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Alejandro Acierto Interview

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Interviewer: Madeline Bolton

Artist: Alejandro T. Acierto

Over the phone interview, Chicago

February 25, 2016

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Arts & Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2016 Winter Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design.



Artist Bio: Alejandro T. Acierto is an artist and musician working in time-based media. He has exhibited his work at the Film Society of Lincoln Center, Issue Project Room, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, Salisbury University, SOMArts and presented performance works at the Brooklyn International Performance Art Festival, Center for Performance Research, and Center for New Music and Technology. Acierto has held residencies at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Banff Centre, High Concept Laboratories, and Chicago Artists' Coalition. He is currently a FT/FN/FG Consortium Fellow, a Center Program Artist at the Hyde Park Art Center, and teaches at UIC and Truman College. Acierto received his undergraduate degree from DePaul University, a MM

from Manhattan School of Music, an MFA in New Media Arts from University Illinois at Chicago, is a recipient of the Kranichsteiner Musikpreis at the Darmstadt Festival for New Music, and founding member of contemporary chamber orchestra Ensemble Dal Niente in Chicago.

-Bio and photograph alejandroacierto.com, 2016

Interview Transcript:

Madeline Bolton: If you could just tell me a little bit about yourself? I read your bio, and I saw that you grew up in Chicago, so what was that like, and were you born there as well, or did you grow up in the city or the suburbs? Just tell me a little bit about that.

Alejandro T. Acierto: I grew up in Chicago on the north side, sort of right off the Irving Park brown line stop, in an area called North Center. I grew up calling it Northwest Lakeview or Ravenswood sort of depending on what day it was. I went to public school until I went to college and I had the fortune of going to Whitney Young High School, which sort of opened up a lot of doors creatively and also intellectually and then I ended up in DePaul with a major in Music. Let's see, what else. Growing up in Chicago, is there anything specific about growing up in Chicago that you're interested in?

MB: I mean, I just wanted to know specifically about where you grew up and then how all your schooling contributed to your evolution as an artist. I guess you kind of answered that. What was the high school you said again?

ATA: Oh, I went to Whitney Young. Also the high school Michelle Obama went to.

MB: Oh cool!

ATA: But she was there before I was of course.

MB: (Laughing)

ATA: I also, well – so a lot of the work that I ended up doing, well this is maybe jumping around a little bit, but a lot of the work that I made in undergrad and then again in grad school, when I was at UIC, related to the experiences that I had as a young human, sort of negotiating the space on the playground and also sort of grappling with identity and identification as I continued my studies and work – creative work. So a lot of what I was doing, mostly what I was doing at DePaul creatively and outside of performing (in regard to making things like writing musical

compositions), were dealing with, or coming to terms with who I was and recognizing all of the intersections of identity that were at play. Particularly as they pertain to a person of mixed race, which is an identity that I claim.

MB: So, where are your parents from specifically? What is the ethnicity that you identify with?

ATA: So my parents are actually both from Chicago, but the ethnic identities that I claim are Filipino and Mexican. Third generation Filipino and fourth generation Mexican American.

MB: Oh, okay! (Both laughing) Well that's awesome. So my next question is, how would you define or categorize your art and yourself.

ATA: Oh wow, that's a big one. I guess creatively speaking, I maintain a bunch of different practices. I would say a lot of the work that I make is rooted in sound. More specifically, I've made videos, a lot of sound work both interactive and performative. And then within that, sort of compositional pieces, durational composed works and then I've also made work on paper, and some other like, I've sort have been moving into sculpture and doing some social practice as of late, does that sort of question mark around that? I'm not sure where I'm going entirely, but yeah.

MB: I guess what I was sort of getting at was some artists categorize themselves as Asian American artists, but I guess you categorize yourself more as a sound artist, over anything? I've been hearing from other people who have interviewed [artists in my class] that that's mostly what they've been getting- the art comes first rather than the identity?

