Essays in Sound 2
- technophonia -

This second issue of Essays in Sound, '*Technophonia*', coincides with an historical moment of intense interest in sound art and theory in Australia.

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney has recently concluded a major exhibition of Australian sound art (*Sound in Space*, 26 May - 22 August 1995). Another national sound art event, 'Earwitness', the sound component of Experimenta '94, was held in Melbourne in November 1994. As this journal is launched, a number of Australian sound writers and artists are preparing presentations on sound related topics for the International Symposium on Electronic Art in Montreal, maintaining the strong antipodean presence at recent ISEAs. The System X collective, a Sydney and Perth based group of sound artists and writers, has recently established the first site dedicated exclusively to sound art and criticism -- Soundsite -- on world wide web. (Essays in Sound will also be available on Soundsite http://sysx.apana.org.au/soundsite/)

This journal is situated in this field. Its themes -- and its title -- reflect more generally the concerns which preoccupy criticism, theory and sound art practices in the final decade of the millenium: critical confrontations with information and communications technologies (digital audio, voice mail, analogue recording); conceptions of acoustic ecology; interrogations of the spatio-temporal aspects of sound; notions of sonic inscription from the philosophical to the subcellular; theorisations of the voice; 'sculptural' and performative sound art practices; and the notion of sound art itself.

A major feature of this issue is its focus on artists' work. Ruark Lewis and Paul Carter present images from their sound installation, RAFT, exhibited at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in early 1995, reproduced here with a text by writer Alexandra Pitsis. Densil Cabrera presents a lucid exposition of the acoustic inferences in the linear constructions of Russian sculptor Naum Gabo. Colin Hood evocatively appraises the work of Yuji Sone, a Japanese performance artist resident in Australia, whose practice enagages questions of linguistic difference, orientalism and alterity. A series of artist's pages documents work by sound and performance artists represented in 'Earwitness', Sound in Space and other recent sound art exhibitions.

Shaun Davies develops an agonistic assessment of Sound in Space as it is represented in its accompanying catalogue essay by Rebecca Coyle. Davies underscores the labile conceptions of sound and sound art which frame the event, and which are more broadly emblematic of discourse on sound: sound art as an artform which defies categorisation versus sound art as the product of 'distinct and particular practices and histories'; sound as a 'natural', 'ever-present' phenonenom versus technologically reproduced sound as a cultural construct; the aesthetic status of sound as a 'thing in its own right' versus conceptions of the sound object as

preeminently synaesthetic. Davies' essay, in traversing these polarities, illuminates and problematises the already polemical and fluid discursive field in which the exhibition was situated, and which Essays in Sound takes, in part, as its focus.

The reproblematisation of nature and 'natural' sound as 'alterity' is taken up by Virginia Madsen who pursues the theme of sound ecology as theorised by, amongst others, R. Murray Schafer in his World Soundscape Project. Madsen eloquently polemicises the overdetermined rhetoric played out in the discourse and practice of acoustic ecology -- a genre which opposes a pristine nature to a vitiated culture. Eschewing naive dualism -- the desire to preserve and idealise nature against the encroachmnents of the cultural and the technological -- Madsen advocates (after Guattari) an 'eco-sophical' practice of listening which negotiates the always shifting and littoral space where environment, socio-political concerns, and the subject interact. In such a space and time ('the durée of listening'), suggests Madsen, we might produce an 'intensive listening' alert to the chimerical condition of a fin de siècle moment which increasingly couples -- as it indetermines the boundaries between -- the technological, the 'virtual' and the natural.

Questions of technology and temporality are related to the relatively new field of digital audio production in John Potts' essay. Potts revisits Henri Bergson's critique of the tendency of the 'mechanistic' intellect to spatialise and to visualise time -- to divide temporality into isolable instants -- and thus to render redundant duration as apprehended by 'creative intuition'. Potts evinces that precisely this process -- discrete time sampling conceived as the 'essence of digital audio' -- opens up fecund possibilities for the creative manipulation of sonic material as a preeminently temporal phenomenon.

Norie Neumark presents a more skeptical and perhaps dystopian appraisal of a new communications technology -- the CD ROM. Neumark's analysis of the CD version of Art Spiegelman's Maus novel traces the experiential contours of this new form in the light of the coextant print media version, throwing into question the effects of the re-purposing. Interestingly, Neumark notes that the low grade quality of the CD ROM's voice track -- the noisy grain of technology -- hyperbolises the voice's affective qualities, at the same time undermining the CD's claim to pure, unadulterated informational and authorial integrity. On the other hand Neumark shows that while Spiegelman's novelistic Maus deploys, as a central trope, the mask -- in its genealogical richness as a device for a play of unstable personae -- the CD ROM version, with its plenary archive, its voice-over, and its talking heads, claims for itself the ground of univocal identity and singular truth, traditionally the realm of documentary. Neumark ultimately throws into question claims that the ostensibly innovative interactive, non-linear CD ROM form necessarily promotes access to multiple and contested textual readings.

