Sound Art & Performativity

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Art as Process

Over the course of the 20th century artistic practice has challenged the closed form of the artwork (Eco 1962), and developed new kinds of processual strategies. Although temporal arts had long existed as closed works in music, theatre and ballet, in the course of the second half of the 20th century these traditional forms dissolved, and their range substantially expanded. Processual practices invaded all genres and shifted to the forefront of contemporary art.

As visual art moved into space, temporal components were introduced into both creation and encounter; mobiles, installations and kinetic sculptures all lent work a durational dimension. Closed representational form was pushed to its limits in the free-form abstractions of Abstract Expressionism, eventually pointing beyond itself in the processual work of Jackson Pollock, and others. Chance and Process techniques challenged tightly controlled compositional methods and injected music with a new impetus. As the finished artwork fell into disrepute - not least as a result of the workings of art's institutions - practitioners envisaged a different function and purpose for art in the wider context of a rapidly expanding mass and media culture. The conceptual strategy of linking art to life, rather than mothballing it in museums and concert halls, called for an open, dynamic and ephemeral kind of artwork that made artistic practices less rigid and certain. Processuality became vital to this change, stressing the unfinished and continuous quality of an immediate and unfolding creative process - whether executed by artists themselves, in front of passive audiences, or reciprocally, with participating audiences, or by encounterers alone, in Events, Happenings and Actions.

Cage's conceptual ideas about the emancipation of sound (Cage 1966, 4), the liberation of structure (Cage 1966, 5) and the new immediacy of contact between composers and sound, which eliminates "intermediary performers" (Cage 1966, 4), acted as conduits between different art forms, challenging the exclusive worlds of both music and visual art. Inspired by these ideas, Fluxus and Performance artists, such as Allan Kaprow, George Brecht, Al Hansen, Max Neuhaus and Dick Higgins, sought a "lifelike art" that favoured "connectedness and wide-angle awareness" (Kaprow 2003, 204).

This set in train radical changes in the way art – in both its cultural role, and aesthetic and formal character - was understood. With artists championing process over product, some came to speak of a "performative turn in the arts" (Mersch 2002, 224).

Performative activities, traditionally reserved in the temporal high arts for the faithful execution of preconceived scripts, libretti or scores by rigorously trained musicians, actors and dancers, now became essential to the open, ephemeral work, shifting the focus from the finished art object to the artistic process itself. These activities were of various kinds, ranging from open processes of creation, through participatory - and later interactive - practices, to more recent context-interventions. By bringing the audience directly into the work, art relinquished its didactic modernist attitude. Authors rejected their former role as messianic geniuses - or were declared "dead" – in order to make way for the reader (Barthes 1967; Foucault 1969). Art became a process of exchange in which artists acted as facilitators, setting up aesthetic situations, affording aesthetic experiences that could be realised only by the encounterer. This widened our notion of artistry beyond virtuosity and artistic genius, so that our understanding of musicality could now include "a person's ability to

perceive, understand and create sonic experiences". (Brown, this publication).

As artists set out "to forsake the conventional art scene and escape to the streets" (Bieber 2010, 4/5), the traditional tripartite division between composer/ writer as conceiver of closed works, musician/ actor as performer or executor of works, and audience as final receiver, dissolved. Scores changed their appearance, becoming drawings or texts, giving way eventually to improvisations, some of which were delegated to the public by shifting the performance off stage and into the auditorium, or by handing out general instructions for the audience to perform. Audiences became both executors and co-creators of works, which existed only in their actions, while composers became both performers and their own public, developing works through a process of trial and error - testing for desired effects through immediate feedback and putting themselves constantly in the position of both performer and audience.

Art shifts here "from creation to discovery" (Mersch 2002, 258) - both in execution and conception - leaving it up to the encounterers what to do with the situation presented and how to engage with it: "passively or actively according to [their] talents for 'engagement'." (Kaprow 2003, 11) Thus art and life truly fuse, since the kind of experience the encounterer draws from a situation depends on the particular sensorial complex he or she brings to it. In consequence, autonomous high art conventions, based on genre perception and expertise, no longer have traction, and are replaced by models that are experiential. Artists do not pass on messages that have to be deciphered by their audiences, but rather facilitate experiences, which encounterers make their own by mobilising sensibilities developed over the span of their lives and in relation to their specific cultural circumstances. By this, art becomes truly individual, since the constellation of individual sensibilities and degrees of sensory refinement depend on the physiological, psychological and cultural qualities of the encounterer's life (Dewey 1934). And, as much as the experiences drawn from art rely on the experiences gathered in life, so much they feed back into life itself, closing the circle of exchange. By facilitating challenging experiences, art can assume the unique cultural task of de-conditioning sensibilities inevitably programmed by an invasive mass and media culture.

