

Sound Art, Art, Music

by Douglas Kahn

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I am not particularly fond of the term *sound art*. I prefer the more generic *sound in the arts*. My last book was subtitled *a history of sound in the arts*; there was no mention of *sound art* and not only because it was outside the historical scope of the book. *Sound in the arts* is a huge topic, especially when one keeps in mind the synthetic nature of the arts, i.e., the various intersecting social, cultural, and environmental realities wittingly and unwittingly embodied in any one of the innumerable factors that go into producing, experiencing, and understanding a particular work. *Sound art* is a smaller topic, if what is meant is that moment that artists, in the general sense of the word, began calling what they were doing *sound art*. In my experience, artists started to use *sound art* in this way during the 1980s, although there were plenty of artists doing similar things with sound earlier and not necessarily calling what they did *sound art*. The topic becomes smaller still if what is meant is the term that refers to what began a few years ago, and it is this meaning that has become well known.

I realize that railing against the widespread use of a term is obviously not a wise use of time. That has not prevented many others wasting time on names. None of the minimalist composers seem to like the term *minimalist* but they were more than willing to live in the shadow of that flag, if not salute. The Situationists despised the term Situationism but then again they spent an inordinate amount of time policing language, and let us not forget the irreparable rift between the Judean People's Front and the People's Front of Judea. Yet, drawing short of name fatigue, there are good reasons to question the usefulness of the term *sound art*. Most artists using sound use many other materials, phenomena, conceptual and sensory modes as well, even when there is only sound. In this respect alone, *sound* tends to narrow down the sphere of understanding rather than suggest that there is in fact a more comprehensive approach being enacted. Instead, art not using sound should be called deaf art, silent art, mute art or, worst of all, mime art (the art of mimes harassing the public). Many artists who have been using sound for a long time would rather be called artists than sound artists. A similar thing happened with female artists in the 1970s when, after collectively gaining recognition, were not fond of the segregation that went with the term *women artists*. Liz Phillips, who was creating artistic "sound structures" circa 1970, may perhaps feel doubly adamant.

Still, most artists, curators and writers seem to think the term *sound art* is okay. Perhaps cutting down complicating factors is not a serious problem, and there is a little transgressive romance to be had by sounding off in the lair of vision. More likely is that people are swept up in circumstance, using the term as a matter of convenience no matter how annoying and imperfect. It is clear also that a few folks see it an opportunity to exploit a momentary and monetary cache in whatever system of exchange they may trade. More positively, there are a number of artists who have developed substantial personal understandings of *sound art* that may or may not overlap with prevailing understandings.

My own suspicion comes from the fact that the term was reinvigorated only when certain metropolitan art centers--their markets, institutions and discourses, and only then a certain subset of those--"discovered"

this thing called *sound art* . One New York sound artist said that sound art started around the year 2000, while in London, it is supposed to have jumped off with the Hayward Gallery exhibition *Sonic Boom* . Such representations seem odd to many artists from Continental Europe, the Nordic nations, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Mexico, and even to Americans outside the art-market purview of a discrete commercial sector of New York City. Indeed, these representations are odd everywhere there had been *sound art* exhibitions and events prior to 2000. At the time of *Sonic Boom* I was living in Australia, which was already onto its third generation of artists dealing with sound and, internationally, off the top of my head I can think of about a dozen high profile group sound exhibitions going back to *Sound* at Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art in 1979 and *Für Augen und Ohren* at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin in 1980. Just follow the names of people like Rene and Ursula Block in Germany, Heidi Grundmann in Austria, Andrew McLennan and Roz Cheney in Australia, Dan Lander in Canada, to find just a few longstanding hubs of activity. For nearly two decades of *self-described sound art* and over two decades of *sound art-in-effect* , there was in fact a noticeable lack of activity in the more official sectors of New York and London.

During the 1980s, at least in Australia, the United States, and Canada, people working in sound used a variety of terms referring to *art* : radio art, audio art and sound art. All these terms have their own geneses, and certainly many of the people involved had been active from at least since the 1970s in the U.S. alone (the work of Bill and Mary Buchen, Paul DeMarinis, Bill Fontana, Liz Phillips, Nic Collins' *Pea Soup* ; David Behrman, Robert Watts and Bob Diamond's *Cloud Music* ; and Patrick Clancy and Palsa a bit earlier, come to mind), with another generation of Fluxus, intermedia artists and experimental musicians setting the sound stage more than a decade before that. In fact, as Paul DeMarinis reminded me in conversation, experimental music up until the early 1970s accommodated what would now be called sound art, but by the mid- to late-70s not only had art spaces become increasingly amenable to sound works, but musical venues and culture had grown more conservative (the rise of Phillip Glass being emblematic) and less interested toward experimentalism.

