

journal of visual culture



Introduction: Sonic Arts and Audio Cultures Writing about Audiovisual Culture

Margaret Schedel and Andrew V. Uroskie

Sound is ever-present; auditory mediation pervades life in the digital age - from soundtracks, to mobile telephones, to mp3 players. Sound indexes past times and distant places; it is texture, the unseen fabric of our environment, often lying just beyond our conscious perception. It streams across networks, interrupts spaces, and shapes private dreamscapes. Sound is produced by transcoding and translation, generated from bodies both artificial and natural, transmuted into images and objects. It is produced and reproduced, stretched and compressed, imagined and heard.

This extract comes from a description of *Sonic Residues*, a 2008 exhibition, concert, and lecture series at Stony Brook University curated by the Consortium for Digital Art, Culture, and Technology (cDACT), an interdisciplinary group working across the Departments of Art, Music, Cultural Studies, and Computer Science. It was an effort to reflect on the relationships shaped by sonic production and reproduction, to consider the habits and processes of listening, and to develop a critical understanding of the sites and locations of sound. Raiford Guins - in his own multiple identity as Associate Professor in Digital Cultural Studies and cDACT, as well as co-founder and co-principal editor of the *journal of visual culture* - proposed that we develop the exhibition into a broader academic dialogue.

Why attempt a dialogue on sound in a journal of visual culture? There is no shortage of journals devoted to contemporary music and sound art that would seem to be more appropriate. The field of 'visual culture studies' arose in opposition to a kind of disciplinary insularity, and with *Sonic Residues* we sought to expand beyond the traditional boundaries of music and sound art to create new forms of sonic exploration both inside and outside the traditions of music, art history, and cultural studies. We hope this issue of *journal of visual culture* will promote and encourage even more cross-disciplinary scholarship.

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Most readers of this journal may not be familiar with the history of sound art, which has been in existence for only 100 years. In his seminal Futurist treatise *The Art of Noises* (1913), Russolo called for the liberation of music to include all kinds of sounds. He created his own instruments, dubbed howlers, exploders, and hissers. With the invention of magnetic tape in the 1930s came a generation of sampling and electronic modulations of sound by Schaeffer and Stockhausen. The 1940s saw a wholesale transformation of exhibition and spectatorship in the work of John Cage. In 1957, the first sound was synthesized by a computer by Matthews at Bell Labs; the song *Bicycle Built for Two* is the final sound the computer Hal makes in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Until the 1980s there was a formidable economic barrier to creating sound art; with the invention of MIDI and ever more powerful computers, we are finally seeing a groundswell of support for diverse forms of sound-based artistic practice. As this issue was going to press, Susan Philipsz won the UK's prestigious Turner prize for contemporary art – the first time a body of sound-based art had even been shortlisted for the prize.

At least part of the significance of this groundswell lies in the challenge sound-based practices present not only to our ideas of art and its cultural institutions, but to entrenched hierarchies of the human sensorium that have consistently understood vision as the noblest of the senses. Although it is easy to focus on the most exciting and innovative new programs, the vast majority of academic departments remain bound by the historical legacy and influence of medium-specificity. While the editors of this issue teach at an institution whose music program has long been committed to the study of electronic and experimental forms, most music programs remain firmly wedded to the most traditional conceptions of instrumentation, technique, composition, and performance. Even modern art history has only recently begun to incorporate postwar audio culture and performance into its curricula in anything but the most marginal and superficial of ways.

It is already quite difficult to describe the characteristics of visual or sonic experience through the medium of writing. Things are even more complicated for many of the authors we have collected for this issue in that they attempt to address a critique of visuality, raised within the medium of sound, through the medium of writing. While sound is increasingly *visible* within contemporary art through its installation within the physical and institutional space of the art gallery, this visibility has both developed from, and helped to precipitate, a newfound critique of visibility itself. The discourse of the art world, despite all the profound changes it has undertaken over the last century of modernist aesthetics, remains bound to an historical privileging of the visual as the 'noblest' of the senses. Sound enters the spaces of contemporary art as a critique of this privileging – an aspect of contemporary art's drive to free aesthetics from the representational paradigm in which it has been constrained. Yet the visual and representational metaphors that have long structured our thought and experience are not so easily dislodged.

