

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.