From my own experience, during the 1980s the term *art* was valued for its ability through its different forms--art, the arts, artists, artistic--to be generalized beyond the fine arts, visual arts and the so-called artworld. It was on that generalized terrain where a postmodern mobility could be found heroically riding roughshod over categorical imperialisms while hand-delivering promise of greater artistic possibility. Those working in sound at that time were (as they are now) from many different backgrounds--music, theatre, "visual art", literature, cinema, media arts, media activism, sciences, engineering, etc.--and working among equally diverse forms and venues. The generalized notion of "art" seemed to be the most innocuous way to talk about this activity, since it provided plenty rhetorical room to move. Some artists made sound their sustained focus; others used it temporarily and then got back to what they were doing previously or moved on; others were somewhere between. The accommodative character of art was the most salient feature, whereas sound, audio, or radio were necessary but secondary and, at times, interchangeable terms.

The recourse to *art* was because it was more capacious, discursively and institutionally, than *music* . Music, of all the arts, fancied itself as having an artistic monopoly on sound, but during the 1980s it was only able to muster up the ideas of two old warriors-- *musique concrète* and John Cage--to lay aesthetic claim to the new activity. It might be difficult

to appreciate today, amid the present-day cacophony of micro-genres and the immediate access and discourse of the internet, that only two decades ago people who used recorded sound, environmental sounds, identifiable sounds, noise or in some way approached sound as material were commonly met by "oh, that's a *concrète* piece" or "it's like Cage..." This occurred in official institutional responses as well as personal conversation. In contrast to such mind-numbing misunderstanding, art, no matter how awkward and reductive, seemed hospitable as well as adept at reworking its concepts to fit contemporary activities.

The ideas of *musique concrète* and Cage were late-modernist products of the late-1940s and early-50s, which means they were already 30 years and older by the time the 1980s rolled around. Also vying for attention at the time among people more familiar with a range of activities were sound poetry, *Das neue Hörspiel*, and text-sound, but their aesthetic programs were either too proscribed (sound poetry) or too vague to explain much. All of them could and did function as inspiration and as touchstones, but they could also get in the way of rehearsing a little postmodern sensibility, responding to theoretical provocations, and engaging in the sport of "problematizing" boundaries.

The aesthetic inertia exerted by *musique concrète* and Cage arose from their own context: although they were marginal to the stodgy project of Western art music, they were still attached to it. The accompanying discourses were also not very useful. Musicology, the least intrepid of academic disciplines, had little to say about sound in general, although it had quite a bit to say about how very finite sets of sounds were organized. Musicologists who ventured out to the margins found themselves trying to protect their topics from the gravitational pull of musicology as a whole. In contrast, there was revitalization, excitement, and theoretical embrace about sound in the grassroots art world, if not among its official organs and venues. Also, the 1980s were a field-day for theory, especially French, in the arts in general, and sound had the added attraction of being the blind spot within a theoretical practice on the lookout for blindspots. The near total lack of history was also refreshing, not in the normal amnesic American way, but because the absence of sound meant that much more than just the progenitors of sound in the arts could be investigated.

In Canada there was the added element of *soundscape* with the publication in 1977 of R. Murray Schafer's book *Tuning of the World*. While the book's main arguments were historical and public-policy oriented, its underlying artistic assumptions and provocations did not go beyond music and Cagean ideas, except perhaps that they could be found traipsing around outdoors draped in very expensive tape recorders, cables snagged in the underbrush. To this was added a complementary Francophone emphasis on electro-acoustic music imported from *musique concrète*. It was in this Canadian context that Dan Lander, Toronto audio artist and one of the editors of *Sound by Artists*, came up with the idea of "musicalization of sound." Perhaps this idea was prompted by his familiarity with the arts of sound from around the world, informed by books coming through Art Metropole and cassettes exchanged through the international networks of cassette culture. In any case, his idea was widely applicable on both practical and theoretical levels. I took Lander's idea and began to historically research and substantiate it, first in the late-1980s and later in my book *Noise, Water, Meat*.

