

Community Building through Artist-led Workshops

Sandra Trienekens & Arie Altena



Mario de Vega's and Victor Mazón Gardoqui's workshop *Speculation as Interface* is a good example of the artist-driven workshops that Sonic Acts organises. Partly based on an interview with Mario de Vega and Victor Mazón Gardoqui, this text explains the rationale behind organising artist-led masterclasses and workshops at Sonic Acts, and the role they can play in building communities of interest.

Cover photo

Speculation as Interface, workshop led by Mario de Vega and Victor Mazón Gardoqui at Sonic Acts Academy 2018, Amsterdam. Photo by Pieter Kers



Tuning Vine, masterclass by Robin Hayward at Sonic Acts Festival 2015, Amsterdam. Photo by Pieter Kers

Sonic Acts started organising workshops and masterclasses in 2010 because it saw that Dutch, as well as international artists and makers, felt a need to exchange knowledge and critically reflect on their arts practice outside the boundaries of institutional education. Sonic Acts has always stressed the importance of critical reflection on the arts and the exchange of knowledge. Critical reflection is at the core of the organisation, as it started as a collaboration between music venue Paradiso in Amsterdam, the Interfaculty Sound and Vision of the Royal Conservatory and the Royal Academy of the Arts in The Hague. The Sonic Acts festivals have always had a discursive programme, and organising workshops and masterclasses was a logical extension of the programme.

The masterclasses give young and emerging makers as well as mid-career artists the occasion to exchange knowledge with international artists in the field of interdisciplinary and technological art. They usually focus on creative processes and artistic methodologies, and provide participants with an opportunity for in-depth exchanges of ideas and extensive discussions with renowned artists. Intergenerational knowledge transfer and insight into artistic methodologies are important aims. With the masterclasses, Sonic Acts hopes to ensure that

the knowledge of pioneering interdisciplinary artists is passed on to a younger generation. Often this knowledge is not part of canonical art history, and is hardly present in the curricula of art academies.

The workshops aim at talent development and the professionalisation of 'makers'. Generally speaking, they focus on acquiring and exchanging practical knowledge, technical skills and methodologies relevant to creative professionals in the wider field of digital culture, visual or performing arts. To provide public insight into the process, they frequently conclude with a small public presentation of the results by the participants. Very recently Sonic Acts also started programming educational workshops aimed at young people (12-18 years), which bring this target group into contact with new forms of art and offer them practical skills and inspiration.

Participants in the workshops and masterclasses are recruited through open calls. The communication targets professionals and students of arts academies who are interested in expanding their capacities and exchanging insights with more experienced artists. The number of applicants often exceeds the number of available spots. This provides the curatorial team, in consultation with the workshop leaders, with an opportunity to carefully select the participants, for instance, with an eye to enabling peer-to-peer learning, by having participants from diverse backgrounds and with diverse skill sets.

Artists who have presented workshops or masterclasses, which vary in length between one afternoon to a full week, include Catherine Christer Hennix, Pauline Oliveros, Tony Conrad, Jana Winderen, Steina & Woody Vasulka, Susan Schuppli, Christina Kubisch, Nabil Ahmed, AM Kanngieser, Ben Russell, Anna Bunting-Branch and Aliyah Hussain. The content and specific approach differs per workshop or masterclass. Workshops have, among others, covered field recording methods, working with scientific data, building and experimenting with DIY electronics, music theory, and philosophy. A deepening of practice in these workshops often goes hand-in-hand with a sharpening of critical reflection, and vice versa.

The subjects or techniques covered in the workshops and masterclasses have a direct or implicit connection to the theme of the festival. Workshop leaders and artists who present the masterclasses have also performed and/or had works exhibited at the festival, and have spoken in the conference. Most of them were also interviewed for the festival publications or for the online Sonic Acts Research Series.



Electrical Walks Amsterdam by Christina Kubisch. Sonic Acts Festival 2019, Amsterdam. Photo by Pieter Kers

Sensing in Radically Different Ways

Looking back, many workshops have been about building or using technologies to sense one's environment in radically different and critical ways. This was the case in the field recording workshop by Jana Winderen and the masterclass by Christina Kubisch. In Jana Winderen's workshop, participants listened to sounds from difficult-to-reach spots using hydrophones; participants in Christina Kubisch's masterclass learned to explore the electromagnetic landscape of the city using the technology Kubisch has developed for her own artistic work. The masterclasses by composers Catherine Christer Hennix and Pauline Oliveros focused on radically different ways to perceive, be aware of, sense and use space and sound. These masterclasses were also about 'changing perception', treated either in a more theoretical sense, or through practical exercises. In general, radically changing perspectives on what one assumes to be reality (with its social, political, or artistic conventions) have always been on the agenda of the masterclasses and workshops – even though this goal was never formulated as such. It was usually a consequence of the choice of the workshop leaders, and their artistic visions and outsider perspectives.

