

When We Hug, I Hear Your Ear

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ABSTRACT

Considering sound as a poetics in my art practice over time, I find a permeable space from which desires and concepts can flow out of imagination into the material world. In various ways I listen to the materials with which I work in order to solve the artistic and conceptual problems I set out for myself. Sometimes this act of listening pulls me away from the material of sound and the idea of sound itself toward other materials and assemblages that may more directly address the central questions of a given inquiry, allowing for other hybrid possibilities to emerge. This poetics, sound as a kind of skeleton key, opens an alchemical space in my practice where surprise awaits me in the studio.

1. INTRODUCTION

For the past 16 years I have been teaching classes in sound art, sculpture, radio, printmaking, circuit bending, and music, in the states and abroad. Prior to this, I completed a master's degree in music (2007) and then, later an MFA in studio art (2013). It is in this transition from being primarily a musician/sound artist (about 13 years, 2000-2013) to more of a sculptor and visual artist, that my thinking about sound and its poetic (versus its physical/material) potentials took shape. A very formative time for me was in the early 2000's—I was co-head of the New York Society for Acoustic Ecology and the practice of sound walking profoundly changed the way I listened, both in regular life and also in my sonic practice. Also in the early 2000's, I was introduced to the field of transmission arts through the New York Society for Acoustic Ecology's relationship with what was then *free103point9* (now *Wave Farm*) in upstate New York. And in that period of time, we, the NYSAE members, hosted a monthly radio program called Giant Ear))), produced a CD of field recordings that *free103point9* released, led many soundwalks, and performed at *Wave Farm* and elsewhere in NYC and upstate New York.

My engagement with these communities had a huge impact on my thinking about sound and what I now refer to in my work as *sound as a poetics*. To attempt to define this phrase, I like to relate it to the literary definition of poetics, which "goes back to the Greek *poietikos*, "pertaining to poetry," or literally, "productive or creative" [1]. This second meaning in particular resonates for me, the idea that poetics are productive and creative. Other definitions of poetics focus on theories of literary forms. This shade of meaning is also useful to me in thinking through sound conceptually—as in, form can suggest meaning with or without actual sounding. It is in this area of conceptual

"visual" work that *sound as a poetics* is most active in my practice. And in this sense, language and semiotics play an important role in how I use sound as a filter through which I theorize sculptural form.

So now, on to trace the idea of *sound as a poetics* in my work and other work that inspires my practice.

2. ORIGINS

While studying for my first master's degree (music) at the City College of New York in the early 2000's, I found the general discourses to be very conservative, and I was feeling that there had to be another space into which I could work, on the edges of music and maybe even against the well-worn paths of academic composition. My thesis from that context strongly informed my sonic and visual practices. It was about John Cage's *Imaginary Landscapes*, Edgard Varèse's *Poème électronique*, and Pierre Schaeffer's *Symphonie pour un homme seule*. My claim was that these were all "compositions that resist inscription" in that they are all very good examples (in the western canon) of noise as the material of the compositions, and how this turn away from the traditional instruments of the orchestra radically altered the way music could be inscribed, performed, interpreted, and disseminated. These works of course coincided with the development of recording technologies, radio, and other electronic instruments. But this was only the beginning of discovery for me.



Fig. 1. Robert Morris, *Box With The Sound of Its Own Making*. Wood, internal speaker, audio tape. 9 3/4" x 9 3/4" x 9 3/4", 1961.

For instance, Robert Morris's *Box With The Sound of Its Own Making* (Fig. 1) had a huge impact on my understanding of how one could define sound art and develop a

practice with sound as a poetics. *Box...* is a wooden cube with a speaker inside. It is designed to play back the recording Robert Morris made while building the box. The story according to Morris is that he invited John Cage to come over and look at and listen to the work. Morris expected he would listen for a few minutes and then leave, but he (Cage being Cage) listened to the entire 3-hour recording. Morris said “he sat for three and a half hours—didn’t move—listening to it. Then he got up and left. Nobody’s ever listened to it for three and a half hours, except Cage” [2].

Post music degree (2007), because of my newly forming relationships with acoustic ecology and transmission arts, I was beginning to think more broadly about sound and specifically thinking of it through a visual art context, and less through a musical one. I was finding myself drawn more to the broader and more outward facing discourses of contemporary visual art into which sound artists were inserting themselves. And then Alan Licht’s book *Sound Art* was published (Rizzoli, 2007) which really opened my mind to what working with sound in a non-musical context could be. I began to understand that objects had real power and that the semiotics of sound had an incredible potential to be explored.

