

Lost In Space

*Sound in Space: Adventures in Australian Sound Art*¹

Shaun Davies

That dialogue may happen

Ask first

Then listen

-- Antonio Machado

In the accompanying exhibition catalogue essay,² the Museum of Contemporary Art's (MCA) guest curator Rebecca Coyle situates *Sound in Space* in an indecisive and problematic relation to the historical avant-garde and the visual arts generally, claiming 'sound art defies categorisation by virtue of its multiple histories' (SIS, 11). It could perhaps be argued that a lack of curatorial clarity might only exemplify some of the ironies and difficulties encountered in attempting to fulfil what MCA director Leon Paroissien has described as the museum's function in 'addressing some of the most challenging developments in contemporary art' (SIS, 4). But *hindsight*, as we know, is a wonderful thing.

To problematise sound art's origins (its 'more general roots' [SIS, 11]) and to make various claims -- specious or otherwise -- regarding sound's ontological status (that it is 'a thing in its own right' [SIS, 8]) seems only to preclude the possibility of asking more difficult and even obvious kinds of questions, those, for instance, genuinely concerned with the future development of sound art theories and practices. If it seems somewhat odd, therefore, that the curator should lament the 'dearth of serious critical writing' on the subject, then her complaint that the 'commonly accepted way' (i.e. 'philosophical theory') of discussing sound art tends only to 'mystify' and so discourage access 'to a broad general public' (SIS, 15) not only presents a manifest contradiction, but an even greater oddity, especially given the suggestion that *Sound in Space* might or should, in fact, present a challenge. It seems, however, that the only 'challenge' actually presented to the 'broad general public' (not to mention sound theorists) was to make some sense out of the plethora of propositions presented in the essay, and to discriminate between particular sounds made in the exhibition -- given that the individual works often competed with one another for air and space, and so also for the listener's attention -- not that the fault lay, here, with the exhibiting artists. In *Sound in Space* the museum space was transformed, literally, into an audition space, sometimes ironically

offering only visual cues to guide the 'public' through it, and from one piece to the next. Perhaps a less farcical challenge might have involved actually addressing some of the fundamental philosophical and art-historical problems relating to sound-art, and attending to some of the acoustical problems which might have been anticipated before the show went up. If anything is to be learned from this experience, and any criticism given a fair hearing, then the precise relation of the museum and its surrogates to the development and representation of sound art histories, practices and theories, and the value of this relationship, should undergo rigorous analysis and deep questioning.

If there is nothing terribly new in raising questions regarding the role of the institution in determining arts practices and theories and the (re-)writing of their histories, then it seems strange that this relation should not have been mentioned by the curator. Given that this kind of relationship has long been recognised as a historiographical index, and that 'the avant-garde art movements of the twentieth century' supply but one of the 'multiple' historical nodal points (the 'range of sources, histories and technologies' [SIS, 15]) around which the curator strains to anchor an allegedly vague and indeterminate set of sound-art practices (those which defy 'categorisation'), it again seems odd -- if not a little subreptitious -- that this elision should have occurred.

The question of the lack of clear definition of what actually constitutes sound art has by now become a well worn cliché, perhaps having even become the very emblem of sound art. In *Sound in Space* it is claimed, therefore, in more florid curatorial leaps, that almost anything at all might constitute and be claimed as sound art, so long as *some* kind of sound is produced, even, say, those emanating from 'Sydney's central transport point, Circular Quay ...' (SIS, 9), situated right on the MCA's front doorstep. The exhibition strains to expand far beyond the physical peripheries bounded by the sandstone walls of the museum, and sometimes even outside the bounds of the most extravagant curatorial assertions. To begin, there is an audio work at each of the museum's entrances and exits: Derek Kreckler's *boo!* on the western side with Panos Couros'/Wayne Stamp's *A Noise of Worms* on the eastern aspect. The latter continue the theme of extension by incorporating the museum's grassy surrounds, with the relatively nearby Royal Botanic Gardens Tropical Centre (housing the work of Sherre DeLys and Joan Grounds: *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*) representing, in a sense, the outermost limits of this, the museum's 'front lawn'. Site specificity becomes the keyword here; although 'site' may be connected to 'space' in respect of the title *Sound in Space*, there are many other 'sites' claimed by the exhibition's curator, ranging from the radiophonic,³ sculptural and experimental

to the 'indigenous' (SIS, 11). Although sometimes paradoxically delimiting sound-space to a simplistic notion of geographical, environmental terrain, this almost totalising gesture also reflects a perception of sound as an unbounded and uncontained 'medium' capable of accommodating a 'multiplicity of ... ideas and practices' (SIS, 11), thereby inviting and perfectly justifying an unrestricted curatorial and 'conceptual' acquisitiveness. *Sound in Space* is, after all, the curator admits, 'inclusive and expansive' (SIS, 13). That the reader could become completely confused, however, when reminded of the earlier, almost opposite assertion: 'sound art [has] a distinct and particular set of practices with specific histories ... ' (SIS, 5) should come as no surprise.