Exploring new and old technologies to challenge our perception or extending the human sensorium is a central topic of Sonic Acts. This exploration is as much about challenging the audiovisual experience, as it is an investigation of the sensorial, social and political repercussions of technologies and their impact on everyday life. Experimentation is

important to the organisation because of the need for radically different visions and truly innovative ideas that can activate the imagination of the audiences – and practitioners – to envisage a different reality. For Sonic Acts, the role of art is not to supply answers or practical solutions, but to formulate questions, to experiment, and to make visible or audible aspects of reality that are invisible or inaudible to our senses, or are beyond our comprehension. For Sonic Acts, art is an attempt to imagine the impossible, and an exploration of uncharted waters.

Informed by this overarching idea, the workshops do not aim to solve today's wicked problems through a creative use of technology. They are set up as occasions for the participants to become critically aware, acquire technical or other skills, and engage in cross-disciplinary dialogue with other participants and artists. The workshops aim to stimulate the participants to explore their own ideas or visions, and provide them with methodologies, ways of approaching technology, ways of thinking, and tools. In other words, they offer participants an opportunity to speculate and experiment, and could be considered a call to rethink and respond to significant problems. With the workshops, Sonic Acts creates a space with a potential for change, connection and inspiration. If this happens to result in a change of ideas about the role of art in society, it is a consequence of what happened between people, and of what emerges from the exchange.

Speculation as Interface

During the Sonic Acts Academy 2018, the artists Mario de Vega and Victor Mazón Gardoqui led a hands-on workshop entitled *Speculation as Interface*. Twelve participants from various artistic and academic disciplines and from different generations, worked for three days at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. Together with the artists, they explored disruptive technologies and instigated an ongoing discussion on alternative ways of creating communities. This workshop is a good example of how the imagination of participants can be triggered, how artists and participants can learn from each other, and lastly, how such a workshop can contribute to building a community of interest.

De Vega and Mazón Gardoqui started presenting workshops about ten years ago because, like many other artists working in the field of technological arts, they felt that the artist-individual is no longer at the centre of artistic practice. As Mazón Gardoqui stated: 'It is not about the two of us, the work needs a wider community.' For them mutual exchange and the building of communities is the centre of artistic practice.

In the workshop *Speculation as Interface*, participants learned to assemble and programme a custom radiation detector, through which they learned about the architecture of WIFI networks, how one can sniff the transmitted data, and put these communications to a different use. They were busy with media intervention, for example, by interrupting or meddling with the signals of local WIFI-networks.

This custom radiation detector, Limenia, was developed by De Vega and Mazón Gardoqui, as part of a larger project. At the core of this is a 'book', which is both a book and a portable server with a microcontroller that can open a WIFI spot. The book is printed with invisible ink. 'Turning on' the book initiates a public WIFI-spot, allowing everyone in the vicinity to access the information contained on the server. However, the same device can block other networks and confuse mobile devices. This 'book' then serves as the starting point and centre of a set of experiments, interventions, discussions and theoretical reflections. The overall project consists of a series of workshops, performances, interventions, and a printed publication. It is ongoing, and is developed in different phases through various applications of the tool.



Field Recording Workshop by Jana Winderen and BJ Nilsen. Sonic Acts Academy 2016, Amsterdam. Photo by Lucas van der Velden

Explaining the Limenia

Explaining the Limenia, Mazón Gardoqui states: 'the small hand-held device first of all reveals high frequencies, microwaves or electromagnetic pollution of Bluetooth, telecommunication systems or security cameras. It helps us to receive and listen to that invisible or hidden information. Secondly, the device transmits, bringing these frequencies into the spectrum of human perception by turning them into sounds that can be used in a composition.'

De Vega considers this device as a tool to open up possibilities for education. The microcontroller can be set up to measure different types of radiation, or gather weather data, for example. During the workshops, participants are encouraged to explore such possibilities and disruptions. An archive of information is created by adding to the information in the publication and on the portable server. Integral to the project is that others – participants in the workshop, invited writers – actively contribute.