The kind of experience mobilised, however, always depends on the particularity of the art practice in question.

Performativity in SoundArt
The second half of the 20th century saw a vast diversification in the arts and the birth of many hybrid practices in which components of hitherto separate single-medium genres, as well as of domains external to art (science, communal life, sports etc.), fused in a synergetic way to form new art practices - such as Performance Art, Event Art, Kinetic Art, Installation Art, new Music Theatre, Screen Dance, Light-Space projects, and many others.

SoundArt is one of those hybrids. In it, sound escapes its autonomous existence and establishes unconventional relations with space, light, still and moving images, objects, sculptures, environments, locations and, not least, with the encounterers, their corporeal movements, orientation, inquisitiveness and affectivity. The manifold cross-media combinations into which sound can enter underwrite a large and heterogeneous field of art practice, which is anything but uniform. Unlike music, which deals with coherent, self-referential forms to which all external conditions are tailored, SoundArt deals with relational configurations in which the different components present in the work – of which sound is merely one – enter into specific relations with one another – which include context and encounterer as determining components. The resulting constellations are of a diverse synergetic nature and evoke diverse synaesthetic experiences.

In multi-component works, the single components cannot exist as self-contained, internally coherent and exclusive phenomena. They must assume an open and inclusive structure in order to bond with other constitutive parts of the work. In respect of sound, such relational qualities can be found in the discrete and discontinuous nature of 'sound events' (Geräusche), which permit other components to interleave, and in the continuous, redundant, steady and repetitive character of 'noise' (Rauschen), which acts as a ground on which other components can operate. In works of SoundArt – especially those of a performative nature – the coherent, self-contained sound

structures characteristic of traditional music are therefore rather the exception.

Although SoundArt is often seen as a durational art form without a performer (Sanio 2003, 13/14) in which technology performs the work through speakers or other devices, on closer inspection, and in consideration of the changed concept of art, we find that performative processes are indeed present in SoundArt and are crucial to it.

1 Some SoundArt practitioners bridge the gap between music and SoundArt by linking their pieces to the tradition of self-built instruments or by continuing to rely on presentational modes of performance, using performers as a kinetic force. Sculptors, designers or engineers, such as Bernard and François Baschet, or Harry and Val Bertoia, constructed sculptures with distinctive sonic features that led a double life, both as silent gallery objects and concert instruments that could be "played" by musicians or audiences at different levels of competence or playfulness. The Baschet brothers' statuesque Sculptures Sonores (1950s) produce complex harmonics when bowed, tapped or stroked, and have featured as solo instruments in composed pieces, while Bertoia's metal rod sculptures are easily animated by touch, responding to simple hand gestures that draw encounterers into repetition through tactility and an immediate relation between gesture and sound.

Self-built instruments designed with a distinct spatial dimension can act as intermediaries between conventional instruments and installations. In Trimpin's Liquid Percussion (1991) a drip release system, suspended high over a long tray filled with different-sized metal and glass vessels, releases - in response to the depression of keys on a standard musical keyboard - drops of water, which fall sonorously onto membranes in the vessels' interiors. Depending on the skill of the player, percussive sequences can be played randomly or through the exercise of musical skills. Release can also be fully computer controlled, turning an installational instrument into an automated installation.

By extending strings beyond the confinement of an instrument body and into space, the space itself becomes a resonating chamber. The long-string instruments of Ellen Fullman or Jose Rose can function as instruments as well as installations. Made to vibrate through the friction of rosin-coated fingers, stroking, tapping or bowing, these strings release rich streams of harmonics or noise-clusters, depending on the length and quality of the strings, the way they are installed and amplified, and the space in which they are installed. Massive long-string installations, such as Paul Panhuyssen's Two Suspended Grand Pianos (1990), may be played by musicians in concert situations or by amateurs in galleries.

