

Still and Moving Lines

Listening and Signification in Sound Art

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NOTE:

DVDs containing 'Recorded Performances' are included with the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

Abstract

This dissertation explores the act of listening within the context of sound art, examining how a particular mode of listening is essential to understanding and appreciating sound art works, and how this differs from conventional music contexts.

While sound art is regarded as an art form and area of musical practice in its own right, it is often a discipline that is misunderstood or overlooked due to its cognitive impenetrability. A heightened form of awareness and listening is important to its reception by the listener, whilst it also informs the aesthetic and compositional decisions of the artist.

The aim of the current research is to examine works where the artist has incorporated listening as a key element of his/her work. From here the relationship between sound art and the role of listening is scrutinised. Specific focus is given to sound art works which incorporate forms of performance, installation and visual media that transmit and realise the artist's intent.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Tristan Louth-Robins and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Introduction

As the first decade of the 21st Century draws to a close, sound art is as omnipresent within the arts as it has ever been. The last ten years have proven a highly active period for sound art and have seen it emerge from the fields of the avant-garde, experimental music and electronic music to establish itself as an artistic field in its own right. The term sound art is used throughout to describe a form of artistic practice that utilises musical and non-musical sound with artistic emphasis placed on the physical condition of sound, its transmission and reception – encapsulating various aspects of contemporary electronic and experimental music practice.¹ Sound art is now recognised as part of the global arts lexicon, it is as familiar to our ears and holds as much sway as its forebearers, musique concrète and electronic music.

The act of listening is inseparable from sound art. Just as any mode of listening is crucial where sound is concerned (such as the Western concert hall where cultural precepts and protocols apply) in sound art a different mode of listening is implied – a form of audition that resides beyond conventions and cultural learning, on the periphery of the senses and aesthetics. In the omnipresent visual culture of the Western world the eye dominates the ear and as a result, in a subordinate role the act of listening is shaped by cultural practices where music has defined parameters with a structured language, codification and set of behaviours. In this scenario, Western ears aren't readily receptive to sound art, which more often than not shuns all known musical conventions and thus joins the rest of the unordered, extraneous sounds of the world.

Sound art finds its locale beyond the concert hall, commonly in gallery spaces, warehouses, homes, electronic devices, networks and the natural environment. Since the 1980s, sound artists have sought a closer relationship and understanding of sound and its potential to be captured, disseminated, organised, contextualised, transmitted, perceived and appreciated. The investigations of sound artists cover a vast range of sonic and artistic territory from the threshold of 'perceived' silence to deafening industrial noise, the simplicity of a single loudspeaker to a complex array of digital technology or a simple stereo sound recording to an impressive multi-media

¹ This however should not be seen as any strict definition and shall be clarified further in Chapter 1.

installation. The plasticity of sound and its ability to be shaped and reconfigured by sound artists presents the listener with a variety of challenges. As sound art falls outside of the conventions of Western music, the meaning of works and their reception (currently) will more often find favour within contemporary arts circles than in musical contexts.

As a practicing Australian sound artist since 2004, I have become increasingly aware of sound art and its position within the arts world. Aside from international events and festivals, Australian events such as Liquid Architecture, Electrofringe, The Now Now, Sound of Failure, The Australasian Computer Music Conference, The Adelaide Festival of Unpopular Music and The Melbourne International Biennale of Exploratory Music have made considerable efforts to define and give recognition to sound art in relation to the broader Australian art scene. In turn a fledgling community of sound artists, curators and audiences have begun to expand.

However, despite its increasing establishment on a global scale and recognition as a credible artistic practice, sound art still remains a largely misunderstood area of musical and artistic territory, one situated on the periphery of the art world. It remains a contentious discipline open to ongoing argument and discussion, because by its very nature it routinely obscures the boundaries between music, sound and noise; whilst also positing itself awkwardly amongst the arts and audiences. Bernd Schulz acknowledges this dilemma, writing in 2002:

The inexpressibility and cognitive impenetrability of the phenomenal experience make it difficult to secure for Sound Art the place it deserves in the art world.²

Schulz's admission is a salient point with regard to sound art and its problematic position within the arts world. Regardless of the progress that has been made over the last thirty years, sound art's fundamental problem lies in its reception, specifically its elusiveness and lack of definition within the realm of listening. As it has been previously pointed out, an alternative mode of listening has become apparent within sound art. But what is it, and how does it differ from conventional modes of listening?

² Bernd Schulz. *Rezonanzen/Resonances: Aspects of Sound Art* (Köln: Kehrer, 2002), p. 15.

It is the fundamental line of enquiry in this research topic to define what this mode of listening is that I will refer to from this point as ‘focused listening’. Focused listening can be succinctly described as an act of attuned intentional hearing, that is a concentrated attuning by the listener to the specific details of a musical sound event. This will be done with reference to historical works and creative works by the author, identifying how this mode of listening is situated within the context of sound art.

The study is predicated on two research questions:

- 1) *What is focused listening and how does it differ from conventional modes of listening?*
- 2) *How is focused listening articulated in specific works and the creative outcomes of the author?*

This research project began in early 2006 as my sound art practice, though underway was still very much in its infancy. I was finding my feet and a plausible direction for my work – absorbing influences, experimenting, critically analysing my own and others work. In the ensuing years paralleling the progress of this research project, my understanding of sound art and listening has developed considerably, which is demonstrated in the findings of this research, as well as through extracurricular activities. It is important to note that this research project is not regarded as a detailed summary of my practice since 2006, rather an encapsulation of this period, with mention of specific works that address the thesis of the research, as evidenced in the dissertation and accompanying creative portfolio.

Research Methodology

The first chapter provides a definition of focused listening and a distinction between hearing and listening. The opening section makes reference to James Tenney's concept of focus and its application to musical and artistic contexts, with specific reference to Clarina Bezzola's *Lärm im Kopf/Noise In My Head* (2008) audio installation. The following section provides a distinction between hearing and listening with reference to Roland Barthes and Paul Hegarty, and the last section provides a detailed explanation of sound art and its historical contexts.

The second chapter examines the work of two sound artists – American composer Alvin Lucier and German artist Rolf Julius. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a background of the artists, their aesthetic and the analysis of selected works with reference made to focused listening and how it is articulated in the work. Lucier and Julius form the inspiration for the creative works by the author which are documented in the following chapter.

The third chapter documents the development of three creative works by the author – the installations *Infuser* (2007, revised 2009), *Sumi* (2007-2008), and the video documentation of a live performance, *190409* (2009). As this research project covers nearly four years of activity, it is appropriate then, that the creative works portfolio should document significant phases of the author's practice from 2006 to 2009. Each work demonstrates a different approach to articulating focused listening within the context of sound art.

The fourth chapter is a commentary examining aspects of sound art and focused listening in greater detail with reference to other sound artists (with relevance to the research project).

The fifth chapter is a conclusion.