

---

# EDITORIAL

---

Sound art is a slippery term, not well defined and absorbing new artistic practices so rapidly that it is in danger of collapsing as a meaningful category. Perhaps a lack of definition and clear delimitations is also what makes sound art so attractive, allowing for its large diversity and offering few of the taxonomy restraints that generally characterise music and art historical academic discourse. Yet this sensed freedom does not mean that the genre is free from institutionalisation. Thus, the increasing number of artistic productions broadly labelled sound art that are penetrating both white cubes and public spaces is a phenomenon that warrants closer investigation.

A practice dating back to the 1970s, sound art has developed as a hybrid art form that encompasses works easily categorised in terms of other genres and media, including installation art, performance, soundscape works, drama, poetry, sound/text art, film, radio, the Internet, and more. The genre sound art has thus emerged through a multitude of starting points. Considering changes in artistic practices that transgress traditional lines of demarcation, this development points to the need for a cross-disciplinary approach to analysing and understanding sound art, drawing on frameworks of interpretation from other art forms as well. As Douglas Kahn (2006) describes, the very term ‘sound art’ seems to narrow down the sphere of understanding instead of expanding it.

The early focus on architecture and acoustics so prevalent in the German *Klangkunst* tradition, for example, or the more Anglo-American focus on experimental music paradigms, has now been supplemented by what may be called a neo-modernist perspective, where interpretation and meaning depart from a wider set of competences than what is found in the singular arts. In discussions of sound art, which often has a visual component, there are a number of repeating concepts. It is frequently argued that sound art is mainly about space, while music is about time. A line of reasoning in this discussion is the distinction between space as a general acoustic precondition, and place as a specific acoustic and social site. Other distinctions are made between sound art and music by arguing that meaning-making processes in visual art and music have significantly different points of departure.

The composer’s surface is an *illusion* into which he puts something real – sound.

The painter’s surface is something *real* from which he then creates an illusion.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this pointed statement, music and visual art are both time-dependent constructs in the viewer/listener, containing narratives that are both material and immaterial. The closeness between music and sound art is obvious, and for example Landy (2007) has argued that sound art can be considered as a subset of music, and that a more important difference in the sound domain lies in whether the artists focus on work with concrete material, or with pitch-based and notated structures.

Sound and its references allow artistic treatment of subjects and associations in much the same way as other art forms, through listening for both abstract forms and referential traces and connections. At the same time, sound art unveils elements and aspects that other art forms cannot reach. Thus I propose that sound art be understood as a sonification of artistic ideas, or sonic representations of the same. This perspective reaches beyond traditional boundaries of art genres, whether the timbral focus of music or the acoustic particularities of installation art. In this sense, music becomes a subset of sound art, in the same way as it may be said – somewhat jokingly – to be a specific instance of applied physics.

To illustrate this notion of sonification, I provide two examples from a recent sound art exhibition, *Absorption and Resonance – Sound and Meaning*, at the Henie Onstad Art Centre in Oslo.<sup>2</sup> These works use written text as material, with the use of sound providing a rich subtext. The first example, *Transfer* (Finborud 2008), consists of the sound recorded from writing a specific text, which is also displayed on paper. The manner in which the text was written, and the diffusion of the sound around the listener, allows the public to hear and follow the temperament, speed and intention of the writing in a way that could never be read. In this way, the audience concretely experiences issues of cross-representation. The other example, *Wittgenstein Chairs* (Hagen 2008), consists of a recording of the reading of a Wittgenstein text combined with a montage of sounds that Wittgenstein has stated have importance for him.

<sup>1</sup>Brian O’Doherty in an interview with Morton Feldman (Feldman 1998: 2).

<sup>2</sup>See Rudi 2008.

Through this combination, the artist reveals some of the subtext for Wittgenstein's oeuvre; the sounding context within which the philosopher worked – another perspective that cannot be reached by written word alone.

These works reflect a new trend in sound art, then, with a referential aspect – sonification – that has moved away from a modernist focus on material, inner coherence, and the autonomous work. This new trend aligns with process-oriented and participatory trends in contemporary art. As such, 'listening strategies' and 'ontology' become key concepts for publics and artists in their approaches to recognizing and making sense of constructed or natural sound objects and environments, and relevant themes for a special issue of *Organised Sound*.

