

BE OPEN Sound Portal Challenges a New Way to Experience Sound Design

BY SAMANTHA TSE, ARTINFO UK | SEPTEMBER 21, 2012



BE OPEN Sound Portal at Trafalgar Square as a part of a site-specific installation for London Design Festival
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Human sensory has been long studied as a science, but **BE OPEN**, a new global think tank helmed by Russian businesswoman and philanthropist, **Elena Baturina**, has developed a sound portal that explores the boundaries of what can be achieved in sound technology by tapping into human perception of sound and how design can transform it. **BE OPEN Sound Portal** launched earlier this week at **Trafalgar Square** as a part of **London Design Festival's** site-specific installations and will feature five sound artists and composers whose work will be performed inside the portal.

"We've decided to carry out some research concerning human senses and we decided to discuss design of those senses. It is a new sphere in which to use the word design but we would like to broaden the concept of the very word 'design'," explained Baturina through a translator to **ARTINFO**.

One of the challenges that **BE OPEN Sound Portal** has set is how the portal can change people's relationship with urban sounds. The black, rubberized structure resides in Trafalgar Square in front of the National Gallery, which is one of the busiest areas in London. **ARTINFO** was told that in the five days that the Sound Portal will be on display, around one million people will pass through Trafalgar Square. The cocoon-like structure is designed to challenge people's experience of urban spaces by almost entirely eliminating its noise and replacing it with different audio compositions.

"The main idea behind the portal was to show different directions of sound development. And for that we have chosen completely different representatives of sound design," said Baturina.

The five sound designers that were chosen for the project represent the wide realm in which audio can be represented. These composers brought different influences to their work, whether it was cultural or audio, so that the project approach to sound and design is in a global context.

"There are designers who use nature sounds and those which use completely electronic sounds. At the same time, we wanted to create the space that enables you to get out of city's noise and hear something different. Because every piece of music demonstrated in the sound portal carries through a particular idea and each idea is different," said Baturina.

For Russian-born, Stockholm based audio artist, **Ivan Pavlov**, he drew on the idea of religious chants. His composition aims to be accessible to audiences of all cultural backgrounds through a choral piece made up of four singers performing a synthesized chant.

"I came to making this kind of chant or choral piece for four singers where every singer is artificial and the voice is artificial. It's synthesized and the lyrics are artificial as well so everybody can relate to the piece but not too closely," Pavlov told **ARTINFO**.

"I wanted it to be globally human not so privately human but in a way it's lifting your audience to the next level of spiritual experience, which is not as private or personal as it is globally, universally. I'm trying to create an experience, which is elevated from a most casual experience."

Ambisonic recording artist **Nathaniel Robbin Mann** was also selected to work on the Sound Portal. He has collaborated with **Adam Lowe** and **Anish Kapoor**, and was awarded the **Gran Prix of the 11th Cairo Arts Biennial** with **Lara Baladi** in 2008. He started his process by spending time in Trafalgar Square to get an idea of the acoustic anthropology of the space. He explores ideas of heritage, identity, and culture and uses unique sounds from bird sanctuaries and railway stations amalgamated with traditional shanty singers in his composition.

"Obviously it's quite an icon to be working here. So my thoughts obviously run the sense of identity and heritage both in terms of the overlooked symbol this square is and what it initially represented but trying but not forgetting how actually the events that shaped this square have shaped the international image of our national identity," Mann told ARTINFO.

"I've recorded on the Avon Valley Railway on the foot plate on one of their steam trains, in a bird sanctuary in the North on London and basically all of these elements to weave this tapestry of ideas and references which is my response to this context. They're elements that would have been present in London but are no longer present and you have to go outside London."

Mann's composition also responds to London's transient nature. Many people who currently live in London are from outside of the city and stay for a defined period of time before moving on. This transience is symbolized with his use of birds, which is a subtle nod to the pigeons that dominated Trafalgar Square many years ago.

"There are no bird sanctuaries in London but it was important for me to have birds because Trafalgar Square 15 years ago used to be full of pigeons but the pigeons are gone. At first I wanted to fill it with pigeons again but I thought no that's not right. It's about having birds from all over the world making a cacophony and just flitting about and I think that says something more about London than pigeons would," said Mann.

After London Design Festival closes, the BE OPEN Sound Portal will find a new home at the **Chelsea College of Art and Design** where it laboratory on sound design will be established based on the portal. Its goal is to study the influence of sound on people living in cities.

"The sound portal is a fantastic instrument for the students to study the nature of sound. And I think this laboratory will find a solution of how to make sound in the city more harmonious," said Baturina.

"We would like to show young designers new areas of applying their knowledge to broaden their outlook of the world. It may help them find their place in the world of design. It may help them research and find something new. I think broadening the areas of design is much more exciting than digging deeper into the field that is already developed."

BE OPEN's next project will focus on taste and is currently being developed for the Milan Design Festival.

BE OPEN Sound Portal is available to experience in **Trafalgar Square** until **September 23**.

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