ATA: I guess it's a little complicated for me because I go back and forth. A lot of the work I make is rooted in the experience of being Asian American and mixed race, primarily. So that's the core of the work. In all of the content, there's always a way for me to extrapolate some discussion around race or critical identifications, sort of any of that discourse. But at the same time, you know, a lot of the way that we interact with other people and are asked that question of like, "what kind of work do you make?", it's typically like a medium specific thing. So I guess that's the only sort of post claimer to that question. I mean, I would consider myself an Asian American artist, for sure, but I also consider myself a Latino artist and a queer artist, then also a mixed race artist. So those are part of that [question].

MB: Yeah, and how you categorize yourself is kind of the second part of the question. Okay, so the next question- I noticed you do a lot of ensemble work, in addition to sculpture and sound work, so tell me a little bit about the different ensembles like *Dal Niente*, and *Nitty Gritty*, and how you got involved with them.¹

ATA: So, *Dal Niente* is a group that I helped start I think like 10 years ago.

MB: Wow!

ATA: Yeah, it's pretty incredible that we're still around. And doing fairly well. They're a mixed instrument chamber ensemble that consists of about 22 members and we do a lot of contemporary classical performance pieces. We play a lot of premieres of new works by composers



*Group photo of Dal Niente by Drew Reynolds, copyright 2016
Courtesy of dalniente.com*

from all over the world, generally specializing in music from the last 10 or 15 years. So I play music part-time. And we tour, and record, and sort of maintain a pretty dominant presence in the Chicago classical music and new music scene, which is pretty awesome, and also we've been getting some recognition around the world and also New York and other places. So that's been fun, and awesome, and definitely has recently become integral to my own creative practice as a sort of "artist." And then within that, I've made various partnerships or collaborative projects with other musicians and artists to do other sort of ensemble type projects. The only other real ensemble that I'm in – well I'm not necessarily officially doing any other ensembles other than *Dal Niente*. I sort of made a decision to only commit to one ensemble so I could spend the rest of my creative life doing solo projects. But I've spent a lot of time working with a group called *ThingNY* in New York, and working very closely with the musicians and composers there. I think they would still consider me a part of their ensemble even though I don't live in New York anymore. But they specialize in contemporary opera and also performance art- generally outside of the contemporary classical music cannon. They're a really interesting group of folks, everybody is a composer and a performer, so it brings an interesting dynamic to the ensemble – especially in rehearsals. They're interested in making new work by the ensemble members for the ensemble. They do other projects every once in awhile, but they're primarily rooted in works for themselves. They're generally big in scale; they've recently been doing a lot of opera.

MB: Very cool! What was the name of that group again? I didn't catch it.

ATA: *ThingNY*.²

MB: When and how did you first get involved with doing a reaction to Cage's [1975] *Child of Tree*? What instruments did you use, and how would you describe your interpretation of it?

ATA: Yeah, so *Child of Tree* was actually a really fun project. I actually was invited to do a performance of it with a bunch of other folks also associated with the Chicago new music scene and it was curated in part by Peter Margasak who runs the "Frequency" series, which happens at Constellation, a venue here in Chicago every Sunday. He also writes for the music section of the *Chicago Reader*, which is pretty awesome. And then it was him, Peter Margasak, and Michael Green, who is a programmer for the Education Department at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. So *Child of Tree* came about as part of a related program to the *Afro-Futurist* exhibition that happened most recently that was in conjunction with the William Pope.L re-reading and staging Cage's work *Silence*. So the programmer wanted to do another take of Cage's work along side the William Pope.L performance that happened either a week after or a week before, I can't remember when. So *Child of Tree* was also part of a residency that Eighth Blackbird has--they're also another Chicago music ensemble who won a Grammy recently--in the second floor of the museum in the little atrium or whatever, and they had *Child of Tree* installed there. So the idea was to bring *Child of Tree* out of the gallery and into the hands of other musicians that are part of Chicago as well as connecting it to the current programming that's happening on the fourth floor besides this Eighth Blackbird installation and the William Pope.L performance. So the site is a little constellation of things, and they invited me to do that, with 5 other artists in Chicago who are sound makers and composer-performance types, and then we did this thing where we -- well they sort of messed up the programming, so we had to do it outside, in the cold, but they served hot tea and coffee, and set up a PA system and a mini stage outside. The six of us set up our performances outside with that project. Oh and then the instruments! All of us used, so the six of us are all friends, and have known each other in various capacities, a lot of us decided to share the same resources, so I think I ended up using some seed pods, from a big tree of sorts that Sam Scranton had brought, and then I brought my own cactus, I think five people that brought cactuses, out of the six of us. It was a sort of BYOC thing, and then I ended up bringing a set-up where I had taken -- I had appropriated, I think 10 different recordings of *Child of Tree* that I had found on the internet then I had programmed them into a software that I built that would randomize the playback of any sample of any one of those recordings that I found online. Then using the cactus as a sort of trigger, anytime I played the cactus it would then play a sample, like a very quick sample of some random place in any one of those 10 recordings. So it was like another random, indeterminate thing, which is in the spirit of Cage.

