

# SOUND ART: BEYOND MUSIC, BETWEEN CATEGORIES

By Alan Licht  
Rizzoli, £25/\$49.95 (hardcover)

Ewan MacColl once said that whenever he was asked what he did for a living, if he answered 'folk singer', people would smile politely and walk away, but if he described himself as a folklorist, a small crowd would gather. The distinction comes to mind when Alan Licht states that the term 'sound artist' carries more legitimacy than 'experimental musician', due to the relative economic and 'glamour' differentials between the artworld and the lot of the underground musician.

Given the higher profile of sonic arts in the past decade – major exhibitions from the Whitney to the Hayward and Pompidou; Tate acquiring work by Christian Marclay, Bruce Nauman and Bill Fontana – the lack of interest from art publishers in commissioning a landmark history of sound art appears negligent, if not downright ignorant of an enormous, underdocumented area of culture. Experimental rock musician, writer and installation artist Alan Licht has bravely stepped into the breach with this, the first attempt to survey the broad terrain of audio art.

In the first section, 'What Is Sound Art?', Licht simply outlines the problematics of coming to some useful definition of the field. Sound art, implies Licht, is neither music (which tends to be consumed as part of the entertainment industry) nor 'art' (in the sense that it doesn't always result in a unique viewable – or saleable – object). Instead, sound art can be defined by the space it's shown in; or it can be a sculpture or installation with a sound-producing function; or it can be sound made by acknowledged visual artists that extends their own practice into an aural medium.

The problem is that Licht doesn't always adhere to his own useful three-line rubric. He's a key player in New York's experimental music

world, curating concerts at the legendary Tonic club for seven years, so the study is weighted towards the US and in particular postwar New York, from the Fluxus-related drones of La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela to the 'virtual gallery' Sonic Youth have been curating on their own LP sleeves. Frequent references to pop and rock musicians' flirtations with the artworld – from John Lennon's association with Yoko Ono to art students Black Dice's appearances at 'openings' – are cited as tenuous evidence of meaningful interplay between musicians and the artworld. When it flows the other way, there's little critical engagement with the work itself. If Rodney Graham's pedestrian, folksy acoustic guitar albums were all that he did, he'd be an inconsequential musical artist; his bloodless songwriting can only have currency as an 'extension' of his video and painted work. Licht leaves these issues of contextuality unexamined.

As Marclay says, "It is in sound's nature to be free and uncontrollable and to go through the cracks and to go places where it's not supposed to go." That's borne out by the sheer variety of invention covered in the book: Laurie Anderson's turntable violin, Jean Tinguely's auto-destructing machines; the public space interventions of Max Neuhaus and Maryanne Amacher; Annea Lockwood's pianos, left to whistle and decay in coastal spray; the Baschet Brothers' space-age steel Sputniks; Ryoji Ikeda's spectral digital datastreams. But there's another book to be written about the significance, the historical context, motivations for and wonder of much of this material. Licht gives us plenty of 'what', but we could have done with far more of the 'why'.

*Rob Young*



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Foreword



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