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IS THE HONEYMOON OVER? THE TUMULTUOUS LOVE AFFAIR BETWEEN THE MUSEUM AND THE ARTS OF SOUND

Introduction

This text considers points of intersection between the arts of sound and visual arts institutions, and examines their rapidly-changing relationships from the beginning of the 21st Century to the present day.¹ I highlight points at which 'sonic substance' enters visual arts institutions, considering how these dynamics have changed over the past twenty years and analysing ruptures that emerge along the way.

In 2005 I was invited by Tate Modern in London to chair an online discussion forum entitled 'The Politics of Sound / The Culture Of Exchange'. The discussion took place between 31 January and 24 March 2005 and as my panellists I invited the composer John Oswald, academic and writer Douglas Kahn, and poet and artist Kenneth Goldsmith.² The conversation flowed and meandered, bringing up topics ranging from the underground tape movement, community and independent radio, sonic collaboration, participation and appropriation across different contexts, as well as sound-based practices in various guises in relation to the museum. There was much discussion about open source culture and some, now looking back, rather utopian ideas about its potential to, if not transform, then significantly alter musical and sound practices – a dream now lost to the takeover of corporate capital, online as well as off. The panellists also engaged with my question of why the museum would be interested in phenomena such as sampling and file sharing, as we all recognised the slightly uncomfortable institutional framing of our discussion. My observation that Tate's engagement with sound-based practices, exemplified by the forum we were taking part in, was a positive move, was quickly rebutted by Kenneth Goldsmith's response that "It's easy for the institutions to raise the issue, but when it comes to practice, they're falling on their face". Goldsmith's statement holds even more true today than back in 2005, given the rapid dwindling of public funding for the arts (at least in the UK and USA) leading to the increasingly symbiotic relationships between museums and private capital and the ensuing focus on commerce, singular authorship, and collectable art objects.

This panel discussion triggered a research direction for me, one which involved tracking points of intersection between artworks which primarily use sound as their medium, and the ever-increasing spectrum of sites and situations in which contemporary art enters the public domain. Aside from the research dimension of the study of such meeting points, there was also a lived, hands-on curatorial element to it. My research was propelled by a curatorial practice experienced through my job at the time, as the

¹ Whilst being aware of continuing debates around the term 'sound art', I do not use this term, nor is the discussion around the terminology and division of what may or may not fall within this category (or distinctions between music and sound art) of particular interest to me. While I here I write about a wide range of practices that use sound, my own definition of what does and what does not constitute 'sound art' is porous and ever changing, tending to pay attention to work that emerges from experimental or improvisational communities, and more broadly work which uses sound as a primary material. The 'arts of sound' is a term introduced by Douglas Kahn in *Noise Water Meat, A History of Sound in the Arts* (2001).

² The forum 'The Politics of Sound / The Culture Of Exchange' was commissioned by Kelli Dipple, then Curator of Intermedia Art at Tate (http://www2.tate.org.uk/intermediaart/discuss/d_culture/politics1.shtm, last accessed 18 September 2019).

founding director of Electra, a London-based arts agency positioned at the intersection of avant-garde, experimental musical communities and contemporary art.³

By mapping ways in which sonic substance enters the world of museums and galleries, spaces traditionally developed to house visual arts, here I continue this research strand, exploring not only the frequency and type of interactions with sound-based work, but also critically examining the quality and depth of those engagements. My interest lies, above all, in the democratising potential of sound and the question of what sound-based practices can do differently in museum and gallery settings, compared to more traditional forms of art. Do the properties of sound – an ephemeral, transient, temporal medium, intrinsically geared towards participation and collaboration – open up alternative possibilities in the processes and economies of contemporary art, possibilities that object-based works do not offer?

Can sound take contemporary art ‘elsewhere’, into new and perhaps more democratic and inclusive realms? By employing similar logics to those of performance, dance, or conceptual art, where the process, or the concept, becomes more important than the final outcome, might collaboration and co-creation through sonic practice have the potential to challenge the aforementioned symbiosis between artistic production and the art market? And, ultimately, I seek to ask whether museums are taking sound-based practice seriously and if so, exploring how this commitment manifests itself. Is sound-based work being commissioned and collected today? How much of it will be present in museums’ archives and collections for future generations to study?

