6. A possible future methodology

Notes on sound

In early 2022 I made an installation piece for a show that I was required to carry out during the first year of the MFA program at DMA. The installation consisted of a protest banner with text projected onto it and a pair of megaphones that played my mother's and my own voice[1]. These objects were held by life castings of hands made in plaster. In conjunction with the voices coming from the megaphones, there was a loud background track of protest drums that looped continuously. This track was an edited percussion-only mix of a song played at a protest inside a Walmart center in La Matanza, Argentina[2], where workers were demanding better working conditions.

While showing this work, I received comments expressing confusion at the presence of the drums. Some people did not understand their purpose, or they felt there was a militaristic tone to the song that seemed out of place. These comments led me to ponder the close relationship between sound (more specifically, sound producing devices) and protest, particularly in my own experience in my home country of Argentina.

[1] *More details can be found at https://auzal.net/manifestacion.html*
[2] *Original source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWiN7xFzBew*

In this text, I will attempt to trace some common threads through a loose genealogy of sound and political dissent as they have existed throughout my life.

The Rioplatense sound

The comments about the drums in my installation coming through as militaristic are dead on. The music being played features a combination of percussive instruments appropriated from European military bands: bass drums, cymbals (oftentimes mounted onto the bass drums) and snare drums. In the original version of the song (before I edited it), there are a few brass instruments, which regularly appear on this type of ensemble (typically trumpets and trombones, for economy as well as portability).

These instruments became intertwined with the Música Rioplatense (Music of the Río de La Plata, a region comprised of the Argentinian provinces of Buenos Aires and Entre Ríos together with the country of Uruguay) through "Murga", a genre of street musical theater typically performed during carnival. Murga derives much of its musical structure from "Candombe[3]", a style of music and dance originated amongst African enslaved people in Uruguay (during the times of the Spanish Colony, the Río de La Plata constituted the biggest point of entry of enslaved people into South America[4]). Candombe is traditionally played on three drums (known as "Chico", "Piano" y "Repique"). However, murga began to incorporate European military

[3] *The complexities and overlaps of Música Rioplatense go beyond the scope of this text, but the correlation between its three main genres was famously drawn by Uruguayan poet and singer Alfredo Zitarrosa: "La Milonga es hija del Candombe, así como el Tango es hijo de la Milonga" (The Milonga is the daughter of Candombe, just as the Tango is the son of the Milonga). https://open.spotify.com/track/6b2xT7NbjsxeiegVCrQuEf?si=3d60ad390da04387*

[4] *See https://ojs.fhce.edu.uy/index.php/claves/article/download/834/1440/4324*

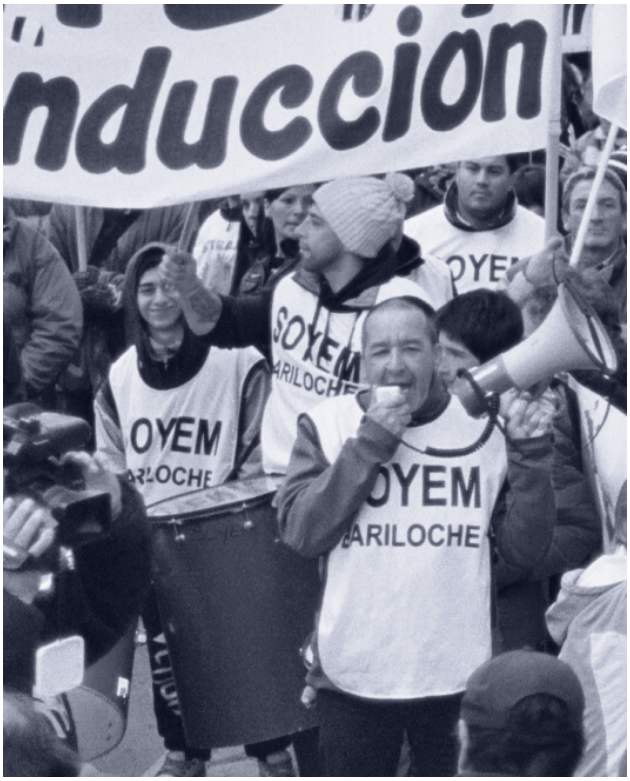
drums in what is known as “Marcha Camión” (Truck March, taking its name from the large trucks used by the musical groups to transport themselves), its base rhythmic structure. These military instruments were introduced by enslaved populations who first encountered them when forced to join the armies of Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay[5].

