

ULTRA-RED

Location: North America and Europe

Operative since: 1994

Practice organised as a: collective - without formal constitution

<http://www.ultrared.org/directory.html>

Ultra-red is a collective of activist artists who engage in cultural analysis and action through sound/listening work. Founded by two AIDS activists, over the years Ultra-red have expanded to include artists, researchers and organisers from different social movements including migration rights, anti-racism, participatory community development, and the politics of HIV/AIDS. Collectively, the group have produced radio broadcasts, performances, recordings, installations, texts and public space actions. Exploring acoustic space as enunciative of social relations, Ultra-red take up the acoustic mapping of contested spaces and histories, utilising sound-based research that directly engages the organising and analyses of political struggles.

Ultra-red's associates in North America and Europe work within a variety of ambiances, conducting Militant Sound Investigations of the spaces of needle exchange (Soundtrax, 1992 - 1996), public sex (Second Nature, 1995 - 1998), public housing (Structural Adjustments, 1997 - 2003), resistance to global capital (Value System, 1998 - 2003), labour (Social Factory, 1997 - 2002), education (School of Echoes, 2001 - Present), anti-racism and migration struggles (Surveying The Future, 2001 - Present), and HIV/AIDS (SILENT|LISTEN, 2005 - Present). The group also runs the fair-use online record label, Public Record. Ultra-red has existed since 1994 but its practices have grown, shifted and diversified over the past twenty years with the arrival of new members. When new members join Ultra-red they bring new ways of doing, acting, and thinking. Taken severally, those new members influence what the collective does. Our way of working permutates and evolves further with differing, sometimes coincidental, line-ups collaborating on fieldwork, composition, installations or writing together.

Ultra-Red

What desires, values and elements of support/discouragement made your practice evolve over time?

Elliot Perkins (EP): How to write this in the “collective voice”?...

I think it is fair to say that one thing which is felt very strongly amongst the members of Ultra-red is how our own situations, urgencies, and desires intersect with the common space we all share as Ultra-red and seem to be in conversation with Ultra-red as a “practice”. With this in mind it will be difficult to grapple with later questions that approach work and non-work severally and ask about time invested. As such, our own interests (twelve members across six cities in three different countries) are never entirely external to those of Ultra-red as a discursive space that we inhabit sometimes loosely, sometimes very closely. Nobody does “just Ultra-red.” All of us engage in some way in political struggle and grapple with the conditions meted out by neo-liberalism in our own communities. This being the case, there is often much to hear and read across Ultra-red of each others' experiences in local projects which may or may not be designated Ultra-red projects per se and therefore may offer incredibly diverse problems, contradictions and, lest we forget, political gains. We now have twenty years of history, relationships, archives, and dispatches (Ultra-red has a practice of writing up projects and circulating them amongst members, friends and collaborators). We also exchange ideas in those instances where members from different locations collaborate on more short-term projects. The mixed-up working line-ups further allow for the cross-contamination of stories, methods, affinities, and tensions. The

interviews

time spent together has also produced many breaks, cuts, and shifts in practice. When Ultra-red listens back to its history, a line can be drawn along which a practice has unfolded from early sound enquiries, to musical and text releases, to installation and performance, to the protocols of listening and pedagogical processes we enact in different situations today. Although this development may seem linear, many of these elements have always been present, some more and some less well reflected. It is perhaps more a coming-to-consciousness of these processes as mechanisms through multiple iterations that help us understand how a process really works. It feels as if this is an ever-present dynamic: listening, dialogue, protocol, process, writing and composition have always been part of any Ultra-red work. At the same time, as our methods progress, these qualities to the work become less nuanced or shift respectively from background to foreground and enjoy perhaps different levels of consciousness and attention.

Discouragements to speak of - from my perspective at least - are mostly attributed to the short-term needs of hosting institutions or their poor understanding of how Ultra-red works or what it does. The loss of interest on the host's part in some recent projects that didn't seem to meet their anticipations has proven disappointing. In its own way, however, this kind of crisis can give us much to think about around the conditions of an invitation. We can examine what is at stake, for who and how the accountabilities lie in a particular situation - particularly those which see us invited into other communities elsewhere to work.

