

Preliminary Study on Alternative Audio Practices

Keywords: sound, music, noise, art

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Abstract

This paper is an introductory study to the fields that approaches sound in alternative and new ways. Four subclasses of sound-based art are introduced: sound art, experimental music, noise art, and environmental acoustic. On each subclass a brief history is given. Works of John Cage, Christian Marclay, John Oswald, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Schaeffer, Iannis Xenakis, Luigi Russolo, Masami Akita, Marcel Duchamp, R. Murray Schafer, Terri Rueb, Ben Rubin and Mark Hansen are investigated with reference to external texts and interviews. Each project's place in main sub-genres of sound-based art is discussed. The study shows the variety of projects and even the variety of additional medium and the problems of classifying the variety. Finally, links for audio and video based extra related material is given.

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1. Methods and Processes

For this study, a regular research method that employs the utilization of libraries and formal databases as well as informal databases such as YouTube is used. The final product will be a digital and printed text document, which also incorporates web links for referring audio and/or video based supporting material.

2. Introduction

I believe that in order to start from the beginning or to have a complete story, at least the history of music should be investigated. However, that is beyond the scope of this paper. The starting time can be pointed out to the invention of the phonograph in 1877 as Kahn suggests which enables recording and playing back thus converting sound from waves into a more permanent medium (Kahn, 1999). As Kahn, the editors of *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* start their chronology with the invention of the phonograph (Cox & Warner, 2006).

The founder of the UbuWeb¹, Kenneth Goldsmith, starts the history from 1902 with the performance of Erik Satie², where he wants the audience not to pay attention to the performance and fails. It is followed by the futurist movement in 1910's. Goldsmith's next main stop is after the World War II. The technology triggers some artists such as Karlheinz Stockhausen and Pierre Schaeffer to create electronic instruments with new sounds. The history continues to the Fluxus movement around 1960's with John Cage and his works like *Indeterminacy* are in focus. 1970's the process becomes the grand idea and Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* is an example where Lucier dictates and records and re-records what he is doing. 1980's presented people who used samples like *Plunderphonics*. Goldsmith ends his history by saying that in sound art, no single style will be ever dominant but it will always change. (Goldsmith, 2004)

The topic will be investigated under four different categories. However, the name of the categories or the titles of the chapters do not reflect an official or formal classification and there will be places where the classification ideas conflict and do not match. However, they will show my attempt of bundling works and projects that are more related to each other in order to understand, investigate and examine the works.

3. Sound Art

My research in sound art did not start with a quest for a definition, however as the study continued the variety of the definition the term became at least interesting. So before an attempt to come up with my own glorified definition, I will introduce those that stood before me:

Christoph Cox introduces the term sound art as follows: "Sound art is an uncertain category and practice. The label itself -in circulation since the mid-1980s but only widespread during the past decade- is dismissed by some prominent practitioners and used sloppily by critics and curators. Visual artists

¹ UbuWeb: <http://ubu.com/>

² More information: <http://www.wfmu.org/~kennyg/popular/articles/satie.html>

predominantly wonder whether sound art is not really Just music, and many musicians either reject the arty whiff of the term or latch onto it in hopes of gaining art-world credibility. Those for whom the term describes a genuine category of artistic practice distinct from visual art and music tend to disagree about its contents and their provenance, about the very nature of the field and its history. Perhaps this tenuousness is due to the absence of a rigorous critical and historical assessment of sound installation, sound sculpture, and allied practices. Such an analysis has certainly not come from art-historical scholarship, which manifests a peculiar allergy to the sonic, unless it is attached to video or performance.” (Kase, 2008).

Matthew Mullen, a scholar in art history, explains the term in these words: “Sound art, as an independent term, is a young one; its origin by name dates to the 1980s, but was not fully realized in practice until the 1990s and not committed to the typical institutional exhibition strategy until the first years of the new millennium. Due in part to the confused curation of these millennial exhibitions and to the scattershot PR programming of progressive or “out” music publishers, sound art has become erroneously synonymous with mediocre contemporary experimental and electronic music forms.” (Mullane, 2010).

In *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories*, Alan Licht defines sound art with the following statements:

“Sound art belongs in an exhibition situation rather than a performance situation.”

“Sound art rarely attempts to create a portrait or capture the soul of a human being or express something about the interaction of human beings.”

“Sound art, then, rejects music’s potential to compete with other time-based and narrative-driven art forms and addresses a basic human craving for sound.”

