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Terminological discourses in the field of sound art

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Abstract

The use of the term ‘sound art’ started occurring in the eighties to refer to a multifaceted and composite genre. As a result of its significant connections to both music and arts, the multiplicity and hybridity of its forms as well as the polysemy of the term itself, it started opening the field of various definitions and terminology. Sound art literature has since been reflecting upon these questions while stressing the difficulty of delimitations.

Through a comparative overview, this paper studies different discourses according to both theories and practices in the aim of questioning the framework in which sound art belongs today. As the peculiarity of its interdisciplinary forms questions the pertinence of possible classifications, terminological inquiries are important in defining it independently from other major fields such as electroacoustic music. Accordingly, this study suggests a taxonomy of forms that considers the modes of creation and diffusion that could fall within the definition of sound art.

Introduction

Sound art has developed in the very era of mixed disciplines, possibilities and ideological transitions of the nineteen-fifties that marked a major turn in music and arts. By embracing an interdisciplinary approach from its roots, making it one of the fundamental aspects of its practices, it has not excluded much of the forms, techniques and practices. From this period onward, sonic works started being experimented and exhibited in spaces once silent and led to reconsidering the necessary technical requirements and changes to integrate sonic elements and the very act of listening. These new perspectives constantly enriched the way this art is understood and comprehended in and out academic institutions, revealing varying degrees of understanding, hence of analysis.

Since the emergence of the first sonic art forms and throughout their development, the opening of a considerable number of alternative spaces, collectives, galleries and festivals associated as much with the music as with the artistic fields increasingly drew attention on this growing art form within cultural and academic institutions. The pioneers of sound art showed us how it is an expanding field which suggests plurality in its correlation with diverse disciplines. The ephemeral characteristic of sound constantly varies the forms sound art can take, including the environment and space it interacts with, consequently putting the perception of the works in continuous change.

Theoretical discourses

Although the fifties is often referred as the point of origin of sound art, the first use of the term itself only appears in the eighties, becoming recurrently used to refer to a practice that tries to stand out from other major artistic and musical forms. The still now existing difficulty of defining sound art lies within this very complexity: tight connections to other major art and music fields such as Fluxus, electroacoustic and experimental music, or even video art. Dan Lander, often considered as having coined the term, already noted in 1990 on the interchangeability between sound art and music due to historical attachments¹. Almost two decades later, Jøran Rudi notes the necessity of a closer investigation on this practice still lacking definition and clear delimitations, stressing how “it is in danger of collapsing as a meaningful category”².

Indeed, a great number of theorists and practitioners have questioned these perspectives for which sound art had laid the ground work by introducing new readings in the crossing of varied and sometimes radically different discourses. In the matter of the use of the term ‘sound art’, Douglas Kahn shared a critical view considering it used as a matter of convenience and rather uses the term “*sound in the arts*”³ to represent a larger topic. On a more radical note, Max Neuhaus questions if ‘sound art’ does indeed constitute a new art form, coming to the conclusion that it has been “consumed”⁴, while Christoph Cox considers it only as “a general term for works of art that focus on sound [...]”⁵.

If ‘sound art’ was and is still questioned, the German school has laid a more solid ground for ‘Klangkunst’, coined by musicologist Helga La Motte-Habber, as an art that wants to be “heard and seen at the same time” with an “abandonment of the strong differentiation between spatial and time-based qualities”⁶. It is also worth noticing how electroacoustic and experimental music are put aside, defining the field in light of a spatial art. A study led by Andreas Engrström and Åsa Stjerna puts the highlight on these differences between sound art and Klangkunst, and from Christoph Metzger’s explanation of sound art as “category of installation art that involves working with spaces both acoustically and sculpturally”⁷, they also draw the conclusion that in German academic discourse, sound installation is not a sound art genre among others – it *is* the sound art. Curator Bernd Schulz also notes the development of sound art as an art form in which “sound has become material within the context of an expanded concept of sculpture”⁸. Within the spatial aspects in sound art, the sculptural dimension is also prominent in the way it connects architecture, spatial perception and site-specific listening.

¹ See Dan Lander, “Introduction”, in *Sound by artists*, Dan Lander and Micah Lexier (eds), Toronto, Art Metropole and Walter Philipps Galery, 1990, p. 10.

² Jøran Rudi, “Editorial”, *Organised sound*, 14(1), 2009, p. 1.

³ Douglas Kahn, “The Arts of Sound Art and Music”, *The Iowa Review Web*, 8(1), 2006, p. 1, http://thestudio.uiowa.edu/tirw/TIRW_Archive/feb06/kahn2.html, http://thestudio.uiowa.edu/tirw/TIRW_Archive/feb06/Kahn_Sound_Art.pdf, http://www.douglaskahn.com/writings/douglas_kahn-sound_art.pdf (last accessed 01/18).