What, in your case, are the advantages and disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses of working collectively?

EP: The collectivity with Ultra-red nowadays is, in the main, in the sharing of ideas, stories, updates, reports of how this protocol or that listening process worked in a particular context through the means mentioned above. It is less frequently the case that we are able to work collectively as a large number since the geographical spread of the group and our resources don't allow for this. In this respect we most commonly work as smaller teams in the US, UK and Germany. I think it is felt amongst most of us that Ultra-red's work is best done together, with at least two of us participating. Occasions when I have done Ultra-red work "alone" in the past have often seemed to take on a less comfortable feel as so much of the protocol and process is worked out provisionally by spending time together travelling, traipsing the streets of strange towns, sitting in hotel rooms discussing past experiences, getting to know a place, listening to sound files, making new recordings, etc.

During the times when Ultra-red was primarily regarded as a musical outfit, the collective was much more mobile with frequent travel across the Atlantic and longer term engagements for some US members in Europe. This has receded over recent years as we have found ourselves increasingly more committed to practicing Ultra-red in our own everyday. The art world becomes increasingly more mobile as it follows the flows of global capital from one biennale to the next international conference. In contrast, Ultra-red has become less itinerant. We prefer the possibility of long duration and connectedness to place which working in one's own neighbourhood has above short-term invitations, as intense and fruitful as short-term engagements may often be.

Around these smaller Ultra-red units, however, arises another question about collectivity. Each of the teams in the US, UK and Germany, because of their local commitments, are always somehow engaged in struggle and practice with

constituencies which at varying times may themselves feel to be very close to Ultra-red or conversely be felt by Ultra-red (or that particular chapter of Ultra-red) to be very close. Where, in this case then, does one demarcate the limits of a collective or collectivity? It is at this point where we make some of our strongest alliances - those which identify as somehow standing in relationship to Ultra-red and its work, particularly if that group evolves from an Ultra-red process (for example School of Echoes) and others which consciously seek (or have already) an autonomy from Ultra-red - for us a main criteria of a successful process in many cases. So Ultra-red has many orbits of collectivity around its own which is again complicated by the many of us in Ultra-red who identify as members of both groups. We inhabit different positions and conditions in each, but also act in some capacity as translators between the two. This brings a richness and certainly many different ways of doing Ultra-red work depending on context and member line-up.

Given the breadth and diversity of context, many different things happen under the moniker of Ultra-red. This speaks to its strengths. There is a reciprocal trust amongst us that folks are free to experiment with Ultra-red method and practice as they feel necessary or desirable in differing contexts. There is no form of artistic control which sets the parameters or limits for what a work of Ultra-red is or might be, given that most of us work in the contiguous space between Ultra-red and other groups we are part of, and often there is an overlapping exchange of methods, process and thinking which bleeds into our work within these contexts with other groups. So it is true to say that, while there are no controls over what a work of Ultra-red is, there are also not really any criteria to delineate what is not a work of Ultra-red.

Dont Rhine (DR): Ultra-red has a commitment to using cultural work as a tool for political education within and alongside social movements. We know there are multiple traditions working from a similar commitment; what Ultra-red does is not new. However, the milieu that conducts this work is extremely small and geographically dispersed. Consequently, many of us in Ultra-red have come to recognize the enormous urgency in expanding that milieu. One way of expanding a milieu of popular education and political organising would be to keep adding new people to Ultra-red. Alternatively, we could nurture new collectives that work independently from Ultra-red while seeking to foster a dialogue with a larger network of collectives. In recent years, the work for some of us has focused on the latter. I can try to give some examples. Ultra-red in New York has spawned what is called Vogue'ology; a collaboration between Ultra-red and members of the gender queer House and Ballroom scene based in New York. Five years into that collaboration, Vogue'ology is laying the groundwork for another collective around the formation of a Freedom School. Similarly, in Los Angeles, our members work primarily in two social movements; first, health justice mostly for poor people and, second, housing justice through the organisation Union de Vecinos. These two political formations precede Ultra-red and have a relationship to Ultra-red that is largely by way of certain forms of intellectual assistance: our members are activists or organizers in these movements in the way that Elliot described earlier.