2 In works close to performance art, hired performers use muscle power to initiate certain kinds of sounds or sound effects. In Gordon Monahan's Swinging Speakers (1982), for instance, one or several performers swing a speaker sounding a sine tone above their heads on a long rope to produce Doppler-shifted pitches. In Ray Lee's work Swing (1994), performers swing loudspeaker cones high above the audience. Benoît Maubrey, in his audio performances, has performers walk through indoor or outdoor spaces in costumes with built-in loudspeakers, diffusing sound spatially as they interact with the audience and the surrounding environment.

All these performative actions are spatially orientated and consist in simple physical movements, such as swinging, pulling or walking. Performers take on the role of movement providers: they act, and the audience experiences the effects of their actions. This kind of performance is often rather basic and repetitive and requires no specific musical training. Since the skill called for falls to the level of "anyone can do it", it can easily be realised by amateurs.

Chico MacMurtrie, on the other hand, builds robotic performers that eliminate human presence altogether and replace it with electrical cables and pneumatic valves. His anthropomorphic robots play traditional instruments - drums, cellos, gongs, xylophones &c. - completely automatically.

3 In sound installations we come across performative actions of a very different kind, which are linked to a very different mode of perception. Sound shifts from a fixed point of reference, such

as a stage, a sculpture, or some localised action, to a spatial configuration in which sound sources are arranged in a conditioning or articulating fashion (Minard 1999) - spread throughout enclosed or delineated open spaces. Unlike the frontal listening perspective of a concert situation, spatial sound installations are typically immersive. Stepping into the space, encounterers find themselves surrounded by strategically positioned loudspeakers or other sound sources. Inside the sound space, they become part of it, experiencing it through corporeal movement (Leitner 1998 and 2008). Walking in sound-treated spaces, encounterers follow their own paths in their own time, according to their own sensorial responsiveness, assembling thereby sound sequences, or sound impressions, unique to themselves. Changing perspectives, they explore the soundscape as well as the spatial environment, constantly finding new listening positions and alternative trajectories of movement.

These activities are always synaesthetic, since encounterers take in sounds, visual information, temperature, tactile sensation and impressions of gravity and spatial dimension simultaneously. Often subconscious, these sensory readings of space and situation rely on an individual's existing sensibility, and correlate to the kind of connections she or he is capable of making: patient or impatient, attentive or inattentive, focused or distracted, imaginative or unimaginative, thorough or superficial, interested or uninterested, engaged or disengaged. As spatial soundworks take shape in individual experience, the kind of engagement operative in the encounter can make or break a work, since the work only exists through the sum of an individual's physical, sensorial and mental performances, and not outside it.

While walking through a space, following sound movements along a line of speakers - as in Hans Peter Kuhn's Jumps (1992) - encounterers will not only get a sense of the dimensions and architectural characteristics of the space they are in, but also a sense of position and distance-away of the sounds they hear. Climbing up and down a twelve-storey granite-clad stairwell alongside the suspended parabolic dishes and reflectors of Bernhard Leitner's Kaskade (2006), visitors are enabled to experience sound as it reflects off the reverberant walls of the installation space, alongside the parallel and counter-movements of the sounds in relation to their ascending or descending motions. Such spatial sound diffusion encourages encounterers constantly to position and reposition themselves in relation to the sounds they hear by moving their heads and bodies, since "the most important thing for spatial listening is to move around" (Leitner 2010). By tracing sound-reflections on architectural surfaces, or sound-vibrations in responsive materials, spatially deployed, experiences can assume visual and haptic qualities. This is common to many of Leitner's works.

4 When interactive elements are added to installations, encounterers are given the possibility to introduce changes actively into the existing sound configuration. Andres Bosshard, for instance, uses swings in his spatial works Rotophonia (2003) and Sound Garden (2005). Swinging back and forth, encounterers shift their listening position along with the cluster of speakers attached between the ropes overhead, changing thereby not only the trajectory of the sounds broadcast by the speakers, but also the constellation of sounds in the space.

Technology has extended performative interventions into sound-space installations, making them more immediate and spontaneous. From single movement sensors picking up simple hand gestures - as in Peter Vogel's early cybernetic constructions – to complex triggering mechanisms, encounterers become increasingly instrumental in the way sounds are activated.

Sensor mechanisms can trigger kinetic sound-makers, as they do in Darrell Viner's Eight Times Three (2000), or recorded sounds, as in Janet Cardiff and George B Miller's Dark Pool (1995), allowing interactors (McGinley 2007) to "play" installations through intentional or accidental movement – their own or in combination with others. Reactive configurations of this kind often rely on identifiable feedback to allocate sonic events to the movements that trigger them, thus encouraging repeated and continuous visitor performance. Interactive installations lacking such evident correlations may become confusing and discourage further interaction.

