Sound Art in America: Cage and Beyond

"Sound Art"?

In American art discourse, "sound art" is a thorny label. Practitioners shy away from it, preferring to call themselves simply "artists" or "composers." Critics often reject the phrase as well in favour of more generic descriptions such as "sound in the arts" or "the sonic arts." Curators, too, are reluctant to put those two words side by side in exhibition titles.[1] The reasons for this wariness seem to be twofold: (1) that "sound art" might just be a passing fad with which soon no one will want to have been associated, and (2) that the description is too narrow to capture work that invariably involves more than sound. In a statement written as wall text for the 2000 exhibition *Volume: Bed of Sound* at MoMA PS1 in New York City, the American pioneer of sound installation Max Neuhaus leveled both these arguments against the label. After declaring the flurry of sound-themed exhibitions to be "an art fad," he dismissed the phrase "sound art" as a category mistake, the equivalent of grouping everything from steel sculpture to steel guitar music under the title "steel art."[2]

Yet, for all that, "sound art" keeps sneaking back into the discourse – and for good reason. While no more adequate to its content than the terms "video art" or "performance" are to describe the wild variety of work that falls under those labels, "sound art" helpfully marks the fact that, in the past two decades or so, sound has indeed become more prominent in venues of contemporary art in the U.S. and around the world, and that this sonic art work tends to be markedly different from musical performance and from other art forms (video and film, for example) in which sound most often plays a merely supportive role. "Sound art" is as good a term as any to describe works in any artistic medium or modality (installation, sculpture, drawing, film, video, recorded sound, etc.) that draw particular attention to the sonic and consider it aesthetically. Surely this category overlaps with "music," and no firm division need be made between them. But, as I have argued elsewhere, "sound art" often marks an ontological distinction between work that *employs* the sonic and work that *examines its conditions of possibility*.[3]

Several Origins

On this (and just about any other) definition, sound art has multiple origins, and Americans figure prominently in its history. Prior to the contributions of composers and artists, the deaf polymath Thomas Edison laid the groundwork for sound art with his invention of the phonograph, which severed sound from its present performance and allowed it to be *installed*, played back independently of the live event, repeated in the absence of the performer and even the listener.(FIG. 1) Moreover, as Friedrich Kittler later observed, the phonograph expanded the aesthetic appreciation of sound beyond music and speech, for it registered audible vibrations indiscriminately,

FIG. 1 Thomas Alva Edison with his second phonograph, photographed by Mathew Brady in Washington, April 1878. Part of the Brady-Handy Photograph Collection (Library of Congress).

heedless of whether they were emitted by a musical instrument, a human voice, wind through the trees, or a passing locomotive.[4] Music was thus subsumed within the broader field of sound or noise and was no longer the only sonic art.

Luigi Russolo, Edgard Varèse, and Pierre Schaeffer explored this newly discovered domain of noise. But all three were content to *make music* with noise, to capture the sounds of the world and use them to musical effect. A more profound contribution was made by John Cage. It is customary to think of Cage as the composer of silence. This is true, of course, but misleading. Instead of exploring musical silence or making silence musical, Cage's most famous piece, the so-called "silent piece" *4'33"* (1952), serves as a window or door through which music opens out to what Cage called "the entire field of sound."[5] Indeed Cage is not so much the thinker and composer of *silence* as the thinker and composer of *noise*, considered as the entire sonic field of which music is but a tiny part. Cage repeatedly reminded us that "there's no such thing as silence"[6] and that "wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise."[7] In short, for Cage, *silence* = *noise*, and not just any noise, but the hubbub of the whole audible world, the impersonal and anonymous sonic flux that precedes and exceeds us: "Until I die there will be sounds," he remarked. "And they will continue following my death."[8]

1 See, for example, the conversation between Stephen Vitiello and Marina Rosenfeld in *NewMusicBox* (March 1, 2004), www.newmusicbox.org/assets/59/interview_vitiello.pdf, and Douglas Kahn, "The Arts of Sound Art and Music," www.douglaskahn.com/writings/douglas_kahn-sound_art.pdf.

2 See Max Neuhaus, "Sound Art?," in *Volume: Bed of Sound* (New York: P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 2000), www.max-neuhaus.info/soundworks/soundart/SoundArt.htm.

