

In Your Ear: Hearing Art in the 21st Century - from mass moca web site

Over the past century, an artform has emerged between the realms of visual art and music. Created by both composers and sculptors, 'sound art' challenges fundamental divisions between these two sister arts and may be found in museums, festivals, or public sites. Works of sound art play on the fringes of our often-unconscious aural experience of a world dominated by the visual. This work addresses our ears in surprising ways: it is not strictly music, or noise, or speech, or any sound found in nature, but often includes, combines, and transforms elements of all of these. Sound art sculpts sound in space and time, reacts to environments and reshapes them, and frames ambient "found" sound, altering our concepts of space, time, music, and noise.

Sound art's redefinition of artistic space and time -- focusing our attention and changing our perception of particular moments through sound -- is often accomplished through the incorporation of new technologies. Technological advances at the turn of the 20th century provided both the fundamental tools of sound art (such as the radio and phonograph) and the modern concept of noise, which arose in tandem with the machine age. Indeed, the roots of sound art can be traced to that time, when new sounds and mechanical devices radically expanded possibilities in the visual arts and music.

When futurist Luigi Russolo, perhaps the first sound artist, published his manifesto *L'arte dei Rumori* (The Art of Noises) in 1913, he envisioned "entire symphonies composed of the sounds of everyday life," including "...the muttering of motors that breathe and pulse with an undeniable animality, the throbbing of valves, the bustle of pistons, the shrieks of power saws, the starting of a streetcar on the tracks, the cracking of whips, the flapping of awnings and flags."

To capture the quality of these sounds, Russolo invented *intonarumori* (noise instruments) which could produce many synthesized timbres over a range of pitches. A modern descendent of the *intonarumori* may be found on the Route 2 overpass near MASS MoCA, where Bruce Odland and Sam Auinger have placed a "tuning tube," part of their Harmonic Bridge installation. This tube collects harmonic strains of traffic noise that are sent to speakers beneath the bridge.

In the field of music, the composer Edgar Varèse attempted the "liberation of sound" in his compositions. His unrealized symphony *Espace*, begun in 1929, would have incorporated "voices in the sky, as though magic, invisible hands turning on and off the knobs of fantastic radios..." Varèse had imagined a performance of the work being broadcast simultaneously in all the capitals of the world. Varèse's works, like those of Walter Fährndrich, whose *Music for a Quarry* is located in the Natural Bridge State Park in North Adams, occupy the liminal space between modern music and sound art. Fährndrich describes his work as music, but music "created for particular spaces and times of day," qualities it shares with sound art.

Sound became a fundamental element of modern art in the work of the Dadaists during the 1910s. Marcel Duchamp's visual and conceptual art, for example, often involved sound. He proposed that "a line of identical sounds could turn around the listener in arabesques (on the right, left, over, under)," creating, for example, "an immense Venus de Milo made of sounds around the listener." Duchamp had a significant impact on the generation of conceptual artists working in the 1960s and '70s, many of whom used sound and referred to their work as 'sound sculpture.'

Hugo Ball, founder of the Dada movement in Zurich, created the *poème simultané*, or simultaneous poem, first presented at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916 with "a high-energy, performance-oriented cacophony of whistling, sighing, grunting, coughing, and singing." His Russian counterparts, such as Wassily Kandinsky and Aleksandr Scriabin, explored similar topics, such as links between visual and aural perception. Following the Bolshevik Revolution, Russian artist Arseni Avraamov directed several monumental sound spectacles in its commemoration. Performed for the fifth anniversary of the Soviet Republic, his *Symphony of Factory Sirens* contained "a huge cast of choirs (joined by spectators), the foghorns of the entire Caspian flotilla, two batteries of artillery guns, a number of full infantry regiments (including a machine-gun division), hydroplanes, and all the factory sirens of [the port-town of Baku](#)."

American composer, artist, and philosopher John Cage was undoubtedly the central figure in the redefinition of sound from the 1950s to the present. His questioning of cultural and artistic practices largely determined the direction of contemporary sound art, temporally and conceptually bridging that of the Futurists and Dadaists working in the 1910s and '20s and that of artists working today. While artists working in the early twentieth century generally reveled in the new, harsh noises of industry and machinery, Cage and many later artists listened for the subtle harmonies that were generated by chance in the natural and built environment. In his "silent" piece *4'33"*, created in 1952, a performer sits at a piano for four minutes and thirty-three seconds without producing a sound, simply turning the pages of the score and closing and opening the piano lid to indicate the three 'movements' of the piece. Chance determined ambient sound (the coughing of the audience, the rustling of programs, and creaking of chairs, for example) becomes the music. Christina Kubisch's *Clocktower Project*, drawing from this tradition, also relies on chance: the position and intensity of the sun, mediated by a computer program, determine the sequencing of tones in the compositions; a passing cloud changes everything.

In recent years, festivals in the United States, Japan, Austria, and Germany have highlighted the multifariousness of current sound art practice. MASS MoCA's 1998 *Earmarks* exhibition of seven sound art installations was one of the largest yet held on the East Coast. The field of sound art has remained a fertile one, in part because constant technological innovation -- now, as at the beginning of the 20th century -- provides new tools and new concepts of sound to those with ears to hear them.