# Introduction: Auditory Relations

Sound is intrinsically and unignorably relational: it emanates, propagates, communicates, vibrates, and agitates; it leaves a body and enters others; it binds and unhinges, harmonizes and traumatizes; it sends the body moving, the mind dreaming, the air oscillating. It seemingly eludes definition, while having profound effect.

Sound art as a practice harnesses, describes, analyzes, performs, and interrogates the condition of sound and the processes by which it operates. It has been my intention to historically follow the developments of sound as an artistic medium while teasing out sound's relational lessons. For it teaches us that space is more than its apparent materiality, that knowledge is festive, alive as a chorus of voices, and that to produce and receive sound is to be involved in connections that make privacy intensely public, and public experience distinctly personal. In this way, this writing attempts to describe what sound is always already doing, yet as framed by the eccentric and productively rich context of art and music and their respective experimental edges.

In writing such history, I have been interested in engaging with specific artists, their specific works, and their auditory operations and intuitions so as to lend more thorough consideration onto instances of sound art at its most social, its most spatial, and within its most public moments, where it is brought self-consciously into play with the intention of performing with and through surrounding space, places, and the perceiving body, inside crowds and through acts of charged listening. To register sound in the effects on perception and the hearing subject, to mark it as spatial and architectural, and therefore integral to the built environment, to speak it so as to shatter the acoustical mirror in which the self and sound bring each other into relief. And to listen intently to all that comes back. For sound itself has drawn my attention to the stirrings of interaction, the intensities of the voice, the resonances of architectures, and the potential of cultural production to address an audience.

It is my view that sound's relational condition can be traced through modes of spatiality, for sound and space in particular have a dynamic relationship. This no doubt stands at the core of the very practice of sound art—the activation of the existing relation between sound and space. It is my intent to contribute to this

understanding by supplying the very equation of sound and space with degrees of complexity, detail, and argument.

Engaging the dynamic of sound and space initially leads us to a number of observations and realizations, which may at first open up perspective on sound art. First, that sound is *always* in more than one place. If I make a sound, such as clapping my hands, we hear this sound here, between my palms at the moment of clapping, but also within the room, tucked up into the corners, and immediately reverberating back, to return to the source of sound. This acoustical event implies a dynamic situation in which sound and space converse by multiplying and expanding the point of attention, or the source of sound: the materiality of a given room shapes the contours of sound, molding it according to reflection and absorption, reverberation and diffraction. At the same time, sound makes a given space appear beyond any total viewpoint: in echoing throughout the room, my clapping describes the space from a multiplicity of perspectives and locations, for the room is here, between my palms, and there, along the trajectory of sound, appearing at multiple locations within its walls, for "the sound wave arriving at the ear is the analogue of the current state of the environment, because as the wave travels, it is charged by each interaction with the environment."[1] Thus, what we hear in this clapping is more than a single sound and its source, but rather a spatial event.

Second, sound occurs among bodies; that is, clapping my hands occurs in the presence of others, either as actual people in the room, directly in front of me, or in the other room and beyond, as eavesdroppers, intentional or not. Sound is produced and inflected not only by the materiality of space but also by the presence of others, by a body there, another there, and another over there. Thus, the acoustical event is also a social one: in multiplying and expanding space, sound necessarily generates listeners and a multiplicity of acoustical "viewpoints," adding to the acoustical event the operations of sociality. Such an observation reminds acoustics that material presence is also determined by the material intervention of social events, physical movements, and the ebb and flow of crowds. Bodies lend dynamic to any acoustical play, contributing to the modulation of sound, its reflection and reverberation, its volume and intensity, and ultimately to what it may communicate. For the presence of bodies, in determining social events, is also determined by the specific sociality of such events. Whether a concert hall or a classroom, the crowd is positioned by such context, either as a kind of subarchitecture in which one takes one's place, or as a kind of built-in respect for a given situation: the body occupies the correct location, either in the foreground or background, onstage or off, in front of or behind. Because of this, the crowd adds character to sound materially, as well as socially, according to the context of the event and its inherent positioning. Therefore, my clapping would be heard differently at a concert than in a classroom.