3 See Christoph Cox, "Sound Art and the Sonic Unconscious," *Organised Sound* 14, no. 1 (2009): 19–26. I develop this idea (and many of the ideas in this essay) in my forthcoming book *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics*.

4 See Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), [23.]

5 John Cage, "The Future of Music: Credo," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 3–6, here 4.

6 Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 70.

7 Cage, "The Future of Music: Credo," 3.

Reflecting on *4'33"* in 1974, Cage told an interviewer: "I have felt and hoped to have led other people to feel that the sounds of their environment constitute a music which is more interesting than the music which they would hear if they went into a concert hall."[9] Cage invited us to leave the concert hall and attend to the sounds of the environment. Yet he did not relinquish "music," hoping that others would accept his expansion of the term to encompass everything that can be heard. It was another artist, Max Neuhaus, who took the decisive step outside of music toward what we know as "sound art." A musical prodigy specializing in avant-garde composition for percussion, Neuhaus had performed pieces by Russolo, Varèse, Cage, and other composers eager to incorporate everyday sounds into their work. Yet, by the mid-1960s, Neuhaus began to worry that this strategy was insufficient. "Few [concert goers] were able to carry the experience over into an appreciation of these sounds in their daily lives," he remarked. "I became interested in going a step further. Why limit listening to the concert hall? Instead of bringing these sounds into the hall, why not simply take the *audience* outside – a demonstration in situ?"[10] Neuhaus intended this exit from the concert hall to be quite literal. In 1966, he initiated a project called *LISTEN* in which he would invite audience members to meet at a concert venue, stamp their hands with those six letters, and then silently lead them outside on a walk through power plants, highway underpasses, and city neighborhoods.

Neuhaus' own final exit from the concert hall came two years later. After recording an LP of his percussion repertoire, he left the world of music and performance for good, turning instead to what he called "sound installations," continuous fields of sound – generally complex drones – that shaped and coloured their chosen sites. "In music the sound is the work," he noted, while "in what I do the sound is the means of making the work, the means of transforming space into place."[11] This shift of interest from temporally-bounded works toward site-specific works that defined a place, he thought, connected his work more fully with sculpture and the visual arts than music. "In terms of classification," he told an interviewer, "I'd move the installations into the purview of the visual arts even though they have no visual component, because the visual arts, in the plastic sense, have dealt with space. Sculptors define and transform spaces. I create, transform, and change spaces by adding sound. That spatial concept is one which music doesn't include; music is supposed to be completely transportable."[12]

Neuhaus began installing unmarked sound pieces in stairwells, subway stations, swimming pools, and elevators, filling them with lush drones, phased clicks, or other sounds that were at once unobtrusive and subtly transformative. In 1973, he happened upon a subway vent on a pedestrian island in New York's Times Square and was struck by a desire to use the cavernous space as the resonant chamber for a sound work. Four years of arduous negotiation with the Metropolitan Transit Authority and Con Edison

FIGS. 2a-c Max Neuhaus, *Times Square*, 1977/2002. Permanent sound installation. Video stills from Rory Logsdail's short film *Max Neuhaus – Times Square*, production: Firefly Pictures for Rai Sat Art, 2002, 7 min. 75 sec.

ensued until Neuhaus finally received permission to climb down into the vent shaft and install a loudspeaker and some homemade electronic sound generators that he jerry-rigged to the city's lighting grid.(FIGS. 2a-c) Neuhaus built the sound by ear, listening carefully to the sonic environment, layering frequencies and timbres the way a painter layers colour, and shaping mass like a sculptor working with invisible material. As in all of Neuhaus's installations, the sound was to be, he liked to say, "almost plausible" in the context and yet also a bit out of place, a slight dislocation of the aural topography. The result was a dense drone that, as Neuhaus described it, resembled "the after ring of large bells,"[13] a sound that summoned the restless clamor of its environs and bathed it in a consistent aural hue.

Launched in September of 1977, the piece defined an aural field that remained in place twenty-four hours a day for fifteen years before Neuhaus dismantled it. In 2002, the Dia Art Foundation relaunched *Times Square* as a permanent installation that is now one of New York City's great works of public art.

