

... sound's dream of us<sup>1</sup>

## The SoundArt of Douglas Henderson

by Dr. Kersten Glandien

My first encounter with Douglas Henderson's sound work was accidental. It was a scorching summer's day in New York and I took shelter in a shady passageway in the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University. Suddenly, a refreshing chill surrounded me. It took a moment to realize that this sensation arose not only from the shady environment, but from the fact that the shade was, so to say, sonically amplified. I was enveloped in ice-cold sounds - a spatial crackling and rustling of countless ice shards, blending with delicate high bell tones and occasional scrapings that gradually gained in width, density and intensity before giving way slowly to planes of moving water-sounds - to gurgling, trickling and burbling. These sounds came from five loudspeakers attached to one of the internal passage walls, reflected back off the opposite wall to fill the entire passageway. The soundscape shifted from familiar and delicate to complex and intense - at times enchanted like the water scenes in Tarkovsky's *Stalker* - turning the passageway intended, as its name indicates, to be passed through, into a place for lingering. I left the Ice Breaker only reluctantly. This time and place-dependent installation so intrigued me that I was determined to meet the artist. Two days later, I was sitting opposite Douglas Henderson in a New York restaurant. We talked of American politics, SoundArt and Europe - and the rest is history: in 2007 Henderson came to Berlin and stayed, supported at first by the DAAD, now as a resident.

Originally trained in classical and electroacoustic composition, Henderson was attracted from the start by the relation of sound to other media. So at first he worked like so many others in dance, before beginning to inquire after less common connections. In a workshop in Paris in 2001, he encountered Xenakis's notion of the "extra-imaginary", referring to that which lies outside one's imagination. Determined "to make things that I cannot imagine"<sup>2</sup>. Henderson found himself attracted by the fact that sound not only appears auditively but can, by its very nature, also adopt corporeal, spatial and visual forms; that sound, through its physical properties, manifests itself in different media and thus exists as a genuine media hybrid: as wave patterns in liquids, pressure conditions in airspace and kinetic energy in responsive materials. This synergetic dimension has been inscribed in various ways in Henderson's SoundArt works ever since; and it is precisely from the close interrelation between the sonic and the non-sonic that his works take shape. In his *Untitled*, for instance, the visual aspect dominates: we see the changing patterns created on four water surfaces excited by sub-woofers, while the 55-minute four-channel composition that creates these patterns remains acoustically inaudible - being pitched below our threshold of hearing. In Henderson's vertical installations, on the other hand, the sound grows out of spiral-shaped loudspeaker columns, as if from the armature of a sculpture around which it forms as volume into space. Sonic energy is conveyed through fluctuations of air pressure that spread latently around the loudspeaker column and assume a palpable presence - an "invisible physical object, made entirely of vibrating air"<sup>3</sup>. Sound here becomes a sculptural body, a delimited spatial compactness: tangible, palpable - even visible, almost. The visitor is drawn toward and around it. Ascending and descending sequences of sound convey themselves through direct physical contact: the eye and the entire body follow the sounds involuntarily.

This attraction is emphasised by the audio dimension of the sound composition.

Since the public always takes priority in Henderson's considerations, a direct relation to the sound

material is of particular importance for him. "It is in the sounds nearest to us, the ordinary events that we process daily, that the heaviest psychological power is harnessed."<sup>4</sup> This is why Henderson works with concrete sonic material: environmental sounds or sounds of materials harvested in custom-built studio contraptions, which he gleans in elaborate and multiply repeated recordings. He cannot imagine, he says, using "existing sound material by other people."<sup>5</sup> And he prefers to use "simple sounds that are familiar to the listener."<sup>6</sup> Building on this closeness, he leads these sounds into abstraction – gesturally related to the content of the work in hand. The familiarity of the original sound remains inscribed in the abstraction. He zooms virtually into the sounds, isolating characteristic features to winnow granular, abstract, sound fragments. On occasion he will use poetic texts, not only to inspire him with content, but also to provide spoken voice material with its own inherent texture and diffusion. Fragments (words, syllables, vowels), gleaned through the deconstruction of the original text-gestalt, will eventually be spatially diffused – linearly as in IN ORDER; in planes as in ... therefore I am; or vertically and spirally as in Babel V: Dream Man.

