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What is Sound Art?

Interviews with ...

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Introduction

Sound Art as nomenclature for the work of a growing body of artists is in common usage. Major presenters and world-wide opinion leaders in the contemporary art world such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art, MassMoca, the Hayward Gallery in London and the ICC in Tokyo routinely present Sound Art. Smaller venues regularly featuring (or in some cases entirely dedicated to) sound installations have appeared in most major cities. Festivals in many different countries focus on the work of Sound Artists who now receive major funding from public and private granting institutions around the world. Sound Art has arrived. It's hot. But what is it? Is Sound Art music? Is it distinct from traditional music in some meaningful way? If so, what is the distinction?

I came to this project with no particular thesis. I wanted to ask a diverse group of artists whose work I find interesting, exciting, challenging and intriguing, and who are considered Sound Artists, about their work. What did they think of a categorical Sound Art? I opened each interview with some variation on the question: "What is Sound Art?," then let the conversation organically proceed from there. I came rather quickly to realize that though I may have had no conscious thesis, I had an agenda. I found myself returning repeatedly to a few areas of inquiry in my pursuit of the topic question. Surely the key to unlocking Sound Art lay in discerning difference (vis-a-vis music) in these areas: the sound material used in the construction of the work, or what the piece is made of; the foundational ideas of structure (especially as it contrasts to traditional musical structure), or how the piece is made; the intent of the work, or why the work is made; and the mode of publication of the work, or how is the piece intended to be heard. These were the parameters of my investigation. Not surprisingly, I found these parameters coincided more exactly or less exactly to the artists ideas of their work depending on the artist. There is no definitive consensus. That in itself is an important acknowledgement. Sound Art is as diverse as the group of artists that it comprises. But Sound Art is a categorical reality. It has arrived and it has arrived from somewhere and, much like me with this project, it too has its agenda. The artists I interviewed are motivated to inquire and to present their works in a context we previously considered music. So, what is Sound Art?

The stuff of musical composition has certainly undergone radical change since WWII. With the advent of magnetic tape, sound recording became (relatively) inexpensive, easy, editable and redo-able. The composer could now utilize any sound that was recordable as material and mold that material into work as different from the popular song or the traditional symphony as the sound of the wind and water is from the sound of a string section. This musique concrete, as Pierre Schaeffer coined it in 1949, begins a line of musical thinking that continues vigorously today and that branches into some of the most important and stimulating work associated with Sound Art. But not just the idea of capturing 'any sound' informs the new musical aesthetic. In short order, with John Cage (in William's Mix, 1952) as with others to follow, the 'found' sound is appropriated as material. The artist need not necessarily record what he or she observes, but can use what the world provides to reflect the way the world is, much the way visual artists did at the beginning of the century (i.e. Braque and Picasso in their papier colle and collage work; Duchamp with his readymades). And if recorded audio material can be appropriated for compositional use, why not translate the sounds that inaudibly surround us? Broadcast sounds are everywhere waiting to be received, and the universe is bombarding us with a steady palette of audio information to be decoded and incorporated in the artistic process. Probably no other previously held musical characteristic has been so radically changed in the last 50 years as the notion that a discrete field of carefully groomed, mathematically-related frequencies is the sole legitimate content of music. And this shift in expectation of content naturally adjusts the listening process in general. Listening to (and for) all sounds as potential material for artistic construction heightens the sense that beauty is observable in the day-to-day world; aesthetic material is always around you, all you have to do is notice. John Cage's notion of silence is just this: Silence is not the absence of sound, but the sound that happens apart from the listener's expectation (or the composer's control). Ambience. This is all fundamentally important today; elemental in the rethinking of what makes up musical

composition.

There is also a fundamental shift in conceptualizing the instrument which is born of the technology of the latter half of the 20th century, particularly with the advent of the computer. The tape machine begins to be thought of as an instrument. Certainly a microphone is considered by many artists today as a primary instrument. And with the advent of the computer, the ability to capture and manipulate sound (or anything else that can be reduced to data) is amplified exponentially. Computers also provide the calculating power to create sounds that had not previously existed. Though audio synthesis began as an analogue adventure in a few discrete laboratories run by visionary pioneers, it explodes into the marketplace and the art world at large when it communes with computer technology, particularly the personal computer. The creation of new sounds or radical modification of existing sounds through any number of powerful and fascinating off-the-shelf filtering systems is commonplace today. However, one of the most interesting things about the computer as an artistic tool is the opportunity to interpret any information by translating it into a common language: computer code. In this translation process, a sort of hyper-synaesthesia ensues in which all the trackable components of experience can be captured, processed and re-expressed as a different experience (i.e. sound becomes visual, motion becomes audible, any discrete activity can be calculated and repackaged for the senses). Subsequently, interface and instrument design start to define new models of musical (and overall artistic) activity.

