From Control to the Non-Cochlear – Evolving Strategies of Sound Art Curation
By Jason van Eyk

Abstract
Over the last fifty years, Sound Art has found a growing prominence among artists, interest among curators and importance in the contemporary art world. Despite this situation, the category continues to sit uncomfortably within the space of Western art galleries and museums. Ongoing attempts to remediate official art histories, the visual logic of exhibition spaces and institutional practices toward Sound Art on the whole have been lacking. Therefore, the need for a productive method of Sound Art curation remains. This paper makes a first attempt toward describing such a method. It approaches the topic through a critical examination of selected Sound Art survey exhibitions and group shows staged within Western arts institutions over the last twenty years. The resulting analysis gives definition to the territory within which curatorial strategies can claim potentially productive practices, thereby arriving at a set of notes to the curator toward a gallerisation of Sound Art.

Keywords
Contemporary art, Curation, Conceptualism, Galleries, Materiality, Museums, Sound.

Convergences and Contradictions in the Exhibition of Sound Art: An Introduction

> "*Today more than ever, sound participates in the writing of a contemporaneity that produces new signs and relinquishes the predominance of vision*" (Lavinge, 2016, p. 9).

Over the last fifty years, an increasing number of sound-based works have filtered up through artist-run spaces and site-specific locations to occupy a greater share of the collections and exhibition schedules of Western art galleries and museums. This development has come about through the concurrence of social, political, conceptual and technological advances that have enabled the emergence of a "sonic turn," asserting sound's significance as a site for analysis, a model for theorization, and a medium for artistic engagement (Drobnick, 2004, p. 10).

The path to the point where sound can be conceived as a legitimate artistic **gesture is** further marked by a well-documented and far-spanning breadth of hybrid experimentations incorporating sound into art and art into sound. It is a path that in many ways follows the 20th Century progression towards a more fulsome *Gesamtkunstwerk*, simultaneously shifting the place of presentation for such all-arts alliances from the concert stage to the white cube. Despite past attempts of art historians to keep sound and vision as separate territories (i.e. in the concert hall and in the gallery), the fact is that the substantial history of intermediality and multidisciplinarity brings these two materials together: [1]

"One could easily argue that sound art, as a discrete practice, is merely the remainder created by music closing off its borders to the extramusical...Sound art is art that posits meaning or value in registers not accounted for by musical systems. Unlike sculpture, and to a lesser extent, cinema, music failed to recognize itself in its expanded situation. Instead, it judged the territory adopted by expansion as alien and excluded it…The term "sound art" suggests the route of escape from music, the path of least resistance available to this errant practice. The gallery-art world, having already learned the tricks of expansion and the assimilation of once-excluded modes, proved a more hospitable homeland for the sound practice of the late-1980s, the 1990s, and the 2000s." (Kim-Cohen, 2010, p. 3)

An art world in which sound exists as a discrete artistic material, medium and form of expression undoubtedly offers exhilarating new potentials for artists. But it also presents an equally perplexing set of challenges for gallery-based curators. This is the case simply because the demands of an expanded contemporary curatorial practice that can adequately account for Sound Art often press up against the vestiges of official histories and their expression within institutional traditions. For example, if a gallery's primary objective remains to help arrange, partition and fix art objects in space in ways that optimize their visibility and contemplation with minimum interference, then art-world structures remain unready for sound. Sound does not submit to the gallery's rectilinear logic nor to its sealing, aesthetic glaze. Rather, sound has the habit of spreading, leaking and bending around corners (Connor, 2011, p. 129). Fundamentally, it is in sound's nature to be free, diffractive and uncontrollable, to go places where it's not supposed to go.

As a result, Sound Art does not wait for the curator to catch up. As artists' experiments continue to dismantle the audio-visual litany that has maintained a privileged divide between the sonic and the visual, they invite Sound Art to resonate beyond expected borders into a myriad of new futures. [2]
This then begs the question: How do we address Sound Art and its curatorial complexities within the expanded field of contemporary art practices and within gallery spaces? How do we welcome the category to exist equitably and with integrity, whether on its own or alongside other media, and in manners that successfully meets its public? With this paper, I make a preliminary approach toward some possible answers to this question.

As is often the case, the future is accessed through the past. I will give a fair bit of space to the critical examination of a selection of important group shows of Sound Art staged within Western arts institutions over the last twenty years. I've selected these exhibitions – curated by Germano Celant, Jesper Jorgensen and Christine van Assche, as well as by artist-curators Christian Marclay, Christof Migone and David Toop – for the methods in which they operate at different levels of scale of scope, intent and organization; but even more so for the way in which they altogether demonstrate an ongoing shift in curatorial strategies in response to exhibiting Sound Art within the ubiquitous white cube of the contemporary art museum. My hope is that this analysis gives some definition to the territory within which such strategies might claim potentially productive practices. With them, I pursue an answer to the questions above as well as to 'How far have we come in creating a hospitable homeland for sound practice?' This work arrives at a set of notes to the curator for the possible gallerisation of Sound Art.

But we need to push this thinking further to address recent theory and remaining discrepancies in curatorial thinking about sound. I extend the conversation by examining a personal curatorial project that points to emerging practices that counterpoint a perpetuation of institutional traditions within recent Sound Art survey shows.

Case Studies: Methods of Exhibiting Sound as Art

The 1970s witnessed the presentation of twenty-one sound exhibitions in museums worldwide. By the 1980s this number had grown to sixty-two (Cluett, 2013, pp. 122-128)**.** The sonic turn of the mid-90s fueled this growth pattern further such that, by the turn of the millennium, Sound Art group exhibitions began to appear in major art institutions under the curation of leading practitioners in the field. Lending such space, talent and resources to the category, and in such a focused manner, has invited the possibility of developing more substantial curatorial thinking concerning Sound Art. The results of these exhibition experiments point us toward two predominant strategies.

Containment / Control

Registered attempts at staging Sound Art exhibitions in the early 2000s demonstrate a curatorial preoccupation with contextualising the presentation of sound-based works as much as with how to address the material and spatial conditions of sound itself. [3] Sound is unlike other artistic materials. It has the additional ability to be simultaneously detailed and diffuse, penetrating and permeating, immersive yet focused. As such, sound has the capacity to envelop and form space in manners that not only give a sense of its outlines, contours and surfaces, but also can define its qualities and relations. Furthermore, we know that the human ear is always open. As a result, one cannot listen away from sound in the same way one can look away from a painting. Therefore, whatever audience is present in the gallery to perceive Sound Art has no choice but to be receptive and engaged with it. For these very reasons, when sound is invited into the sealed-off and static space of the gallery, it offers thrilling possibilities that, if not properly handled, can be equally calamitous from a curatorial perspective (Connor, 2011, pp. 129-134).

