



I collected sounds of my grandchild crying, of myself washing clothes, bicycle sounds, my laughter – scary, right?

We learn to train our hearing, to focus on our surroundings... transfer our experience into arts.

This is an experiment.

I feel different,
I feel like i'm so young.

ORGANISED BY



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SOUNDING MOTION



A
CONTEMPORARY ART PROJECT
WITH SENIORS

BY
ANGIE SEAH WITH ZAI TANG

INTRODUCTION



Sounding Motion is a community art project that explores how seniors engage with the environment through sound. Utilising social engagement in contemporary art practice, artists Angie Seah and Zai Tang take 14 seniors on an acoustic adventure that aimed to rediscover engagement with the aural: how it shapes daily experiences, and its possibilities as a tool for abstract visual and physical expression.

The experience was envisioned by Angie as a customized 'tour package' for seniors, drawing inspiration from holiday packages and seniors' penchant for full-day outings with their community centres. It aimed to take seniors out of their daily routine and give them new experiences in developing imagination. From excursions to art experiments, it was hoped that they would emerge with fresh perspectives on interacting with the world through a variety of aural-centric activities.

In the project, elders are envisaged as acoustic geographers, investigating the environment through sound. They record sound on cassette at home and on field trips that took them to old haunts. In a fun branding exercise, they design covers for their cassette soundtracks. Next, the seniors respond to live sounds and experiment with mark-making in a sound-drawing activity. Finally, the sounds recorded from field trips and at home then undergo a process of abstraction to remove their original association with their source. Through use of a sensory device

programmed by Zai, the seniors respond to the set of abstract sounds through improvised movement performances.

In the closing activity, after undergoing a myriad of sound-centric expressions, the body is used as an intuitive instrument for painting with sounds of daily life. The end result is an aging body that transcends itself. *Sounding Motion* is about elevating the everyday, celebrating how elders understand the world.

This project was commissioned by the National Arts Council in May 2013 as part of Community Arts Project initiative.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Sound is usually derivative of a space. It creates a lot of the feeling of an environment and has an equal amount of importance as other elements in daily life. However, it is usually neglected through this acoustic adventure, we want to elevate the sound of daily life.

Sounding Motion is about making something from nothing, where familiar sounds of everyday life become an abstract palette for elders to express themselves visually and physically.

Drawing partly from acoustic ecology, a sound-centric way of looking at space and geography, we wanted to help seniors respond to their aural environment in a fun, engaging way.

We hoped their sensitivity, curiosity and alertness would be heightened in a stimulating sensory experience that would engage mind and body. We wanted to empower them to express themselves and find fulfillment in creativity. The project culminates in a final session combining sound and physical expression. Aging bodies find freedom in movements that conduct sound, in a performance that exalts the commonplace and celebrates an open exploration of forms.

Acting as creative mediators, we made a co-owned experience where learning is done on both ends. By presenting the elderly in contemporary art, we highlight and learn from their wisdom and spirit, celebrating their unique ways of experiencing the world. Through working closely with them in an intimate process, we invent a collective experience of exploring possibilities where nothing is a mistake in this search for the voice within.



THE JOURNEY

[SESSION 1-3] INTRODUCTION AND SOUNDWALKS

1 CLASSROOM INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS SOUND?

Angie demonstrates how to use a cassette recorder in the first session before the outing, and outlines the entire project to the newly ushered acoustic explorers!



2 A WALK OF ART THE POTENTIAL OF THE SOUND WALK AS PRACTICE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Field trips to Rochor, Botanic Gardens and The Science Centre had the seniors exposed to and recording different types of sounds- from that of a nostalgic city quarter, to nature and electric sounds. In this photo, the ladies boldly record the sounds of toy cars at a roadside stall in Rochor.



3

The seniors record anything they find aurally interesting during these sound walks. The locations held some personal meaning for the participants, mostly related to past memory, such as a beloved childhood haunt. These field trips thus provide a chance for reminiscence, which some of the seniors appreciated.



4

These field trips are envisioned as experiments combining walking, sound and memory. The seniors act as geographers, researching cultural geography through the acoustics of spaces.



5

The ladies try to figure out each other's cassette recorders. Using the medium of cassette provides a familiar instrument for the seniors and gives the collected sound a nostalgic aural quality that is part of the project's aesthetic.



6

Taking a break in the Botanic Gardens with goody bags put together by Angie.



