

# The Shell: Incorporating sound art practices within Book Art

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How would a book sound if it could speak? Would it merely read its words aloud, or would the sounds of the worlds it inhabits pour out of its pages as well? There has long been a curiosity around how the multi-sensorial worlds described in books might be experienced when their pages are opened. In Cyrano de Bergerac's *Voyage to the Moon* (1650), written in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, he describes a special type of book as:

...a concern of metal something like one of our watches, full of curious little springs and minute machinery. It was really a book, but a wonderful book that has no leaves or letters: a book for the understanding which only the ears are necessary.<sup>1</sup>

Here, de Bergerac rather magically describes the way that sound and objects could act as books. However, there are few audio books combining sophisticated sound design and diffusion with the tactility and aesthetic of paper books, and far fewer that possess the explorative and experimental characteristics of Book Art.

Audio books are a relatively recent development of the traditional book form, gaining greater popularity in recent years due to online platforms for streaming and downloading. Generally, they can be grouped into three models: (I) children's books with button-triggered audio (these are generally traditional paper based books with built in speakers from which sounds are triggered by pressing buttons); (II) online audio books, or CD-ROMs (these take the form of a digital audio file, which can be downloaded from the internet); and (III) hand held e-books (these consist of a touch screen electronic computer book<sup>2</sup>).

However these designs have flaws that often detract from the reader/listener experience. All three can lack the tactility present in traditional books. For many, one of the most pleasurable aspects of reading is the way books feel, their materials, and the excitement of turning to the next page. Ebooks especially can also lack the visual aesthetic of traditional paper books<sup>3</sup> and children's button-based audio books in particular often use low quality speakers with poor sound quality<sup>4</sup>.

Additionally, audio books have often been met with a negative reception. As Sarah Kozloff states in her article 'Audio Books in a Visual Culture'<sup>5</sup>:

Audio books are both dismissed as a negligible fad, and feared as another potent threat to traditional literacy.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, the audio book medium is at times perceived as existing for lazy or illiterate readers, and a threat to the perceived value, and sales, of traditional books. While it is true that Ebook and audio book sales are increasing, so too are sales of paper books<sup>7</sup>.

Additionally this suspicious fear of electronic audio books seems to mirror the value attributed to the written word and literacy over language skills in general in western culture<sup>8</sup>.

But what if the tactile and explorative elements found in Book Art were to be combined with the immersive and experimental potentials in audio? Could this create a medium in which text and narrative unfold in new and interesting ways visually and physically, while simultaneously pouring out into the ears of the reader? I aimed to explore these questions in making my own audio artist's book, *The Shell* (2010).

*The Shell* is an interactive book based on James Stephens's<sup>9</sup> poem *The Shell* (1908), which is part of the Linen Hall Library's poetry collection in Belfast<sup>10</sup>. I wanted to base the project in this particular library because of its important role in Northern Ireland's literary culture. The library is the oldest in Belfast and from its formation in 1788 it has established an extensive collection of Irish poetry, literature and Irish language publications. The library has "maintained the principle that its resources are owned by the community for the community"<sup>11</sup> and therefore seemed to offer an appropriate space in which to exhibit the book to a wide audience.

I came across Stephens's poem after many days searching through the numerous books on the library's shelves. When walking on Dublin's Sandymount Strand, Stephens picked up a shell and pressed it to his ear. Inspired by the sounds he heard he wrote this poem:

## The Shell

James Stephens, 1908

And then I pressed the shell,  
Close to my ear,  
And listened well,

And straightway like a bell,  
Came low and clear,  
The slow, sad murmur of the distant seas,

Whipped by an icy breeze,  
Upon a shore,  
Wind-swept and desolate.

It was a sunless strand that never bore,  
The footprint of a man,  
Nor felt the weight,  
Since time began,  
Of any human quality or stir,  
Save what the dreary winds and waves incur.

And in the hush of waters was the sound  
Of pebbles rolling round,  
For ever rolling with a hollow sound.

And bubbling sea-weeds as the waters go  
Swish to and fro  
Their long, cold tentacles of slimy grey.

There was no day,  
Nor ever came a night  
Setting the stars alight  
To wonder at the moon:

Was twilight only and the frightened croon,  
Smitten to whimpers, of the dreary wind  
And waves that journeyed blind—

And then I loosed my ear ...  
O, it was sweet  
To hear a cart go jolting down the street.

Stephens's references to both visual and aural imaginings offer many possibilities for an audio artist's book. In order to develop my ideas further I researched existing combinations of audio within Book Art. Here I will briefly discuss three examples.