The importance of the sonic arts and audio culture within contemporary art and visual cultural studies lies in its implicit critique of vision's long-held hegemony

over the senses. A number of our contributors attempt to engage with the relentless 'visualization' of our experience. Henri Lefebvre (1991) wrote:

The visual gains the upper hand over the other senses, all impressions derived from taste, smell, touch and even hearing first lose clarity, then fade away altogether ... part of the object and what it offers comes to be taken for the whole. (p. 286)

If the historical privileging of sight has caused the other senses to atrophy, and to denigrate our sensory encounter with the world, the restitution made through contemporary art's increasing attention to the audible is much more than an exploration of the audio medium as such. Rather, it stands for a whole phenomenology of experience that has been denied us through a framing of the world as a thing to be seen.

The field of sound art and audio cultures is too young, and the discourse too undeveloped, to propose a singular methodological approach. Instead, we have sought articles that address the topos through diverse conjunctions of history and theory, art and culture, music, and performance. Our authors refuse any simple or straightforward opposition between the visible and the audible, between sound and site, or between the temporal and the plastic. In different ways, they point to a range of contemporary cultural practices that frustrate these historical demarcations, exchanging a binary logic of opposition for a more complex elaboration of chiasmus or intersection. Taking an intentionally catholic approach, we have solicited works not only from academics, but also from composers, performers, distributors, and critics working outside traditional academic forms. We do so not simply to present a range and diversity of approaches, but to incorporate an experiential knowledge of sonic composition, performance, and installation into the conceptualization and theorization of this emerging field.

To provide clarity, we have broken the issue into six subsections: Sonic Ontologies; Rhetorics of Sound; Sound and Social Space; The Sonic Event; New Models of Production and Distribution; and Temporalities of Sound. In the first section, Christoph Cox sketches a brief philosophical history of sound. Cox is a true interdisciplinarian, a Professor of Philosophy at Hampshire College, who is a well-known critic and curator of contemporary sound art. In this article, he contends that contemporary cultural studies remains mired in a deeply 'representational' framework, one that reduces both the phenomenal experience and the ontology of sound to 'a field or system of signs that operate in complex relations of referral to other signs'. While Cox finds their diverse theoretical approaches to be philosophically rich and a powerful tool for cultural analysis, he nonetheless faults their primarily textual orientation for an epistemological and ontological insularity that separates nature from culture. The resulting dualism regresses to a Kantian epistemology and ontology, in which materiality is necessarily sequestered on the side of inert, dumb matter, outside the domain of the symbolic discourse that marks the limits of the knowable. In so doing, it also comes to imply – often against its own intent – a philosophically

tenuous anthropocentrism. By contrast, Cox traces an alternative, 'materialist' conceptualization of sound that he locates within a line of thought running from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche to Bergson and Deleuze, asking not what something 'means or represents, but what it *does*, how it *operates*, what changes it effectuates' (emphases in original).

In the Rhetorics of Sound section, two author/composer/performers ask how can we hear differently? For Cox, if thought is presented as fundamentally congruent with perception, then 'learning to listen' is not so much a matter of perceptual proficiency, but more fundamentally a matter of orientation and attunement. The first article is by Pauline Oliveros, one of the founders of the legendary San Francisco Tape Music Center in the early 1960s, who has been one of the people most responsible for shifting the possibilities of electroacoustic composition over the five decades since then. In her short piece, Oliveros offers two key terms with which to undertake the kind of hybrid perceptual/philosophical inquiry that Cox describes. The first, 'auralization', is a gauntlet thrown down to common usage, a pointed refusal to concede the ground of human 'imagination' to the limited specificity of the image-domain. The second, her concept of the 'Sonosphere', specifically denies the demarcations of the traditional 'object', in order to gesture towards an interconnected web - Cox's 'complexes of forces materially inflected by other forces' - curiously free of anthropocentric baggage. As the 'sonorous or sonic envelope of the earth - the global sum of all soundings', the Sonosphere is sensed 'according to the bandwidth and resonant frequencies and mechanics of the ear, skin, bones, meridians, fluids and other organs and tissues of the body as coupled to the earth'.

