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Situating the Avant-Garde: conformity and oppositional culture

Editorial
Monty Adkins, Ambrose Field

The assembling of this edition of *Organised Sound* has been a lengthy, challenging but nevertheless, an interesting one. In the initial call for papers we acknowledged that independent artistic practitioners, empowered by technology, have radically changed the digital arts climate in western societies over the last twenty years, particularly music. As a result we sought to review the role of the institution and ask how such institutions can drive radically new cultural development, rather than offering reactionary responses to independent commercial experimental artwork, or falling back on past models and aesthetics. We cast our net wide seeking to illicit writing on oppositional cultures in contemporary electronic music; our changing role as listeners and performers with technology in the sonic arts; the role of the institution and educator in the contemporary avant-garde; post-laptop music and the resurgence of the modular synthesizer amongst other such sub-topics. What we hoped to present was a cross-section of the diverse and thriving contemporary electronic music scene and the wider critical framing of this from a cultural, theoretical and musicological perspective.

Simply, we failed. The response to our call was woeful. Yet this failure can actually be seen to demonstrate certain aspects of our original intention and its flaws. Perhaps our biggest disappointment was that fact that so many composers were approached who are making innovative and arresting work, but do not see any imperative in writing about their work. Be this as it may, there was also a sense that the composers and sound artists we discussed this edition with no longer considered the notion of the avant-garde as one they engaged with or belonged to. The idea of the avant-garde with its inherent notions of rupture and a radical agenda were seen as reactionary and somewhat irrelevant in today's practice. There was rather a prevailing attitude of inclusivity. One that sought to present newness as a reframing of elements drawn together in different ways, but a way that was not considered to be informed by a post-modernist perspective.

For the editors, the question arising from this is similar to a statement written over two decades ago by Hal Foster, commenting on Peter Bürger's seminal text 'Theory of the Avant-Garde' (1984) that, '…for Bürger the repetition of the historical avant-garde by the neo-avant-garde can only turn the antiaesthetic into the artistic, the transgressive into the institutional.' (Foster, 1994: 13). If, as is suggested by the response to our call, the transgressive avant-garde in electronic music has become institutionalized then where is today's radical and politically motivated work situated? Is there any critique of the acculturation of the previous avant-garde?

But perhaps we are actually asking ourselves the wrong questions. Perhaps the shock of the new is no longer shocking and there is no longer a desire for the 'new' per se. Perhaps the boundaries of sound-based conceptually driven music have been explored, from John Cage's nominally 'silent' *4'33"* to JLIAT's maximalist *All Possible CDs*, and from Sachiko M's radically reductionist sine tone pieces through to Lasse Marhaug's full frequency noise assaults? Perhaps was is left to explore is within these boundaries? Additionally, there is perhaps also an acceptance that it is

not about making 'new' music i.e. aesthetically challenging work, but questioning our on-going and ever-evolving relationship, immersion and dependence on technology. For Bürger the idea of detaching from an ideology or paradigmatic practice was the freedom to find a new stance to critique societal or artistic structures. Perhaps today's artists are content to work within these structures and pose different questions relating to our human condition.

Nevertheless, there is a feeling for the editors that we have lost the radical integrity of the discourse around acousmatic and electronic art music and whilst there is much discussion relating to its practice, analysis and modes of listening, there is no wider critique of its cultural status in the present or its future aesthetic direction. We identify a passive acceptance. Perhaps the radical political agenda of the avant-garde to destroy bourgeois art is itself an historic idea and the notion of the avant-garde, if considered at all, is now merely a watered down version, accepting the marginal aspect of new music and the overwhelming global dominance of commercially oriented electronic dance music in its various guises. Whatever the reason for contemporary musicologists, sound artists and composers not to have engaged with this topic it is, for the editors, concerning that our art is no longer considered radical or relevant as a cultural force to engender musicological debate.

