

On some theoretical and practical problems surrounding the notion of sound art

Indrek Grigor interviews John Grzinich



John Grzinich, photograph by Goncalo Velho

One of the final events of the year 2013, in the Estonian art scene was a major sound art exhibition "Out of Sync. Looking Back at the History of Sound Art" in Kumu (Tallinn)¹, curated by Kati Ilves and Ragne Nukk. This was without a question the biggest and most remarkable attention sound art has gotten so far from the institutional art world in Estonia, which put the theoretical and practical questions surrounding sound art into a very sharp focus.

Sound art as a term was first used in the beginning of 1980s, but its history is usually traced back to the 1960s to the area of the so called postmodern turn. The first historical sound art pieces, usually mentioned are Luigi Russolo's noise machines. Those were created in 1913 to perform noise concerts, carried by the enthusiasm the Italian futurists felt toward the coming first world war.

The path that the futurists laid out, can be seen in one way or another, as something followed by the actions of dadaists, surrealists, situationists and fluxus, but also in kinetic art, minimalism and even land art. The situation is even more complicated by the fact that like all attempts to describe and classify art on a practice based level, so does the description of sound art as a separate art form, create a whole set of hybrid forms. It is not at all clear when sound art becomes experimental music or the other way around. And in the same way it is unclear whether Jean Tinguely's machines, which have so far been historically mentioned as kinetic objects, should now on be classified as works of sound art.

But fortunately the question for defining a discreet boarder is not important. Since we know from the theory of semiotics, the boarder area is the most active part of the semiosphere. The illusion that a closed boarder exists maybe only be in the center, and even there, only as a structural function. It is said that the exception proves the rule, but for the exception to prove the rule there first has to be a rule. The function of the power center (of the state or of an artistic discipline) is to keep up the fiction of the holistic territory, and this is for the sole reason, that the boarder itself is actually unstable.

Let it be said that with this I do not wish to undermine the function of the center, since one of the purposes of this introduction and the following interview is also in a way to open a broader discussion by laying out and describing the problems surrounding sound art.

But still, why does the art world need one more term, with a definition as vague as of all the other terms defining art practices? The answer is inevitably paradoxical. We must admit that chaos means also plurality, plurality again means a more comprehensive picture of the world, which in the end means more order.

This sounds like dialectics, and it is. And with it, the theoretical and methodological positions of my questions are summarized and its finally time to discussing sound art.

With a series of questions surrounding the problematics of sound art, I've turned to John Grzinich, an artist who has worked with sound for over 20 years, and is one of the board members of MoKS, an artist residency popular among sound artists from around the world. His work continues to be part of many sound art events in Estonia

and elsewhere. In 2006 he edited a special issue of the magazine Kunst.ee dedicated to sound art which can be considered the first serious treatment of sound art in Estonian media² and he is a frequent participant in discussions concerning sound art among sound artists themselves in online communities.

The first edition of this interview was aired on Estonian national radio as part of the program Ministry of Art. Prior to the interview, I sent John my questions, to have time to prepare the answers, but he also took the time to write down more thorough responses to my questions, and published them on his [website](#). It therefore seemed relevant to share this discussion with the readers of Echo Gone Wrong.

Indrek Grigor

1. Sound art as a theoretical object.

1.1. When one tries to describe sound art as an object of inquiry then it is often referred to as immaterial as opposed to other, more material forms of art. On the other extreme the beginning of sound art is often related to the invention of the phonograph, and so sound not being anymore tied to the presence or creation of the action, which created it.