Drones and the Sonic Flux

Neuhaus coined the phrase "sound installation"; but he was not alone in developing ongoing, site-specific sound environments during the 1960s and 1970s. As early as 1962, the minimalist composer and improviser La Monte Young began to envision what he called a Dream House, a space that "will allow music which, after a year, ten years, a hundred years or more of constant sound, would not only be a real living organism with a life and tradition all its own but one with a capacity to propel itself by its own momentum."[14] Four years later, Young and his wife, the vocalist and light artist Marian Zazeela, experimented with sine wave oscillators to create a private Dream

FIG. 3 La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela, *Dream House*, 1989. Sound and light environment, wall sculpture, neon, speaker, light, plastic film. Installation view ZKM | Karlsruhe, 2012.

8 John Cage, "Experimental Music," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 7–12, here 8.

9 Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 70.

10 Max Neuhaus, "Listen," in *Sound by Artists*, ed. Dan Lander and Micah Lexier (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1990), 63–67, here 63.

11 Max Neuhaus, "Conversation with Ulrich Loock," in *Max Neuhaus: Sound Works*, vol. 1, *Inscription* (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1994), 122–135, here 130.

12 Max Neuhaus, "Interview with William Duckworth," in *Max Neuhaus: Sound Works*, 42–49, here 42.

13 Walter Cianciusi, "Max Neuhaus: Pioneer of Invisible and (Almost) Inaudible Sound Installations," in *International Computer Music Conference Proceedings* (2013), 248–253, here 249.

House in their Tribeca loft. The project was first presented in public for two weeks in July 1969 at Galerie Heiner Friedrich in Munich, where Young's oscillators generated a field of sine tones fluctuating around 50 Hz ("the underlying drone of the city and all AC-powered equipment"[15]) and Zazeela projected pure light frequencies at metal mobiles to give the impression of "self-luminous coloured bodies freely suspended in an atmosphere of continuously moving calligraphic strokes."[16] A decade later, Friedrich's Dia Art Foundation funded a "permanent" *Dream House* in the former New York Mercantile Exchange building in lower Manhattan. The installation ran for six years before disputes within the foundation led to its dismantling and reinstallation elsewhere, finally in a space on Church Street, where it remains today. Temporary versions of the sound and light environment have been presented in museums and art spaces around the world.(FIG. 3)

While Neuhaus' installations unobtrusively mark and colour public space, Young and Zazeela's are overpowering presentations of sound in interior spaces that allow them precise control over frequencies and their psychoacoustic effects. Nonetheless, these early sound installations are kindred in their use of complex drones, a defining feature of early sound installation in America. Cage's *4'33"* set out to draw attention to the sonic flux of the world, the ceaseless din that surrounds us at every moment. In a grand sense, this background noise is surely a drone – the continuous and simultaneous sounding of all that is audible. Like Cage, Young attempted to tap into this perpetual flux, drawing our attention to an experience of time that vastly exceeds not only the temporality of musical composition but also the span of human life. Both Cage and Young affirmed the drone in all its manifestations, whether natural or technological, human or nonhuman. Cage was inspired equally by the droning sounds of "a truck at fifty miles per hour," "static between the stations," and "rain,"[17] Young by "the sound of the wind going through the chinks of the log cabin"[18] where he was raised, "the sounds of insects; the sounds of telephone poles and motors; sounds produced by steam escaping from such as [his] mother's tea-kettle or train whistles; and resonation from the natural characteristics of particular geographic areas such as valleys, lakes, and plains."[19]

A no less cosmic but more scientific or phenomenological approach to the drone was pursued by other American sound artists in the 1970s. Working without any direct connection to the New York art and music scenes, the southern California artist Michael Brewster combined Young's interest in controlled environments with Neuhaus's desire to articulate space through sound. Unlike Cage, Neuhaus, and Young, all of whom came from music, Brewster's background was in the visual arts and, specifically, sculpture. "I think like an artist and I behave like an artist, not like a musician,"[20] he told an interviewer. "I work with sound because of its sculptural potential – it is a physical material to me."[21] "It has size and dimensions, viscosities, textures, even excitements,"[22] he continued.