These concerns were present when David Toop assembled *Sonic Boom* (2000), one of the first-ever surveys of Sound Art in Britain. Billing himself as the exhibition's ´Selector´, Toop's primary objective was to feature artists who had made a commitment to working with sound to articulate physical space. [4] When asked how the works by the selected twenty-three artists would mix successfully within the Hayward Gallery, Toop answered:

> "I chose artists and musicians who I imagined and hoped would be flexible and compatible…I decided not to select artists who I thought would suffer badly if their work was infiltrated and swamped by external sounds, or who might insist on imposing oppressive sound levels on everybody else." (Toop, 2000, p. 15)

The represented artists were no doubt pleased to be included in such a groundbreaking show but also wary of the potential for sonic interference generated by the proposed exhibition sequencing. In fact, critical reviews were quite open about the resulting cacophony of Toop's display (Martin, 2000, p. 1), as were the recorded accounts of participating artists protesting their 'noisy neighbours' in the Gallery (Connor, 2011, p. 131). Nonetheless, Toop defended his approach:

"Firstly, it wasn't a problem, and secondly, I didn't want to keep them separate …the character of music in the present time is that it all overlaps. We are saturated by sound now. We walk around and we move through constantly changing soundscapes, different types of music, different genres of music overlap all the time…you are almost walking through an environment where one sound overlaps and then you walk away from that sound and it fades and you walk into a new sound. So the gallery is the total, immersed experience and hopefully that transforms the gallery from what we think of as being a rather sterile space for showing art to something which is more alive and human." (Toop as cited in Martin, 2000, p. 1)

This statement certainly rings true with those reasons for why sound has been brought into art and the art world. Yet, I can't help but feel that it also smacks of justification instead of curatorial intent. Even in the most radical of displays, the curator bears responsibility for establishing links, correspondences and dialogues between works in a manner that respects the integrity of each artist's contribution while simultaneously enhancing the audience experience of each individual work and the exhibition as a whole. Despite 20th Century art movements like Dada and Fluxus that establish precedents for melding art, music and everyday life inside the gallery, an exhibition like *Sonic Boom* offered a unique opportunity to present a wholly different perspective and perception of the art of sound; one vastly different than the cacophony its audience no doubt experience everyday within London's urban soundscape.

I doubt that Max Eastley's *Architecture (2000)* sounds sculptures, their fine wires designed to produce delicate and ethereal sounds, succeeded within Toop's strategy. But Eastley was not alone. As a result, Toop was forced to resort to a standard response to exhibiting Sound Art: works were placed outside of gallery walls (Christina Kubisch's *Oasis* (2000) in particular) while others were partitioned by extra walls and yet others were placed within their own sound-insulated rooms (Connor, 2011, p. 131). Exhibition designer Ian Ritchie's floor plans show exactly how heavily divided the exhibition space had become as a result (Ritchie, 2000, p. 1).

Sonic Boom (2000)
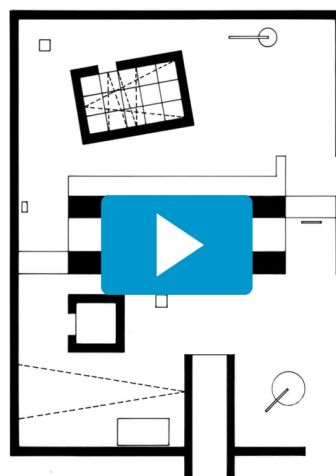
R. Murray Schafer reminds us that such practices exist beyond gallery politics into the history of music performance. Music has long been housed within special architectural

containers intended to enhance its 'proper presentation.' Such efforts simultaneously lead such art form's evolution towards more refined expressions but also away from everyday experience (Schafer, 1992, p. 35). This impulse to spatially contain and control sound remains difficult to escape.

But I truly think the root curatorial issue with *Sonic Boom* is not with these display remediations, but rather with Toop's curatorial concept in itself. It is too firmly rooted in his particular views of sound as an extension of music and not nearly close enough to the intermediality of Sound Art itself. Reading his catalogue essay reveals a problematically pervasive situation of the category within Western classical music traditions, sustaining a terminological divide between the two sides of sound and art. This position is further complicated by what I consider a misreading of soundscape theory by which Toop characterizes the last century of music as a "feeling of immersion…a field, a landscape, an environment…an ocean" (Toop, 2000, p. 113). He describes *Sonic Boom* in these same terms, offering "a landscape of the imagination…a total environment for all of the senses." (Toop, 2000, p. 121). But his landscape is one envisioned as some sort of emulsified liquid state in which works "linked at a profound level of sonic disturbance" are blended and suspended into a lo-fi acoustic field that inevitably lacks the soundmarkers and hi-fi elements of a rich soundscape composition. As a consequence, *Sonic Boom* as an exhibition experiment runs counter to both avant-garde musical theory and common curatorial sense. It fails at the conceptual level, and to such a degree, that containment remains as the only available mode of redress.

Curator Christine van Assche positioned her 2002 exhibition *Sonic Process* as a further attempt in the direction of successfully exhibiting sound work – in this particular case, exploring the electronic music explosion of the 1990s and its intersections with the visual arts. As she rightfully and astutely recognised, the exhibition of sound works runs against the grain of standard museology and therefore requires additional thought towards acoustic parameters. Her particular response was twofold: first, to adopt a different architectural model (the sound studio) to produce optimal listening conditions; and second, to use a set of sound data banks accessible through headphones to broaden the range of available sound works. Ultimately, each invited artist was provided with their own 'sound studio' in which to present their work. Within these spaces, van Assche encouraged the artists to embrace the performative and mutable character of sound that renders the work "at the risk of…losing its limits" (van Assche, 2033, p. 12). However, such sonic liberation could only take place within the confines of the assigned space. In her exhibition essay, she readily admitted that the overall presentation concept reduced the placement of work and circulation among them to purely functional parameters: "Under such circumstances, it was not conceivable to imagine a conceptual trajectory the way curators are accustomed to doing" (van Assche, 2003, p. 11).