MB: So, the next question I have is- tell me a little bit about the meaning of *to fill a void*. How did you make this? Why did you choose the air mattress? Is there a reason you chose the certain people that you did, do they represent someone/something?

ATA: This is the work- I'm sorry?

MB: It's like a video of people filling up an air mattress, a white air mattress?

ATA: Oh yeah! So that's actually- its not a mattress. It's actually a breather bag for a silo- a grain silo. So in farming, industrial grain gets housed in these giant silos, and historically, they've always been these large containers of things that you know, hold a bunch of corn or other grains. But what happens, or has happened historically, is that because of the weight of the grain and the high content of carbon in the particulates, so in the dust and granulates, fire tends to happen frequently. Especially when either something breaks or because of the weight of the grain it sometimes crushes the exterior of the container- particularly if they're really old. So a lot of what happens, or has happened, is that young farmers or young people who work on the farms have to move the grain around so they can fit more in it. Unfortunately what happens is that because of the way that the grain falls, on occasion, there will be pockets. And you'll have these large volumes, inside of the silo, underneath tons of grain that is essentially empty, that when moved around at the right moment and time creates a sinkhole, so that people working on top of the grain, in the silo, are sometimes subject to falling through and then asphyxiating.

MB: Wow.

ATA: So there's a high ratio of silo deaths among young people, typically under the age of 18. And as part of a sort of solution to that problem, for the safety of the workers as well as the safety of the gain, and so it doesn't explode and you don't lose you know, a year's worth of crops – they have this newer technology called a low oxygen silo where essentially they're a little bit wider and they use these bags to regulate the amount of pressure and oxygen that's inside of that container. So what it does is the bag itself inflates and deflates based on the atmospheric pressure and temperature outside so that the amount of oxygen inside of the container, inside of the silo itself, is minimized so that there's not any harm of explosion or any need to move things around as much because a wider grain silo is going to settle better and more efficiently than a tall and skinny one. So what I did was, I was invited to do a work in Buffalo, NY for Colin Tucker, he's finishing his doctorate at U of Buffalo in musical composition. He's a friend of mine who also curates under the name [null point] and put together this festival of works for sound, or sound works for Silo City. It's a specific site in Buffalo that is comprised of I want to say like 5-7 storage facilities that have anywhere between 18-25 individual silos per site. Because a lot of that type of grain storage diminished, or became obsolete, particularly along the St. Lawrence Seaway, between the lakes and the oceans, they become vacant. So he was invited by the current owners - some of them are still in operation, I think Labatt Blue still runs one and Kellogg's runs one and there's another beer company that runs one of those complexes, or one of those facilities, and then there are just 4 other ones who are empty and vacant. Anyways, the owner who manages those properties asked Colin to do some event over a weekend to try to invite people back into the space to try and revitalize it in some capacity. Colin then invited me, along