There is indeed many paradoxes in even thinking about “sound art”, the main one being the term itself. For example, why don't we say ‘audible art’ like we do with ‘visual art’, as opposed to defining it as ‘light art’. A lot has to do with your perspective on the art in question whether you're really talking about the object or thinking about it from the viewer him/herself. From the subjective experiential end, art is essentially perceptual sensory information, and with sound we're possibly more culturally ingrained to think about it on the immaterial level. This might be connected to how we think about music as something we mainly listen to. But with all (or most) music there are still instruments and musicians that produce what we hear. The musical equivalent of visual art would look rather strange, to put the instrument on a pedestal where we can ponder the sound of object itself rather than what we do with it. Funny as it may seem this is the kind of question “sound art” allows us to investigate. With my own practice it turns out this is one of the questions I work with most, what do objects sound like and what do we do with these sounds? So for me the idea of instruments is extended to ordinary objects and how we can “play” them or maybe we don't play them at all. If objects are placed or found in the landscape they can be played not by humans but by the forces of nature itself, as with things like aeolian structures, wires, metal objects, trees affected by wind. This is an entirely different form of listening. Generally though, the material aspect of “sound art” extends more into mediated forms through technology. So much of what can be considered the history of “sound art” relates to the introduction and evolution of new technologies, particularly with respect to recording sound. I've written about this before, but we see that as soon as sound could be recorded, it becomes displaced from its source and can therefore be manipulated and transformed in a variety of ways. So while we think of technology as representing and enhancing the “real”, it is also source for experimentation and the two processes are often much more complimentary than we acknowledge. It is no wonder that early electronic music composers like Pierre Schaeffer came up with terms like ‘sound object’ (objet sonore) in referring to pieces of recorded sound on tape. In assembling those pieces together, you build or compose what can be considered ‘concrete music’ (Musique Concrète). The understanding here is that although sound is immaterial, the process of composing usually has a parallel in the material world.

1.2. Could it be that the question: what is sound art, came from the same origin as the question, what is photo- or video art? So are questions like, when does music become sound art, not a specific to sound art (also like when does film become video art), but is common to all media based arts, or is it actually related to all media based art definitions?

Yes, these questions elaborate on some of the paradoxes addressed above, where much of the “new” forms of artistic expression emerged with the introduction of new technologies. The pattern is fairly clear with photography and video and now sound to some degree, but not as clearly because experimentation with sound goes back very far. This culminated in the 1990's with the idea of “media art” which converged all existing electronic media and relations to technology with the new emerging digital tools and communications networks (i.e. faster PCs and the Internet). Through every phase of a technological shift an ensuing debate emerges as to define the fields in which artists use the new tools now at their disposal. Sadly the labels have often come down to formats rather than processes, ideas and relations to the wider social-political context, but this is slowly changing. (I hope) now that the tools and formats of the media based arts are converging into fewer and fewer devices, the issue of format is less relevant. Isn't all art connected to some form of media? Every 12 year old kid nowadays can take photos, record sound and video and publish it for the world to see. Does that make them “media artists”, well yes and no... and from here you can go back to the age old question of ‘what is art?’. My hope and interest though is that we can finally move beyond the definitions of practices based on formats and start broadening our understanding of art beyond objects and age old institutions that control them. A subject for another interview perhaps, but there are more pressing questions for me are related to sound and art...

2. Installing or presenting works of Sound Art

Installing is one of the central problems one encounters when looking at the issues surrounding sound art (but video as well). Because of the way sound behaves (in the space). I have noticed two kinds of reactions from commentaries:

first: Technical problems a special sound art gallery would face – the space needs special isolation and so on.

Second: the artists are often accused of working with their headphones on, not thinking about the space, which makes me think why not just “exhibit with headphones”?

Actually a lot of sound artists are working mostly with headphones on and don't consider the space enough in which they present. They and their audience need to take the headphones off once in a while. With that said though, if a work is produced with headphones then why not exhibit it with headphones? To continue with what I was saying before this is also related to the format issue and trying to move beyond it. As you rightfully noted, sound is inherently linked to the space in which we perceive it. Headphones are a relatively controlled space which is why they work, but open acoustic spaces are often difficult if not impossible spaces to control sound. So what does that mean? Well to make another comparison to the visual arts where we have an evolved culture of galleries and museums with special lighting, dimensions and colors to enhance the viewing experience. There are not many parallels with sound “galleries” per se. The intelligent response has either been to dramatically change the overall character of the space to suit the needs of sound based art (shape, materials, light etc...) or design the work to fit the space. In many cases this is not addressed because sound can often demand more attention then purely visual art in the way its presented.

