

**Digits on the historical pulse:
*Being a way to think about
how so much is happening
and has happened
in sound in the arts***

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Sound art or, rather, sound in art has arrived. It seems practically pervasive. Sure, sound/art has been around in one form or another for a very long time; nevertheless, it has now crept up to that indeterminate institutional and discursive level where things are discovered, oddly mature at birth, full-born from the hip. Sounds are now allowed to intrude upon and saturate the hushed space of a gallery with impunity. Not one eyebrow is raised, no lips are pursed. Where mouths might have once been lock-jawed in resentment, they are now held slightly open, like an f-hole, to better provide a resonant chamber wherein soft sounds are amplified. Go into the next room and there are people leaning backwards, legs braced, elbows akimbo, training the loud and low frequencies to wander underneath their ribcages where they modulate into strange burbling sounds which vigorously massage the major internal organs. This wouldn't have happened a decade ago.

True, sound in art has been around for a very long time, but it is only recently that one could imagine that it has existed as long as there has been art, that is, the historical phenomenon known as "art". The silence deceived people. Art has come down through the ages with its tongue plucked out, its mouth gagged, its hands pinned down, its legs bound up so that no movement would disturb the air and upset the obedience of the picture. The most sound that art historians could muster was the sound of pages being thumbed into tiny puffs of air. Fortunately, historians more recently have begun to reinstate the auditory contexts in which these artworks might have been first encountered. They are combing acres of archival text to tease out the everyday sounds of the past and how people thought about them in order to generate a knowledge of period sound. As a result, the past and all the objects inhabiting the past, artistic objects included, come to occupy a space where the soundful pulse of life might be detected. They may not emit those physical vibrations capable of being heard by more than one person at a time, what we conventionally call sounds, but the sounds they gathered up in context and association, in the mental processes of individuals, in the mind's ear of the culture, cannot be discounted. We no longer mute such sounds in contemporary art-many interesting artists traffic in conceptual sounds-why should we mute them historically? They no longer baffle us.

If we are mapping back let it instead be based on Christian Marclay's 1997 Whitney Museum installation, *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Mussorgsky may have used Victor Hartmann's drawings as inspiration, but Marclay uses a wide repertoire of drawings, paintings and other artworks as both score and instrumental sound sources, and creates a composition which turns everyone into a composer/performer unlike any sing-a-long or

1960's audience participation. We are faced with over forty paintings, photographs hung edge to edge salon-style, which Richard Artschwager's *Organ of Cause and Effect* off to the side, all taken from the museum's collection. Facing the wall arrayed pew-like (the Artschwager organ on the side fills in this church scene) are several benches, each with its cushion covered in a kitschy music-related fabric. The images on the wall are all realist depictions of sound and music, even as realism extends to a Roy Lichtenstein cartoon explosion. Many images elicit an implied sound response. "Implied sound" was a device used in silent films, where an image of someone sawing away on a violin was meant to evoke the sound of a violin. Other images generate sounds through acts of interpolation; that is, where images do not telegraph implied sounds, the observer/listener becomes free to imagine through an array of auditive possibilities. Indeed, the entire wall of images transforms into a giant score as the room itself dissolves in a veritable proscenium stage for mind-music and conceptual sound improvisation, performed by those of sound and unsound mind alike, sitting there on the benches.

This is not audience participation, because there really is no audience. If there was one it would have to be located, as with say a musical performance, on the other side of the score. With the performers on the pews, their sounds and music pouring forth where prayer should be, with their score on the wall, means that the audience should rightfully be on the other side of the wall where they would, unwittingly, hear nothing. The audience may in fact be the performers, but like members of a congregation in silent prayer, or individuals watching the same television program, they are privy only to their solos. Or the performer may include the performances of others into her own, imagining which physiognomy would engender which mind-music style, including a style which might incorporate such recuperation. In thinking about the body of works could be grown from such protean folding, we have become a better audience.

Map Marclay's *Pictures Back* and the putative silence of the past begins to unlock its vibrations. The images and objects of the church had their implied sounds, voice-over narrations, surround soundtrack of speech and song and ritual chant, the backchat of prayer, all the auditive cues and conceits which were brought like baggage through the front door and spatially routed through room ambience, cranium, up through the roof into the cosmos where, what would otherwise be the nightmare of all performers, only one person has showed up to listen. To imagine these sounds now we need to wedge our reverential noses off the paintings, take a step back and attend to more than one sensory register at a time, acting like the multi-sensory creatures we are. We will find images and objects already couched in stories, memories, ideas and expectations; already couched in particular places with at least a hiss, a hum or murmur, ostensible silences already formed, in Saussurean ears, by what they exclude. It is possible to think of mute images and objects only if one can imagine a soundless imagination.