In terms of the housing justice work in Los Angeles, Union de Vecinos works in collaboration with other groups in a long-term effort to form an organising collective that seeks to launch a city-wide renters' union. But what sort of political education is available to organisers in such a movement and in community organising in general? Two years ago, Ultra-red began School of Echoes Los Angeles to provide a pedagogical space for young organisers, activists, and artists committed to the struggles of poor

people in the city. In just two short years, School of Echoes Los Angeles has become an incubator for new collaborations and new collectives.

Again, the point here is not to clone Ultra-red. There is no need for a dozen Ultra-reds all working from the same protocols and committed to the same notions of political listening. That is not the point. Rather, for those of us in Ultra-red Los Angeles at least, the point is that in order for a movement to crystallize, there have to be multiple points of struggle. A movement requires that multiplication to become a movement. We need to proliferate collectives committed to experimenting with a synthesis of political education, political organising, and cultural action.

How do you deal with money and wages between the components of your group?

How do you deal with tensions and power relations within your group?

DR: I think it's safe to say that no one joins Ultra-red for the money. Most of the work we do as Ultra-red receives no compensation. Even in those instances where our members have succeeded in raising grants or securing commissions, neither has provided the sort of income to pay our people for the full amount of work that we do. We have a tacit agreement to refer invitations from institutions to the members that live in the inviting country or region. An exception would be those situations where the invitation comes through a personal contact. On some occasions, we use an invitation as an opportunity to bring people together from different locations in the Ultra-red network. The people who work on a funded project determine the scope of the work, what protocols to use, which communities benefit from a redistribution of resources, and who receives honoraria. There is no common Ultra-red fund that receives income and doles out money to our members.

How do you organise your time between work and non-work? What systems do you use to keep track of where you invest your time?

DR: As Elliot said at the beginning, most members of Ultra-red situate themselves within the context of an on-going engagement in a political struggle. For many of us, that engagement occupies a significant amount of time well above and beyond the time dedicated to activities that fall under the rubric of Ultra-red. One of our Los Angeles members, Leonardo Vilchis, once described it this way: he spends 80% of his labour doing the salaried political organising work; the remaining 20% of his labour goes to Ultra-red, which is largely uncompensated.

The calculation Leonardo speaks of will be different across our membership depending on whether individuals receive wages for their political work or have to split their time between salaried jobs such as teaching, and political work on top of their waged-labour. Needless to say, it's not ideal. If we were a big NGO that received large state contracts to run education programs, then we would gladly pay ourselves salaries. But by resolving one set of contradictions, the formal institutionalization of Ultra-red as an NGO would bring an entirely different set of contradictions and constraints. Consequently, we exist in something of a shadow zone. Ultra-red is not an NGO, not a non-profit charity, not a business, not a legal entity, and not a political party. Yet we are often approached by a range of institutions to facilitate sound investigations outside of and apart from the popular education work we do within our respective base communities. Sometimes those invitations come from educational institutions, from museums or arts organisations, from explicitly political groups or, on rare occasions, from governmental agencies. All of these invitations involve their own contradictions and nearly every invitation results in some sort of crisis for us and for the agency that issues the invitation. This is an effect of political listening; it produces knowledge that comes into conflict with the comfortable and familiar ways

people hear the world. We try to caution our hosts that the listening may have such an effect. We do not drive the process intentionally to the point of crisis, but, since solidarity entails listening in, across, and through difference, conflict is inevitable. You cannot do politics without conflict.

