

Audio Art: The Illusion of Repetition - Steve Heimbecker, 2007

We all have unique relationships with our own lives and with the work we have produced as artists or otherwise. I am no different and make no attempt here to position myself as anything but a working artist whose sustained years of creation has allowed a certain organization of experiences, and juxtapositions. These experiences and juxtapositions are directly informed by my subjective involvement as an artist in an age of mechanism and media. And while it is clearly reasonable to accept that over time an artist such as myself would develop some cluster of written theoretical guidelines to describe and/or defend his works of art, this theoretical aspect of the work is really of the resulting detritus cut from the process of creation. Chips off the block so to speak. When these chips are swept up into a pile and then reviewed for recycling, many questions can be formulated, some already with answers, but many with no answers at all, just the evidence of process.

From the German publication initiative, Media Art Net 1: Survey of Media Art, 2004, Dr. Golo Föllmer tells us in the introduction to his definitive chapter on Audio Art, that his paper will, “allow the clear identification of the radical change that separates Audio Art from the traditional understanding of music”.¹ He continues to investigate Audio Art by segmenting his article into 21 sub headings, which in themselves are interesting and are listed here: *transmission (radio), participation, aesthetization, radio art, storage, musique concrète, sound, principles of chance, musique d’ameublement, sound installation and ambient music, synthesis, sound composition, score synthesis, intermedia, space, media narration, detemporalization, virtualization, dehierarchization, and audio art as a phenomenon of the modern age.*²

¹ Dr. Golo Föllmer, *Media Art Net 1: Survey of Media Art - Chapter 3: Audio Art*, (Medien Kunst Netz, Germany, 2004) 80 - 01. On line at: http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/overview_of_media_art/audio/ , 80 - 01.

² Föllmer, *Audio Art*, 80 - 01.

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For the closing of his chapter, Dr. Föllmer summarizes his arguments: “Three fundamentally new ways of implementing technical media thus distinguish Audio Art from the traditional understanding of music as manifested in the use of mechanical musical instruments. These differences define audio art as a phenomenon of Modernity. First, Audio Art accepts the structural peculiarities of media as the source of aesthetic rules of design. Secondly, it accepts the task of the experimental investigation of media specific phenomena of perception. Thirdly, it uses media both in a critical and in a playful way against media themselves by deliberately seeking the loss of control: because the plurality of access and the unpredictableness of the results are considered to be the condition of development”.³

The article written by Dr. Föllmer is probably the most comprehensive, article I have read toward the establishment of a definition of Audio Art (although there are not that many), and too offers a great set of tools, through his sub headings, for a continued study and expansion of the subject. The artistic concepts and references Dr. Föllmer sites as important contributions to the formation of Audio Art over the last 100 years, does indeed include many art works from “non-musical” visual artists. This is in some contrast to articles on Sound Art, such as N.B. Aldrich’s 2003 article for the EMF Institute in Albany, N.Y., who references visual or conceptual artists (of 1950s and 60s New York) only to say, “As music had previously opened up to all sounds, the art world now opens up to all disciplines”⁴, suggesting that visual artists had no direct or early influence on Sound Art or Audio Art. As another example, Mr. Aldrich goes on to say conceptual artists abandoned the art gallery in the 1960’s in New York and as a result, musicians were left free in the art gallery to invent the sound installation.⁵ However, this ignores such artists of the same place and period as N. J. Paik for example. Dr. Föllmer too, writes that the

³ Föllmer, *Audio Art*, 80 – 15.

⁴ N.B. Aldrich, *What is Sound Art?: Introduction* (The EMF Institute, Albany, NY, 2003) <http://emfinstitute.emf.org/articles/aldrich03/aldrich.html>

⁵ *Ibid.*, introduction – 01.

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sound installation was first created in New York City in the late 1960's and adds that it was lead by musicians such as M. Neuhaus and M. Amacher, with Neuhaus coining the term "sound installation".⁶ For me these citations exemplify a continuation of an error in taxonomy that needs to be addressed between Visual Art, Audio Art, and Sound Art. This error is related to an early musical exclusivity toward temporal art which does not seem to include visual space, but it is space nonetheless. The error is compounded by dating the origin of an art movement only by it's naming, such as in the case of sound installation in relation to installation art and audio art installation. The works of such "visual" artists as R. Russolo, K. Schwitters, and many of the Dadaists, not to mention the important contribution of (silent) film makers of this early period created many conceptual frame works of a temporal spatial nature, specifically exploring ideas and concepts of art installation and non musical sound, with a continued goal to articulate the perception of space, and who as artists did search for new inclusive contemporary mediums to create from which openly explored sound, intermedia, time and space, often synaesthetically. To his credit, synaesthesia is included in Dr. Föllmer's article, under his sub-heading, intermedia.⁷ For me, especially as I am trained "officially" as a visual artist, the spatial / temporal / transmission aspects of these "visual" artists, is the beginning of the contemporary Audio Art movement, a movement which has had a significant but somewhat misunderstood influence on Sound Art and it's current definitions.