In my opinion, *Sonic Process* presents an opposite problem to *Sonic Boom* in addressing the sonic in art. All of these headphones, data banks and listening-privileged ´sound studios´ ironically disempowered Sound Art to deliver the mixing and intermingling's that are part of its very potential; a potential that Brandon Labelle helps us recognize for its capacity to generate a coherent sense of community:

> "Sound supports meaningful exchanges by locating us within a greater social and energetic weave. From my perspective, sound operates as an *emergent community* by linking together bodies that do not necessarily search for each other and bringing them into proximity for a moment, or longer. This dynamic

establishes a spatiality that coheres temporarily, as a space to dwell, while also being immediately divergent and diffuse." (Labelle, 2017, p. 2)

Held fast in their pods, no community could emerge in van Assche's exhibition. But if we can push Labelle's thought further, I would say that sound interweaves not only across bodies but across aesthetics, ideas and politics as well. From this perspective, a more fundamental criticism was leveled against *Sonic Process* by one of its own artists. In the foreword to a reprinted version of his catalogue essay, Mike Kelley noted that the exhibition leveraged the rhetoric of appropriation, fracturing and collage derived from avant-garde sources to lend legitimacy to exhibiting popular forms of electronic music. Yet, the constrained and commercial nature within which most of this music is produced is wrongly linked to the radical intentions of modernist innovators:

> "The art institution's recent embrace of such popular forms of music, which are diluted versions of more complex and radical sources, is, I believe, a tactic designed not to re-evoke historical precedents but to neuter them, to depoliticize them by presenting them as harmless fun…" (Kelley, 2003, p. 23)

Taken altogether, these analyses render van Assche's exhibition as a diluted attempt at perpetuating neo-modernist movements that pay little attention to sound's inherent entanglements. Consequently, the end result of this curatorial experiment remains in many ways as flawed and unresolved as *Sonic Boom*.

One example from this same period can be credited with an advanced appreciation for Sound Art: Jesper Jorgensen's *Frequencies [HZ]* (2002) for Frankfurt's Schirn Kunsthalle threw out the idea of producing the typical survey show to focus on a selection of artists whose work explored the interrelations between art, sound, space, technology and society in ways that expressed the permeability between these boundaries (Jorgensen, 2002, p. 13). His catalogue essay articulates a refreshingly reflexive and self-aware curatorial thinking not witnessed elsewhere and I think that the results bear out well in the exhibition itself.

While Jorgensen recognizes that bringing together a group of artists who work in one medium runs the risk of being perceived as an 'old-school' format (much like a painting exhibition can be bound by its formal focus), he is explicit in his intention for *Frequencies [HZ]* to suspend its audiences' experience somewhere between the formal, the scientific, the architectural and the social-relational (Jorgensen, 2002, p. 85). Jorgensen is also keenly aware of the intermedial and intertextual frameworks of sound art practice and how these relate to the manipulation of the temporal and spatial economies of audiovisual media designed to grasp an audience's attention and subvert their perceptions (Jorgensen, 2002, p. 78). As he astutely summarizes:

> "Sounds has the ability to diffuse as well as to inform; it is limited by physical obstacles at the same time as it can dissolve architectural limitations. It deals with time, duration and distance via its constant presence and its construction. It is political, both as a means of communicating information and of interfering in the flow of communication. The artists all relate to…the use of sound in creating or intervening in architectural environments and society." (Jorgensen, 2002, p. 85)

What was equally refreshing with *Frequencies [HZ]* was its Meander model of exhibition design – a sequenced series of variably-sized and acoustically prepared

exhibition halls "conceived to accommodate various sound objects such that they retain their autonomy but together form a continuous space" (Diederichsen, 2002, p. 181). In asking the fundamental question "can audio objects be put on view?" the *Frequencies [HZ]* design team directly contended with the constant conflicts found between the autonomy of sound works and the heteronomy of their exhibition within museum space. It did so by honestly pointing out those blind spots that limit the equal privileging of sound and vision. The solution in this case was to embrace the blind spot directly within the Meander prototype to develop an innovative "cube hypothesis" where each gallery operated somewhere between a non-white-cube and a non-black-box (Diederichsen, 2002, p. 187). Fundamentally, the Meander was the solution *Sonic Process* should have delivered, an assembly of customized sonic cubes equipped as both sound studios and display spaces to accommodate the unique conditions of each exhibited art work while retaining a clear conceptual trajectory.

By inviting audiences to perceive Sound Art in these new ways, *Frequencies [HZ]* offered an exhibition experience that was noted as being less prescriptive and predictable (Kraut, 2012, p. 372). Austrian artist Franz Pomasll fashioned one stage of the Meander as a completely darkened space navigable solely by low-frequency emissions from an array of loudspeakers, while Ryoji Ikeda's 30-metre long corridor heightened the anxiety of its narrow confines with high sine tone diffusion and intermittent strobe light flashes that lit the way (Fricke, 2002, p. 1). Many of the other works exhibited in *Frequencies [HZ]* extended this interactive dialogue between sound, architectural surroundings and social experience in ways that, even if only conceptually, overturned the control relationship between sonic practice and institutional space. Carl Michael von Hausswolff transformed the building's electrical grid into something audible with his *Parasitic Electronic Seance* (1997-2002), while Grönlund and Nilsen's parabolic mirrors (*Ultrasonic,* 1996-2002) oscillated across emitted frequencies dependent upon localized readings of environmental radiation.

Unfortunately, where *Frequencies [HZ]* failed was in grasping the imagination of the audience toward sound serving as an art form in itself. Critics suggested that the exhibition amounted to little more than a series of scientific experiments with the feel of a physics laboratory (Fricke, 2002, p. 2). Often the complexities of the artworks lacked enough visual interpretation to hold interest, veering toward little more than illustration (Heiser, 2002: p. 2). In retrospect, I would argue that we can interpret such criticism as being based in an inherent bias toward the visual, which is far from unusual. As one critic noted, the coloured light boxes of Angela Bulloch's *Geometric Audio Merge* (2002) "felt like a welcome figurative intrusion into the arctic sparseness of the abstract soundscapes" (Fricke, 2002, p. 2). The exhibition's audiences, entrenched in long-formed habits of experiencing strictly visual art exhibitions, were clearly not yet ready to receive what was a well-considered and coherent curatorial experiment that truly understood and treated sound as art.

Correspondence / Co-Existence

Sound Art exhibitions of the last five to seven years have moved beyond these reliances on audiovisual and spatial divides. Since the mid-2000s, we have begun to receive shows that have involved a much more critically-minded approach to curation, opening onto new territory. They have embraced the unique power of Sound Art to turn the gallery inside out, exposing it to its other(s). In fact, it is in embracing the opposition of the white cube to sound that its architectural, spatial and socio-cultural tropes can be simultaneously engaged as an excellent conceptual frame for Sound Art (Connor, 2011,

p. 137). And it is within this situation that the capacity to both critically and reflexively advance discourse beyond other forms of art is amplified. Consequently, curators have been embracing the productive contradictions within the gallerisation of Sound Art to create new strategies and approaches to their work.

Christian Marclay's *Ensemble* (2007) exhibition for the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art remains one of the best early examples I can find of this new approach to Sound Art curation. As he asserts in his exhibition essay, the desire for curators to isolate, contain or control demonstrates a lack of understanding of sound itself. Instead of explaining away disruptive acoustic overlays, sounds should be enhanced in exhibition through links, correspondences and associative play in the same manner that any other series of artworks would be treated.

