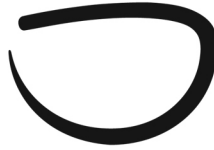


Canadian Food Studies



La Revue canadienne des
études sur l'alimentation

Audio-Visual Work

Invisible guests: A sound installation in a Montréal community restaurant

Mélanie Binette

Artistic Director, Théâtre Nulle Part

Abstract

Invité.e.s invisibles (Invisible Guests) is a sound installation created in collaboration with a community restaurant that provides affordable meals to a disadvantaged population in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, a former industrial neighbourhood in Montreal. Recorded conversations were made available for patrons who were eating alone, with the hope of breaking the social isolation experienced by some. By listening to the conversations on headphones as they were eating, patrons could virtually encounter other members of the community and engage with their concerns through hearing their stories. This is a first step toward group socialization for those who find it hard to communicate in person, and yet are eager to "share" their meals. This paper sketches how this sound installation came to be, and includes an audio extract.

Keywords: food insecurity; civic engagement; community wellness; sound art; art installation; community-based practices; relational art

*Corresponding author: mel.binette@gmail.com

DOI: 10.15353/cfs-rcea.v4i2.220

ISSN: 2292-3071

Artist statement

Hochelaga-Maisonneuve is a post-industrial Montréal neighbourhood with a high rate of unemployment and a large number of residents living with constant financial insecurity. As an artist who has called this neighbourhood home for the past decade, I have engaged with my living environment in many ways, from my regular *flâneries* to my participation in art interventions and small acts of political resistance. In 2014, the food studies artist-researcher Natalie Doonan offered technical, artistic and critical support from the Sensorium,¹ a performance art platform that she curates, to produce a food-related community art project. With this instigation, I got in touch with Maggie Lebeau, who is in charge of community services at Le Chic Resto Pop, a charity/community restaurant fighting food insecurity and supporting social reintegration in Hochelaga. Since I had just moved a few blocks away and wanted to volunteer there, I submitted this idea to her: *Invisible Guests*, a sound installation that addresses the subject of eating in restaurants as a primary social need for people living alone in a situation of poverty.

I knew Le Chic Resto Pop by reputation, in part because of the documentary *Au Chic Resto* (Michel & Rached, 1990), hence I was familiar with its active contributions to the social cohesion of this neighbourhood. Located in a former church, this charity was founded in 1984 by a group of people on social assistance who wanted to improve their life conditions and, by extension, those of their neighbours. Le Chic Resto sells meals at very low cost; feeds the pupils of École Baril, a nearby primary education school; offers cooking workshops and training for restaurant work; and hosts educational activities about food and household budget management. In addition to providing an inclusive space for people of varied backgrounds (students, low-income workers, people on social or unemployment assistance, new immigrants, artists, et cetera), this charity succeeds in creating a sense of belonging for those who have too often felt trampled on in civil society, by acknowledging their place within the city. Through my encounters with members of this community, I have discovered a support network that fosters values such as sharing, listening and acceptance. This reinforces the testimonies that I have heard over the years, including those of my mother, who worked for 16 years as a child psychologist at École Baril.

What I had not anticipated was the challenge that some patrons of Le Chic Resto face in beating loneliness, even within a context of social inclusion such as this one. On the evening that we met, Maggie pointed out how many patrons sit on their own, scattered around the restaurant, clearing their plates in silence. While some want to be alone, socializing represents an enormous challenge for others. This new realization

¹ Natalie Doonan curates "artists whose work engages critically and playfully with food and consumption. (...) The SensoriumM presents participatory art performances with the aim of generating conversation." (le SensoriumM, n.d.). Her support for this project included training in audio editing, conversation throughout its development, and a publication about the work that is available here: <http://www.lesensorium.com/2012/06/catalogue-season-4.html>

prompted me to adapt my initial proposal for *Invisible Guests*. I decided that instead of simply meditating on the importance of socializing as a collateral aspect of food insecurity interventions, I wanted to create an installation that would also encourage patrons to meet other members of the community.

The final format of this artistic intervention is a thirty-minute soundtrack made up of conversations that I recorded with patrons of the Chic Resto community. The track is meant to be listened to during mealtime using headphones that can be borrowed at the reception desk. My aim is to create a positive impact for those who find it hard to communicate in person due to issues such as language impairment. The recordings came about after several months of volunteering at Le Chic Resto Pop, which was mediated by Maggie.