Frances Dyson returns us to a critique of the philosophical appropriation

of an earlier technology. In a reading of Jacques Derrida's Cinders and Ulysses Gramophone, Dyson critically evaluates Derrida's recuperative analysis of voice which posits the phonographic voice -- always-already-written speech -- as a deferral of the ontological presence grounded in the silent voice of soliloquy. In these texts, Derrida's answer to the interior and silent voice of metaphysics is an appeal to a technology which will amplify and prosthetise the soliloquy -- the tape recorder. In Dyson's estimation, Derrida's recourse to the phonographed voice is not unproblematic. The acorporeal voice of technology comes to substitute for the interlocutor's presence; at the same time, it supplements the solipsistic, silent voice of consciousness. The price paid for this simultaneous 'evacuation and restoration' of inner voice, Dyson shows, is precisely that of embodied sonority: in this schema, the voice as a function of corporeality is, in an archetypical philosophical gesture, effaced. In a complex and rigorous reading Dyson demonstrates that Derrida's reliance on an old inscriptional metaphor is far from revolutionary, and ultimately conventionally intrametaphysical.

Douglas Kahn also turns to inscriptional motifs in a highly idiosyncratic reading of William S. Burroughs' dictum 'language is a virus', refracted through L. Ron Hubbard's Dianetic 'engram' and the General Semantics of Count Alfred Korzybski. Kahn adroitly elucidates the early genealogy of the tropes of binary code or trace -- in the human organism as genetic information, in computers and in viruses -- which preoccupy many contemporary artists and theorists. Here, metaphysics' notion of inner voice is refigured as Burroughs' 'resisting organism' -- the viral word.

The word, as it is inscribed by the technologies of sound storage, transmission and reproduction which predate voice mail, is the subject of Thomas Levin's scholarly ur-historiography of the analogue to digitial paradigm shift. Levin's archaeology of the acoustic trace illuminates such fantastical instruments as Giovanni Battista Porta's 'speaking tube' of 1589 and the apocryphal indigenous Australian 'sound sponge' (subject of an anonymous seventeenth century report in the Bibliotheque Nationale); Levin ultimately demonstrates the persistence of the inscriptive trope.

Allen S. Weiss' rich meditation -- which also broaches the inscriptional -- ranges through fragmentary reflections on, amongst many others things, Charles Cros' desire to fix time and sound in the 'paleograph', a sound recording device conceived in the same year as the phonograph (1877); Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's 'glory machine' which would mechanise the claque (the hired clappers), transforming auditoria into enormous sounding machines which literally 'bring the house down'; Mallarmé on Wagner and poetry; Valéry's nostalgia for revivification of the voice which haunts the dead letter of the inscribed poetic text; and the relation between the orgiastic sounds emanating from Sadean chateaux and the necropolitan space of circulating radiophonic voices. Weiss' reading traces Dionysian and Apollonian, erotic and thanatic motifs in these instances of sounding, technology and inscription. The essay culminates in a memorium for friends lost to thanatos in the cataclysm of AIDS. Weiss sets his moving,

final fragment against the acoustic backdrop of the confluent sounds of live, feverish Dionysian sex and the disembodied voices of the monster/horror film soundtrack in the conventionally Apollonian space of the cinema -- a space reconfigured in the second-run movie houses or 'scatological "maisons ouvertes"' of 1960s Paris as a site for anonymous erotic activity.

Niall Lucy's The Sound of a Dream concludes 'Technophonia' with a melancholy reverie on the oneiric qualities of sound. Sound, for Lucy, can be understood as both corporeal and dream-like: it is thus, he suggests, susceptible to 'accidental effects' (as are the dreamer or the conscious subject), and indeed bears an intimate relation to the ultimate accident -- death. The recording studio becomes, Lucy suggests, a topos in which the body's death, the liminal site of passage to a 'dimension beyond the conscious self', is both experienced and externalised in the voice's (recorded) trace, a reliquary of 'living presence'. We might suggest that the studio also becomes, perhaps, one of the many prosthetic, technological, inscriptional and acoustic spaces of 'technophonia' explored herein.

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