7

Zai and the seniors as acoustic geographers in the Botanic Gardens



HOME RECORDINGS were also made by the seniors. These included conversations among family and friends, kitchen sounds such as mortar and pestle, sounds of birds and children. One participant recorded her signature laughter, which was later used for movement to everyone's amusement.

**[SESSION 4]
DESIGN AND PACKAGE YOUR SOUND**

8 The seniors each have three cassettes for three outings; each reel captures a sound distinctive to individual experiences. Through each of them we may experience one person's aural world.



9 Angie explains how branding a work gives it an identity. Every senior's design is special; this activity teaches them to recognise their unique way of looking at the world.



10 The seniors get creative as they design their own cassette album covers, in relation to the sound collected in each cassette. They draw things like trees, electrical sparks and the Rochor landscape to illustrate the nature of the sound captured.



11 The collective works reflect a shared nostalgia, fun and innocent wonder.



**[SESSION 5]
HEARING COLOR, SEEING SOUND**

12 Sound drawing exercises are experimental activities where participants listen to sounds and respond to them with simple visual artworks. These exercises help to connect different senses, expand creative expression and open up how we perceive the world.



13 Improvised sounds were made live on instruments like drums and bells. The session draws concepts from Expressionism and the artistic practice of painter Wassily Kandinsky.



KANDINSKY, a prominent painter of abstract works, made synesthetic artworks where musical tones he listened to greatly influenced the use of colour and form. He believed music to be powerful visual stimuli and made paintings that sought to use form and colour in a way that freed them from representation.

14 The seniors are encouraged to meditate upon the inherent qualities of sound, such as tone and pitch. The sounds have the sole purpose of inducing visual response based on these qualities. Mark making, shapes, forms and colours are explored. Some sounds are 'round', while others may be 'jagged'.



15 The works are individual visual interpretations of sound, in an activity largely new to the seniors. Essentially, sound and image are synthesised in a notating process. Many of them enjoyed discovering connections between their senses in this activity.



[SESSION 6—7]
SOUND AND MOVEMENT

16

Sounds collected from the field trips were mixed by Zai to disassociate them from their origins. Different sounds are mixed together. Aural and body movement are then used to paint a live soundscape in a sound and movement exercise.



Via a programmed Xbox Kinect that connects sensed movement to the sounds, the body becomes an instrument, the means to interact with different sounds. The original recorded sounds have been distorted and modified so the seniors may try to guess their origins- but they essentially play with highly abstract sounds that encourage them to focus on the sounds' intrinsic qualities.

17

The hands are mapped to frequency and volume of sound, while the torso is mapped to speed. Any movements within the space can shape the sound. These movements can improve seniors' motor skills and heighten sensitivity to sound.



18

A live duet where two participants move together intuitively, painting a shared sound work. For many of them, it was their first time connecting both senses spontaneously in this way, but they were confident, alert and curious in their expression.



19

The last session was a tea party where seniors invite family and friends, presenting live sounding motion performances and reflecting on the project. The seniors generously contributed to the potluck, and a surprise birthday cake ended the revelry.







Participants listen closely to sounds in the final session.

The elderly started off very wary of technology. But recording the sounds, they had lots of fun and were very creative- some of them recorded sounds coming out of the drain. They found out that it wasn't that frightening after all. This workshop also gives them the chance to connect with technology. When you get them to be creative about themselves, it's very helpful to let them become more aware of the environment around them.

PHYLLIS TNG
Programme Coordinator
Silver Connect, Tampines Changkat CC

FROM THE ADVENTUROUS PARTICIPANTS

I like the sound of electric sparking, very loudly. Because before I was doing aircraft for 50 years, and the sound is the same as I found in the Science Centre. I feel very happy because this is an experiment, we do art with instruction.

RAMDZAN MASLAM, 85

When we were young we didn't get the chance to draw, now we are like children trying this out. I collected sounds of my grandchild crying, of myself washing clothes, bicycle sounds, my laughter- horrifying, right?

TAY KWEE KIM, 67

I recorded MRT sound, my granddaughter speaking to me, my husband talking to my family, the sound of my fan. I love it a lot. At home I watch TV, nothing to do, but here I learn something. There is a lot of difference in me.

NORMAH BINTE IBRAHIM, 62

From the beginning until the end, I learnt a lot, from nothing to something new. We learn to train our hearing, to focus on our surroundings... transfer our experience into arts.