In approaching his exhibition with the ears of a composer, rather than solely with the eyes of a curator, Marclay assembled twenty-seven mechanical, kinetic, interactive yet always acoustic works with a considered sense of how they might mix and play together, much like a musical ensemble might. In so doing, he also embraced the existing room tone of the ICA's open gallery space as a display condition. Within such a spatial situation, Marclay's ensemble – ranging the subtlest of sounds (Céleste Boursier-Mougenot's meditative *Climamen* (2013)) to the most aggressive (the shrieking sirens of Yoshi Wada's *The Alarming Trash Can* (1990)) – ebbed and flowed organically over time to generate a wide range of new sonic events resonating across a shifting aural landscape.

Ensemble (2007)
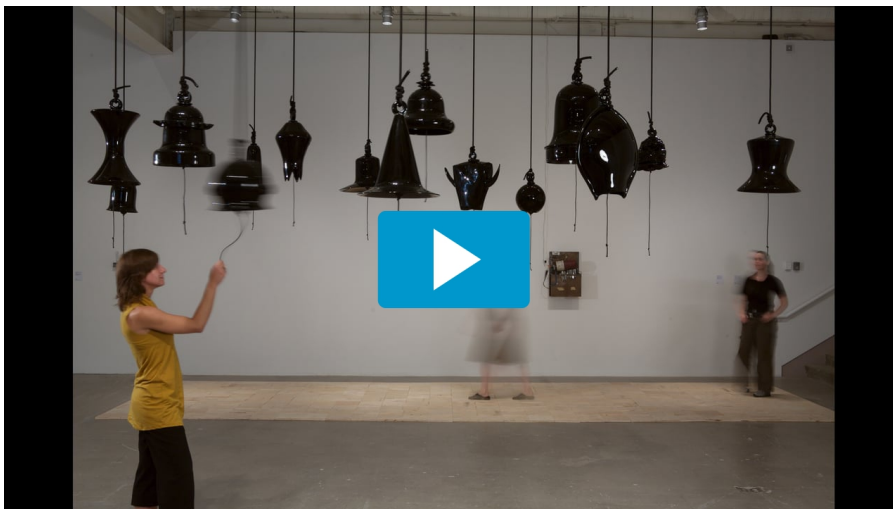
Marclay extended the notion of 'ensemble' further by inviting musicians and other sounds artists (Marina Rosenfeld, Alan Licht and Alison Knowles, among others) to activate the exhibition through the creation of their own soundscapes, whether these took advantage of the assembled sound sculptures or not. More importantly, the audience was invited to interact with the exhibition from a variety of positions – as listeners, composers, performers or deejays – depending on what level they cared to participate. In this manner, the curatorial concept and strategies behind *Ensemble* created a sonic commoning, mixing and intermingling sound experiences within a space of fluid co-existence; where notions of authority and autonomy were cast aside to encourage various roles and voices to merge and emerge, resound and dissipate over an extended time frame. Within *Ensemble*, the ontological notions of sound as becoming

were free to resonate on many registers, echoing Labelle's emergent community in an environment where it could be put fully into force (Labelle, 2017, p. 2).

By contrast, curator, theorist and sound artist Christof Migone offers a much more vexing sense of creative association. The twenty-four works he assembled for *Volume: Hear Here* (2013) formed what at first seemed like a confounding collection that he could barely contain within the Blackwood and Justina M. Barnicke galleries of the University of Toronto.

By example: John Oswald's asynchonrous *Whisperfields* (2004) soundtrack was diffused without its video. Alexis O'Hara's *SQUEEEQUEE! The Improbable Igloo* (2009) speaker fort-igloo was equal parts cozy space for communal sound-making and ear-threatening feedback trap. Dave Dyment's *Untitled (Headset)* (2007) offered earphones that would only perform when unworn; his nearly imperceptible ultrasonic tone-cluster sculpture *Nothing (for Robert Barry)* (2007) was as unnervingly inaudible as it was almost innocuous. Ian Skedd's video piece displayed a choir signing what they should have been singing. Neil Klassen's tar-encased trumpet was rendered forever unplayable. Ryan Park's silenced copy of John Cage's *Silence* rubbed out the whole book in a buffed graphite; Chiyoko Szlavnics' moiré line drawings emerged from a series that might possibly become musical compositions but were defiantly not scores in themselves; and John Wynne's box of old hearing aids played bewildering feedback in accompaniment to an intimately projected photo of the Atlantic Ocean. And this was just half of what Migone had put on display.

SQUEEEQUEE! The Improbable Igloo (2009)
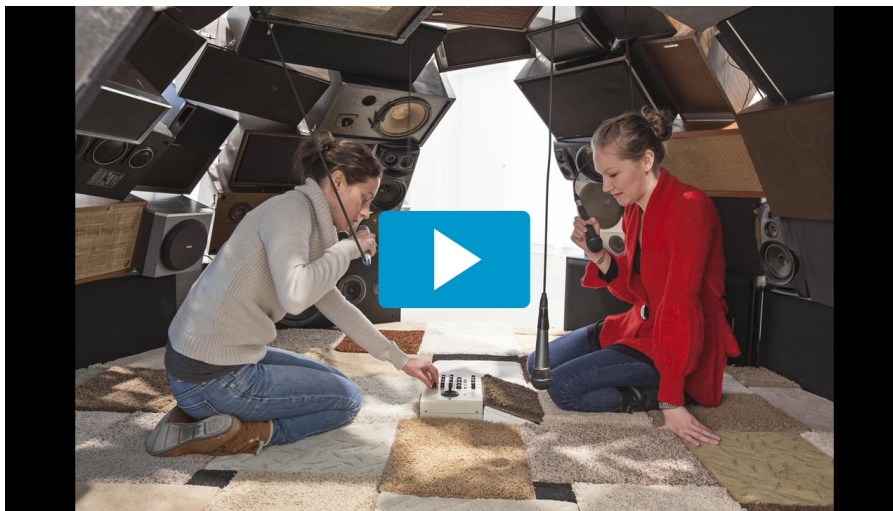
What was the audience to take away from all this slippery sonic stuff? In searching for clues, I had to return to the exhibition title, which Migone had very carefully crafted. His essay "Volume (of Confinement and Infinity): A History of Unsound Art" gives us an initial sense of what is conceptually at play here:

