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From object to instrument: the ambiguity of sound sculpture

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Abstract

This joint paper, and accompanying performance, aims to explore the ambiguous categorisation of ‘sound sculpture’, viewing this as a hybrid object which opens up boundaries between discrete fields of creative activity. It will focus on a case study of the Steel-cello and Bow-chime. Constructed out of steel sheets, wires and rods, these were conceived as ‘played’ sound sculptures in the late 1960s by veteran US abstract-expressionist, Bob Rutman.

Sound brings to sculpture a time-based dimension and a relationship with acoustic-space, which is denied to the traditional sculptural object. The conception of the Steel-cello and Bow-chime as *playable* objects places them equally within the disciplines of music and performance, and within a history of invented instruments which challenged the organisation, instrumentation and sonorities of western musical traditions. This intrinsic inter-disciplinarity has provoked in their performance history, a complex set of interactions which have traversed visual art, architecture, music, dance, and theatre. This paper/performance examines this history and the shifting status of the Steel-cello/Bow-chime from ‘art object’ (a unique work attached to an individual creator) to ‘musical instrument’ (a multiple object used and developed by a number of practitioners in a variety of contexts and combinations). Adrian Palka is prominent amongst these

practitioners and has performed over many years in a wide range of inter-disciplinary projects. A short illustrative performance of the Steel-cello and Bow-chime accompanies this paper.

Paper

The hybrid nature of sound sculpture, as illustrated by the example of the Steel-cello and Bow-chime, offers both interdisciplinary potential and some confusion in terms of categorisation. The element of sound brings to sculpture a time-based dimension and a relationship with acoustic-space, which is denied to the traditional sculptural object. The conception and construction of certain sound sculptures as *playable_objects* places them equally within the disciplines of music and performance and within a history of 20th century ‘new’ instruments. Adrian Palka has outlined in his paper how the intrinsic inter-disciplinarity of the sound sculpture has provoked in their performance history a complex set of interactions which have traversed visual art, architecture, music, dance, and theatre. In this paper I want to examine a very brief, and highly selective fragment of this history of playable sound sculpture, to attempt to place the Steel-cello and Bow-chime within a wider development and to outline some particular tendencies.

This category confusion means that a number of the individuals I’m going to mention are equally likely to be found within histories of art, performance and music. This being said, however, the development of ‘sound sculpture’ has a clear relationship to a musical tradition. I want to begin by mentioning the work of Italian futurist Luigi Russolo, who in both his writings *The Art of Noises* (1913) and his creation of his own battery of invented

instruments, the *intonarumori*, directly raised the question of what constituted musical sound. He aimed to widen the gene-pool of organised sound by bringing the sounds, or more precisely the ‘noise’, of the outside world of modernity, into the realms of art and music. As he states in *The Art of Noises* manifesto of 1913, ‘we find far more enjoyment in the combination of the noises of trams, backfiring motors, carriages and bawling crowds than in rehearsing, for example, the “Eroica” or the “Pastoral”’¹

His writings make a direct demand for the regeneration of music through challenging the demarcation of what sounds/ noises were acceptable within the sphere of musical practice. The *intonarumori*, were a direct means of achieving this aim through their invocation of the noise of the modern. The key to this ‘invocation’ was by recourse to the glissando, produced by the rotary motion which operated the instruments of the *intonarumori*. Douglas Khan describes in his book *Noise, Water, Meat* the importance of the glissando in the context of early modernist challenges to the musical convention. As he states:

‘Within the techniques and technologies of music, the modernist glissando alluded to worldliness by being set in contrast to the segmentation of both temperament and instrumental design. The silenced sounds between notes, between microtones, were seen as markers of a lack of freedom, of a restricted movement within a comprehensive and infinitely fine universe, and the gradient of all possible pitches was considered to be typical of the wealth of lived experience outside music.’²

Khan’s statement is particularly relevant to the work of Harry Partch, who is often cited as the founder of the sound sculpture ‘movement’. Partch notoriously burnt his own

compositions in 1930, and set himself on a course towards the creation of a new set of instruments. The new instruments announced his break both from his own musical past and more generally that of western art music - in particular what he regarded as the 'tyranny' of the system of 12-tone, equal temperament, based on the piano keyboard. In order to open up the 'infinitely fine universe' of microtones, Partch made use of both the glissando and a system of just intonation in the creation of many of his new instruments, at times utilising a 43-tone octave. It is Partch who also directs the playable sound sculpture towards a place within the plastic / visual arts and the realm of performance through his insistence on the importance of both the visual elements of the instruments and the totality of the whole performance experience. His use of the terms 'corporeal' and 'ritual' emphasised his understanding of the music and performance as a total bodily, intellectual and emotional experience for both the players and audience. He also raised the awareness of the spatial and architectural elements of the performance. This awareness concerned the positioning of the players and instruments in relation to the architecture of the stage and the concert venue and therefore to both the physical and acoustic space of the performance site.