My main purpose is neither to produce an ethnographic document that offers a portrait of this community, nor is it to provide a new tool for social workers or Le Chic Resto's employees. The purpose of this sound installation is rather to create a virtual space of communion, one that remains inclusive for those who have a tendency to get isolated because they find person-to-person exchanges too challenging.

The term *sound installation* is generally employed to describe an artistic use of a sound device in the context of an immersive environment (in this case, a community restaurant). The combined explorations of food and sound in art practices are not unusual. A few weeks before launching *Invisible Guests* at Le Chic Resto in August 2015, in a fortuitous synchronicity a Montréal design collective named Daily Tous Les Jours produced *Food Sessions*, another intervention that involved listening to a soundtrack throughout mealtime. This installation was presented at C2MTL, a conference about commerce and creativity organized by the advertising agency Sid Lee. Participants were invited to settle down at a table and listen to a “guided meditation” about “ways to eat with all their senses” (Daily Tous Les Jours, n.d.) on headphones while they ate. If both installations are similar in their form, their contexts of production, the content of their recordings and their creative processes have little in common. The most striking difference between the two is their target audience. In the case of *Food Sessions*, it was a privileged audience, savvy of new media arts, who could afford to pay a single entry pass worth between \$2000-3000.² These rates make the piece accessible only to the employees of well-established companies that can cover their admission fees. The event hence capitalizes on the artists' creativity to promote the supposedly avant-garde character of its elitist networking. *Invisible Guests*, for its part, engaged with the community of a disadvantaged neighbourhood and the installation aimed at fostering social cohesion and a feeling of belonging for the patrons, new and regular. It was accessible for free at the reception desk and the production of the recordings involved the participation of the community.

² Daily Tous Les Jours travelled this installation in other contexts, notably for another art audience at the Festival du Nouveau Cinéma, and in other cities such as New York, San Francisco and Biarritz.

The fruitful combination of food and storytelling does not necessarily require technology and has often been used in art interventions to highlight the complexity of the relations between social and political actors within communities. For instance, Marije Vogelzang created *Eat, Love, Budapest* (2011), an installation about the gesture of feeding someone, with the aim of fighting prejudices against Roma people, a European ethnic minority. This installation isolated each spectator behind canvas tents where they were fed by Roma women who recounted their food-related memories. The tents revealed only the women's hands, to put an emphasis on their voices and the gesture of feeding. Vogelzang intended to create a connection that goes beyond the preconceived ideas sometimes triggered by physical differences: “To create understanding for gypsy people, I think to use food is one thing but then to be fed by someone is another thing. (...) I think the idea of feeding is very intimate: a mother feeds her child with food but also with love at the same time. I thought about making this installation where people are getting physically fed with food but also with stories” (Marije Vogelsang, n.d.). She used food and storytelling to foster a feeling of intimacy between two strangers, to subvert social divides and social norms. Likewise, *Invisible Guests* conceals its protagonists' physical identities to favour an intimate connection through the sound of voices.

However, here again the contexts for the presentation of these two installations were dissimilar: *Eat, Love, Budapest* took place in an art gallery and appealed to an art audience that is versed in this kind of experience, composed of people who most probably have very different backgrounds than those of the Roma women. The tents even created a palpable boundary between the women and their spectators, as well as with the artist who remained distant from the performance, orchestrating it from above. *Eat, Love, Budapest* aimed to connect people of very different backgrounds. On the other hand, Natalie Doonan and I agreed after a few discussions that it wouldn't be ethical to bring an art audience into Le Chic Resto's environment. I wanted this work to remain a creation by and for Le Chic Resto's community and I knew from my conversations with Maggie Lebeau that she would not have allowed it in any other way.³ We didn't want to turn this experience into a showcase of Le Chic Resto's patrons for a visiting art audience. Hence I did not promote this installation anywhere else than within Le Chic Resto's network, nor did I engage with a promotion of the event in the media. My participation with the Sensorium was rather to use the platform as a space within which to think critically about the work that I was doing in that community, through conversations and a publication that I wrote for its 2015 catalogue.