> "Volume: a measure of a space, and volume: amplitude of sound. Consider volume as the variability of that space in sound. Consider volume as something within but wholly separate. Consider volume as the invisible and unmarked presence of sound. Consider volume as the intertwine of the spatial and the sonic. Now, consider sound as lost in space, more intent to illimit than delimit. The volume of sound art is immeasurable, deafening. It can overwhelm with

silence just as well as it can blast with noise. By playing with the volume dial here we shall consider the *place* of sound art…Even prior to an intentional sound entering the equation, every space has its own soundtrack, its room tone. Every space is sonorous, every space has a breath… we shall weigh the propensity for sound to displace, multiply, heterogenize the topos, place, site. We shall also pay attention to volume of the unheard, the volume that activates the synaptic, the insidious volume of grey matter, the realm of the unsound." (Migone, 2003, p. 81)

If this multivalent view of volume problematises the gallerisation of Sound Art, then the arising questions of 'here' (the essential presence or absence of the listener in the space where Sound Art is sounding or not) and of 'hear' (the nature of reception and presentness of the listener in the space where Sound Art is) only further complicate the relationship. That is to say, if the very nature of Sound Art exhibitions is already problematic, then why shouldn't the work itself challenge these same notions in its very intent and content? At least, this is what I sense Migone might be asking us to consider. Although, like sound itself, the fixity of his curatorial concept slides along slick lines between silence, sounding and sonic interruption – indirect, unframed, oblique paths to meaning. His curatorial volume is set at destabilizing levels that create resonances of some pluralized truth that takes shape and reverberates as quickly as it diffracts, escapes and dissipates.

Germano Celant's approach to bringing sound into the gallery shares affinities with both Marclay and Migone, but extends it to his characteristically encyclopedic scale. His *Art or Sound* (2014) for the Prada Foundation mirrored the aforementioned ideas of range, interaction and interplay, pursuing them further in search of an overall release from the gallery's sensory repression toward a more democratic experience. He achieved this goal through an augmented exhibition practice that engaged many artworks geared toward generating a greater whole-body, multi-sensory audience involvement, all positioned alongside a dizzying array objects that explored the gamut of representations, perceptions, intersections and inversions that can and have been expressed between art and sound over the last five hundred years.

Taking the musical instrument as a touchstone – exploring how it exists as both a sculptural entity and a sounding body – *Art or Sound* proceeded to unfold chronologically throughout the two main floors of the Ca' Corner della Regina in Venice, but not without extensive cross-referencing of human creative preoccupations that have spanned across centuries. Nearly any and every form of audiovisual creation was on offer: musical instruments both old and new, scores, automata, synthaesthetic experiments, painting, sculpture, kinetic artworks, interactive pieces, digital tools and computer-based works all found their home here. As Celant explained in his exhibition essay, this strategy of stimulating a broad sensory presentation invited a new schematic for both the display and contemplation of art: one where the fullest range of aurality could be experienced, much of it as it was intended by their creators to be encountered. Such intent included access to numerous artworks that are expected to be 'played' by the public, such as Laurie Anderson's body-sound conductive *Handphone Table* (1978), Doug Aitken's marimba-like *Marble Sonic Table* (2011) or Bernard Leitner's *Ton-liege* (1975) sound chair. Excuses of economic value or material fragility were ignored to make such works available as part of cultivating a deeper sonic understanding.

Art or Sound (2014)
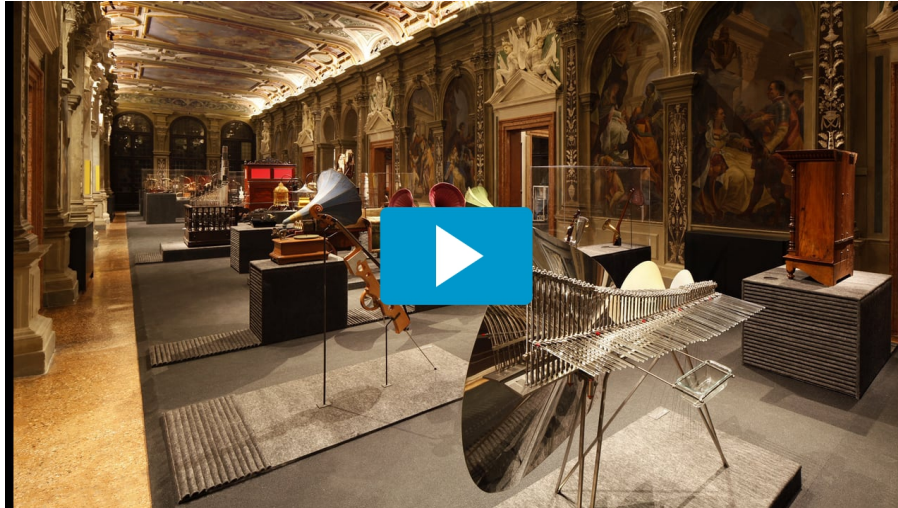
As Celant conceived it, this overarching sonic experience encouraged a more dynamic and complex relationship to art, specifically designed to further intensify the audience's relationship to their own bodies and the things that surround them. For this brief moment in the history of exhibitions, Celant empowered art to do what I believe it is fundamentally intended to do: to create new awareness of the self, of the other, and of our sense of reality. In privileging sound as the vehicle through which to experience oneself anew, Celant helped broaden our relationship with the world and the things and people who inhabit it, including ourselves (Celant, 2014, pp. 18-20). He situated us within a "particularly vital form of multiplicity" where we can encounter "more than meets the eye, and often in tandem with the unidentifiable, the invisible, the overlooked, the coming and going of events, of frictions" (Labelle, 2017, p. 2).

Notes to the Curator – Successful Strategies for Sound Art Curation

The foregoing historical, conditional, experimental and experiential explorations offer a set of notes for contemporary art curators like me, from which we may extract and scaffold productive methods for the conception and execution of Sound Art exhibitions. Chief among these notes would be the one that foregrounds the complex relationship between sound and space. It appears in the case of gallery-based Sound Art exhibitions that too often space is treated as a poorly considered given; a condition within which the already-conceived exhibition and its selected works must be contained, controlled or possibly even expelled. Rather, it seems clear that space must be treated as a primary precondition of the exhibition's concept. Here, I call on Marclay's assertion that Sound Art requires different architectures and technologies for its presentation. I also recall Migone's caveat that every space is already sonorous even before sound enters it. The case studies above highlight attempts at creating more productive conditions, whether they be to accept sound for the real, messy and immersive material it is (Toop) or to privilege pristine listening conditions (van Assche). Nonetheless, such strategies have revealed their respective receptive and museological challenges, where their failures were rooted in the very conceptual framework from which the exhibition was born. Rather, it is those exhibitions that start from the place of understanding the relationship between sound and space that appear to be more successful – Marclay's *Ensemble* as a case in point, but just as much so Jorgensen's *Frequencies [HZ]* and its Meander