“Sound art, like its godfather experimental music, is indeed between categories, perhaps because its effect on the listener is between categories. It’s not emotional nor is it necessarily intellectual.” (Licht, 2007).

In *Noise/Music: A History*, Paul Hegarty defines sound art with the following words: “Something porous and very hard to describe but ... it is too self-contained, and sets up the listener as self-contained” (8) (Hegarty, 2007).

As the examples show there is no certain definition, and since it is not the topic of the paper, a definition will not be proposed but it will be the term will be used as a common ground for the works and people introduced below.

3.1 Works

In this section, examples of works provided with the artist’s insight are given.

3.1.1 4'33" by John Cage

John Cage says that 4'33" is his best piece (Gilgoff, 2002). 4'33" composed in 1952 is a piece that is not written for a specific instrument and neither it has a note to be played nor a rest to be silent. The piece only has a definite length. Even though the piece seems to focus on silence in fact it shows that the absolute silence cannot be achieved and noise prevails.

In his own words, Cage describes 4'33" as follows: "to compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to Muzak Co. It will be three or four-and-a-half minutes long—those being the standard lengths of "canned" music and its title will be Silent Prayer. It will open with a single idea which I will attempt to make as seductive as the color and shape and fragrance of a flower. The ending will approach imperceptibility." (Pritchett, 1993).

In Chapter 9, a performance of 4'33" by a complete orchestra is referenced. When compared with Cage's original performance of 4'33" by a single pianist. For me, the orchestra performance is driven by showmanship and an overdone-challenging-swagger that takes the focus from the incredible subtle idea.

3.1.2 Guitar Drag by Christian Marclay

Christian Marclay is an American artist that has mainly worked with analog recordings such as tape and vinyl in process-based way. *Guitar Drag*, dated 2000, is not only a sound piece, in fact it is a video piece, where the camera records an electric guitar being dragged behind a pick-up. The guitar is plugged to an amplifier and one can hear the screams coming from the guitar while seeing the landscape of Texas in the background. The work has multiple references with the apparent one is to the murder of James Byrd Jr³ and the other one to Nam June Paik's *Violin with String*⁴, dated 1962 as well as other instruments destroyed either by Fluxus or rock musicians. A detailed reading of the video can be found in Carlos Kase's article (Kase, 2008). Here using the guitar, whom Marclay defines a phallic object with a female body (Georgia, 2008) introduces a number of references however after watching the video and reading a number of articles and reviews one cannot avoid seeing the Fender brand.

Marclay explains *Guitar Drag* with the following sentences: "All these references are there, and I think it really depends on the viewer's interest, knowledge, and state of mind. People will have different readings of this video, and I want all these to be legitimate. Ultimately, I made the video because of what happened to James Byrd, but all these other references allowed me to think of the guitar as this very anthropomorphic instrument that was already associated with violence, and with rebellion, and crazy youth. I think it's fine when people walk out of there disgusted. I think it's also fine when they walk out of there exhilarated." (Kase, 2008).

³ <http://www.cnn.com/US/9807/06/dragging.death.02/index.html>

⁴ http://artnews.org/gallery.php?i=667&exi=15154&MUMOK&Nam_June_Paik

3.1.3 Plunderphonics by John Oswald

Like Marclay, Oswald also uses recordings as the medium and source for his project *Plunderphonics*. Unlike Marclay, where the records are left open to accidental or intentional physical changes, in Oswald intentionally takes the songs from recordings and modify them before releasing as an album not to be sold but to be distributed to places with the ability for public display such as radio stations and libraries (Cutler, 2006). With *Plunderphonics*, Oswald not only criticizes the popular music culture but it also raises discussions about piracy, plagiarism and copyrights in 1985. There have been lawsuits that resulted with Oswald destroying all of the undistributed copies of his works.

In his paper, *Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative*, Oswald explains as follows: "The precarious commodity in music today is no longer the tune. A fan can recognize a hit from a ten millisecond burst, 9 faster than a Fairlight can whistle Dixie. Notes with their rhythm and pitch values are trivial components in the corporate harmonization of cacophony. Few pop musicians can read music with any facility. The Art of Noise, a studio based, mass market targeted recording firm, strings atonal arrays of timbres on the line of an ubiquitous beat. The Emulator fills the bill. Singers with original material aren't studying Bruce Springsteen's melodic contours, they're trying to sound just like him. And sonic impersonation is quite legal. While performing rights organizations continue to farm for proceeds for tunesters and poeticians, those who are shaping the way the buck says the music should be, rhythmatis, timbralists and mixologists under various monikers, have rarely been given compositional credit." (Oswald).

