

## The Politics of Sound Art

*I am interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings, an art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check and nihilism at bay.*

—WILLIAM KENTRIDGE [1].

**IF IN 1968** someone had asked the 14-year-old me to define “sound art” I probably would have pointed to the megaphones that sprouted that spring across the Columbia University campus (see this issue’s cover). They were ubiquitous and frequently mishandled or malfunctioning: words were interlaced with feedback and obscured by distortion. Amplifying one’s voice to address a handful of friendly comrades under a tree seemed more of a conceptual statement than an acoustic necessity.

In that turbulent year the inflection of art by politics seemed natural, and music was one of the most conspicuous vehicles of expression. The first discs to grace my kiddie record player were by the subtly subversive Burl Ives (blacklisted 1950), while Pete Seeger (blacklisted 1957) had provided the musical backdrop in the living room.

But 1968 was also the year I bought Jimi Hendrix’s *Are You Experienced*, and electricity became the central component of my musical world. To an adolescent the artifacts of feedback and distortion seemed as much an anti-authoritarian statement when applied to the guitar as they were when they rang out at a sit-in. These were the sounds of subversion, rather than of protest. While Seeger overlaid timeless, politically neutral chords and melodies with pointed lyric statements, Hendrix reshaped the underlying musical material; his message lay inside the sound itself.

Between the protest song and the protesting megaphone lies the wide swath of political music and sound art, the timely subject matter of this volume of *Leonardo Music Journal*. Half a century after the Sixties we are again living in a world of intense political divisiveness, and activists on both the left and the right have taken up sound as a medium, a weapon, and a subject of study. The time has come to review this landscape.

Many of our contributors addressed aspects of field recording in this issue of *LMJ*. With its quasi-documentary mandate, the emergent field of phonography abounds with political content and implications, from recordings of street protests (Christopher DeLaurenti and Christopher Wood), to ecological advocacy (Tom Kohut, Alison Pezanoski-Browne), to compositions based on the voices of Cuban street vendors (Neil Leonard), to analyses of the genre itself in terms of political agency (Gerald Fiebig, Tullis Rennie).

Political agency begins with access, and several authors focus on the role of new technologies in increasing accessibility to music and sound. Helen R. Mitchell reports on the use of biometric computer games in the diagnosis and treatment of dementia, while Koichi Samuels reviews designs for “open” musical interfaces that can be easily adapted to compensate for various disabilities. Adam Tinkle and Daniel Walzer both discuss novel pedagogies for music education.

The political and social characteristics of technology itself are the subjects of several papers. Andrew Brooks brings glitch into the field of queer studies. Ryan Jordan considers do-it-yourself (DIY) electronics as a form of “literal critical practice.” Shelly Knotts looks at network music as a means of developing nonhierarchical models of communication and power distribution. Karen Collins and Ruth Dockwray analyze the role of sound design as a rhetorical device in public service announcements. Nathan Thompson considers audio feedback as a tool for creating environmentally responsive installations.

Providing an outline of the political topics utilized in his 40 years of work, Richard Lerman discusses his use of piezo contact mikes to make recordings at sites of human rights abuses, while Mo H. Zareei describes his mechatronic sound sculptures in terms of Brutalist design theory. William A. Thompson IV and Jeffrey Albert discuss the role of music production and listening during Thompson’s deployment in Iraq following 9/11.

Jing Wang contributes an overview of the current state

of sound art in China, while Sandra Kazlauskaitė provides insight into similar practices in post-Soviet Lithuania. Tara Rodgers takes a more global view of the political dimensions of electronic music and the possible pathways of sonic activism.

Historical perspective is provided in both Adi Louriya-Hayon's critique of the "sounding body" in the work of Bruce Nauman, and Martyn Hudson's reevaluation of the relation of sound to architecture in Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*. For its "political" issue in 1969 *Source* magazine asked 20 composers: "Have you, or has anyone ever used your music for political or social ends?" For this volume of *LMJ* Alyce Santoro put the same question to 20 composers working today, including several who had been included in the earlier *Source*.

Drawing on his peripatetic musical background, Lukas Ligeti curated the downloadable album *Sonic Commentary: Meaning through Hearing* for this volume. In addition Katia Chornik has contributed a short essay and web link

for her extraordinary *Cantos Cautivos* project, an online archive of songs in the context of detention and torture in Chile under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973–1990). Finally, Larry Polansky—founding editor of *Leonardo Music Journal*—contributes a rather poignant essay on *LMJ*'s first 25 years.

Art historian Susan Tallman has observed that the idea of "political art" suffers from an innate contradiction: the complexity and ambiguity of good art precludes the pedantic clarity usually needed to incite political action [2]. South African artist William Kentridge has articulated a possible solution to that conundrum: the idea that ambiguity itself can constitute a defiant political statement, which brings us back to where we started: The feedback disrupting the megaphone.

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## Endnote

Mark Trayle passed away in February 2015, at the age of 60. Mark was a founding member of The Hub, a beloved faculty member at CalArts, and a contributor to and peer reviewer for *Leonardo Music Journal*. He will be missed by many, and this volume of *LMJ* is dedicated to his memory.

## References and Notes

- 1 William Kentridge, in *William Kentridge: Drawings for Projection, Four Animated Films* (Johannesburg: Goodman Gallery, 1992) n.p.
- 2 Conversation with author, June 2015.