INPUT/OUTPUT

The epistemology of loss

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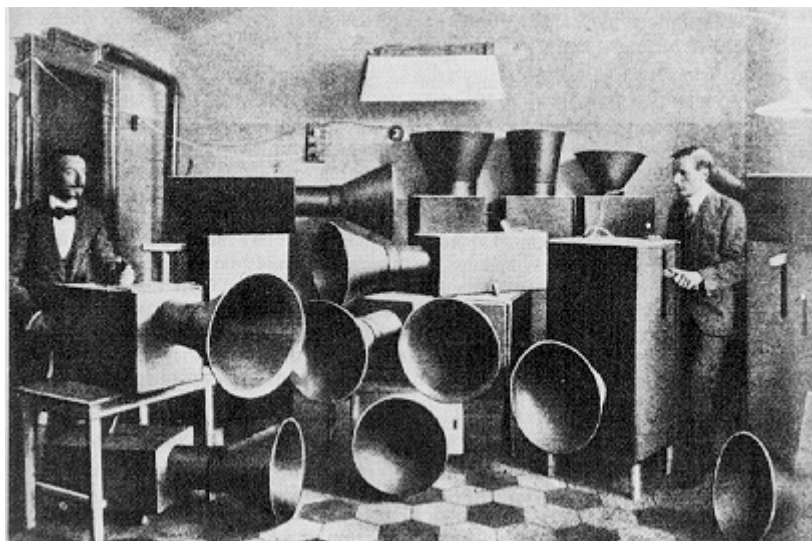MACT 2004

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Introduction:

Input/Output has proved problematic for me as a sculptor. I have been involved in the acquisition of new skills relating to technology and new uses of technology in relation to sculpture throughout my professional life. You would think that this gave me an advantage in answering this module and allowed me to merely draw on my previous experience and place a piece of work before you. Alas no!

I have always regarded the idea as sacrosanct in any production. Everything is sacrificed to the idea. If I can only realise it with technology then I learn it and do it. If it requires a pencil, that's what I use.

My research through the Input/Output module has led me to attempt to combine two strands of art, Sound art and Environmental art. It is not something that has not been done before but is something that I have not considered.

I have been fascinated to explore the sound works of Bill Fontana and Janet Cardiff and to reacquaint myself with Richard Long and Hamish Fulton. I have also explored some ideas of narrative and the desire to organise and interpret which seems fundamentally human.

This paper outlines the areas I have looked at, briefly, and then describes my reasons for combining the two into a single artwork. Following this is a description of the process of development and an assessment of the effectiveness of the final piece.

Context 1: The Art of Noise

'the art of noise must not limit itself to imitative reproduction'
Luigi Russolo, *L'arte dei Rumori (The Art of Noises) 1913*

Sound art is generally agreed to have begun with Russolo's manifesto. Futurism was a dynamic, fascist outpouring of the machismo of progress, he envisaged the *"…muttering of motors that breathe and pulse with an undeniable animality, the throbbing of valves, the bustle of pistons, the shrieks of power saws, the starting of a streetcar on the tracks, the cracking of whips, the flapping of awnings and flags."(1)*

Subsequently sound became fundamental to the Dadaists, particularly through Marcel Duchamp whose influence would reverberate through the sixties and seventies and through Hugo Ball, the co-founder of Zurich Dada. Ball was instrumental in establishing the Cabaret Voltaire where one evening he '*read his "Verses without words", based on the equilibrium of vowels, regulated and distributed exclusively in relation to the phonic value of the initial line.'(2)*

At the same time in Russia artists like Wassily Kandinsky and Aleksandr Scriabin were exploring similar areas, such as the links between visual and aural perception. Arseni Avraamov arrived at the quintessence of the 'art of noise' in Russolo's definition with his Symphony of Factory sirens to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Soviet Republic.

These early works revel in the pleasures of noise, after the Second World War artists listened more for subtle harmony in the general hubbub of humanity. John Cage was a central figure in this development. His 4'33", apparently silent, involved the chance variation of ambient sound, the piano lid is opened and closed, members of the audience cough, and programs rustle.

The essence of one major strand of contemporary Sound Art is to alter the context of noises to change them into something else. Artists like Bill Fontana (3) and Janet Cardiff (4) explore the sensations created by everyday noises re-contextualised by the artwork. In a paper on the relocation of ambient sound, Bill Fontana explains the beginnings of his work in this area…

'Influenced by Duchamp's strategy of the found object, I began to realize that the relocation of an ambient sound source within a new context would alter radically the acoustic meaning of the ambient sound source. I conceived such relocations in sculptural terms because ambient sounds are sculptural in the way they belong to a particular place. To make art out of an ambient sound, the act of placing this sound would have considerable aesthetic importance' (5)

Janet Cardiff explores the idea of new contexts for sounds by devising walks in which the audience, of one, is accompanied by an audio track. The blend of ambient sounds and voice on the tape guides the viewer through the walk directing attention to particular things along the way and digressing into memories evoked by sounds and the environment. The result for both these artists is to redefine the spaces and alter the viewer's experience of them. For Fontana history resonates through the space, for Cardiff a more personal history underscores the experience.

