

Acoustic Art Forms in the Age of Recordability

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Many theoretical accounts of sound art tend to treat it as a subcategory of either music or visual art. I argue that this dualism prevents many works of sound art from being fully appreciated. My subsequent attempt of finding a basis for a more comprehensive aesthetic of acoustic art forms is helped along by Trevor Wishart's concept of 'sonic art'. I follow Wishart's insight that the status of music was changed by the invention of sound recording and go on to argue that an even more important ontological consequence of recording was the new possibility of storing and manipulating any acoustic event. This media-historic condition, which I refer to as 'recordability', spawned three distinct art forms with different degrees of abstraction – electroacoustic music in the tradition of Pierre Schaeffer, gallery-oriented sound art and radiogenic *Ars Acustica*. Introducing *Ars Acustica*, or radio art, as a third term provides some perspective on the music/sound art binarism. A brief look at the history of radio art aims at substantiating my claim that all art forms based on recordable sounds can be fruitfully discussed by appreciating their shared technological basis and the multiplicity of their reference systems rather than by subsuming one into another.

1. MUSIC VS SOUND ART: A FORCED CHOICE

In recent years, there has been some controversial, even polemical, debate about what relation sound art has, should, or should not have to music. Seth Kim-Cohen's 2009 book *In the Blink of an Ear* presented an exemplary attempt at constructing the 'language of a sonic practice distinct from music' (Kim-Cohen 2009: xxiii) by relating it to developments in fine art practice and theory from the 'conceptual turn after Marcel Duchamp' (Kim-Cohen 2009: xvii) to Rosalind Krauss. 'Kim-Cohen's theory of an "expanded sonic practice" transposes Krauss' argument from her famous essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" into the register of sound art' (Kane 2013). But in trying to emancipate sound art as a genre in its own right from what he perceives as the overwhelmingly dominant discourse of Western art music and musicology, Kim-Cohen practically rethinks sound art as a form of conceptual art, thus bringing it almost completely under the jurisdiction of a history and theory of the fine arts, or, as Kim-Cohen calls them, the gallery arts. But, as Brian Kane rightly observes, Kim-Cohen presents his readers with 'a forced choice; sound art can follow

the bad path of Music, or the good path of the gallery arts' (Kane 2013, original emphasis).

Some aspects of this debate uncannily echo earlier discussions 'in Germany, where sound art is an established practice' (Kim-Cohen 2009: 116) – mainly due to the fact that several artists who went on to give shape to sound art on an international level, such as Christina Kubisch and Rolf Julius, started their careers in West Germany in the 1970s. The catalogue of the first Sonambiente sound art festival in Berlin, held in 1995 and presenting a wide range of international sound artists, provides a good example for the dualistic nature of much critical writing on sound in German. The contributors variously refer to sound art as a 'new musical genre' (Sanio 1996: 230, my translation) or as 'sound sculpture' (de la Motte-Haber 1996: 16, my translation), to quote just two examples. Yet fifteen years on, Kim-Cohen's leap of faith from music to gallery art still seems trapped within the same dualism, unable to conceive of sound art as a discipline in its own right. To phrase the problem in Kim-Cohen's own terms, sound art may now be viewed as 'distinct from music' (Kim-Cohen 2009: xxiii), but at the risk of being reduced to a mere genre of the gallery arts – either as conceptual art that incidentally uses sound, or as a mere 'technique', with artists using sound alongside more traditional artistic media such as watercolours, acrylic paint, marble or wood.

This constant concern with the question of whether 'music' is the right frame of reference to discuss acoustic artworks tends to distract attention from the actual acoustic materiality of individual works of sound art, which is not necessarily of a musical nature at all, but might instead be composed of speech or noises. However, suggesting that sound art belongs to the 'gallery arts' rather than to music tends to restrict the discourse on sound art to those acoustic works that have a visual component or are at least conceived for presentation in a gallery context. This, I would argue, neglects the fact that a comprehensive aesthetic of acoustic art forms would have to take into account not only music and (gallery-related) sound art, but also artistic forms that employ non-musical sound in the form of recorded media or broadcasts, both of which are not usually intended for a gallery situation.

