

Audio Bombing: Magnetic Cassette Tape Graffiti

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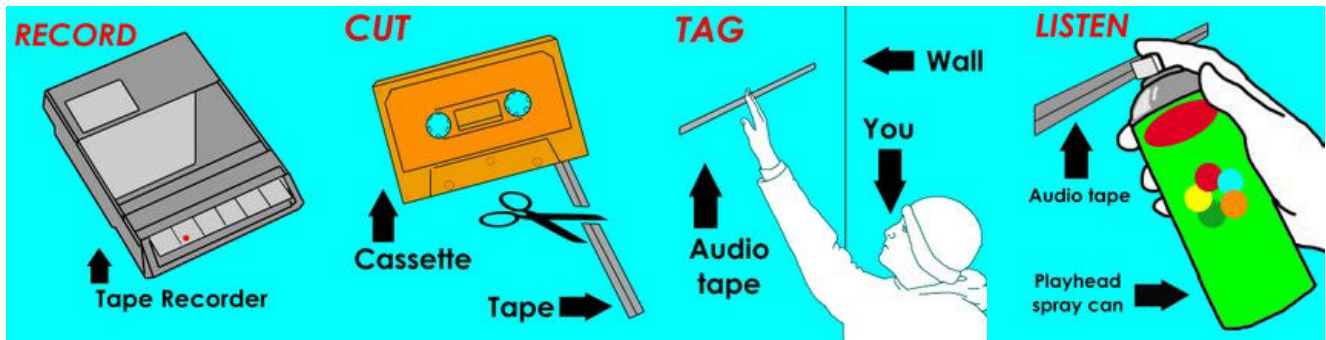


Figure 1 – The Audio Bombing Process.

ABSTRACT

Audio Bombing is an alternative form of graffiti that uses magnetic audiotape as its medium. Drawing from hip hop and graffiti culture Audio Bombing starts with a basic cassette tape. Using a tape recorder you can record any information you want on to a cassette (music, poems, philosophy, subversive literature, etc.). After recording you remove the tape and cut out the segments that you want to use. Then take your tape segments and go tag whatever you want (buildings, benches, posters, buses, etc.). Using the augmented playhead spray can you can listen to the tags by running the playhead over the tape.

Keywords

Tangible Audio, Ubiquitous Music, Interdisciplinary, New Media Arts

1. INTRODUCTION

The intention of this project was to create a new form of underground expression from a medium that is falling out of use; Reinventing graffiti with cassette tapes which have a long history in hip hop culture. It is open to anyone who has a cassette tape to “audiobomb”. It just takes recording what you want on cassette, cutting the tape up and then tagging it up. Manifesting audio

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samples into a physical and more visible form while allowing for manipulation of its playback echoes some of the re-appropriation of funk or disco beats seen in productions by DJs in early Hip Hop. It does not require any skill in drawing or traditional graffiti and functions under the radar of most suspicious authorities.

Since this medium is less visually obtrusive, being only a thin black line, it has an undercover versatility which normal graffiti does not. This specifically allows it to infiltrate spaces traditional graffiti can not, such as office buildings, under tables, in elevators, coffee shops, schools, and tight spaces.

The need to physically run a playhead over the magnetic tape in order to hear the audio tag makes the scenario of reading someone’s tag mirror the act of writing that tag. This project questions the role of the reader when taking part in subversive communication. In reading an audiobomb tag the reader is put in the same position as a traditional graffiti writer instead of a traditional (passive) audience. The reader needs to actively engage with the content to receive the content of the tag.

2. PROTOTYPE

Our prototype consists of a hacked and reconstructed cassette player. We removed the casing from the player and then dismantled the play head from the circuit board so it was free to function externally. With the play head free you can run it along a magnetic cassette tape that is on the wall and listen to it. We created a website with step-by-step instructions for building a reader, how to post audiobomb tags, and videos of users tagging and reading tags (<http://www.audiobombing.blogspot.com/>)

We have explored a number of types of content for the cassette tape tags, including music and spoken word. At the proof-of-concept stage we have been using simple layouts of tape, but the physical form of an audio bomb can be as straightforward as a line

or as complex as the tangled paste-up of Nam June Paik's *Random Access* [5]. This combination of visual complexity and the complexity of the content will be explored in future work.

3. RELATED WORK

Audio bombing is an analog, tangible complement to several digital mobile music scenarios. Sonic City [4] creates music based on sensor inputs polling bodily state and environmental conditions, reacting to the body and the built environment. gpsTunes [8] spatializes the playback of sound embedded by designers at particular GPS coordinates, creating a navigation aid for users in physical space. The Urban Tapestries project [2] enlists entire communities to author audio content and layers it in space, creating sound maps that can be layered, shared, and expanded cooperatively. Sonic Graffiti [3] describes a scenario where traditional graffiti practice is augmented through an audio spray can. Through a set of learned gestures, taggers can leave patterns of sound clips tied to particular visual patterns marking the space. The result is much like a visual representation of a DJ session, or sonified information visualization.

Our use of the spray can as a reading device for the audio bomb tags is similar to the use of cell phones as tag making and reading devices in Garner et al. [1]. In their system, mobile phones combined with RFID tags, allowed users to virtually mark territory with unobtrusive and socially acceptable devices. These visual tags were made visible only in virtual space and on the display of the cell phones. In contrast, our spray can marks its user immediately as a participant in audio bombing (or graffiti writing), promoting a very different kind of experience.

The physical experience of tagging, the act of arranging the tape at the site, is replicated by the reader of the tags. In some ways the reader has to mimic the motion of the tagger, creating a physical resonance with the act that embedded the memory. The DJammer project [7] uses accelerometers to allow DJs to manipulate sounds using hand gestures. The hand gestures of the reader are equally important with audio bombs. Similar to Sonic Fabric [6] this project uses an externalized play head reading device to listen to re-appropriated audiotape. The reader of a tag has the opportunity to approach the content of the tag from any point and at any speed of replay depending on how they manually manipulate the spray can. The care and slowness in writing/reading audio bombs is in contrast to the ease and speed of many of the digital approaches and can further distinguish the experience of audio bombing from other uses of the public spaces that are tagged, hopefully making interaction more deliberate and intentional.

4. FUTURE WORK

As future work we hope to extend the web component of the project to foster a subculture of use. The project largely anticipates actual presence in sites and potential applications, but we would like to gather accounts of user experiences with audio bombs. Audience, not just the taggers but passers-by, and sociality are important aspects of audio bombing. We hope to

further explore the distinctions between the subculture and broadcast aspects of audio bombing, and how they may relate to audience reception.

Through more controlled deployment, we will examine specific design choices in content, form, and placement in the built environment. By using specific themes in content we will engage with magnetic tape as a form of collective storage and memory. What kinds of narratives are supported by using tape? How are traditional graffiti practices, like overwriting tags, changed with this new visual and data form? How does preservation of memory, in this case the tape, relate to the fading of visual graffiti?

With further iteration we will examine what sorts of sounds might function well in this lo-fi setting and what sound sources might not work well, due to duration, speed, or fidelity?

The magnetic tape is less obtrusive than other graffiti forms but still acts as a form of visual mark-making. Future prototypes will look at the life of the tape in the space – How the ways the tape could call attention to itself, or not? How might the tape accent the architecture or contrast with the architecture? How might the tape reflect paths, or demarcate spaces or zones? Again, traditional graffiti practices, like placing tags in hard to reach sites (“stay-ups”), need to be considered differently when reading a tag requires visual *and* physical engagement.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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