exhibition design – with the caveat that considering such relations as the core element of the curatorial concept can render the exhibition disconnected from its intended public. Other recent attempts to create customised conditions that privilege sound over vision, such as Jin Wang's *Big Can* are laudable (Wang, 2016, p. 63). Nonetheless, I find them troubled in the sense that they only further hinder the curator's control of conceptual trajectories and risk re-ghettoizing Sound Art into a state of precarity. To create a bigger black box exclusive to sound simply creates space for a larger blind spot than the one to which Diedrichsen has already drawn our attention. Rather, we should listen to the advice of sound designer Colin Griffiths, who has worked with high profile artists such as Rodney Graham and Stan Douglas to install their sound-based projects. He advises curators to use an ear keenly attuned to space; to consider the conditions that will create a coherent intelligibility for sound to live in the gallery; to remain mindful of how the audience will first encounter an artwork (how their attention will be drawn to it and then transitioned away); and, above all, to be open to experimentation (Griffiths, 2003, pp. 107-112). The Meander model is a good example of this approach. However, by introducing the audience's role as a triangulating point between sound and space, Griffith helps us expand curatorial strategy toward an inclusion of experiential attributes that positions the listener within an intelligible listening space that is *within* the artwork itself (Griffith, 2003, p. 113).

This leads us to the next note, which concerns the relationship of sound to sound. As curator Okui Enwezor reminds us, to create an exhibition is to make a thinking machine; one that produces a forum for processing and responding to the current state of things as much as to address the discourse of art's potential to renew our vision of reality (Enwezor, 2015). Given the diffuse, permeable, immersive and impermanent qualities of sound, any machine that seeks to actively engage and enable its productive and responsive powers is one that must embrace the inevitable sonic mixing that will result. Composition in contemporary practice has moved forward in this direction of mixing, which also extends back through a long lineage of avant-garde artistic and musical practices (Connor, 2011, p. 132). To effectively and successfully mix and relate sounds within the intermedial frame of Sound Art requires the curator to use the ear of a composer alongside the eye of an artist. But we must do so responsibly, with a mind to Griffith's call for approach, coherency and intelligibility. We want to set the volume dial at Jorgensen's levels, where sound can inform and communicate as much as it can diffuse and disturb. We also want the capacity to dial the volume up to amplify Migone's unheard *unsound*. Celant describes in succinct yet suitable complexity this relationship between the eye and the ear (each at their own interrelated volumes) and how it impacts the role the curator must play as a sound-mixer:

> "The creation of an equivalence between ear and eye, visible and invisible, limited and unlimited establishes an echo of reciprocity that, in many cases, produces connections between one room and another, between a nearby object and a distant one, even when the visitor is not standing directly in front of the exhibit. A significant effect of interaction that is defined today as 'interference,' but is in fact a multi-modal and multisensory manner of appreciating art, as well as its contingent surroundings" (Celant, 2014, p. 21)

The final note applies to the role of sound beyond itself. While much of the concern about curating Sound Art has lain – in fact continues to lie – with sound's material, spatial and temporal properties, and how these properties relate to the conception, display and trajectories of an exhibition, there are also the undeniable social, cultural, political and philosophical issues that sound embodies and that beg to be addressed.

From the Fluxus movement forward, artists have embraced sound for its ability to ignite open-ended and engaged relationships between audiences and art; for its capacity to stimulate new somatic sensations that intensify the awareness of self and to the surrounding world; and for its power to ignite new criticality within conceptualism. Sound has the unique property of being able to move between discourses such that it can open up onto new meanings…fundamentally to do the difficult, vigilant, active and informed work of art that the visual alone cannot (Kim-Cohen, 2016, p. 68). From this perspective, the curator must be prepared to move beyond the entrapments of the audiovisual litany and neo-modernist tendencies to engage sound and unsound in their fullest sense.

The Call for Non-Cochlear

That last curatorial note might seem out of place, where my discussion of Sound Art has been limited in regards to its social, political and cultural properties, including its capacity to do critical work. While examples have filtered through in certain ways, overall the case studies show a bias toward the materialist discourse of sound; one that has been used to illustrate and perpetuate a specific modernist theoretical trajectory of abstraction, perceptual effects, technological processes and self-referentiality (Drobnick, 2004, p. 10). It's what artist-theorist Seth Kim-Cohen helps expand with his definition of ambient conceptualism – a flow toward immersion and ineffability, those inexplicable oceans of sound we've experienced in art institutions for over twenty years now (Kim-Cohen, 2016, p. 12).

But if sound is so good at escaping boundaries, then why hasn't it slipped past such theoretical traps to take up its fuller potential within boundary-crossing criticality? The primary reason remains with Sound Art's enchainment to Western classical music history, as its avant-garde offshoot, rather than within its multidisciplinary reality. Kim-Cohen has proposed a correction with his 'non-cochlear sound art' [5] – an art that seeks to release sound from the confines of music by realigning it with visual art's Conceptual turn (a turn that music didn't take), thereby (re)connecting it to a broader set of human concerns (Kim-Cohen, 2009, p. xix).

At the level of the art work, it's possible to conceive of how sound and its extremes might occupy a non-cochlear space – or what Christof Migone has referred to as synapse-activating *unsound* – to voice a more reflexive and self-aware relation with the current state of things. Sound undoubtedly has the capacity to tread "between interpretative domains, as a murmur of meanings produced between unexpected shifts…" (Kim-Cohen, 2016, p. 68). Since coining the term in 2009, Kim-Cohen has sought to exemplify what exactly a non-cochlear artwork can be. He identified at least 160 such possibilities in 2010 through an open call to artists and went on to select nineteen of them for a 2011 exhibition at the Diapason Gallery in New York City. [6] The exhibition itself received a mixed reception: Christoph Cox's *Artforum* review called it noisy, overly text-based and bearing a tendency to make "grand claims on behalf of works that could neither support nor provoke them on their own" (Cox, 2011, p. 224).

This has caused me to question: What does it this mean to engage with the non-cochlear at the level of curation? From his own experience, Kim-Cohen advises that such a shift requires us to think more carefully about how works interact with the specifics of their situation, with the conventions of their presentation and with the world outside the white cube (Kim-Cohen, 2016, p. 70). Therefore, to think the exhibition as non-cochlear is to

start from a position that is acutely aware yet functioning beyond concern for the materialist conditions of sound-to-space or sound-to-sound to arrive at broadly yet rigorously contextualized zone in which sound *is* art and art *is* sound. It is to shift privilege away from any one sense, any one material, or any one medium to open both conceptual and content channels to resonate on many wavelengths, to amplify an experience of what is truly at stake. It is to engage with curation as an entangled, interactive and intertextual practice that gives voice to discovery and discourse, that renews reverberations of social, cultural and political realities and that satisfies a hunger for meaning through the power of Sound Art.

