



Sound Art: Seeing Sound

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Seeing Sound

Focusing on recent works by Conor Kelly, Andrea Phillips explores the theatre of sound, assessing its implications for theory and practice in the contemporary visual arts.



Carl André once said of his work that *"a thing is a whole, in a thing which is not"*. This apparent contortion, carefully phrased to question the nature of sculpture at the same time as conjure up the laddishness of minimalism, becomes even more tortuous if an element of sound is introduced into his equation. André's sense of 'a whole' – this defined piece of wood standing vertically in the gallery or that defined piece of metal lying on the gallery floor – can perhaps be perceived initially through its most obvious qualities of visibili-

ty and tactility. A 'whole sound', on the other hand, is much more difficult to define through tangible means. Sound and object together in a public space present the viewer with a more complex phenomenology. Indeed, sound-as-art might be defined by turning André's statement inside out: a sound is a not-whole (or an inverse) in a thing which is constituted as whole by sound's not-wholeness (or invisibility).

'Sound sculpture', a term which displays the poverty of art historical definitions, has acquired a status within gallery cultures in

recent years which, whilst by no means rivalling the popularity of video installation, reflects an increasing interest in work that moves outside the bounds of the silent sculptural object. This increasing willingness to investigate the 'margins' of cultural production, often fetishised as the liminal and thus magical work of postmodernism, belies the differing and longer terms of interdisciplinarity through which composers (or 'sound artists') work. 'Sound' and 'sculpture' pushed together reflect the wilful contradiction endemic in many current practices. By

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placing sound in a gallery, artists question the nature of the tactility of art production, of the objects that their sound surrounds, and of the way in which we might 'see' this sound.

Conor Kelly, whose work over the last few years has involved placing recorded compositions and treated found noise into public environments in order to persuade his audience to 'see sound', would probably have none of this. Avoiding art rhetoric whilst dealing in its complexities, his practice has been one of producing relatively simple scenarios that nevertheless demand a rigorous attitude to looking and listening.

A year ago, Kelly exhibited *Evening Echoes*, a collaboration with John Carson, at the Temple Bar Gallery & Studios [1] and produced *Statue And Other Moving Things*, a solo show at the Project Arts Centre. *Statue...* comprised of two works that took place simultaneously in the theatre and the smaller gallery. In the gallery space, a six foot church speaker box was hung by chains from the ceiling to form a looming, and slightly listing, column above head-height. From the box, the noise of the quiet activity in a church was just distinguishable, passing from the top to the bottom speaker inside (footsteps leading along the aisles, the soft echo of stifled conversations: a kind of gentle, holy bustle). The object was lit to reinforce its deistic location, presenting what Kelly calls an 'arrested narrative', a visual and aural icon working at once as a photograph and an imaginative, filmic journey.

In the theatre auditorium, Kelly hid speakers under the stage and audience rostra, each speaker producing a shifting soundtrack of the instructions, conversations and background noises of a technical rehearsal. On the stage, lit by working lights, the set of a play (a turn-of-the century domestic interior) provided context, reinforcing the uncanny outside of theatrical mimicry. The language of a lighting designer's instructions, like the noises of the church, is familiar to those who are used to the environment but a bizarre code to those who are not: "No. 47 down 20%", "No. 48 up 10%" etc. The missed presence of the actors, traced through their voices, added irony: "Can you see me if I stand here?".

Whilst Kelly's previous work such as *The*

Width, Thickness And Viscosity Of Ghosts [2] has exhibited an interest in ambient sound reminiscent of the work of John Cage and La Monte Young (amongst many others) - a tradition he cites with ease - recent work has concentrated on the movement, and thus the implied tactility, of sound. An irreverent, ambiguous link to twentieth century traditions of occidental experimental music and expanded cinema scores mixed with Fluxus happenstance and Duchampian regard makes Kelly both the joker and the outsider of both the gallery and the concert hall, infuriating some of his audience and enchanting others. In a work produced for the Freundes Guter Musik festival in Berlin this year, Kelly placed six speakers around a seated auditorium and projected the sound of a game of pool through them such that the audience was surrounded by an entire pool game but particularly close to one or other 'pocket'. Kelly's current work-in-progress involves the animation of a huge disused cigarette factory in Marseille, in which various sets of speakers will be configured to move sound through determined areas of the space. Thus his interest in effecting, expanding and confusing the isometric qualities of places continues.

When describing the church speaker work at the Project, Kelly extracts four elements that combine to produce the effect he likes: the speakers, the room itself, the sound and the movement of the sound from the top speaker to the bottom speaker. He explains this process in terms of narrative: "Someone walking from one end of the church to another registers from top to bottom of the speaker because of the way they are placed. I did this so that people could almost 'watch' that journey. A door opening and closing might be a confessional door and it might not, but it makes me think of a confessional because of the echo-chamber quality of the sound of a church. There is an invisible dynamic that makes the watcher aware that there is something happening in time. That itself implies an everyday narrative. At the same time it is a kind of nothingness narrative."

A narrative of nothing approaches the contortion of André's thing which is not a whole: both are empty, residual, invisible; both are only visible next to the wholeness that they once might have been. There is also a nostalgia in this nothingness.