The development of digital interfaces facilitates a more creative and intuitive kind of interactivity. Motion-tracking, gesture or sound-feature recognition, for instance, can pick up performative events

and translate them in real time - through generative audio software and mapping - into coherent sound processes, so that corporeal and spatial movements seemingly create sound out of thin air. Effective and engaging interaction here depends not only on the kind of involvement an interactor can devise, but, to a great extent, on the flexibility of the set-up itself, which needs to be rich in variations to induce creative interactions from its encounterers. An artist's preparatory work in devising open or sufficiently complex sonification and composition techniques is of vital importance if a flexible system for the encounterer to play with and explore is to be generated. Such interactive systems often form a bridge between performance art and music, since they can also be used by dancers, performers and musician-composers.

5 Diffusing sound in space spurs encounterers to explorative activities. These explorations are often guided by installational configurations of sound sources in combination with objects, light or image projections or, in open spaces, by focused attention. Navigations through unfamiliar outdoor territories in sound walks that draw attention to particular soundmarks or to the keynote or signal sounds of a given place (Schafer 1977, 10) can be guided by artists familiar with the terrain by way of marks at specific locations, as in Akio Suzuki's Otodate, or by the use of maps, as in Christina Kubisch's Electrical Walks(2005). Such navigations can also be achieved through narrative frameworks in the form of accompanying audio recordings, as in Janet Cardiff's The Missing Voice (1999 – present), or through a combination of recordings and physical guidance, as with Lundahl & Seitl's Symphony of a Missing Room (2009), in which dancers lead blindfolded visitors through an array of different sound-space situations.

Guidance can be vital to sound navigation. When withheld, the simple action of meaningful positioning in relation to sound on the part of the encounterer can present real challenges, as happened, for instance, in Bruce Nauman's Raw Material installation (2005) in the turbine hall of London's Tate Modern. These works might not reveal themselves easily and encounterers need considerable experience with the medium - or a keen sense of exploration – to be able to connect with them.

When artists act as facilitators, delegating execution through exploratory action to encounterers, art becomes discovery. By mobilising their own curiosity and sense of exploration, encounterers can take inspiration from guidance provided and then utilise it in their performance, thereby expanding their own experience. The transference to everyday life of new experiences gained though SoundArt can lead to an altered perception of familiar environments, and may work against the anaesthetic effect of increasing noise pollution and challenge the sensory conditioning inculcated by mainstream culture. In the context of a culture dominated by mass media, this de-conditioning effect is a vital function that SoundArt artists have claimed for themselves.

The more involved encounterers become, the more profound the experience and the sensorial impact of the work. Heightened context awareness is part of this effect. A creative interactive performance - as suggested in Akio Suzuki's concept of "throwing & following" (Schulz 1998) - can enhance exploratory activity, as interactors are encouraged to introduce their own sounds into existing soundscapes (throwing), and to track their traces (following). Such explorative activities can be pursued by encounterers and artists alike, and may take the shape of distinctive sound improvisations, which are executed at specific locations.

Site-specific installations often make reference to social or cultural situations, or histories, which have to be deciphered by the encounterer in order to become relevant to the experience. This makes such installations particularly effective as part of communal projects, since contextual awareness is integral to people's everyday lives.

6 Beyond interactions with objects, situations, environments, installations or spaces, recent conceptual developments in the performative arts – as exemplified, for instance, in flash mobbing - stress direct communal interaction between members of the public. These can assume sonic

dimensions. Paul Matisse, in his Kandell Band installation (1987) in a Boston subway station, set up three sound sculptures, which can be played by idling passengers waiting for a train, using mechanical levers. Jon Rose, on the other hand, makes use of advanced interactive sensor technology, combined with computer software, to sonify balls of various dimensions, which emit sounds on contact, and can be thrown, pushed, tapped, rolled or stroked by individuals, in pairs, teams or crowds. In such works, the performative interaction between people is essential, adding an immediate and irrefutably communal aspect to the sonic experience. Sport projects of this sort are intuitive and fun, and can bring music directly to communities, "making music important again for them" (Rose 2011). Such performances are linked to new artistic concepts of intervention and interference that are characteristic of new communal and political tendencies in contemporary arts, and which speak again of new departures in art practice – SoundArt included.

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