⁴ Max Neuhaus, “Introduction”, *Volume: Bed of Sound*, New York, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, 2000, p. 1, <http://www.max-neuhaus.info/soundworks/soundart/SoundArt.pdf> (last accessed 01/18).

⁵ Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, “Glossary”, in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, New York, The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2004, p. 415.

⁶ Andreas Engrström and Åsa Stjerna, “Sound Art or Klangkunst? A reading of the German and English literature on sound art”, *Organised Sound*, 14(1), 2009, p. 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸ Bernd SCHULZ, “Introduction”, in *Resonanzen / Resonances: Aspekte der Klangkunst / Aspects of Sound art*, Bernd Schulz (ed), Heidelberg, Kehrer Verlag, 2002, pp. 14-15.

Sound installation is thus a particularly striking representative of the way we consider sound in and with space, making it possible to consider it as the very form of sound art. John Grzinich does not fail to emphasize on that, explaining how ‘sound art’ could be an idea that leads us to concentrate on installation⁹. In addition, we are also facing the peculiar temporality in sound art, as pointed out by Alan Licht: “Unlike music, which has a fixed time duration [...] a sound art piece, like a visual artwork, has no specified timeline; it can be experienced over a long or short period of time, without missing the beginning, middle or end.”¹⁰

If we examine a broader consideration of sound based practices, Brandon LaBelle, in his publication *Background Noise: Perspectives on sound art* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2006) goes back to the fifties music and arts history as genesis, breaking down sound art aesthetic into distinct chapters on sculptures, text, voice and performance, locational listening, environments and network space. LaBelle’s perspectives on sonic forms and the history of sound art accentuate the differences found by Engrström and Stjerna in their research in regard to Klangkunst, asserting to “sound art” a larger panel of sonic forms and interdisciplinary approaches.

Taxonomy of forms

Different definitions are attributed and study fields explored that seemingly triggers criticism besides the borrowed terms, sometimes splitting in different schools of thought. However, they are also used as a purely general descriptive tool rather than a distinct category. As a result, sound art often finds itself among forms, whether as a sub-genre or a category that summarizes any sonic practice that does not belong to a pre-defined field, omitting relevant precisions.

For that matter, the following ongoing taxonomy of forms tries to delimitate groups and study fields. A classification that takes the modes of diffusion and hybrid characteristics into consideration is suggested through some of the sonic works that could fall within these categories while reflecting on their roots. Thus, according to the interrelations between production methods and resulting works, the suggested classification of sound art mainly includes sculptural, structure-borne, performative and mobile forms.

Sculptural forms

In the perspective of sound art being a space-oriented art form, installation and sculpture seem to be the most prominent referent forms that sound art takes, though not limited to them. The term ‘sound sculpture’ introduced in the fifties through the Baschet Brothers’ *Sculptures sonores* initially referred to their acoustic instruments. Expanding with the works of Harry Partch and Harry Bertoia, as well as those of Takis, Hugh Davis, Max Eastly and Earle Brown, it engages the sonic phenomena with the three dimension space. We could note the notion of sculpture also referred to ‘sculpting’ sound, or sound as ‘building material’. The approach to sound as a sculptural material or substance exceeds the initial definition that implies sound as an extension of a primarily visual experience. The material approach to sculpture is put in parallel with the sonic element with works that continued the tradition of the initial sound sculpture definition.

⁹ See John Grzinich and Carsten Seiffarth, “Sound in a Space Between”, in *Kunst.ee magazine: Kunsti Jaa Visuaalkultuuri Kvartaliajakiri / Estonian Quarterly of Art and Visual Culture* (partly in English), special section “Sound art?”, 2, 2006, p. 77.

¹⁰ Alan LICHT, “Sound art: origins, development and ambiguities”, *Organised Sound*, 14(1), 2009, p. 3.

Bernhard Leitner, who has a background in architecture before he became interested in sound, highlights the importance of visual space and the complexity of the visual and aural connections. Instruments built in symbiosis with space properties is an approach shown in his works such as *Sound Cube* (1968) in which speakers create sounds that move through the space, or *Sound Chair* (1976) in which the participant-audience is invited to sit on the chair to experience the sounds inside it through their body.

In John Grayson's *Sound sculpture* (A.R.C, 1975), the author already puts light on the audiovisual approach of David Rothenberg and John Chowning's work on acoustic space and design as examples of 'future direction' of sound sculpture. These sculptural installations put environmental and spatial experience forefront along with the materiality of sound while it incorporates the visual dimension. Sculptural sound art thus puts the auditory and visual elements in a parallel sensory experience.

