not far from where the Tlatelolco massacre took place in 1968. Whether big or small it seemed like there was constant support for experimental artists, as each event had someone that would offer us a spot somewhere else, or show us other opportunities.

Finally, the fellowship year concluded with an artist residency at a place called *Espectro Electromagnetico* (Electromagnetic Spectrum). From the months of May to the



beginning of August, I was sharing a space with three other artists with different approaches to working with sound. Each Monday we would meet up and catch up on each others projects. This proved to be very helpful for me because it challenged me and ultimately changed my process and attitude towards my work. I decided I wanted to continue working on the bicycle wheel prototype to finish into a more fuller installation. Inspired partially by Huichol culture and art, I wanted to emulate a spiritual object used for meditation. I improved the wheel by removing the media players and installing Frequency Modulation modules to receive audio signal wirelessly through battery powered transmitters. This allowed an easy communication between my computer and the wheel without any wires. The final result was an interactive sound sculpture that amplified four microphones in different placements of the wheel to output to the large speakers placed in corners of the room. The viewer would come into an environment full of sounds consisting of white noise, faded radio stations from nearby towers, and alternating tones. The combination to me was a reconciliation between peace and chaos and how they go hand in hand. The exhibition opened on August 5th and lasted as an installation for public view for two nights. Our projects were on display all throughout the building along with live coders and other guest performers.



MOD18 at the Cultural Center of Spain in Mexico. March 2017.



5º Encuentro Internacional de Arte Sonoro y Exploración Audiovisual. January 2017.



Video Still of Residency Interviews: 3:47-6:06

<https://youtu.be/0Hc7zFyUvXA>



Video Still of Installation Documentation

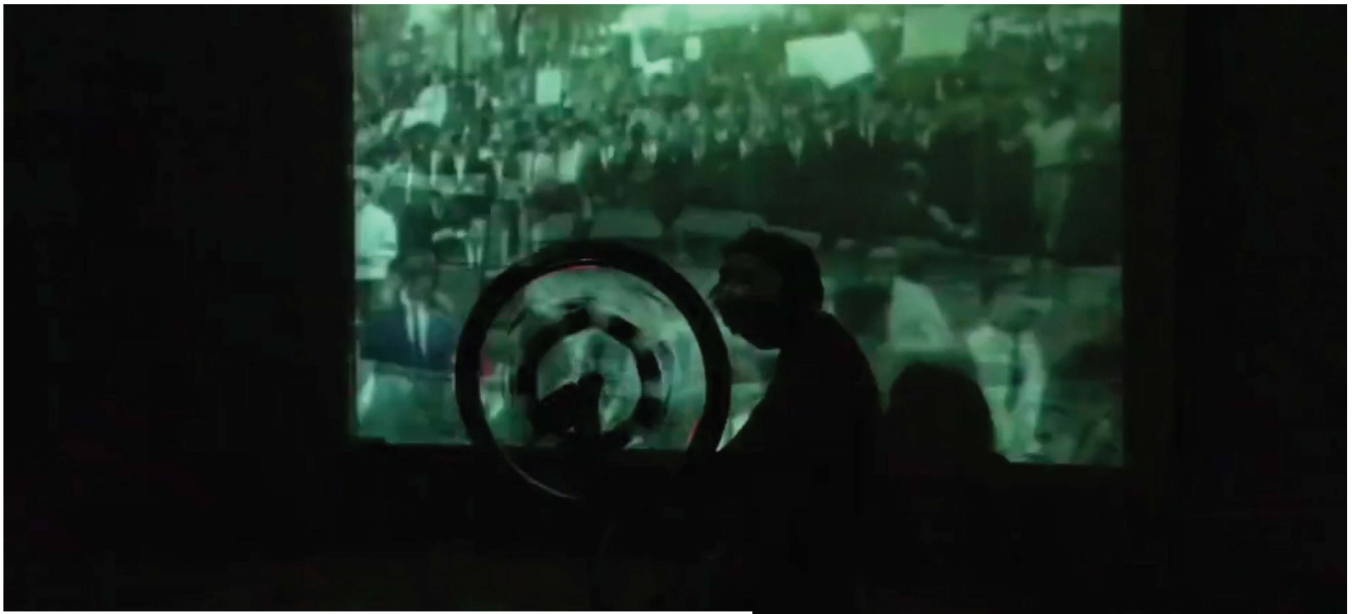
<https://vimeo.com/22895573>

How I have changed, where I am now, and where I am going

I am beyond grateful for the Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship, the doors it has opened, and the exciting spiritual continuation of it in the future. Whenever things went wrong in my presentations, I was very down and disappointed, but people showed me how much more interesting it is this way. I am no longer afraid of mistakes, but rather I look forward to showing them to people. Getting rid of this fear of error in the public view helped me grow exponentially.

Furthermore, I am motivated by the idea of showing by example that new media art is not as inaccessible or expensive as it seems to be for young lower income artists. It was a privilege and a blessing to be able to work with the freedom of having a financial buffer room for mistakes, which is necessary for this kind of medium. When searching the right places, recycled electronic components are just as accessible as paint at any art supply store. With open source software and the Internet providing plenty information to get started, I hope to continue spreading this idea into classrooms and neighborhoods where new media art programs or workshops are not available, starting with the areas I grew up in San Antonio. The price tags of many of the tools of established sound artists are scary, but there is always an alternative. It is exactly this kind of creative DIY culture that can give birth to spaces fertile for learning about the community and its history using technology to amplify our curiosities. Today I am continuing to make sound work for future exhibitions, with one coming up in the near future. I strive to be loyal to this low budget philosophy by scavenging for parts and opening up discarded toys, gadgets, and devices to repurpose them. Stylistically, I now believe that the rawness and vulnerability of exposed wires and messy components in any project echo what I found to be beautiful about the experimental sound art scene in Mexico City. I hope to stay true to that.

¹ *Vjing is the act of video jockeying. A video jockey is the video version of DJ, someone who performs with video in real time.*



First Presentation with Bicycle Prototype



Preparing the Sound Installation with the Help of Isaac Medina.



MOD 18 Encuentros de Musica Electronica Viva

Miercoles 29 de marzo // 19 h // Espacio X
[Im!|Dcoocierto](#)



ARTURIA



centro cultural de españa en méxico

W Co-((emx
 Dlocemx

18.hjffll.9l
 C29F 88-80192_C2C-cc18h st
 *cc-llure-911911

.t a)df.f.d.,jd4
 ADW0x89J511Kl8orF4118coores_8J509h3<0MfcaMJ.FD29@1efzr.r.
 MU@Plictrénia.SullhNdro.p.o.umud4t11Ffjic.anttU--l1FfoOdl'1858teti
 @CCIT"IOtmfQ.MtfSQI.lFCOI"lWWfnWl@E@t nW.O
 @to.,P!UC@Hu.,_Tt<MOP.,11r,DO.y@F10rti@HtdilWI
 /14ntJs.,rtaoR!Yn,HorrisTh.,lloJu=Refu.MaeliedlNYRMVhmil
 Q @ a n H O O
 Cowbor--nt11vfts.hjhHuskS@1Arturi,

Flier for MOD18 at the Cultural Center of Spain in Mexico.