> At lower frequencies, its wavelengths are of human scale. Its densities are such that we can walk through them, inhabiting their interiors, considering their particulars. I love the elegant physics of sound's wave-form behavior. I think this whole cosmic show is driven by what physics studies: the very stuff of life. So I feel close to the essential motors of our world when I'm working with the quasi-physical oscillations of sounds, blending and coaxing them into place. I had hopes that the resulting fields of sound space would be a way to expand and reinvigorate the sculptural experience.[23]

FIG. 4 Michael Brewster, *An Exit to Sculpture*, 1985. Acoustic sculpture with neon, audio, and narration, dimensions variable. Installation view Temporary Contemporary building, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1985/1986, the artist activating the installation.

In 1970, Brewster began producing what he called "acoustic sculptures"(FIG. 4) consisting of sine tones generated by oscillators and broadcast into bare rectangular gallery spaces via loudspeakers. Brewster tuned his equipment to generate standing waves, invisible but nonetheless audible and palpable forms that created a sonic geography of peaks and valleys to be traversed by visitors. From a musical perspective, the work was utterly simple and unimpressive. Yet, for Brewster, these sine tones were simply tools for sculpting space and shaping forms. And, at this, he felt, they were superior to hammers and chisels. "I realized that hearing was more congruent with the goals and ambitions of sculpture than was seeing,"[24] Brewster noted. "We see through the flat while we hear fully in the round, hence we can hear more sculpturally than we see."[25]

A sculpture made of metal, stone, or wood remains an object set apart from us in the world, an entity to be surveyed with the eye as we circle around it. But sound, Brewster thought, enables audiences to inhabit the *interior* of the form. Just as Young often spoke of "living inside the sound," Brewster maintained that his acoustic sculptures collapse the distinctions between subject and object, here and there, now and then.[26] "No longer is the object of desire over there. We are in it, a part of it, here, now. I've always wanted to bridge the distance, to be closer to the core of my own experience, to overcome that awayness, the apartness that consciousness generates, to have my desire become one with its object. If I'm providing anything at all, I hope it is a full-on, all-around experience, from toes to head. Acoustic sound wraps itself elaborately all around us."[27]

Sonic Architecture

This physical exploration of sounds in space was also a driving force for Alvin Lucier, whose work since the late 1960s has constantly shuttled between musical composition and sound installation. Lucier's sound installations are inspired less by sculpture than by architecture – by the way that sounds can map the built environment, which in turn acts as a sonic filter and amplifier. The early work *Vespers* (1968), for example, paid homage to the common bat *(vespertilionidae)*, equipping blindfolded performers with hand-held echolocation devices that they used to maneuver through a darkened space toward a central point.(FIG. 5a-c)

FIGS. 5a-c Alvin Lucier, *Vespers*, 1968. Acoustic orientation by means of echolocation, for players with hand-held echolocation devices. Performed by Pepe Garcia, Joey Marijs, Juan Martinez, and Niels Meliefste of Slagwerk Den Haag, Festival Dag in de Branding, The Hague, 2010, video stills. Video available online at: vimeo.com/89093088.

14 La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, "Dream House," in Young and Zazeela, *Selected Writings* (Munich: Heiner Friedrich, 1969), reissued by ubuclassics in 2004, 10–16, here 16, www.ubu.com/historical/young/young_selected.pdf. Biographical details about Young are drawn from Jeremy Grimshaw, *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It: The Music and Mysticism of La Monte Young* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

15 Young and Zazeela, "Dream House," 12.

16 Ibid., 13.

17 Cage, "Future of Music: Credo," 3.

18 Richard Kostelanetz, "Conversation with La Monte Young," in La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, *Selected Writings* (ubuclassics, 2004), 17–63, here 20.

19 Ibid., 33.

20 Michael Brewster, "An Interview with Brandon LaBelle," in Michael Brewster, *See Hear Now: A Sonic Drawing and Five Acoustic Sculptures* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 2002), 26–30, here 28.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 26.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 See Kostelanetz, "Conversation with La Monte Young," 35, and La Monte Young, "Lecture 1960," in La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, *Selected Writings* (ubuclassics, 2004), 66–76, here 74–75. On "living inside the sound," see also Young's erstwhile collaborator Tony Conrad, "LYssophobia: On *Four Violins*," in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004), 313–18.