Murga lyrics typically involve some form of political commentary or social demand. The genre constitutes a form of protest that takes place exclusively in the streets and is often camouflaged under complex dances and costumes. This characteristic of murga as protest became particularly important during times when other forms of protest were outlawed, such as during the military dictatorship periods of the 70’s and 80’s[6]. In this way, murga constitutes a form of musical protest (with celebratory undertones),

[5] The most notorious of these instances being the “Guerra de la triple alianza” (War of the triple alliance), from 1864 to 1870.
[6] After the return of democracy to Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, murga songs have played an active role in the maintenance of active political memory. See https://www.cultura.gob.ar/murgas-una-practica-que-cuida-la-memoria_5532/

born in working class neighborhoods, structured by African rhythms, that takes military instruments used to advance invasion and colonization and subverts them into tools for political dissent and communality.

From the beginning of the 20th century until now, this ensemble of drums and its use as a tool to express the "popular" will (here I am using "popular" in Spanish, meaning "of the people") has permeated the Río de la Plata region beyond murga and carnival. These instruments and rhythms can be found in political rallies (particularly for socialist movements), football stadiums and street protests. These events and locations oftentimes overlap and melt into one another. It should come as no surprise then that the track from my installation was being played by a murga group[7], in solidarity with exploited Walmart employees.