*Audio Arts* is a magazine established by Bill Furlong in 1973, now part of Tate Britain's online archive<sup>12</sup>, and consists of various recorded interviews with artists. The magazine was posted out to 'readers' as cassette tapes, which must be heard rather than read. Therefore the listener cannot flick through sections or make annotations as with pages of a book or an article. Rather, the magazine exists more in time than space, as listeners must hear it unfold from beginning to end.

Sergei Yakunin's artist's book *Daniil Kharms: liubovs i smerts* (1992), is based on the life and writings of Daniil Kharms (1905-1942), an early Soviet-era avant-garde poet, dramatist and writer of children's books<sup>13</sup>. The work is now part of the National Art Library at the Victoria and Art Museum<sup>14</sup>, London, and incorporates various doors and unraveling sections. There are also bells that can be struck and a mechanical puppet that operates a small pianola and billows that play tones heard through a set of built-in non-electronic headphones. Additionally, there are masks that can be worn by the reader. These different elements invite the reader to see, read and touch the book, but also to hear and perform it too.

Moneik Darge<sup>15</sup> creates music boxes that contain 'tiny sonic worlds'<sup>16</sup>. Darge describes the process of making these pieces in her essay 'Soundscaping'<sup>17</sup>:

I visit flea markets looking for the most appealing, still, silent box and listen to the sounds in my head. What kind of sound will I decide to escape from what kind of box? Once a box is chosen I start working on the visuals. Little by little my ears become pregnant with the most appropriate sounds. When the box is finished it transforms itself into a poetical miniature world, in which we can walk around, dreaming about what we see and hear.<sup>18</sup>

Darge looks at a box, and while imagining what might be contained within, she also hears the sounds of these little worlds. Darge's description above, like all of these examples, demonstrates the immersive and exciting possibilities of audio Book Art. However, while each incorporates sound in some way, the sophisticated potentials of sound art, such as sound processing, editing, diffusion and spatialisation, are not fully explored. Perhaps one of the best examples of a work that does explore these potentials is the interactive audio book *Listen Reader*<sup>19</sup>, which aimed to keep the aesthetic of a paper book while integrating high quality sound design.

*Listen Reader* was installed in the Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose, California. The reader sat in a chair with speakers built into either side of the frame, one positioned at each ear of the reader as well as a subwoofer under the seat, giving an immersive and intimate stereo diffusion. The sound track was triggered from the speakers through sensors when the reader moved their hand over sections of the books pages. This was made possible by a

combination of two technologies: embedded RFID tagging<sup>20</sup> for page identification and electric field sensing<sup>21</sup> to read proximity data from the hands of the reader(s). This meant that the sensors could be embedded in the spine and pages of the book without being visible to the reader<sup>22</sup>. Though this use of technology within the paper book form is exciting, it requires a significant budget, technical expertise and equipment. *Listen Reader* is also relatively large and importable, unlike a traditional book.

Therefore, drawing from the research above, when making *The Shell* I decided to employ sophisticated sound technology within the actual composition process rather than the book's design. By making good quality field recordings and having access to a professional studio, I was able to create an audio file that could be heard while interacting with the book object. The audio is easily loaded into a player built into the book, which is charged with a USB input and any computer. The book and its contents are easily transported and stored.

Many of the sonic and visual materials incorporated in this work were sourced from a journey I made to Sandymount Strand in Dublin, the inspiration for Stephens's poem. Through this process I sought to explore the poem's relationship with the strand and the Library in the context of the time in which it was written (1900's), in contrast with the experiences of the strand's present day visitors. There are many aspects to this process that could be discussed in great detail, from the significance of its inspired location to the philosophies that may have influenced Stephens when writing a poem about nature, mankind and "placelessness". However, here I will focus on its combination of sound, object and text.

*The Shell* contains four compartments in the base of the box. One compartment contains the audio player; another opens to reveal a collection of shells strung together with gold wire, with words on the inside of each shell from the poem. Another compartment opens to reveal seaweed with words from the poem sewn with golden thread. The fourth compartment pulls out to reveal a folded map of Sandymount Strand.

In the lid of the box is a mask mounted onto a square card construction, secured with clasps. When taken out the mask reveals an Edwardian style peep box of Sandymount Strand. Behind this, two doors open to reveal collaged images from Edwardian postcards, as well as images of geese, shells and flowers from Sandymount Strand. Each door or compartment contains a hidden world.