Although the *musicalization of sound* is not an overly complicated idea, it has met with some confusion. A bit of historical detachment helps. Cage and *musique concrète* both involve an admonition against various significances of sound. It was a hangover from 19th Century arguments against the mimetic properties of program music and was rehearsed through avant-garde music in the first half of the century through the post-war years. *Musique concrète* attempted to eradicate troublesome indexical qualities through direct manipulation of the sound on tape (speeding up, slowing down, reversing, cutting up, etc.), while Cage extended these operations from production to reception in order to hold a last line of defense at the psychological threshold between listening and thought. Throughout this history, prohibition was most often set against imitative sounds, but it was part of a larger social and ecological deracination of sound. It became particularly difficult to adhere to within a media-saturated society that had loaded up sounds with multiple and ever-changing meanings, and had informed the experience of listening far beyond the sites of media. Perhaps it was a generational difference. Cage's 25-year retrospective concert took place in 1958, when top-40 radio was new and television had already begun babysitting some of the artists who were active in the 1980s.

Late-modernist music warded off imitative sounds because it was thought that they channeled attention too restrictively. If you look at the examples of sounds they give, it becomes obvious that they had a trivial notion about how sounds mean and how meaning itself works. In reality, sounds are never far enough above or below society to escape poetics, bodies, materials, technologies, discursive and institutional contexts or the beck-and-call of phenomenology's "auditory imagination". All that needs to happen is to admit that consciousness plays a part of auditory perception. Even if one wished to maintain a strict division between a type of musical listening that imagines to hear only sonic and phonic content and other types of listening that hear a range of other contents riding the vibrations of sound, then all that needs to happen is to admit the possibility of different modes of listening existing simultaneously or oscillating quickly. Rahsaan Roland Kirk, introducing a piece of music where he plays two melodies simultaneously, says, "It's splittin' the mind in two parts. It's making one part of your mind say 'oo-bla-dee,' and making the other part of your mind say, 'what does he mean?'"

There are some artists who used the idea of musicalization to say what they were doing was not music. The recently trafficked idea that sound art is really about space whereas music is about time is truly a caricature of earlier positions. For most of the people working in the 1980s it was not important to say one way or the other, because such a distinction presumed the type of demarcation that the concept of musicalization was trying to criticize in the first place. That is, not much would be accomplished by keeping old fences if what was desired initially was a terrain upon which artists could move freely. Besides, a division between sound art and music would be like Rhode Island seceding from the U.S. motivated by the fact that it is not really an island. Because of the power imbalance, no one would really care, let alone care about an arcane argument. *Musicalization* was a means to identify a particular technical and discursive approach to the artistic use of sound, not a declaration of independence. Of course, "sound artists" separate themselves from music at their peril. The seemingly infinite use of a finite use of sounds is a model to be emulated now that a seemingly infinite set of sounds is available. Craft, discipline, and virtuosity, even a healthy pretense for profound and improvisatory insight would go a long way at improving all the arts of sound.

More positively, one of the offshoots of the *musicalization of sound* is an encouragement to hear complexly and comprehensively. This would be applicable to what people consider music as well. For example, John Oswald's *plunderphonic* pieces are composed with social, cultural and poetic realities and possibilities purposefully ingrained in his notion of the sound. This was already typified in some of his earliest work that was inspired by William Burroughs' ideas about cut-ups and even used Burroughs' own voice in some pieces. Besides Cage, Burroughs is the other great post-war sound theorist with respect to the arts, especially with regard to technology. Burroughs' literary preoccupations, in contrast to Cage, invited all manner of meaning into every relation of sound, listening and technology and mitigated against the various reductions of musicalization. You can see this operating in Oswald's plunderphonics, with its complex weaving of conceptual and affective references to musical cultures, intellectual property issues, technological repetition, etc. Thus, plunderphonics may sound like music but it has not retreated to proscriptions against hearing the world anew in all its myriad attributes, i.e., the presence of music cannot be equated with musicalization.

A similar model could be applied to the use of electronic sounds, where cultures of electricity, bioelectrics, electromagnetism, transmission, radiophony, circuits, systems, nerves and networks would lead to a more comprehensive and complex engagement of electronic musics or other electronic sounds in the arts. We await an electrical Burroughs. Similar models could be extended to the base technical, social and ecological attributes of all sound making in the arts and beyond. Most obviously, there is an overdue need among practitioners, audiences, commentators, and researchers alike for reworking basic sound-image relationships in film, video, live electronic video, and other media from a sound perspective, and for reworking ideas of "nature" and sound, following from the work of David Dunn. All such work is a matter of openness and possibility that activities within sound in the arts have long embodied, promoted and will continue to provoke.