

Sound as Material

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By

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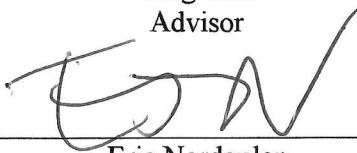
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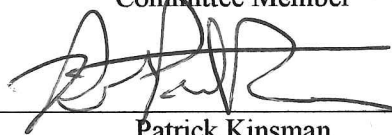
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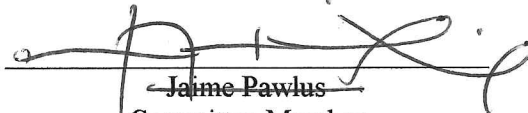
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Sound as material posits an art practice that resides between music and the plastic arts, but is in itself neither music nor the plastic arts. It is an art that shares territory with theater and language arts with a unique foundation of composition and audition, the power of hearing.

Sound stripped of visual referent is more common than it seems. Listening to the radio or recorded music supports sound free of vision. In a visual art context however, it often demands the attention of listeners in a way traditional painting and sculpture do not. Sound as object in a gallery or museum moves quickly, and in its need to not be music or the plastic arts, avoids many of the signs that would allow comparison. Our perception of sound is often indebted to vision, as our culture is primarily based on this aspect of perception. Too often the visual signifier of a sound is misinterpreted for the sound itself. This misnomer is easily disputed by pointing out that my words are not my mouth, my tongue, lips, teeth, or even the ink on this page, but instead the real, or implied, sound constituted by the culmination of each of these tools.

There is naturally a practice that supports contrasting of these ideas, while still allowing sound to be material. Certain sounds and sound groups can have inherent meaning, specifically when the instrument used to create this sound is present (visually) and in particular when said instrument is obscured. The instrument could be obscured in a number of ways: it is incredibly small, it is distorted through means of amplification, it is an invented form, etc. The instrument

is still present, but its cause and effect relation to modes of listening create questions to be answered by the listener. This style of sound as object is supported by Seth Kim-Cohen's concept of a non-cochlear sonic practice. A non-cochlear practice includes sound's ability to move beyond the ear. This is similar to conceptual visual art, in that it supersedes materiality as a central issue in favor of raising questions of the existence of a central issue.

Reading, for direct example, will utilize both modes of listening. There is the listening required through your eyes (reading) the sounds it produces in your head, as well as the sounds created by interacting with the physical object of the paper. (You may also be enjoying a beverage, perhaps there is construction work happening outside, maybe you're eating a snack, or a TV is on in a nearby room...at any rate, you'll no doubt be balancing the sounds created in your head with those of the world around you (outside of your head) and those external world sounds will be in your head as well (whether you see them or not)). It's between these poles that my sound art practice resides.

Phenomenology is an approach to consciousness that focuses on the objects of direct experience. This philosophy is most commonly used to describe and theorize understanding through one's body in relation to the world. It is most commonly used to describe an interaction with an object as object, removing the subjectivity of experience. In this way the external references of an interaction, while not to be overlooked, are not integral to the event itself, for it is experience

itself that creates experience and thusly perception can be allowed to remain simply perception.

“Phenomenology disregards the traditional philosophical distinctions between “subject” and “object,” “appearance” and “reality” and instead attempts simply to describe the contents of experience without reference to its source or subjective mode (e.g., dreaming, waking, etc.) In the case of sound, for example, instead of distinguishing sounds with reference for their sources (the sound *of* a guitar, the sound *of* a violin), phenomenology attempts to “reduce” (separate or distill) signal from source, and to restrict itself to describing the differences among sounds themselves.”¹

The sonic object being the sound itself and not the device used to create the sound is a hard to grasp concept in our visual-centric culture. The sonic field is populated with simultaneous sonic objects that exist and are perceived in a separate manner than those visual objects that populate the visual environment. Sonic objects mesh in time and space to be perceived in flux, whereas visual objects occupy space singularly, to be perceived in a contained, logical order. Marshall McLuhan argued in his essay *Visual and Acoustic Space* that our hearing is indebted to our vision as a cultural condition or preference in which “Western civilization has been mesmerized by a picture of the universe in a limited container in which all things are arranged according to the vanishing point, in linear geometric order.”²

The visual counterpart often describes the sonic environment, whether seen or not. The bump in the night is relegated to those known variables within our home (the

¹ Cox, Christoph and Warner, Daniel. “Audio Culture, Readings in Modern Music”, New York, Continuum, 2006, p.76.

