

Between the stage and the gallery: objects and spaces in three works by Canadian sound artists

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Abstract

Physical objects as sounding bodies are found on the concert stage as instruments and in the art gallery as exhibition pieces, and all along the conceptual, performative and perceptual spectrum between the two. This paper presentation explores three Canadian artists whose work intercepts with electroacoustic music and who place themselves, the audience and the sounding object(s) at various positions between the stage and the gallery on the performance/reception continuum. Jean-François Laporte's invention and performance of the *TuYo* instruments represents the sounding object as instrument, manipulated by an expert performer onstage. This seemingly straightforward use of the sounding physical object is quickly subverted by the fantastical nature of the invention, which combines electronic, robotic and physical means to generate its sound, and whose performance is not always contingent on the presence of a performer. Nicolas Bernier has a laboratory-style setup for his work *frequencies (a)*, in which the performer interacts with an array of tuning forks activated by computer-controlled solenoids. The accuracy possible in the performer/composer's real-time interaction with the object array contrasts with the exactitude of sequences and mechanisms programmed in advance, encouraging questions on the performer's function, his relationship with the object and the nature of performance in this context. Finally, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's *The Cabinet of Curiousness* invites the audience to take the role of DJ, interacting with the object as it might an eccentric jukebox inside the reverential space of the art gallery. This ostensibly commonplace object nevertheless invites a questioning on the nature of musical instruments, the artists' – and our – relationship with things, as well as what performativity might outside of the concert hall ritual.

The diversity of positions represented by these works sheds different shades of light on a number of relationships, three of which we will discuss: object-sound, object-performativity, and object-work. To illustrate: is the object/sound relationship on an acoustic level, as in the case of most traditional musical instruments, whose desired sonic capacity largely determines physical design? Is it of a more conceptual or aesthetic nature? Or, perhaps, in between? In terms of performativity, can we speak of expertise, and if so, how is this determined? Can the object be performed by others, by anyone? How does the audience perceive this performance capacity? Can others compose for the object as for an instrument? This leads nicely into the object's relationship to the work itself: does it reside in the performance of the object, in the object's deployment within the context of another work, or is the object itself the work?

Introduction

This paper presentation is the result of my increasing involvement in the intersection of performance and installation practice within sound art. Recent creative opportunities to occupy different spaces and formats in music making led me to investigate the ideas of other composers in my vicinity whose work deals with similar issues. I kept finding myself attracted to the notion of how objects – physical, sounding or even conceptual – invite interaction in ways depending on how artists deploy them in specific spaces. I've chosen three Canadian artists to illustrate some of my observations: Jean-François Laporte, Nicolas Bernier and the partnership of Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller.

Using interactions with objects in the creation and diffusion of sound works happens all along the spectrum between the stage and the gallery. What I mean by this is that although each of these spaces generates certain expectations and behaviours, the increasing mobility resulting from shared tools and practices allows has allowed artists to inhabit different places on that spectrum depending on the occasion. And just as interactions with objects can find a place somewhere between the stage and the gallery, they also often occur somewhere between performers and the audience. The object's manipulation might require expertise; it might require performance by its audience, or, conversely, be entirely autonomous, casting everyone – including its composer – into a listening stance. I should add that many of the artists whose work I explored – and indeed who are presented here – have a background in or are active within musical, if not electroacoustic circles, and thus what follows is necessarily biased, not speaking for sound art in general.

To contextualize the following examples, I'd like to focus on the object by zooming outwards, starting from its relationship with sound, through to its communication via its operator, to a bigger picture of how it fits into the work itself.

Object/Sound

When using an object within the context of a sound work, an obvious place to start is whether the object's sound relates to what is heard – is the object analogous to the sound or disparate? How does the physicality of the object relate to what we hear? In other words, is there a consonance or a dissonance between the object's physicality and our perception? Is the object being used to make the sound, or is the relationship more incongruous or oblique? Similarly, is the sound – and/or the object itself – singular, crafted for specifically this purpose, inviting individual or unique interpretation, or is it familiar, more everyday and universal, carrying with it a host of associations and relations?

Object/Operator

Moving from the sound itself of the object to who is playing it and how, we are confronted with the operator and their agency within the work. The first important choice, clearly, is whether the presence of an operator is felt: does the object depend on a human interaction or is it autonomous? Further investigation opens the question of how much of that interaction and reactivity is predictable and programmed. All of these apparent dualities, then, are but ranges of possibility, depending on the angle of focus.

