

Temporal Sculpture and Spatial Sound – some thoughts on sound art and music

Defining sound art is a tricky Business. Is it music or is it art?

Exhibitions of sound art have tended to focus on a range of interactions between sound and fine art, displaying everything from graphic scores to musical kinetic sculptures and surround-sound installations. Individual artists working with sound have produced a similarly broad range. Many of Christian Marclay's pieces, for example, do not even produce sound, yet they are pregnant with the idea of sound (e.g. a telephone in a bird cage or a series of photographs of open mouths). The same artist, however gives performances with turntables and cut-up vinyl LPs, often collaborating with established musicians such as Steve Beresford or Arto Lindsay. Sound art lives in the border territory between art and music.

Increasingly, artists from both musical and fine art backgrounds have been drawn to this place by the possibilities opened up by technology and by the increasing awareness of aural culture.

Yet there is a sense that, until quite recently, neither the art-world nor the musical establishment have quite known what to make of this hybrid field. In 2000 the Sonic Boom exhibition at the Hayward gallery signalled the acceptance of sound-art by the art-world. How would the musical establishment react? Would it breath a sigh of relief: sound art is somebody else's problem, we can get on with our lives?

Fortunately there are signs to the contrary.

The Huddersfield contemporary music festival has consistently supported a wide range of sound art projects and this year will be no exception, with the appearance of Janek Schaefer whose work ranges from site-specific installations to performances using a three-armed turntable. Perhaps more surprisingly, the PRS foundation recently revealed a three work shortlist for their New Music Award, entirely consisting of works that involve characteristics normally associated with sound art. All three involve site-specific installations and a strong bias toward environmental sound. The winning work, Jem Finer's 'Score for a Hole in the Ground' consists of a deep shaft in the countryside in which various sounding bowls are placed at various heights. These create a musical composition in response to environmental conditions as the bowls fill with rainwater and overflow into one another. The piece is heard through a large acoustic horn at the head of the shaft.

Introducing the shortlist the PRS magazine asked: "But is it Music?". By supporting this work the PRS has answered with a resounding YES. This is as it should be as, I will argue, sound art belongs equally to art and music and needs to be nurtured by both cultures to thrive. The roots of sound art demonstrate this. They include the liberation of noise as a musical material in the work of the futurists, Varèse and John Cage, and the technological advances in recording which allowed composers of musique concrète to work with sound directly, moulding it into a fixed form. Much sound art also concerns the attempt to extend the spatial forms of sculpture and painting into the

temporal dimension, and to extend the temporal art of music into space.

Artists such as Takis and Tinguely explore time in sculpture using mechanical movement. It is a natural extension to make the sculptures sound. Sound articulates time in the way that objects articulate space and the complex workings of a Tinguely produces a highly articulated musical composition.

The Baschet brothers started to build sonic sculptures in the 1950's using perspex rods attached to metallic resonators. These may be played as instruments by stroking the rods and have been used by composers as diverse as Takemitsu and Tom Waits. Artists such as Max Eastley are bridging the gap between sound sculpture and electroacoustic music, using amplification to bring out the sonorities of their creations and collaborating with musicians such as David Toop on ethereal recorded soundscapes.

Another notion of sound sculpture has grown up, however, that doesn't involve physical objects at all. This work deals with the way that sound can be used to articulate space. A recurring theme in the history of music from Giovanni Gabrieli to Henry Brant, the exploration of the spatial aspects of sound has become a major interest thanks to recording technology. Janet Cardiff, for example, has deconstructed Thomas Tallis' 40 part motet Spem in Alium, recording each voice separately and allowing gallery visitors to move freely among the 40 loudspeakers.

Bill Fontana uses live transmission of sound from various environments, presenting the work on loudspeakers in distant places.

Works such as *Sound Island* (1994) in which the sounds of the sea off Normandy were relayed to the Arc de Triomphe, masking the noise of the traffic, are designed to alter the listener's perception of a familiar environment. Spatial sound installations such as this offer the listener the opportunity to explore the sound-space physically, interacting with the piece to create a personal composition.

This level of interaction is taken a step further by artists such as Christina Kubisch, who in works such as *Oasis* (2000) allows visitors to navigate virtual acoustic spaces by walking under a grid of wires that induce a signal into a pair of headphones. The temporal form of the work is uniquely experienced by each listener, the structure of the work is conceived spatially. It is fascinating to think that the modular 'open' forms developed by artists such as Stockhausen, Boulez and Pousseur in the 50s have found a practical application in the interactive art of the 21st century.

The acceptance of work like Janek Schaefer's and Jem Finer's by the musical establishment is good news because sound art belongs as much to music as it does to art. For the field to produce truly valuable work it must continue to draw on musical culture as much as it does on the fine arts. The PRS announcement, far from being a threat to music is a signal that we are ready to move forward into an exciting new territory.

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