

# Return to form: Christoph Cox on neo-modernist sound art - Sound - Column

ArtForum, Nov, 2003 by Christoph Cox

"WHATEVER HAPPENED to postmodernism?" asked the critic Hal Foster in 1993, reflecting on the apparent exhaustion of the postmodernist project in art and theory. Rather than declare the end of postmodernism, however, Foster went on to sketch a complex historical picture in which modernism and postmodernism are engaged in a kind of temporal dance, where one or the other comes to the fore at different moments.

Foster's suggestive analysis helps account for the steady reemergence of modernist commitments and strategies over the past decade and particularly in the past several years. In critical theory, for instance, Alain Badiou and Alenka Zupancic are offering potent challenges to postmodern thought, reviving distinctly avant-gardist conceptions of aesthetic innovation and revolutionary commitment. In a recent manifesto, new-media critic Lev Manovich celebrates the "new modernism of data visualizations, vector nets, pixel-thin grids and arrows" in software art. And, this past summer, curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev mounted an international group exhibition in Turin polemically titled "The Moderns," featuring work by a generation of visual artists, most born in the 1960s, who reanimate modernist practices for a digital age.

This revival of modernist strategies of abstraction, Reduction, self-referentiality, and attention to the perceptual act itself--what could be called, with out irony, "neo-modernism"--is nowhere more evident than in sound art. Appropriately, "The Moderns" included a sound-art component, curated by Anthony Huberman, that featured many of the field's leading practitioners, among them Carsten Nicolai, Richard Chartier, Carl Michael von Hausswolff, Bernhard Gunter, and Kim Cascone.

Postmodernist music and sound art exhibited many of the signature features of postmodernism in the other arts: quotation, pastiche, and the hyper-speed collapse of time, space, high art, and pop culture. Exemplary figures such as Christian Marclay, John Oswald, and John Zorn reveled in jump-cut fragments ripped from the entire archive of recorded sound. Neo-modernist sound art could not be more different. Where postmodernism is about mixture and overload, neo-modernism is about purity and reduction. Where postmodernism is about content and the concrete (the vertiginous string of recognizable samples), neo-modernism is about form and abstraction. Nicolai creates spare loops out of crystalline ticks and beeps, while Ryoji Ikeda, another leading figure, sets up patterns of interference with simple sine tones. Chartier explores the limits of auditory perception with nearly silent surfaces crossed by quiet digital rumbles, scribbles, and pin-sharp signals. Like their postmodernist forebears, the new generation--Gunter, Francisco Lopez, Steve Roden, and William Basinski--begin with found sound; yet these

neo-modernists take care to abstract their raw material beyond recognition, stretching and layering it into dense drones and loops.

Neo-modernist sound art summons the ghosts of a few key modernist composers. Last year Ikeda and Lopez paid tribute to Iannis Xenakis with *Persepolis + Remixes*, and Chartier, Roden, and GÖnter to Morton Feldman with *(For Morton Feldman)*. Yet by and large, neo-modernism is akin less to modernist music than to modernist visual art. Feldman himself tried to emulate in sound the abstract canvases of his friends Mark Rothko, Philip Guston, and Franz Kline. The neo-modernists are implicitly allied with a later group of visual abstractionists and their works: the austere paintings of Brice Marden and Agnes Martin, the sculptural repetitions of Donald Judd and Carl Andre, and the luminous installations of Dan Flavin and James Turrell. Kindred in sensibility to these predecessors, the neo-modernist sound and scientific, into the basic forms of aesthetic matter and the fundamental conditions of perception.

Sound installations such as Nicolai's *Telefunken*, 2000, and Roden's *moonfield*, 2002, reference this visual tradition. But, for the most part, the neo-modernists adhere to Clement Greenberg's famous characterization of modernism as foregrounding "that which [is] unique and irreducible in each particular art." Hence, they offer up the experience of sound-in-itself: Before performances of his self-termed "transcendental" sound compositions, Lopez distributes blindfolds; Ikeda's *Matrix*, 2000, requires "a totally darkened anechoic room"; and Chartier notes that his music and installations "try to remove visual cues" in order to "approach as closely as possible a state of non-referentiality." So, while the benches and speakers that populate Chartier and Taylor Deupree's recent installation *specification.twelve*, 2003, may recall the sculptural work of Judd or Robert Morris, their primary function is to reveal the fact that sound is directional and immersive.

To the postmodernist, the new sound art might seem to retreat from social and political concerns. But neo-modernism has a politics of its own--a distinctly avant-gardist one that recalls both Greenberg and Theodor Adorno and implicitly criticizes postmodernism for its symbiotic relationship with the culture industry. In eschewing mass-media content, the genre proposes a more radical exploration of the formal conditions of the medium itself. Against the anesthetic assault of daily life, it reclaims a basic function of art: the affirmation and extension of pure sensation.