This issue contains articles that approach theory and a number of concrete works from different perspectives. Alan Licht, author of *Sound Art* (2007), gives a thorough and detailed introduction and historical overview of the genre and its aesthetic roots, and is rich in examples. Andreas Engström and Åsa Stjerna approach the understanding of sound art through an analysis of the literature on the subject, describing how the written discourse has contributed to defining the field differently in the German and Anglo-American traditions.

In his article, Christoph Cox develops an ontology of sound, an ontology that is revealed through the meaning-making-processes involved in sound art and its call upon the auditory unconscious, which he calls 'noise'. In assigning meaning to sounds, they are transformed from noise to signal.

Lilian Campesato brings out core elements in the felt differences between music and sound art in her descriptions of sound art's referential and representational discourses. Her point of departure is the different conceptualisations of time and space employed in sound art and music.

Joanna Demers discusses field recordings, and in particular those of Francisco López and Toshiya Tsunoda. She finds that these are best understood in relation to the visual arts concept of 'objecthood', disengaged from their context and referential meaning. Dani Iosafat discusses oppositions in perspectives on sonification, and considers sonic representation of site as 'psychosonification' (developed from the Situationist concept of psychogeography), grounded in the concrete actions, aspects and relationships in an experienced locality.

In her text, Claudia Tittel discusses different approaches to changing situations and contexts with sound, with a particular concern for sociocultural aspects of site-specific works. Several works of Christina Kubisch are discussed in depth, as examples on how otherwise unnoticeable aspects our environment can be made perceptible through sonification.

The use of sound for creating narratives in movies is the main theme in Julio d'Escriván's text, and he focuses on sound's implied signification rather than on its physical qualities. He also provides a short history of sound in film, outlining the early beginnings of electronic sound generation and manipulation.

The work of Finnish performance artist Heidi Fast is the topic for Gascia Ouzonian's article. Fast uses her voice to 'actualise' social situations through the transformation of her actions. Owen Chapman discusses his work *The Icebreaker* as a combination of performance, soundscape composition and sound installation, bringing unnoticed sounds and contexts to our attention.

Virginia Madsen reconsiders the power of sound in her discussion of her performance piece *Cantata of Fire*, a work based on the Waco incident of 1993. Sound was used actively as a weapon in this incident as a means of subduing a religious sect that had barricaded itself in its compound.

Georg Klein's article contains a personal discussion of sound installations in public space, with a particular focus on transitory spaces. The author considers the transformation of public space into 'place' through the use of site-specific sound (*Ortsklang*).

The collection of articles thus forms a wide set of approaches to the term and practice of sound art, grounding them within the discourse of music represented in this journal. We have aimed to strategically use the strain that sound art places on traditional discourses of what constitutes music in order to enrich debate, and to contribute perspectives to the continually changing self-understanding any artistic organisation of sound makes possible.

Jøran Rudi  
Guest Editor

## REFERENCES

- Feldman, Morton. 1998. Between Categories. *Contemporary Music Review* 2(2).
- Finborud, Lars Mørch. 2008. Transfer – A Discussion of Bjørn Erik Haugen's Work. In Jøran Rudi (ed.), *Absorption and Resonance – Sound and Meaning*. Oslo: NOTAM, 65–6.
- Hagen, Lars Petter. 2008. An Exacting, Investigative Manner of Working – A discussion of Emil Bernhardt's work *Wittgenstein Chairs*. In Jøran Rudi (ed.), *Absorption and Resonance – Sound and Meaning*. Oslo: NOTAM, 60–1.
- Kahn, Douglas. 2006. *The Arts of Sound Art and Music*. [http://www.douglaskahn.com/writings/douglas\\_kahn-sound\\_art.pdf](http://www.douglaskahn.com/writings/douglas_kahn-sound_art.pdf) (accessed 30 October 2008).
- Landy, Leigh. 2007. *Understanding the Art of Sound Organisation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Licht, Alan. 2007. *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Beyond Categories*. New York: Rizzoli.
- Rudi, Jøran (ed.) 2008. *Absorption and Resonance – Sound and Meaning*. Oslo: NOTAM.