27 Brewster, "Interview with Brandon LaBelle," 27.

"A performance of *Vespers* gives you an acoustic signature of the room," remarked Lucier, "as if one were taking a slow sound photograph over a long period of time. You hear what the room sounds like. That was mysterious to me and wonderful. It really turned me on."[28]

Lucier's scientific inquiry into echolocation transformed his conceptions of music and sound. "I began thinking of sounds in terms of short and long wavelengths, not as high and low pitches or notes written in time from left to right on a page," he recalled.[29] "Thinking of sounds as measurable wavelengths […] has changed my whole idea of music from a metaphor to a fact and, in a real way, has connected me with architecture."[30] Lucier pursued these architectural investigations in several other key works, notably his most famous piece *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1970). A wonderfully self-reflexive variant on the "text scores" that, via Fluxus and conceptual art, became prominent in the 1960s, *I Am Sitting in a Room* consists simply of a four-sentence description of the piece read into a tape recorder and played back into a room repeatedly until the resonant frequencies characteristic of the space pile up on one another and overwhelm the sounds of speech.(FIG. 6) In the 1980 recording of the piece, Lucier's characteristic voice (and evident stutter) becomes more distant and indistinct with each iteration of the text, eventually dissolving into a wavering metallic drone.

The drone formed the basis of another of Lucier's installations, *Music on a Long Thin Wire* (1977).(FIG. 7) In its debut version, Lucier clamped each end of a ninety-foot wire to two wooden tables under the dome of the U.S. Custom House in New York City and set the wire into vibration using an oscillator and an electromagnet, amplifying the movement of the wire with contact microphones. "By carefully tuning the oscillator," Lucier explained,

> the wire could be left to sound by itself. Fatigue, air currents, heating and cooling, even human proximity could cause the wire to undergo enormous changes. In a dance studio in Kyoto, for example, visitors' footsteps on the Marley floor caused extremely slight shifts in the positions of the tables to which the wire was clamped, causing spectacular changes in the sound of the wire. Shin Nakagawa, who arranged my visit there, slept overnight under the wire and reported that even with no movement in the room it would mysteriously erupt into triadic harmonies.[31]

Lucier, Brewster, and Young were concerned with the ways that sound filled spaces and the ways that enclosures shaped and modified sounds. The American composer and sound artist Maryanne Amacher pressed beyond the architectural volume to investigate the very

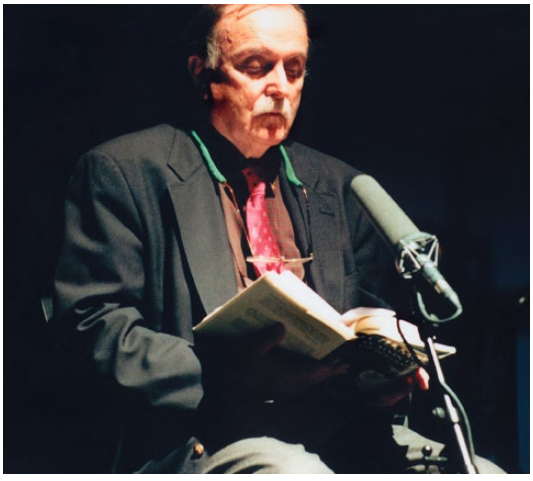


FIG. 6 Alvin Lucier, *„I am Sitting in a Room"*, 1970. Audio installation for voice and electromagnetic tape.

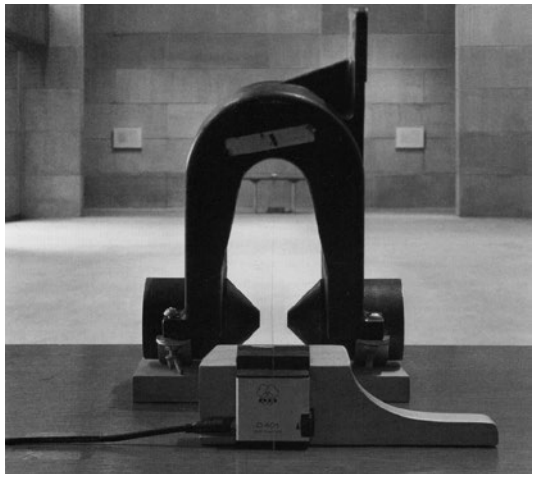


FIG. 7 Alvin Lucier, *Music on a Long Thin Wire*, 1977. Sound installation for audio oscillator and electronic monochord. Installation view Wesleyan University, 1988.