To silence the past we would also need to be deaf to all the sounds recorded in text, especially to all the texts in which art itself was conducted. Within artistic modernism at the turn of the last century, there is little doubt that the most interesting sounds in the arts were being created in literature and other sites of writing. The French novelist and eccentric Raymond Roussel—who thought he was intensifying the tradition of Jules Verne

when in reality he was presaging Surrealism-was a master at the craft, especially in his two best known novels: *Impressions of Africa* and *Locus Solus*. In *Impressions of Africa* alone we find a limbless one-man band, a candle whose sputter imitates the sound of thunder, a man playing a flute carved from his own tibia, the pitched wheels of twelve chariots performing "a variety of popular airs," an orchestrion replete with a gramophone fueled by the expansion and contraction of a thermally sensitive metal, a hiccupping mollusk, a talking horse, a man who can simultaneously sing four different parts from four different areas of his enormous mouth, rodent hair that produces two distinct notes per strand when bowed, a father ricocheting a vocal performance against the acoustical mirrors formed by his six sons with their hollowed-out thoracic cavities, a zither player who trains a large white worm to be his instrument, among many others. It was likewise in writing where the most interesting early uses of the phonograph took place. Another eccentric Frenchman, Alfred Jarry, was the first turntablist, by spinning a short tale about a cylinder in *Phonograph*. The contraption becomes a "mineral siren," as if one of the treacherous songsters had been sunk into the perch of her coastal rock, just as Echo herself had been banished to the task of reproducibility as a rock face. Guillaume Apollinaire uses a priapic phonographic device in his story "The Moon King" to conjure phantom lovers and prefigure virtual dildonics by decades. There is inventiveness in literature, but this is simple invention in literature, and much of it makes sound and makes us listen differently.

When the sonic achievements carried out in text are taken into account, then the story of sound in the arts starts sounding much more interesting. Pin our ears back to where only physical vibrations alone are felt and history becomes less provocative and we are reduced to servants of received historical context. The heralded achievements of the arts of sound were conditioned by these very contexts. Luigi Russolo's art of sound was expansive only to the extent that the acceptance of timbre within Western art music was severely restricted. The sound poetry of Hugo Ball, Raoul Hausmann or Kurt Schwitters was formed more from abdication than appropriation, and the appropriation - whether from liturgical babble, onomatopoeia, modernist reductionism, or musical structure - itself shied away from diverse, multitudinous engagements with the world. The rupture they represented was important, of course, but only to the extent that the strictures imposed by the context had inflated importance.

In contrast, sounds in literature, sounds interpolated freely from images, are open up to the broader approaches, to new forms of technological realization, and to those sounds that one person alone hears, the realm of the Great Unmiked. The last belongs to the larger topic of privatized listening among exceptional psychological states- drugs, dreams, mysticism, ritual, psychological and neurological states, psychopathological states, and combinations thereof. Such sounds cannot be ignored easily for the simple reason that millions of people hear things heard by one person alone. Many of these things disobey acoustical, semiotic and cultural laws, or they lobby to have them overturned. Moreover, their qualities reach further than one suspects. They are joined, after all, by that one class of sound heard differently by almost all individuals: the sound of one's own voice. The pride of place given this sound by Husserl and Derrida alike in their respective systems should signal that these sounds have a great future in store.

It is safe to say that certain strictures have been removed and that artists and musicians now have a greater variety of means at their disposal, the means that accompany the discourses, processes, and experience of one of the top two senses. That is very positive development, but it does not necessarily mean that anything has been accomplished. It does not necessarily mean that nothing has been accomplished. There is simply nothing involved in working with sound that promises anything, except perhaps for a greater degree of license, a greater sense of possibility, and a greater capability in simulating and representing the ideas, images, scenes and systems of existence. While none of these promise anything, they have all proved to be beneficial to the arts in the past.

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A couple ideas have been circulating on why the move to sound in the arts has occurred now.

(1) As a reaction to an emphasis on vision within recent cultural and artistic discourses.

Visuality, visual culture, the gaze, the spectacle, textuality, all the tropes of the eye informing the discourses from which many art world critics, journalists, academics, students and practitioners take their cues, gained such monolithic status that it somehow begged the question of what it excluded and what that exclusion might mean. It was as if there was a feedback control fixed to a "balance of the senses" and the eye had become too hot or heavy. The discussion of visual this and visual that could not help but to invoke the senses, along with the traditional sequestering of the individual senses and hierarchical positioning of vision in Western culture. Studies of visual culture had tied the objects, processes and situation of sight in relation to power, but even the critiques of vision were seen, because of the exclusion of all else, as a backdoor privileging of vision. In addition, the fusions and agglomerations of the senses individuals experience day to day and differently from culture to culture did not accord to viewing all of existence as viewing. So it was easy to ask "why is the sound turned off?" Are we in the silent film phase of theory?

