

Sound in Contemporary Art: Aspiring to the Condition of Music

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The question of the role of sound in the arts has received much attention of late. In recent years it has become common to hear discussion around 'sound art' and its place in the gallery. It is familiar for so called 'sound art' to be shown in galleries around the world, supported by funding bodies and even included in festivals previously reserved for 'visual art'.

Given this acceptance, why then do so many in the arts community profess a lack of understanding of 'sound art' when they confidently claim to understand other art forms? Under what circumstances does the, far older, art form of music become 'sound art'? What separates 'sound art' from 'visual art'? Why does 'sound art' remain a marginalised form with limited audiences? And why is 'sound art' seen as insular and exclusionary in its practice?

It appears that the use of the term 'sound art' itself has led to a degree of confusion amongst artists, reviewers and curators alike. Referring ostensibly to all art works presented in a gallery context that focus on the use of sound, the term is itself relatively new compared with age old art forms such as painting, music and even writing. There is no discrete practice of 'sound art'. 'Sound art' as a terminology is representative of a shift in perceptual approach to the auditory arts, attempting to place such work in the milieu of art rather than that of music. Just as 'visual art' refers to a vast array of artistic practices so too must 'sound art', and even then both terms fail to encapsulate the plurality of practices to which they refer and construct arbitrary sensory distinctions between the arts which are increasingly meaningless in a contemporary context.

It has been suggested to me many times that 'sound art' remains impenetrable to many because of the inability of sound to 'refer outside itself', a reiteration of the familiar argument that music is the only closed semiotic system and certainly not a new argument, save for the significant substitution of sound for music.

Writing in the nineteenth century, Walter Pater coined the famous quotation 'all art constantly aspires toward the condition of music'. He argued that music presents form and matter as one, appealing to the senses not just the intellect, and therefore stands as ideal in the arts:

All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music. For while in all other kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it. That the mere matter of a poem, for instance, its subject, namely, its given incidents or situation — that the mere matter of a picture, the actual circumstances of an event, the actual topography of a landscape — should be nothing without the form, the spirit, of the handling, that this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter: this is what all art constantly strives after, and achieves in different degrees (Pater 1922; pp.105).

It is widely believed that these ideas stem from the work of philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer and his major work *The World as Will and Representation*, in which he constructed a detailed aesthetic theory that placed music in a privileged position in relation to other art forms. Schopenhauer considered music to be the only non-representational art, an immediate and abstract art form that possessed an immanent quality that remained unattainable to the other, more material, art forms of the time, and was in fact a source of inspiration for other arts such as poetry. In his own words he said of music:

It stands alone, quite cut off from all the other arts. In it we do not recognize the copy or repetition of any Idea of existence in the world. Yet it is such a great and exceedingly noble art, its effect on the inmost nature of man is so powerful, and it is so entirely and deeply understood by him in his inmost consciousness as a perfectly universal language, the distinctness of which surpasses even that of the perceptible world itself (Schopenhauer 1966; pp.330-331).

It is interesting that apparently there has been such a paradoxical reversal from the discourse around music's relation to art in the nineteenth century to more recent discourse that has placed 'sound art' as impenetrable to most due to the perceived non-referential character of the form. I suggest that this reversal is the result of a shift from a focus on music as a form to one on sound as a medium.

Attempts at understanding the nature of sound remain, historically, a relatively recent affair. In fact, as Jonathan Sterne noted in his book *The Audible Past*, 'prior to the nineteenth century, philosophies of sound usually considered their object through a particular, idealized instance such as speech or music' (Sterne 2003; pp.23). For example, Pythagoras developed a series of equations as translations of musical notes after realising that the sounds emanating from Blacksmiths hitting their anvils were beautiful and harmonious and eventually discovered this was due to the relative sizes of the anvils being simple ratios of one another. However, he undertook this work attempting to better understand the art of music rather than the nature of sound. Leonardo Da Vinci was perhaps the first thinker to attempt to understand the nature of sound, writing that:

Just as a stone flung into the water becomes the centre and cause of many circles, and as sound diffuses itself in circles in the air; so any object, placed in the luminous atmosphere, diffuses itself in circles, and fills the surrounding air with infinite images of itself (Da Vinci 1977; pp. 203).