In cases where some overt interaction with the object is necessary, there is an important distinction between those works requiring an expert and those that sound for anyone: is it more universal or singular? This choice will certainly entail a completely different set of design choices and consequences on the front end, since the issues in building an interface that requires little instruction is a very different proposition than creating one to be decoded and/or interpreted by a specialist. But they also lead to quite different perceptual results, since they locate the artist and the public in a different spot on the axis between stage and gallery and between performer and audience.

Object/Work

This brings us to how the object interacts with our perception of where the work itself resides. Is it the *actual* sound and functioning of the object in a *particular* situation, or is it the *potential* of interaction or sound that the object invites or represents? Since temporal experience within sound works is such an important factor, we need to consider the structure and perception of the work's temporality. Is it composed into particular, determined temporal experience, or is it a more spontaneous or indeterminate one? And how can or are those things perceived differently. This is clearly one of the key differences between the standard "composition" and "installation" aesthetics, and yet it too is a range of possibilities. As is true of the work's instructions, or scoring. Artists might consider the work the composed score or the program running and interactive system, or they might see the work in its perceptual and/or interactive potential. There exists then, a continuum between a highly arranged set of sound events and object manipulations or a more autonomously assembled one, which we could also see as overlapping with the spectrum between the singular, deterministic and the more open, mutable and perhaps more universal.

Caveats

As has by now become clear these binaries are ranges of possibilities, whose endpoints are very shifty, and could perhaps be rearranged or reinterpreted to offer quite different connections – even perhaps quite opposite ones. In a more traditional musical sense, the three preceding sections also parallel the notion of instrument, performer and performance. Using different terms, however, expands our conception of those notions, and move us further away from the traditionally stage-oriented perspective of musical composition. The terms and relationships (what could be considered the subject) also depend, then, on whether one is looking from the perspective of the creator or the perceiver. "Autonomous," robotic objects are a particularly good example of this, since perceptually, agency feels neutralized, yet creating this perception requires the programming of autonomous agency to a high degree.

Subject/Perception

Baudrillard brings the subject of the work together with its object in saying that:

Every object thus has two functions: one is to be put to use/practiced, the other to be possessed," when he's just told us that "Possession is not that of a utensil, which refers back to the world, but always that of an object *abstracted from its function and thus brought into relationship with the subject*". (Baudrillard, 1968, p. 104)

In abstracting and choosing how the object functions, the artists are in essence placing the work in different spots on the grid, offering us different roles and experiences through our relationship with the object.

I've chosen Jean-François Laporte, Nicolas Bernier and Janet Cardiff/George Bures Miller because these artists have a multi-faceted output that relates to objects in different ways. I've chosen these three particular works because they each show a different approach, different places between the pairs I outlined above.

Jean-François Laporte – The Pipe

Jean-François Laporte's Tuyo is one of the oldest instruments that he built. He describes discovering its prototype by accident, and credits the moment of blowing across bowl covered in a balloon for the beginning of his whole *luthier* journey. In fact the Tuyo has been updated to a new name, The Pipe (Laporte, 2014).

So clearly, here is an example of a very particular, singular object – although there are two examples of it here, the one hanging, working as if autonomously, though being played remotely by Benjamin Thigpen, and one being manipulated by Laporte himself. These are clearly instruments being played in a concert setting, with something close to a stage and a fairly motionless audience.

The performative elements clearly create certain consonances between the instrument and the sound, since one of the performers is interacting and exciting sounds physically, but also certain perceptual ambiguities, since the other performer is controlling the hanging version remotely. My question is whether the more overtly “live” performer is there to explain the operation of the more mechanical?

This is a good question to ponder when considering the 2008 exhibition at the Fonderie Darling in Montreal called *Psúkho*, where Laporte placed a number of Tuyos that were automated to act as if they were as sounding sculptures. Here then, there was no performer, and the audience, through their movements, was encouraged to mix their own experience. Interestingly, there were a number of concert ritual events organized, where instrumentalists came in to improvise with the installation. In an interview, the artist told me that he found it frustrating that the instrumentalists playing traditional instruments generated a totally different attitude from the listeners, in that they really listened - quietly. He calls for more spaces devoted to a concentrated form of quiet listening, and that people should be sensitized, educated, about how to be a part of these environments. He likens it to the fact that people know not to touch sculptures in museums. I feel this is an important issue when making a move away from the stage.