Underlying *The Shell's* audio content is the influence of electro-acoustic composition techniques<sup>23</sup>. The audio opens with the sound of field recordings taken at various locations on the strand. These are blended and processed until different scenes merge in and out of one another. Voices of visitors to the strand seep in and out, describing its characteristics and significance to them. A rhythmic murmuring begins underneath these sounds of birds, sea and traffic, and grows until it becomes a lone voice reciting the first line of the poem. All other sounds drop out and this single voice continues, as if on the end of a telephone line having a personal and private conversation with the listener. Sounds of the strand re-enter behind the reciting of the poem, but this time they sound different, distorted. The sounds of “bubbling seaweeds” and “the slow sad murmur of the distant seas” are heard as they are described in the poem, and when the voice recites “and then I loosed my ear”, the audio cuts out again.

Instead of the waves of the sea, now there are distant waves of layered voices, growing louder and louder. These voices build until one voice emerges clearly, followed by another and another. Different voices alternate reading a line from the poem, and each time a small sample of these voices is stretched, creating drones that stretch to the end of the poem. These drones start to form chords as new voices enter and blend with the distorted seascapes. When the last voice reads the final line of the poem, “Oh it was sweet, to hear a cart go jolting down the street”, the recording of a large lorry moves across the stereo spectrum, fading out to end the audio.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to avoid describing the audio and physicality of the book's design separately. However, this does not communicate the multi-sensorial experience of exploring the book. It is perhaps better to discuss its sonic and physical elements through the key themes present in the work:

- **Timelessness**

Stephens describes a place where “there was no day, nor ever came a night”. To communicate this idea of place without time, Edwardian depictions of Sandymount Strand are juxtaposed with modern day perceptions and experiences. Images of Edwardian seaside holidays are collaged on the book's back panel and on postcards inside, and the Edwardian inspired peep box also incorporates photographs taken of Sandymount Strand in the present day. Similarly,

the recorded interviews with beach visitors and field recordings of Sandymount Strand include sounds that would not have been present when the poem was written, such as the electrical plant's high pitched murmur and cars driving past on the road.

### ● **The Catagorisation and Humanisation of Nature**

In the poem, Stephens appears to be fearful of a place with no “human quality or stir” and is gladly woken from his isolated daydream by the sound of a cart “jolting down the street”. Therefore, there are various references to the humanisation of the natural or unknown. For example, the mutated sea people on the back panel and the imposed text on shells and seaweed collected at Sandymount Strand are all distorted imaginings of nature, but with a human foot print.

### ● **Personalising Place**

Throughout the poem, Stephens imprints his own personal narrative onto Sandymount Strand, and throughout the book this personalising of place is explored. For example, the text taken from people's memories of Sandymount Strand is imposed onto a map of Sandymount Strand and the postcards contain written memories of the beach imposing personal identities onto this location. Similarly, the recorded interviews with visitors to the strand in the audio foreground personal experiences of this location.

### ● **Aural and Visual Combinations**

Throughout the poem, Stephens references sound as well as image with descriptions of “bubbling seaweeds”, “whimpers” and “the slow sad murmur of the distant seas”. Therefore, *The Shell* incorporates objects that make reference to sound in addition to the built in music player. The shells tied together are connected to small bells that jingle when picked up and an accordion style design is used for the unfolding map.

The techniques above combine to provide the reader/listener with a multi-sensorial experience of text. There is a sense of discovery as new sections reveal themselves both visually and sonically, distorting and developing as each section unravels. Textures and surfaces, when touched, resonate with the field recordings of the beach, the recorded interviews with passers by and the collages of maps and photographs of Sandymount Strand. There is a multi-faceted exploration of place as the book encourages each user to take their own journey through the work, the poem and its inspired location through memories,

objects, sound and text. This experience is heavily connected to a specific location, therefore engaging the user with the meaning of place through language.

Each user has his or her own unique experience of *The Shell*, as there is no linear beginning or end. The audio loops in a cycle and the user can decide the order in which they explore the book's compartments. Throughout the audio there are various voices, and each voice brings individual qualities to the text. Within the box, the poem is fragmented over different objects. This was intentionally done at random throughout much of the work, apart from specific sections such as the peep box. Therefore, each reader/listener will hear and read words at different times and so interpret the poem in different ways.

Visitors to the library gave feedback on their experience of the book. Many appreciated how the interdisciplinary nature of the piece gave an engrossing and personal interpretation of the text, while others commented on how much the sounds of Sandymount Strand enhanced their reading of the poem. However, some found difficulty at first engaging with an object of this nature as it is neither book, nor audio device, but instead an object in its own right.

