Since the 1960s, art has foregrounded the conceptual, concerning itself with questions that the eye alone cannot answer, questions regarding the conditions of art’s own possibility. Sound as a medium is time-based and is sensitive to space, perception and environment, and is intertwined with disciplines of sculpture, architecture, film, and media art. Its ephemeral nature poses a number of challenges within cultural practice and presentation. Situated between practices of music and art, sound overflows boundaries of the gallery, disrupts the line between stage and audience, moves beyond categorisations, and merges models of economy and culture. Sound art unites silence, tones, sound, and noise, and at the same time resonates beyond the solely sonic dimension through its intimate links with other sensory and intellectual worlds as expressed in the visual arts, literature and media art.

The themes of sound art frequently involve people’s listening habits as well as hearing itself, which often transpires unconsciously. Its history is shared with that of experimental music and with contemporary visual arts, linking Futurism, Dada, Fluxus, Bauhaus, Post-Modern and Relational art. But there is one place mentioned time after time whenever the history of sound art is discussed – Italy. The Futurists – a group of artists, writers and musicians – were embracing the radical changes that were sweeping into modern life in the early 20th century. They celebrated the dynamics of the mechanical age, the bustle and speed of the city and they particularly celebrated noise. Although the Futurists had their composers and musicians it was a painter, Luigi Russolo, who wrote the manifesto ‘The Art of Noises’ in 1913. In the manifesto he put forth the idea of a new kind of music, an evolution of contemporary music that would reflect the modern industrialised world. He divided noise-sounds into several categories and built a different noise instrument for each one. This manifesto is one of the most influential texts on musical aesthetics in the 20th century.
With the invention of the magnetic tape in the 1930s came a generation of sampling and electronic modulations of sound by Schaeffer and Stockhausen. The 1940s saw a wholesale transformation of exhibition and spectatorship in the work of John Cage. His 1952 piece 4’33” was seminal in this regard as it celebrated the importance of silence. In fact, his entire body of work can be divided into aesthetic periods during which he explored Noise, Quiet, Silence and Sound. In the catalogue essay for the exhibition, ‘John Cage and Experimental Art: The Anarchy of Silence’ at the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, James Pritchett says, ‘Cage was composing directly from the silence now, and the music that he found there astonished him.’

Virtuoso pianist and composer, David Tudor, who worked closely with Cage, during his first performance, is said to have opened the keyboard lid and sit silently for thirty seconds. He then closed the lid. He reopened it, and then sat silently again for a full two minutes and twenty-three seconds. He then closed and reopened the lid one more time, sitting silently this time for one minute and forty seconds. He then closed the lid and walked off stage. That was the end of his performance!

The meaning of sound is often invested in the object that created it and we put these objects together in our minds to make some kind of narrative. Pierre Schaeffer suggested that we should listen ‘acousmatically’, without regard to the source of the sound. The experience of listening to recorded sound, removed in space and time from the circumstances of production, allows for the acousmatic reduction, ultimately an increased attention to the specificity of sound-in-itself. By the late 1940s, Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry were taking recordings of documentary sounds and processing them to the point of it becoming unrecognisable, divorcing them even further from their original source and initiating the genre of musique concrète, which attempted to eradicate troublesome indexical qualities through direct manipulation of the sound on tape (speeding up, slowing down, reversing, cutting up, etc. The other value of recording tape, besides its malleability, was its capacity for repetition, not only by rewinding and playing a recording over and over again but by forming tape loops in which the machine would play a given section of tape over and over without interruption. Such repetition made possible the sort of close study of sounds that one would usually associate with a frozen visual image or with the notation of specific pitches in a musical score.
This process takes us to artist Alexis Bhagat, a New York based Indian artist, who in his compositional experiment, *Din & Hiss*, acquired a mini-disc recorder on which loops were produced within a minidisc and then laid down onto CD 'sketchbooks'. He improvised on the composition loops with two minidisc players and two CD players, with his CD sketchbooks running through a mixer. Versions were then run through several times, adding layers until the track 'sounded finished'. This sketchbook-overdub technique has been used to produce his subsequent audio collages.

