

The Sound of Art

A Conversation with Steve Roden

By Kristian Kofoed

From John Cage's concerts to Maya Deren's films, modern artists have experimented with mixing sound art and visual art—sometimes called “sound/art”—with motives and techniques as varied as the individual artists. This art proliferates wildly on the Web, with its electronic canvas stretched wide as the world, a built-in soundtrack and the promise of easily digitized sound and drawing.

When the critical history of sound/art is written, Steve Roden will occupy an important chapter. Perhaps uniquely among sound artists, he builds an enhanced sense of place, using sound as internal walls and visual art as windows through the site. Roden is sensitive to the reciprocal effect of art-space and artwork, saying of one Seattle exhibit: “I was sitting on the steps looking at the work and all of a sudden it looked like a bunch of quiet ships floating in the night—something I never connected the sculpture with before—and I love how the installation can change works in this way ...”

The subtle, iterative connections he makes among sound, visuals and site are facilitated by a commitment to equal primacy for each form. The result is an invitation into an intimate web of experience, like walking into a white cube that has morphed into a warm, glowing skin, within which the artwork drifts and flows like liquid.

This summer, Seattle featured two significant Roden shows: a simultaneous exhibition of 490 small sculptures at Suyama Space and a compelling visual/soundwork/film installation at Jack Straw

Productions. His (summarized) answers to questions I posed reveal the subtlety of his connections between sonic and visual art and provide a deeper understanding of how his art maps onto the larger discipline of conceptual art.

Artweek *What was the inspiration for The Surface of the Moon at Suyama Space?*

Steve Roden I remember sitting on a Minneapolis street corner, thumbing through this great little book on amateur astronomy written around 1910, and stopping cold at a list of land-formations on the moon. In my head at the time were tramp art, old record-

ings of hillbilly music, Robert Indiana's early sculptures and Rimbaud's poem equating the vowels with colors. So, I really wanted to make something that dealt with a handmade, human approach to American craft, something big connected to the text, therefore connected to

work, and by my interest in Luke Howard (a meteorologist) and his connection to Goethe.

I searched for the most complete list of cloud terms I could find ... then, after I made a connection between the word “cloud” to the word “chamber,” I set about the house finding the same number of resonant chambers (glass bowls, ceramic bowls, etc.) to match the different letters in the cloud terms (for example, an equivalence between an “A” and an 8-inch bowl, or a “B” and a small teacup, etc.). I then began to build a soundwork using the sounds of these chambers that equaled the letters in the list of cloud names. So, embedded in the soundwork are the descriptions of different cloud types.

At that point I had my sound, but no visuals, so I decided to make drawings using the chamber-to-letter equivalence, creating abstract drawings of “every name of every cloud in every sky.” The film takes it even further by using letter stencils, descriptive “science” text, a fragment of a Goethe poem dedicated to Howard, and a drawing process similar to the ink drawings but using white pencil on blue. Everything is so abstracted at this point that one can only come to the work and simply respond to it.

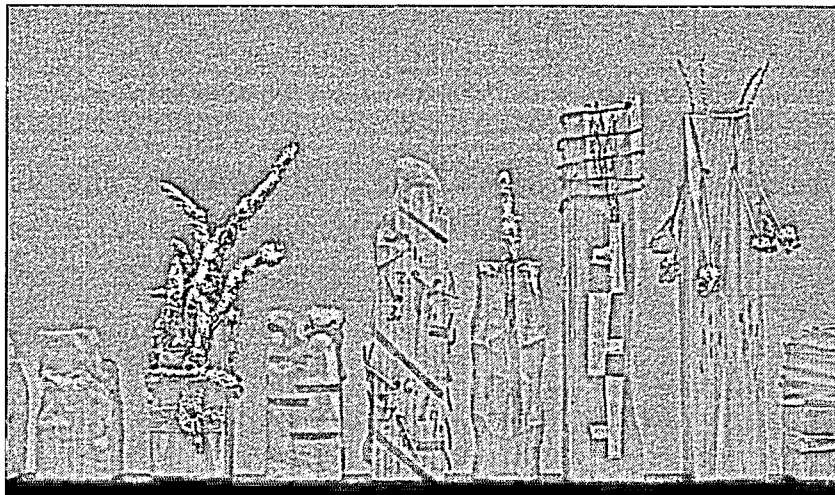
Decoding is out of the question, and hopefully not as interesting as a kind of pure experience.