It became clear to many that it was more a matter of discursive momentum, the eyes lit up from behind by the Enlightenment, or perhaps a technical inertia put into place by all the silent pictures and print, all the mute media that scholars and theorists spend hours each and every day staring at, that was responsible for these rhetorical blinders fitted upon the expanse of sensory experience. The class and market underpinnings of art world discourse (bolstered by the New York real estate market in the 1980s) exacerbated the monocular sense of sense by empowering it in the lucrative traffic of silent objects, sanctifying it in the reverential ambience maintained in institutions dedicated to precious objects, and passing it on to those who are commissioned to write about these things in arts journalism and the academic press alike.

During the 1980s, the shift in thinking about sound was initiated by artists themselves active in art, music, theater, media arts, literature and, more commonly, in intermedia and

general interdisciplinarity. The artists were there but the writing was not. This was a time when so much ink in the arts sought to obtain a rubberstamp from poststructuralist, psychoanalytic, or postmodernist theory. These artists could not find any significant stretch of theory which addressed their interests in sound and aurality. The theorists, it seemed, were unable to question, deconstruct, decenter or deterritorialize their own sensory assumptions, unable to move back beyond the bounds of peripheral vision to where ears appear and hearing extends back around the subject (exception: Serres and later Lyotard). Only a little bit of cheek was required. There was also much talk about bodies, or rather, as it was known: *the body*, that place where one can find the voice, ears, ways of making sounds and ways of thinking about them. At the same time, there was Derrida's critique of the presence of the voice which engendered, among certain sensitive types, a phonophobia (Garrett Stewart's term in *Reading Voices*) and favored instead the visual register of writing and inscription. This fear of the voice extended into other realms of sound.

Much as other groups of artists have been compelled to do at other times, artists in the 1980s interested in sound developed their own histories and theories. They developed their own institutions, exhibitions, performances, broadcasts, symposia, publications, etc., and their attempts waxed and waned and waxed enough times to set up a vibratory force in itself. The main difference from similar sets of artists concerned in part with sound within the Western avant-garde and experimental tradition in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, was that the 1980s was accompanied by different discursive environment, over determined by theory and driven by an at once more broadly-based and detailed questioning of sensory operations. Throughout the 1980s, however, the eye still had hold of the museums, galleries, journals, magazines, and minds. Sound had still not been "discovered."

The collapse of the art market in the late-1980s meant that many galleries and art institutions became more open to art work that had little or no economic potential or pedigree. Nobody was going to make any money anyway, so installations and performances, and other spaces and opportunities for sound, began to occur more frequently in institutions with closer proximity to the discourses that announce the discovery of things. A renewed interest in Fluxus and intermedia arts occurred in a related way, since these were artistic trends which existed on a shoestring, most often outside the professional and commercial terrain of the official art world and, most importantly for our purposes here, they were the most soundful of the trends and movements in the avant-garde and experimental arts. People's knowledge of Fluxus and intermedia was at this time aided, ironically, by the elevation of its objects and traces to a more official, collectible status, in an art world that had so long ignored them. With the rising price of each scrap of Fluxus paper the art world became that much noisier.

During the 1990s historians started growing ears and becoming noisier as well. There had been a few forays and influential texts in the 1970s and 1980s, but with the mid- to late-1990s, to the present day, has come a veritable explosion of texts on sound, the voice, listening, developing to what is increasingly being called the study of auditory culture or auditory history. The authors at that time were usually working in isolation within their

own fields, where they were benignly tolerated at best, and were unaware of others working in other fields. Some pitted their projects against the prevailing emphasis on vision and the text, but only as a momentary consideration to a more embodied understanding of culture and society. Here are a few of the books published in this period: Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*; Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past*; Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth Century America*; Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England*; Alain Corbin, *Village Bells*; *Sound States*, edited by Adalaide Morris; Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*; Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck*; Felicia Miller Frank, *The Mechanical Song*; James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris*; Paul Carter, *The Sound In-between*. Where there was practically nothing, there are now innumerable chapters, essays and papers; top scholars in many fields are now writing on things auditory. This "auditory turn" in scholarship has occurred around the same time as the "discovery" of sound in the arts. Unfortunately, the two have largely arisen in ignorance of one another. It is only a matter of time until these and other texts dealing with auditory culture are incorporated into the more established disciplines dealing with sound such as musicology or the study of film sound, incorporated into the artistic practices themselves, and incorporated into the subsequent study of these artistic practices themselves.