Third, sound is never a private affair, for if we listen to something like "my speaking voice" we tend to look toward the speaker as the source of sound, as an

index of personality: all eyes watch my mouth, as if this sound remains bound to my person. Yet we can see, or hear, how my voice is also immediately beyond myself, around the room, and, importantly, inside the heads of others. In this way, sound is always already a public event, in that it moves from a single source and immediately arrives at multiple destinations. It emanates and in doing so fills space and other ears. To speak then is to live in more than one head, beyond an individual mind. Listening is thus a form of participation in the sharing of a sound event, however banal. Such occurrence implies a psychological dimension to considering sound and modes of spatiality. Whereas the acoustical brings to the fore material presence, adding and subtracting space by carrying sound beyond itself, to multiple points, involved in the social organization of people and their situational dramas, it further carries with it a psychological dynamic in which sound converses with the spatial confines of mental reverberation, as a kind of "radiophonic" broadcast arriving at unseen, unknowable locations in the head.

With this in mind, we can understand how sound as relational phenomena immediately operates through modes of spatiality, from the immediate present to the distant transmission, from inside one's thoughts and toward others, from immaterial wave to material mass, from the here and now to the there and then. For the presence of architecture, found sounds, environmental noise, and the details of given locations loom as continual input into forms of listening. That is to say, the sonorous world always presses in, adding extra ingredients by which we locate ourselves.

Sound thus *performs* with and through space: it navigates geographically, reverberates acoustically, and structures socially, for sound amplifies and silences, contorts, distorts, and pushes against architecture; it escapes rooms, vibrates walls, disrupts conversation; it expands and contracts space by accumulating reverberation, relocating place beyond itself, carrying it in its wave, and inhabiting always more than one place; it misplaces and displaces; like a car speaker blasting too much music, sound overflows borders. It is boundless on the one hand, and site-specific on the other.

## Site Specificity

The understanding that art brings with it the possibility to address the world, beyond an abstract or elusive category, can be seen to gain significance throughout the latter part of the twentieth century in the form of "site-specific practice" of the late 1960s and 1970s and subsequent forms of contextual practice. Such methodologies produce artwork that, rather than separate itself from the space of its presentation, aims to incorporate it into the work, from material, such as architectural features, to informational, as in the governing curatorial premise behind an exhibition or larger social and cultural conventions. From here, art self-consciously becomes critical of its own structure, offering critique to its institutions, from the

museum to the language of art history, and relying more on a move away from the fabrication of objects to the dematerialized potential of events, actions, ideas, ephemera, and the politics inherent to space.

The developments of sound art, which took its defining steps from the mid to late 1960s, coincides generally with the developments of such methods, along with Performance and Installation art. It is my view that such correspondence is not by chance, for the very move away from objects toward environments, from a single object of attention and toward a multiplicity of viewpoints, from the body toward others, describes the very relational, spatial, and temporal nature of sound itself. Sound provides a means to activate perception, spatial boundaries, bodies and voices, and the energy waves of forms of broadcast, transmission, and other modes of radiating out. Yet, paradoxically, the historicization of sound art and the historicization of site-specific and contextual practice remain separate. While sound art is finding a current footing within cultural and academic arenas, as witnessed in the plethora of exhibitions and conferences over the last five years, its history remains separate and fixed within a specialized domain that neglects the historical context of not so much experimental music but of the visual arts and its related forms of practice of the postwar and contemporary period, particularly those actively engaged in spatial questions. It is my intent to bring these two together, inserting the history and context of sound art alongside and within the history and content of site-specificity, so as to recognize how sound art is built around the very notion of context and location.

To follow the course of such a project, I have been concerned to not so much articulate a survey of works but to pick up specific projects and artists that set in motion a critical dynamic of self and the world, through the particular use of sound, beginning in the early 1950s. From this historical point, I follow the developments of sound as an artistic medium through the 1960s and 1970s, tracing such chronology by implementing thematic threads related to architecture, place, and location, asking: how does sound embed us within local environments while connecting us to a broader horizon? What consequence do forms of sound practice have on notions of spatiality and issues surrounding public space? Can we identify questions of identity and experience in relation to listening and the resonance of space?