with a bunch of other artists from all over the world to do projects and respond to the site of these grain storage facilities through an open call. So the way that, coming back, sorry this is a huge ramble, so when I was invited to do this project I thought a lot about who occupied those spaces and sort of went back to this idea of asphyxiation. A lot of what I was making, and kind of still making now, but at the beginning of when I was working on this project, I had been moving towards focusing on breath as a material. And so dealing with asphyxiation and sort of trying to find some sort of memorial space was important to me at that site, at that time. So, especially what was happening with *to fill a void*, which is the video documentation of the actual performance and installation that happened. But the performance itself- I asked two farmers from the area to inflate this bag that was meant for grain storage inside of the site of the silo so that they could then re-inhabit the space of death, with a space of two living farmers who are using their breath to sort of recreate a sense of living. Over the weekend, the bag then deflated, after they spent 2 and a half, or 3 hours inflating the bag, but at that point it, it was their breath that was left in the space, even after the left to go back to where they lived, which is about 30 miles out from the silos themselves. So the idea is that the remains of the living were still present in the space that had the remains of other folks that had died, in areas like that.

MB: Wow, that's very cool. So the next question- so you use your mouth, electronics, clarinet, and contrabass clarinet. Is there any instrument that's your favorite and what purpose does each one serve?

ATA: Yeah so I want to say maybe a couple years ago I made a very conscious decision to privilege the contrabass clarinet as my instrument of choice. I mean I still play all the other clarinets, I mean in undergrad you learn how to play contrabass but it's a very auxiliary thing that you go on with later. So part of why I privileged it was because I decided to buy one, for whatever reason when I was in NY, which is a crazy thought. But since I had it, and it had been sitting around - I hadn't been using it so I asked a bunch of people to write music for it. I also decided to write music for it, and it became, for me, this other extension - almost a prosthetic, that allowed me to explore more sonic terrain that had yet to be explored. Partially because the music for it hadn't been written, so I thought that I would be the one to initiate that process. Also thinking a lot about - and this sort of connects back which is sort of nice - speaking about that instrument as being a sort of on the margins, or within the margins of professional clarinet playing and sort of only being relegated to only "amateur applications", for me it sort of made a lot of sense to push the contra as an instrument to privilege because it was this thing that existed out of the margins. And didn't really have a lot of repertoire. So I wanted to bring that up, and play it often, and sort of made it my - the thing that I specialize in even though I still play all the other clarinets. I like to think of myself of more as a bass player, so that's part of how it came into play on the clarinet side of things. It didn't make its way into my art thinking until after I'd done a series of vocal pieces, and then it sort of made sense that that instrument itself was another mediator for my voice. I really didn't make that connection until I was in grad school,

like my second year of grad school at UIC. Where the contrabass clarinet, or really any of the other clarinets really was the thing that changes my breath into sound. So thinking about the voice - the mouth, and the teeth and the tongue are the things that change your breath into sound. And I hadn't really broken it down that far, so then thinking about the clarinet and the contrabass clarinet that I was spending a lot of time with, it only made sense that the contra itself was an instrument exactly for the breath. Which is sort of a duh thing, but also had a lot of really important - it resolved a lot of things in my thinking of how to deal with the voice and how to deal with voices and breath, and breathing, and all those things. It also then connected me back to these questions about mediation and electronics and sort of navigating digital space and how to deal with the sort of concerns of communication that are inherent within new technologies and new media that haven't emerged.

MB: So then the contrabass would be your favorite?

ATA: Yeah, I will go on record and say the contrabass is my favorite.

MB: What is your favorite medium, or combination of mediums to work with? I guess you kind of answered it, but if you just want to clarify

ATA: I don't know if I have a favorite, but I would say that I work conceptually so that the medium that I employ is relevant and important to the concept of the work. So I don't necessarily feel a commitment to any sort of particular media, but I do feel comfortable in specific media. So, sound is what I feel the most comfortable in because I spend a lot of time doing it, and I continue to make sound, as a musician and also as a sound artist. Because I work with the breath and the voice, those are things that sound. I've been looking at megaphones a lot, and things that amplify the voice, so sound becomes this sort of central aspect in a lot of ways but then I have other works that I would consider research based that aren't necessarily sounding works or have any necessary relationship to sound. And so in that respect, they sort of remain as visual things that might have been a result of some sound at some point but maybe don't have that trace anymore afterwards.