Going back to Dr. Föllmer's article to gain further insight to the early days of Audio Art through the usage of non electric technical media such as hurdy gurdies, street pianos and music boxes, he writes, "These aspects, too, are articulated in audio art: not as a secondary effect of the social or economic process of art, but on the contrary, frequently as the true focus of a work. Technical media are used to re-experience everyday perceptions of body, history, space or time

⁶ Föllmer, *Audio Art*, 80 – 06.

⁷ Ibid, 80 – 08.

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in an aestheticized form. However, they are also critically reflected on with regard to their social potential for and effect on the individual”.⁸

Many creation references are cited in both of these articles, especially in Dr. Föllmer’s, but the information is summarized somewhat externally and at an “objective” distance. While this functions perfectly in the circumstance to create a scholarly overview of Audio Art and its historical artifacts, it does not directly reflect the personal motives and thoughts of the individual artists. Secondly, the emphasis on Dr. Föllmer’s definition of Audio Art is related to “new ways of implementing technical media” as represented in a summary of three distinct (albeit important) points already cited. From my own experience however, there is a case to be made that Dr. Föllmer’s 3 point summary can be overshadowed with an extended definition of Audio Art that is related to a new contemporary paradigm of perception that although related to the origins of “technical media” physically, conceptually, and metaphorically, it is also fundamentally based upon a creative understanding of 4 dimensional space (3 dimensional space plus time), which I believe can be described by the definition of a single word - **audio**. But I will come back to this.

Personally, I have throughout my career as an Audio Artist, tended to embrace the notion of isolation, and in a certain way, the ritual of process. I believe it is isolation and the creation of individual processes that gives an artist his or her honest mandate to create and theorize subjectively, innocently, and even naively. Isolated independent creation empowers the artist with the ability to create their own vernacular. A vernacular that will run parallel to more broadly based formal studies and theories. It also protects the artist from self-censorship and past conceptual paradigms, where the act of creation is limited by a sense of contrition toward the influence of history. Simply put, the idea that you can't do something because it's been done

⁸ Ibid, 80 – 15.

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before (unless of course you prefer conscious and deliberate derivation). And while I believe exact duplication is physically impossible to achieve, it is equally physically impossible to avoid similarities within the outcomes of our works and our lives. In life, we touch each other and from this network experience we are all in greater or lesser degrees touched by much the same influences. How we come to understand and manage these influences is the basis for how we build our own cognitive process of human understanding and artistic creation. So while it may appear that history is more objective, it is not. More resolution and definition does not necessarily produce more objectivity. To quote Dr. Föllmer again, “artistic value does not solely unfold through an increase in control, extended playability or new sound perspectives”.⁹

As far as I am concerned in a perfect world, an artist should do their work and connect the external dots later (if at all). But then again, we all have our processes, and imperatives. It is true that the self determining method I propose is not very scientific, and it doesn't really fit within the rules of engagement, accountability, and repeatability in our commodity driven western world, but with persistence, it does produce some very interesting results, albeit often considered to be from "out in left field".

As it happens, I grew up in left field, a small prairie village in Saskatchewan in the 1960s whose population was then about 100 people. The nearest city, Saskatoon was about 100 miles away. As a child I do not remember the first telephones being installed in the village homes, but I do remember that our families first telephone number was two digits long, 19. It was part of a network called a "party line", a communication system that was managed by a central operator in the village. Each family shared their phone line with 3 other families. The sound of the telephone ring which consisted of combinations of short and long rings, indicated if your household should answer the phone or not. Our ring was one long, one short. The fact that the

⁹ Ibid, 80 – 14.

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telephone rang in 4 homes at once (including the operator) also meant that it was likely that at least one of your neighbors would be listening to your telephone call at any given time. I guess from an early age I developed ways to cope with such open networks of transmission and notions of passive surveillance and self-censorship. Don't say anything you don't mean to say to all.

