

On Listening to Installation

TOM DAVIS

INTRODUCTION

This article describes the experience of interacting with and listening to the sound installation *Cross-Pollination*. This installation was first exhibited at FIX'o8, the biennial performance art festival hosted by Catalyst Arts Gallery, Belfast. It has also been shown in the Sonic Lab, Sonic Arts Research Centre (SARC), Belfast, and has been used more recently as a performance environment for a concert at the Vibe Bar in London. This article takes as its starting point a description of a personal encounter with the installation, and moves on to outline a conception of listening as a performative act that is active and embodied.

Cross-Pollination was produced as the final piece of work for my PhD portfolio and thus represents the most fully formed practical output relating to my research interests at that time. It emerged from a process of intertwined practice and research, and thus is perhaps best introduced by a short description of these research concerns. My thesis, entitled *In the Ear of the Beholder: Ecology, Embodiment and Complexity in Sound Installation*, focused primarily on an exploration of emergent complex systems (as defined by complexity theory) through sound. Emergence in this context can be loosely defined as high-level structures that apprise as a by-product of interactions of lower-level constituents. As I was concerned primarily



• Figure 1: Group interaction in SARC's Sonic Laboratory
© Tom Davis

with how these structures could be represented in an auditory form, I became increasingly interested in how one might listen to such a process: how they would emerge 'in the ear'; how they would be constructed in the sonic perceptual systems of a listener. Consequently, I became interested in how one might become actively aware of the arising of auditory emergent structures and what a description of such an active process of listening might consist of. Such concerns led me to consider activities in which we could become aware of our own processes of listening and perception, and to think about how one might define listening as an active and embodied activity.

AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE WORK

On entering the quiet gallery space I am faced with what appears to be a circle of twenty balloons hanging freely in the air. As I move nearer the circle, I notice that these three-foot, white balloons are attached to long thin wires, running from the ceiling to the floor. I touch a balloon and the installation springs into life; motors start whirring, strings vibrating and balloons humming. Investigating the interaction more closely, I deduce that a noise at one balloon activates a motor, which in turn plucks a string that supports a different balloon. Through these feedback loops my intervention at any point in the installation has an effect on the installation as a whole: from one small touch of a single balloon, twenty motors are wildly plucking twenty strings, causing twenty balloons to resonate in the space. Listening to the installation for a while, the seemingly random series of sonic elements start falling into recognisable patterns, shifting and altering over time, affected by the unstable nature of the feedback loops and to changes in my listening position. I become aware that listening to this installation is an active process; I become aware of myself perceiving. After a while the installation starts to get quieter, the balloons making less and less noise and the motors



slowing. Without further stimulation it falls back into silence, waiting for another touch to bring it to life. However, other people enter the space and start to interact with it. Again, their interactions have repercussions in different areas of the installation; energy is being displaced from one area to another. This draws me to move around the installation, altering my spatial relation to it. As I seek to understand this relationship of cause and effect I switch between listening to the results of others' actions and intervening myself. My role as a participant constantly oscillates between those of performer and audience, or those of performer and listener.

• Figure 2: The installation touched © Tom Davis

THE INSTALLATION TOUCHED

Cross-Pollination is tactile in nature, but in addition the microphones are sensitive enough to pick up any vibrations in the space. In this way the installation itself listens to the environment, mirroring the listening of the visitors, responding to physical as well as sonic touch.

Moving through the installation, I feel compelled to touch the balloons; their latex skins cry out to be caressed. The thin piano



• Figure 3: The installation embodied © Tom Davis

wires desire to be plucked, bowed or struck. The installation speaks, and sound resounds off the walls of the space; sound connects us to the installation and to the space itself.

Of all our senses, listening is perhaps most similar to that of touch. The faculties of listening and touch are both durational in nature: they require a persistent yet transient contact in order to transfer information. If a sound is too short or its temporal characteristics static, its capacity to transfer information is severely limited. On the same level, both senses can also be thought of as inherently spatial. To touch something is to explore its distance from yourself and its physical place in the world. Similarly, listening to sound places the sound and the listening body in a context defined by environmental characteristics.

However, whereas touch enables us to explore space near our bodies, listening has the capacity to extend our senses away from our body into the space itself. Borrowing a metaphor from Steven Connor, listening can be described as extending the reach of our bodies in the same way that water in a bath extends the reach of our skin (Connor 2005). It is through the act of listening that we feel ourselves to have real physical contact with distant objects: a physical connection to a bigger and larger space.

Sound, then, has a way of highlighting our

experience of being in the world. Although communication through sound is often personal, directed towards an individual - a subjective response based on an active process of listening - it is also dynamically related to its context. Sound is not only affected by the medium of its transmission but also by the space of its articulation. It is modulated by surfaces, taking on the characteristics of the space and, in so doing, reflecting and defining its environmental context. Listening to sound defines space as much as the space defines the sound.