Dealing in the most obvious architectural and cultural parallels the art gallery evokes - those of the theatre and the church - Kelly manages to slip away from such towering references through the use of quotidian sound. These 'everyday narratives' are equally like 'nothingness' in an over-determined habitat: the nothingness of action that leaves no trace (walking, talking, playing) in the definitive confines of place (a church, a theatre, a pool hall). Walking around a church, dealing with the practicalities of the trickery of a theatre show, playing a game of pool, are all actions that produce a certain amount of noise that remains behind the principal purpose of action and place: noise is a secondary mark. Whilst Kelly's *Statue...* might, in one respect, conjure the strangely-shared iconography of religion and minimalism, he is also interested in 'mere' background noise, the off-screen noise of the everyday, its continual, absurd but heuristic cultural traces, made extraordinary by its circumstance. "A speaker becomes a house or a primitive fence" he says, "a framing device for all sorts of data. It's the difference between something that is on an object and something that is in an object."

Background noise is, of course, always part of museum culture, as visitors find strategies of communication despite being variously subdued or coerced into a silent gazing. Making sound in the gallery, as artists such as Bruce Nauman have discovered, has an immediate effect, read as aggressive in historically muted edifices unused to such Bakhtinian profanity. But whereas Nauman uses words (for instance, and most obviously, his *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room* or *Clown Torture* series), Kelly uses everyday noise in a much quieter dramatic sense, so inscribing the (often monolithic) objects from which his compositions emanate with a disturbed identity. Homi Bhabha has described language as full of the trace of the other. Here we could characterise sound as inscribing other presences upon the erstwhile singularity or authorship

of the object. Returning to André, this process could be described as a hollowing out of his solid 'thing'.

Performance art, as advanced in the West over the last century, develops in some senses out of an urgency to 'make some noise' in the gallery, a transgression which is usually read as cultural as well as aesthetic. Sound, as well as the body, is social, and thus what we could call the 'social body of sound' impinges on the world of objects in a more or less overt way. Kelly's way is slight, mediated through technology, and currently seems to implicate small daily narratives. In this sense he was influenced by early work as a composer with performance artists such as Alanna O'Kelly and Anne Tallentire: "I became interested in using recorded sounds, putting them in a space and letting them have a performance stature, a resonance that is almost live, even though I was using recorded material."

Born and brought up in Dublin, Kelly dropped out of formal education in order to form the rock band Max in the early 1980s. When Max became too popular for his liking, he began to collaborate on scores for theatre and expanded cinema. He currently works in the cinema department at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London and teaches time-based and mixed media courses whilst working on a wide range of projects, often with long-term collaborator Sam Park. Moving through disciplines, he says, means that "things have started to leak into each other". His involvement with narrative theatrical and filmic imagery has developed over a considerable period: "There is a forced action in time that somehow engages that aspect of viewing in some of the work that I have done that is similar to the way we perceive performance work - the kind of gaze you associate with theatre rather than the gallery. My work is time-based, but tapes, for instance, are also objects. Tape is actually just a bunch of stuff that needs to be played at a certain speed in order to fill a certain time, a certain time that I can play with."

Kelly insists, somewhat unlike many of his sculptural and musical forebears, that his work is also entertainment. His keen desire to work towards the ontology of theatrical



presentation, whilst acknowledging the in-built contradiction of technological 'liveness', feeds this need to shed the conceptual baggage of the 'true object' or 'thing' in a gallery. It also buys into a whole process of playing, pretending and psychoanalytical trickery. Kelly enjoys a joke, but is also intrigued by ambivalence. The ambivalence, for instance of looking at sound: "If you are sitting at home listening to your favourite record, what are you looking at? You will probably be sitting between two speakers, and your inactive gaze will be a very active one."

Michael Fried's famous essay on *Art and Objecthood*, published in 1967 at the height of minimalist fervour, pointed a trembling finger at artists such as Carl André in fear of the reinterpretation of the object that their silent, obsessive sculptures implied. Disturbed by the theatre that he found in objects that alluded to the subjectivity of the viewer and his or her position inside and outside the gallery, Fried's idea of 'presence' revealed a desire for oceanic purity not only expressed in the lines and shapes of the object itself, but also within the concept of the artwork: he wanted a purity that blessed the ideal object with an hermetic existence that was at the same time transcendental; that denied the other presence of the viewer at the

same time as disavowing his or her implication within any kind of scene. His idea of 'theatre', on the other hand, supposed the loss of a system of valuation resulting from the imposition of an 'as if' within the artwork's schema, a representative practice that could no longer ensure the authenticated object resting 'within itself'. This 'as if' had to do with duration.

In Kelly's work, duration is not only physical (his works are composed spatially) but also conceptual. When working as a composer for theatre, he finds that "theatre-makers often want me to fill the 'lows' with exciting music, so that there is never a dull moment. But there are obviously powerful influences who have worked in the theatre such as Samuel Beckett who realised that time itself can contain a horrible emptiness."

Despite its most obvious heredity, Kelly's work has perhaps more to do with Beckett than, for instance Cage, whose obsession with the passing of time belonged to a period of dogmatic and ideological border crossing. In Kelly's work the gloss of theatre, so antithetical to a modernist perspective such as Fried's, is tinged with a nostalgic relationship to subject matter - a kind of desire to fill the emptiness of sound with objects.

To suggest that sound has a tactile, and therefore visible surface is, of course, ambivalent. Such a thought fills the gap between an object and a sound with ghostly presences; pushes sound closer to the condition of the visual; wills objects to speak. "I'm borrowing the term theatre", says Kelly, "but I don't know whether I believe in it. I like to think that I work in limbo, simply setting up the conditions for looking and listening."

[1] See *Circa* 74, Winter 1995 p67.

[2] A project curated by Strike, at Spitalfields public lavatories, London 1993.

Andrea Phillips

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Conor Kelly with Statue
and other moving things
Project Arts Centre
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Photo: Michael McCreedy