I. Sound and institutions

I.a. Recent Institutional Engagement with the Arts of Sound

Visual arts institutions are by no means new to the ‘arts of sound’, given the confluence and cross-pollination between music, live art, and visual art throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Artists’ expanded practice from the 1960s onwards has ushered sound in various guises into arts institutions, a road already paved by the Italian Futurists in the first decade of the twentieth century. Sound has been leaking into museums and galleries through artist/musician collaborations, in the form of soundtracks or as ‘noise’ that is part and parcel of live art. Whether it rode in on the coat-tails of Warhol’s factory, video art, art bands, Fluxus, performance art, or simply in the form of artists’ ephemera available as commodities (CDs, records, tapes) in museum bookshops, the presence of sound in art institutions and museums has not been a new phenomenon for some time now.

However, until the early years of the 21st Century, sound in itself had rarely been the focal point of exhibitions and had seldom been placed centre-stage in museums or galleries. The early 2000s saw the beginning of a wave of exhibitions solely devoted to the arts of sound (or work that predominantly uses sound as a medium), which suggests that it was only at this point that visual arts institutions began to engage with sound as an artistic medium per se, as opposed to approaching it as a secondary element, or as an accompaniment to visual art or moving image.

³ Electra is a London based contemporary art agency founded in 2003 by the author of this text and Anne Hilde Neset, which specialises in commissioning, producing and exhibiting art projects across disciplines, presenting them within the UK and internationally. Much of Electra’s work involves working with the arts of sound and has included commissions and projects with Marina Rosenfeld, Carl Michael von Hausswolff and Christian Marclay, Kim Gordon, Christina Kubisch, Jakob Kirkegaard, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, amongst many others (<http://www.electra-productions.com/index.shtml>).

In 2000 alone, institutions in the UK (*Audible Light*, Modern Art Oxford and *Sonic Boom*, Hayward Gallery, London), Japan (*Sound Art - Sound As Media*, NTT: ICC Tokyo), and the US (*Bed Of Sound*, PS1, New York) staged several large scale exhibitions exclusively devoted to the arts of sound. Following in their footsteps, a surge of exhibitions devoted to sound began to appear internationally, in some cases brought on board by specialist guest curators. In 2002, the Centre Pompidou initiated and toured a major exhibition titled *Sonic Process: A New Geography of Sounds*, whilst in the UK, Bristol's Arnolfini Gallery brought on board curator, musician, and author David Toop to curate *Playing John Cage* (2005). Tate Modern's commission of Bruce Nauman's site-specific sound work 'Raw Material' (2005), developed for the Turbine Hall, also pointed to a new level of visibility for sound as material in museums, while the same year in London, Electra's own research and exhibition project *Her Noise*, investigating gender in sound-led practice, took place at South London Gallery with offshoots at Tate Modern and the Goethe Institut London, continuing its online components to this day through the Her Noise Archive.⁴

A significant moment was the staging of one of the most ambitious initiatives to investigate sound-based practice in Linz, Austria. *SEE THIS SOUND. Promises in Sound and Vision* (2009/10) was a research-led collaboration between the Lentos Kunstmuseum and the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute. Claiming that "the former hegemony of the visual has meanwhile given way to a diverse interplay of image and sound", the curatorial and research team investigated these questions through a substantial exhibition featuring close to a hundred artists, an equally rich catalogue, a symposium, and a thorough online research space.⁵ This was followed by the equally ambitious *Sound Art: Sound as a Medium of Art* (ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2012) exhibition and substantial accompanying catalogue.

Institutions with a special interest in the study of avant-garde practices have equally focussed their energies on sound-based shows such as Poland's Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź with its extensively researched *Sounding The Body Electric. Experiments In Art And Music In Eastern Europe 1957-1984* curated by the museum's own curator Daniel Muzyczuk and guest curator, the academic David Crowley, held in 2012, later touring to London's Calvert 22 Foundation in 2013. More recently, MoMA held its first sound-based exhibition *Soundings: A Contemporary Score* (2013), which featured the work of sixteen artists, while London's Tate Modern staged a more modest exhibition focussed on the voice. *WORD. SOUND. POWER* took place in Tate's project space in the same year, showcasing the work of seven artists. Recent exhibitions such as *Listen Hear: The Art of Sound* (2017) at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum investigated the spatial properties of sound with a host of predominantly North American artists' installations, while *Hacer La Audicion (Hear Here): Encounters Between Art and Sound in Peru* (Lima Art Museum, 2016) claimed to be the largest exhibition to date to deal with sound in