KUMU did fairly well, in their large “Out of Sync. Looking Back at the History of Sound Art” exhibition, where they made a significant effort to place walls between works and cover the surfaces with acoustically absorbing materials. They also made the sharp decision to ask visitors to take off their shoes, effectively forcing people to think about how they perceive and exhibition, which is a first for a sound based exhibition as far as I know. These are also precisely the kinds of issues that are being addressed in a complex event like Tuned City (held in Tallinn in 2011 and directed by Carsten Stabenow). Tuned City aims to address the relations between sound and architecture by expanding the formats and ways sound based artwork is developed and presented. While helping to organize the festival, I clearly saw how each work connected to the event is site-specific in nature, meaning that space, location, timing, social conditions etc are all addressed early on along with concept. Every venue

and programming decision is connected to the work that is presented whether it is a concert, sculpture, workshop, installation etc. It is one of the few events where I felt sound was being taken as a medium on its own terms. Things are changing however and with Tuned City as a model other sound oriented events and festivals are beginning to understand the need for diversified approaches as well.

3. Public Reception

common quote... "I don't know anything about music / I don't know anything about sound art."

I see here a conflict which I have not solved. On one hand the term sound art and the interest in it, refers to a need to define or name a set of artistic practices. On the other hand the "I don't know anything about..." reaction is a bit strange because a lot of sound art is installation based, so the rejection seems to be very much name based.

The reception of sound art is a great deal in the hands of the artists themselves and it does influence the reception to a great deal, making it exclusive in the already exclusive framework of contemporary art... I just try to understand "how come"? And which are the benefits and drawbacks.

Anyone making the statement "I don't know anything about..." related to sound might just as well say, "I don't really want to think about what I'm listening to"... which can be for a good reason. Listening takes a special effort, possibly more effort than looking at something. It uses a different, and from my experiences, not often exercised enough form of perception. This isn't just about the public either, these kind of reactions can be seen in curators, seasoned art goers and even sound artists themselves. This can be laziness or because giving your attention to a sound based work is probably something new for many people. On the positive side, artists are responding, probably because they have to if they want to gain any sort of audience at all. Anyone with experience at giving "experimental music" concerts is familiar with endless struggle to attract audiences, particularly audiences that are not the rare few male fans who happen to collect your CDs (nothing against the traditional supporters personally, they just don't often make up a significant audience).

Much of my emphasis in recent years on giving workshops that focus on the process of listening, experimenting, and exploring sound in a collaborative social manner has directly to do with the relative alienation I've experienced in working in the areas labelled "experimental, industrial, electronic" music. There are many reasons for this which can be saved for another interview, but the important point was that I saw how the presentation formats of the resulting artworks (usually concerts in "clubs") were very much a contributing factor in alienating audiences from the artists and even the artwork itself. Again we're back to my frustration with the format question... but over the years I felt more and more the need to shift the public attention away from formats and more toward the process of working with sound itself. Nothing in my experiences through giving workshops has shown that there is any resistance toward sound and "sound art" based on gender, age, ethnicity, class, education etc... its all more or less culturally ingrained. Given the right motives and context, everyone benefits from deeper more attentive listening, whether the source of sound is a person, instrument, animal, environment, art object and so on. Will the effort to attract and maintain audiences for sound based works demand more from artists, curators, institution etc.. indeed.

[John Grzinich](#) has worked since the early 1990s as an artist and cultural coordinator with various practices combining sound, image, site, and collaborative social structures. His interest and work with sound combines such divergent methods as field recording, kinetic sculpture, electro-acoustic composition, performance, spatial perception and acoustics, filmmaking, group workshops and exercises in listening. His compositions have been published on international labels such as: SIRR, Staalplaat, Erewhon, Intransitive, Cut, Elevator Bath, CMR, Orogenetics, Mystery Sea, Invisible Birds and others. 2012 saw the DVD release of "Two Films" on and/OAR. He lives in Estonia and works as a program coordinator for MoKS, a non-profit artist-run project and residency space.

1. www.kumu.ee/en/visit/calendar?view=event&id=1170 ↑
2. <http://maaheli.ee/main/archives/59> ↑

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