(2) The changing conditions of media technology associated with digital technologies and represented by technological "convergence" provided a stimulus to consider the senses more comprehensively and evenly deployed.

This line of thinking was rehearsed a number of years ago by Eric Havelock in *The Muse Learns to Write* when he stated that the main proponents of the study of oral cultures had been shaped by the new presence of the radio starting in the 1920s and 1930s. This audiophonic media hub from which the voice was electronically revived and enunciated from speakers would explain, he said, why the historical study of orality happened to show up at the historical moment it did. It can be shown through similar historical instances that just as often the idea or promise of a technology has a more substantial effect on the generation of artistic and cultural tropes than does the social placement of the technology, where technical limitations, commercial and state exigencies, and lack of access to technologies tend to exert a sobering influence. And, of course, there are other instances where tropes precede any idea of a technology, not that the appearance of a technology is predicted (by Bacon or a sci-fi writer) or that tropes or practices act as tea-leaves or entrails of the future (Attali's premonitory fallacy), but where both tropes and technologies are expressions of a deeper running social and cultural "desire," if indeed societies have libidos.

The relationship between sound/arts and digital technologies has revolved around the notion of convergence, which had its first flush of rhetorical power beginning in the late-1980s and into the 1990s. Convergence too was a negotiated admixture of idea and actuality. This was not the term convergence used to designate how different home communication and entertainment appliances would collapse into one all-purpose black box channeling, like an omniscient medium, the laughs, the tears, the propaganda, the real business of the day. This was the technical convergence more on the productive

rather than the consumptive side of the equation, the one where different sensory registers and the practices associated with them came together with a newfound facility, for those with access to the technologies. It was the type of technical convergence used or imagined by artists, producers and communicators who could work with the graphic, spatial and temporal dimensions of both vision and hearing, the haptic less so, to create new, more fully sensory and experiential worlds. In the earlier days the graphic, orthographic and photographic capabilities were much more sophisticated than the auditory, save for music to a certain extent (compact discs are digital). Personal computer storage devices such as the CD-ROM gave privileged status to visuals, although certain artists attempted to defeat this design, and internet bandwidth and speed was not conducive to time-based forms until relatively recently. In other words, the technological convergence enabling a more integrated approach to digital production was, during most of the 1990s, an imagined one. The emblem for this imaginary convergence was, of course, virtual reality, which collapsed long before the absent fourth wall came crashing down on the dot communists.

With regards to sound, there was a "little convergence" on the practical side which also had an influence. This was the digital audio editing workstation that has since become standardized in ProTools and similar systems. What these workstations did was to provide a technology which simultaneously incorporated the needs of the music and film industries, and placed them on a textual basis. The speed and facility of manipulating sound and synching it to visuals, correcting mistakes as quickly as they were made, choosing from a range of options in less time than was previously used in the construction of a single option, in a comfortable interface metaphor situated between a tape recorder, mixing board and a word processor. The collapse of two major industries in a digital bid for expedited and privatized post-production had the aesthetic upshot of foregrounding the equalization of all-sound in a scriptural economy, especially in the way that it broke down the difference between sound and musical sound. Film sound, of course, had done this all along but the productive tracks (literally and figuratively) of its practice had kept sound and musical sound separate. There were exceptions in cartoon sound and avant-garde film and radio, but composition with recorded sound become recuperated into a musical frame with *musique concrète* and subsequently with other tape musics, while performance with recorded sound was elaborated through the delimited interfaces of keyboard sampling and turntablism. The formal means and the interfaces for dealing artistically with a full range of sounds have yet to be systematically explored.

This "little convergence" and the larger imagined technical convergence have both been accompanied, the former grounded in the industry the latter in industry and a certain inertia in the arts, by two presumptions. First, that the respective elements being converged had already been adequately explored and, second, the ways in which they would converge and diverge were also already given. The facility for technical expedience, and even intensification, became and remains a surrogate for further exploration. The basis of the rhetoric of convergence has, therefore, had less to do with innovation and substantive techniques of representation than it had with productivity gains and a wider access (eventually) to tools. Although there was a sensory democracy of sorts imagined within certain strains of "convergence," it also contained a self-

satisfaction that sound and sound-image relationships were being developed when in fact they were merely being reproduced.