Sound art surfaced in the late 1960s as a confluence of experimental strategies in music with Postminimalist installation practices in the visual arts. The roots of sound art lie in the disjunction of sound and image afforded by the inventions of the telephone and audio recording as well as the age-old notion of acoustic space. With the experience of hearing each other's voices as well as other sounds divorced from their source, sound became an ever more instantaneous identifier as image had been. Surabhi Saraf’s, *Spinning Four*, a visually rich immersive sonic experience stimulates the senses. From her ruminations of Indian classical music to the multiplicity of sounds emerging from old mechanical fans, her performance dealt with the phenomena on which we all depend — wind and breath. The artist layered the sound of her voice over the droning percussion of the rotating blades of old fans powered by electric motors. Saraf also live feeds the small fans as large video projections that, along with her soundscapes, created a visual experience immersive enough to remind us that everything is constantly spinning around us.
While sound is increasingly visible within contemporary art through its installation within the physical and institutional space of the art gallery, this visibility has both developed from, and helped to precipitate, a newfound critique of visibility itself. The discourse of the art world, despite all the profound changes it has undertaken over the last century of modernist aesthetics, remains bound to a historical privileging of the visual as the ‘noblest’ of the senses. Sound enters the spaces of contemporary art as a critique of this privileging – an aspect of contemporary art’s drive to free aesthetics from the representational paradigm in which it has been constrained.

Yet the visual and representational metaphors that have long structured our thought and experience are not so easily dislodged. An example of the confluence of visual art and music (hitherto not unknown) is between photographer Dayanita Singh and Talvin Singh, a tabla player and winner of the Mercury Prize. Dayanita insists that the aural and the visual always coincide and interrelate, the music she listens to while working has always had an effect on her visual work. This collaboration culminated in a performance in which Dayanita’s photographs were projected on screen, while Talvin responded to them aurally — his was an aural response to visual stimuli, while hers had been a visual response to aural stimuli. By then Talvin had already done a solo show of his visual explorations of his music making in Mumbai in 2008. At the same time there were other artists in India who were venturing into sonic spheres departing from their normal chosen mediums. Riyas Komu was one, for example. In one of his works he enquired the effect of reverberations of musical chants playing in a loop in a series of audio emissions one after the other among the trees in the ruins of Mehrauli village in Delhi.

Inviting viewers to use their ears as well as eyes is becoming increasingly common at art institutions around the country. This June saw the opening of Sound Reasons an event presented by Pro Helvetia – Swiss Arts Council in collaboration with Clark House Initiative, Mumbai. The installations included a complex spectrum of sound art by the participating Swiss and Indian artists. The installations covered important fields of sound art that presented sonifications of very complex data. One such example of this is through Marcus Maeder’s, *Trees: Pinus Sylvestris* an audiovisual installation that presented measured acoustic emissions in plants and made them perceptible in relation to climatic and physiological data. The other artworks were invocations of the listening processes.

Ish S’s six channel sound sculpture, *Sitting Still*, is initiated spatially as the viewer explores the timeless continuum of the now and the becoming of the listener via sound. Salomé Voeglin’s *5 Meter Conduit*, is a series of compositional pieces that focus on the small and slight, the unseen and almost overheard sounds. It recorded material at the margins of the everyday soundscape and the threshold of hearing, to produce sonic fictions and trigger auditory imaginations from moments that almost remain inaudible but nevertheless determine what we see. My own interactive installation named *Aural Mirror*, used microphones to pick up ambient sounds and reverbed back into the space making the listener aware of their movements by directing attention towards the aural environment. The installation records and re-records the ambient sounds, playing them back into the room over and over until we hear a drone of the ambient resonances, retaining the rhythms of the movements within the installation.
The open-ended sonic forms and often site-specific location of sound installations thwart artists’ musicological analysis, which remains oriented to the formal examination of discrete sound structures and performances, while the purely visual purview of art history allows its practitioners not only to disregard sound art but also to gloss over the sonic strategies of Postminimalism and Conceptualism. Paul DeMarinis mentioned that experimental music up until the early 1970s accommodated what would now be called sound art, but by the late-70s not only had art spaces become increasingly open to sound works, but musical venues and culture had grown more conservative and less interested toward experimentalism. During the 1980s in Australia, America, and Canada, people working in sound used a variety of terms referring to art: radio art, audio art and sound art. Each term had its own genuses, and certainly many of the people involved had been active from at least since the 1970s. Through the 1980s those working in sound were from many different backgrounds—

and working among equally diverse forms and venues. The generalised notion of ‘art’ seemed to be the most innocuous way to talk about this activity, since it provided plenty rhetorical room to move. Some artists made sound their sustained focus; others used it temporarily and then moved on. The recourse to art was because it was more extensive, discursively and institutionally, than music.