Of those papers we did receive, they cover an interesting range of topics. Rodrigo Velloso and researchers at the Grupo de Pesquisas Oficina de Música Contemporânea at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro present the product of seven years work collecting data about the historical avant-garde in Brazilian electroacoustic music. Their paper presents a fascinating example of the emergence of a genre of music both within and outside of the academy and how such different situatedness has affected the working methodology and aesthetics of the composers they interviewed. Their work also questions how the new generation of practitioners who draw on experimental techniques but present this in non-academic contexts fit into the Brazilian lineage of electroacoustic music practice.

This last issue is one of the starting points for Adkins, Scott and Tremblay's article *Post-Acousmatic Practice: Re-evaluating Schaeffer's heritage*. It seeks to situate a wide range of contemporary music making as trajectories clustered around nodes of activity extending out from the acousmatic paradigm in order to reinvigorate the critical debate around acousmatic practice. It acknowledges that the cultural space of post-acousmatic music is a different one from the prevailing, though simplistic idea that acousmatic is academic or institutionalized electronic music. As such it proposes a number of starting points for further discussion.

Robert Bentall extends this notion of nodal hybridity, situating his works *Summer Anthem*, *Russian Roulette* and *A Berry Bursts* within a wider cultural context, particularly through his involvement with commercial music. Bentall also posits the concept of 'reconstructive sampling'. Blurring the boundaries between musical borrowing and compositional invention, Bentall's notion is discussed in terms of his own works, but is, importantly; applicable to discussions of many other works in may different genres.

Like Bentall, John Ferguson and Andrew Brown also use their own work as a springboard to facilitate a wider musicological discussion. In their paper they discuss

how contemporary computational and electronic music making can be considered as a post-digital avant-garde. Their definition of this term, as well as their role as educators within this, are discussed in detail. The article is not merely a presentation of an abstract methodology or theoretical argument. Rather, its significance lies in their translation of their concepts into a practical pedagogical environment for undergraduates.

Otso Lähdeoja's article, in its discussion of live-electronic music and symbol-mediated computing problematizes and develops ideas touched on briefly in Ferguson and Brown's paper, particularly the latters live coding practice. Lähdeoja argues that issues of live electronic music such as disembodied laptop performance, the decline of group musicianship and the institutional clustering of the pioneering underground are all related to the machine-mediated textual bias of today's tools for creating such music. Indeed he goes further to suggest that 'an ontological discrepancy might exist between the textually-oriented computing and the sensory-motor oriented *musicking*' and suggests possible ways forwards from this position for future research.

Off topic papers in this edition are by Kerry Hagan, Nicolas Marty, Andra McCartney and Jordan Lacey. These cover a diverse range of issues. Hagan draws together theories from Simon Emmerson, Marco Stroppa, Miller Puckette and Carl Seleborg amongst others to interrogate and re-evaluate issues surrounding real-time electronics and our perceptions of live electronics performance and interactivity.

Jordan Lacey presents a methodology for creating and situating sound installations in urban spaces, which aim to enhance human wellbeing. The article is the result of fieldwork undertaken in 2015 across North America and Europe that documented several enduring sound installations. Through an inductive process including listening exercises, sound recordings, observations and interviews, Lacey's analysis identifies three approaches to creating sound installations and ten attributes of operative sound installations.

Andra McCartney's paper also considers issues of place and context, but from the perspective of composers and sound artists working with soundscapes. McCartney questions how the meaning of place is constituted in such work and what the ethical implications are when presenting such materials in the context of soundwalks, installations or works for concert presentation. McCartney also questions the role of listeners in such works and presents Luc Ferrari's *Presque Rien No. 1* as a case study in ecotonal thinking about such work. Derived from a keynote paper given at the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology in Finland in 2010, this paper poses as many questions as it seeks to answer.

The final article in this edition by Nicolas Marty discusses Elizabeth Anderson's *Chat Noir* (1998-2000) from a perspective informed by Gilles Deleuze's writings on cinema particularly his concepts of the 'movement-image' and 'time-image'. Having explored Deleuze's notions and their kinship with sound-based music, Marty discusses how these might be used to consider how we experience and remember the form of a work.

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