KAMARIAH BTE TOHID, 51

We go out, mix with other people, learn new things. I feel different, I feel like I'm so young. Even outside look old but my heart look young. I enjoy, I'm so happy. Always look in front, don't look at the back.

MUHD IRFAN AMAN, 61

Q&A WITH ANGIE AND ZAI

ONE AIM OF THE PROJECT WAS TO HELP THE SENIORS DISCOVER NEW WAYS OF ENGAGING WITH THEIR ENVIRONMENT AND BODIES THROUGH SOUND AND LISTENING. HOW DID YOU WITNESS THEM RESPONDING TO THIS AND GROWING THROUGH THE PROJECT?

ANGIE Seeing them record abstract sounds discreetly or boldly is amazing. They were so gutsy- no boundaries. On the outing to Rochor, one of them pretended to look at the medicine man on the ground but was actually recording sound.

ZAI I saw them learning to play with the body as if it is an instrument. With a little bit of guidance, they began to free up their body and explore it too. They were trying to search for their sound, not just the sound they were shaping with their bodies, but the sound that's also internal. They were exploring something that they wanted to find out themselves.

HOW DID YOU CUSTOMISE ELEMENTS OF THE PROJECT FOR THE SENIORS?

A It was customised like a tour package, to cater to their needs. For example, I curated the refreshments on the outings, like cheese, butter and sugar biscuits that they will like. I like packages. We just want them to have a new experience.

HOW DOES SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART MAKE AN IMPACT IN THE SOCIAL SPHERE?

Z It's about what having a creative outlet can mean to people who haven't been used to expressing themselves. The value of these

activities is to give people their own voice. If you're elderly, your perceived worth in society is diminished. But there's so much wisdom and experience we can learn.

TELL US ABOUT ART AS COMMUNICATION AND THE ART OF EVERYDAY LIFE, WHICH ARE SUCH A PART OF THIS PROJECT.

A Everyday life is important. I see importance in small things and gestures. Something small can be so incredibly loud. I want to highlight and amplify things that are ignored. Contemporary art is very close to life itself. There is no more line between art and life. Bringing in sound to a group of conservative elderly, you wouldn't know they are so open. This is what contemporary art is. I'm embedding this spirit into the work, and celebrating it.

HOW DOES THIS PROJECT GROW YOUR OWN ARTISTIC PRACTICE?

A I continue to introduce more interactive elements. I enjoy working with communities because I love people, I love everyday life. Doing art in the community really allows me to be myself. Sometimes contemporary art can be bombastic, hardly on the ground; how do you break away the prestige and bring it to the people? That is a challenge for artists- introducing methodology at a ground level, because contemporary art is not elegant.

Z Being an introvert in some ways, working with people helps me to shed my skin a little and engage with something new. Here the work is less removed. I'd like to hear what everyday people have to say.

WHAT WAS THE MOST REWARDING MOMENT IN THE PROJECT?

A Witnessing how they began to understand that they can be artists too and find new ways of engaging and responding to the environment through creative exercises. They also tell me about their daily lives and are always so full of gratitude and thankfulness, just the way they are.

Z The final workshop. I could genuinely see people listening to themselves. I could see them connecting with a real sense of exploration. Everybody found something that day. When we use our bodies in relation to sound, there's a release that's so primal.

A In the last session they were so sensitive to sound; it was really incredible. They were also very proud to bring their family for the yumcha presentation. Some brought homemade food like agar agar, mee siam goreng, curry puffs, porridge, after they found out I liked those things!

WHAT DID YOU LEARN MOST FROM THE SENIORS?

Z I was surprised by their enthusiasm. Their spirit is so strong at that age. It was a great privilege to work with them.

A They are so spontaneous and so free. They're very open as there's nothing to lose at their age. They take life easily. I really respect their spirit. I wanted to encourage and enhance this spirit. We need this spirit as society is moving too fast and harsh. That's how we can still feel young and open. The celebration of life should be like this.

ACOUSTIC ECOLOGY, with origins in the 1960s, is a sound-centric way of looking at space. By treating the urban landscape as a living source of musical information, old ideas of noise are challenged in a rediscovery of how sound affects our experience of spaces. The field trips encourage the seniors to undertake a personal exploration of their environments and appreciate the sounds they live with in a new way.



ARTIST BIO

ANGIE SEAH

Angie Seah's multidisciplinary practise explores human nature in relation to the social environment, through encounters with the ephemeral realm of sound. Her work playfully traverses the domains of drawing, sculpture, performance and installation, giving form to the shapeless aural experience. Spontaneity is a key artistic strategy for Angie, allowing chance and intuition to navigate a range of shifting emotional resonances and psychological states.