² McLuhan, Marshall. “Visual and Acoustic Space.” In *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989

cat, the dog) or those imagined (a burglar, a ghost.) The sound itself is not addressed. In other words sound challenges form by constantly traveling away from its source. This is common. “Honey, what was that sound? Go check it out.” As if I could turn back time which in most people’s hypnagogic state seems likely, as an artist I know it to be impossible.

A phenomenological listening approach undermines visual superiority. Just as McLuhan suggests visual preference has been conditioned, so too can an aural preference. “Phenomenology focuses totally on what is given in intuition and is not meant to rely on logical inferences, or mediate knowledge of any kind.”³ From the phenomenological approach audition is able to carry its own meaning apart from its visual signifier. This concept thusly subverts a semiotic understanding by reducing sound to object and dispensing with its visual counterpart.

According to Saussureian semiotics a sign consists of two parts, the signified and the signifier. The signified is the concept or object and the signifier the sound or image attached to the signified. The thing itself in the world related to the sign is the sign’s referent. If any sound is subjected analytically as a referent, sound itself can be the signified but the signifier would namely be the sound’s visual device, not the sound itself, therefore constituting this understanding of sound as sign opposite to sign as object. A sound object’s device or point of creation however can be subjected to semiotics for analysis.

Applying semiotics to the sonic object tends to create a feedback loop of analysis. Consider seeing someone ring a bell. The bell itself and its sound could be the referent,

³ Moran, Dermot. “Introduction to Phenomenology”, Routledge, London, 2000 p.176

the actual thing in the world. The signified would relate to the bells' sound image, or sound memory and what it represents (dinner bell, church bell, etc.) as well as the physical bell. The signifier would be the word bell, the visual image of the bell and its sound. In this model the physical sound created by the bell is second to the bell as a sign, the sound created stands for something apart from the sound object.

Now, if the sound of the bell itself were read in this manner, without seeing its source, the sonic object would be the signified as well as the signifier. The referent then would also be the sound. At each turn, the sound object, when removed from its visual point of creation can assume each responsibility of signified, signifier and referent while also subverting each one. This feedback lends itself to a fractal reading of semiotics wherein each part has the same characteristics as the whole. This evens out any type of power relationships within the perception of a sound and allows it to be simply a sound. There is little hierarchy in terms of meaning in the aural environment.

“A non-cochlear sound art does not accept the resolution of sound-in-itself - not because it seeks another kind of resolution, but because it denies the possibility of resolution, ipso facto.”⁴ The semiotic resolution of sound as object is rejected by the non-cochlear approach. It is stated by Kim-Cohen that the sound-in-itself model is viewed as a move inward, one toward materiality and therefore a move toward essentialism. This is opposite to his view of “sound-out-of-itself”, or a sonic practice that moves outward, beyond tradition, toward experimentation.

It contends that sound as material can simultaneously inhabit both sound-in-and-out-of-itself by creating loosely controlled scenarios where sound is object, constituted by subjective means, allowing conditions to question the given materials in

⁴ Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, pg. 260

flux with those outside of control.

This is the separating point of a holistic sound art approach and one of music, in particular Western music. Music places emphasis on certain sounds or sound groups, their volume and duration to create meaning, or instill emotion, leading toward progress, conflict and resolution. Sound art, and sound as an object subverts this by asking its listeners to consider each sound or sound group congruously with everything happening in flux without any inferred power-dynamics in relation to meaning.

I use these ideas in my art practice. My projects range in material, duration and location. Over the past two years my sound art has changed in many ways.

I wanted to extend my use of sonic feedback into sculpture, into a dimensional being, one that went beyond the ear. I wanted to do this because the concept of feedback, a listening device hearing itself, fascinated me. I was curious to see what happened when I extended this concept of self-reference to other objects and scenarios. My first experiments with this concept included video, sound, objects, photocopies and mail. In these projects I was attempting to create a visual feedback that worked in a similar manner to microphone feedback as well as the feedback of a fractal semiotic reading of sound-in-itself.

