

Ears Have Walls: On Hearing Art

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A talk given in the series *Bodily Knowledges: Challenging Ocularcentricity* at [Tate Modern](#), 21 February 2003. It has been published in [FO A R M](#), 4 (2005), 48-57.

Sound art responds to two contrary tractions in the practices of making and displaying art. One is the desire to burst boundaries, to tear down the walls, to break out of the confined space of the gallery. Sound is ideal for this because of its well-known expansiveness and leakiness. Galleries are designed according to the angular, not to say perpendicular logic dispensed and required by the eye. The interior spaces of galleries are disposed in Euclidean straight lines and perpendicular planes, presumably because that is how light travels and how vision works. Rather than moving from source to destination like a letter or a missile, sound diffuses in all directions, like a gas. Unlike light, sound goes round corners. Sound work makes us aware of the continuing emphasis upon division and partition that continues to exist even in the most radically revisable or polymorphous gallery space, because sound spreads and leaks, like odour.

It is not what you put in a gallery that matters. Since an art gallery can surround any object with a sort of invisible force-field or glaze of 'aestheticity', it is whether or not it stays in its place. I think it is in part this power of sealing or marooning things in their visibility and this allergy to things that spread that makes art galleries so horribly fatiguing and inhuman: at least to me. Sounds, by contrast, have a power to relieve and invigorate just as smells do. I can see works of art much better on a wet day, when the moist fog steaming from boots, macs and hair, can ventilate my otherwise asphyxiated gawp.

Much of the work that is characteristic of sound art has either gone outside, or has the capacity to bring the outside inside. Sound is doubly extramural, first of all in a disciplinary sense, in that it adds to art a dimension that has traditionally been left to other, more temporal arts and secondly in the more immediate or phenomenological sense, in that it introduces timely events into the permanent, partitioned world of art. Sound art comes not only through the wall, but round the corner and through the floor. Perhaps the greatest allure of sound for artists more than ever convinced of their libertarian vocation somehow to go over the institutional wall, is that sound, like an odour or a giggle, escapes.

According to R. Murray Schafer, Western music has done everything it can to retreat from this exposed or open-air condition. Observing how many languages have no separate word to distinguish music from sound in general – it is true, for example of Japanese, of Inuit, of most North-American languages, as well as of African languages like Yoruba and Igbo – Schafer suggests that the special status of music in European and other Northern cultures has a strongly architectural determinant:

Music has become an activity which requires silence for its proper presentation – containers of silence called music rooms...In fact it would be possible to write the entire history of European music in terms of walls, showing not only how the varying resonances of its performance spaces have affected its harmonies, tempi and timbres, but also to show how its social character evolved once it was set apart from everyday life. (Schafer 35)

In the special kind of sound we call music, in other words, time and duration thicken and aggregate into space and place.

Sound art, by contrast, has typically sought to expand beyond the gallery, to ventilate the gallery with the sounds of what lies outside it, or to temporalise place. The Sonic Boom exhibition of sound art at the Hayward Gallery in 2000 included a piece by a group entitled Greyworld (who are the artists Andrew Shoben, Sabine Tress and Floyd Gilmore) in which the steps down to the Hayward Gallery from Waterloo Bridge were mined with sound sensors, allowing a kind of feedback of the sounds of visitors as they ascended and descended. The sound and performance artist [Janet Cardiff](#) has taken the audio-guides that have become so popular in galleries and adapted them for audio-walks in different environments. Other sound works have taken to the streets in other ways. Between 1st November and 14th December 2002, Michael Clark set up a sound-sculpture entitled [Drawing Breath](#), consisting of a loop of panting sounds outside the *Janus* sex-shop in Soho. Since the shop specialised in the arcana of spanking, the reference was perhaps to the folkloric link between the midwife's slap and the breath of life. In 1998 Scanner completed a piece entitled [Surface Noise](#), (download: [part 1](#); [part 2](#); [part 3](#); [part 4](#); [part 5](#)) built around movement through London. Here is his explanation of the methods by which the piece was devised:

[T]his work took a red double-decker bus as its focus. Making a route determined by overlaying the sheet music from London Bridge is Falling Down onto a map of London, I recorded the sounds and images at points where the notes fell on the cityscape. These co-ordinates provided the score for the piece and by using software that translated images into sound and original source recordings, I was able to mix the work live on each journey through a speaker system we installed throughout the bus, as it followed the original walk shuttling between Big Ben and St Paul's Cathedral.