⁴ Her Noise was a research and exhibition project initiated by the author and Anne Hilde Neset in 2001 with an ambition to investigate music and sound histories in relation to gender, and to create a lasting resource in this area through building up an archive. The exhibition *Her Noise*, building on this research, took place at South London Gallery, Tate Modern, and the Goethe Institut and gathered international artists who use sound to investigate social relations, inspire action, or uncover hidden soundscapes. The exhibition included newly commissioned works by Kim Gordon & Jutta Koether, Emma Hedditch, Christina Kubisch, Kaffe Matthews Hayley Newman, and Marina Rosenfeld, as well as a series of talks and performances. The project continues through the Her Noise Archive held at the London College of Communications, and through the Her Noise blog: <http://hernoise.org/>

⁵ From the See This Sound press release at: <https://www.lentos.at/html/en/528.aspx>. The project research website can be found at: <http://www.see-this-sound.at> (last accessed 25 September 2019)

Latin America. The question of sound and gender, which I will return to further on in this text, was once again investigated at Nottingham's New Art Exchange in 2018 with an exhibition *Sounds Like Her. Gender, Sound Art & Sonic Cultures*, which featured seven female artists working with sound.

In tandem with the proliferation of sound-based exhibitions, a number of artists working with sound began to receive prizes and high-profile accolades around the same time. Susan Phillipsz's work 'Lowlands' (2008/10) earned the artist the prestigious Turner Prize (2010), Britain's art equivalent of an Oscar. The increased visibility and mainstream success of artists such as Haroon Mirza, Céleste Boursier-Mougenot, Christian Marclay, and Lawrence Abu Hamdan in high-profile exhibitions and biennials, are also been signs of the art world's readiness to embrace fluid practices, even if these artists' works frequently employ other media as well. One could argue that Christian Marclay's prestigious Golden Lion award at the Venice Biennale in 2011 and his much publicised 24-hour exhibition of 'The Clock' (2010) at Tate Modern in 2018 indirectly brought attention to sound-based practices through the ever-increasing visibility for this artist deeply immersed in experimental music communities, even if his practice today straddles both music and art contexts. Most recently, the resounding success of this year's Lithuanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, the experimental participatory opera 'The Sun and the Sea' (2019) which won the artists Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė, Lina Lapelytė, and curator Lucia Pietroiusti the prestigious Golden Lion, demonstrated the possibility of an experimental and unconventional work being universally accepted at the very highest level within the most visible contemporary art platform.

The multiplicity of outputs listed above make it clear that sound is no longer the poor cousin of the visual arts, despite the often awkward and uncomfortable relationship the two may share. As Musician and academic Seth Cluett of Columbia University remarked in 2013, at that point he had counted "128 sound art exhibitions in museums worldwide from 2000 to 2009, up from just 21 from 1970 to 1979" – a rough estimate at best (it is unclear what the parameters of 'sound art' in Cluett's research were), but nevertheless a telling observation, pointing to the rapid increase in shows concerned with sound over the past twenty years.⁶

I.b. Sound Studies as a Maturing Field of Study

In parallel with the above (and other) museum and gallery exhibitions, over the past twenty-odd years we have witnessed the proliferation of literature about sound culture shaping a rapidly developing field of study in its own right. Key cultural studies publications such as *Wireless Imagination, A History of Radio and Sound in the Twentieth Century* (Ed. Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead) (1994) and Douglas Kahn's *Noise Water Meat, A History of Sound in the Arts* (2001) have been instrumental in contextualising key sonic moments in art of the twentieth century and in laying the foundations for a new awareness of aurality as a bona fide angle in the study of cultural and artistic phenomena. Several years later, in his volume *Audio Culture - Readings In Modern Music* (2004, Eds. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner), Christoph Cox wrote about the emergence of an audio culture, a culture made up of "musicians, composers, sound artists, scholars, and listeners attentive to sonic substance, the act of listening and the creative possibilities of sound recording, playback and transmission", thus providing

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/04/arts/international/The-Power-of-Sound-as-an-Art-Form.html>, last accessed 10 September 2019.

this nascent field of study with a term, soon to be critically discussed by a number of academics.⁷ Terminology soon developed further, to include ‘sound art’, ‘audio culture’ or ‘sound culture’, all of which continue to be actively debated in academic publications such as the Sound Studies series (Routledge), the recently launched *Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture* (University of California Press), the special issue of *Parallax Journal* (James Lavender (2017) Introduction: Sounding / Thinking, Parallax, 23:3amongst others.⁸ A surge of sound culture anthologies followed, including Alan Licht’s *Sound Art - Beyond Music, Between Categories* (2007), the *Sound Studies Reader* by Jonathan Sterne (Ed., 2012), Marie Lincoln’s *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* (Bloomsbury, 2017), as well as numerous publications covering different aspects of audio or sound culture by authors including David Toop, Cathy Lane, Salome Voeglin, Brandon La Belle, Seth Kim Cohen, Steve Goodman, Diedrich Diederichsen, Steven Connor, Rob Young, Geeta Dayal, and others.