It was this experiment with non-cochlear curation that September Collective [7] set out to explore with its ambitious project *Symphony of Hunger: Digesting Fluxus in Four Movements* for A plus A Gallery in 2015, unaware that there was a name for the emerging practice. Rather, we were simply following our desire to work with sound as vital material within post-WWII artistic practice, for how it gives expression to some critical concerns of our times – hunger, consumption, accumulation and loss within the politics of bodily presence at a time of massive human migration – and to do so with a curatorial model that was informed by the precedents and consequences of the art works that we were exploring together. In the end, *Symphony of Hunger* connected sonics and somatics from Fluxus to today through themes of desire, taste, digestion, and waste, all orchestrated as an organic exploration of corporal, sociopolitical and aesthetic hungers. This was accomplished through a dialogic composition of twenty-one artworks from both established and emerging artists from across five decades. The bass of the composition was formed by nine historical works from renowned Fluxus artists (Joseph Beuys, Robert Filiou, George Maciunas, Claes Oldenburg, among others), all found in the Bonotto Foundation collection. These were harmonised with an international assemblage of twelve more contemporary works by Tizian Baldinger, Graham Dunning, Christof Migone, Mano Penalva, Davide Sgambaro, Christian Skjodt and others, all of who exhibited a fluid continuity with their Fluxus precursors.

In the manner of a symphony, the exhibition followed an experimental presentation model by unfolding over four days in a succession of curatorial movements. Following the physical process of digestion in the conjectural path of a musical score, each day unveiled a new grouping of works punctuated by a live performance. As the score of the show progressed, each movement built on the last to create a consonance of nuanced connections. This conceptual symphony reached its climax as the exhibition completed on the fourth day. Although the display of the show became fixed at that point, the works did not remain static. Rather, the exhibition was planned such that many of the pieces continuously shifted. By example, each performer was asked to leave an archival trace of their work in the space – sound artist Graham Dunning left four metabolized vinyl records behind for display, Tizian Baldinger built an artist's shelter from scavenged goods that included a broken television hissing white noise – thereby challenging us curators to respond in real time to incorporate these artifacts.

Beyond how the principled organization of sound influenced the curatorial model itself, sonics entered the exhibition in the shape of artworks. The most present of these was Christian Skjodt's *Vibrant Disturbance* (2015)*,* what we described as an inorganic organism whose (sonic) output was effected by the ingestion of light and shadow within the local environment. The darker the space became, the louder (and hungrier) the creature sounded; as each day progressed, the disturbances became more pervasive throughout the gallery space. This organism, comprised of many exposed suspended speakers, wires and sensors, was paired with Maciunas' *Stomach Anatomy Apron*

(1975). Much like *Vibrant Disturbance* wore its 'guts' on the outside, Maciunas' visualization of the human digestive track emphasized the metabolistic relationships at play.

Figure 1
Installation view of Christian Skjodt's Vibrant Disturbance (2015) by Jason van Eyk. Part of Symphony of Hunger: Digesting Fluxus in Four Movements (2015) at A plus A Gallery.

Figure 2
Installation view of Georg Maciunas' Stomach Anatomy Apron (1975) by Sandro Pignotti. Part of Symphony of Hunger: Digesting Fluxus in Four Movements (2015) at A plus A Gallery.

These types of non-cochlear interplays were emphasised throughout *Symphony of Hunger*. An inedible plastic pear from Oldenburg's *False Food* (1968) sat within arm's reach of Migone's video *The Release Into Motion, or how to leak inarticulacy out of your mouth* (2000), in which a mouth holds an ice-blocked tomato until one or the other falls off. Its sonic somatics – sucking, spitting, smacking, wheezing – amplified an uneasy relationship between 'processed' food and persistent hunger. Elsewhere, Walter Marchetti's *Poemetti Popolare Allegorico* (2002) orchestrated the digestive process in a very direct yet poetically playful manner. "Butt trumpet, health of the body. If I didn't have a butt I would surely die." Marchetti's assemblage of a trumpet, this written statement and a photo of a lady's buttocks delve into the role of bowel movements as a healthy but much maligned bodily process. Nearby whispers of Migone's *South Winds* (2006) sound piece confirmed that indeed the body is a noisy thing that uncontainedly emits and transmits. All these parts crossed paths with Baldinger's artist shelter, set in close relief to Beuys *Kunst = Kapital* (1980), whose words rang so loudly off their chalkboard. Just adjacent was Pil And Galia Kollectiv's sharp black & white video animation *Elvis Burger* (2001), which mashed the American icon through robotic machinery into an assembly of burgers, all in tune with abrasive dubstep soundtrack that amplified an aggressive, pervasive, accelerated expression of excessive commodification and contemporary consumption.

Symphony of Hunger: Digesting Fluxus in Four Movements (2015)

Symphony of Hunger sounded many voices on multiple channels in ways that make its experimental attempts difficult draw back to their curatorial source. Yet, despite the apparent contextual cacophonies, the exhibition very carefully organized its noisiness within Kim-Cohen's advice. Its spatial, relational and conceptual concerns were addressed within the very DNA of its curatorial model, itself informed by the selection of works it put on display. In grounding its presentation outside of privileged space – for sound or art, for the historical or the contemporary, or for the musical or the visual – it was free to integrate all elements via intertextual, intergenerational and interactive modes. By holding these opposing worlds within a frame that responsively embraced their correlations and conflicts, *Symphony of Hunger* engaged with the current state of things from a sound-focused position that invited interplay and overlays between acoustics, discourses, interpretations and indeterminacy that altogether heard the call for a non-cochlear curation.

Footnotes

1. Given how well documented the history and development of Sound Art has become through a plethora of anthologies and texts (see Cox, Kahn, Labelle, Licht, et al.), I'll not seek to summarize it here for the sake of focusing on the question of how sound is addressed in contemporary art curation. But the reader will find references throughout the paper that will help create relevant context.

2. Sterne notes that this audiovisual litany that divides the properties of sound and sight has a tendency to idealize hearing while both denigrating and elevating vision. By accepting the audiovisual divide as fact without reflection and criticality leads Sound Art toward a focus on sound in and for itself, or what Seth Kim-Cohen would call an ambient conceptualism. In this mode, Sound Art cannot advance along the lines of linguistic conceptualism that has helped contemporary art develop over the last 45+ years (Kim-Cohen, 2016: 10).