When sound comes into the gallery to play, its exhilarating and delinquent leakiness can make for ironies. When David Toop was putting together the *Sonic Boom* exhibition of sound art at the Hayward Gallery, he was faced with a positively suburban problem of sound pollution. Though many of the artists represented in the show might well have paid lip service to the idea of the importance and pleasure of the diffusiveness of sound, the potential for undesirable interference was high. The scarcely-audible scratchings and sussurations of Max Eastley's etherial metal figures were at risk of being swamped by the glorious but omnipresent headachy bruise of a sound that throbbed from Pan Sonic's low-frequency installation. During the planning, the artists involved became a new species of suburbanite, protesting against their noisy neighbours in the gallery

space. The solution to which David Toop and some of his artists was led was the traditional one: they put up extra walls, and built rooms of sound, to insulate and contain the different sound events. At least one of the pieces in the exhibition played with that, Scanner's *The Collector*, in which a series of images of butterflies was projected on to the walls of a little enclosed booth or cabinet to the accompaniment of a soundtrack. The 'flutter' that is a feature of audio-talk became literalised in the piece's suggestion of tiny wings, beating and butterflykissing the auditory membrane.

Mixing

Sound is the permeable. A world of sound is a world grasped as irreducibly and undecomposably compound. The difficulty of conceiving this state becomes apparent as soon as one inspects the metaphors we habitually use to think of that which is conjoined. 'Complexity' has at its root the idea of one surface folded over upon another. Collage and juxtaposition similarly focusses attention on the edges or outward surfaces of things brought up against each other. Even the word 'compound', despite its helpful though etymologically irrelevant suggestion of things that have been kneaded or mashed together, derives from com-ponere, meaning the putting of things together or alongside each other. Our language tends to separate the compound into the merely com-posite, into the setting together, surface against surface, or edge against edge, of entities which remain entire.

The vernacular language is a little wiser. Where we have traditionally spoken of the making of music as a composition, this act is more likely to be named in contemporary sound practice as a process of 'mixing'. Composition and music-making have started in many quarters to become once again what they always really have been, a mixing process more akin to cooking and chemistry than to calculation. Sound belongs to what the philosopher Michel Serres (1985) has called a '[philosophy of mixed bodies](#)', bodies which are compound all the way through. The unsighted, or undersighted, by which I mean both the blind and the intently listening, inhabit a world – a world which is *the* world – of mixed bodies, of permeable, impermanent, volatile space, of irreducible adulteration.

We might note in passing another feature of mixing, namely that it appears to be an effect of a new dispensation in sound production, in which listening and sound production enter into rapid exchanges or feedback loops with one another. The sound mixer has moved from the lowly accessory condition of the one who merely tunes or refines the sound to the condition of the one who produces or even originates it. The mixing of sounds is also a mixing together of the making and the hearing of sound, which had previously been much more strictly bifurcated.

The sighted world allows for neutral containers: frames, grounds or empty volumes, rooms in which things may occur, screens which may carry inscriptions, scenes which are, as we say, set, for events. For the unsighted, there are no such set-ups or scenographies. In the unsighted world, latency is temporal and not spatial. And because it is temporal, it is also tense with possibility rather than neutrally open to it. Michel Chion has put this particularly well with regard to the difference between image and

sound in film. Apart from in certain experiences of immersive cinema, the viewer of an image in the cinema can almost always see or intuit the edge of the frame, which remains the visible, or visualisable horizon of everything that occurs as we say on the screen or in the frame. But sound in the cinema, like sound in the world, has no frame, no 'auditory container' (Chion 68). The world of the unsighted is a world without firmament, without permanent fixtures and fittings, walls or rooms. It is a world rather of events, which are both continuously about-to-be, for one cannot listen away as one can look away, cannot ever stop hearing, and also, so to speak, continuously intermittent. There is no background, no firmament, only figures which start forth from their own ground. John Hull (1991) has evoked wonderfully well this absence of givens, or set-ups, the world of unannounced annunciations, which the unsighted inhabit. Not visibility, but rather visitation.

I have been evoking the different worlds of the oversighted and the undersighted, as though they were entirely different and incommunicable conditions. But it is doubtful that even these two conditions can be sealed or walled off from each other. Not only does sightedness include unsightedness as a possibility, blindness, at least in anyone who can use our vision-shaped language, includes the horizon of sight. Even the blind from birth, who might seem never to have had any visual experience, will learn to understand much of the meaning and import of the eye, must accede to the configuration of the world in terms of the eye. When we sighted say that we see what we mean, the unsighted indeed see what we mean by that, and mean the same as we in saying it.