Equally, the prolific and continuous work of academic research centres has grown, such as the excellent work of the Creative Research into Sound Arts Practice (CRiSAP) research group at the London College of Communication London, UK, founded in 2005, Aarhus University’s ‘Center for Sound Studies’, Belfast’s Sonic Arts Research Centre, as well as certain research strands of the Paris-based IRCAM research centre.

Whilst exhibitions like the ones mentioned above, along with a myriad of performance evenings and concerts which are now regularly held in museums and galleries, mark a significant move towards institutional engagement with sound, they do not automatically guarantee a profound and long-lasting institutional support (which would manifest itself through producing, commissioning, or collecting) for artists working in the field, nor do they necessarily open up the playing field to a wide spectrum of practitioners.

Already at this stage, only a few years after the field has begun to come into its own, a critical evaluation in terms of inclusion and diversity within this rapidly growing arena has become urgent and necessary. Questions of race, class, and gender have rarely intersected with the more visible manifestations of sound culture, at least as far as mainstream arts institutions are concerned. We have yet to see an intersectional approach to sound-based practices in museums and galleries.

I.c. Whose Sound Culture?

Having established the undeniable acceptance of sound-based practices in visual art contexts in broad strokes, a more pertinent question emerges, as we find we must ask whose sound practices we are encountering once they do enter the museum’s walls. The dominance of white male protagonists in sound-based practices appears to have inherited the dominant white male well-educated profile that can be seen in the canon of contemporary music as well as contemporary art. For instance, it is somewhat shocking to encounter Alan Licht’s compendium *Sound Art - Beyond Music, Between Categories* (2007), whose chapter “Sound and the Art World” astoundingly knits together an almost entirely male history of avant-garde sound-based practices, listing only a handful of female protagonists (**insert figures**). However, writers including Salome Voeglin, Cathy Lane, Louise Grey, as well as the ongoing work of the Sonic

⁷ Cox Christoph, (2004) *Audio Culture, Readings in Modern Music*, ‘Music and the New Audio Culture’, introduction xiii, Continuum Press.

⁸ For a discussion of the term ‘auditory culture’, see Brian Kane (2015) “Sound studies without auditory culture: a critique of the ontological turn”, *Sound Studies*, 1:1, 2-21, DOI: 10.1080/20551940.2015.1079063.

Cyberfeminism group, and especially the writing of Marie Thompson on whiteness and sound culture, are working to counteract this tendency toward a white-male dominated canon.⁹

But regardless of these investigations, black, queer, feminist, networked, egalitarian and decolonial sound practices continue to be far and few between in museums and galleries.

II. Moving forward: the many ways the arts of sound are making their way into the visual art establishment

How is sound actually present in the visual art world? In order to pinpoint the tensions, and, in certain cases, the contradictory or clashing agendas in the contemporary relationship between sound-based work and institutional frameworks, here I map out a number of models in which visual art institutions currently tend to engage with the arts of sound. Sound is present in myriad ways, with actual exhibitions of the arts of sound being the minority – despite the focus in the literature on this aspect. Even though the models listed below increase the visibility and profile of sound-based practice, a closer analysis reveals that in many cases the inclusion of this work in fact creates a platform for superficial engagement, which is unlikely to result in a deeper integration of the arts of sound into museums in the long run. The question remains: how much of the work that finds its way into the museum will become an integral part of its legacy? This would only be possible through inclusion in permanent collections and the creation of substantial catalogues making the work available for scholarly study in the future.

1. Musician/sound artist as entertainer at an exhibition opening or party or at special events in order to 'animate' object-based works.

Established sound artists and musicians are regularly invited to DJ at openings or provide 'soundscapes' for parties or openings, yet it is ludicrous to imagine the exact opposite situation, whereby a painter would be asked to provide paintings as "wallpaper" for someone's concert. This form of engagement emerges from the traditional model in which museums have modern composition/improvised music evenings for specific groups (friends of the museum, patrons), wherein the audience looks around at the show, wine glass in hand. Such events may at times be open to the general public, or may cater especially to members, "friends" of the museum, or corporate donors. In any case, the focus is on the work in the exhibition while the music serves as a way to enhance the evening.