Central for them is the realisation that we need access to and knowledge of technological devices to be able to envision a different social reality. De Vega: ‘We live in a world that is governed by our dependencies on technologies. For this world we need more than our five senses. We need certain interfaces or extensions that allow us to perceive the world in a different way. When you materialise the invisible through a medium, even a medium like sound that is invisible itself, you can demonstrate that there is much more than that we normally sense or perceive. This applies to everybody regardless of age or expertise. It becomes the common ground between the participants; they realise that all of us need more than five senses to approach the world.’

In the workshop, De Vega and Mazón Gardoqui are concerned with discussing and sharing tools, and enabling participants to use these in whatever way they see fit. The artists point out that it is entirely up to the participants whether or not they eventually apply the workshop’s technology or insights in a more activist or political realm – for example, building devices that register the electromagnetic fields of security cameras. Discussing the implications may also open up ways to protest against or sabotage such technologies that invade both our public and private spheres.



Speculation as Interface, workshop led by Mario de Vega and Victor Mazón Gardoqui at Sonic Acts Academy 2018, Amsterdam. Photo by Pieter Kers

From Speculation to Engagement

Explaining the title of the workshop *Speculation as Interface*, De Vega also elucidates why he leaves the participants so much space: ‘In the workshops we speculate what an interface can mean. When you start to unveil the invisible, when you start to engage, you start to speculate. Revealing what is indiscernible or hidden, what is beyond the range of our perceptions, is also the bridge to start communicating. Neither of us can see more than what is right in front of us. This is the common ground: we are all in the same story. Through certain tools you can show that there is much more. That is where the sharing of knowledge and interests comes in. When you deconstruct these processes and topics, it is logical that there will be a reaction from those involved. As artists leading the workshops, we might not be able to directly change anything, but what could change is how participants approach these topics.’

In addition to providing a collective experience for the participants, the workshop’s intention is to make them aware of what surrounds them and to initiate a dialogue. There are many important reasons for doing so, according to Mario de Vega, and the impact of technology on how we view reality, on our feelings, and on the decisions we make is one of them: ‘Topics addressed in the workshops are the impact of technology, but also the value of vulnerability: the vulnerability of systems, the world, and of individual people. We’re all exposed, observed and maybe even manipulated by technology that has been developed since the first spacecraft was launched into orbit by the Russians. This has radically changed the way we communicate, navigate the world, and predict the weather. Basically, the way we see the world is from above. We can perceive of ourselves as being observed from above. It’s a silent oppression. We need to realise that our decisions may not be truly ours. In the end we may become a downward-looking species again. People may be more aware of certain privacy issues than in the past, but we are trapped because of our dependency on technology. Victor and I don’t say that these technologies are necessarily bad; the issue is how we can use them sensibly and what the consequences of using them are. In a way, building the device is just an excuse to start a conversation on these topics. The workshop is not meant to just expose the invisible, but to create awareness of what surrounds us. Learning how to build and use the device, while at the same time discussing the impact of these frequencies or pollution, allows for much more interesting discussions and a deeper understanding.’

Building a Community

Mazón Gardoqui points out that the discussions become part of an ongoing dialogue in a community they are creating: ‘The result of the workshop is meeting all these people, and exchanging, learning and discussing topics such as the invisibility of high frequencies, electromagnetic pollution, or the dissemination of information. The conversation in this particular workshop becomes part of all other workshops and works that we have been producing together for ten years.’

Opening up technologies in a workshop and starting a dialogue with participants thus becomes a way to build a community of the like-minded. De Vega: 'We need to examine the impact that technology and artificial waves have on us human beings, and on the natural equilibrium of the planet. To explore these topics, as well as the possibilities and different methods, we'll need to build up a community of interested people. We've used our website as a platform for this. We don't sell our technology as ready-made devices. Instead, we offer all the information around it on our website. Festivals are contexts in which we like to organise workshops to bring people together and extend the network.'

Dialogue and exchange are central for them. De Vega: 'People from different generations, backgrounds and contexts participate and realise that they have something to exchange. That is the transformation: if these people meet again the future, they will certainly remember each other. Inviting new participants for each workshop expands the network and the community grows. That's why we prefer working with open workshops as opposed to giving seminars to a fixed group, even though we know that many participants would like to join in again. Though obviously, we're happy to welcome back someone to share his or her expertise with the new participants.'

An important aspect of this way of approaching a workshop is that people with different skill sets and knowledge come together and exchange insights, skills, and knowledge. As De Vega says: 'Learning is a completely different thing when you bring together people from different backgrounds and disciplines as we did in our workshop at Sonic Acts Academy. There was a biologist, a musician, a physics student, an architecture student, and so on. Such an encounter of expertise makes the process and the conversations around the topics much stronger. That is important, as the workshops are not about who is the fastest builder or the best, but about peer learning and the sharing of knowledge and expertise. That is the underlying reason why we do this work.'