In the summer of 2014, I was experiencing a period of instability: I had just graduated from an interdisciplinary Masters of Art degree, I was unemployed and I was

³ Some may argue that since I was the one editing the recordings, I wasn't giving full agency to the participants to enable them choose the content of the track. I chose not to make this project about technology education because first, I was myself in the process of learning how to use the editing software, so I did not feel comfortable enough to teach it to others. Second, this would have excluded the participants who were reluctant to learn about technology but were eager to find social connections.

going through a burnout. Isolated from academia, I was seeking a safe haven where I could heal from my stress and start to thrive again. Given these circumstances, I didn't consider myself an outsider within Le Chic Resto's community: like many of its patrons, I was withdrawn from my professional life and I was attracted to Le Chic Resto because it offered a place for social acceptance where I did not have to define myself according to my social status or my employability. I approached this project as a relational experiment that would provoke encounters and trigger discussions. It offered community members, myself included, a chance to break out of isolation. My participation in this community life was a way for me to put down roots and find purpose in my neighbourhood.

When I shared my desire to create this sound installation with Maggie Lebeau she became immediately involved in the conceptualization of the project and provided insights on the internal dynamics and the needs of this community. Our relationship quickly shifted into a collaborative one, which unfolded over the span of a year. Maggie facilitated my integration within this community, inviting me to cooking and crafting workshops, involving me with the distribution of fruit and vegetable baskets, and helping me to organize a “café-discussion” that would invite patrons to join me in reflecting upon the project's themes: socializing in a restaurant; chosen or forced solitude; the challenges of maintaining a social lifestyle when most outings are out of your budget reach. Throughout these encounters, I was able to create connections with regular patrons and to familiarize myself with their diverse backgrounds.

I had started off with the idea of creating a different track with a single voice for each pair of headphones, enabling encounters with one virtual individual at a time. In this way I was hoping to facilitate a feeling of intimacy between the listeners and the story of the recorded person. However, Maggie informed me of a particular dynamic within the community: the popularity contest. Reporters often seek out Le Chic Resto's patrons for their news stories, which sometimes has the negative effect of fostering a star system amongst the regulars. We hence decided to proceed with only one edited track, presenting different voices, to bring the group into focus rather than highlighting a few individuals. Without excluding patrons whose eloquence is often solicited, we made sure that we would include others who are more rarely asked to contribute. For this reason, Maggie and I didn't want the form of the installation to insist on the participants' identities, although other members of the community can easily recognize their voices and their first names can sometimes be heard in the conversations on the soundtrack. Audio as a medium provides a powerful feeling of proximity without compromising the physical identity of participants. In the context of this installation this was a great asset. Lastly, by mixing their stories and making an effort not to put too much emphasis on one participant over the others, I attempted to account for the kinship between their very different trajectories. I tried to convey the strong sense of solidarity that comes from being in contact with them.

Maggie and other staff members of Le Chic Resto's community services made suggestions for which participants to approach for the project and I had already met with some of them through my participation in the organization's activities. We put up posters to invite anyone interested in the project to get information and register at the reception desk. It was essential that I let the staff guide me in the selection of participants, because their knowledge of the regulars' personal situations allowed them to discern whether the experience would benefit them or if it would become a source of stress. Additionally, each participant signed a consent form, which I read to those who struggled with reading.⁴ I recorded over a period of six weeks. Sometimes I would meet community-members one-on-one; other times we would be many, assembling around coffee or a meal. Different personality types call for different approaches: some prefer intimate encounters; others thrive during group meetings.

I considered the recordings like actual conversations in which I participated, as opposed to directed interviews. I listened a lot: the participants had many things they wanted to share. I encouraged them to address issues that mattered to them, even if these fell outside the range of the project's broader theme of socializing during mealtime. Conversation topics varied from the lack of resources for people living with a disability, to the impact of a neoliberal rhetoric of austerity on community-based organizations, and the struggles inherited from a youth spent in foster families, et cetera. These deviations remain present in the final version of the soundtrack and they inspired how I grouped the excerpts thematically throughout the editing process. I also left exposed in the soundtrack a short moment during which I open up about my own story, because I was concerned with sharing the risk of vulnerability with other community members.