A more contemporary version of this model can be seen at major biennials, which are known to up the glamour factor by inviting musicians and sound artists to provide entertainment at the opening. An example would be the commissioning of established artist Stephen Vitiello to provide a sound-based environment for the exclusive party marking the launch of Tate's UBS sponsored re-hang of the collection. Despite the fact that Vitiello created an impressive installation in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, the viewing of the work was restricted to the invite-only party audience and never publicised or shown to the public.

2. Musician/artist collaborations in exhibitions.

⁹ See: Thompson, Marie (2017) *Whiteness and the ontological turn in sound studies*. Parallax, 23 (3). pp. 266-282. ISSN 1353-4645

This model allows for a deeper engagement with the arts of sound, although it still demonstrates a lack of confidence in bringing in sound-based work on the part of the institution. An example of this model may be the exhibition *Sonic Process: A New Geography Of Sound* curated by Christine Van Assche of the Pompidou Centre (2000), in which musicians and sound artists were paired together with visual artists and commissioned to create new installation works. Collaborations included Mike Kelley and Scanner; Richard Dorfmeister/Rupert Huber/Gabriel Orozco, amongst others. Although this exhibition allowed for commissioning new work, its core curatorial strategy was to create “museum friendly” hybrid works, incorporating, in most cases, moving image – a decision that felt like a safety mechanism in case the actual focus of the show proved to be too unpalatable for visitor tastes. As a result, although the exhibition claimed to explore the new geographies of electronic music, it ultimately stayed away from truly welcoming these communities into the museum, resulting in a fairly conventional exhibition dominated by video installations.

3. Performance or education departments bringing sound practice into the building – music as a way to “reach out to new audiences”.

Often the smoothest in-roads into museums for less established practices are via the education departments or performance/live art initiatives, which tend to have more freedom as they are less closely scrutinised by the institutional agenda, pressures and budgets, given their lower ranking on institutional hierarchies. Admittedly, obtaining institutional commitment for a one-day event is always likely to prove much easier than for a 6- to 8-week installation. Examples of this may include: Serpentine Gallery’s recent sound events, the “Late at Tate” series at Tate Britain, and Whitechapel’s “Adventures in Music” In my own experience of collaborations with a range of institutions through Electra, performance and education curators have often been our most sympathetic partners in bringing sound-based work into museums and galleries. Electra’s own projects, such as Christian Marclay’s ‘Sounds Of Christmas’ at Tate Modern (2004), and Marina Rosenfeld’s ‘Emotional Orchestra’ (2005) and ‘Sheer Frost Orchestra’ (2006) at Tate Modern, have all been brought into the institution in this way. It is only recently that the dedicated performance and often sound-based work within the programme at Tate Tanks, as well as the promise of New York MoMA’s Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Studio (opening October 2019) will be the world’s first dedicated space for performance, process, and time-based art that is centrally incorporated into the museum, that sound is beginning to have appropriate spaces and dedicated curatorial attention in major museums.

4. Rock and art: exhibitions and “art bands”.

Exhibitions which explore the cross pollination between music and art have been very popular over the past decade (these shows often feature rock memorabilia, such as guitars and other instruments, or draw on the ‘cool’ factor of the musicians). Examples would include MOMA PS1’s recent exhibition *Music Is A Better Noise* (2006), the Museum of Modern Art Chicago exhibition *Sympathy for the Devil: Art and Rock and Roll Since 1967* curated by Dominic Molon (2007), and the *Play it Loud* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City (2019).

5. The visual artist who is also a musician and includes music or sound in his/her museum shows.

Another way in which the arts of sound frequently find themselves in the museum is through exhibitions of household name artists who also happen to be musicians or

heavily engaged in sound practice. Perhaps making for the most natural entry into museum spaces, these works will simply be included in retrospectives and solo exhibitions, receiving equal treatment as all other works by the artist. Examples may include artists such as Rodney Graham, Martin Creed, Christian Marclay, Carl Michael von Hausswolff, and numerous others.