Born in 1979, Angie graduated from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology's Bachelor of Arts, and was awarded a culture scholarship from the Goethe Institute, Berlin, in 2005. Since 1997, she has presented visual and performance works as well as participated in artist residencies locally and internationally. In recent years, she has created many community art projects with the National Arts Council and the Esplanade, working with families, underprivileged children and the elderly.

<http://angieseah.wordpress.com/>

ZAI TANG

Zai's work focuses on the evolving relationship between sound, space and the body, in both real and imagined environments. Drawing influence from his research in acoustic ecology, psychogeography, experimental music and synaesthesia, his work is a means of engaging the mind's eye of the audience through the act of listening. Through this he hopes to reveal how a greater awareness of sound can enrich our experience of place and contribute to more dynamic states of being.

Applying a multidisciplinary approach to his creative practice, Zai has experimented with turntable and vinyl records in a live setting, created immersive site-specific installations and composed sound and music for film, theatre and dance. He has a Bachelor's degree in Creative Music Technology at Bath Spa University, and completed a post-graduate in Digital Arts at Camberwell College of Arts. Since 2006 he has been exhibiting work and performing in Singapore, London and most notably Venice; collaborating with Tang Da Wu at the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007).

<http://zaitang.com>



PARTICIPANTS

ABDUL LATIF, 76, a retiree who often frequents the Community Club, enjoyed moving his body to sound because it was good exercise for him.

CHONG AH PEE, 80, likes the sound of getai in Rochor. Her favourite part of the project was the outings, as she got a rare chance to try new and fun things with her friends.

HATIJAH BTE TULAIKAN, 64, a homemaker, most enjoyed recording birdsong.

HERMIN DJOEWARIAH, 77, likes going to the gym and shopping around Tampines. She enjoyed recording herself pound sambal with mortar and pestle.

KAMARIAH BTE TOHID, 51, has five supportive children whom she constantly updated about the project. Her favourite sound was the waterfall in the Botanic Gardens, which she found calming.

KIANG SIANG LOK, 60, believes he learnt about different dimensions of sensory awareness. He greatly enjoyed the outing to Botanic Gardens, which was his childhood playground. His favourite sound was the cicada, which he describes as conducting an orchestra in nature with its rhythm.

MOK SEOW BOON, 59, loves the virtual game Candy Crush where she finds her favourite sounds. After the project, she went to South Africa and listened to the waves at the Cape of Good Hope.

MUHD IRFAN AMAN, 61, keeps himself busy with activities like Sounding Motion. He does taichi every morning and enjoys cycling around Tampines. He believes he is getting younger and younger.

NORMAH BINTE IBRAHIM, 62, a homemaker who loves to cook, enjoyed recording sounds of home life, like conversations.

ONG BEE HONG, 67, loves the sound of water from rain to the sound of clothes being washed. She now wishes she has a tape recorder to capture sounds she hears in daily life.

RAMDZAN MASLAM, 85, a retired flight engineer and a handyman for his friends, likes electric sounds because they remind him of his past.

TAY KWEE KIM, 67, recorded the sound of her laughter –which became a favourite among her project mates- because people told her she has a rough, manly voice. She also likes the abstract sounds used in the movement exercise as they are strange and interesting.

SELMAH BTE KEPONG, 74, a homemaker who likes baking, enjoyed recording cooking sounds at home.

ZAINON SALIM, 73, enjoyed the trip to the Science Centre because they remind her of when she brought her son there as a child. She thinks the project is good for her memory, and enjoys the *jalan jalan* component with friends.





ARTS & COMMUNITIES NATIONAL ARTS COUNCIL

In Arts & Communities, we collaborate with artists, corporations and communities to bring the arts to where people work, live and play. We aim to engage everyone through the arts to promote creativity, self-expression and community bonding.

The Community Arts Project is an initiative mooted in 2011 to provide opportunities for people to come together and participate in an arts project. Its main focus is in galvanising the community to contribute their own experiences and creativity to the arts-making process. Such artist-led project empowers people of different backgrounds to share their perspectives, turning diversity into a collectively unique experience for all. It provides participants an enjoyable and meaningful arts engagement ; bonding them and deepening their understanding and appreciation of the arts.

SPECIAL THANKS TO
Tampines Changkat Community Club, Silver Connect