I began by filming the corner of a room. This video was then projected onto the same corner. I then filmed that projection. I repeated this process several times. Each time the process was repeated the image receded into itself. The audio of the silent room

was also compounded in this way. Eventually the sound and video created a resonance specific to this room.

To further this idea I photocopied a blank piece of paper. The result was a paper that was slightly grey. I then photocopied that piece of paper, which resulted in a yet darker shade. I continued this process until I had a black piece of paper.

I was happy with these results but wanted to extend this idea further from traditional art practices and materials. I felt as though this idea would become more fascinating when removed from the artistic context of studio or gallery materials. I'm unsure where or how this idea came to be, but I began sending myself mail. I used traditional sized envelopes. I wrote my name and address as sender and receiver. I used correct postage. When I got the letter in the mail I walked it to a mailbox to be returned to sender. As this process continued the date stamps would collect until they became unrecognizable.

I drove cross-country. As I crossed the border of each state I recorded the sounds inside the car for a few minutes. I was drawn to the idea of the interior of the car (my immediate surroundings) remaining the same although my exterior surroundings were changing drastically. When I returned from the trip I mixed all of these audio tracks together to create a massive sonic landscape portrait on the miniature scale of an audio file.

I also brought a few self-addressed letters with me on this trip. I dropped them in mailboxes as I came across them. These letters presented a different type of visual feedback. The sender and receiver had my Indianapolis address, yet the postmark read from a different state.

I repeated this process for a series of site-specific recording projects. I recorded the sound of the Marion County downtown library and played this recording in the Herron Art library. I recorded the sound of the Marion Library playing in the Herron Library. I played this recording in the IUPUI central library and recorded the results. I then sent this conglomerate recording to the Cincinnati Public Library to be included in their exhibition “Works for a Prepared Library.”

Both sets of letters, those post-marked in Indiana and those from across the country, the recording of the car’s interior and the layered libraries support a non-cochlear sound art that includes noise and large sounds unheard by a viewer or myself. The object of the letter travels a great distance only to end up back where it started. It collects visual indexes of the space it has traversed, and therefore references to the sounds it has made, or witnessed. The mail that has travelled cross-country raises conditional questions of how anything traverses expanses. The mail represent the same idea of recording the interior of the car as it travels cross-country, but nearly in a reverse fashion. The sound is demure, a non-event. A culmination of massive amounts of sound, speed and distance, boiled down to a deafening silence. The letters, visually weak, are loaded with information relating not only to creating conditional understanding, but the understanding of condition itself.

This idea of the order of materiality, being able to mix suspected use of pattern and order is highly appealing to me for its allusions to sound. Much sound art attempts to jostle a listener into asking questions about sound itself. Extending these notions to projects that may not directly create sound brings every object, or activity, into the world of the hearing by creating conditional experiences based on sound.

I made a wooden stand that resembles a coffee table without a top. I made several wooden frames of different sizes. The frames can be stacked inside of the open table. There are many different ways of organizing them. They can be balanced and extend this sculpture ten feet tall or more, or balance in another way so that it is barely 2 feet tall. This performance sculpture illustrates a non-cochlear sound art in that the slight sounds created by the stacking of the wood are somewhat ancillary to the anticipation of the sound of the sculpture falling and breaking.

Similarly I used push brooms to precariously hold heavy objects balanced against the wall. These objects, while secure, appear to be on the verge of falling. Chairs, shelves, pieces of wood and steel are balanced on top of a broom and wedged against the wall. These sculptures are completely silent, yet retain both the history of the sound of their placement as well as the anticipatory sound of their crash.

I organized a performance for 13 people with 13 push brooms. We swept the courtyard at the Herron Sculpture and Ceramics building. We did this in unison, by forming a straight line that covered the width of the courtyard. We progressed together sweeping the length of the courtyard. The idea behind this performance was a visual noise, as well as the physical sounds created by the brooms, our feet and our chatter. I was interested in illustrating what isn't there. It makes sense to clean an area as a way to illustrate that something is missing. (I didn't anticipate the courtyard, in early spring, to be as dirty and dusty as it was. We mostly swept up rocks. One participant later said, "That was filthy.")