AW *You are one of the leading artists working simultaneously in sound and visual media. How did this crossover movement start, and when did it first become important to you?*

SR It would be tough to say where this all began. Certainly an interest in sound/visual experiences goes back at least 100 years in terms of modernism: Schoenberg and Kandinsky both were interested in a kind of early synaesthetic experience. Light and sound and color experiments have a long rich history where alchemy and music meet. Early avant-garde filmmaking was one of the first ways experimental music and imagery were combined. It begins to cross over into the art world in the 1960s with a kind of post-fluxus work as well as early conceptual art and European sound art.

In 1996, I created my first real sound installation (10 years after I began to show my visual work) and, in this case, the work was inspired by the exhibition site itself. Soundworks have become very important to my practice for this reason. I don't make site-specific paintings or sculptures, but as sound engages so much with a space, I have done many installations with soundworks created for specific spaces, such as the MAK Center for Art and Architecture here in Los Angeles, which is the former studio/residence of R. M. Schindler and one of my favorite buildings in the world. In this case, the house itself becomes the visual, and the sound becomes a kind of frame or map or a different type of engagement with the space.

AW *You've said you aspire to “create a meaning beyond words so that the experience within the work becomes the*



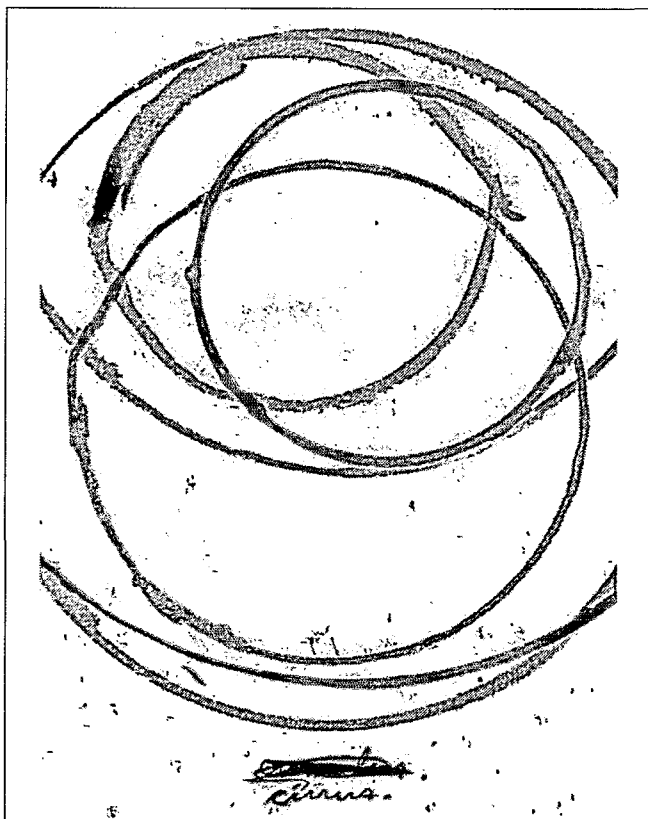
Above: Steve Roden, *The Surface of the Moon*, 2002, mixed media, 6" x 1" x 1". (Photo: Eduardo Calderon. Courtesy of Suyama Space, Seattle.); below: *Cirrus*, drawing from *Chamber Music*. (Photo courtesy of Jack Straw Productions, Seattle.)

the moon. But something that could also exist on its own as an abstract presence and that fused my two main interests in terms of mode of creation: pure intuition and pre-determined systems.

I equated the vowels in the words naming the land-formations with materials and height in inches, and worked on the 490 sculptures from those parameters. It became an exploration of so many things—the moon, discovery and naming, the use of arbitrary systems ...

