

Re - Soundings:

The Art of Bill Fontana

by

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*"It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear." Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities*

Bill Fontana's sound environments renew our awareness of the places we inhabit and the powerful role sound plays in both our sense of self and our memory. Fontana's achievement in his projects has been to evoke a dynamic sense of the natural environment as a continuous, life-enhancing presence, rekindling an awareness of the narrative envelope that sound forms around our lives.

On one level, Fontana's work is predicated on a sophisticated investigation into how we perceive sounds in the world. As in learning a language, we identify sounds through a complex set of sensory cues, linking them to their technological or natural sources in the environment. Fontana has created a series of compelling projects that subtly treat the interplay between the origins of sounds and the contexts in which we perceive them. In the process Fontana causes the viewer to become conscious of himself and his senses as he hears and perceives anew the world he inhabits.

The environments in which we grow up are made up of a range of smells, lights, colors, and sounds whose range and gradations play an important role in our recalling of past moments in time in addition to providing powerful cues in constructing our sense of physical place. Sound is one element in the whole palette of the senses that compose our perception and reception of the world around us. Visual artists, from photographers to painters, compose through representational images that interpret place through an imaginary distortion of reality intrinsic both to the medium and to the artist's aesthetic. Thus we can look at the history of Western culture through its visual artifacts which show us real and imaginary landscapes from Renaissance religious narratives to Dutch views of daily life.

Fontana's art can be seen in a complex dialectical relation to both the naturalism of representational art and to Marcel Duchamp's strategy of the "found" object. By removing an everyday object from its customary context, labeling it an art object, and placing it in a gallery, Duchamp gave it new meaning and significance. This strategy overturned the traditional assumption of what makes a work of art. Other modernists carried Duchamp's Ideas into composition and performance. John Cage, in his seminal composition "4'33'" from the early 1950's, instructs the musician to make no sound. The performance then, is made of the sounds which, by chance, fill the concert hall during the length of the composition. Other artists such as Max Neuhaus and Alvin Lucier explored and manipulated the natural sounds of the environment. The result of these endeavors has been a new definition of music, one that links sound to the environment that generates it.

Bill Fontana's art works range from work created for gallery spaces to projects which engage large outdoor environments. In 1983 Fontana completed "Oscillating Steel Grids Along the Brooklyn Bridge" on the occasion of the bridge's centennial. The public, standing in the plaza of the World Trade Center, heard from hidden speakers the sounds made by the vibrations of the bridge's road surface caused by the constant surge of traffic. By transmitting these sounds live from the bridge to a public plaza that is, to a place removed from the cause of the sound Fontana made the listeners more aware of the tonal range and modulation. By isolating the sound from its source, Fontana enabled the listener to concentrate on its intrinsic beauty and complexity.

In "Entfernte Zuge" (1984), the original source of the sound is central to Fontana's concept. While an artist-in-residence in West Berlin in 1984, he visited an empty field which had once been the site of the Anhalter Bahnhof, a major train station in pre-war Berlin. He there played sounds he had recorded onto eight channel tape at the Cologne railroad station West Germany's busiest. The sounds emanating from eight speakers hidden in the desolate field evoked a haunting sense of a bustling train station.

"Kirribilli Wharf" (1976), Fontana's first eight-channel field recording, is a key work in his career. He recorded the sound of the waves rushing beneath Kirribilli Wharf in Sydney Harbor, Australia. These sounds were then played through speakers placed within a gallery space. The gallery was dark, with the echoing sound of the water evoking the tangible presence of the wharf, creating a vivid, naturalistic sound environment. With all visual cues or connections removed, the listener perceived this work as the pure play of water against the pier.

These three projects describe a range of strategies developed by Fontana in his installation projects as means to reframe our awareness and perception of the natural environment. The dislocation of a sound in real time from its original source to another nearby causes us to invest that sound with a new sense of mystery; transmitting a sound from an identifiable source to another location can recall that space's original function, bringing it back to life as a community's memory of the historical past; capturing on tape the natural sound of the environment and placing it in a neutral space creates a heightened sense of that sound through which we can imagine that original environment purely through the movement and placement of the sounds.

Bill Fontana's recent projects, including the spectacular work created for Vienna, modulate and move sound within a circulating spatial trajectory that links locations to a mix of sounds. In the "Hamburg Projekt" (1989), three different locations each with a characteristic range of sounds evoking the architecture of docks and tunnels are transmitted to a bridge where they are heard intermittently mixed with natural sounds from other locations. Here the "map" of Hamburg's unique architecture and physical location is mixed into the natural environment. This idea is developed further in "Acoustical Views of the San Francisco Ferry Building", in which Fontana transmits the sounds from an architectural and acoustical landmark in San Francisco, the South Ferry Building located in the harbor, to a gallery space within the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Fontana develops a complex interplay between how the sounds of the bell tower are heard throughout San Francisco in the natural and urban environment, and how he recreates and captures the movement of sound in the gallery installation. By introducing his own sounds into the dynamic of the landscape of the environment, Fontana subtly modulates the perception of the movement of sound and its interaction with the city at that same time that he contains it within the gallery.

The project which Bill Fontana has created for Vienna is an elegant and ambitious mix of the past and present. In this land-urbanscape project Fontana brings his audio canvas into the city to evoke through the changing sounds of the swampland a place at once real and imaginary, thus looking to the future of the city through the ecology of the present.

*"At times I feel your voice is reaching from far away, while I am prisoner of a gaudy and unlivable present, where all forms of human society have reached an extreme of their cycle and there is no imagining what new forms they may assume. And I hear, from your voice, the invisible reasons which make cities live, through which perhaps, once dead, they will come to life again". Italo Calvina, Invisible Cities*