MB: Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity themes or histories in your artwork? If so, please give a specific example.

ATA: I think earlier on when I was sort of realizing that I was making artwork, there was a couple of projects - so one of them is these series of - well I have the *book of mazes* which is one of the first projects that I had started which is a series of 18 works on paper. They're small like 4x6 drawings of mazes, each with sort of destinations within in them. Thinking about that, it was mostly about navigating multi-racial terrain but a lot of that comes out of thinking about the migrations of my family and in particular my Filipino side, and sort of their movement through

the country and through their own temporal states and beginning to think about ideas of language.

I did another project called *Preludes*, and then again the *six pieces*. And a lot of the vocal works, those come out of navigating language specifically and sort of trying to decide if I should feel guilty about not knowing Tagalog. Which is really one of the big central questions. So a lot of that work was- I mean those were sort of text-based works that then also got wrapped into the histories of redlining practices and the segregation of Chicago, which to me, helped to contribute to the sort of language loss of the native languages through the middle 20th century, so through the 40's, 50's, 60's which was when my parents were growing up and also the times that sort of America was re-evaluating its priorities. So a lot of that, which I addressed textually, they sort offered these three posters that I have that are Xeroxes. One of them says just plainly "you talk too white." That was a sort of question, well, not a question but a thing I heard a lot growing up. I didn't sound Mexican enough or Pilipino enough. And not necessarily from my grandparents because they had already gone through that process of being, sort of re-learning English enough to the point where they had erased their accent. They made it very intentional that my parents- my dad and his brother and sister, and also on my mom's side but less so, that they spoke English properly and without an accent. So a lot of that, for me, comes out of an Asian American history, particularly a Filipino American history, and I feel like a lot of other Asian Americans who I've talked to and confided in have shared similar experiences where they feel like they need to lose their accent in order to gain the ability to be "American." And so the text works that happen after that, the vocal pieces that happened after that, and then the album that I made after that sort of preceded all of that text work and these language pieces are rooted in that sort of question of, ya know, what are you supposed to sound like as a person of mixed heritage? Where is your Asian-ness and where is your Latino-ness?

MB: Yeah, I mean I've noticed in taking Professor Laura Kina's Asian-American contemporary art class that's a common theme that we're running into as well. So my next question- have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian or Asian American, or have you ever been labeled as Asian or Asian American artist.

ATA: I wouldn't say an exhibition, I have not been included in an exhibition that was specifically Asian American focused, I would love to be, but I have not yet. But I have presented my work at the Association for Asian American Studies conference, and I'll be doing that again coming up in April. So I have claimed it and presented my work as being within the concerns of Asian American studies. But also those presentations were part of the mixed race section. So it's all intersectional, but also those experiences still drive the work in a lot of ways.

MB: So my next question- I think you already answered it but if identifying, as Asian American was something important to you, please explain.

ATA: Yeah, I would say it's definitely important to me. There's no question about that informing a lot of the decisions that I make and how I approach the work. As of late, things are shifting in terms of how I'm claiming the work. But they're all rooted in Asian American politics. I would say Asian American and mixed race consciousness.