Nicolas Bernier – *frequencies (a)*

In Nicolas Bernier's *frequencies (a)*, the artist is in some ways a mediator between the object and the audience. We are still watching someone onstage, but Bernier avoids using the word instrument. He calls it

a sound performance combining the sound of mechanically triggered tuning forks with pure digital sound waves. The performer is triggering sequences from the computer, activating solenoids that hit the tuning forks with high precision. Streams of light burst in synchronicity with the forks, creating a not-quite-minimal sound and light composition. (Bernier, 2014b)

What I find fascinating here is that the choice of materials and the aesthetic of the construction and deployment has a laboratory-like feel to it. Clearly this subverts a regular musical performance, to bring us into a much more theatrical realm, while at the same time leaving us questioning the performer's agency. Bernier writes:

frequencies (a) [...] does not provide any haptic feedback, which led to the decision to add a layer of purely instrumental performance in which the artist manipulates the tuning forks that are not attached to the mechanical interface. The goal, then, is to find modes of cohabitation between the phenomenal virtuosity of the machine when faced with the approximate virtuosity of human manipulation. The human and the machine rub together in a choreography where both complement each other, playing together either counterpoint or in opposition. (Bernier, 2014a, p. 30).

And he also says:

in *frequencies (a)* the man/machine relationship is related the notions of instrumental performance, apprenticeship/practice and virtuosity. Techniques are invented in order to allow for human-machine cohabitation that work together in the development of the performance. (Bernier, 2014a, p. 31).

Clearly then, this large interface, built up of these sounding objects, diapasons, could quite easily have been conceived and implemented as an autonomous installation. However, it is precisely our expectations of who and what is the performer that are being played with here.

Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller – *The Cabinet of Curiousness*

Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller are also playing with the notion of the performer, but from a different angle. Instead of questioning the autonomy of the object/instrument, they are inviting the audience into the performative sphere.

Many of their works require the audience to take action in order to experience the work – as is the case in their numerous audio and augmented reality walks - or they create listening spaces far from a stage – such as forests or penitentiaries – that at least must be visited particularly.

I chose the *Cabinet of Curiousness* (Cardiff and Miller, 2014) because it is a small piece and fairly self-explanatory. That is, in fact, one of its distinguishing characteristics. Of all the examples, it is the most universal, and its performance is put together spontaneously by anyone. However, one should consider the contents of the card catalogue: with 20 recordings to trigger on and off, the performers are clearly working with an instrument of limited sonic possibility.

What I find important here is also that there are a limited number of people who can interact with the cabinet at one time, so a dynamic is nevertheless set up, with certain people becoming spectators, others performers. I think it is not a coincidence that many of Cardiff and Miller's other works, though presented in a gallery, are temporal and allow a certain number of visitors at once, clearly showing their interest in staging experience.

Cardiff says, "So I'm manufacturing these kinds of synchronicities. I see them as how you put poetry together; you put images of sound." She also says:

I think wonderment in our work is something that we really concentrate on, because we love to experience it. And we make work so that we can feel it, and so many of our pieces have this sense – whether it's through trickery of technology, or playfulness – it gives you a sense of 'Wow, how did they do that? or all of a sudden you realize you're in one space in your mind, and in the physical reality you're all in different spaces and your mind kind of goes through this

point where it can't concentrate and so it goes into a state of wonderment, I think. (Cardiff, 2012a).

In their work, then, Cardiff and Miller are using objects and actions to transport people into yet other spaces and to other realities through physicality. So this made me really start thinking about a dichotomy I have not mentioned but which is never far from consideration: the real and the virtual.

A final quote from Cardiff:

The rhetoric around ideas of reality through artists has always been important to me and how linear perspective made people think about how they were getting into the realness of the world [...] it's a search for connection to someone else, a search for somehow getting so real that you're really there. (Cardiff, 2012b).

Conclusion

Clearly interacting with objects – usually considered instruments – has always created an artistic space of performance. What these artists and their works, along with their various incarnations and variations, show, is that we can relate to a whole range of objects and our expectations can be utilized and subverted to generate hybrid forms, in which categories and traditions are of lesser importance than the perceptual experience. What I would still very much like to explore further at some point, is what notions such as virtuosity, presence and absence – or real and virtual, as well as liveness mean in these contexts.

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