Since the early 1950s, sound as an aesthetic category has continually gained prominence. Initially through the experimental music of John Cage and musique concrète, divisions between music and sound stimulated adventures in electronics, field recording, the spatialization of sonic presentation, and the introduction of alternative procedures. Musical composition was to take on a broader set of terms that often left behind traditional instrumentation and the control of the composer's hand. Part 1 of this book addresses the work of Cage as progenitor of experimental music and its emphasis on "sound" as a specific category. Oscillating between sound as worldly phenomena to music as cultural work, Cage sets the stage for a heightened consideration of listening and the "place" of sound by

developing a form of critical practice. Specific works, such as *4'33"* and his Black Mountain performance, are investigated as a means to uncover the principles by which sound art developed—for Cage's work positions music in relation to a broader set of questions to do with social experience and everyday life. Musique concrète and Group Ongaku are placed alongside Cage as a way to extend the North American emphasis to that of Europe and Japan, as well as to elaborate on the general thrust of the postwar period as experimental music engaged questions of found sound and environmental material. By pushing the envelope of musicality to an extreme, found objects, audience, and social space coalesce in an unstable amalgam of input and output, technologies and their inherent ability to arrest and accentuate sonic detail, and the performing body as situated within found environment come to initiate a vocabulary by which experimental music slips into sound art.

Part 2 sets out historically to follow Cage's influence in the work of Happenings, Environments, and Fluxus, as well as Minimalist sculpture and music and Conceptual art. The artistic developments of the 1960s introduce questions of phenomenology and presence alongside social and political concerns, demanding that art become indistinguishable from life and that objects take on relational dialogue with people. Beginning with Happenings and Environments, initiated by Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, and various students of Cage, the performativity of the body and the larger contextual frame of audience and space are made the focus of art. Such shifts are furthered in the work of Fluxus, whose perceptual games define the art object as inextricably linked to an immediacy of the real. Event scores and performances are organized around "post-cognitive" understanding, creating work to be completed in the mind of the viewer/listener. The immediate and proximate can be said to govern throughout the 1960s, and find elaboration in the works of La Monte Young in music, Robert Morris in sculpture, and Michael Asher in spatial installation. Part 2 follows, in more detail, their respective works with a view toward elaborating questions of presence, as manifest in sound, space, and bodily perception. Each artist uses sound in diverse ways, pointing toward the potential of the medium to perform phenomenally (Young), discursively (Morris), and conceptually (Asher). The concern of presence is ultimately problematized in the work of Conceptual art in the late 1960s and early 1970s through semiotic games, dematerial strategies, and performative tensions that deconstruct, politicize, and spatialize perception inside the cultural structures of language. It is my argument that Conceptual art, while causing a break with earlier work, finds its inception in the work of John Cage and can be said to problematize his project.

Part 3 moves into Performance art of the early 1970s, addressing the works of Vito Acconci and, in turn, Alvin Lucier, along with the contemporary work of Christof Migone, with the intention of hearing how the voice is put to use so as to unsettle social conventions of subjectivity. Lucier's *I am sitting in a room* and Acconci's *Seedbed* and *Claim* performance installations use speech to reveal an

alternative view of presence by staging the self at its most volatile. Sexualized, disembodied, excessive, and self-obsessed, speech travels through technologies of reproduction and architectural containers to inaugurate spatiality as integral to subjectivity. Their work questions the phenomenology of Minimalism by subtracting from the plenitude of presence, inserting instead a "radiophonic" body, further exemplified in Christof Migone's work. How does the voice, as a sonorous expenditure of the body, locate the self against the greater social environment? What are its limitations and how does it position the self within a contextualized and situational geography? These are some of the questions pursued in the artists' works, marking them as integral to an expanded investigation of sound's spatial and relational operations.

The spatiality of sound is furthered in Part 4 by addressing the development of sound installation in the works of Max Neuhaus, Bernhard Leitner, Maryanne Amacher, and Michael Brewster. Sound installation, spatialized musicality, and acoustic design all situate sound in relation to architecture. Architecture is taken on, dissected, and redrawn by positioning sound work in relation to its given acoustics. Amplifying existing sounds, fostering auditory dialogues across inside and outside, tapping into structural vibrations to expand the sonic palette of tonality, and designing listening experiences by harnessing the environmental mix of found auditory events: each of these procedures come to the fore in sound installation, blossoming more fully into the beginnings of sound art as a distinct discipline. With sound installation, and the works of Neuhaus and others, sound art finds definition, demarcating itself from the legacy of experimental music and entering into a more thorough conversation with the visual arts. Shifting back, I look at Iannis Xenakis with the intention of using his work as a further example of sound's architectural potential. For Xenakis's example is indispensable to any formulation of a history of sound art by forging a dynamic mix of musical and spatial elements. To appropriate and create architecture for renewed sense of listening, sound installation moves increasingly toward public space, situating the listener within a larger framework of sonic experience that is necessarily social, thereby leaving behind the singular object or space for an enlarged environmental potential.

