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Stephen Vitiello and Marina Rosenfeld Sound Artist vs. Composer

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STEPHEN VITIELLO: We can start with that idea of being a sound artist. I did this interview with Alvin Lucier last week for a new CD-based audio magazine called *The Relay Project* which is going to be introducing sound pieces that Lucy Raven from *BOMB* and Rebecca Gates from The Spinanes are starting. I started out by asking him how he defines himself and if he uses the term Sound Artist. Even though he has rejected the term, Alvin is as important as they go in terms of really being conceptual and musical, doing so much work that has really moved me in the field that I consider Sound Art. Do you think of yourself as a sound artist?

Sound Artist vs. Composer

MARINA ROSENFELD: I don't. I find that the notion of being a sound artist is very useful in terms of expanding the potential field in which my work is operating, but ultimately I prefer the notion—just for myself, personally—that all of my work still engages with a fairly strict idea about music and music as a subcategory of sound. I don't see those two things as equivalent. Sound artist as a definition take you outside of that.

STEPHEN VITIELLO: You studied music, right?

MARINA ROSENFELD: Yeah, my background is really in music—music composition, music theory. I guess I'm somewhat influenced by that. And you?

STEPHEN VITIELLO: Well, I think of myself as a sound artist, but then when I write my bios I tend to cater it to whatever it needs to be. So when I've made CDs, they've tended to say electronic musician Stephen Vitiello, or composer, or something like that. But really my background is playing in punk rock bands in the late '70s, then other bands in the '80s, and then starting to collaborate with visual artists on soundtracks from the late '80s for about ten years, doing probably close to 100 soundtracks for short film, video, dance, and performance art. I came to my own personal identity through the project at the World Trade Center, where I started listening to buildings and architecture, finding that I had a lot more connection to defining or relating to a space than I had to certainly playing guitar and also relating to other people's images. As I did it, I started to read and see what else other people had done. I've read a good deal about Max Neuhaus, who had this kind of basic distinction for his work with new music as being about sound in time vs his work with installation/sound art as being defined by sound in space—I'm paraphrasing. For me that really connected to creating open-ended work....

MARINA ROSENFELD: Sound in time versus sound in space...

STEPHEN VITIELLO: Yeah, and that has really lasted as music versus installation—installation being sound art, again for my personal reference.

MARINA ROSENFELD: That distinction doesn't ring true for me automatically, but that's interesting. I think the connection you and I both have is an idea of enlarging the area that we're allowed to be talking about while still doing the kind of aesthetic work that we're interested in.



Stephen Vitiello
World Trade Center Recordings, 1999
Documentation of recording process
Photo by Stephen Vitiello

For me the distinction between concert music or performed music and installation is not so important as what I like to think of in terms of a personal trajectory, the discovery (as a musician and as a fledgling composer) of the visual artists, the conceptual artists of the '60s and '70s filtered through having looked at Cage, Fluxus, and that world—discoveries about Robert Smithson, Sherrie Levine, and especially Bruce Nauman. The interest for me was to bring that kind of discussion back into contact with the practice of composing music. Not so much discarding the history and looking at it as sound in space, but making the construction of musical ideas in time into a way of talking about some of those same issues that were extra-musical or just larger-musical. But obviously both approaches can yield results. I think we'll both agree, it's more of a way to find a prism or find a frame.

STEPHEN VITIELLO: In terms of the work I've done, I tend to hold onto that sound art concept. Sometimes I need a distinct term to represent—not just my own work—but having worked as a curator, an archivist, and a distributor, as a way to tightly describe something to people.

MARINA ROSENFELD: The utility of these definitions is interesting because it's quite clear that we are not in a field like painting, where the distribution and marketplace are set up to insure that the artist is taken care of. We're in this real no man's land. It's a wonderful freedom on one hand, and it's a real handicap from another point of view. We're both interested in the production of objects around these more ephemeral kinds of outputs in our work, so some of these definitions simply have a marketplace utility, which is important. Sound art has a sort of '70s ring to it to me. It sounds somewhat utopian. It also sounds medium based, which is traditional in the sense of the way art areas have been categorized or separated. To that extent I embrace it as simply one more mantle to add to my resume. One thing that affects me very much—by choice, but also sometimes in a negative way—is that I like to be engaged with that history that comes with the word "composer." I often butt up against it in a somewhat violent way it seems, in terms of the reactions that some of my work produces. It's definitely a mixed bag. I think there's more room in the sound art category to be undefined. You're really in trouble as soon as you take on that composer thing.

STEPHEN VITIELLO: Meaning how people respond to you when you say, "I'm a composer"?

MARINA ROSENFELD: Well, when you present a work that's unconventional in terms of the history of composing, and say "I'm the composer of this work and I see myself as the composer and I will now conduct it for you," you've accepted a whole set of conditions obviously. Foremost among them is the notion that you're the auteur. You are the author of this experience that other people are about to have. That's exactly an area that I'm really interested in messing things up in—careening the outcomes and production scenarios.

STEPHEN VITIELLO: I would connect this more to the history of conceptual art, or creating forms to work within. For me it's different and the same. It's funny, I haven't been in academic circles enough to run into the trouble that I might. The only place where I find a problem is when I apply for funding. Not to bring everything back to money...

MARINA ROSENFELD: What category do I apply in?

STEPHEN VITIELLO: Yeah, because most music panels have a bias towards composers, and I'm not really a visual artist although I'm represented by two galleries and I do make objects, but people still say really basic things like: what are the dimensions? I got one really big grant once for "advances in the visual arts" for the work I've been doing. I talked to Kristin Oppenheim, who is also as a gallery-based sound artist. I said, 'What do I do? I have sent in CDs to grants panels and they said we don't have a CD player, send slides.' She said, 'Well, take pictures of the speakers and write down your title and a short description.' Then I got a \$30,000 grant, which paid for my next exhibition. But it was a kind of crazy thing about fitting into rules. I have never managed to get a grant as a composer. All the lecturing I do and workshop teaching is always in visual arts departments, even if I'm talking about sound in relation to video artists or film, or media art in general.

MARINA ROSENFELD: That's interesting because I, by contrast, am actually on the graduate faculty at Bard in their music/sound department. I've taught during the year there in the electronic music category. I think that's because the people in charge there have a different attitude than you might find at a Princeton or Columbia.