6. Sound art exhibitions.

Some of the most prominent exhibitions showcasing sound-based work over the past decades have been those that engage with the arts of sound as a genre - these are often the more formal outputs in which the work is contextualised within the narrower definitions of “sound art” and the focus is on the properties of and relationships between sound and space. Many examples of this were cited in the previous section, although the exhibition *Frequencies [Hz]* (2002) held at Frankfurt’s Schirn Kunsthalle could be cited as one of the best examples. Even though exhibitions such as this tend to be the best environments to exhibit sonic work, as they guarantee a relatively high level of commitment from the institution (resulting in considerable technical and financial resources being put toward installation and the needs of the work), the flip side often tends to be that such exhibitions can marginalise the work, by contextualising it as “sound art” - perhaps an artform that exists within its own niche. For those not actively interested in sound art as a genre, there would be little reason to visit such a show. In my own experience of approaching institutions about Electra’s projects, I have come across responses such as, “But we already did a sound art show a few years ago” – meaning this area of practice was “ticked off” the institutional agenda for a little while.

7. Sound and vision - shows about the senses - synaesthesia.

A number of exhibitions that investigated sound as material in recent years have centred on the notion of synaesthesia – a neurological condition in which two or more bodily senses are coupled. In the cases of these exhibitions, the focus was the relationship between sound and image. Such exhibitions include *What Sound Does A Colour Make* (exploring the fusion of vision and sound in electronic media), a travelling exhibition organized by the Independent Curators International (ICI) in New York, *Visual Music* (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.), and *Son Et Lumières* at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, 2004-2005.

The aforementioned exhibition *SEE THIS SOUND. Promises in Sound and Vision*, at Kunstmuseum Linz, Austria equally focussed on the interplay of the senses, claiming that the dominance of the visual realm was a thing of the past. The phenomenon of listening was investigated via the work of 14 artists and groups, in the excellent exhibition ‘Esma/Listen’, staged at the Beirut Art Center in 2016. A more recent exhibition which also addressed relationship between the senses was *Inner Ear Vision: Sound as Medium at the Bemis Center, Omaha, Nebraska* (2019) through the exploration of sound as an artistic medium beyond the aural, focussing on multi-sensory nature of the ear and the way it affects not only our sense of sound, but also those of vision, space, and even cognition.

8. New commissions and acquisitions, new galleries.

It has been rare for museums to commission and collect sound-based work, for a range of reasons which (depending on the work) include difficulty in displaying the work in the existing space, accessibility (sound-based work is often deemed 'difficult' by

institutions pressured to maximise visitor figures and show accessible work), investment in equipment, sound proofing, etc.

However, some ambitious examples might include works such as Tate Modern's Turbine Hall installation 'Raw Materials' (2004) by Bruce Nauman, followed by Bill Fontana's 'Harmonic Bridge' (2006) (which was brought to the Tate by an external partner – Platform For Art). It is worth noting, however, that neither of these two works now appear to be part of the Tate Collection, which somewhat undermines the importance given to them by the institution.¹⁰ It is only with the opening of Tate Tanks (2012) that we have begun to see more appropriate and risk-taking initiatives in the realm of non-object based work, welcoming performance and often sound-based works into Tate, much of it spearheaded by decades of sustained programming in this realm by its now well-established Senior Curator of International Art, Catherine Wood.

Examples of more committed engagement might include MaSS MOCA (the Massachusetts Museum Of Modern Art in North Adams, MA, US) which has several permanent sound works it has commissioned: Bruce Odland & Sam Auinger's 'Harmonic Bridge', Walter Fandrich's 'Music for a Quarry', and Christina Kubisch's 'Clocktower Project'. These projects continue to be displayed on the museum's website as "current exhibitions" and are contextualized as a permanent part of the museum's programme.

Similarly, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (Ridgefield, CT, US) included a sound gallery in its new building, which opened in 2004, thus demonstrating a long-term commitment to showing this type of work, whilst the MOMA (NYC), for its reopening in October 2019, renovated its space to include the Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Studio, which claims to be "the world's first dedicated space for performance, process, and time-based art to be centrally integrated within the galleries of a major museum¹¹".

9. Inclusion – Whose Sounds? Artists as archivists, self-historicisation and development of networks

As I have pointed out above, the question of whose sound practices have been finding their way into institutions is by now a critical one. Given the lack of diversity in both art and music canons, the increasing number of feminist and post/decolonial projects of late, revisiting these histories have been a welcome and long overdue development. Projects attempting to grapple with questions of race, class, gender or sexuality in sound-based practices have made some inroads into institutional programming- even if it will take some decades for significant change on a systemic level to occur. The question of who has access and feels welcome in cultural institutions as well as what can institutions do to decolonise, queer and feminise their programming and acquisition strategies have been asked in relation to sound-based work, although not always as explicitly as is necessary. For example the current Independent Curators International exhibition '*Soundings: An Exhibition in Five Parts*', (2019/20) curated by first nations curators Candice Hopkins (Tlingit) and Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō), asks how can a score be a call and tool

¹⁰ Tate's collection does include the sketch for Raw Materials, titled 'Layout for Raw Materials 6 April 2004 2004, ink on paper, but it does not include the sound work itself.