The representation of a terrain as that which is explored and investigated by a marginalised, 'avant-garde' minority ('much of the exhibition and performance of sound artworks has been marginal ... ' [SIS, 5]) also seems, questionably, to depend upon the setting up of numerous -- perhaps false -- problems and premises, not least concerning this 'avant-garde' and Cagean lineage.⁴ Having raised the question of blood-line and categorical definition, together with the problem of 'over-emphasis' on the mystifying propensities of avant-garde and philosophical references (dragging an improbable 'public' in along the way), the whole box and dice is then, unchallengingly, thrown into the too-hard basket.

Anxiety is often expressed in the form of sound's difference from visual media or other forms, i.e., what sound art is *not*, or in terms of its synaesthetic coupling with other sensory faculties ('It is the interconnection between the senses that is important' [SIS, 14]). In other words, the aesthetic status of sound, despite the desire to flesh out its meaning on its 'own terms', as it is sometimes put, seems linked in an ambiguous relation with various other media. On the one hand, affirmation of this differential relationship is often maintained ('Any discussion of the visual over the audio is spurious ... ' [SIS, 13]), but on the other, the struggle to 'free' sound from what is often posited as its purely ancillary and subordinate relation to the visual has sometimes become the sound artist's catch-cry (where sound is posited as 'a thing in its own right' [SIS, 8]). But it is this negational manoeuvring which has provided, in fact, the very means by which sound art has been able to be curated and museologised here, and the very thing which has maintained the field's dubiously determined 'marginal' status.

The avoidance of raising from the outset the kinds of questions which might offer some interesting new directions and freshness only thwarts any attempt to think clearly about what might constitute a sound arts practice, and is one of the conceits by which certain 'problems' (lineage/definition) are able to be

maintained and seen to represent a 'challenge'. As it is represented here, sound art's very future seems to actually depend upon its being immersed in these muddy and confused waters, clouded *not* by asking questions of a fundamental and philosophical nature, but by denying that even raising them has any validity. The raising of false problems, on the other hand, manages to avoid the responsibility of engaging with more pressing and difficult tasks by throwing out the stillborn baby with the murky bathwater.

If it is the case that sound artists, theorists and curators prefer to grope about in relative obscurity, and strive to place sound art on an equal footing with any other plastic art ('discussion of the visual as distinct from the audio is spurious ... ', and 'All definitions of sound art ... presuppose a pre-existing definition of art' [SIS, 12]), then long may they continue to agglomerate and calcify in the visual art museum's penumbra. Under quite different curatorial circumstances, however, the critical possibilities afforded by the involvement of a better advised and informed museum could offer great potential for the field and work towards the cultivation and development of more appreciative *audiences*. Obscurantism is not real status.

This desire to raise sound to the status of the plastic, visual arts, and to provide an ontological and epistemological enframing of sound, also seems tied into a preoccupation with reification, or the recovery of some notion pure, original experience or with ostensive demonstration. This is variously expressed in the essay by way of references to 'original or "live" sound' (even as an 'original "virtual" medium'!) which both has 'roots', is 'ever-present' and is an 'entity', and by linking it to manifestly plastic art objects such as Denis Cabrera's and Robert Britton's *Pipes and Bells*, Deborah Vaughan's *Dora's Feet*, and other works. Also, a preoccupation with inserting sound art -- sometimes almost sideways -- into already well established and documented art histories, and the placing of general 'historical' readings over sound, establishes the credentials by which sound art may be *viewed* as itself a valid form of arts practice. In *Sound in Space* this anxiety over the recovery of 'historical' and 'primary' experience, coupled with notions of substantiality (as we are told when entering the exhibition ' ... sound ... has a substance') is quite apparent, and the relationship between these anxieties and the desire to conserve and encase these notions within institutional or museological parameters is also quite clear. In the process, one could argue, more curly questions regarding the nature of this relationship are often bypassed, with the result that the phenomenal/art status of sound becomes concatenated with a purely museologically determined 'epistemology'. After having accrued certain exchange value, sound, of course, takes on other properties and uses, serving, perhaps, a

more utilitarian *function*; perhaps the curator's reference to 'the cocktail party effect' in the essay may in fact reveal another preoccupation of hers altogether?

'History' -- whether in reference to a relationship with 'avant-garde' arts practice or as a continuation of the spirit of technological reproduction -- represents but one of the means for validating and retrospectively inserting sound art into the canons of established practice. The other preoccupation is with reference to 'nature', in respect of the transformation, transubstantiation or reproduction of the 'primary' raw material of 'sound', whether this is articulated as earthly, environmental sound, or as a form of ambience, a term which lends itself to a number of interpretations and possibilities: 'the sound ever-present in the enfolding spaces of the body ...' (SIS, 9), etc. In this show, however, it seems that simple reference to 'bodies' suffices to justify and bolster certain art practices, as if mere incorporation of the term 'body' into 'theory' takes full account of the complex subject of bodily representation generally.