The journalist Steven Poole writing in the Guardian newspaper in November 2001 describes the experience of one of Cardiff's pieces.
One work that revels in the form's multimedia possibilities is Canadian artist Janet Cardiff's work The Missing Voice (Case Study B), which is part radio play, part performance poetry, part sonic design and part portable installation. In London's Whitechapel Library, I am given a Sony Discman. Through the headphones, a woman begins talking. She seems paranoid. There are sounds of other library-users: scuffling feet, brushes of paper against paper. Soon the woman tells me to go outside. I am led through the rainy, mazy streets for 45 minutes, following a fragmentary, surreal detective story. I am never quite sure if a police siren or a

passing lorry is real or only on the CD. At one point gunfire erupts; inside a church, a heavenly choir sings out of nowhere. (6)

Janet Cardiff. Forest Walk 1991

Context 2: Walking the Line

A WALK IN A GREEN FOREST

TWO SNAKES   A DOUBLE HALO AROUND THE SUN   CROAKING FROGS
SUMMER AIR CONDENSING OVER WINTER SNOW   RAIN HAMMERING ON
THE TENT   RIVERS TURNING FROM CLEAR TO MUDDY   CLOUDY NIGHT
NO-MOON BLACKNESS   A MUD SLIDE   ROCKS CRACKING TO THE TOUCH
GLOW-WORMS   WATCHING MOONLIGHT TURNING INTO DAWN   THE
FOOTPATH PASSING THROUGH A CLEFT TREE   A NIGHT OF THUNDER AND
LIGHTNING   A LARGE CHESTNUT TREE STRUCK DOWN   A FAMILY OF
MONKEYS   THE MILKY WAY SHINING BETWEEN THE CRESTS OF A RAVINE
MAGNOLIA TREES LIKE PATCHES OF SNOW   CUCKOOS AND WOODPECKERS
SITTING ON A MOUNTAINTOP AMID BEECHES AND BAMBOO   THE DAYTIME
RACKET OF FOREST LIFE   SLEEPING BY THE SOUND OF A RIVER AND A
WATERFALL   UNDER A TREE THE CHAOTIC BEAT OF RAINDROPS   STREAMS
RISING AND FALLING WITH PASSING DOWNPOURS   BREAKING CAMP
AND BREAKING A CIRCLE LINE   A WINDLESS WALK   TADPOLES AND LILAC

EIGHT DAYS WALKING IN THE SHIRAKAMI MOUNTAINS
AOMORI JAPAN 1997

'A walk in a green forest' Richard Long 1997

In the 1960s and 1970s a movement of artists rejected the exhibition spaces of museums and galleries as too limiting and prescriptive. They worked outside traditional art like painting and sculpture. Instead, these artists created art that transformed an area of land using rock and soil. The best known examples are Walter De La Maria's lightning field, Dennis Oppenheim's Salt Flat of 1968, Smithson's Spiral Jetty (1970) and works by James Turrell, Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy.

Richard Long and Hamish Fulton in particular regard the walk as a form of artwork in itself. Fulton has said that *'If I do not walk, I cannot make a work of art' (7)* and Long speaks of walking as a '*means for me to explore relationships between time, distance, geography and measurement.'(8)*

It is significant that for both artists the walk is a solitary activity. Although the walk is active, the act is not a performance. In the exhibited work the experience becomes a text, a 3d drawing utilising the materials of the location, or a photograph. For an artist like Goldsworthy the walk is a means of reaching a sculpture created in a

remote location and serves to prepare the viewer for the experience. An experience that for Goldsworthy is increasingly tied to the site and the history of the environment the object occupies.

On his official website Richard Long speaks of his first work *'…made by walking, in 1967, was a straight line in a grass field, which was also my own path, going 'nowhere' (*8) and goes on to explain his desire to create a new art form that served as a distillation of experience.

The works use a narrative device to provide a record of an experience and promote the idea that the exhibited work is a kind of archive of experience. A kind of memento.

Project Proposal:

'He is learning, well behind his desperate eyes,
The epistemology of loss…'

The Ball Poem, John Berryman (9)

While viewing or experiencing the works described earlier, I was struck by need to interpret, to, as it were, add narrative. Narrative is fundamental to human understanding. We demand the story and interpret seemingly random events through this need for connectivity. Angela Carter notes in an essay on folk tales that *'Language exists before its own written form. The voice is the first instrument of literature; narrative precedes text.'*(10)

Narrative in this sense is not purely the story; it is the effects or ramifications of the story on us. Much in the same way as we read poetry we read works of art – literally in the sense of most land artists – the sounds of Bill Fontana becoming changed in meaning through context cause us to question and interpret, we re-contextualise the sound again, after the artist has confused us.