In Calgary, in the late 1970's, during the period I was attending art school, and at a meeting of the membership of an artist run centre that felt to me more like a gathering of resistance (freedom) fighters, one of the older artists (who was probably in his mid 30's at the time), took me aside and confided in me, "an artist has only a handful of questions in his life to answer, that's all. The trick (in art) is not so much about what answers are found, but the diversity and processes the artist uses to manifest those answers". Then perhaps about a year later, one of my professors from art school told me that, "a good art work is never finished. An artist can only choose a good moment to stop." Many years after this, while in post concert, late night tavern revelry with other audio artists who were attending the 2001 Send + Receive Festival in Winnipeg, we happily discussed the concept of "the illusion of repetition" within the context of Audio Art, and after ordering again, more refreshments. The "illusion of repetition" has stuck with me and is a phrase that to me is a less clumsy and a more poetic way to encapsulate the first two points of my early mentors. Unfortunately, to many in our society witnessing an artist in the throws of the physical implementation of the illusion of repetition technique, the activity is often mistaken for obsessive compulsive behavior, and is generally met with resistance, as the illusion is not always recognized or appreciated to it's fullest amusement! It might also be good to consider too, that for most people, stopping is not the same as finishing.

Turn the page to the late 1980's, still in Calgary, and after about 10 years of producing sculptures, drawings, paintings, art punk performances, concerts, performance art happenings, and video, I felt largely unsatisfied. As a result I suppose, I became obsessed with needing to

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find a more definitive answer to what the meaning of art might be, even though I had been dedicated to communicating diversity through my art creation to "answer my handful of questions".

So I asked myself the question, "What is art?" especially within the context of process art being so contradictory to the meanings and goals manifested from the traditional idea of the art object. I had received many opinions of what was not art, but never what art was. I decided to look up the definition in a copy of the Random House College Dictionary I had and this is what I found:

Art, (noun),

*1. the quality, production, expression, or realm of what is beautiful, or of more than ordinary significance. 2. the class of objects subject to aesthetic criteria; works of objects belonging to this realm, as paintings, drawings etc.: a museum of art. 3. a field, genre, or category of this realm: Dance is an art. 4. the fine arts collectively, often excluding architecture: art and commerce. 5. any field using the skills or techniques of art: advertising art. 6. illustrative or decorative material. 7. the principles or methods governing any craft, skill, or branch of learning: the art of baking; the art of sailing. 8. the craft or trade using these principles or methods. 9. skill in conducting any human activity: a master at the art of conversation. 10. a branch of learning or university study, especially one of the fine arts or the humanities. 11. the humanities: a college of arts and sciences. 12. skilled workmanship, execution, or agency, as distinguished from nature. 13. studied action: artificiality in behavior. 14. an artifice or artful device: the innumerable arts and wiles of politics. 15. archaic, science; learning. [ME < OF, oblique form of ars < L ars (nom.), artem (acc.)]*¹⁰

¹⁰ Random House College Dictionary, revised edition (USA, 1975), 76.

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With this definition in hand, I promptly wrote an art punk song in 1987 entitled "Art" for my band "The Beat Apostles". I used the litany of the definitions of art (noun) to form the lyrical content. My personality and creativity led me to focus on definition numbers 9 and 12 in particular, and to create my own abbreviated interpretations of these definitions: def. 9 - "art, any human activity", and def. 12 - "art, not nature". These two new credos also became early building blocks in my conceptual practice. For example it helped me create content for my Audio Art installation and manifesto, "The Forum for the Alienation of Art" (1995). In this piece through narration, I asked a simple question, "Is humanity natural?" If answered yes, the implication was that humanity could not make art (def. #12), therefore my audio installation, ironically located in the garden courtyard of an old factory, could not be considered as being art, because the garden, and humanity by default, had created an "art free zone". An audio recording of a woman's voice repeated slowly (in addition to the argument), "No matter what you do, no matter what you think, no matter what the consequences, you can not call this art. This is an art free zone. This garden is declared an art free zone".¹¹

By the mid 1990's I had established several years of independent and blissfully naive solo Audio Art exploration and creation. Perhaps because of my ease with sculpture, kinetics, intermedia and space, my artistic focus was often aimed toward the manifestation of Audio Art works that conceptually defined relationships of time and space. My concepts and works of this period include:

- the construction of a 144 tone, 1200 pound , 22 foot tall wind chime (1987),
- the construction of an antenna based, 26 channel sound diffusion installation of real time AM/FM radio frequency sampling (1990)

¹¹ "The Forum for the Alienation of Art", was exhibited in Montréal by Champ Libre, at the time of, and in the middle of, ISEA 1995. The soundtrack of this manifesto was published on my 1998 double CD "The Enormousness of Cloud Machines" from Avatar / Ohm Editions in Quebec City.

