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Reflection on the Sound Art Symposium

I found the Sound Art Symposium to be an interesting display of cultural and personal understandings of the world around us. Through this course, I have learned that sounds are a means through which to investigate issues of cultural history and theory, the sense of the human body, and our relationship to the world around us. Sound art provides us with the opportunity to tap into the unique, peripheral aspects of sound and learn through individuals like Alvin Lucier that an idea can define form, rather than form defining the idea. Through the conversations at the sound art symposium, I was able to dive deeper into understandings like Lucier's, the various intentional choices that artists make, and the stylistic issues that help to differentiate artists in today's sound art community.

To start, I found Alvin Lucier to be an influential in terms of letting the idea create the form, rather than the form creating the idea. In his discussion, Alvin took a hard stance against the other discussants, explaining that if you have an idea in one setting – be that a drawing, sheet music, etc. – this idea can then be transposed and implemented in various settings around the world. While it is never the exact same in replication, this is not a major problem; all that matters is that our central idea can be seen in the recreation. To that end, I noticed that Alvin focused heavily on the idea of flexibility and being open to these types of changes. This ties in well to his history and roots as an artist, working heavily with individuals like Frederic Rzewski and the Sonic Arts Union (Gordon Mumma and Robert Ashley). Through these relationships, Lucier

learned that there were profound and interesting alternatives to the classical forms of composing. While for his whole life Lucier recognized that composers had a score containing concrete structure and purpose to a piece of music, there was the opportunity to take these notes away from the page and implement them in dynamic and fluid ways.

One specific example that shows just how Lucier found his interest in art off of the sheet music was by finding the resonant frequency of a room by saying the simple words of “I am sitting in a room.” Over time, as he continued to play these words back and record their response, he was able to arrive at the resonant harmony of the room. In doing so, Alvin demonstrates to us this concept of letting an idea create a form, rather than a form creating an idea. By stating these simple words repeatedly, Lucier arrives at a form over a substantial amount of time – that form is the resonant frequency of the room around him. In many other cases, artists would think to start with a frequency and go from there, whereas Lucier lets his idea carry him to his final product: the resonant frequency of the room. While many artists struggle to make this leap Lucier explains that this is what is so crucial about sound art – the ability to stretch beyond the tunnel vision of classical art and composing and dive into new directions of thinking in terms of sound.

Through his work at the Bema, Lucier exposes one last important concept of his work: the ability for sound to function as a medium in art. As we noted in class, Lucier has placed several deep Bose speakers underground to emit a heavy, wobbling bass tune throughout the day. These tunes stand out if you are aware of them and intentionally listen, however, to the average listener, they almost sound natural and in rhythm with the surroundings. Similar to Lucier’s input at the symposium, this piece is flexible and open to the surrounding environment – in fact, it is in many ways a fusion of the two. In this

way, I found these two components (sound and surrounding environment) to be complementary, and I think that in making them one cohesive piece, Lucier utilizes the sound as a medium to make his piece function. Through the droning sound, the woods of the Bema come to life, through the rumbling of the ground, we can almost sense the vibrancy of our living and moving world, and through the movement of the sound back and forth, we sense a movement in the woods around us. The sound in Lucier's work, in a sense, brings to life a living and breathing environment around us, and this would not be possible were it not for the medium of sound to make the piece run smoothly.