In the Ball Poem, written early in his career, John Berryman writes of an experience remembered and the ambiguity of our encounter as readers with that experience. For him this centres on the increasing realisation of himself as a poet and his acceptance of this. Being a poet means that he is perpetually engaged in the consideration of loss - lost love, growing old, becoming disappointed. Do we read it as a memoir or as universality? Is the human experience of loss universal? Can a boy losing a ball serve as a metaphor for all the losses we experience in our lives?

Ambiguity here is centred on our desire as readers to become participants. In the case of an artwork or poem or piece of music we are asked to encounter. The encounter is always more than simply reading or seeing or listening, it is experiencing. This experience is ambiguous because we are simultaneously part of it and external to it. At the same time we critically view and assess the experience and we take part in it, it also exists as object, if you will, independently of the process of its being experienced.

I propose to create a work that explores this ambiguity through remembered sounds transposed to a new environment. The work would vary depending on location and would not be specific to a place.

Imagine a conversation heard on the train or in a restaurant, between people you don't know and about things that you would normally regard as private. Imagine overhearing a conversation between lovers in a forest or woodland, you can't see them, you don't hear it all, but you get the gist of a disagreement. In each case you find that the ambient noise, at first irritating, becomes a counterpoint to the conversation, illustrating the dilemma. Should you be listening?

I intend to record conversations, the couple in the restaurant, music, traffic noise, machinery and so on, at a distance so that the sounds are muffled, distant, but still audible and relay them in woodland. Simultaneously the sounds of the woodland, the lovers conversation, animals, leaves rustling, dogs barking, cattle lowing etc., would be relayed in a public space like a restaurant. The sounds would attract attention and when you tried to see who was speaking you would see an object rather than a person. Or there would be nothing to find, just the sound.

Progress:

The first thing to note is that it very quickly became apparent that my project was far too ambitious for the timescale. The prospect of setting up a linked recording and delivery system between two locations, one of which was outdoors, though not impossible is too big a project to engage in for this module.

The first thing I did when I looked at my diary was to reassess the project aims. My intention is to combine the idea of walking as an artwork with the re-contextualising of the sound in that environment. So if I can't do it for real I can produce examples of what it might be like.

I decided to shoot short 15 second films with my digital camera as stage 1. This would give me the footage and the accompanying sound. I would then transfer the sounds between environments. Thus the scene of walking in the city would be accompanied by the sounds of running water, while the view of a stream would be accompanied by the sounds of traffic and city life.

This was relatively easy to do, using After Effects to extract the sound as a .wav file and the film as an .avi then Blaze Media Pro to reconstruct the videos and, after experimentation, to convert them to wmv format. This proved the most effective way to produce the works and the examples provided were all created with this method.

The problem with these pieces is that they are too simple. There are not enough clues to suggest the appropriate narrative. This is not to say there is no narrative, it is impossible to reduce the scene to no story whatsoever (?)(11)

After spending several hours (approx 120) trying various permutations of this methodology I produced a page of trials under the heading of test pieces that are available on the website and decided on the final piece, to be a simple one minute video based on a journey with the soundtrack of memory.

To aid the development of the soundtrack for the one minute video I used Adobe Audition 1.5 utilising clips taken from videos of a holiday I took some two years ago.

Conclusion:

As with every piece of work I've ever produced there is more potential than achievement. In a way that's only the nature of life! This is the first time I've ever worked with video and sound and I found the process fascinating and frustrating in equal measure.

The piece I have made works for me in the juxtaposition of the 15-second clips and the implied, or at least possible, narrative. The sound track is less effective but does work to some degree.

Actually I can't really say any of the above, all I can say is that I'll need to look at it later and think about it.

I've learned to use After Effects, Blaze Media and Adobe Auditions; I've used my digital camera more creatively than I have in the past and I've learned a bit more about HTML.

All in all a good experience.

Notes:

(1) Luigi Russolo, *L'arte dei Rumori (The Art of Noises) 1913* this version from http://www.unknown.nu/futurism/noises.html

(2) Ubuweb *http://www.ubu.com/sound/ball.html* accessed 14/12/2004. There are some good sound files in real and MP3 format on the site.

(3) http://www.resoundings.org/Pages/Falling%20Echoes%20.html Falling Echoes, Bill Fontana

(4) http://www.abbeymedia.com/Janweb/chiaro.htm Janet Cardiff's work.

(5) Bill Fontana, The Relocation of Ambient Sound: Urban Sound Sculpture, http://www.resoundings.org/Pages/Urban%20Sound%20Sculpture.html,

(6) Poole, Steven. Prick Up your Ears. Guardian November 17 2001, http://www.guardian.co.uk/saturday_review/story/0,3605,596122,00.html

(7) Quoted on Tate Britain website http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/hamishfulton/

(8) http://www.richardlong.org/

(9) Berryman, John Collected Poems 1937-1971, Faber London 1990 pp 11

(10) Carter, Angela Expletives Deleted; Selected Writings, Chatto & Windus London 1992 pp20

(11) Or is it? There is potential for some further study here.