In sound-processing, Henderson is particularly attracted to multiple structures, and so initially selects materials that already appear as multiples and are sonically, so to say, "suitable" for multiplication: splintering glass, dripping water, rustling leaves, crackling ice, popping corn or ringing coins. Henderson relies on analogue granulation, which – far from uniform digital granular synthesis - assigns a slightly different sound character to each individual fragment. Those sound components that shine through from the original material, frequency figurations that Bill Viola calls the "second shadow existence"<sup>7</sup> of the object, lend Henderson's compositional stratifications, sequencings and convolutions their multi-variant, lively textures. These can only be realised through meticulous detailed work and testify not least to Henderson's engineering expertise; acquired over decades as a professional mastering engineer. As well as multiplication procedures, Henderson often applies sound processing techniques such as 'convolution' – "a way of imprinting the frequency characteristics of one sound onto another - and [...] simple mixing techniques, using various forms of distortion, equalisation and speed changes to make two dissimilar things occupy the same spectral space/time."<sup>8</sup> These morphed sound figures and precisely superimposed sound layers not only constitute the building blocks for the vertical sound flows in Henderson's loudspeaker spirals, but also articulate his metaphorical relationship to the bizarre hybrid creature in the paintings by Breughel and Bosch made conceptually manifest in the Dukatenscheier.

Here a poetic moment in Henderson's work reveals itself, through which hybridity as well as changes in scale become significant. At the point of intersection between two diversities, poetic energies are released, which push imagination beyond itself. The confrontation of alterities abrogates habitual patterns of imagination and perception, opening up a free space in which imagination, new associations and unaccustomed experiences can thrive. This dramatic tension pervades Henderson's entire aesthetic concept. Sound processing procedures acquire metaphorical significance, the abstract indicates the concrete and together creating a contentual dimension that is intuitively perceptible. The sensory fusion between sound, form, colour, and space-design, infused with Henderson's idiosyncratic humour, acts as a potent catalyst for the synaesthetic experience of his works.

Each new piece starts with a non-sonic idea extracted from drawings, paintings, poems, prose texts or current events. The sources of Henderson's inspiration are wide-ranging, reaching from medieval painting to the current financial crisis, from space flights to comic book heroes, Paul Celan to MC Jabber. His works are conceived, with few exceptions - like Ice Breaker, which is installed outdoors - for closed spaces, partly because of the consistency of the sound and partly because of the fragility of the constructions. Smaller kinetic works, like some of the Superhero-series (Wonder Woman, Flash Gordon, Kosmonaut Gagarin) are skilfully constructed and exquisitely crafted. The loudspeaker, almost obligatory in SoundArt, often becomes "a deliberate and not accidental focus"<sup>9</sup> as a sculptural form; a broadcasting object transformed into an icon. Thus, common loudspeakers blossom, humorously and colourfully, into water bowls (Untitled), brassieres (Wonder Woman), waste pipe components (Dukatenscheier), counterweights (Babel III and V) and vertical spirals (See we rise, Fadensonnen). They are inserted into pedestals (... therefore I am) or

small sculptures (IN ORDER) or - pierced by steel strings - turn into sounding bodies (Flash Gordon).

Henderson's synergetic way of working, his witty intermingling of conceptual sense and artistic technique, opens a wide field of association for the visitor. Behind a humorous obviousness there emerge – through the different aesthetic dimensions of his work - varying sensory perspectives and perspectives of meaning. The latent transition from first contact to deeper exploration of these works amalgamates levels of reception. With its particular blending of the sensual and the abstract, Douglas Henderson's works add their own idiosyncratic nuances to the rich palette of SoundArt.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Inspired by Morton Feldman, who described noise as "music's dream of us".
- 2 Douglas Henderson: Gilding the Dukatenscheißer: Objects in Sound and Sound in Objects. Lecture transcript. June 2010, p.1.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid. p.3
- 5 Henderson in conversation with the author, August 2009.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Viola, Bill (1986) The Sound of One Line Scanning, in Lander, Dan & Lexier Micah (eds) (1990) Sound by Artists pp.39-54. Toronto & Banff: Art Metropole & Walter Philips Gallery, p.43
- 8 Henderson: Gilding the Dukatenscheißer, p.3
- 9 Ibid.