Another formative work for me during this time was Stephen Vitiello’s *Finding Pictures in Search of Sounds*.¹ In this work, Vitiello, out on a field recording trip, took photographs while making recordings. Then he made the photographs into a loose-leaf book (Fig. 2). The images are very evocative and pairing them with the concept of sound reinforced the idea to me that sound as a concept could be just as interesting and powerful as sound itself.



Fig. 2. Stephen Vitiello, *Finding Pictures in Search of Sounds*, 2008.

So, these two works, Morris’s and Vitiello’s became my touchstones. To make art, specifically, objects, with sound as the idea, the poetics—how objects, ideas, language, sound (or not), and visual presentation come together to form a meaning. An artwork could make sound or it could simply refer to sound and you could call it sound art or not. Sound became a skeleton key which allowed me to open all kinds of creative and conceptual doors that the study of music had not.

3. SOUND IT OUT

I returned to school in 2011 to work on an MFA at School of the Art Institute of Chicago and began experimenting with the relationship between sound art and conceptual/language-based art. The work in Fig. 3 is a piece from 2013 with the phrase UUND/ERST/ANDD/ ON’TU. It is a photo-etched print with this cryptic phrase arranged in such a way that the viewer must sound it out in order to “understand” it. One of my MFA grad school advisors, when first presented with this work, thought it was Dutch. If sounded out correctly, you would easily understand the phrase to read “you understand, don’t you?” But to get there requires both visual and sonic play. Having to do this work gets right at the question: does sound art have to make sound? And in this specific case, can a print be considered a work of sound art? Arguments could be made either way, but for me it is a resounding yes!



Fig. 3. Jonny Farrow, *UUND/ERST/ANDD/ON'TU*. Photo-etched print, 12x18 inches. 2013.

And below (Fig. 4) is an example of an image and a title working to give you the sonic clue. This painting is called *Trajectory 6 (Outta Gas)* from 2021. I would expect that the viewer would imagine the sound this painting represents.



Fig. 4. Jonny Farrow, *Trajectory 6 (Outta Gas)*. 39x39 inches, 2021.

¹ See: <https://www.printedmatter.org/catalog/23438/> for more images of this work.

4. HAECCEITY

Haecceity (pronounced *hek-see-a-tee*) is a concept from 13th century philosophy that I learned about from reading Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* [3]. It has to do with the idea of thingness or thisness. I see this term as defining an inextricable link between sounds with the objects/assemblages that make them. I apply this concept to my thinking about some of my work.

Spiral (Fig. 5), a kinetic work that features three cast bronze rods approximately 60 cm in length, attached to a motor suspended from the ceiling.² The rods twist, lift, and shift as the motor rotates, incidentally marking the concrete tile upon which they partially rest. The hum of the electric motor and the sound the rods make as they clank and shift is not particularly sonorous or musical, but clunky, irregular, and mechanical. This work leans into the phenomenological and is meant to be observed over time, like watching a performance of dancers.

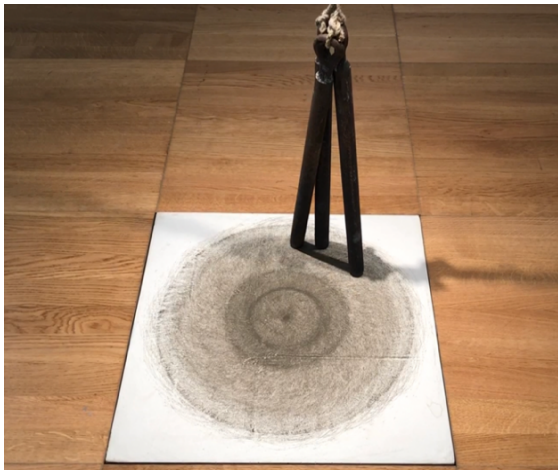


Fig. 5. Jonny Farrow, *Spiral*, 2018.

I came to this work through the form first, meaning that I conceptualized of these rods as multiples of mass. In thinking about how to install them, I already had been working with slowly turning motors in other pieces of my work, and so through studio experimentation, the physical outcome produced incidental sound, and in that production created the ‘thisness’ of the entire assemblage. So, in a sense this work is a backward application of *sound as a poetics*. It is not that sound led the investigation per se, but that form led to sound and suggested the embrace of its integral material presence.

5. A BELL IS A CUP

The *kyosaku* (Fig. 6), also known as the “stick of compassion” or as an “encouragement stick”, is used to help meditators regain focus during long periods of *zazen* sitting and concentration.



Fig. 6. The *Kyosaku* stick.



Fig. 7. A *godō* applies the strike on the requesting sitter.

A strike is typically applied to the shoulders upon request of the sitter (Fig. 7). The sound of the strike is a part of the enlivening contact from the assemblage of meditator, *godō*, and stick. Of course, sound also plays a crucial role in the *zendō*. Bells and meditation bowls are struck and used to mark various periods of time. A bowl is a bell, or *a bell is a cup until it is struck*.