Yet, If Partch's break from the forms and codes of western art music was seemingly emphatic, it was not, like the futurist Russolo, in the name of modernity. The ritual element of the performance, his building of instruments, his affinity for just intonation over equal temperament, was conceived in the terms of a reconnection with older practices and civilisations. As he makes clear, 'Primitive man found magical sounds in the materials around him - in the reed, a piece of bamboo, a particular piece of wood held in a particular way, a skin stretched over a gourd, or a tortoise shell ... some

resonating body. He then proceeded to make the object, the vehicle, the instrument as beautiful as he could.’³

The role of musical instruments within the social and cultural life of an imagined past provided the foundation of Partch’s practice. As he states, ‘These acts of primitive man became the trinity of my work: magical sounds, visual forms, beauty and experienced ritual.’⁴ An obvious tension is observable with Partch between a modernist drive to disrupt and broaden the parameters of western music, but a drive couched in a nostalgia for an imagined past which he sees as a repository for values lacking in his own time and culture.

Some of these tensions are also apparent in the sound-sculpture work produced by Francois and Bernard Baschet. Their long career as makers of ‘Les Sculptures Sonores’ began in the 1950s and involved their work having life as gallery and site-specific exhibits (regarded both as sculpture and as examples of contemporary design) as concert instruments, as educational aids and as a marketable commodity. The sound sculptures as concert instruments also reinforced these tensions and contradictions. Although they created new sonic experiences, which the Baschet’s contended could rival the sonorities produced by the experiments in *musique concrète* by contemporaries such as Pierre Schaeffer, their concerts could also contain highly conventional material such as renditions of Bach and Vivaldi. Their *Structures Sonores* were often considered in the 1950s and 1960s as cutting edge examples of contemporary sculpture in terms of form, use of materials and their kinetic qualities, but the Baschets were also driven by more traditional principles and avoided the use of electricity or electronics in order to remain true to traditional instrument design. However, the Baschets themselves were interested

to go beyond the classical influence that informed the other members of their ensemble of the 1950s and 60s and emphasise the unique resonances the sculptures produced to develop a ‘floating, organic, spontaneous, sensual, anti-intellectual music’.⁵

In many ways the Baschets’ practice was re-invented due to these tensions. Uncertain how they traversed the various disciplines they could be aligned to, they moved into the area of activity which seemed the most straight-forward, i.e. a direct engagement with the public through site specific artworks and educational workshops. This move made explicit the audience participation and interactivity that had long been a feature of their work. This had a specific social dimension, as indicated by the concentration on work with children and disadvantaged youth. The production of sound sculptures and sound-fountains in this context being a focus for developing a sense of craft, collaboration and ‘social inclusion’. It was also intended to encourage a latent musicality in the participants, often unrealised in conventional terms.

To broaden out the issue of sound sculpture into a wider socio-economic perspective, I want to draw on a few comments by Jacques Attali from his book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. In his final chapter he establishes his conception of ‘composition’, which he sees as the emerging phase of music production, and therefore, in line with his general thesis, the possible harbinger of broader changes in economics and society. As he asserts:

‘We see emerging, piecemeal and with the greatest ambiguity, the seeds of a new noise. One exterior to the institutions and customary sites of a political conflict. A noise of Festival and Freedom, it may create the conditions for a major discontinuity extending far

beyond its field. It may be the essential element in a strategy for the emergence of a truly new society'.⁶ Attali considers the political economy of 'composition' difficult to conceptualise, seeing production melding with consumption and the 'act of doing' taking over from the stock-piling of labour inherent in the circulation of music as mass produced object. He suggests that, 'The bulk of commodity production then shifts to the production of tools allowing people to create the conditions for taking pleasure in the act of composing. We can see – in the make-up of musical groups, in the creation of new instruments, in the development of the imaginary through the planning of personal gardens, in production using rudimentary tools – an outline of what composition can mean: each person dreaming up his own criteria, and at the same time his way of confronting them'.⁷