¹¹ <https://www.moma.org/about/new-moma>, last accessed 4 October, 2019.

for decolonization?. The exhibition features newly commissioned scores and sounds for decolonization by Indigenous artists who attempt to answer this question.

But this exhibition at such a scale is an exception. Such investigations are seldom initiated by large institutions and usually tend to come from smaller organisations, individual curators or in many cases artists themselves, who often have no choice but to step into the roles of archivists, curators or collectors as a way of redressing omissions, imbalances and exclusions. In most cases the sheer despair of witnessing the exclusionary ways of dominant structures leads to forms of self-historicisation and develops archival impulses.

A key example are the ongoing efforts in this realm of the British artist Sonia Boyce, namely her *Devotional Collection* project [1999–ongoing]: an archive of sound, ephemera and wallpaper which investigate collective memory in relation to black British women in music, and which has been shown in a number of institutions internationally, over the years. Similarly, the work of the American artist Renée Green is often dubbed ‘archival’ as, like Boyce’s, her work often includes collections of other artists’ materials as a way of bringing these practices into the institution. For instance, her ongoing project *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992) installation that was developed as a result of her close friendship with the German cultural theorist Diedrich Diederichsen, at the time the editor of the German music magazine *Spex*. The work, one of many of Green’s engagement with archives and sound, ‘interprets Diederichsen’s personal collection of objects relating to African and African American diasporic culture – from blues and jazz to philosophy and hip hop – as well as Green’s music, books and magazines.’¹²

A sustained feminist enquiry into sound based practice and gender, also hinged around the building of an archive, can be seen in Electra’s own aforementioned research-and exhibition project *Her Noise* curated by Anne Hilde Neset and myself, with invaluable input from the curator and writer Irene Revell, (the three of us the directors of Electra), which grew out of puzzlement at of our own curatorial practices which, although inspired by female heroines, were at the time somehow still producing heavily white male dominated events and projects. *Her Noise* was an attempt to, through developing an archive and building of a network, understand and somehow alter this system that strips out all feminist impulses and desires to eventually perpetuate the existing canonical myopia. The archive has since been acquired by the London College of Communications Archives and Special Collections and incorporated into the MA in Sound Art in the form of a module, inviting students’ responses into gender and sound practice – perhaps the most productive outcome we could have hoped for.

Many years later, in 2019, the exhibition ‘*Sounds Like Her – Gender, Sound Art and Sonic Cultures*’ curated by Christine Eyene and shown in York Art Gallery, sought to explore feminist art and her research on sound art from an African perspective and to challenge ‘existing approaches to sound art and challenge the Eurocentric and patriarchal frameworks that have informed the discourse on sound art practice and continue to dominate the mainstream today.’ through the work of six women artists, each exploring sound as a medium or subject matter.

It is telling of our institutional practices today that a female (or transgender and non-binary) artist of colour effectively needs to take the initiative to ‘put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement’ as Helene Cixous wrote in back 1976, following the adage that if you want something done, you have to do it yourself.

¹²For further information about *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992) see: <https://frieze.com/article/art-culture-appropriation-importexport-funk-office>

Much needed revisions of canonical histories and practices, it seems, often stem from passionate efforts of individuals or small organisations and not the more established and well-funded players on the contemporary arts landscape. Smaller grassroots networks continue to foster sound based practices while institutions continue to grapple with how to engage with these ongoing outputs authored by communities of artists. Aside from Electra, numerous smaller organisations have been supporting sound-based (as well as performance) work for decades, but often remain 'under the radar' in the historicization of these practices. Established in 2005, *If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution*, for instance, is an art organisation 'dedicated to exploring the evolution and typology of performance and performativity in contemporary art'. Since the inception the organisation has been supporting and exhibiting networked, process-based practices with a strong feminist ethos.¹³

Equally, in the UK, immense support to the field has come from the work of Wysing Arts Centre and its annual music festival, residencies and retreats as well its recent initiative 'Wysing Polyphonic Studio'(2017) established as a way of supporting new music and sonic works.