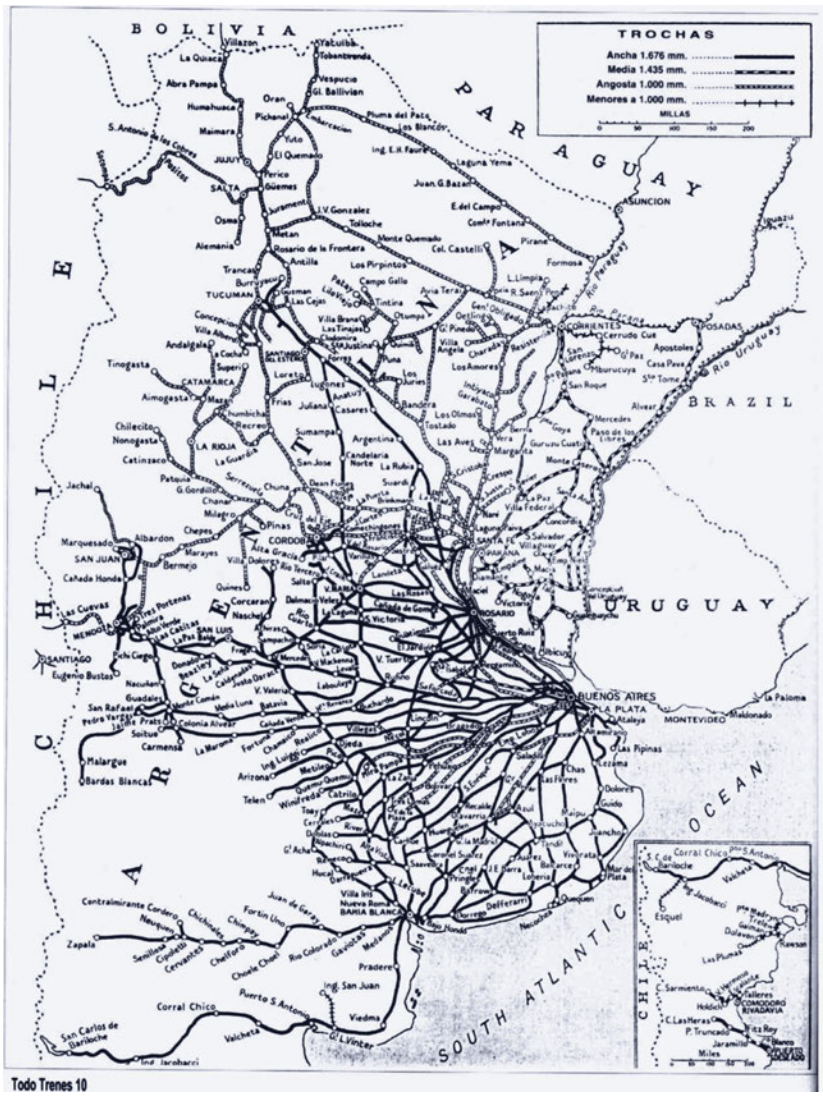


[7] *"Los fantásticos del oeste": https://www.instagram.com/fantasticos_deloeste*

In this way, drums constitute one of the most recognizable symbols and tools of South American protest, together with megaphones and large communal banners.

A note on geography and distribution

Argentina is a highly centralized country, with a strong cultural influence emanating from Buenos Aires towards the rest of the country. Although some efforts have been made to revert this situation, it is a direct result of the colonial structure created by the Spanish crown (in an attempt to control both the traffic of goods as well as the dissemination of ideas and news) and is thus deeply ingrained in the country's organization and idiosyncrasy. This explains why cultural practices such as the use of military drums in protests have radiated from Buenos Aires to all corners of Argentina (this is certainly true of my home city in the south of the country). The same can be said about access to the arts, with the provinces being highly exposed to cultural production from the Rio de La Plata, but not the other way around. This led to my childhood home being filled with music from this region, particularly folk singers who combined Candombe influences and leftist political positions (such as Alfredo Zitarrosa or Los Olimareños).



Map of the Argentinian railway system at the peak of its extent. Notice the fan pattern that converges in Buenos Aires

It is important to note that the history of percussion instruments in South America is much more complex and nuanced than stated here. There are

countless other variations both in the technology[8] of drums as well as in the types of music produced with them. This complexity is the result of a process of "mestizaje[9]" and has spawned many genres and artists who have kept percussion instruments in intimate dialogue with themes of protest, left wing politics, ancestral native knowledge, and humanism[10]. In some areas of the continent, this process has created entire social-musical movements, such as the "Nueva canción chilena" (New Chilean song), which played a crucial role in Chile's turn towards socialism in the 1960's.