AW *Both Surface of the Moon and Chamber Music are artistic translations of lists, or taxonomies. Is that common to your work?*

SR Everything I do is a kind of translation, an exploration of translation and abstraction through rules (taxonomies and alphabets) and my intuitive responses to them, taking cues from the logic or misunderstandings of taxonomies and alphabets. The Jack Straw show translates a list into objects, sound into forms, etc. I was particularly inspired by a 1940s book for cloud watchers from airplanes, by wanting to use cloud terms to generate a sound-



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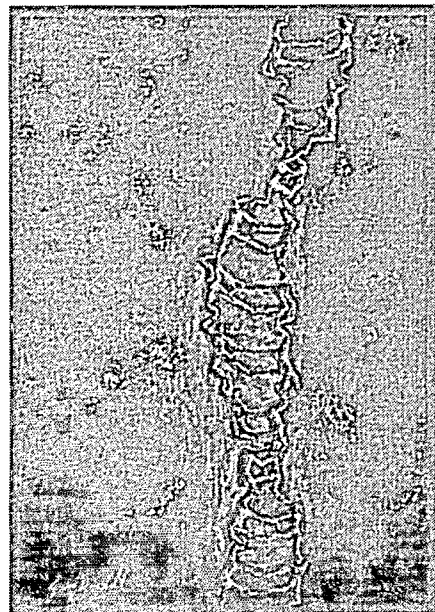
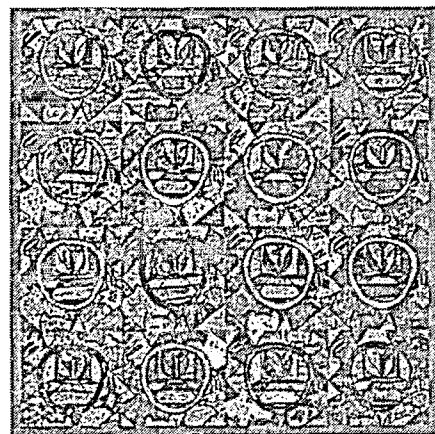
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and the National Park Service. There will be a reception for the artists on October 19 from 4-7 P.M.

There will also be local preview exhibitions opening in October and continuing through November at ARTshare 25 Gallery in San Mateo, the Elizabeth Norton Gallery in Palo Alto, and Cogswell College Gallery in Sunnyvale.

For maps and information, visit www.PeninsulaOpenStudios.org.

Peninsula Open Studios participants (from top): Suzanne Couch, *Jester*, clay, 28" x 19" x 9"; Therese May, *Tulip*, 2003, fabric, paint, 8' x 8'; Julie Newdoll, *Dawn of the Double Helix*, mixed media, 25" x 18".



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selves the simultaneously more humble and noble tasks of simply and faithfully presenting an artist's work, seemed to understand that art of such brilliance, if presented well and left alone, can reveal its own ideas, political and otherwise, just fine all by itself.

Guston's work proves that it is possible for politically oriented work, though borne of a specific context, to resonate beyond its immediate context, beyond what might be considered its sphere of usefulness. Moreover, while I'd be dishonest if I didn't admit that part of the appeal of Guston to me involves a sympathetic view of his politics, I believe nonetheless that his work proves that the real power of political art is less a matter of which politics are embodied than in what thing and by what manner they are embodied. Guston's works continue to defy both camps (which seem to represent too simply and greatly the options to which artists gravitate presently) that argue for art that insists on the basis of its value by displaying the right politics (which reduces art to visual aids) or by displaying its utter lack of politics (which is a fallacy anyway). Guston understood that art could do more, that it could stand on its merits without politics while standing for the politics not of a party or faction but of its unique, idiosyncratic, unpredictable and therefore uncontrollable maker. And uncontrollable makers are dangerous because they define their own positions rather than waiting to be put in their places.

I left the Guston retrospective thrilled (as I still am) and deflated. After all, it was great to know that I could find such work and that that I could find it without leaving the U.S., but I wish I didn't have find it in old paintings by a dead man, impressive as they are.