Habitats

Sound is arousing and dangerous because it can so easily penetrate and permeate, so effortlessly become the soft catastrophe of space. The blast of Joshua's seven ram's horns, along with the vigorous shouting of the faithful was enough to bring down the walls of Jericho ([Joshua 6.20](#)). But the artists of the Sonic Boom exhibition who sought to fence off or wall up their own particular sound environments were responding to another, oddly opposite, feature of sound, namely its capacity to envelop, to fill, form and fix space. It is a power attested to in the story of Amphion, son of Zeus: when he played the lyre he was taught by its inventor Hermes, the stones of the walls of Thebes moved into place of their own accord. Sound can not only impregnate, irradiate, it can also, it seems, provide a haven or habitat: 'safe' as the saying is 'and sound'. We use sound to locate things, and to orientate ourselves in space: to take the measure of things, we take 'soundings' or 'sound things out'. Something which responds favourably to this process may even be said to be 'sound', meaning presumably that it is in fact reassuringly resistant to sound's probative passage. Sound is exploratory rather than merely metric or analytic, because sound does not give us just the outline or contour of things – their size, shape and position – but also gives us the sense of their quality, or their relation to us: their texture, density, resistance, porosity, wetness, absorptiveness.

It is striking that many sound artists are concerned to use sound as a form of detention or agglutination of place, rather than its dispersal into sound or movement. One example would be William Furlong, who contributed to the Arts Council Touring Exhibition *Voice Over* in 1998. Furlong, who presents his work under the name 'Audio Arts' (like many

DJs who prefer to name themselves as collectivities rather than as individuals) employs a method which involves interviewing people about their habits, likes and dislikes, and then cutting and remixing the results. According to the *Voice Over* curator Michael Archer, a piece such as [*Spoken For/Spoken About*](#) (1997), 'allows the place to speak and to be listened to by those who move through it...A voice sounds in the space that it makes as it sounds.' (*Voice Over*, 12)

Immersion

When you are in a bath, or even in a sauna, you feel yourself at once inside your skin and taken beyond it. One seems to expand outwards from one's core to one's skin. But this movement does not confine one in one's skin, but releases one to continue to expand into the element in which one is immersed. Dider Anzieu finds an analogue for this immersion in what he calls the 'sonorous envelope', or bath of sounds, to which all of us are subject, first of all as foetus, in which sound and tactile sensation are powerfully intermingled, and then the experiences of the young child, in which the sensation of being held and embraced continues to cooperate with the lulling and lulling, all the gentle hubbub, with which the child is surrounded. We can say therefore that the experience of immersion in sound is a strange hybrid, that does not yield easily to the language of space. In the experience of sonorous immersion, one is on the outside of what surrounds one. One is sheltered within a space which one nevertheless oneself suffuses. For all the sad, wild foolishness of psychoanalytic surmise about the origins of autism in childhood trauma, the accounts offered by Edith Lecourt of the necessity felt by some autistic children for physical support and enclosure along with their auditory equivalents, in humming or other sound-routines, have a compelling poignancy. Sound is here erected as a barrier against the disordering, extinguishing incursions of sound itself.

I take it that this was the pun involved in the title of the installation in the Museum of Modern Art in New York which ran during the second half of 2000. In [*Volume: Bed of Sound*](#) visitors were invited to find a corner to snuggle into of an enormous futon-bed, from which extruded a number of sets of headphones, each playing a piece of sound or music created by a composer or artist.

The capacity of sound to build as well as to take down walls is a more difficult matter to think about steadily about than sound's diffusiveness. How can sound be experienced as at once the diffuser and the builder of bounded place? What is it about sound that makes us imagine it to be habitable?

Partly it is because sound is voluminous. If vision always puts creatures physically constituted as we are in front of the world, then sound, as Walter Ong has put it, puts us in the midst of things. Sound puts us in the world from which vision requires us, however minimally, to withdraw. Even this is a simplification, for, in order for a sound to be audible, it is always necessary for it to be in us just as much as we are in it. We inhabit sound, because it happens to us. We do not inhabit the world of vision because our acts of looking are constantly doing things to that world. Looking, as Merleau-Ponty

has remarked, is a kind of having. Listening can only approximate to this appropriative hand-eye coordination.