One of the lawsuits that *Plunderphonics* has faced was about the album cover, which featured an image of Michael Jackson with a nude female body. Even though, the aim of the album covers are to attract attention, give information, promote the artist and make the product sell more and again even though the photomontage of Michael Jackson is in line with the audial idea, I still believe that it is too apparent and in-your-face that it shadows the audio content.

3.2 Conclusion

As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, I have used sound art as a common ground for works that do use the audio medium to tell an event, ask a question or make a statement or present an aesthetic product without having ideas of music, noise and acoustic ecology at their core. In this view *4'33''* and *Plunderphonics* are questionable for being listed as sound art but their being driven by the ideology rather than aesthetics or musical emotion puts them in this chapter.

4. Noise Art

Noise, as we know of, was born with the mechanical technology and industrial revolution. Noise in art historically appeared Russolo as a futurist ideology and now it is a part of the pop culture through simple distortion pedals. Noise art generally focus on the liberation of sound from the tonal scale and timbre of classical western instruments, thus also triggering and crossing the path of experimental music.

4.1 Works

In this section, examples of works provided with the artist's insight are given.

4.1.1 Intonarumori by Luigi Russolo

Even though originally a painter, he is mainly known for his writing *The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto* in 1913. In his writings, he proposes people to embrace the new sounds and noises rather rejecting them. With this idea, he proposes new families of sounds and an instrument for music. *Intonarumori*, meaning noise instruments, is a mechanical device that can create sound with varying pitch and timbre. Even though, the instrument and the recordings are lost and/or destroyed during the World War II. The instrument has been recreated in time.

His first conclusion in the manifesto is: "We must enlarge and enrich more and more the domain of musical sounds. Our sensibility requires it. In fact it can be noticed that all contemporary composers of genius tend to stress the most complex dissonances. Moving away from pure sound, they nearly reach noise-sound. This need and this tendency can be totally realized only through the joining and substituting of noises to and for musical sounds." (Russolo, 2006).

4.1.2 Merzbow by Masami Akita

Masami Akita is a Japanese noise-musician influenced by Dadaism, Surrealism, Futurism and Japanese sado-masochism. Unlike Russolo's approach Akita uses the structures of rhythm, melody and pitch in the compositional structure, yet his sound is defined by feedback, distortion and other sound effects. His recording name is *Merzbow*, which is a reference to Kurt Schwitters' installation, *the Merzbau*.

About *Merzbow*, Akita explains as follows: "I am using a more physically rooted Noise Music not as conceptually anti-instrument and anti-body as before. If music was sex, Merzbow would be pornography. [...] I mean that pornography is the unconsciousness of sex. So, Noise is the unconsciousness of music. It's completely misunderstood if Merzbow is music for men. Merzbow is not male or female. Merzbow is erotic like a car crash can be related to genital intercourse." (Hensley, 2006).

4.1.3 With Hidden Noise Marcel Duchamp

With Hidden Noise is not the only sound project that Marcel Duchamp worked on. Done in 1916 in collaboration with Walter Arensberg, *With Hidden Noise* is a small object that has a concealed space through strings. Inside the space is an object that creates noise when shaken. The object is not known, since the secret was lost with Arensberg and Duchamp never wanted to learn it. (Philadelphia Museum of Art)

Duchamp describes the object as follows: "Before I finished it Arensberg put something inside the ball of twine, and never told me what it was, and I didn't want to know. It was a sort of secret between us, and

it makes noise, so we called this a Ready-made with a hidden noise. Listen to it. I don't know; I will never know whether it is a diamond or a coin" (With Hidden Noise or Bruit Secret)

Here the title of the piece is interesting. Why it is not With Hidden Sound? Duchamp uses the more specific word noise instead of sound and that is related to the object's being anonymous. A direct answer would be: The sound creates curiosity yet does not give information so it just takes room in the neural system without being resolved or ended. Moreover does it matter if the object is a coin or a diamond?

4.2 Conclusion

In this chapter, the three examples are listed noise art but, they could also be listed as a machine, a music genre and a sculpture. However the type of sound created with the three are at least modeled after noise, thus belonging to this chapter.