THE INSTALLATION EMBODIED

In addition to the relationship between sound and space described above, listening also foregrounds presence within space in an embodied sense. Images are always presented in front of us, limited by our field of vision, but sounds can take on a spatial component in any position relative to our bodies. Sound thus has a special relationship to the location of bodies within space, a relationship perhaps echoed in the dual functions of our ears pertaining to balance as much as hearing. In 'Material Things in Their Relation to the Aesthetic Body', Husserl presents a concept of the body as a zero-point of orientation; a positioning of perception in relation to a single entity from

which to refer (Husserl 1999: 34). Holenstein argues that this point can take on any position, lying in the body when the body is the dominant figure in perception, but moving and changing depending on the ‘most powerful figure in each context’ (Holenstein 1999: 90). However, as I have previously argued, in the auditory field this zero-point is more often than not centred in the listener’s body itself (Davis and Rebelo 2005), the pertinent questions relating to listening seemingly always in relation to this body. For example, how does this sound move in relation to my body; where is that sound coming from in relation to my body? It is in fact hard to imagine a scenario in which a sonic zero-point could be anywhere else. Sounds, then, can always be considered as somehow mapped around the body, taking on a relationship to each individual listener: their personal embodied position within a space and the position of their ears.

This conception of sound is especially pertinent to installations that have an acoustic, physical presence in the space (as opposed to those in which all sound is mediated via speakers). For example, in *Cross-Pollination* there is a true interaction between the installation and its context. Sound does not emanate indiscriminately from (disembodied) speakers into an uncaring space; rather, the sonic ‘agents’ actively respond to the space and have a physical presence that creates an environment to actively explore, offering a listening experience that naturally highlights a situated and embodied encounter with the work. Such a conception of interaction has a history tied to Merleau-Ponty’s notions of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty 2002): ideas that gained prominence in the conceptualisation of minimalist installation (Bishop 2005). However, I argue that such notions have a special relevance when it comes to our relationship to listening and the function of sound in positioning the body and foregrounding embodied experience.

In *Cross-Pollination* one encounters a number of sound making instruments distributed in space. How one hears the installation and one’s

sonic relationship to it is very much defined by spatial location, both in relation to the installation as a whole and to each sounding element. The physically distributed installation offers many possibilities for movement as an exploration of sonic qualities: sounds mapped in relation to your body.

THE INSTALLATION PERCEIVED

As stated at the beginning of this article, one of the research concerns driving this installation was the idea of sonic emergent structures becoming apparent in the perceptual systems of the users. In short, I wanted people to hear emergent structures, to become aware of the perceptual process of listening – of the creation of sonic structures ‘in the ear’.

As Alva Noë notes in ‘art and enaction’ (2002), one of the problems with studying perception is that the act is designed to be transparent (what he terms perceiving in ‘the mode of transparency’). However, Noë argues that art can be used as a tool for the investigation of perception as it can create situations in which we can catch ourselves in the process of perception: a mode of perceptual awareness that he terms ‘the mode of activity’ (Noë 2002).

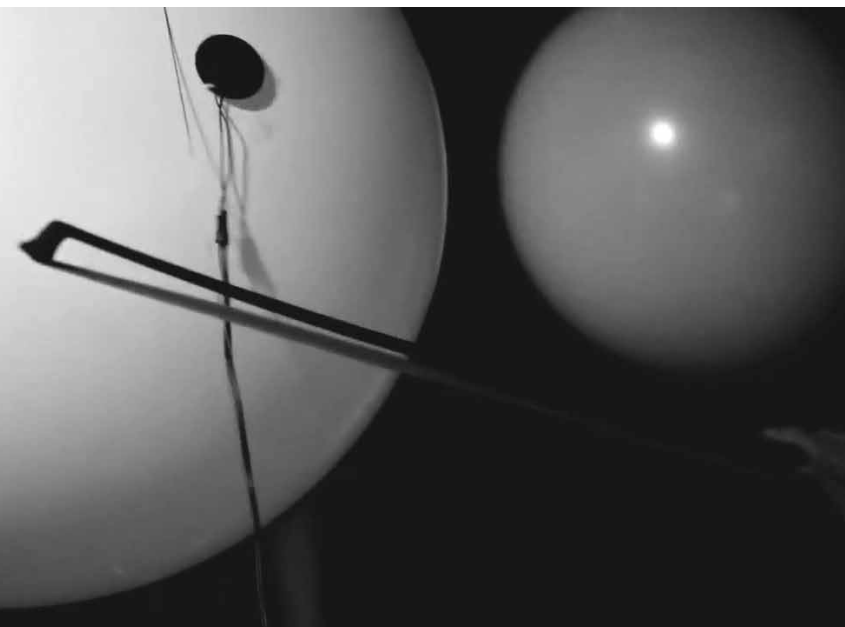
Noë’s ‘mode of activity’ has much in common with another active concept of perception, known as enaction and defined by Varela, Rosch and Thomson as ‘perceptually guided action’ (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1993: 173). In the concept of enaction there is no pre-given world that is perceived by a pre-given mind; rather, the world is temporally explored and created on the basis of the ‘history of a variety of actions that the being in the world performs’ (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1993: 9). Perception of the world is contingent on sensorimotor exploration of it; on our temporal embodiment within it. In this conception, we recognise that the world is not disclosed to us in all its detail at once; rather, ‘the world becomes available to us through our active exploration’ (Noë 2002).

