

**Exhuming The Dead: Traversing Sound Art, Music and Performance**  
**A Response to Nigel Helyer's 'Sound Arts and The Living Dead'**

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Upon initial reading of Nigel Helyer's article 'Sound Arts and The Living Dead' in *Realtime* Issue 70, I was outraged at his complete lack of understanding of the laptop performances he so confidently criticized and so casually dismissed his comments as ignorant and self-important, as did I imagine many of my fellow laptop performers and improvisers. However, upon further reading and discussion I was compelled to reply, feeling that, despite its verbose and at times unfounded arguments, Helyer's article does, at its heart, touch on some very interesting and important issues.

'Sound Arts and The Living Dead' argued against what Helyer sees as a historical revisionism that has emerged in recent years positing laptop performance as 'sound art' at the exclusion of any and all other artistic explorations in sound, be they radiophonics, installation or the sound sculpture's Helyer himself produces. Helyer's own practice has demonstrated an extended, and committed, interest in the sounding of objects, which may go some way to explaining his complaint against laptop performance and what he describes as its 'profound level of banality'. Though certainly few would argue the banal nature of the laptop and its use in performance - as Helyer points out, 'personal computers are now as ubiquitous as the Singer sewing machine in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century'. However, interrogating this criticism, is it not equally valid to argue the banality of the guitar as an instrument of modern music?

Laptop performance should indeed be recognised as banal, and purposefully so, but this banality cannot be explained as the result of a complete disinterest in performance or commitment to the Acousmatic. Laptop performance does not exist entirely in the French Acousmatic tradition, as Helyer observes. Instead, it fuses these traditions with those of popular music performance and more conceptual artistic traditions, laptop performers existing as workers of ambiguous responsibility who traverse a liminal space between the roles of musician, DJ and artist. Through a banality of instrumentation, coupled with a conscious absence of gestural performance (which itself is contradictory and inevitably incomplete), laptop performance exists as a paradox, presenting an ephemeral space of sounding, grounded neither entirely through existing languages of popular musical performance, any sort of musical avant-garde nor more established artistic conventions, and sitting uneasily between art and music as a discipline, accepted fully by neither and instead functioning as an exclusive sub-culture, often to its own detriment.

Helyer sees his complaints against laptop performance, and its apparent current position as the one and only 'sound art', as the result of 'an alarming fog of amnesia that obscures the recent archaeology of sound art and sonic performance' that has allowed a 'hijacking of the term sound art...and it's repurposing as a synonym for laptop electronica', perhaps to some extent due to the exclusivity and isolationism I mention as so common to laptop performance. However, in constructing this argument he makes the patronizing assumption that those involved in cultures of laptop performance are somehow ignorant of histories of exploration in sound, citing examples such as the Futurists and Luigi Russolo's text *The Art Of Noises* as well as snidely suggesting younger artists are unaware of William Burroughs, or for that matter that it was he who initially claimed 'language is a virus' and not Laurie Anderson years later. Contradicting this view, I would argue that most laptop performers are in fact unusually knowledgeable when it comes to histories of sound and music. And in fact many of the laptop performers in Australia have passed in recent years through the newly established university degrees in Electronic and Media Arts now so popular at institutions such as UTS, UWS, COFA and RMIT, in which they are commonly taught art and music theory side-by-side and emerge well aware of both histories. Prior to this it seems most identified as either sound artists or musicians, considering their work either 'sound art' or music. However these are boundaries that remain undefined and now seem more irrelevant than ever as, since the work of those such as Russolo, Burroughs and Cage, all sound exists approachable as music, and indeed all music recognizable as sound.

Far from claiming 'sound art' as their own, many laptop performers prefer to consider themselves musicians or, more commonly still, retreat from the argument with mumbled comments that they 'just work with sound' and, if anything, the use of the terminology 'sound art' to describe performative, and frequently quite musical, sound has been championed by publications such as *Realtime* in an attempt to theorize an inherently elusive art form. Rather than exposing the failures or pretensions of laptop performance, what Helyer's article highlights is the disjuncture that has emerged in Australian sound culture in recent years in the form of a generational split between older artists who have commonly worked either in the field of 'sound art' or that of music and younger artists who are now emerging in a field where the two seem almost impossible to distinguish.