28 Alvin Lucier, *Music 109: Notes on Experimental Music* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 87.

29 Ibid., 85.

30 Alvin Lucier, "Every room has its own melody," in Alvin Lucier, *Reflections: Interviews, Scores, Writings* (Köln: MusikTexte, 1995), 94–103, here 98.

31 Alvin Lucier, liner notes to *Music on a Long Thin Wire*, Lovely LCD 10011, 1992.

32 See Maryanne Amacher, "Music for Sound-Joined Rooms," http://maryanneamacher.org/memorial/Maryanne_Amacher/Amacher_Archive_Project/Entries/2009/10/24_music_for_sound_joined_rooms.html, and http://maryanneamacher.org/memorial/Maryanne_Amacher/Amacher_Archive_Project/Entries/2009/10/23_Writing_on__Living_sound%2C_patent_pending.html.

33 See Amacher, "Composing Perceptual Geographies," http://maryanneamacher.org/memorial/Maryanne_Amacher/Amacher_Archive_Project/Entries/2009/10/23_Composing_perceptual_geographies.html, and Kabir Carter and Alan Licht, "Sound/Klang," *Parkett* 89 (2011): 6–20.

34 See Douglas Kahn, "Christian Marclay's Early Years: An Interview," *Leonardo Music Journal* 13 (2003): 17–21.

FIGS. 8a-c Maryanne Amacher, *Gravity* from the *Music for Sound Joined Rooms* series, 2006. Site-specific installation, created for the tower room of the parochial church in Berlin. Installation view singuhr – hoergalerie in parochial berlin (a), 2006. Detail view of the northern spiral staircase in front of the bell room (b) and detail view of the former vestry between the northern and the southern spiral staircase (c).

infrastructure of buildings and spaces. In 1980, she launched the project *Music for Sound-Joined Rooms*,(FIGS. 8a-c) which called for the installation of loudspeakers and transducers throughout a building to generate "structure-borne" sound, designed to travel not so much through the air but through the wood, metal, stone, and plaster surfaces of an entire house, gallery, or museum. After receiving a commission, Amacher would spend weeks at the site investigating its material features and acoustic potentials. Likening the process to choreography, theater, and cinema, she aimed to create spaces of aural and tactile intrigue, carefully placing and sequencing vibrations to suggest distance or to produce sonic close-ups, generate sonic illusions, entice visitors into neighboring rooms, lead them through pockets of intense pressure, or deposit them into spaces of ethereal calm.[32]

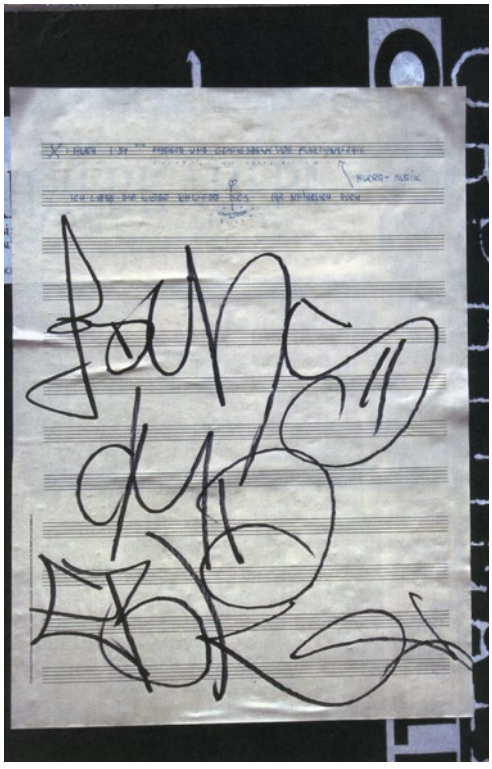
Between Sound and Image

Amacher's fascination with immersive sound environments and sonic-tactile experience drew her to club culture and to the idea that the dance club might be considered a sort of sound installation.[33] The early work of Christian Marclay also crossed this divide between the gallery, the club, and the concert hall. Marclay attended art school where, inspired by Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, and punk rock, he began to perform using cheap turntables and records found on the street or purchased at thrift stores.[34] Marclay dealt with this detritus of pop culture in all manner of ways – cutting the records apart and gluing them back together in different configurations; hammering nails into the record surface so that the tone arm was buffeted back and forth, etc. – devising a practice that connected with the scratching and sampling that hip hop DJs were developing at the time.