But the spatiality of sound comes about also for just the opposite reason, namely that we are in fact never wholly passive with regard to sound. We never merely hear sound, we are always also listening to it, which is to say selecting certain significant sounds and isolating them from the background noise which continuously rumbles and rattles, continually on the qui vive for patterns of resemblance or recurrence. As with sight, and [following Wordsworth](#), the ear 'half-creates' what it thinks it hears. This language of sound is spatial. Why does the increase in frequency of a sound suggest that it is getting 'higher'? In other words, the spatiality of sound is a reflex, formed by the projective, imagining ear, the ear commandeering the eye to make out the space it finds itself in. It is in this sense that ears may be said to have walls.

Sound Objects

If some of sound art is concerned with what Pierre Schaeffer has called the 'acousmatic' dimensions of sound, namely sound produced without visible or even definable source, other kinds of sound art are interested in the ambiguous embodiments or fixations of sound. Ambiguous because, despite all our instincts to the contrary, there are no sound objects. We say, hearing a sound, that is a siren, or, that is the sea, but objects are only the occasions for sound, never their origins. And there is no sound that is the sound of one object alone. All sounds are the result of collisions, abrasions, impingements or minglings of objects.

Nevertheless, since the beginning of the century, composers and avant-garde artists have been following the lead of the Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo, in building or inventing objects to embody sound. Having called for an '[Art of Noises](#)' in a manifesto written in 1913 (1986), Russolo set himself to constructing a series of noise instruments: whirrers, rubbers, roarers, and the like. The expansion of the spectrum of music into more and more unfamiliar or unregistered areas of sound led composers such as Harry Partch to the construction of ever more outlandish [instruments](#). One might have expected the development of the technologies of sound synthesis and manipulation to have led artists away from the attempt to embody their new sounds, but the two tendencies have in fact advanced together in parallel. The visual and tactile correlatives of sound art have become more rather than less important in art galleries.

I spent 4 years thinking I was writing a [book about the disembodied voice](#) and concluded that there was never any such thing; that sounds, though always on the move, are hungry to come to rest, hungry to be lodged in a local habitation that they can be said to have come from. Sounds are always embodied, though not always in the kind of bodies made known to vision.

The phrase sound-sculpture refers interestingly to two kinds of thing. A sound-sculpture in the sense in which it is used by the American artist Bill Fontana is a piece of shaped sound, often with a close relationship to a specific location. Examples are his piece *Sound Sculptures Through the Golden Gate* of 1981 or his [Acoustical Visions of](#)

[Venice](#) . The latter mixed together sounds recorded at noon from 13 different locations all visible from the Punta della Dogana in Venice. But other artists use the term ‘sound sculpture’ to refer to instrument-like objects that are themselves designed or adapted to produce sound. In both cases there is a commerce between sound and shape, whether in the form of a shaping of time, or in the form of a kind of precipitation of sound in form.

This materialisation may be the reflex of a loosening and dematerialisation of sculpture that has taken place over the last century. Up until the twentieth century, sculpture referred to an art of shaped masses and materials. Increasingly through the century, sculptural forms have begun to exhibit interiority. From Hepworth and Moore through to [Anish Kapoor](#), masses have become topologies, in which channels, apertures and cavities are more and more functional, just as they are in a musical instrument. As more and more air has circulated in and around sculpted forms, sculptures have become more and more like resonating bodies, more and more like instruments for making sound. Walter Ong has spoken of the link between sound and interiority: where vision only ever gives us information about the surface of things, sound can inform us about otherwise invisible interiorities – the sturdiness of a wall, the state of the lungs, the steadiness of the soul. One may see not just in sound sculpture but in sculpture in general a move away from the idea of mass formed from the outside in to the idea of a mass shaped from the inside out, as a shell or a shell-like ear is.