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- the creation of my first octaphonic studio composition, produced and presented on 1/2" 8 track reel to reel tape (1992).
- the creation of an audio recording system to record a linear mile of sound space from 8 simultaneous and equidistant source points (thus capturing a representation of speed of sound), and then presenting these recordings in an invented 8 channel acoustic model, 64 feet long (1993).
- experiments with octaphonic and quadraphonic microphone field recording arrays for multi track recording and Audio Art composition. I called my technique the Acoustic Mapping Process (1993/94).¹²
- performing live quadraphonic concerts that filled the concert space with the amplified audio of simple percussive sound sources and generated feed back modulation from 4 open microphones placed in the center of the concert space (1992 to 1995).¹³
- developing a technique I called "Dynamic Voltage Mapping" which is a complimentary (parametric) system to my Acoustic Mapping Process, where the amplitude events of one sound source, especially quadraphonic samples, could be used to trigger (in milliseconds) other continuous quadraphonic sound samples in spatialized time / space (1995).
- discovering the word *audile* (1995).
- creating an installation "instrument" in 1996, that generated an immersive 8 channel sound environment fundamentally consisting of low amplitude 3 hertz vibrations produced by giant

¹² I named my sound recording technique the "Acoustic Mapping Process" after I attended the Tuning of the World Conference (1993) in Banff, Alberta, and after hearing Douglas Quin speak of his own mono field recording techniques "as part of a continuing attempt to inventory and map new world tropical wildlife." The idea of mapping in relation to sound and layered together with my own spatial / temporal sound recording research inspired me to eventually design a head sized portable quadraphonic microphone array for portable 4 track field recording and multi-channel audio art creation in 1995. Douglas Quin, *Amazon Diary: August 21, 1991: Proceedings The Tuning of the World, Volume Two*, (The Banff Centre, Banff, Alberta, 1993), 01

¹³ As a descriptive name, I eventually used the term "Sound Sailing", a technique related to me in person by Swiss composer Andres Bosshard at the Tuning of the World Conference. Andres Bosshard, *Discovering and Exploring the Terrestrial Soundscape: Proceedings The Tuning of the World, Volume Two*, (The Banff Centre, Banff, Alberta, 1993), 01

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servo electric mechanical / canvas speakers whose kinetic surfaces were hand painted with psychedelic visual patterns (1995). I called the environment produced by the installation, the soundpool.

It was not until after I had produced this work, that I decided the definition of art was for me, a verb. And although I wrote an unpublished paper entitled "Art is a Verb" in 1997, I admit, I do not remember having ever looked up the definition of art (verb) until now. So again, from the same Random House College Dictionary and for this paper:

Art, (verb) - Archaic or literary

1. 2nd person singular present indicative *of be*.

[ME; OE *eart* = *ear* - (see *ARE I = of be*) + *-t* ending of 2nd pers. sing.] - *art*, variant of *-ard*: *braggart* (which in my mind has an interesting confluence with the word *bard - sh*).¹⁴

Coming back to the dictionary definition of art has completely fortified the "art is a verb" belief in me, as my clear inclination here is to feel relief in reading the definition of art, not as the prolific noun, but as the verb, simply.... *of be*, and which also happens to be the first definition listed for the word **are**, with it's inference that art is life.

There is also in this definition my unexpected and completely synchronistic discovery of the Old English word **eart**, which is represented as equaling the word **ear**: the characteristic vertebrate organ of hearing and equilibrium, also of Old English origin, stemming from the Latin **auris** and the Greek **ous**. It seems *of be* is congruent with ear/ hear/ sound.

With dictionary in hand, I additionally discovered without surprise that the word sound like art (the noun), is well represented in our culture and in our English language dictionary too. It's definitions range from being *healthy and without defect, stable*, to our topic here: *a particular auditory impression, the sensation perceived by the sense of hearing, meaningless*

¹⁴ Random House College Dictionary, revised edition (USA, 1975), 76

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*noise, recorded auditory material, a particular musical style, to make or convey an impression - especially when heard.*¹⁵ Much like art the noun, there is little revelation in any of these definitions.