As the workshop offers a setting for mutual exchange of knowledge and expertise between artists and participants, it comes as no surprise that the artists also benefit from working with the participants. As Mazón Gardoqui concludes: 'We receive expertise from the participants in return for what we give them. But the satisfaction for us also lies in the confirmation that people need to know about these topics.'

Creating Change through Engagement

The example of Mario de Vega and Victor Mazón Gardoqui's workshop shows that workshops can be a way of deepening the relation with an audience. Workshops create engagement with an issue, and stimulate an exchange of knowledge, which is also a way to shape a community. The participants in *Speculation as Interface* stated that the workshop broadened their understanding of technology, and that they felt they had become part of a growing community, and of an ongoing dialogue on the impact of technology. They all indicated that they would like to remain involved.

Key to the success of building such a (temporary) community is ensuring that the setting of the workshop enables mutual exchange and shared learning. This is not only about creating an atmosphere of trust, but also about shaping the workshop around a clear topic or tool, and making sure that different participants can bring diverse ideas and skills. The focus should not be on the workshop leader but on the collective process, which can be open ended. The goal of the workshops at Sonic Acts is therefore not a directly quantifiable increase of knowledge or skill of a participant, or proposing a solution to a problem, but raising the audience's awareness of pressing issues. Such a workshop offers the audience tools to approach such issues, in order to open up a discussion, engage in mutual exchange, and create a potential for change.



Electrical Walks Amsterdam by Christina Kubisch. Sonic Acts Festival 2019, Amsterdam. Photo by Pieter Kers

BIOGRAPHIES

Victor Mazón Gardoqui (ES) explores amplification, electromagnetic phenomena and perception by using locative audio techniques and custom electronics. Mazon Gardoqui's work questions perception, altered state and vulnerability through un/stable arrangements. His work materialises as interventions or site-specific performances through experimental processes, exhibitions as consequences of previous actions and collective work through seminars in cultural and or academic institutions. His works have been performed or exhibited in museums, galleries, billboards, urban screens, public TV and radio stations across the world.

Sandra Trienekens (NL) is a cultural sociologist (PhD) and social geographer (MA). With her research bureau Urban Paradoxes she researches citizenship, diversity and the arts. She has also worked as a scientific collaborator and lecturer at various Dutch and English universities. From 2007 to 2011 she was Lector of Citizenship and Cultural Dynamics at the Hogeschool van Amsterdam. She is the author of *Participatieve kunst* (2020).

Mario de Vega (MX/DE) is an artist best known for his site-specific interventions, sculptures and sound improvisations. He explores the threshold of human perception and the physicality of listening. De Vega's work digs into the materiality of sound, the vulnerability of systems, materials and individuals, and the aesthetic potential of unstable arrangements. De Vega is also interested in both the perceptive capacities and incapacities of humans, such as the limits of aural perception and the transposition of high and low frequencies into audible sounds. He has been guest artist and lecturer at a.o. Universität der Künste Berlin, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts de Paris; and his work has been performed and exhibited worldwide.

Arie Altena (NL) is an editor, writer and researcher who works in the field of art and technology. He is an editor at V2_ in Rotterdam, and as part of the Sonic Acts team co-organised numerous Sonic Acts festival editions and projects such as *Kontraste* and *Dark Ecology*. He has edited several Sonic Acts publications, and is the author of *Wat is community art?* (2017).

CONTEXT

This article is part of the *Re-Imagine Europe* publication. The publication collects articles, essays, interviews and reports about audience engagement for interdisciplinary arts organisations. It aims to share knowledge gained throughout the *Re-Imagine Europe* project with professionals in the cultural sector who would like to gain a deeper insight in audience development and capacity building.

Re-Imagine Europe (2017-2021) is a four-year project of ten cultural organizations from across Europe, responding to the current social and political challenges. With a programme of residencies, commissions, symposia and workshops, the project partners stimulate both artistic production and audience development. They experiment with new ways of reaching out to their audiences, motivated by the ambition to develop a broader and more engaging approach to audience development and capacity building.

COLOPHON

Editor	Lucas van der Velden Annette Wolfsberger
Authors	Arie Altena Sandra Trienekens
Contributors	Victor Mazón Gardoqui Mario de Vega
Photos	Pieter Kers Lucas van der Velden
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