The phrase, as I use it here, comes from the title of the 1988 album by the group Wire, *A Bell Is A Cup Until It Is Struck* (Fig. 8). This title has always fascinated me, that is, the idea that an object has multiple functions/meanings, but perhaps not at the same time. The functions/meanings become apparent in context and application and are only stable when that context is invoked or present. There is a moment of transformation realized by the strike.

This ‘moment’ brings me to another concept, again, from Deleuze and Guattari. In their chapter called *November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics*, they introduce the concept of the “order word” which is a word or phrase that changes something from one state to another [4]. The magic word “*abracadabra*” is an example. Its utterance usually results in something appearing, disappearing, or transforming from one thing into another. It is supposedly Aramaic in origin from the words *avra khedabra* and translates to “I will create as I speak” [5]. Legal pronouncements are similar: officiants at weddings say, *I pronounce you...*; Judges at trials announce that, *the defendant is guilty (or innocent) as charged*. The strike of the *kyosaku* also

² See <https://vimeo.com/264841942> for a video of this work.

performs a transformation, bringing one from listlessness instantly into the present.

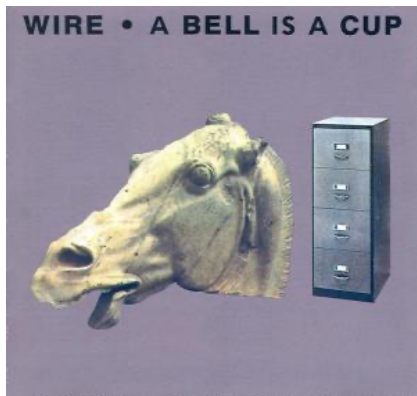


Fig. 8. Album cover for the band Wire, *A Bell Is A Cup Until It Is Struck*, 1988.

A typical gallery soundscape is quiet. One might even categorize it as reverent or meditative, similar to a *zendō*. In my work *Frequency Shift* (Fig. 9), I use sound as a *kyosaku*.³ An amplifier periodically sends randomly selected low frequencies to transducers installed under the gallery floor with the intention of bringing the viewer/auditor into the present moment. In this iteration from 2018, which was installed in a gallery with other of my sculptures, it also had the effect of pulling visitors around the gallery to search out the origins of the sounds. The frequencies not only activated the space, then, but also the viewer/auditor, functioning as a non-linguistic ‘order word’ or ‘stick of compassion’. One could also argue that this sonic intervention distracts from the possibility for an extended contemplation of the other (primarily bronze) sculptures present in the room.⁴ So, for me this is a bit of sonic playfulness that gives the visitor to the space a small jolt, against their own thoughts, against the preciousness of the gallery space, against the art-historical weight of bronze as an important material, and against overdetermining any one piece in the show.



Fig. 9. Jonny Farrow, *Frequency Shift*. Amp, transducers, custom software, 2018.

5. CONCLUSION: WHEN WE HUG...

This brief selection of works brings me back around to the title of this paper and the work to which it refers. *When we hug I hear your ear* (Fig. 10) is a painting with the phrase

spread across a series of irregularly shaped pieces of wood. I saved this piece for the conclusion because it is a work-in-progress (the newest) and also similar to my first experiments with the sonic-visual—a refrain, if you will.



Fig. 10. Jonny Farrow. Studio view of *When we hug I hear your ear*. Acrylic on wood, 2022.

The close and brief listening opportunity suggested by this phrase may not reveal anything much to the listener/hugger, but rather is a statement of desire and connection, a ‘blue-sky’ statement. In the same sense of seeing eye to eye, two can hear ear to ear. And similar to other language-based works of mine, I would consider this work to be a ‘sound’ work, in that when you read, you typically hear what you read in your head. In this sense, to read and to comprehend relates to the sympathetic notion of *understanding*, whether it be something or someone. And suddenly (at least in my way of thinking), we are back into sound via the sympathetic vibrations and resonances when *sound as a poetics* works to suggest or complete a form or create an image in the mind. This way of working conceptually forefronts the dialogue between the sonic and the visual, between sound as material and sound as concept, and between objects and *thisness*. These are some of the things that I wish for my art to do: to enliven, to interrupt, to pronounce, to stutter, to vibrate, to resonate, to transform, and to connect.

6. REFERENCES

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³ See <https://vimeo.com/273035297> for a video of *Frequency Shift*.

⁴ More images from this show, titled, —*a fine word, galaxy* can be found at: <https://www.jonnyfarrow.net/afinewordgalaxy-8tyc>