In Joan Grounds' and Sherre DeLys' *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, an installation housed in the Sydney Tropical Centre at the Royal Botanic Gardens, a number of inferences can be drawn with respect to the relation between the conservatory and the museum experience. Tropical plants housed here represent a metonymic contraction of an exotic world existing well beyond the confines of the centre's shapely glasshouses; various species of plants relocated here, for the well-being of a nature-loving urban public, thrive in an artificially produced atmosphere. Domestic and constructed objects placed amongst the plants, and the sounds emanating from them, either mimic 'natural' forms or contrast with them, both reduplicating the effect of artificiality whilst at the same time commenting upon the very contrivance of the public space and the problematic of origins and originality. Vocal and other mimicry mimics mimicry; a system of labyrinthine referentiality is established which on the one hand presses the listener to suspend auditory disbelief onto an even more tenuous level, to move beyond the disruptive predicament of the revelation of this nature/culture distinction and to seek refuge in some exotic, represented ideal 'space'. (Mimicry, as we know, functions to both attract and repel.) Like Magritte's painting of a pipe, the reference never settles precisely upon a concrete object as such, and even if it seems to, the very process of referencing, given the title of this work, is at the same time ironised. On the other hand, by tracing sound back to some material source, imagined or not, 'present' or 'absent', one may seek to reify the listening experience and ground it in some notion of embodied or natural 'reality'. But this sign-play interestingly indicates the reificational preoccupations of sound art in *Sound in Space*, its anxiety over the establishment of historical

and material credentials, and the grounding of listening into some idealistic notion of 'real experience'.

In the absence of some such signifieds, then, the experience of listening may, in a sense, run in proximity to a loss. This, as stated, raises an interesting problem regarding the very possibility of sourcing sound along historical or natural axes. If, as Coyle states in the catalogue essay, 'recorded sound ... cannot reproduce sound as it actually occurs in space' and 'technology used for sound storage and reproduction is [not] culturally neutral' (SIS, 8), then this implies that sound 'as it occurs in space', i.e. 'natural sound' *is*, as such. Of course, the very projection onto 'nature' of the *idea* of nature, or the very consideration of 'nature', is always from the outset a philosophically and historically locatable cultural activity. In other words, there can in no sense be a natural 'raw material' such as sound. The enculturation of sound, 'historically' or 'naturally' may thus be seen to be the function of a retrospective conceptual grasp, and an attempt to situate an already cultural product within an even more highly delimiting institutional apparatus. In a similar kind of way, sound installations, housed in the museum space as they are in *Sound in Space*, are positioned as if they are the collected specimens of exotic arts practices, displaying vaguely blue-blood lineages, examples of the activities of certain cultural species which take place 'over there' somewhere, but which have been taxonomised and metonymically *contracted* into museological practice and parlance. But in a quite disingenuous tone, perhaps in an attempt to raise another fog, the curator claims the contrary: 'Sound art defies categorisation', and then, in a paradoxical and revealingly 'naturalistic' phrase, goes on to list the historical 'roots' from which it nevertheless 'stems': 'electronic music; sound/concrete poetry, art installations and sculpture, sound design, radio art and performance' (SIS, 11). If, however, this material and historical tracing is exposed as simply an anxious attempt to locate any putative ground(s) in which sound art can be embedded, then even the museum's role must be seen, in the end, as merely -- regrettably -- ancillary. In the MCA, we *see* the works on display, and sound is channelled through them in an almost auxiliary role. In a most revealing comment towards the end of the essay, Coyle proclaims: 'Sound in Space *focuses* on carving out a more positive *vision* for sound art' (SIS, 15) (my emphases). One might ask if after this exhibition any sound will have been left unprivatised, enough of it left over for the development of more finely-tuned and disciplined kinds of listening experiences, for the articulation and generation of more authentically challenging and exciting ideas, and for the enculturation and development of audiences.

Paradoxically, however, the show does remain something of a

curate's egg: if stock is taken of the fact that the exhibition disappoints, and fails the artists, and serious thought is given as to the many and complex reasons why, then the development of the field nevertheless remains a distinct and exciting possibility. One might say, ironically, that *Sound in Space* was the exhibition we had to have.

With thanks, for discussions, to Daniel Cole.

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1 An exhibition held at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Sydney, from 26 May - 22 August, 1995, incorporating performances, installations, audiothèque, film screenings, radio broadcasts, and artists' talks.

2 'Sound in Space: a Curatorial Perspective' in *Sound in Space: Adventures in Australian Sound Art*, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995. Hereafter cited as SIS.

3 From 1 - 29 May, the Australian Broadcasting Commission's *The Listening Room* broadcast a number of works by various artists; 2SER FM's *Audiodaze* featured items from and about *Sound in Space*.

4 See Douglas Kahn, 'Yodelling in Space', in *The Sydney Review*, July 1995, p. 13.