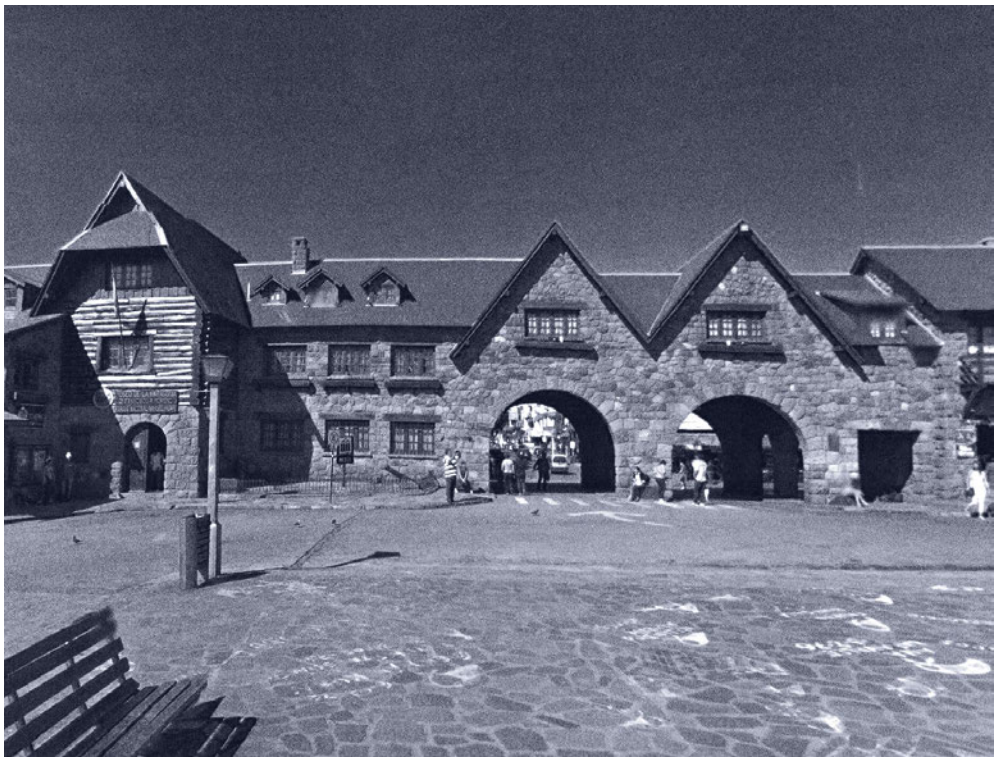
Sound and public architecture

My home city is, as many other South American cities, modeled on European urban models. Colonization has cursed us with cities that feature a central town square around which government buildings (and many times churches) are laid out, and from which a perfectly rectangular grid of streets spread out[11]. This logic has been consistently applied, even when the local topography makes it highly impractical. Moreover, my town suffers from strong architectural influences from Swiss and Austrian settlers, which

[8] One notable example is the "Bombo legüero" (league bass drum), a large drum with pre-Columbian origins, which was later technologically influenced by European military drums. Its name comes from the fact that this drum's dark sound could be heard from a league away. It provides the basis for several folk music genres, such as Zamba, and was also used as a means to communicate across large distances in sparsely populated areas.
[9] This translates to "miscegenation" in English. I use the Spanish term as it carries very different implications and much more nuance. For a wonderful discussion of this word, see Camila Marambio's "Mestiza," entry for "An Incomplete Glossary of Latin America," in United States of Latin America, ed. Jens Hoffman (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016). p.100-101. https://camilamarambio.com/docs/Mestiza.pdf
[10] Mercedes Sosa, Atahualpa Yupanqui, José Larralde, Violeta Parra and Víctor Jara come to mind.
[11] This is known as a "damero" (checkerboard) layout. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cercado_de_Lima

means that there is a doubling of the colonizing effect: the city layout is traditionally Spanish, whereas its architecture is unmistakably Tyrolean.

The entrance to the city square is guarded by two stone archways, designed to control the flow of traffic into the public space. Protests tend to cross the city through its busiest streets and end in the central town square. When crossing these archways, the section of the protest that carries the drums stops and plays there for several minutes.



Archways at the entrance of the town square

The cavity resulting from the arches constitutes a chamber that amplifies and reverberates the drumbeats, creating a vibrating texture of continuous cavernous sound that takes over the surrounding space. This sound can be felt on the entire bodies of those occupying the space: you can feel the ground shaking underneath your feet, you can feel the air vibrating in every hair on your body, you can feel your stomach pulsating, you can feel your

hands trembling to the rhythmic structure. When you are in this space, you are compelled to contribute to this great sound by any means available: feet are stomped, hands are clapped, shouts are offered. This embodied experience connects those who are present in a very physical way, creating a tangible sense of amalgamation with others, a unification of solidarity through sound.