Attali's reference to the 'creation of new instruments' as a feature of the 'composition' phase perhaps underlines the utopian or visionary impulse visible within the production of sound-sculpture. His outlining of the creation of personalised criteria for developing a practice, is certainly indicative in different ways of Partch, Russolo, the Baschet Brothers, Rutman and many others in the field. This is a utopianism that seeks to break free of categorisation and constraint within discrete disciplines. The position of sound sculpture in relation to established western musical culture is complex, being both a disavowal of codes and conventions and a desire for its renewal. However, there is perhaps in common a re-evaluation of, or re-connection with, the fundamental materiality of sound beyond the codes and practices of music. This is in terms of both the production of sound through the shaping of materials – metal, glass, wood, plastics – and the body's perception of sound at the sensory level. The body here can be a site of ritual performance (Partch), or

the recipient of an intense new sound / noise of the modern world (Russolo). In the case of the Baschets, it is the performer, participant or maker understanding his/her own agency as producer of sound material through the coaxing of vibrations out of sculptured/crafted matter. All of them suggesting that music production is less a self-referential area of cultural activity but part of a more encompassing lived experience.

To return to the objects themselves. Sound sculptures can be regarded as either individualised and reified works of art - or as a proto-commodity. As art object or musical instrument. The specific example of the Steel-cello and Bow-chime, are interesting as the specific objects performed on at this conference are not made by the creating artist, namely, Bob Rutman, but with his permission and to his specifications. Here the sculptures are more like the artist's multiple or the limited edition. In other words, an object that can be regarded as conceived by the artist, but with perhaps less of the artist's direct involvement in production. This allows for a broader dissemination beyond the boundaries of the art institution or wealthy collector. which are the usual destinations of single unique objects. The multiple also allows, significantly perhaps, a more fluid income stream for the artist.

To return to Jacques Attali, he also raises a number of issues in relation to instruments as production tools. He also offers some warnings. As he states, 'Inducing people to compose using predefined instruments cannot lead to a mode of production different from that authorised by those instruments'.⁸ And elsewhere, 'One produces what technology makes possible, instead of creating the technology for what one wishes to produce'.⁹ In line with these observations, perhaps the real utopian impulse within sound-sculpture is

to continually invent and re-invent personal technologies in order to break out of pre-determined patterns and systems of commodification and control.

To give a more contemporary relevance for revisiting sound-sculpture, many of the concerns and approaches that are part of their history, are also apparent in the development of contemporary sound art. The development of personalised tools is mirrored in the development of individual software and generative music programs. Here digital artists and programmers create new methods and tools that alter and expand the commodity-based framework of computer hardware and proprietary software. The intuitive interactivity and participation that became central to the practice of the Baschets for example, is also a feature of many digital sound installations. Interactivity, if not an unproblematic concept, plays a key part in the renewal of practice generally across the digital arts.

The history of sound sculpture, which goes far beyond the very few individuals I have mentioned in this paper, create precedents for many forms of digital sound work in the migration between the gallery, the concert hall and other, more informal spaces for installation or performance. The interest in the materiality of sound is also a continuing area of concern, re-configured through the emergence of digital technologies. And perhaps also a utopian current is still apparent, if a little tarnished now, in the possibilities of new forms of communication and participation engendered by networked systems and conceptions of the virtual and acoustic cyber-space.

Our project in relation to sound sculptures, specifically the Steel-cello and the Bow-chime, is to continue to develop and broaden a performance practice around them but also to place them historically as objects that traverse and reveal a number of trends of

the 20th century avant-garde. Objects which also opened up approaches, methods and ideas that are currently being re-worked and rapidly developed in relation to digital sound art practice.

¹ Luigi Russolo, 'The Art of Noises' 1913): <http://www.unknown.nu/futurism/noises.html>

² Douglas Khan *Noise, Water, Meat* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press) p. 84

³ Harry Partch, 'Barbs and Broadsides', lectures edited by Danlee Mitchell and Jonathan Glasier: <http://www.corporeal.com/barbs.html>

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Francois Baschet *Les Sculptures Sonores* (Chelmsford:Soundworld 1999) p. 98

⁶ Jacques Attali *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2002) p.133

⁷ *ibid.* p. 145

⁸ *ibid.* p.141

⁹ *ibid.* p.115