Do we accept every invitation? I would say that, more and more, our members have become selective about the invitations we accept. The art world remains deeply entrenched in its modernist obsession with the art object as a thing in itself. That is where the money goes. Even though, by now, anyone who knows of Ultra-red knows that we approach sound as the object cause of the desire to listen, we still get asked to compose sound art as an end in itself. After all these years, most of the art world thinks that we make sonic representations of politics. So, in each situation, we have to decide if the invitation is flexible enough to subvert the demand for a representation and develop a process of listening either among ourselves as a collective or in partnership with a constituency that may have something to teach us that we can take back to our base communities where we conduct our long-term political engagements.

Since Ultra-red is as much a cultural action collective as a research and political education collective, we exist in a very particular relation to art. Over the years, Ultra-red has attracted a number of people who professionally identify as artists.

I would even go so far as to say that, sometimes, artists believe that an association with Ultra-red will help negate their own alienation from actual existing political struggle. Those folks, as precious as they may be to us individually, do not remain in Ultra-red very long. Our collective is not a substitute or a short-cut to political engagement. The real politics exists out there in the unglamorous work of walking with the poor in their resistance to class annihilation.

In Ultra-red, the art object functions to catalyze reflection, analysis, and new actions. Yes, it may bring aesthetic pleasure, but that pleasure is realized by what it generates in the encounter with listening subjects. For myself, with a long history of composing music, I would love to pursue all sorts of sound art projects on my own. But every time I'm in a listening session or accompanying a political group on a sound investigation, I am reminded once again that the power of sound lies in its listening and the changes in the world that listening might catalyze among people committed to revolution. The sound object as an end in itself is a pale retreat from the thrill of that possibility. As I sometimes tell young artists, why settle for a representation when you can engage the world? Why participate in love making, when you can make love?

How does your current working and living environment (geographic location, spatial arrangement) reflect (or not) the ethos, methods and dynamics of your practice?

DR: I think Elliot and I answered this question already. The basic problem of working in the art world is the general fickleness of those who hold the purse-strings. What is new and hot gets funding. Artists who receive large commissions and grants receive more commissions and bigger grants. Like in every aspect of capitalism, money serves as a way of ensuring that those with money get more money, while, at the same time, money rewards the entrepreneurial and the spectacular, given that is the ideological basis of capitalism (but not its objective basis, which is monopoly).

So, for example, in Los Angeles, we have had no success in raising money to support our long-term sound inquiries in the city. In our twenty years, we have not received a single competitive grant for that work. The Berlin team has had a bit more success. The UK members of Ultra-red and the New York members have both benefited from a single non-profit arts organisation. But, as Elliot has alluded to, in all situations we

are often subjected to the whims of promoters and curators who chase after their own authorial signature, as well as remaining constrained by their funding sources. The fact is, as an artist collective, we face two options. On the one hand, we have the option of organising ourselves into an entrepreneurial partnership that develops a product and then markets that product within the logic of capital. There are considerable support systems guiding artists in this direction. It is largely the function of art schools, public funding agencies and the whole discursive apparatus of art criticism to interpellate +artists as entrepreneurs. It is really no different than the pressures placed on non-profit and community-based organisations: monetise or die.

The other option is to cobble together a myriad of funding sources that pay one's own bills, supports oneself at the level of one's political engagements, and at the barest minimum supports the sound investigations at the local level. All of our members have full- or part-time employment as teachers, public health workers, community organizers, or public dole workers. This is how all of us pay our bills – and for some of us, often only barely. Given our tenuous relationship to the golden umbilical cord of capital, we exist under less pressure to make our work legible within the largely conservative categories of art. We can also, and perhaps more importantly, challenge the reactionary assumptions of art regarding its audience. Our audience, that is, those to whom we are accountable, are the social movements and base communities struggling against capital for their very survival. These are the people with whom we spend much more of our time than labouring as artists in a bourgeois and petite bourgeois art world. These are the relationships that structure our solidarity.

The art world is not our community any more than it is our boss or our church. It is, at times, a partner in a temporary alliance.