3. Note that, for the purposes of this discussion, I am purposely focusing on those gallery and museum-based exhibitions that substantially present Sound Art in Western art institutions. It could be argued that biennales, festival and contemporary art events like the 1996 Sonambiente project in Berlin should be studied among the earliest examples of such exhibitions, but given that its presentation strategy involved a geographically scattered and site-specific approach, it has not been included here. My primary concern is to address the challenges with the gallerisation of Sound Art within institutional settings.

4. A Selector is the one who selects and passes the records (vinyls) to the person that is playing them on the sound system. It originated in reggae/dancehall music, but filtered up into UK electronic music styles like Jungle and Drum&Bass to describe a deejay.

5. Kim-Cohen borrows from Marcel Duchamps' 'non-retinal art' to coin this term.

6. See 'Non-Cochlear Sound' - http://noncochlearsound.com/

7. September Collective is comprised of seventeen members from twelve countries (including the author). It breaks with dominant traditions of authoritative curatorial hierarchies to harness the potential of collaborative thought and action to generate new curatorial knowledge and know how. The collective was formed in 2015 during the 56th International Art Biennale of Venice as a groundbreaking platform for global inquiry into contemporary art, curatorial practice, exhibition making and art publication.

References

Celant, G. (2014) 'Art or Sound: From Multilingual to the Multisensory' in Celant, G. (ed.) *Art or Sound.* Milan: Fondazione Prada, pp.18-27.

Cluett, S. (2013) *Loud Speaker: Toward a Component Theory of Media Sound*. PhD dissertation. Ann Arbor: Proquest / UMI

Connor, S. (2011) 'Ears Have Walls: On Hearing Art' in Kelly, C. (ed.) *Sound*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 129-139.

Cox, C. (2011) 'Non-Cochlear Sound' review in *Artforum* (January 2011) [online]. Available at: http://annewalshjr.org/bio/images/Non-Cochlear_Sound.pdf. (Accessed October 3, 2017)

Diederichsen, D. (2002) 'Meander: The Exhibition Design' in Hollein, M. and Jorgensen, J. (eds.) *Frequencies [HZ] – Audio-visual Spaces*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, pp. 181-189.

Drobnick, J. (2004). 'Listening Awry' in Drobnick, J. (ed.) *Aural Cultures*. Toronto: YYZ Books, pp. 9-15.

Draxler, H. (2011) 'How Can We Perceive Sound as Arts?' In Kelly, C. (ed.) *Sound*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 139-143.

Enwezor, O. (2015) *Address to delegates of the 2015 Creative Time Summit*. Venice, Italy.

Fricke, H. (2002) 'Frequenzen [HZ]' review in *Artforum* (October 2002) [online]. Available at: https://www.mutualart.com/Article/-Frequenzen--HZ--/00092A1B64FC0F2E (Accessed November 20, 2016)

Griffiths. C. (2003) 'Articulated Spaces' in Gingras, N. (ed.) *Sound in Contemporary Canadian Art.* Sherbrooke: Artexte Editions, pp. 106-113.

Heiser, J. (2002) 'Frequencies [HZ]' review in *frieze*, No. 67 (November 2002) [online]. Available at: https://frieze.com/article/frequencies-hz (Accessed November 20, 2016)

Hou, H. (2014) 'From Open Museum to Open City' In Hou, H. (ed.) *Open Museum Open City.* Milan: Mousse Publishing, pp. 5-31.

Jorgensen, J. (2002) 'Frequent Encounters' in Hollein, M. and Jorgensen, J. (eds.) *Frequencies [HZ] – Audio-visual Spaces*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, pp. 77-85.\|
\|
Kelley, M. (2003) 'An Academic Cut-Up, in Easily Digestible Paragraph-Size Chunks; Or, The New King of Pop: Dr. Konstantin Raudive' in *Grey Room* 11. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 22-34.

Kim-Cohen, S. (2009) *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art*. New York: Continuum\|
\|
Kim-Cohen (2010) 'Sound Today' [online]. Available at: http://noncochlearsound.com/?page_id=101 (Accessed October 3, 2017) Kim-Cohen, S. (2016) *Against Ambience and other essays*. New York: Bloomsbury

Kraut, P. (2012) 'In the Music Museum of the Present: Music Exhibitions as Extended Concerts: A Foray into the History of the Presentation of Music and the Visual Arts' in Beil. R. and Kraut, P. (eds.) *A House Full of Music: Strategies in Music and Art*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, pp. 363-375.

Labelle, B. (2017) 'Room Tone' in White, J. (ed.) *Soundtracks.* San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [online]. Available at:

https://www.sfmoma.org/publication/soundtracks/brandon-labelle-room-tone/ (Accessed October 3, 2017)

Lavigne, Emma (2016) 'Foreword' in Rafael, M.F. (ed.) *Ari Benjamin Meyers: Music on Display*. Cologne: Walter Konig, pp.7-9.

Licht, A. (2007) *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories*. New York: Rizzoli

Marclay, C. (2008) *Ensemble*. Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art \|
Martin, J. (2000) 'Sonic Boom – The Art of Sound' review in *Seen and Heard* (May 2000) [online]. Available at: http://www.musicweb-international.com/SandH/2000/may00/SonicBoom.htm (Accessed November 20, 2016)\|
\|
Migone, C. (2003) 'Volume (of Confinement and Infinity): A History of Unsound Art' in Gingras, N. (ed.) *Sound in Contemporary Canadian Art*. Sherbrooke: Artexte Editions, pp. 80-91.

Miles, H. (2000) 'Smash hits and sound gardens. Sonic Boom – The Art of Sound' review in *eye,* No. 37 (Autumn 2000) [online]. Available at: http://www.eyemagazine.com/review/article/smash-hits-and-sound-gardens (Accessed November 20, 2016)

Milliard, C. (2016) 'Introduction' in Milliard, C., Niemojewski, R. et al. (eds.) *The New Curator*. London: Laurence King Publishing, pp.7-8.

Ritchie, I. (2000) *Sonic Boom 27th April – 18th June 2000* [online]. Available at: http://www.ianritchiearchitects.co.uk/projects/sonic-boom (Accessed November 20, 2016)

Schafer, R.M. (1992) 'Music, Non-Music and the Soundscape' in Paynter, J., Howell, T., Orton, R. and Seymour, P. (eds.) *A Companion to Contemporary Musical Thought*. London: Routledge, pp. 34-45.

September Collective (2015) *Symphony of Hunger: The Fifth Movement*. Venice: Automatic Books

Sterne, J. (2003) *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. Durham: Duke University Press

Toop (2000) *Sonic Boom: The Art of Sound*. London: Hayward Gallery\|
\|
Van Assche, C. (2002) 'Sonic Process: A New Geography of Sound' in Davila, M. (ed.) *Sonic Process: A New Geography of Sound*. Barcelona: MACBA and Actar, pp. 5-16.