Music, of all the arts, fancied itself as having an artistic monopoly on sound, but during the 80s it was only able to muster up the ideas of — musique concrète and John Cage—to lay aesthetic claim to the new activity. These ideas were late-modernist products of the late-1940s and early-50s, which means they were already 30 years and older by the time the 1980s rolled around. Also vying for attention at the time among people more familiar with a range of activities were sound poetry and text-sound, but their aesthetic programs were too vague.

The aesthetic inertia exerted by musique concrète and Cage arose from their own context: although they were marginal to the project of Western art music, they were still attached to it. Musicology had little to say about sound art in general, although it had quite a bit to say about how very finite sets of sounds were organised. Musicologists who ventured out to the margins found themselves trying to protect their topics from the gravitational pull of musicology as a whole. In contrast, there was revitalisation, excitement, and theoretical embrace about sound in the art world, if not among its official venues. Until the 1980s there was a formidable economic barrier to creating sound art, but with the invention of MIDI and ever more powerful computers, we are finally seeing a wave of support for diverse forms of sound-based artistic practice. Late-modernist music warded off imitative sounds because it was thought that they channelled attention too restrictively. In reality, sounds are never far enough above or below society to escape poetics, bodies, materials, technologies and institutional contexts. All that needs to happen is to admit that consciousness plays a part of auditory perception. Even if one wished to maintain a strict division between a type of musical listening that imagines to hear only sonic and phonic content and other types of listening that hear a range of other contents riding the vibrations of sound, then all that needs to happen is to admit the possibility of different modes of listening existing simultaneously.
Sound acts as a trigger for aesthetic experiences, memories, and a heightened sense of subjectivity, space and time. Sound re-invests and invents meanings and functions of space. The listener visiting such installations is made to inhabit the visual space through a sonic insistence. Sound sculpture – i.e. sculpture with an inherent sound-producing facility, as opposed to a musical instrument crafted to produce specific pitches – is the oldest form of sound art, dating back to the ancient Chinese lithophones (stones that are hit with a mallet to produce vibrations). Unlike most musical works, which are principally concerned with organizing sounds in time, sound installations are centrally concerned with organizing sounds in space. Existing discourses on ‘spatial sound’ privilege technical descriptions of sound localisation within physical spaces. Conspicuously absent within these discourses are extended concepts of space and spatiality, for example social spaces, the spaces of the body, imaginary spaces, and spaces that span multiple times and places, whether real, virtual, or imaginary.

As a term, ‘sound art’ is mainly of value in crediting site or object-specific works that are not intended as music per se. Much like rock and roll, a purist view of sound art becomes very narrow, and much of what is called or categorised as sound art can be just as easily viewed as a hyphenated fusion of sound art with an experimental musical style. As sound artist Steve Roden wrote, ‘sound is not a medium that developed through a clean linear trajectory and ended as a real movement like Futurism or even Fluxus; it’s a messy history that includes a lot of wonderful things. Development for most of us was piecemeal and personal, not as a group evolving together.’ A universal definition and definitive history of sound art may not be likely for these reasons; but ultimately it is better to honour sound pieces created in a non-time-based, non-programmatic way as being sound art as opposed to music than to simply shoe-horn any sound work into the genre of experimental music, or to practice the lazy revisionism of blanketeting any experimental sound composition, performance or recording under the rubric of sound art.

**SITTING STILL, ISH 5, INDIA, SOUND SCULPTURE, PHOTOGRAPH BY RENUKA BISHT**
In May 2013, Khoj announced its international sound residency programme with seven artists – Abhijeet Tambe (India), Chi-Wei Lin (Taiwan), Malose Malahela (South Africa), Priya Sen (India), Rudi Punzo (Italy), Pawel Janicki (Poland) and Robert Millis (USA) – for a duration of one month, at the end of which, the sound artists exhibited/performed their works. Curated by Charu Maithani, the purpose of this residency was simple – to look at how the ‘act of listening and the creative possibilities open through sound recording, dissemination, transmission and playback is transforming art production and the endless scope of sound and noise’. Khoj has been instrumental in not just supporting sound art in India but in finding interesting ways in which this fairly new art idiom could flourish. Why we felt this was relevant to us, even today, was because of the kind of recognition it brought to ‘sound’ in a country that is, quite ironically, built on the foundation of sound itself – our rituals, our chanting, our song and dance, our oral traditions – sound has been central to how we shape our culture and to how we interpret it to the world. In fact, as these artists proved during the residency programme, sound as a medium, often lost behind the extravagance of music, is probably central to how we understand humanity itself, because what we see is never what we hear, but what we hear is always something that we do ‘see’.