Since art critic Nicolas Bourriaud (1998) introduced the term *relational art* to describe "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space" (p.113), socially-oriented artworks have raised many concerns.⁵ For these past years, many artists in Montreal have responded to this social turn by inscribing their art practice in a somewhat community-engaged context, some conflating their creative process with anthropological methods.⁶ As underscored by art critic Hal Foster in his key article, "The Artist as Ethnographer?" (1995), the position of artists who claim to use anthropological methodology is often conflictual, because the conditions of production and the final objectives of artists remain largely different from

⁴ This form reaffirmed their right to withdraw their consent at any time and to end their participation. It specified that the audio work could potentially be used for dissemination in conferences or publications, in academic or artistic contexts.

⁵ Notably from art critic Claire Bishop: in "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" (2004), Bishop accuses relational art practices of contributing to the experience economy, by programming the social interactions of its participants. I also borrow the term *social turn* from her eponymous article: "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontent." (2006).

⁶ For instance, the descriptive of a "docu-fiction" titled *Habiter Villeray* on Théâtre Aux Écuries' website, (2017) mentions the "anthropological work lead by Marcelle Dubois", a playwright. (Aux Écuries, 2017)

those of anthropologists. Many artists, or the artistic institutions that program them, have a tendency to capitalize on the 'authenticity' of their participants and on the production's social reach to serve self-promotion or fit the demands of grant applications. To avoid some of those pitfalls, I want to stress here that I was not working for any institution (artistic, academic or governmental), nor was I formally gathering data. I was not working for Le Chic Resto, and we had agreed upon the fact that the recordings wouldn't serve the promotion of the organization.⁷

If anthropological methods have informed my work ethic and my way of approaching this community, I was not conducting research, and exhibition wasn't the purpose of this installation. With *Invisible Guests*, I was rather attempting to produce an experience that is both social and aesthetic with a community. Once withdrawn from its listening context, *in situ* and *in socius*, the soundtrack only appears as traces of social encounters that happened on site. The "invisible" presence of the soundtrack's protagonists allowed different levels of socializing: a virtual presence for people for whom one-to-one encounters are too challenging, an excuse for socializing for those who could use the help of an icebreaker. Hence I would position the nature of this artistic intervention as a socially engaged work, subverting the supposedly isolating effect of headphones to create an alternative model for social interactions. This was made possible because the creative process thrived on a collaboration with Le Chic Resto's community and on an immersion in community life.

At the launch event for the installation, organized in August 2015 by Maggie and me in collaboration with Le Chic Resto's community, we witnessed a few experiences of socialization that seemed triggered by the potential of this simple device. My intent here is not to debate whether or not this installation is effective, but rather to account for my first-hand observations of those using the headphones.⁸ A few of the participants had already connected with each other during a previous gathering that I had organized. For instance, a Chic Resto employee mentioned to me that two participants who met at the "café-discussion" were now regularly eating together, whereas they used to sit on their own. During the launch event, I noticed two men eating side by side while avoiding any eye contact, so I decided to give them the headphones. When I took another look at them later, they were having a chat. When I got closer, one of them handed me back the two pairs of headphones, apologizing for no longer listening to the track, explaining that he

⁷ However, Le Chic Resto Pop invited me in November 2015 to present the concept of the installation at ÉvalPop, a conference for charities fighting food insecurity that aimed at sharing practices. I accepted to participate with Maggie Lebeau in this event because I considered that it was important to share our experience with actors from that milieu and to discuss the potential of collaborations between artists and community-based organisations.

⁸ In "The Accident and the Account: Toward a Taxonomy of Spectatorial Witness in Theatre and Performance Studies" (2009), Caroline Wake discusses different witnessing positions for spectators using the rhetoric of Berthold Brecht's accident scene. According to her, a primary witness reports his/her testimony in the hope to develop a better understanding of the lived experience of the performance, which includes in the current case the social interactions provoked by the installation.

would rather talk to his neighbour. He mentioned that he wouldn't usually talk to other patrons when he came to Le Chic, but that the soundtrack put him in the right mood for talking. Most of the participants that I had recorded were present at the event. One of them was so proud of the result that he listened to the soundtrack twice in a row. When I left, the headphones were still circulating. I noticed a woman wearing them, smoking alone at the restaurant's threshold and gently smiling while she listened to the track. Her image remains printed in my mind: an apparently lonesome woman smiling because of virtual encounters.