Through the qualities discussed above, *The Shell*, and indeed the medium of audio artists' books in general, invites us to re-examine our experience of text and narrative. Future development of this medium could include the incorporation of other technologies, much like the sensors used in *Listen Reader*, or focus on interesting presentations of these objects through installation or theatre performance. These developments might further transcend our contact with books from written text to living, breathing, speaking 'things'. The possibilities are endless and exciting, allowing our encounters with books to be about much more than written words, but instead multi-sensorial experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> de Bergerac, Cyrano. *Voyage to the Moon* (1650), cited in Sarah Kozloff, "Audio Books in a Visual Culture," *Journal of American Culture* 18, no. 4 (1995): 83

<sup>2</sup> Maribeth Back et al., "Listen Reader: An Electronically Augmented Paper-based Book," in *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human factors in computing systems* (presented at the Human Factors in Computing Systems, Seattle, U.S.A: Association for Computing Machinery, New York, 2001): 23.

<sup>3</sup> Dearnley, James, Cliff McKnight, and Morris Anne. "Electronic book usage in public libraries." *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 36, no. 4 (2004): 179

<sup>4</sup> Maribeth Back et al., "Listen Reader: An Electronically Augmented Paper-based Book," in *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human factors in computing systems* (presented at the Human Factors in Computing Systems, Seattle, U.S.A: Association for Computing Machinery, New York, 2001): 23.



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- <sup>5</sup> Sarah Kozloff, "Audio Books in a Visual Culture," *Journal of American Culture* 18, no. 4 (1995): 83–95.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*: 83.
- <sup>7</sup> There have been many articles questioning the affects of audio and ebooks on paper book sales. One that questions to what extent is Lloyd Shepherd, "The death of books has been greatly exaggerated," *The Guardian* (London, August 30, 2011), sec. Books, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/aug/30/death-books-exaggerated>.
- <sup>8</sup> For further reading on the relationship between oral and written language in a historical context please see Constance Classen, "Literacy as anti-culture: The Andean experience of the written word," in *Worlds of Sense* (London: Routledge, 1993), 106–120.
- <sup>9</sup> James Stephens was a highly regarded Anglo-Irish writer who was praised by the likes of Joyce and Yates in his time. However, he is now relatively unknown. For a biography of James Stephens see <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/565503/James-Stephens>
- <sup>10</sup> For more information on the Linen Hall Library and its collections see <http://www.linenhall.com>
- <sup>11</sup> For more information on the history of the Linen Hall Library see <http://www.linenhall.com/aboutUsIndex.asp>
- <sup>12</sup> Audio Arts is available to listen to online at the Tate Britain's online archive: <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/audioarts/>
- <sup>13</sup> For more information on Daniil Kharms and his work see George Saunders, "Soviet Deadpan," *New York Times* (New York, December 9, 2007), sec. Books, Review, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/09/books/review/Saunders-t.html?pagewanted=all>.
- <sup>14</sup> For images and more information see the National Art Library's online artists' books collection see <http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/15147>
- <sup>15</sup> For more information on Moneik Darge's work see <http://logosfoundation.org/index-mon.html>
- <sup>16</sup> Moniek Darge, "Soundscaping," in *Site of Sound: Of Architecture and the Ear Vol. 2* (Errant Bodies Press, 1999): 98.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*: 98.
- <sup>19</sup> Maribeth Back et al., "Listen Reader: An Electronically Augmented Paper-based Book," in *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human factors in computing systems* (presented at the Human Factors in Computing Systems, Seattle, U.S.A: Association for Computing Machinery, New York, 2001), 23–29.
- <sup>20</sup> Radio frequency identification (RFID) is a system that transmits the identity of an object wirelessly using radio waves. For further reading see Daniel V. Hunt, Albert Puglia, and Mike Puglia, *RFID: a guide to radio frequency identification* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2007).
- <sup>21</sup> Electronic field sensing enables machines to inexpensively sense human interaction and movement in three dimensions without the need for the user to wear or hold anything. For further reading on electronic field sensing and its musical and sonic applications see Joseph A. Paradiso and Neil Gershenfeld, "Musical Applications of Electronic Field Sensing," *Computer Music Journal* 21, no. 2 (1997): 69–89.
- <sup>22</sup> Maribeth Back et al., "Listen Reader: An Electronically Augmented Paper-based Book," in *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human factors in computing systems* (presented at the Human Factors in Computing Systems, Seattle, U.S.A: Association for Computing Machinery, New York, 2001): 25–26.
- <sup>23</sup> For further reading on electroacoustic composition techniques see Simon Emmerson, *Music, Electronic Media and Culture*: (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2000).

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