In the 1980s, Marclay began to consider the culture of recording more broadly, exhibiting photographic collages, sculptures, and installations composed of records, album covers, magnetic tape, and found images of singers or instrumentalists. Working between music and visual art, Marclay was fascinated with the connections and disjunctions between sound and image. *Chorus* and *Chorus II* (both 1988), for example, present found photographs of mouths open in song, the gap at the center of each image drawing attention to a fundamental lack, the incapacity of the image to supply its sonic content.(FIG. 9) Later projects investigated the indeterminacy of translation between sound and image and, in particular, the generative capacities of the musical score, which, even in its most conventional form, requires the performer to render a set of visual symbols as sounds. For *Graffiti Composition* (1996), Marclay posted blank sheets of musical paper on kiosks and walls throughout Berlin, inviting passersby to mark on them. Marclay photographed the results and printed them on cards to be interpreted by musicians as prompts for improvisation.(FIGS. 10a,b)

Such translations between sound and image are central to the work of Steve Roden, an audiovisual

FIG. 9 Christian Marclay, *Chorus*, 1988. Installation, 29 black-and-white photographs, framed. Installation view *Honk If You Love Silence*, cycloptically, fifth episode of the *Rolywholyover* exhibition cycle, MAMCO, Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, Geneva, June 25–September 21, 2008.



FIGS. 10a, b Christian Marclay, *Graffiti Composition*, 2002. Portfolio of 150 images, Indigo prints on Cougar stock, 35.56 × 24.13 × 7.62 cm, published by Paula Cooper Gallery, limited edition of 25, plus 5 performance copies and 5 artist's proofs.

FIG. 11 Steve Roden, *letter forms*, 2002. Installation, 26 objects, wood, embroidery thread, polyurethane, enamel paint, approx. 27.94 × 10.16 cm each. Installation view *Treble,* SculptureCenter, New York, 2004.

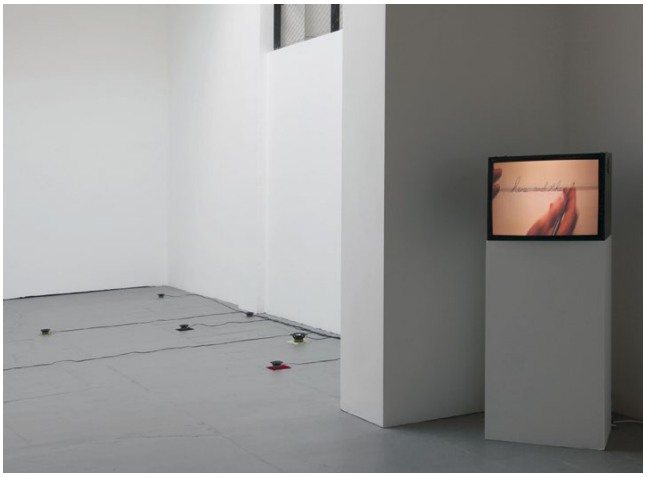


FIG. 12 Steve Roden, *ragpicking (berlin)*, 2012. Mutimedia installation, on the floor: *symbol/cymbal*, 2012, 8-channel sound installation with a single cymbal as sound source, 20 min., looped; on the monitor: *a lexicon of walter benjamin's silences*, 2012, video, 22 min. 19 sec., silent. Installation view singuhr – hoergalerie berlin, partial view, MEINBLAU project space, Berlin.

artist from Los Angeles whose work is rooted in sound. In the late 1990s, Roden began to devise idiosyncratic translation schemes in order to spark new ideas and chance conjunctions. His *letter forms* (2002), for example, are a set of wood and thread sculptures that model the sound waves of the artist's voice speaking or singing each letter of the alphabet,(FIG. 11) the vowels painted in accordance with letter-colour associations laid out in Arthur Rimbaud's poem "Alchemy of the Verb." The more recent installations *rag picker (los angeles & new york)* (2013) and *ragpicking (berlin)* (2012)(FIG. 12) derive from visual elements discovered in the notebooks of German cultural critic Walter Benjamin, whose colour-coded symbols Roden transformed into graphic notation that guided a percussive/electronic score and determined colour combinations in a set of accompanying drawings.

