

LOOP: A Circular Ferric Memory in Slow Decline

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ABSTRACT

The author describes the manipulation of time and memory in LOOP, a tape-based sound installation started in 2004.

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Many of my artworks are hybrid assemblages of obsolete and contemporary technology. The use of the obsolete is most immediately apparent in LOOP, a long-running (2004-present) sound installation built out of a Fostex X-34 four track recorder and C90 cassette tape. The Fostex X-34 is in many ways unexceptional: its sound and build quality are adequate at best. Indeed, most notable is perhaps that, by the time of its release in April 2000, it was arguably already rendered obsolete by the rise of MiniDisc recorders and audio-capable home computers. Nevertheless, the X-34 fitted the modest budget of a Birmingham schoolboy, and I acquired a lightly used and moderately discounted ex-demo unit about three months after its launch. The accessibility of the cassette tape was also key: while its popularity had significantly diminished after its late 1980s peak, blank tapes remained readily locally available.

After around fifteen months of recording mainly guitar-led song demos, I moved over to a computer DAW and the four track sat unused until Christmas 2003. However, as an undergraduate sculpture student at Northumbria University with an increasingly ‘digital’ arts curriculum (Photoshop, video production, et cetera), the materiality and hands-on physicality of the cassette tape offered an antidote to the bland sterility of the computer lab. In this sense there are similarities with work by John Richards [1]. The basis of the cassette tape’s appeal was twofold. One, if the cassette tape was once simultaneously useful and (subject to its contents) relatively valuable, it had become, for the majority of people and for most purposes, worthless and throwaway. These qualities enabled the kind of perilous experimentation that would have

been far less permissible with a more precious technology. Two, no longer required to perform the function intended by Phillips in 1962 and therefore unshackled from its prior sociocultural weight, its possibilities appeared unbounded and ripe for radical reimagining.

LOOP relies on modification to both the four track recorder and the C90 cassette tape. More specifically, the side of the recorder is sliced open and part of the plastic case of the cassette is removed (Fig. 1). This enables the tape to be teased out and passed approximately 100 feet around a series of homemade rollers mounted on steel structures positioned around the gallery space. The tape is then cut and spliced in a circular loop.

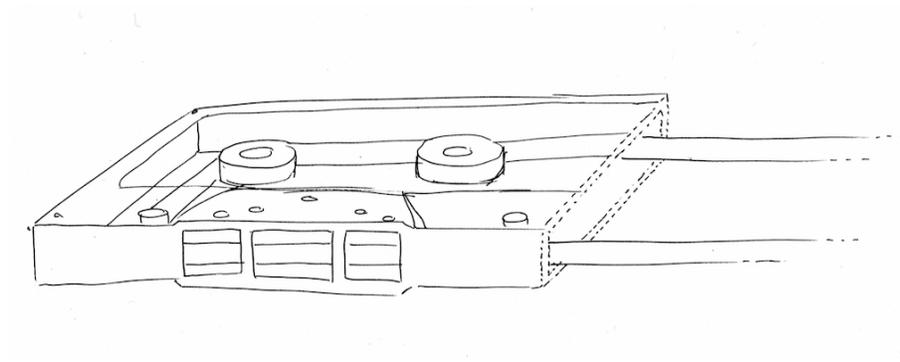


Fig. 1. Sketch showing the modification to the cassette tape case. (<c> Mat Dalgleish.)

The ambient sound of the gallery space is captured via the four track's inbuilt microphone and recorded onto the cassette tape. The recorded section of tape does not immediately pass over the playback head: sounds are not heard until the tape has completed its circuit around the steel structures (see Fig. 2.), a temporal delay of around two minutes.



Fig. 2. LOOP installed at Northumbria University, May 2004. (<c> Mat Dalgleish. Photo: Mat Dalgleish.)

Time and memory are manipulated in at multiple levels that correspond to minutes, days and years. Firstly, the environment's very recent audible past is constantly folded back into itself, much like William S. Burrough's aural 'poisoning' of London's Moka Bar [2]. One of the most prominent effects is that, as sounds reappear, their spatiality can be rearranged and unfamiliar; the phantom can be spatially separated from its source. Another is that the proximity of the installation's loudspeakers to the microphone results in sound playback being recaptured and re-recorded (i.e. an acoustic feedback loop). As with Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* [3], the intelligibility of each recirculation is progressively eroded by the cumulative effect of architectural acoustics and technological mediation. Second, although the same length of tape is rewritten over and over, this circular memory is never totally or pristinely erased. Traces of the past slowly accumulate, their layers collapsed into a condensed document of a specific space and period of time. Third, the LOOP installation has to date had five iterations over the last twelve years, its physical form changing (to some extent) in response to the specificities of each particular site. Unexpectedly, it has been possible to continue with the same tape loop. The surface of the tape has slowly disintegrated, vastly reducing the quality of sound reproduction. Inevitably, the tape will eventually fatigue to the extent that it catastrophically fails [4]. In the

meantime, its delicate ferric memory provides a more than decade long physical record of inherently destructive electromechanical processes.

References and Notes

1. J. Richards, “32kg: Performance Systems for a Post-Digital Age.” *NIME Proceedings*, IRCAM, Paris (2006) pp. 283-287.
2. D. Odier, *The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs* (London: Penguin Books, 1989) pp. 24–25.
3. A. Lucier, *I Am Sitting in a Room* (Lovely Music, 1990).
4. In addition to surface damage, a loss of elasticity in the plastic support layer has already caused the tape to stretch by around 5%.

MAT DALGLEISH (British, 1984) has created new musical instruments and sound installations for over a decade. He is a Senior Lecturer in Music Technology and Course Leader for MSc Audio Technology at the University of Wolverhampton, UK.