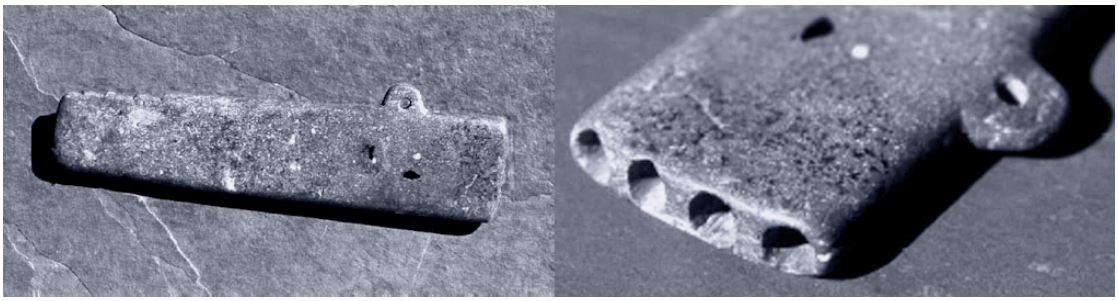
In this way, sound provides a medium through which to inhabit and subvert the negative spaces of colonial public architecture, becoming a powerful vibratory force that appropriates existing infrastructure to unite and synchronize bodies in an act of political dissent.

El sonido rajado

In her film project "Kon Kon[12]", Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña touches upon the notion of "El sonido rajado" or the "torn sound". This sound comes from the dissonant flutes of the "Bailes Chinos[13]", a type of dance that is performed across the north and the center of Chile and that has pre-Columbian origins in the Quechua and Paracas cultures. In another related film, she refers to this flute sound and the resulting movement of air as "es como el bombeo de un corazón, es como un corazón colectivo[14]" ("it's like the pumping of a heart, it's like a collective heart"). This stems from the fact that each flute produces multiple frequencies (hence this polytonal sound could be thought as collective), but most importantly this dance is performed by a group of performers, producing a unified body

[12] *See Cecilia's website for the project: https://konkon.cl/*
[13] *See https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/baile-chino-00988*
[14] *Cecilia Vicuña, "Sonido Rajado", 02:53. https://vimeo.com/562569286*

of sound that cannot be traced to a single point of origin, but rather becomes a communal manifestation.



Stone flute or "Tubo Complejo" (complex tube)[15]

This idea of the dissonant torn sound, that appears as a tear or a crack, and that forces one to stop and pay attention is linked to the Spanish word “parar”, which literally means “to stop”. However, to parar(se) is also to stand up, and more importantly, parar is also to perform a labor strike. This plural relationship between parar as stopping to become aware of something, as well as to putting a stop to one’s labor as a sign of protest, while simultaneously meaning to stand up, to stand on our own being, is mentioned by Cecilia Vicuña and Camila Marambio in their book “Slow down fast, a toda raja”. Cecilia reflects on parar as:

> “[…] it is as simple as coming to a stop and in doing so, letting the continued inertia of adoring property, excess and accumulation move without you.[16]”

I would also add the important difference that exists between parar as a peaceful protest action of simply stopping, as opposed to the English term “to strike” which carries an inherent violence.

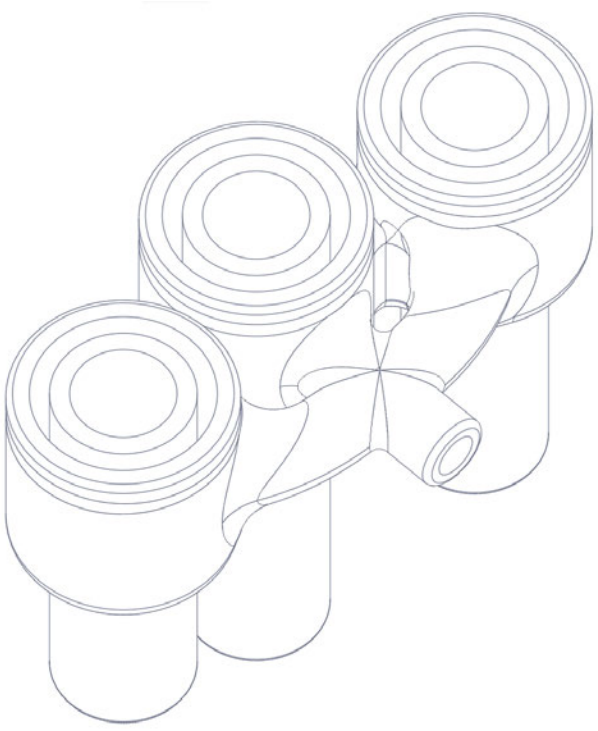
[15] *This piece dates to 1000 – 1470 a.d. https://museo.precolombino.cl/2020/10/10/la-flauta-y-los-chinos/*
[16] *Marambio, Camila, and Cecilia Vicuña. Slow down Fast, a Toda Raja. Errant Bodies Press, 2019.*