As Noë states, ‘[a]rt, or other spectacles (e.g. the

performance of a magician) provides a natural occasion for this sort of reflection in the mode of activity' (Noë 2002). In this context we are reflecting on experiences as things themselves that we can do, things that afford possibility for movement or action. This links the physical act of movement to that of perception, recognising that perceivers are embodied within space, with the potential to move in and relate to this space. Noë calls to our attention the idea of artists as 'experience engineers', citing a Richard Serra sculpture as an example of art that 'provides a context in which we are enabled to catch ourselves in the act of exploring the world' (Noë 2002).

This consideration of perception seems highly relevant to installation, and in particular sound installation. Installation as an art form has a history linked to ideas of embodied perception and the theatricality of the object (Fried 1967). Due to its physical composition, with disparate entities communicating through space, *Cross-Pollination* encourages active sensual exploration, exploiting embodied temporal perception of the space as a means of catching oneself in the act of auditory perception.

• Figure 4. The installation bowed © Chris Jinks www.vitalsignproductions.com



I would like to link between this idea of enactive listening and Christopher Small's concept of 'musicking' (Small 1998 :9): a conception of music in which composers, performers and listeners are all considered active in the creation of the musical event. Small contrasts this with the tendency found most prominently in Western classical music - but also across other traditions - for audience members to be passive spectators. He characterises modern classical concert-going as a detached rather than active act, with a strong and insurmountable distinction between audience and performers: 'Who we are, then is spectators rather than participants, and our silence during the performance is a sign of this condition, that we have nothing to contribute but our attention to the spectacle that has been arranged for us' (Small 1998: 44). Small makes a distinction between this modern Western practice and village music-making in societies where every member is considered a musician, and thus everybody is involved in some way in the production of music.

Cross-Pollination explores the process of music creation on two levels. First, it engages an enactive conception of listening, where each listener creates their own version of events, linked to their subjective perception of the installation from their embodied and temporally and spatially extended encounter with it. Second, in this context there is no distinction between performer and listener; rather, the performers and listeners oscillate between roles. When an individual interacts with the installation, she or he constantly switches between the roles of performer and listener. If a group interacts, one's activity affects another's. One may well argue that this is true of all installations (or indeed all experiences), but in this case there is a direct physical relationship between interacting with the installation and the resulting sonic output.

In a sonic encounter with the installation we regain what has been lost in the modern Western encounter with music. This is not a passive



• Figure 5: Installation as performance © Tom Davis

reception of an event, 'a spectacle that has been arranged for us' (Small 1998: 44); in this instance there is no musician and no audience, only 'musickers': people engaged in the active act of music creation, in an active act of listening.

FINAL REMARKS

In creating this installation I strived to create a space within which people could become aware of their own perceptual processes of listening, highlighting listening as a subjective, embodied encounter with sound. I aimed to create a situation in which active listening is explored and celebrated, and that places the performativity of listening on a par with the physical act of sound creation. *Cross-Pollination* explores the boundaries between performer and listener, exploiting and highlighting the mutability of these roles.

REFERENCES

Bishop, C. H. (2005) *Installation Art: A Critical History*, New York: Routledge.
 Connor, S. (2005) 'Ears have Walls: On Hearing art', *FOA RM* 4: 48-57.

Davis, T. and Rebelo, P. (2005) *Hearing Emergence: Towards Sound-Based Self-Organisation*, Proceedings of the International Computer Music Conference, September 2005.

Fried, M. (1967) 'Art and Objecthood', in C. Harrison and P. Wood (eds) *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, 2000 edn, Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, pp. 822-33.

Holenstein, E. (1999) 'The Zero-Point of Orientation: The Placement of the I in Perceived Space', in D. Welton (ed.) *The Body: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Malden, Mass.: Blackwell. pp. 57-94.

Husserl, E. (1999) 'Material Things in Their Relation to the Aesthetic Body', in D. Welton (ed.) *The Body: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Malden, Mass.: Blackwell. pp. 11-37.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002) *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, London: Routledge.

Noë, A. (2002) last update, *art as enaction*. <http://www.interdisciplines.org/artcog/papers/8/6/1#_6>

Small, C. (1998) *Musicking: the meanings of performing and listening*, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Varela, F. J. Thompson, E. and Rosch, E. (1993) *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.