Stephen Vitiello’s recordings from the top of the World Trade Center secure the artist’s place in an as yet unwritten history, says Seth Kim-Cohen

In 1999, artist Stephen Vitiello was given a residency in an unoccupied office on the 91st floor of Tower One at the World Trade Center. With contact microphones fastened to the windows, he converted one of the world’s tallest buildings into the world’s largest microphone, the vertiginous glass curtain acting as a distended microphonic diaphragm. The resulting recordings depict a sound world beyond the reach of most human beings: even beyond the reach of most of humanity’s edifices. We hear winds and street traffic, the bellow of a ship in New York Harbor, and can even pick out an occasional voice from the streets a thousand feet below. Unsettlingly, there are several planes in the air, and the building itself creaks like an old wooden ship, straining against the torque of its frame in the howling gales of Hurricane Floyd. Vitiello also employed photo-sensitive cells at the eye-end of a telescope to translate discrete light sources in the late-night New York skyline into eerie aural ghosts of the visual world.

Tracing the sound of space is Vitiello’s most recent venture, but throughout the 1990s he was the sound guy on call for New York video artists. His sound works accompanied video works by among others, Tony Oursler, Jen Cohen and Nan June Paik. A collaboration with Brazilian artist Feral Santos brought him to the attention of the organizers of the 1998 Per>SON festival. Vitiello was then invited to create a 64-channel audio work in a church in Cologne. Programmed alongside filmmakers Oliveros and Scannor, Vitiello kept trim video accompaniment to the first rank of artists using sound in its own right. At the same time, ‘sound art’ kept from dank basement sub-categorization to shiny immateriality.

Vitiello is Assistant Professor of Kinetic Imaging at Virginia Commonwealth University — which is odd, given that he doesn’t make images, and what he does make would not be considered kinetic in the conventional sense. This, of course, points to a
The motion of the speakers is sound realized visually, a sly reversal of the...
them better known as visual artists – made a strong showing (or sounding) too. Fluxus was well-represented by Alison Knowles, Philip Corner, George Brecht and Dick Higgins. Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci, who have each worked in sound, often as accompaniment to their own videos and installations, were also included.

In addition to answering the question 'who? Vitiello has suggested answers to the question 'what?' Last April, in an online symposium on sound art on the Artforum website, he wrote: 'Music can be defined by sound in time, while sound art may be defined by sound in space,' an idea he confessed to borrowing from Max Neuhaus, father of the sound installation. The philosopher and critic Christoph Cox took issue with this definition, pointing out that 'sound is irreducibly temporal' and that such distinctions tended to 'occlude the profound temporal experience of sound installations.' Still, Vitiello says he stands by the notion. He is quick to point out that it may not work for everyone or for every sound piece, but for him it creates a useful conceptual distinction. He is interested in dialogue between himself and a place, or between the listener, and a place, a dialogue carried out in the language of sound.

For Vitiello, the sounds he captures, creates, and uses have their own narrative and vocabulary. Much of this derives from the referentiality of sounds, from sonic depictions of their sources: barking = dog, siren = ambulance, thunder = lightning, and so on. The World Trade Center recordings, GCT Loops recorded in New York's Grand Central Terminal, and Intrasonica, a web-based piece created for Dia, retain the connection of sounds to their sources, harvesting those connections for their semiotic value. Other pieces, however, erase all material referentiality. Mirror Light, with legendary drone violinist Tony Conrad, and The Light of Falling Cars CD nudges Vitiello's practice closer to something one could comfortably call music.

Much of his recent work engages directly with the notion of sound in space, often echoing the interior architecture of the buildings in which they are installed. Speakers are suspended from the ceiling, tracing the contours of the space and radiating sub-sonic tones that make the speaker cones vibrate in patterns Vitiello describes as 'nearly choreographed'. The motion of the speakers is sound realised visually, a visual reversal of sound art's tendency to represent the visual aurally. The lines traced by the arrangement of speakers make direct reference to the spaces of the built environment in which most of us spend the better part of our lives, drawing attention to the boundaries that delimit and contain our senses. And at the same time, the organism-like pulsations of the speakers initiate a spatial intervention which can be seen and perhaps felt but, due to a 'blind spot' in the range of our hearing, not heard. Appropriately, for a professor of kinetic imaging, the result is the very image of a kinetic sculpture, albeit one subtly driven by sound.

Stephen Vitiello's work is on display at the Sound Art Museum, Rome (www.soundartmuseum.net, www.stephenvitiello.com)

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