5. Experimental Music

Music is an important part of the audio culture. Even though it was dominated by the classical western tonal music, some changes were starting to happen in the composition side by composers like Claude Debussy and Béla Bartók. This development was later followed by introduction of instruments with new sounds. Experimental music is as loose term as sound art and the examples range from just using a non-traditional instrument to not using any instrument at all, with the aim of having new or different types of music as the end result.

5.1 Works

In this section, examples of works provided with the artist's insight are given.

5.1.1 Kontakte by Karlheinz Stockhausen

The idea behind *Gesang der Junglinge*, *Kontakte*, *Telemusik* and *Hymnen* is to free music from the limits of the sound of the traditional western instruments. For this purpose, Karlheinz Stockhausen created his own instruments through circuits as music is already free composition-wise (Stockhausen, 2006).

Stockhausen describes *Kontakte* in his article as follows: "In the preparatory work for my composition *Kontakte*, I found, for the first time, ways to bring all properties [i.e., timbre, pitch, intensity and duration] under a single control" (Stockhausen, The Concept of Unity in Electronic Music, 1962).

However, Daniel Pemberton offers a critique of *Kontakte*. He argues that *Kontakte* solely focuses on sound and the composition with the aim of being different, falls short of being different as it lacks creative and only tries to be opposite of regular compositions (Stockhausen, *Twins*, Scanner, & Pemberton, 2006).

5.1.2 Symphonie Pour Un Homme Seul by Pierre Schaeffer

An engineer as well as a composer, Pierre Schaeffer is the founder of 'Musique Concrète' or concrete music, which is a type of music that utilizes electroacoustic sounds that belong to an action that the audience cannot see but only hear. On the other hand, the composition is not limited to the structures of tonal music.

Symphonie Pour Un Homme Seul (Symphony for One Man Alone in English), which is a collaborative work of Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry, was defined as "an opera for the blind" By Schaeffer. In the writings titled, *À la recherche d'une musique concrete (in search of a concrete music in English)*, it is described as follows: "The lone man should find his symphony within himself, not only in conceiving the music in abstract, but in being his own instrument. A lone man possesses considerably more than the twelve notes of the pitched voice. He cries, he whistles, he walks, he thumps his fist, he laughs, he groans. His heart beats, his breathing accelerates, he utters words, launches calls and other calls reply to him. Nothing echoes more a solitary cry than the clamour of crowds."(Symphonie pour un homme seul, 2011).

5.1.3 UPIC by Iannis Xenakis

Iannis Xenakis is also an interdisciplinary person having studied architecture and engineering. His musical approach included using mathematical expressions and engineering. Xenakis designed the music composing tool called *Unite' Polyagogique Informatique du CeMAMu* (UPIC) in 1976 at Centre d'Études de Mathématique et Automatique. The system allows one to compose music via drawing. *Metastasis* is one of Xenakis' major works; it is an orchestral piece that has a visual notation like the blueprints of a structure.

Xenakis describes *UPIC* as follows: "[...] the UPIC did not come from architecture, but it came from music itself. Because when I wrote for orchestras, some of the things were too complicated to be specified in stave notation. So I had to introduce a graphic notation which, by the way, is also more universal... UPIC certainly wasn't made to simulate existing instruments." (Lohner & Xenakis, 1986).

5.2 Conclusion

The lines between experimental music and noise art can be vague sometimes. Here, the projects are chosen due to their experimenting with the traditional music not through only sound-wise but also through other aspects such as composition, performance and notation.

6. Acoustic Ecology and Soundscapes

The simple idea of acoustic ecology is that all the sounds that we hear around and in fact the universe itself is a music composed by the factors that act upon the environment. The term acoustic ecology is introduced by R. Murray Schafer, his studies about acoustics of ecology shows that everything has a special place in frequency spectrum, these environments are called hi-fi. On the other hand, the

acoustics of a city shows that these separations are violated by noise and some frequency bands become useless. These ecologies are called low-fi (Wrightson, 2007).

6.1 Works

In this section, examples of works provided with the artist's insight are given.

4.1.1 World Soundscape Project by R. Murray Schafer

Like acoustic ecology, soundscape is a term introduced by Schafer. *The World Soundscape Project* is a research based project, where the aim was to show reaction against the evolution of the soundscapes from hi-fi environments to low-fi environments in Vancouver initially and measure the changes in locations over time and to compare hi-fi and low-fi in environments (Truax).

4.1.2 Drift by Terri Rueb

Drift is an installation by Terri Rueb. It is a sound-based locative art, which allows the audience to listen to the recordings of speech and footsteps in water as they virtually wander in the Wadden Sea area. The installation gives a feeling of discovering the Wadden Sea as the hearing depends on the walks. The piece creates a soundscape enhanced by a physical environment via a virtual link.