Extending such concerns, Part 5 looks toward more overt environmental investigations as found in acoustic ecology and other "soundscape" work. Acoustic ecology parallels the developments of Land art throughout the 1970s, both of which look toward the remote, distant, and "natural" landscape as source for an enlarged artistic experience. As progenitor of greater awareness of the sonic environment, acoustic ecology brings to the fore sound as a physical presence whose understanding can lead to more sensitive built environments that reduce noise levels and infuse sociality with deep listening. In addition, acoustic ecology opens up a greater field of sound to artistic and musical practice, exemplified in the works of Hildegard Westerkamp, Annea Lockwood, and Steve Peters, all of whom work with environmental sound to map its local presence. Through their

respective works, I chart the ways in which sound and modes of site-specificity overlap and form an extended dialogue. Acoustic ecology articulates an elaborated sociology of sound in which music, ecology, and "sound studies" coalesce to form a hybrid research and musical practice. Yet acoustic ecology runs the risk of shutting down auditory possibilities by registering sound within an overarching framework of value: what sound is harmful and what sound isn't? Which sounds contribute to noise pollution and which sounds don't? To stage a critical perspective against acoustic ecology, I address the practice of Yasunao Tone and Bill Fontana, along with the artist group WrK, whose works draw in questions of noise, systems of information, and their environmental organization. Tone and Fontana problematize in a productive way the often naïve procedures of environmental sound practice by agitating its seeming purity.

Moving increasingly from the location of sound to its propagation, from the concert hall, as in Cage, and to the environment, in Westerkamp, Part 6 follows sound's expansion into global and interpersonal network space. By looking at digital networks and interactive technologies in the works of Achim Wollscheid, Atau Tanaka, and the art collective Apo33, I arrive at present forms of sound art. Contemporary sound art fulfills Marshall McLuhan's theory of the "imploded society," for sound's current location is multiple, diverse, and expansive, streamed across the globe in networked performances, seeking the potential of interpersonal spaces, which, in turn, brings sound into every space, in every time. Such current methods operate by leaving behind the phenomenology of acoustic experience in favor of the behaviors of people. It thus seems to partially return us to John Cage by once again removing the referent in favor of materiality and the living out proposed by sound's own organizational thrust. Interactive and participatory, streamed live and Web-cast, sound has gained an intensified and dynamic place within contemporary culture. It is my argument, that its relational, spatial, and temporal nature parallels theories of electronic media, for both operate on the level of mobility, connectivity, and the immaterial.

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That sound has gained momentum as a field within postmodern studies is not without its philosophical, cultural, and social backing, for the auditory provides an escape route to the representational metaphysics of modernity by offering a slippery surface upon which representation blurs and the intractable forms of codified order gain elasticity. For the acoustical could be said to function "weakly" in its elusive yet ever-present signifying chains, its vibrations between, through, and against bodies by slipping through the symbolic net of the alphabetical house and delivering up the immediate presence of the real, in all its concrete materiality. It registers in the vibratory waves of tactile experience, which, rather than being debunked by technology, is brought forth, through a McLuhanesque implosion in which the body is externalized and thus implicated in the network of electric circuitry and

global nerves. In short, the acoustical may function as an appropriate model for confronting such a jumble of nerves and extensions and their subsequent ethical and social implications, as transformed through the globalizing networks of signals and intensities.

With such an enlarged acoustic mirror, sound may figure as an increasingly relevant and important category to offer the self a new set of codes by which to operate, as a medium intrinsically communicational and heterogeneous, and by which to negotiate and utilize the increasingly animate and telepresent world, for sound embeds itself in the creation of meanings, while remaining elusive to their significations.

I have been interested to listen to sound as it congeals into forms of creative assertion, identifying specific artists, composers, and works that seek architecture's echo, the city's crowd, and the audience as interlocutor, as a means to uncover facets to the development of sound art. By doing so, this book contends and converses with existing literatures across disciplines, from musicology and cinema studies to art history and architectural theory, ultimately with the intention of contributing to the emerging arena of sound studies. It puts forth sound art as a field that may engage levels of sociality through understanding not only the harmonies but also the dissonances between place, self, and their interaction.

## Notes

1. Barry Truax, *Acoustic Communication* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1994), p. 15.