Conclusion

The use of 'sonic substance' as a primary material for art is not new. We typically call this "music", and it has been with us for centuries, performed in music halls, opera houses, street festivals, and everywhere in between. In his volume *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, French economist Jacques Attali traces the social role of music and musicians through history, within the wider framework of listening to our society (as opposed to looking at the world). For Attali, music, or the "noise of a society", is both a mirror and a prophecy of that society. Attali suggests that if we listen to the sounds of society (its art, festivals, etc.), we will understand better the "folly of men¹⁴" and be able to see where our society is going. For this scholar, the world is "for hearing... it is not legible, but audible¹⁵". Attali's notion that our musical process of structuring noise is also our political process of structuring community may at times oversimplify, but his text does encourage a deeper examination of the relationships between society and its sounds.

A number of artists have recently turned their attention to attention itself, asking how we listen and how can we make sense of these troubled times of increasingly noisy cities, overwhelming demands on our attention and listening, made worse by ever-shortening attention spans, social media overload and fake news. Artists such as Aura Satz and Lawrence Abu Hamdan have both made works about the cacophony of everyday life, with Satz's research into the changing sounds of sirens and alerts suggesting that as a society we are no longer able to recognise danger signals when we hear them. New forms of alerts are necessary, Satz claims, in her 'pre-emptive listening' project, to be able to grab our attention. Similarly, in his work 'The All-Hearing; (2014) Abu Hamdan commissioned two Sheikhs in Cairo to deliver their sermons about the cacophony of cities and the issue of noise pollution.

¹³ For a comprehensive list of organisations and networks supporting sound and music practices by of female, transgender and non-binary artists, see: <https://drlizdobson.com/2018/02/18/feministsoundcollectives/>, last accessed 6 October 2019

¹⁴ Attali, Jacques, (1977), *Noise: The Political Economy Of Music*. University Of Minnesota Press, USA, Chapter 1, p 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Chapter 1.

Meanwhile, our society seems set on marketing and monetising all forms of mindfulness, mediation and strategies to tune out of the cacophony we live in. Museums around the world have started offering yoga classes.¹⁶ Recently Tate held ‘deep listening workshops’, developed by the late Pauline Oliveros, as a way of recalibrating our senses, to the world we live in.¹⁷ We are witnessing a time when our museums are engaging with the noises of society in a more decisive manner than ever before, and perhaps this attentiveness may lead to insights into how to deal with and organise the way we listen to and engage with the world. In other words, when sound begins to travel around spaces originally designed to display and preserve art objects, such as paintings and sculptures, the very nature of the institutions in question – their role, economic models, exhibition and preservation strategies – must be re-examined with a view to accommodating for these new types of work. Not only must we then examine the actual sounds of our society but the sounds in relation to where they are ending up and in what form.

Embracing sound-based practice in a profound way no doubt presents a complex task for any institution, although not insurmountable if the works are treated with as much commitment as any other artwork. As the above examples illustrate, any visual arts institution that wishes to truly engage with such practices needs to acknowledge that to commission, exhibit, and collect sound-based work can require substantial time, financial and, at times, even physical commitment, as sometimes these works may require an architectural adjustment to the space. The key question is whether or not this particular strand of practice is indeed significant enough to merit the commitment and investment on the part of visual art institutions. Do the arts of sound “belong” in a museum, or are they better off scattered across a range of sites: public sites, performance halls, independent initiatives, and DIY galleries, to name but a few. Do these practices need to be embraced by museums as part and parcel of contemporary practice that should be collected, written about, and displayed?

Drawing on my experience of working collaboratively with a range of institutions on a variety of sound-based projects, I have found that the deciding factor in the success of any project is the level of institutional commitment to a particular artist and a particular piece of work. Difficulties in delivering successful high-profile sound-based projects in visual arts institutions cannot be attributed to an intrinsic challenges of sound as a medium. Instead, difficulties arise as a result of of, a lack of institutional resources, time or commitment invested in the project. Just like there is no single way to define ‘the arts of sound’, there is no single way to resolve the ideal relationship between museums and diverse sonic practices. Perhaps one can only conclude that institutional engagement with audio culture at large requires a paradigm shift and a willingness on the part of the institution to commit resources and take risks.

Institutional engagement, however ultimately reflects the value ascribed to the work within the institution, which brings us to the core issue of where the value of any work of art lies, and according to what criteria institutions at any given time assign that value.

¹⁶ See: <https://www.museum.com/practice-your-favourite-yoga-asanas-in-these-museums-around-europe/> (last accessed 6 October 2019)

¹⁷ DEEP LISTENING SUNDAY MORNINGS were offered at Tate Britain in 2018: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/workshop/deep-listening-sunday-mornings>