Sonic Politics

For much of its history, American sound art – like sound art in general – has either concentrated on the physical, psychoacoustic, sculptural, and architectural capacities of sound or considered the tensions between sound and image. Yet, particularly recently, in the context of American military aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan, sound artists have attuned themselves to the political potentials of sound, examining the role of the sonic in what philosopher Jacques Rancière has called "the distribution of the sensible" in social space, and employing sound as a means of altering that distribution.[35] Via videos, sculptural installations, and performances, the artist duo Allora & Calzadilla (Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla) probe the relationships between music and war, investigating sound as an instrument of military violence, territorial domination, and the mobilization of human bodies.(FIG. 13) Likewise, in their practice, Angel Nevarez and Valerie Tevere test the populist potentials of radio and the protest song, and examine the uses of voice recognition for biopolitical control.(FIG. 14)

Surely the most sustained investigation of audio politics has been undertaken by the collective Ultra-red. Formed in Los Angeles in 1994, the group initially dedicated itself to AIDS activism before turning to broader questions of housing and immigration. Ultra-red's early recordings – which mixed samples of political speech with experimental electronic dance music – allowed its members entry into music festivals that became platforms for their political interventions. Since 2006, the collective has primarily dedicated itself to the politics of silence and listening in public space. Deeply inspired by John Cage and developing the political potential of *4'33"* for what the group calls "Militant Sound Investigations,"[36]

35 See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), esp. part 1: *The Distribution of the Sensible*.

FIG. 13 Allora & Calzadilla, *Clamor*, 2006. Multimedia installation, plaster, foam, pigment, 1 tuba, 1 trumpet, 2 trombones, 1 flute, 1 drum kit, pre-recorded sound, and live musicians. Installation view Kunsthalle Zurich, Zurich.

FIG. 14 Angel Nevarez and Valerie Tevere, *Another Protest Song: Karaoke with a Message*, 2008. Public performance with karaoke system, Flushing Meadows / Corona Park, Queens, NY.

Ultra-red has laid out a set of "protocols for organized listening"[37] aimed at "exploring acoustic space as enunciative of social relations."[38] Via site- and community-specific discussions,(FIG. 15) the group facilitates inquiries around broad questions of sonic politics, such as: "What is the sound of anti-racism?" "What is the sound of the war on the poor?" "What is the sound of freedom?" Participants are invited to undertake sound walks or to produce recordings that they then subject to analysis guided by the deliberately open question "What did you hear?" Ultra-red's aim is to attune communities to the affective and social forces of the soundscape, empowering them to compose it differently. The project richly manifests Rancière's proposal that every social space is aesthetic insofar as it determines what and who can be seen and heard, and, conversely, what is forced to remain silent or invisible. As Ultra-red cofounder Dont Rhine put it: "With Cage the idea was that the composer is not composing sounds but is composing new ways of listening. You are organizing listening, so the sound artist organizes sound as a political strategy. If we're going to take that seriously, then organizers are already involved in aesthetic operations."[39]

FIG. 15 Ultra-red, SILENT|LISTEN, listening session, Banff Center for the Arts, Banff, Canada, June 23, 2005. Shown seated (left to right), Don't Rhine and Nicole Neve. Further information on the project SILENT|LISTEN are available online at http://ultrared.org/pso8.html.

Ultra-red's practice reveals how tremendously generative Cage's questions and proposals have been for American sound art. While artists such as Neuhaus, Young, Lucier, and Amacher pursued Cage's ontological and epistemological inquiries concerning noise, sound, silence, and listening, Ultra-red, Allora & Calzadilla, Nevarez & Tevere, and others have amplified the politics of these sonic relationships. Alfred North Whitehead famously remarked that the European philosophical tradition consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.[40] Likewise, it can reasonably be said that American sound art has and continues to be a series of footnotes to Cage, its progenitor and the source of its problems and prospects.

36 Ultra-red, "Mission Statement" (2000), www.ultrared.org/mission.html.

37 Ultra-red, *Five Protocols for Organized Listening: With Variations*, 2012, www.ultrared.org/uploads/2012-Five_Protocols.pdf.

38 Ultra-red, "Mission Statement."

39 Dont Rhine, quoted in Mark Fisher, "Public Space is the Place," *The Wire* 295 (September 2008): 28–33, here 29.

40 See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 39.