

IF AN ELECTRON MOVES AND NO-ONE HEARS IT, DID IT MOVE? CHARLOTTE PARALLEL AND THE AUDIFICATION OF THE INVISIBLE WORLD

Mark Wong



Figure 1. Serangoon/Coney Island hydrophone recording, Singapore, 2017, Photograph: Charlotte Parallel.



Figure 2. Installation view from opening night of *When do the trees sleep?* at Instinct Gallery, Singapore, 2017, Photograph: Peck Hoon.

On my first meeting with Charlotte Parallel, she hesitates when I refer to her as a “sound artist.” The reasons for this become clear as I become better acquainted with her practice. While many of her artworks have their most obvious expression in sound, the way these sounds have been generated come from diverse sources – light, electricity, the electromagnetic field and more.

Would a term like “art physicist” come closer to describing what she does? Sound scientist? Online, she has referred to herself as an “art worker.” While these descriptions fall short on their own, when considered together, they help us start to grasp at the wider implications of her work. In 2015, she assembled a “mobile sonic research kit” that she carries with her when she goes out to work. The kit consists of a DIY light-to-sound transducer, a stethoscope microphone, a hydrophone and a digital audio recorder.

In the YouTube documentation of her 2015 work, *Data Processing System – A Sonic Cartography of Venice*, one sees Parallel walking the night-time cityscape carrying a 25 × 25 cm solar panel with wires dangling, attached to a metre-long steel rod. This image brings to mind several figures: Fukushima scientist carrying radiation detector; gold prospector using metal detector to find treasures in the earth, or, more mundanely and closer to home, the mosquito fumigator and grass cutter: Parallel sweeps her device in front of LED signs, shop window displays and other sources of night-time illumination, as passers-by inevitably look on. By directly connecting the solar panel into an amplifier, she makes audible the electric currents produced, which, depending on their physical attributes, result in hums and stutters, moans and whines.

Expanding her project to Singapore, Parallel's methodology has brought her all around the island to record different sound phenomena, which she has used to build an interactive wall-mounted sound map (modelled after the mass rapid transit map). She has used both the terms psychogeography and psychogeophysics to describe her methods, both equally apt as the former is concerned with the effects of the urban environment on our psyche, while the latter broadens its scope to look at the total physical conditions of the earth that mould our dispositions.

The transduction of night-time light sources in our urban environment into sound draws attention to Singapore's intense light pollution, as does the title of her work, *When do the trees sleep?* A 2016 *Business Insider* headline screamed, "Night doesn't exist anymore in Singapore," reporting on a study which ranked the city-state #1 on the light pollution charts. It is through this transformation of light into sound that Charlotte is able to make us aware of the enormous amount of lumen "noise" that blights our environment. We Singapore urbanites are so used to the persistence of artificial light that we are oblivious to the way it has changed the behaviour, circadian rhythms, and biochemical and biological processes of humans and the natural environment. But the conversion to sound helps jolt us out of our collective unconsciousness ... at least for now it does. Imagine the day when sound pollution reaches such levels that the burr of static glitch is met with utter indifference.

One thing to understand about Parallel's light-to-sound transducer, though, is that it is not directly measuring light levels, but the flow of electrons which are created by the photovoltaic quality of the solar cells. Strictly speaking, what is being audified is not that which is visible (light), but that which is invisible (electricity). Parallel's work makes perceivable the invisible world of lighting networks which turns Singapore's night into day and extends the number of hours we can work, play and shop, while reducing the time we sleep.

Parallel's use of the hydrophone taps into another invisible network. By recording the sounds of Singapore's shores and canal systems, she gives us a new perspective on our water bodies and adds new meaning to the phrase "deep listening." Secretly, I am hoping that the government will commission Parallel to work on its ABC Waters programme – which stands for Active, Beautiful, Clean Waters – for she manages to reveal our waterways as the vibrant system teeming with life and activity that they are. Our water bodies sustain us and an entire ecosystem. This is evident when Parallel excitedly lets me listen to the strange and hypnotic clicking sounds that she found in the waters of Pulau Ubin, which she has not heard elsewhere and which she believes to be Ubin's coastal shrimp. The hydrophone reveals the energies which lie beneath calm waters, the buzz of underwater movements that we on the surface are not privy to.

In *When do the trees sleep?* Parallel's techniques penetrate the visible world to give us a listen to unseen forces around us.



Figure 3. Pulau Ubin Hydrophone recording, Singapore, Photograph: Lio Cheung, 2017.
<https://soundcloud.com/portc/hydro-pulau-ubin>



Figure 4. Listening to the Soho2 information board using solar panel transducer, Singapore, 2017, Photograph: Lufang Hsiung.
<https://soundcloud.com/portc/sg-solar-streets>

Mark Wong (b.1982, Singapore) works in and with sound to devise listening strategies for new and intense possibilities of being. His diverse practice includes gallery installations, improvised performances, compositions for film and dance, and live DJ-spinning. He also writes on sound and music.

Charlotte Parallel completed her Master of Fine Arts at the Dunedin School of Art in 2016. Alongside her own practice, Parallel manages an artist-run space, the Anteroom, in Port Chalmers. Parallel was awarded the Asia NZ Residency at Instinc Gallery, Singapore, in January–March 2017. The residency was an opportunity to focus on her research interests in sonic cartography and audifying processes of transduction; her inquiry was realised through interactive sculpture, collaboration and performance.