We are perhaps far from being sensitive enough to the cultural phenomenology of musical instruments. We can define an instrument as a sounding posture of the body. We learn to hear the postures imprinted in sounds: the fat, farting buttock-cheeks of the tuba, the undulant caressings of the cello, the hooked, crooked intensity of the violin (for all its feminine curlicues, the violin is an instrument of acute angles; chin, wrist, elbow, armpit). The more that the artificial production and reproduction of sound, in amplification, for example, threatens to lead away from this sense of embodied source, the more we learn to replace or refuse this loss, as with the extravagant, martyred postures of the electric guitar, enacted both in the ecstatic writhings it evokes, and in the ever more baroque contortions of its own shapes. What a marvellous invention is the despised “air-guitar”! When we hear an instrument that we have never heard before, we cannot fully or properly hear it until we have guessed or supposed in it the manner of its production, the mutual disposition of body and instrument that results in the sound, and of which the sound bears the impress. Sometimes, perhaps a little at a loss for an adequate sound-posture to project, we will treat the instruments of reproduction or transmission as instruments, as in the manipulations of tape and vinyl practised since the *musique concrète* of the 1950s. We are not simply touched by this kind of sound. We take it into us, hear it in the mode of producing it, in an instrumental coenesthesia. This mode of touch gives us not so much touch as pressure, or as the impending of things upon us, as the touch of shape, or touch as the guarantee of shape. Philip Jeck’s explorations of the linked sound and texture of old record players in his piece *Off The Record* seems to requisition something like this desire to apprehend the bodily shape of sound, here formed from the chattering gossip of 20 or 30 record players all tuned imperfectly together, rather as in N.F. Simpson’s play *A Resounding Tinkle*, in which 100 I-Speak-Your-Weight machines are being coached to sing the Hallelujah Chorus.

So I have outlined a kind of paradox. Sound art is the gallery turned inside out, exposed to its outside, the walls made permeable, objects becoming events. Sound art is the most potent agency of that attempt to dissolve or surpass the object which has been so much in evidence among artists since dadaism in the 1920s. And yet, the gallery or museum seems to provide a kind of necessary framing or matrix, a habitat or milieu in which art can fulfil its strange contemporary vocation to be not quite there.

Pathos

The terms in which I have evoked an art of sound suggest a pleasurable ecology or interchange, a mixing of that which was previously kept coldly or aggressively distinct. But sound is not all pleasurable permeation or erotic meeting of membranes. Sound, as Aristotle puts it, is the result of a pathos. All sound is an attempt to occupy space, to make oneself heard at the cost of others. Sound has power. Michel Chion has pointed to an odd convention about invisible sources of sound in cinema, namely that they are usually thought of as having the power to see other characters who cannot see them (Chion 129-30). This is perhaps because divinity is associated with invisible or sourceless sound, while mortality is associated with the condition of visible audition. As John Hull has so crisply put it: 'When we say that the divine being is invisible, we mean that we do not have power over it. To say that the divine was inaudible, however, would be to claim that it had no power over us' (Hull 127)

This note of pathos or agon is to be found occasionally erupting even in Romantic evocations of sound like Wordsworth's ['On The Power of Sound'](#), which begins with an evocation of the perils of the ear:

a Spirit aerial
Informs the cell of Hearing, dark and blind;
Intricate labyrinth, more dread for thought
To enter than oracular cave;
Strict passage, through which sighs are brought,
And whispers for the heart, their slave;
And shrieks, that revel in abuse
Of shivering flesh; and warbled air,
Whose piercing sweetness can unloose
The chains of frenzy, or entice a smile
Into the ambush of despair;

With its interest in that which goes through the wall, or that which can huff and puff and blow the house down, sound art might have been drawn more than it has been to the explosive gesture, to the raucous ugliness of Marinetti's sound events. One tireless exponent of the agon of sound has been Christian Marclay, who devised a piece entitled Guitar Drag. This piece conjoined a video showing a live electric guitar being dragged behind a pick-up truck through Texas back roads with the sound recorded from the tortured instrument. But in fact if there is a characteristic gesture of sound art it is the incorporation in it of the light touch, of delicacy, of sounds that are at the fringes of audibility. One might instance for example the recent work of Kaffe Matthews, on her [eb](#)

[and flo](#), of performances in Vienna and London, using as her only sound source a small theremin, an electronic instrument played by moving the hands in the space between two electronic transmitters. The ricepaper walls of the traditional Japanese house may, as R. Murray Schafer suggests, contrast with the glass windows of European houses, in that '[g]lass resists nature; rice-paper invites its penetration'. Such houses are therefore auditory constructions, which not only have, but also are ears. But they achieve this by reminding us of the violability of the ear. The ear is the most delicate of organs because it is more prone than any other organ to damage by an excess of the stimulus it is made to detect. Precisely because we are more continuously exposed to sound than to touch, taste, smell or sight, the ear is not exposed on the body's surface, but involuted, devious, sequestered, esoteric. To hear our own hearing is to become aware of that fragile screen which must remain intact for hearing to occur at all. The burst tympanum is mute.

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