

Boy Can See With His Ears

Lecture/performance at AUDIO SCENE'79

By Hank Bull



Hank Bull's lecture/performance at Audio Scene '79

"Audio Scene '79, Sound: a Medium for Visual Art". Taken literally, this title is a paradox. How can sound be visual art?

There are several ways that sound can be visual. Firstly, it can refer to vision. Radio sound effects are like this. They make you see something with your mind's eye.

EXAMPLE (Radio Production)

TAPE: *Play a tape of "high wind", or whistle near the microphone.*

SOUND EFFECTS: *To make the sound of thunder, put some rice or gun shot into a balloon and shake it near the microphone. To make it rain, hold a piece of paper on a slant and pour rice on it.*

"BOY CAN SEE WITH HIS EARS."

This was front page news recently in the popular tabloid, "National Enquirer". The Russians are apparently developing an audio aid for blind people that will allow them to literally see with their ears! The Romantic concept of "synesthesia" developed in Vienna by E.T.A. Hoffmann and others, is now, after a hundred and sixty years, becoming a physical reality.

Halfway between hearing and vision we find the borderline case. In musical sculpture we experience both sound and image in equal amounts. In some concept art we are asked to imagine both. In much of video, performance and film, sound and image are interlocked to create a new sense of space. One way to view pure painting and music is at opposite ends of a sliding scale. In painting the image takes precedence over the sound and in music the sound takes precedence over the image. Even in extreme painting, the sound element is there: it is silence. We imagine the sounds. A quiet museum is a perfect setting in which to do this.

In a word, sound can be visual art if it happens in an art context. This is the old idea that it's art if it's in an art gallery. But as soon as we step outside this idea we run into art problems. Because sound is difficult to present in a museum, teach in a school, or sell in a gallery. Because it breaks down the barriers, not only between the arts, but also between art and life, sound, and all intermedia activity, lead us away from art institutions. The interesting thing is not so much that "art

equals life" or that "everyone is an artist", it is that we find ourselves talking directly to a non-art audience, without the mediation of the art world.

For example: for two and a half years, my partner Patrick Ready and I were heavily into broadcasting. We had a weekly, ninety-minute radio show called "The HP Show" Every week the show was new. No re-runs. The show was not so much about art as it was itself art. But we were not in an art context and we were talking to a non-art audience. And we did anything to keep them listening. "Uh, Uh, Uh, Uh...Don't touch that dial!" we stooped to the lowest levels. We tried to make everything funny, fast, entertaining, puzzling or at least tasteless. When we did occasionally present something that was long or difficult, we found that people that were stimulated by it and would often tell us. The telephone lines were always open. The show was "live". We concluded that it's not art that people distrust, but art galleries.

Our performance became social action. Our aesthetic became strategy.

There are many examples. In Vancouver, a city of one and a half million, there are two artists' TV broadcasts, and a punk rock show on TV every week. Very quickly, the home video market is asking for more films on tape, information tapes, music tapes and video by artists. Distribution is the key.

"Audio Arts" and "SPress" already have effective distribution of audio cassettes, while others, like Sam Schönbaum and Grita Insam are publishing audio cassette magazines. Punks are famous for producing their own platters, and record sales are improving for Bob George (110 Records) and René Block, to mention only two of many producers. Artists' books, and especially magazines, are becoming more accessible. Performers are taking to night clubs and theatres. Related to this is the emergence of artists' co-operatives and artist-run spaces. There is a coherent network of these in Canada. In Europe there are more and more "galleristes" who are selling less painting and becoming more interested in promoting the new media. The danger is that these "alternate" growths can all too soon become themselves institutionalized. Nevertheless the fundamental relationship with the public is changing. This is so even in the more enlightened museums; enlightened to the fact of the "information revolution" and the ominous problems it presents; problems of how information flows and how that flow is controlled.

I am not arguing here for a happy global community of computer pen-pals, although that's part of it. There are some countries who definitely do not want foreign satellites blasting twenty new TV channels into their air space. National mass-media networks are designed to centralize and control information flow, when communications systems should be used on a much more local and esoteric level.

Airline "audio entertainment" selections, on international flights for example, which become progressively worse as they approach the ideal of pleasing all of the people all of the time, should have a much wider variety. Certainly the disco channel is good, but how about a channel with tapes like: "How to Service Your Bicycle", or "Music of the Eskimo."

Politically, a problem develops whenever administration is separate from the everyday job of operating businesses; whenever management is separate from labour. Structurally, the battlefield is divided into two interlocking areas - the centralized and the de-centralized. The strategy is to aim for a very loose structure. The ideal is to have no structure at all and to move freely between structures.

Be on different networks - the radio network, the mail network, the Eternal Network.

Be on your local scene.

Be internationally famous.

Use the museums.

Start your own gallery.

Sell to collectors.

Give your work away for free.

Avoid bureaucracy.

Visit each other.

Use computer mail systems.

Contribute to magazines. Subscribe.

Learn to operate machines. It's easy.

At the same time that culture moves to the Right, it moves to the Left. As Strauss, Khomeini, Thatcher and Clark come on stage, the artists, ecologists and philosophers in the cheap seats are becoming more politically conscious. And the technicians in the orchestra pit are bored. When will the audience start throwing tomatoes? Is the control mechanism too efficient to allow it? Will the "invisible mechanisms" of media change things spontaneously? No sooner than delicate cultural traditions are swept aside by a bland, insidious internationalism, a new balance of culture emerges. The evolution of rocks and other living things, can move quite quickly. Given the right conditions an idea can take root in a generation, or less even.

Around the world everyone is listening to rock, disco, jazz, listening to foreign languages, hearing recognizable words, becoming aware of others. International culture may be banal but is giving people a language with which to communicate. This language is not simply American. America has no culture. American culture was nipped in the bud by international culture. Other nations have deep rooted cultures. The differences between peoples is very strong and not to be tempered with. Yet we all share the emerging global languages. Developing effective ways to use them is our politics. Will using them in the 80's be our religion?