I chose to use the turntable as a tool because it alludes to hearing on a visual level. When we see a turntable we think of listening to records or for turntablism (DJing)

the act of mixing and scratching records on multiple record players. However, I took apart the turntable and removed the stylus so that it can't play a record in the traditional manner again. I set it so that if the power is on, the platter spins non-stop. I also built two contact microphones into the body of the turntable for amplification. I utilize a combination of traditional loudspeakers and audio transducers placed on resonant objects for amplification. The visual component of these materials is inherently musical, yet the sounds they produce and the overall composing abilities are not. The visual representation of music extends only so far as the look of the turntable and the speakers, the objects used to cause the sounds are decidedly non-musical both visually and acoustically.

These collected objects vary and the collection is always in flux. It is often comprised of found objects, which may or may not have inherent resonant qualities such as drinking straws, Styrofoam cups, plastic or glass items, but also items made or purchased distinctly for their sonic qualities. The objects can be arranged on the platter and left to scrape or tumble or are handled manually. The spinning platter of the turntable is simultaneously resonated by and is used to cause objects to resonate. These sounds are then amplified, being reproduced simultaneously with the acoustic sound. The amplified sound can then be processed electronically, either through analog circuitry or digital manipulation. I use a volume pedal that allows me to adjust the amount of amplified sound with the acoustic sound. In this way I can create interplay between the sound's sources that can further configure into the listener's perception. This combination of creating sound acoustically and electronically with multiple devices allows for a

listening environment capable of supporting sound as sonic object, sound as visual object, and object as object.

Despite the differing aural perceptions of the sounds created by the turntable, viewers have one experience and listeners another. The aural disembodied sounds of the turntable (recorded) and the visual disembodied sounds (performance) react in similar ways but with distinctly different results. Listening to a recording of this material yields visual images much larger than the action that is physically taking place. Listeners have described sounds such as dump trucks, fire, a river or power tools. Viewers of a turntable performance often remark on the difference between their visual perceptions in relation to the auditory - for example, making a very loud sound with something small such as a piece of hay or a seashell.

As I continue to work with the turntable I've sought ways of replicating this activity in sculptural installations. My first attempts to do this utilized low voltage motors. I created small sculptures that held one motor affixed to found objects. I made 12 of these motor powered objects and hung them along the hall outside of my studio. The motors ran continuously when plugged into the power source. The motors ran at different speeds and each one used different materials to create varying sounds and patterns. The hallway I used is rather long, something that added to the listening situation. As one walked down the hall the work composed itself in space, some of the pieces were louder or quieter, more colorful, more kinetic than others. In this way the listener/viewer is welcome to inspect each piece for as long as he or she likes, or move through the hall at a regular pace.

Furthering this idea became difficult. I was drawn to the simultaneity of these motor driven pieces. Their ability to support repetition without accumulation was far more successful than certain aspects of the turntable (those that invited comparison of sound groups through time) yet for all their sound and movement, they were static objects. They encouraged movement through a space, but retained western music's fixation with a "frontal" listening situation, one that supports performer and listener as distinctly different entities. I began using these motor pieces in my performances, powered either with batteries or extension cords. This allowed me to move these sounds around the room, interrupting the audience/performer relationship, or at times even leaving the room, to place a sound making motor away from the traditional "frontal" listening situation. I enjoy this technique and have adapted it to include handing sound making objects to the audience.

This development has opened up a large territory for me. At first the objects I handed out were very simple, cheap, everyday things like paper bags, Styrofoam cups, drinking straws, aluminum foil and came with no instruction. At times the audiences were baffled, waiting for me to tell them what to do. Other times creativity was rampant and the audience would respond by manipulating the objects in whatever manner they saw fit. (Mind you this would be happening while the turntable was creating sound in front of the audience and the motor pieces were distributed around them.)