This is the sort of art maker we need more of, but as most of us (I'm as guilty as anyone else) prefer to see reflected in art either the right politics (ours) or none (leaving ours undisturbed), it comes as little surprise that makers like Guston are few and far between. If we want more of them, then the rest of us are going to have to give up on an idea of art as something predictable or malleable that can fit our uses, and accept it instead as something that can feed needs, arouse desires and inspire feelings we might not have even known (or wanted to know) we had. Then things could actually get interesting, could actually get dangerous, maybe even as dangerous as some old paintings by a dead man.

Guest columnist Christopher Miles is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.

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transcendent experience.

By contrast, artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson explores the relationship between science, technology and fantasy in her recently released film *Teknologi*, for which she collaborated with Karen Black and Tilda Swinton. Swinton plays four characters: the nerdy biochemist Rosetta Stone and three "techno clones"—also called "self-replicating automatons" or SRAs—that Rosetta breeds by downloading her own DNA. Ruby, one of the clones, makes trips into the world to collect x-chromosomes, which the SRAs consume for survival. To do this, Ruby has sex with men, whose sperm she gathers in condoms and takes home to brew, which she and her sisters can mainline and drink as tea. The plot progresses in a campy, engaging manner until a virus crosses over from the computer to the male suppliers, who develop strange viral symptoms including impotence and a barcode rash on their foreheads. To protect herself from emotional attachments, Ruby never has sex with the same man more than three times, but does express a desire to cuddle, indicating an emergent desire of the SRAs for liberation from their maker.

With a huge dose of humor, Hershman Leeson's cinematic scenario of technology-meets-science brings philosophical and emotional factors into disciplines that we tend to perceive as devoid of such feelings. Yet, if you examine this a bit closer, it seems quite natural that artists' interpretations of the developments in science and technology would be replete with such content, because all such research is, ultimately, in some way about human existence.

As the interest in the relationship between art and technology expanded during the early 1990s, Ken Rinaldo was among the artists who did a lot of work investigating the relationship between the body and computers. In a talk Rinaldo gave years ago, he described how he was struck by a statement made by a representative of Xerox Corporation, who spoke of how artists have always made stuff with the "mud by the river," and that technology was this new primordial medium. A decade later, artists are using these technologies to explore the vast terrain of science, which currently seems to be the uncontaminated "mud." This brings to mind one of Walt Whitman's most resonant reflections, that "after you have exhausted what there is in business, politics, conviviality, and so on—have found that none of these finally satisfy, or permanently wear—what remains? Nature remains."

Guest columnist Terri Cohn is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.

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meaning." Is there artistic tension between that goal and allowing the viewer to "decode" the work by knowing, e.g., that vowels correspond to height and materials (Suyama) or colors (Jack Straw)? Does decoding take the viewer outside the work, and away from the meaning you want to create? Or does decoding create more freedom to wander in the world you create?

SR This is a really interesting question because I struggle with it all the time. I view my work as simply trying to make beautiful abstract objects. I am not interested in pushing these things onto the viewer or listener. The work is a product of both predetermined systems and my intuitive practice. I have a quiet, personal, mystical, physical, etc., response to certain types of information and I am interested in creating works out of this experience—to create a new kind of information—art—for others to respond to. How I got there is not so important to me in terms of the "meaning" of the work, but I feel that I have to reveal sources and pathways. This gets tricky because these things can be taken in good ways and bad. A statement can be a crutch, or a small window to see the work through; or a simple explanation that falls away from the work once one comes in contact with it, demystifying the work so that one can simply move into it without a lot of irrelevant questions.

Decoding can create more freedom to wander, but it can also leave the viewer paralyzed ... there is no sure answer to this. I feel that revealing the secrets at this point keeps the work honest—it doesn't allow for the kind of mystery that makes me look like a wacky genius, nor make me dishonest or manipulative as an artist. In a strange way, it is the humblest way I can approach the presentation of the works; to simply lay bare my process, not to seem interesting, but as a road map from nothingness to artwork, hoping people will not misunderstand that the process is not about meaning, but making and that they can come to the work in a way that allows them to wander.

Steve Roden: *Surface of the Moon* closed in August at Suyama Space, Seattle; and Steve Roden: *Chamber Music* closed in August at Jack Straw Productions's New Media Gallery, Seattle.

Kristian Kofoed is a freelance writer based in Seattle.

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