

**LINE MAGA-
ZINE:
SOUND
EDITION**

I LIKE THE SOUND OF THAT

Opening Essay
By Graham Lister



Somewhere between contemporary classical composition and found-noises nestles what the average gallery visitor might term Sound Art.

No, wait.

Somewhere between electronic aural exploration and spoken-word performance lies...

That doesn't do it justice either.

The truth is that the medium of sound is a facet of contemporary art practice, which is somewhat tricky to describe and quantify. It follows that for many, it occupies a complex position within art culture. Audiences have a desire to neatly package and understand movements in art and it is because sound art is, by its very nature, interdisciplinary, that it is regarded as a conflicting presence in visual art discourse.

Travelling the spectrum from Italian Futurist, Luigi Russollos noise intoners in the early twentieth century, to John Cage's silent 4'33 (1952), to the way in which current Turner Prize nominee Susan Philipsz explores the disembodied nature of performance and the emotive effects of song, it would be a thankless task to weave an all-encompassing definition for the medium of sound. However, the whole notion of delineating the boundaries of Sound Art would appear to miss a major and important point of the medium.

Just as seeing is one of our senses, allowing for comprehension of two and three-dimensional visual spaces, so hearing is obviously the function which allows us to perceive sound. This physiological element of human existence means that we can gather and subsequently process our aural surroundings. From delicate or background noises, to thundering and prolonged chords, we can encounter and understand sound. It is this idea of listening, and being in contact with the sounds which is at the core of the medium of sound in art.

Like some clichéd tree falling unobserved in those imaginary woods somewhere, sound art exists when we, as viewers or listeners, can be part of it. It is the very act of listening which, it would seem, is critical here. When confronted by or immersed in sound (or indeed in silence), other senses are activated, and the listener's faculties of comprehension are stimulated. The listener takes on a role as an activator; allowing the sound to be understood as a function of time and space, and more importantly, taking up their role as the interactive element required by sound art to flourish.

By experiencing sound as art, the listener brings not only their aural understanding of elements such as volume, rhythm and tonal quality, but they add something much more important to the sonic party. They bring along qualities associated with personal experience and emotions.

Sound can be considered as a bridge between the senses. Successful practitioners are aware of this, and utilise the qualities of the medium to engage personal and emotional responses in someone who is experiencing their work. And here we arrive at the very crux of the complex nature of sound art.

The palette of someone using sound as a medium is limited only by the physicality of hearing, and the canvas or setting for their work is virtually limitless. It is because of this that sound art occupies such a difficult position within contemporary practice. With few constraints on the form which it can take, how can one effectively experience, understand and comment on the medium in meaningful terms? Sound art exists with a refusal to be pinned down and it is this elusive nature which makes it such an intriguing aspect of art and curatorial practice

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... we might not find any real definition of sound as a medium in art. But, with the listener as an activator, bringing their own personal understanding to the act of experiencing works involving sound, we arrive at the beauty of the position of sound as a medium in the contemporary culture of art.

Artist Profile: Katie Paterson By Jennifer Owen

A disembodied voice speaks through Katie Paterson's artwork. A desultory glance at her recurring raw materials - glaciers, lightning storms, the surface of the moon - spontaneously connotes natural disasters and issues of climate change. Yet in an oeuvre where the visual is typically subordinate to the audible, it is clear that these links are somewhat missing the point. With the aid of technology and keen investigation, Paterson explores the transmission of information (sometimes across immense distances) and often relies on sound alone to transmit the conceptual experience to the audience.

Vatnajökull (the sound of), 2007, most succinctly summarises the remote position Paterson places the viewer-turned-listener in. A neon telephone number was the only gallery presence, which, once called, provided a solitary link to a mobile phone within the Vatnajökull glacier. Sound and space suffered compression as the telephone call created a secret performance, with the drips of the melting glacier the only means of experiencing this distant event.

These sounds recurred in Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull, but within a wider context, as the

viewer and listener are encouraged to consider both the provision and subsequent loss of information. The recorded sounds of three glaciers were pressed onto records made from the melted water of the original icebergs, and in addition to the intriguing relationship between destruction and re-creation, the ice-records were then played on turntables until they melted. This merged the sound of the original recording with the recreation of the melting event, ending with the record's disappearance, creating a triple layer of meaning for the viewer/listener.

However, it is not only the gradual loss of sound and information that is displayed within Paterson's work. With Earth-Moon-Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon), there is a more immediate obstruction to the transmission. Using Earth-Moon-Earth (E.M.E.) radio transmission, a Morse code version of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata is reflected off the surface of the moon. On its return, the Morse code is returned to musical notation, and played automatically by a grand piano. However, this sophisticated technology is subverted by the inherently irregular nature of the moon, as the code is distorted by craters, and returns with added silences. While the sight of a piano playing of its own volition is already unusual, it is again through sound that Paterson affects the listener.

Expectantly, they wait for the inevitable gaps in the musical piece, relying upon their memory of the original to inform them of the breaks in transmission. This familiarity, combined with the automatic silences of distance, envelops the listener in a complex yet artificial combination of sound, reaction, and meaning.

The anticipation element of Earth-Moon-Earth exposes a secondary attitude to sound within Paterson's work - which is sound's absence. Also in 2007, Earth-Moon-Earth (4'33") fulfilled the dual purpose of paying homage to the experimental composer John Cage, and presenting a space within which Paterson could pursue technological and constructed experiences of sound. Using the same E.M.E. technology, Paterson reflected Cage's famous silent composition 4'33" of 1952 from the earth to the moon and back again, adding a cosmic element to the original piece which focused upon peripheral sound. However, a more recent work entitled Streetlight Storm from 2009-10 deals with the absence of sound in a more captivating sense. The work consisted of setting the evening streetlights of Deal Pier, Kent to respond to and flicker in time with lightning strikes occurring simultaneously around the world. This translated a violent, threatening experience (usually accompanied by roars of thunder) into a silent light display, where

'sound' is only implied within the conceptual construct, and causes the viewer to consider wider notions of the filtering of experience through media to be transmitted worldwide.

Sound within Paterson's works is therefore not a superfluous element. It is the key that provides the audience with the experience, which consequently allows Paterson to transfigure well-used subject matter such as the moon, lightning and glaciers into vessels capable of carrying alternative meaning. Sound is present and absent in equal measure, and while visible elements may fluctuate and melt away, those who encounter Paterson's works will never remain unmoved by the expectation and experience of the audible.

PROFILE: KATIE PATERSON