MB: So what types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

ATA: Well, things have been looking good. I've been fortunate enough to have been able to attend a couple of residencies that are I guess some people call prestigious. It's also funny how I didn't exist in the art world until I ended up accidentally going to art school. And even then after I left I wasn't really- I didn't feel like I was making a ton of visual art, I felt like I was using it as an excuse to compose and make music. So in any event, I was encouraged to do some applications and attend some specific residencies I think from that, I've been able to make some work that I feel good about, but that has given me some other opportunities for exhibitions. I'm presenting a new sound work at the MCA in a month, which is really exciting. A part of that was supposed to happen last year, but got pushed back for scheduling reasons and also money. So they're presenting me as part of their *Live Series*, on Tuesdays. And then I'm just finishing my first sort of officially professional solo show that closes this week, and then this week I have an opening for an exhibition which is at the Chicago Artist Coalition. I'll be presenting new work at the Hyde Park Art Center, beginning of next August- the beginning of next season (but it's August). And then I think that's it for now, in terms of the sort of artwork. Doing a show in Buffalo was pretty important for my work, and then I did a residency in Berlin, Germany. I had a show there and that was pretty important to me and the work that I was making. So I would say I've been fortunate to have made enough connections through these various sort of residencies and programs that I'm doing and then from that, you sort of get the call on occasion to do other things as they pop up. And in the music world, part of my affiliation with *Dal Niente* has been most transformative for a lot of other big prizes and stuff like that. So we got the big international prize one year, which was a really really big deal because no ensembles at the time had gotten that prize. And also, no American groups or soloists had gotten that prize, so it was a big deal for us.

MB: Wow! What's the name of that prize?

ATA: The Kranichstein Music Prize. It's at the Darmstadt festival for new music. It happens every two years. It's the biennial of contemporary music worldwide for contemporary classical music. It's been around since the 50's.

MB: Well that's awesome, congratulations. My final question, what are you currently working on?

ATA: I'm working on a project for a show opening next week. It's sort of follow up to the project I did in Berlin, where I'm employing megaphones. There's two- one I think is a sculpture, formally and the other one is a sound installation/ performative framework. Basically they're utilizing megaphones to question who is made visible through social media. So I'm utilizing a Raspberry Pi, which is an open source hardware platform, to run a program that I also built, that searches through tweets in real time, and represents a snippet of the recording of the start mechanism for the microphone of the megaphone. So on the side, if you ever see someone walking around with a megaphone, they have this little like handheld device that's then attached by wire to the megaphone. So on the side of it there's a little button, so when you press the button you can turn the microphone on. So I'm using that sample of the recording of the click to then get played in the space at every tweet. That's the sort of installation/ performance proposal. The other sculptural thing uses a similar software that has a different sound where I source recordings of other protests that happened in Chicago, primarily related to the recent Laquan McDonald case, and then I'm also trying to find other recordings- generally sourced from YouTube- other recordings of the recent protests around Pedro Rios, who was 14 and shot by police, and used to live in the neighborhood that I live in now, in Rogers park. So there's a megaphone that's attached to that recording. But inside of the megaphone there is a white acoustic panel, acoustic foam that sufficiently is both suffocating and silencing the recordings of the protests as they're happening. So that's that project. And then there's the MCA show, which is dealing with representing the invisible audible spectrum within space, the transmissions of broadcast technology, and I'll probably use some tweets for that as well. And then after that I don't know what I'm doing. I'm sort of still working on what else is going on for the August show, but probably breath related something.



*Even as your own weight insists you are here, fighting off the weight of nonexistence 2016
Megaphone, spray paint, white acoustic foam panel, Raspberry Pi, custom software, Internet
12 x 12 x 15 in, responsive audio, variable
Photo taken by Madeline Bolton*

MB: So that's all the questions that I have. It was really nice interviewing you! I feel like I learned a lot, and it's very interesting everything that you do. The dates on your newest exhibitions, are those available online? Because if I'm available it would be cool to go.

ATA: On my website, tomorrow there's a closing event, and then Sunday I have the Frequency Festival. March 4th is the opening for "Secular Studies," and then the 29th is MCA. If you just go to my home page, they're at the bottom in the upcoming area and if you click on it it'll give you more information, also the location- the address and the specific date and times. All that information is right there and you should be able to click it.

MB: I think that's all, if I need anything else, I will reach out to you through email.

ATA: Yeah that's totally fine!

MB: Thank you so much for your time!

ATA: Of course, thank you!

MB: Have a nice night.

ATA: You too. Bye

MB: Bye!

¹ <http://www.dalniente.com/>

² <http://www.thingny.com/>