David Toop's writing on contemporary audio cultures has long served as a touchstone not only for performance-based musicians, but for a new generation of sound artists working in the white cube of the gallery space. Invited to submit to this issue of the *journal of visual culture*, he chose to reverse the typical orientation, using his formidable experience with sonic culture to 'listen' to those seemingly silent works of visual culture that reside within the art gallery's white cube. Like Oliveros, Toop challenges the delimited conception of listening that we have inherited from visual culture. Rather than remaining confined to the delimited frequencies of the audible, he encourages us to reconsider our hearing in the way that we have long understood seeing: as a metaphoric of thought and experience. The synaesthetic exercise he undertakes in regard to painting can thus be seen - or perhaps, can be *heard* - as the first steps toward a more ambitious retraining of our perceptual and cognitive facilities.

Sound cannot exist in a vacuum; the two articles in Sound and Social Space address sonic events within architectural and cultural constructs. Brandon LaBelle, a sound artist, critic and historian, returns us to a consideration of Lefebvre's conception of space as a complex *social* production by asking what occurs when we listen to the spaces of the built environment, rather than relating to them through vision alone. Within artistic Minimalism in the 1960s, the internal relationships in the work of visual art, understood as an autonomous object, were 'displaced' into the field of external relationship between the work and its spectator. A quasi-phenomenological exploration of these spatial and

perceptual relationships constituted a particularly influential aesthetic program for sculptural practice from the mid-60s and 70s. An important dimension of contemporary sound art and criticism has been the exploration of sound's relation to physical space in a manner that could be said to 'transpose' this earlier Minimalist endeavor into both a new medium and a new set of relations. Long the exclusive province of sight-lines and visual perspective, LaBelle finds contemporary architectural theory and design migrating towards an increasing recognition of what he terms *ambience* - 'the conjunction of subjective and objective qualities that together define a specific mood inherent in a physical setting'.

Fluid and dynamic, amorphous and unstable, the ambience of a space is a kind of energy not easily delimited or grasped by language. It is not a thing, but an experience. Viscerally affective, it is the way in which a variety of material and immaterial conditions come together to produce a poetics of space. As with Cox, LaBelle is not concerned with the phenomenology of sound per se, but rather with the ways in which sound's curiously 'immaterial' materiality functions as a synecdoche for the more encompassing 'ambient flux' through which we come to experience and relate to the built environment.

Like LaBelle, the work of the sound artist Camille Norment has sought to engage the phenomenological dynamics of material and social space. By moving towards the wider compass indicated by Oliveros, Norment seeks to bridge the microscopic level of the individual sonic encounter and the macroscopic level of a global auditory ecology through the notion of an 'audiotopia'. Based upon Foucault's distinction between utopia and heterotopia made in his 1967 text *Of Other Spaces*, Norment describes the audiotopia as a convergence of sound, space, and identity ... momentarily contained in the world of the sound through which an assimilatory logic of unification through sameness prevalent within mainstream audio cultures might be resisted. She sees audiotopias as creating pools of difference parallel to, and perhaps even associated with, the role of genetic diversity in the evolutionary propagation of life itself.

In the fourth section, Sonic Event, we return to a more traditional definition of music, presenting two articles on musical performance and perception. Cox asked us to consider the sonic event as a thing in itself, separate and distinct from its material cause; Brian Kane, an Assistant Professor of Music Theory at Yale University, pursues an almost opposite path. Using Pierre Schaeffer's theorization of phonology within *musique concrète* as a starting point, his article traces the complex psychological dynamics inherent in acousmatic perception - the experience of hearing a sound whose source remains concealed. Kane presents a case study of the pop music legend and early musical technologist, Les Paul, as a means of expanding Schaeffer's account of acousmatic perception beyond the specific confines of his *musique concrète*. Kane considers the ways in which Les Paul and Mary Ford, having built a reputation on acousmatic technologies that could only exist in the purely auditory environment of the recording studio or radio broadcast, were forced by their own success to negotiate the new hyper-visibility of the performance stage or television screen in the 1950s.

Gascia Ouzounian also works with ideas of performance, but from the very different perspective of the Fluxus pioneer George Brecht, an artist best known for contributions to the post-Cagean mix of conceptual art and experimental music. Ouzounian examines the artist's famous event scores, brief verbal scores comprised of lists of terms or open-ended instructions that provided a foundational model for indeterminate composition in the postwar era. Revisiting Brecht's early writings and research, she reveals how the artist considered his event scores not simply a means of scripting performance, but more fundamentally as 'structures of experience' through which the underlying connections between chance-made forms could be revealed, and an experience of a more 'expanded' and 'unified reality' made possible.