Rueb defines her project as follows: "The ubiquity of GPS (global positioning satellite) and other tracking technologies suggests that "being lost" may itself be an experience that is being lost. However, simply knowing one's geographical location as expressed in longitude and latitude coordinates has little bearing on one's personal sense of place or direction. "Drift" poses the age-old question "Where am I and where am I going?" in a contemporary moment in which spatial positioning and tracking technologies provide evermore precise, yet limited, answers to this question." (Rueb).

4.1.3 Listening Post by Ben Rubin and Mark Hansen

Listening Post is an installation by Ben Rubin and Mark Hansen. The installation sniffs texts from chat rooms and reads them via a text-to-speech module while displaying the text in hundreds of small screens.

Ben Rubin describes *Listening Post* with the following sentences: "Dissociating the communication from its conventional on-screen presence, Listening Post is a visual and sonic response to the content, magnitude, and immediacy of virtual communication." (Rubin, 2010).

The project brings the sounds and/or noises of the virtual chat spaces into a small physical environment. The project is also interesting as it crosses virtual and real spaces. Looking from Schafer's view, one can ask about the acoustic ecology of virtual spaces, the amount of buildings constructed in games, the amount of cars racing as binary data or the ads that shout through the browsers.

6.2 Conclusion

The works discussed cover installation arts, (non-locative) locative arts and acoustic ecology. However unlike a sound recording the sounds are attached to a space either real or virtual.

7. Conclusion

The literature survey and all the readings show that the range of the works is much more than one initially anticipates. Even though, I approached the subject as “anything that has a main component that is hearable”, I still found myself looking for a connection to music or sound design in the traditional sense. In that sense, the works of James Joyce and Marcel Duchamp are more intriguing as they come from a different foundation.

In addition, the purity or the hybridity of the medium works is interesting. Due to its nature sound is based on time and if not created from a recording there is always a varying amount of performance involved. If we just look investigate a project that is introduced above, we can see the relations of sound with space, location, visuals, performance and so on. Guitar Drag is not a good example in this point as it is a video work by its nature but one can think about 4’33” being experienced in a concert hall and being experienced through a recording, where you know that there is a song in both cases and there are no technical problems. At that point, I believe the effect would be same and the performance would just be an extra redundant material. However, where the process is also a focus the importance of performance cannot be denied.

The same analysis can be made over most of the sound-based work because sound itself is a wave that disappears over time. Thus it always needs to be created again and again, even the silence in 4’33”.

One of the main problems I had was the structure of the paper. Through the evolution of the paper the titles and sections changed, most of the works belong to more than one class. But I think this does not show the failure of the titles rather it shows the nature of the sound. I believe a wider analysis that incorporates other classes like sound sculptures, sound structures, interactive sound installations and readings will support the conclusion.

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9. External Material

First known sounds recorded by human: <http://www.firstsounds.org/sounds/scott.php>

Performance 4'33'': <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUJagb7hL0E>

John Cage on silence: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcHnL7aS64Y&feature=related>

Guitar Drag: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-2795402948568743834>

Christian Marclay on his art: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yqM3dAqTzs>

Kontakte: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNt6a5xFOe&feature=related>

Karlheinz Stockhausen, Four Criteria of Electronic Music:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIPVc2Jvd0w&feature=related>

Plunderphonics: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbHCnx00bD4&feature=related>

John Oswald on Plunderphonics and other topics part 1:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0UsNY5eJ9o>

Symphonie Pour Un Homme Seul: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gj7sJmt1r94>

Metastasis: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZazYFchLRI>

Xenakis Interview part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4nj2nklbts>

Xenakis Interview part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zukz4KcouNg>

Intonarumori: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BbbmPD7NuDY>

Minus Zero from Merzbow: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGzrL8J0t-c>

Marcel Duchamp and With Hidden Noise: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzktQk2CuHA>

World Soundscape Project, Vancouver: <http://www.sfu.ca/sonic-studio/excerpts/HarbourAmbience.mp3>

Drift: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_u-z-N5Db8

Listening Post: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dD36lajCz6A>

Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin on Listening Post Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKHouIXleEE>

Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin on Listening Post Part 2:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhmMjG7FTdQ>

Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin on Listening Post Part 3: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_KEZcUtDsg

James Joyce's readings: <http://www.ubu.com/sound/joyce.html>