Just one example: film sound. There is much sophisticated use of sound, voice and music within cinema, but it remains within certain parameters and exceedingly cautious with respect to the possibilities at its disposal. Although the audio and visual aspects of a film are constituted separately, they have been coordinated through various realist conventions in such a way that the audio is in support to the visual, even within art-house cinema. There are very few exceptions. One that stands out is Godard's *Hail Mary!* (we have the Vatican banning to thank for its wide distribution). Following his mentor Dziga Vertov, it is Godard's most sustained use of principles of asynchronous sound, where the soundtrack has a certain degree of autonomy which enables it to enter into whole other classes of relationships with the visual and other elements of a film. There is a density and subtlety possible within an asynch film that is simply not possible using conventional means. It is as though one were watching one-and-a-half films, with extra layers of audio and audio-visual relationships running in parallel (an auditive version of the transparencies in Peter Greenaway's compositing). Indeed, it is possible to fully understand *Hail Mary!* only by watching it through the sound. There is an allegory to this relationship in the formation of the film's narrative. It was one of several films that Godard made under the premise that, if one were to tell a story that everyone knew, then one could dispense with the task of telling the story and use the time for more important things. The redundancy of film sound's servitude has rendered it a story we all know too well. The time should be better spent. Yet, without a strong tradition in asynch cinema, one in which *Hail Mary!* itself would appear careful, the ways in which sound and visual images might converge and diverge and otherwise interrelate will remain severely constrained.

Because film sound has established itself as the primary cultural locus of audio-visual relationships within artistic practices of representation, it becomes more important to the extent it abandons its demarcations and self-satisfaction. In the first heyday of audiophonic experimentation in the 1920s and early 1930s, film sound was in fact a fluid practice among other domains of audiophonic practice, not cinema. Optical sound recording on film provided the opportunity for experimentation in synthesized sound, for montages two decades before the founding of *musique concrète* in 1948, and for radical approaches to sound in animation, which eventually played such an important musical role in the postmodern improvisational machinations of John Zorn and others. "Film phonographs" were used for radio plays and early audio art; and there was greater speculative activity for the possibilities of sound-image relationships in cinema itself.

This fluidity extended up to mid-century, where Pierre Henry could find only one valid precedent for *musique concrète* itself, "the prefigurement of *musique concrète* was, indeed, relatively abstract, save, evidently, for the possibilities offered by the sound on film of cinema." Perhaps a dramatically reconfigured approach film sound could model an entirely new type of composition and improvisation in music? It may be the other way around, or something in between or both at once. The recent activity in live improvised cinema, or live electronic video, could very well hold the key. Coming out of the

subcultural ranks of the laptop music/sound scene, as well as rave and club VJs, this activity relies on the accessibility of machines quick enough to invoke, run and manipulate moving images, the development of the programs to do so, and the advent of better, less expensive projectors. Much of this activity has difficulty in rising above pastiche, hyperactive wallpaper, screensavers writ large and laptop lightshows. What is missing are compositional, performative and improvisational logics appropriate to the means and materials at hand. Nevertheless, the possibilities are formidable, since what the technologies afford for the first time is the ability for the recordings and live action of cinema production to stop being limited to postproduction settings, the equivalent of traditional modes of composition in Western art music, and instead join the ranks of performance. It is as though the traditions of improvisation in music and theatre can for the first time be exercised with the techniques and within the rich traditions of cinema.

This is a monumental confluence of historical/cultural forces. But, again, the technology has arrived on a wide scale, but the artistic underpinnings have not been established. It is good to remember that the technological capacity for *musique concrète*, a similar performance of recorded material, had existed for two decades before it was finally brought to bear in a sustained artistic practice. Still, in comparison the historical transformation of film sound into *musique concrète* was a simple matter when compared to what is required presently, for its performance (actually, a composition) of recording fell back on the tropes of Western art music which acted to trivialize and eliminate signification. It is impossible for a new form of performed cinema to avoid engaging signification, for it would rehearse older forms and, more importantly, fundamentally reduce the nature of the material which includes, among other things, access to a century or so of cumulative cinematic and other audiovisual media experience, let alone other realms of collective experience.

There has yet to be a developed practice of a performance of recording within the auditive realm itself. There have been admirable examples of composition of recording but they have not risen into a recognizable practice, “discovered” as it were, which could then serve as a touchstone for performance and improvisatory modes. Perhaps the problem has been that, historically, the composition that finds its way into performance has been left to composers and musicians who have had relatively little experience in matters of such things as syntax, semiotics, rhetoric, narrative, and their antimatter forms. It may fall to those artists, media and culture producers who do have that type of experience, but then they lack the experience in performance, with or without technologies, and thus have not lived through the sounds, felt the pulse of electricity through their representations, or run through the instantaneous ranks of the moment. The problem is not insurmountable. It will happen and then it might be discovered. Until then we can think of what it sounds and looks like.