With complete curiosity and intuition, I have over the course of my career created many different Audio Art projects covering a wide variety of interests and applications. But in 1986, I still did not know that there was a category and history of Audio Art. Thanks in part to the Canada Council for the Arts, and the establishment of Audio Art as a new category of individual creation funding in 1987, for the first time in my career I felt as though I had found some ground as an artist to stand upon with colleagues, especially within the idea of diversity in creation, including audio, sound, and intermedia, and creating works that didn't necessarily have an end. I believe Audio Art stems from an intuitive sense of flow and transmission, and an individual affinity to process, but not necessarily to outcome. Thus, my inclination toward the notion that art is a verb, remains. And now as alluded to earlier, the definition of the word **audio**:

1 au·dio (adjective)

Etymology: audio - Latin *audire* to hear, Date: 1916

1. of or relating to acoustic, mechanical, or electrical frequencies corresponding to normally audible sound waves which are of frequencies approximately from 15 to 20,000 hertz. 2. of or relating to sound or its reproduction and especially high-fidelity reproduction. 3. relating to or used in the transmission or reception of sound — compare video. 4. of, relating to, or utilizing recorded sound.

2 audio (noun) Date: 1934

*1. an audio signal; broadly : sound. 2. the section of television or motion-picture equipment that deals with sound. 3. the transmission, reception, or reproduction of sound.*¹⁶

¹⁵ Merriam Webster online dictionary: (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sound>).

¹⁶ Merriam Webster online dictionary: (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/audio>)

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I will point your attention to the fact that the word audio (at least according to Merriam Webster) is less than a century old. Therefore, not only is the concept and practice of Audio Art a modern one as suggested by Dr. Föllmer, but too, the word audio itself is a modern one. Secondly, when reviewing definitions #1.3 from audio (the adjective) and #2.3 from audio (the noun), we should focus our attention specifically upon: *transmission and reception*. It is clear from my own experience and understanding, that transmission and reception, since at least the turn of the 20C., has been a common artistic and conceptual ground for Audio Art production.

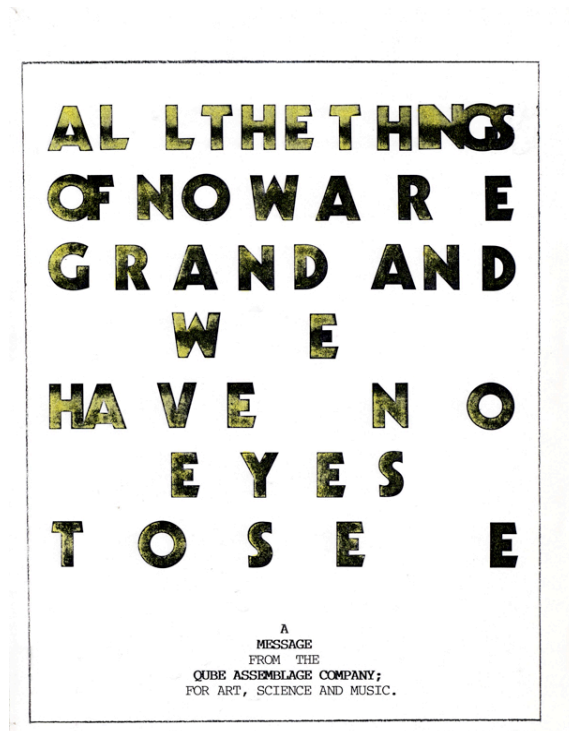
The act of art is directly related to the act of life and of living. But also, the word audio as shown here, has a very similar sensibility to the definition of art the verb. Parallel to Dr. Föllmer, whose article tends to emphasize ideas of technical media and storage as a primary modern influence on Audio Art, I will add the direct influence of the audio artist and their own imperative to transmit and receive ideas through the process of creation, and with the tools, concepts, and paradigms of his age, as demonstrated and defined by the modern / contemporary understanding of time / space found within 4D creation.

To continue, by selecting and combining the dictionary definition of audio: *of transmission and reception*, and art (verb): *of be*, I feel we can extrapolate a simple but very worth while conceptual and poetic definition of / for ***Audio Art : the transmission and reception of being***. And while I acknowledge my new definition may be considered a bit fanciful for some, it suits me just fine.

Finally, to further distinguish Audio Art from Sound Art, I will state that even though Audio Art does indeed infer the use of sound, it does not require sound, it is not sound dependent. I believe Audio Art requires an expanded and perhaps synaesthetic (intermedia) appreciation of what sound and the sound wave is within the framework of the production and reception of vibration and frequency. What is vibration and frequency if not a metaphor of

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repetition? They are at the heart of transmission and reception, an *illusion of repetition*, and are the fabric of audio art practice, perception, and *of be*.



“All the things of now are grand and we have no eyes to see”.¹⁷

the end – word count 3937

¹⁷ From my company the Qube Assemblage Company for Art, Science and Music (1987), a text based graphic audio art message I created in 1989 published in the Calgary art review magazine Artichoke. Artichoke Magazine (Calgary Alberta: vol. 1, no. 2, January 1990), 42.