The torn sound and its relationship to strike practices is present in a series of noise making devices that I developed together with other DMA students during the graduate student strike of 2022. The initial version of these devices was bagpipe-like, made from discarded cardboard tubes and rubber gloves.

DMA graduate students protesting with early versions of the noise makers

These devices were made exclusively out of scrap materials available in the DMA fabrication lab. We were able to build them at zero cost for ourselves. It felt important to turn the UC's waste product into tools to fight the UC itself. We iterated through many versions of the devices, trying out new ideas and materials on the fly. We tested different strategies, such as large and visually striking devices and small ones that could fit into a pocket. This versatility is important, as the conditions of protest changed daily (it was necessary to quickly shift from large public demonstrations to the more stealthy occupation of buildings, for example).

As the strike developed, I kept working through iterations of these noise makers, eventually arriving at a design that shares several characteristics with the flute from the Bailes Chinos, such as its compact size, the striking volume produced by such a small device, and its multiple chambers that create a polytonal dissonant sound. The final design is meant to be easy to conceal, small enough to be used with one hand, and simple and cheap to reproduce (it can be created out of PVC pipes, or 3D printed as a single part). It is publicly available at: https://github.com/auzal/noise_makers . A copy of this repository has been included following this text. Along with this original 3D print file, the repository contains documentations of many variations that have been used at different protests, even at different campuses throughout the US.



Polytonal noise maker design

These noise making objects serve several purposes. In terms of sound and its relation to protest, they allow us to be heard (by us -those who are protesting- and by them -those who we stand against-), they are political in

their design and creation, they serve to unite through their sound (they act as beacons of togetherness and safety), and they allow for disruption. Additionally, they are tools for communal play and experimentation. They can be gifted, shared freely, and played with others. Their compact size and portability also grant them an amulet-like quality, an object one may hold closely in difficult times. Cecilia Vicuña speaks of the multidimensionality of objects in her 1973 book "Saborami":

> "Los objetos tratan de matar tres pájaros de un solo tiro: hacer un trabajo mágico, uno revolucionario y uno estético.[17]" ("Objects try to kill three birds with one stone: they do magical wok, revolutionary work, and aesthetic work.")

She refers to "un golpe mágico que es ayudar a la liberación" ("a magical strike that helps liberation"), "un golpe político" ("a political strike") that is revolutionary, and "un golpe estético: tienen que ser bellos para darle fuerza al alma" ("an aesthetic strike: they -objects- must be beautiful to give strength to the soul").

These notes on sound technologies, cultural sound practices, and their relationship to protest stem from the need to develop a framework of thought that is particular to my South American experience. It is both a search to reveal, connect and build a network of references as much as it is an effort to resist the overwhelming pressures of the hegemonic cultural histories of the global north.

[17] *Vicuña, Cecilia, and Felipe Ehrenberg. Saborami. Beau Geste Press, 1973.*

This process of creating one's own genealogies[18] is one that I wish to expand into other areas of my practice, as a means to put my work into conversation with relevant historical, cultural, political and artistic processes and figures.

[18] *This is an idea that was suggested to me by artist Carolina Caycedo, through conversations about the exclusion of Latin American identities from the mainstream canon of art theory and history.*