This further developed into a combination of the wall mounted motor pieces, illustrations of empty space, turntable performances and the simple handouts into a series of (primarily) wooden noisemakers. These wooden devices bridge the gap between all of these works in a simple way. They vary in size as well as material. The construction is

simple. The piece has a handle, which is attached to a sprocket housed inside wooden rails that holds a strip of material. The objects are performed by holding the handle and swinging the rails around the sprocket; resulting in a percussive repetitive sound.

I am using these to replace the traditional performer-audience relationship, as well as the traditional object-viewer relationship of the gallery or museum. These pieces are also now accompanied by other hand-operated sound making devices. Some roll on the floor, others are struck or rubbed by the hand. These sonic objects support sound-in-itself when heard but not seen, sound-out-of-itself when seen and heard, and the non-cochlear when only viewed. It is the combination of all these ideas that drive these pieces allowing for a combination of performance and installation that results in a holistic sound art.

Images



Figure 1 John Collins McCormick performing at The Cincinnati Public Library, 2013 Photo by Steve Kemple



Figure 2 Screen Shot of Sweeping Performance 2013



Figure 3 Stackable Wooden Piece 2013

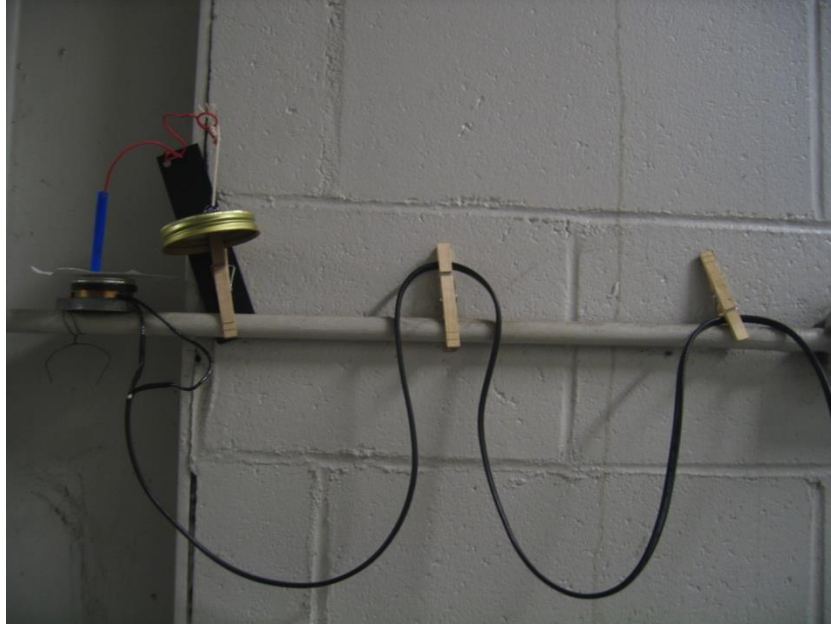


Figure 4 Hallway Motor. Jar lid, Clothes Pin, Straw, and Bead. 2012



Figure 5 Wooden Noisemakers. 2014

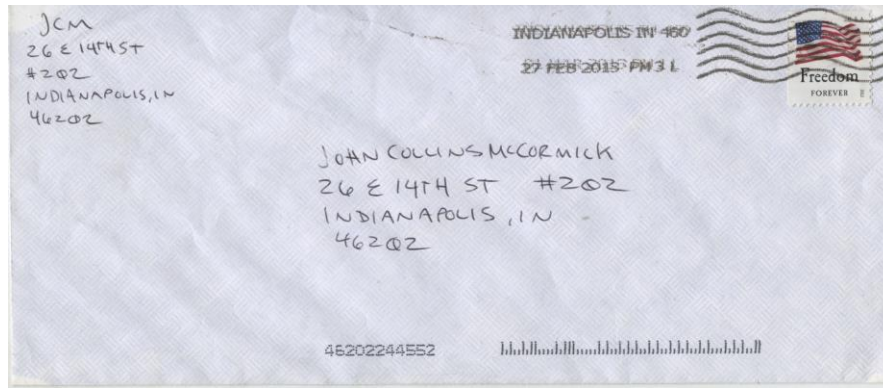


Figure 6 Mailing Myself Mail (Feedback) 2013

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