We got in touch with Chi-Wei Lin and Rudi Punzo, two diametrically opposite contemporary sound artists in thought and structure, and yet, connected in the sense of immediacy they give their art forms, to talk about their relationship with sound and where they find themselves in it.
How do you think, fundamentally, the culture of how we listen to ‘sound’ has changed?

Well, I don’t know if I can say anything new than what French historian Alain Corbin has already explored in his famous book ‘Sound and Meaning in the Village Bells’. But I agree with what he says about colonisation history actually being the main factor of how listening has changed in the past eras, and modernisation is the key word. I think these experiences are more or less shared by all Asian people.

In Asian cultures, especially, there is a lot of ritual involved that is inherently connected to sound – bells ringing, chanting, rhythm of movement. Do you think the loss of ritual in contemporary times means a loss of this ‘sound’ as well?

In many ways, fine art plays the role of de-contextualisation of the religious tradition; it is same for the use of sounds in contemporary art context. I don’t feel confident with the secularism aspect of contemporary art…and I totally agree with Ashish Nandi’s idea that secularism is just another form of belief. However, many artists who work with sound do have some religious aspect present, probably much more evident than today’s visual artists. I think it is about the multi-sensual nature of sound artists. There is something shared by rituals and sound ‘art’ practices.

Given the unpredictable space of sound, how do you envision your projects?

I don’t do formal ‘sound installation’ works, which means the main sound source in my works are from the audiences instead of the objects. I will give you an example of their reactions/interactions from the ‘Tape Music’ series. When it was played in primary schools with school children, there are certain reactions which appears to be unusual for the adults…one thing worth noticing is the sudden spread of silence among the students during the performance…I think it comes from a kind of collective affection, such as when the teacher approaches a noisy class, one child will see the danger and will suddenly stops talking and the rest will follow immediately by instinct, without even telling each other; they react just like a flock of birds. If it was proved to be a wrong prediction, a burst of laughter would follow and children will start talking again…this used to happen during my school days.

Another silence worth mentioning is what happened in a factory in Shenzhen where a group of workers were invited to participate in the Tape Music session during their work time…the end, nobody makes any sound, like other sessions elsewhere, for there is no instruction from their boss.

To know more about Chi-Wei’s work, visit www.linchiwei.com
When working with sound in a sculpture as against sound in a performance, what happens to you and your relationship with sound?

I’m obsessed by ‘the sound of matter and the matter of sound’. Comparing different disciplines such as sculpture, sound and performing art – stressing a particular and personal focus on the recycling of discarded materials and shapes and the use of renewable energy sources – I intend to challenge the vision of sculpture as a 3D art by transforming the noise inherent in the kinetic momentum into sound. Visitors of the exhibitions are invited to rotate or move – with caution – a pedal, a crank mechanism, a handle, thus directly participating in the creative process: they will be rewarded, sometimes with the perception of a thin wail, some other time with a shrill sound.

Any particular reason why you primarily work with discarded materials to create your music sculptures?

There are artists who design the use of the new, and artists who reconfigure the existing; I cast a heartfelt glance at scrap, giving scrap itself an aesthetic appearance and a musical life. The sound obsession of materials becomes the instigating cause of assembling machines that have a simple and yet relentless functioning. These devices do not re-sound their structural need, rather their freedom of expression, hence a new way to understand and grasp them. The arcane and constitutive desire of human sensibility to manipulate the language of sounds compels me to produce a visionary reality, creating objects, flows and bodies (namely, my own body that interacts with the machines) fooling technocracy itself, trying to render it something else, bringing to life a never expected musical purpose from those gears, and yet lying in them.

Tell us a little bit about your electronic performances, of Rudimachines. Does a performance change how you feel as against an exhibition?

These heteroclite elements (in Rudimachines) become means of sonorous representations – concerts, theatrical pieces or brief performances – the guiding principle of which is an ironical glance that conjugates simplicity and technology, improvisation and planning. Performing in front of 300 people who are awaiting your every single gesture is a strong experience, yet – on a smaller scale – similar to the opening of your exhibition of a new body of artworks.

To know more about Rudi’s work, visit www.rudipunzo.it
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