

LMJ 23: Sound Art

What's in a name? That which we call "Music" is judged by the full weight of history and fashion; substitute "Sound Art" and most of these preconceptions fall away. As recently as a decade ago the reaction instead might have been bemusement. The term Sound Art was coined in the late 1960s to describe sonic activities taking place outside the concert hall: interactive installations, listening walks, environmental recordings, open duration sound events—even "happenings" and performance art were occasionally lumped under this rubric. For many years Sound Art remained an interstitial activity, falling between music and visual art, embraced fully by neither. Many composers viewed self-styled Sound Artists as failed members of their own club pursuing "a career move . . . a branding exercise" (as Chris Mann is quoted as saying in Ricardo Arias's contribution to this volume of *Leonardo Music Journal* [1]). Most museums and galleries, in turn, shied away from an art form that was often stunningly unvisual even by the standards of Conceptual Art and for which there appeared to be no market. (Gallery assistants often found it very irritating to boot.)

By 2013, however, Sound Art clearly has been accepted as an identifiable musical genre, an art world commodity, and a subject of critical study. Its newfound visibility can be traced to a number of aesthetic, technological and economic factors. First and foremost, I suspect, is the ubiquity of video in contemporary life: On the heels of the ever-declining price of camcorders, cellphone cameras have brought the world—from out-of-tune Van Halen concerts to the Arab Spring—to our laptops, and every video clip is invariably accompanied by sound. As I observed in an earlier volume of LMJ,

For many artists . . . the digital camcorder has become the new sketchbook, and it's so difficult to defeat the camera's built-in microphone that most video footage is accompanied by sound by default. And, just as a camera often redirects the artist's eye, so the constant presence of a soundtrack, whether intentional or not, draws attention to sound [2].

This "video-isation" of our lives contributes to the muddling of the distinction between Art and Music: Art keeps getting noisier while music is increasingly represented in visual formats, creating an ideal nurturing environment for Sound Art. Moreover, the development and dissemination of powerful digital tools minimize the importance of domain-specific training: One doesn't need to master counterpoint or life drawing to be a virtuoso of ctrl-X/ctrl-V; artists can cut sound as easily as musicians can arrange images. And, of course, the recent visibility and financial success of a handful of artists identified with the genre, such as Christian Marclay, Janet Cardiff and Susanne Philipsz, has heightened public awareness.

The ascendance of Sound Art could be seen in the flood of proposals we received after choosing the subject as the theme for this volume of *Leonardo Music Journal*—four times as many as for any previous issue. The submissions we accepted illustrate the rich inclusiveness of the field as it stands today.

Environmental sound (both pastoral and urban) and the spatial distribution of sound, while of marginal significance in traditional music, are common obsessions in Sound Art and are germane to many of the papers in this volume. Llorenç Barber documents his citywide performances with church bells. Peter Batchelor, Marc Berghaus, and Jane Grant and John Matthias contribute essays on various aspects of sound spatialization, ranging from multi-speaker arrays to motorized "sound showers." Mike Blow suspends solar-powered circuitry

in trees. Florian Grond, Adriana Olmos and Jeremy R. Cooperstock employ echolocation technology in the design of sculpture for the visually impaired. Sound walks and portable electronics are central to the work of Yolande Harris, Rob van Rijswijk and Jeroen Strijbos, Jessica Thompson, Edwin van der Heide and Emma Whittaker. David Monacchi, Jos Mulder and Colin Wambsgans employ field recordings in their gallery presentations, while Florian Hollerweger creates time displacements from real-time recordings of visitors to his installation.

Several of the articles focus on technical innovations, employing both cutting-edge and antiquated materials. Yuan-Yi Fan and David Minnen describe their research in gesture control for 3D sound distribution. Jess Rowland builds loudspeakers using copper tape on paper and other flat surfaces, integrating sound directly into graphic artworks. Jay Needham and Eric Leonardson use historic gramophone horns, old mechanical clocks and other spring mechanisms in their performances.

This volume contains a number of historical and critical essays as well. Ricardo Arias reviews the work of three contemporary Colombian artists; Gascia Ouzounian surveys Sound Art in Belfast; and Simon Polson discusses the role of the Berlin Wall in the work of Terry Fox and Anthony Hood. Daniele Balit focuses on artists experimenting with audio perception and what he calls “discreet sound,” while Ethan Rose looks at examples of Sound Art in which the physical object is of great importance. Dugal McKinnon writes about the role of silence in Sound Art. Chuck Johnson analyzes the role of cybernetics and system theory in several pioneering electronic performers. Daniel Wilson contributes an account of relatively unknown pre-loudspeaker Sound Art in Victorian music halls.

The choice of theme for this edition of LMJ was prompted by a symposium on “Sound Art Theories” organized at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the fall of 2011 by my colleague Lou Mallozzi. Hosted by the first American art school to have a Department of Sound, the event was distinguished by the inclusion of several younger critics. The papers from this symposium (by Daniela Cascella, Michael Eng, T. Brandon Evans, Erin Gee, Seth Kim-Cohen, Åsa Stjerna and Salomé Voegelin) form a special on-line supplement to this volume, with abstracts and an introductory essay by Mallozzi included in print.

The CD for this issue is curated by Seth Cluett, and demonstrates how listenable Sound Art has become. As the wall between art and music crumbles, it is being replaced by a very inviting promenade.

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References

1. Ricardo Arias, “Rakes, Live Deaths and Modified Cassette Players: Three Contemporary Sound Artists in Colombia,” *Leonardo Music Journal* **23** (2013).
2. Nicolas Collins, “Noises Off: Sound Beyond Music,” *Leonardo Music Journal* **16** (2006) p. 7.