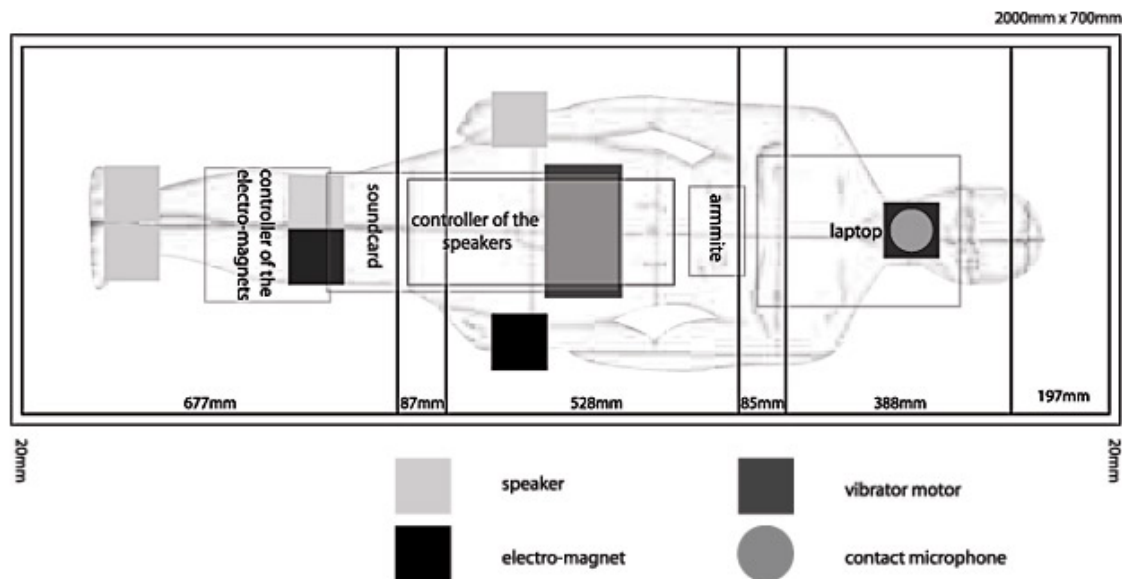
In contrast to Lucier, Jacob Kirkegaard had an opposing stance on Lucier's opinion that we must let our ideas define the form. In his piece *Transmission*, Kirkegaard lets the form of the environment around him influence his idea – the sound of his piece in Fairchild at Dartmouth College. In his piece, Kirkegaard records various underground, geological noises from Arizona and Utah, which offers a unique perspective into the deep rumblings of the world around us. He then takes these noises and puts them on different floors throughout Fairchild. On the first floor, we can hear very deep rumblings, while on the fourth floor, we can hear much lighter noises, such as birds rustling and whistling. While for Lucier, we see a case in which the sound defines the idea, Kirkegaard's idea (geologic sounds) defines the art. As he mentioned in the symposium, you can always change a score from location to location, but for a work as specific as *Transmission*, you can never recreate these noises and move them around to achieve the exact same viewing and listening experience. To that end, Kirkegaard shows us that there is not as much flexibility as Lucier had noted; rather, sound may still function as a medium of art, but this functionality may be very sound and location-specific.

During the symposium, we were also able to hear from Christine Sun Kim, an American sound artist that has been deaf since she was born. Among her goals as an artist, the most notable is her desire to “unlearn sound etiquette,” or the implicit rules that society has placed on sounds around us. Instead, Sun Kim has taken an approach towards sound that is profoundly unique in that it is broad and involves various sensory aspects such as touch. For Sun Kim, her inspiration derives from individuals like Pierre Schaeffer, a 20th century French composer that focused on the idea of sound being distant from its source, and more importantly, that sound becomes more of an object than an identifiable sound. To Sun Kim, this opened a door for her by making sound tangible, something that she could work with as a deaf individual.

In her piece at Dartmouth College, Sun Kim also proved that she is remarkably brave and fearless. Through *The Grid of Prefixed Acousmatics*, Sun Kim uses clay to help us understand how various sounds appear in her visual and textural world. As she mentioned, clay is similar to interpreters because she is able to cement an experience and validate sounds through things that are tangible. Most importantly for Sun Kim is the notion of sound functioning as a medium for her art. While many consider sound to be one-dimensional and closed to the senses, Sun Kim finds ways to access this medium through the other senses – something that is impressive in today’s closed-minded world. Given her background and success as a fearless artist, Sun Kim was one of my favorite guests at the sound art symposium.

I also enjoyed hearing Laura Maes speak, particularly about not only the diverse and broad aspect of each artist’s work, but also the commonality in being grounded in sound and materiality. One of the examples that she spoke about was *Oorwonde*, which is

an audio operating table made for the listener to lay down on and explore the notion of bodily hearing. For the piece, the sound begins when an individual lays down on her table in the piece and activates the various sensors around the project.



Maes opens our eyes to the sensation of sound, relative to the various pressure points of the human body. Similar to Christine Sun Kim, we see an intersection of sound and tangibility – the notion that sound does not have to relate specifically to what we hear, but also to what we touch. This is similar to her piece in Thayer School of Engineering at Dartmouth College, in that we see an interesting connection between light, something that we can sense with our eyes and skin, and the various lights and clicks within the entryway of Thayer. Again, Maes provides us with an opportunity to bridge a gap between the human senses, showing us that there is a commonality if we look beyond the classical “etiquette” of sound art.

Overall, I found the sound art symposium to be a great display of the wide variety of ways in which we can take in the substance and beauty of noise in today’s world. Through these speakers, it became clear that sound is inherently interdisciplinary rather

than one-directional and unrelated to the other senses. From Sun Kim's vibrant clay work to Kirkegaard's earthly sound art in Fairchild, we can see the fusion of the world around us to our own personal lives, using sound as a medium in the process. To that end, I think it is important to keep our peripherals open, just as these individuals have. With this approach, we can expand our understanding of sound in relation to the world around us and move forward in this progressive realm along with the artists at the sound art symposium.

Works Cited

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