New models of musical activity imply new ideas of structure, of methods for construction. It is not surprising to note that with the introduction of new material into the musical lexicon, new and innovative thinking about how that material works compositionally also arises. In the 1950s, John Cage with indeterminacy and chance operations, Iannis Xenakis with stochastic composition, Karlheinz Stockhausen with statistical composition all begin to model methods of composition that more and more lead the composer away from the traditional role of constructing an exacting map of what a musical piece sounds like toward a place that more readily accepts the free-ranging material now at the composer's hand. Again, it is Cage who breaks most radically from tradition by introducing intentional randomization as an integral part of the compositional process. If the world we perceive is in great part the result of the random behavior of the universe, should the art we make conform to that process? Isn't absolute determinism an inaccurate reflection of the universal order? With this line of questioning Cage directly challenges the traditional thinking of how a musical work is structured. But it is with the rise of the Conceptual Art movement in the mid-1960s that not only is the how of composition redressed, but the *why*.

If art is to be socially relevant, the Conceptualist declares, it must transcend the notion of the aesthetic object. The Modernist's pretension that formalism is the true realm of Art, with its champions (such as Jackson Pollack) formalizing their innermost workings in bursts of expression, is rejected. Form is grammar, content lies elsewhere. Content lies in ideas. And ideas lead to critical thinking which unifies artistic endeavors with philosophy, psychology, politics, sociology, ecology and environmentalism, indeed any human pursuit in which the mind is critically engaged. Art in general becomes a metastructure for cultural goals. Composers now need to explore how the world operates and use their work to reflect that exploration, which, of course, harkens back to Cage. Field recordings are not just aesthetic objects, but philosophical reverberants. Game theory as a compositional practice models theories of social organization and human interaction. So, much as the computer offers an opportunity to translate information from one medium to the next, the artist now thinks of the same translation when creating work: how is ecology reflected in sound, how is social organization reflected in compositional structure, how is political activity reflected in drama, etc. As music had previously opened up to all sounds, the art world now opens up to all disciplines. Though the art object continues to be produced and the intuitive manifestation of the individual remains at the core of the artistic impulse, the notion of the artist as social observer and commentator is out of the bag.

There is another interesting ramification of the Conceptual Art movement which has quite an impact on the music world (and the new Video Art world as well). The Conceptual Artists, mostly from the ranks of the Visual Arts, in their anti-establishmentarianism revolted against the "gallery system". In their refusal to create aesthetic objects merely as commodities for consumption they sought to leave the art gallery behind. They preferred, theoretically at least, to dematerialize the work. Art's true merit lay in its ideas, not in the objects which are the byproducts of those ideas. A (perhaps metaphorical) vacuum was created since the presentation and sale of an idea was (intentionally, from the artists perspective) problematic. Music and video thus had an opportunity to present themselves in a new forum: the gallery environment. As this new forum beckoned to the musician, it created the need for a new form and that form became the installation. It is perhaps here that Sound Art truly comes into its own as music gets the opportunity to manifest itself in a way that is less about performance and more about existing in time and space.

The art installation is a product of Conceptualism in that it seeks to be a work of art which is not an art object. It is an environment. It is a place where the audience is participating, or, rather, completing the art work through experiencing the environment. In the context of music it is the opportunity for publication without performance. It is also the opportunity for an audience to engage work in their own time, the time they spend walking through the space, rather than be presented with a form that can only be engaged only in its own time. The performance of a piece of music and the recording of a piece of music, in contrast to the installation, behave exactly the same, both being fixed in the temporal relationship they will have with the listener. This new audition environment frees the listener from that fixed relationship. Stay for five minutes or stay for five hours, the decision is the listener's. The installation also offers a different spatial context from the traditional music performance, be it live or recorded. A traditional music performance will expect the audience member to have a static spacial relationship to the sound, even if the sound is spatially animated and moves about the performance space. The listener's position in the space will only incur minor variations in experience, and that is the goal. The installation, however, invites the listener to create his or her own spatial relationship to the piece by moving through it and creating an individualized path or sequence. This intended personalizing of the experience is the uniqueness of the installation as a mode of publicizing a work of art.

So the areas of material, structure, intent and mode of publication seem to be key places to look in trying to distinguish how music might have come to be considered Sound Art. The protestation that Sound Art is as much a semantic move as anything else is at points supported in the following interviews, but then again, the artist working in the post-Conceptual Art world may see no distinction between works of self-expression and works of social critique, they are part and parcel

of the same activity. Just as the notion that the sound of traffic or the wind is musically on par with the sound of the guitar or clarinet is no stretch for the post-Cagean musician. The landscape of audio composition today is as broad and rich as it has ever been and the artists working in that landscape utilize many new and fascinating ideas in their pursuits, challenging traditional notions of music, listening and awareness while creating new compositional standards and aesthetic milestones as they go.

I would like to extend my most sincere thanks to the artists who conceded to participate in this inquiry. The thought and care and time they offered was gracious and the ideas and experiences relayed are enlightening.

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