According to Martin Kemp, in his book *Leonardo Da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man*, Da Vinci understood sound as 'a series of successive 'tremors' rather than as linear movements of actual material. He noted that tremors from different sources crossing the same space will mingle yet remain discrete and separately discernible, as revealed by the manner in which we can simultaneously see more than one light source and distinguish more than one source of sound, just as the circular ripples from two stones thrown into water intersect yet retain their geometrical integrity' (Kemp 2006; pp.114). Prior to that point in time many had, like Pythagoras, undertaken related study, but always with constructions such as the voice or music in mind as the object of study, rather than sound itself. It is only after the Leonardo Da Vinci and others in the last five hundred years or so that we have begun to focus on sound itself and approach it as an immanent perceptual modality.

More recently, it wasn't until the development of technologies of sound reproduction, led by phonography, in the late eighteenth century that all sounds were rendered potential as manipulable in the name of the arts. Subsequently the work of artists such as the Italian Futurists, the French school of musique concrete and finally John Cage himself established the possible use of all sounds in music and by extension in the arts more broadly. It was in this context that the notion of 'sound art' emerged. The development of photographic technology assumed mimetic responsibility in the visual arts from the art of painting, allowing the development of modernist abstract painting. Similarly, although it advanced the possibilities for auditory arts beyond music, the development of phonography resulted in a corresponding development of mimetic expectation on such technologies, just as exists on photography to some extent, to this day.

Sound technologies were, and largely still are, expected to reproduce 'true' or 'original' sounds with discrete and recognisable sources, as is exemplified in the rhetoric of 'high-fidelity' that accompanied these technologies, a trend we see even today with advertising describing 'hi-fi' stereos and other equipment. It is this milieu that auditory art works are interpreted and, corresponding, required to offer 'fidelity', 'meaning' and 'understanding' to its audiences in a way that is not required of other art forms such as abstract expressionist painting.

Straddling the worlds of art and music, the auditory arts have remained marginalised throughout their existence. Artists who explore the use of sound in art and/or music beyond the western twelve-tone musical tradition are dismissed as 'experimental'. Continually we here talk of the 'avant-garde' in music and the arts despite the work of luminaries such as Luigi Russolo. Pierre Schaeffer and John Cage in the auditory arts and Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol in the visual arts supposedly having opened the door to the possibility of viewing absolutely anything as art or music over fifty years ago.

Performances, exhibitions and releases from artists working directly with sound in the arts usually attract relatively small audiences precisely because of the failure of so many to 'understand', even though they are usually not asked to do anything of the sort. It is only artists working with sound who somehow open up a visually or conceptually digestible approach to their work that are able to generate interest in the broader art world. For example, Christian Marclay works with sound in almost all his works yet his focus is on the materiality of sound, expressed principally through his work with records, and so he has not only been accepted more widely but has come to be seen not as a 'sound artist' but simply as an artist. Along with the personality types and interests of those attracted to such work, who we must admit are often not a particularly social nature, cultures around the auditory arts are often isolationist and unwelcoming to outsiders precisely because of this lack of 'understanding', preferring to develop self-sufficient communities rather than answer the same questions again and again from outsiders asking them to explain themselves.

The term 'sound art' is primarily the result of a push for legitimacy from artists and musicians working in the arts who do not feel completely comfortable wearing either moniker. Really very little separates the auditory arts from their visual cousins and if artworks produced entirely from sound are presented in a gallery context without any sort of material dimensions then I would argue that, save for some examples of more conceptual works, they are presented as music and regardless can be received simply as art. It has only been around two hundred years since we even began to regard the senses as separate and distinct and yet we now see modes of sensory perception as some sort of insurmountable distinction in form despite the fact that increasingly we are presented with mixed media installation work presented which not only invites audiences to watch and listen but to touch, smell and sometimes taste as well.

'Sound art' and indeed any distinction made between the auditory and visual arts in a contemporary context is nothing more than an arbitrary delineation based on modes of sensory perception and if we dispense with such sensory distinctions as a basis for denoting art forms then we will be in a better position to conceive the arts as a whole. We should dispense with our preoccupation with 'understanding' and approach art with an acknowledged and renewed naivety, engaging with a greater concept of total aesthetic experience and attempting to come to terms with the immanent. In reality all the arts are inherently based in our own sensory perception. Anyone and everyone is equipped to approach, explore and enjoy so called 'sound art', just as we are any of the arts, if only we can get past that little phrase 'I don't understand'.

References

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