While Fluxus sought to expand the experience of art beyond the institutional space of the 'art world' per se, the contributions in the fifth section of this issue by Valérie Vivancos, and Julio d'Escriván and Nick Collins explore the New Models of Production and Distribution that have emerged within contemporary sonic culture in the digital era. Deeply indebted to the history of independent artists' publications adopted by conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s, the French sound artist and curator Vivancos presents her experience founding *vibrö/vibröfiles* as a hybrid 'online/offline' site for the exhibition and distribution of contemporary sound art. Vivancos's project is an attempt to move outside the physical space (if not always the discursive space) of established art world institutions. Julio d'Escriván and Nick Collins explore the possibilities for contemporary exploration in sound art and audio culture within the rich and dynamic field of videogame design. Bringing together the concerns of interactive and generative art in a popular format, these games often employ advanced audio technologies that have been overlooked by a scholarship predominantly focused on visuality. The authors examine existing games, and posit new ones, in which there is an explicit pursuit of musical goals, finding an intriguing confluence of sonic art and interactive visuals that may assist in the study of multimedia production and experience more generally.

The issue concludes with three articles that speak to the complex Temporalities of Sound as an individual, phenomenological matter, and within the historical matrix of audiovisual culture. R. Luke Dubois, a New York-based composer and video artist, begins by thinking about the forms of temporal condensation inherent in the act of listening and remembrance. What is it that we experience immediately after listening to a piece of music? What is the sound-impression that remains, and for how long? How easily does it remain imprinted in our memories; when and why does it flutter away? As sound became emancipated from its material source through the invention of phonography, Dubois contends, the immeasurable expansion in the freedom of our auditory experience has been accompanied by an increasing sense of impatience with the very act of listening. The limitless diversity of *always available* audible recordings induces schizophrenic auditory desires: we either 'surf the dial' perpetually sampling tidbits, or endlessly repeat that single favorite song. Using techniques of extreme time-condensation, Dubois's recent compositions attempt to simulate this important mnemonic component of audio experience, creating an auditory effect of haunting not unlike the visual condensation and additive accumulation of time

that so fascinated Walter Benjamin in the very first long-exposure photographs of the mid-19th century.

While many contemporary sound artists create works that evoke a cinematic experience, the Korean composer Seongah Shin approaches the intersection of sound and cinema from an almost opposite perspective. Instead of alluding to the experience of the cinematic familiar to the codes of industrial narrative film, Shin's self-proclaimed lo-fi compositional practice indexes her physical encounter with the celluloid matrix on which the cinematic image is relayed. Self-consciously exploring ideas of technological obsolescence and the temporalities of media culture, her artisanal practice of hand-made film-sound looks to the structural limitations of analog media as the impetus for her creative expression.

Shin is a composer who uses film as a means of musical and visual composition to create fixed media works; the next author, Douglas Kahn, studies the combination of sound and visual, mixing live performance and audiovisual editing under the rubric of 'live cinema'. Kahn, author of the now-seminal monograph *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (1999), describes the conjunction as 'a beautifully located oxymoron that both embodies and runs headlong into large portions of the creative and uncreative arts of the twentieth century, and promises a range of possibilities for the twenty-first'. Perhaps most fundamentally, Kahn questions whether and in what manner the recorded performance – whether the now commonplace performance of recorded sounds, or the more provisional performance of audiovisual materials – can be *embodied*. Embodiment has become a touchstone of contemporary theory; Kahn wants us to consider the difference between stray, theoretical, and metaphorical forms of embodiment and tangible, processual tasks of embodiment. Are these new interfaces responsive to semiotic elements or themselves processes of semiosis? Do they embody materiality, or a semiosis of materiality?

Conjoining artists and composers with scholars from various disciplines, these articles collectively address the new prominence of sonic practices within the institutional and discursive space formerly known as music or even visual arts, the difficulties in speaking and writing about these practices using a language dominated by metaphors of vision and, ultimately, the more foundational, ontological investigation of sound and its relation to visuality that these new artistic practices both occasion and require.

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