However, the sustainability of this installation is precarious. Despite the fact that I conceived it as a permanent installation, available whenever the reception desk is open, the lack of financial resources and the high rate of staff turnover at this charity made it difficult to follow up, and the installation momentarily threatens to sink into oblivion. However simple its operation, it still demands a bit of mediation especially for those who are not familiar with technology. Two employees at the reception desk went on leave and Maggie left her position during the winter of 2016. My communications were not fluid with the new coordinator, who seemed overwhelmed. In this political climate of so-called economic austerity during which charities' funds have shrunk, I didn't want to burden them with another administrative task; so I waited. Respecting their rhythm and following the calendar of their priorities mattered to me. At the same time I questioned the sustainability of this kind of project once its best ambassadors had quit their jobs. Perhaps the new coordinator simply did not find any interest in this installation. The fact that Maggie had actively contributed to the concept of this project motivated her to sustain it. Nevertheless, the new coordinator got in touch again during the fall of 2016 and asked me to come show her how the headphones and the installation work. Interest in this installation thus continues to survive.

The different contexts in which I did the recordings create a dynamic portrait of the ever-changing atmosphere that one encounters at Le Chic Resto Pop: at times peaceful, other times quite hectic. To help convey the energy arising from this site, I did not conceal the soundscape in the soundtrack: clinking cutlery, children playing or crying, laughter coming from the surrounding tables, interruption from a singing employee who came to pour some more coffee, et cetera. The common area at Le Chic Resto is open, spacious and bright, with rays of light filtering through the windows that no longer support stained glass; a mood that is in line with the charity's aim to foster transparency and lightness. The difference in scale, from a small bachelor rental for some to the high ceilings of a former church, is a reminder that the experience of space is often dependent upon one's budget.

While listening to the short excerpt of the full soundtrack that accompanies this article, you will hear the users of this space express how Le Chic Resto impacts their lives. This charity goes beyond the single task of feeding a disadvantaged population; it provides a social environment that opens up the everyday life of its patrons by exposing

them to otherness and new ideas. This doesn't always come without friction, as mentioned by some of them here. While you listen, please imagine that you are sipping coffee in Le Chic Resto's environment, and it would be even better if you can get a hold of a hot, and very real beverage.

If you are interested in listening to the entire track, please visit:
<https://melbinette.wordpress.com/solo/invite-e-s-invisibles/>

Please note that the track is only in French, because it was the mother tongue of all the participants.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Le Chic Resto Pop, la Caisse Populaire Desjardins d'Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, and Concordia University for their support in producing this project.

References

- Aux Écuries. (2017). *Habiter Villeray*. Retrieved from <http://auxecuries.com/projet/habiter-villeray/>
- Bishop, C. (2004). Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics. *October*, 110, 51-79.
- Bishop, C. (2006). The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontent. *Artforum* 44.6, 179-185.
- Bourriaud, N. (2002) *Relational Aesthetics*. (S. Pleasance, F. Woods & M. Copeland, Trans.) Paris: Les Presses du Réel. (Original work published 1998)
- Daily Tous Les Jours. (n.d.). *Food Sessions*. Retrieved from <http://www.dailytouslesjours.com/project/food-sessions-for-in-the-mouth/>
- Foster, H. (1995). The Artist as Ethnographer? In G. E. Marcus & F. R. Myers (Eds.). *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (302-309). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Le Sensorium. (n.d.) *About*. Retrieved from: <http://www.lesensorium.com/p/about.html>
- Michel, E. (Producer) and Rached, T. (Director). (1990). *Au Chic Resto Pop*. [Motion picture]. Canada: National Film Board.
- Vogelzang, M. (Producer). (n.d.). *Eat, Love, Budapest*. [video file] Retrieved from http://marijevogelzang.nl/portfolio_page/eat-love-budapest/

Wake, C. (2009). The Accident and the Account: Toward a Taxonomy of Spectatorial Witness in Theatre and Performance Studies. *Performance Paradigm*, 5.1. Retrieved from <http://www.performanceparadigm.net/journal/issue-51/articles/the-accident-and-the-account-towards-a-taxonomy-of-spectatorial-witness-in-theatre-and-performance-studies/>