Structure-borne forms

Borrowing the term coined by Maryanne Amacher that takes the specificities and acoustic of a physical space and architecture into account, structure-borne forms take these specifics as primary source that creates or modifies the sonic result, as well as an active and responsive listening. Amacher's *Music for Sound-Joined Rooms* installation series (1980) is a representative of this paradigm, inviting the audience to move around connected rooms in which large multi-channel installations combine sound and visual experience. The acoustic phenomena of these situated sounds are thus a result of an architectural and receptive experience. Similarly in Alvin Lucier's *I am sitting in a room* (1969), through repeated recordings of his voice recorded, reciting a text that explains his performance, the original vocal is changed by the resonant frequencies of the room. Positioned as a performer, this work uses the space's acoustic properties that make the sounding result a site-specific, structure-borne work.

La Monte Young's *Dreamhouse*, which he started experimenting on from 1962 with his partner, Marian Zazeela, represents another structure-borne work that interacts with two connected elements: the continuous sine-tones diffused that seem static at first takes the acoustic properties and the audience's movements that influences the perceptive experience. The *Dream House* was represented in different locations, subsequently making it a site-specific work that changes depending on its spatial conditioning and the audience's participation. The site-specificity in structure-borne forms highlights the intrinsic elements as the base structure to working with sound, giving it the primary elements in which sonic approach is shifted, built and shaped within, as well as receptiveness.

Performative forms

Taking its roots in music culture, live-electronic, Fluxus, Happenings and conceptual arts, performative sound art opens way to numerous possibilities. Sound poetry founded with the Swedish text-sound composition of Fylkingen, the Lettrists and the German Hörspiel also heavily influenced sound art that articulates vocal work, text and language.

Engaged in more explorative forms of performance, The Sonic Arts Union had the ambition of going beyond sonic experiments that occurred between the sixties and seventies, incorporating electronics, visuals arts, poetry and music. Alvin Lucier, one of its members, continued creating works that followed that vision of performative experimentation, seen in works such as *Music for solo performer* (1965) in which human brain waves triggers sound. Electrodes attached to the performer's head detect alpha brain waves that are transmitted via

amplifiers to loudspeakers that resonate through percussive instruments. Performance here implicates an expanded notion of sounding bodies and of the connection between performer, audience and instrument.

If the performative approach could be questioned regarding the definition of sound art, we could also briefly mention the numerous recent festivals, events and organizations in which this art form is often put together with experimental music and finds itself in hybrid venues.

Mobile forms

With the development of digital technologies, mobile sound art forms enhance itinerant and connective locational listening in individual and collective, private and public spaces. This peculiar context of mobile presentation and listening makes it the founding element of the sonic production that works tightly with the diffusion location in which it finds itself, but also with the social and cultural connections between listening spaces.

Brandon LaBelle elaborates on sound art in creating the conditions for different experiences of social space and behavior, giving examples of works by the French group Apo33 and their web radio and Internet transmission of live sound events, described as works that “accentuate the contextual boundaries of a given sound event while broadcasting and transposing it onto greater space of sound”¹¹. New technologies connecting different spaces, that of the virtual space of internet for instance, enabled new listening situations. Through a pluridisciplinary approach, many artists and research groups question these sonic uses in their social contexts through technological mediation. Examples also include the CRESSON Lab (*Centre de recherche sur l'espace sonore et l'environnement urbain*) and Locus Sonus research group which primary concerns are the consideration of mobile audio-technology through mapping, sounding as well as shared phenomenology, questioning distant listening through networked sonic spaces.

Audio mobility also characterizes ‘sound walks’ or ‘audio walks’ representing the locational itinerancy through device and participant-audience's mobility. Janet Cardiff's *Her Long Black Hair* changes the usual walk at Central Park during fifty-five minutes in which sound guiding the walk, location and visuals are put through binaural technology, while David Helbich's *City Tracks* invites the listener to follow the guideline of the piece in order to articulate everyday sounds and environments in different cities.

Conclusion

From both theoretical and practical aspects, sound art never ceased, now as then, to reassert fundamental questions concerning the use and apprehension of sound. It has pushed beyond the boundaries of conventional listening situations by outing all sonic possibilities front and center through its interaction with space, visuals and receptivity, engendering significant changes in our understanding and apprehension of sound. The suggested taxonomy proposes sound art forms with sound as distinct vocabulary in an ongoing research that tries to delimitate study field to better analyze sound art works.

As a result of various elements cited integrating into the aesthetic and discourses on sound art, we are aware of the contest these taxonomical complications provoke, as many of the sound artists work across these different traditions, whether they are rooted in music, sculpture,

¹¹ Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2006, p. 282.

performance art or conceptual art without necessarily delimitating these frameworks. Yet, the fact sound art always bordered on other categories and the lack of definition are undoubtedly among the reasons for the difficulty its artistic and academic insertion as an independent art form, while its hybrid characteristics continues to be widely explored.

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