

What Is Sound Art?

Interviews with Jeph Jerman, Annea
Lockwood, Chris Mann, Alvin Lucier and
Stephen Vitiello

by N.B.Aldrich

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Introduction

Sound Art as nomenclature for the work of a growing body of artists is in common usage. Major presenters and world-wide opinion leaders in the contemporary art world such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art, MassMoca, the Hayward Gallery in London and the ICC in Tokyo routinely present Sound Art. Smaller venues regularly featuring (or in some cases entirely dedicated to) sound installations have appeared in most major cities. Festivals in many different countries focus on the work of Sound Artists who now receive major funding from public and private granting institutions around the world. Sound Art has arrived. It's hot. But what is it? Is Sound Art music? Is it distinct from traditional music in some meaningful way? If so, what is the distinction?

I came to this project with no particular thesis. I wanted to ask a diverse group of artists whose work I find interesting, exciting, challenging and intriguing, and who are considered Sound Artists, about their work. What did they think of a categorical Sound Art? I opened each interview with some variation on the question: "What is Sound Art?," then let the conversation organically proceed from there. I came rather quickly to realize that though I may have had no conscious thesis, I had an agenda. I found myself returning repeatedly to a few areas of inquiry in my pursuit of the topic question. Surely the key to unlocking Sound Art lay in discerning difference (vis-a-vis music) in these areas: the sound material used in the construction of the work, or what the piece is made of; the foundational ideas of structure (especially as it contrasts to traditional musical structure), or how the piece is made; the intent of the work, or why the work is made; and the mode of publication of the work, or how is the piece intended to

be heard. These were the parameters of my investigation. Not surprisingly, I found these parameters coincided more exactly or less exactly to the artists ideas of their work depending on the artist. There is no definitive consensus. That in itself is an important acknowledgement. Sound Art is as diverse as the group of artists that it comprises. But Sound Art is a categorical reality. It has arrived and it has arrived from somewhere and, much like me with this project, it too has its agenda. The artists I interviewed are motivated to inquire and to present their works in a context we previously considered music. So, what is Sound Art?

The stuff of musical composition has certainly undergone radical change since WWII. With the advent of magnetic tape, sound recording became (relatively) inexpensive, easy, editable and redo-able. The composer could now utilize any sound that was recordable as material and mold that material into work as different from the popular song or the traditional symphony as the sound of the wind and water is from the sound of a string section. This *musique concrete*, as Pierre Schaeffer coined it in 1949, begins a line of musical thinking that continues vigorously today and that branches into some of the most important and stimulating work associated with Sound Art. But not just the idea of capturing 'any sound' informs the new musical aesthetic. In short order, with John Cage (in *William's Mix*, 1952) as with others to follow, the 'found' sound is appropriated as material. The artist need not necessarily record what he or she observes, but can use what the world provides to reflect the way the world is, much the way visual artists did at the beginning of the century (i.e. Braque and Picasso in their *papier colle* and collage work; Duchamp with his readymades). And if recorded audio material can be appropriated for compositional use, why not translate the sounds that inaudibly surround us? Broadcast sounds are everywhere waiting to be received, and the universe is bombarding us with a steady palette of audio information to be decoded and incorporated in the artistic process. Probably no other previously held musical characteris-

tic has been so radically changed in the last 50 years as the notion that a discrete field of carefully groomed, mathematically-related frequencies is the sole legitimate content of music. And this shift in expectation of content naturally adjusts the listening process in general. Listening to (and for) all sounds as potential material for artistic construction heightens the sense that beauty is observable in the day-to-day world; aesthetic material is always around you, all you have to do is notice. John Cage's notion of silence is just this: Silence is not the absence of sound, but the sound that happens apart from the listener's expectation (or the composer's control). Ambience. This is all fundamentally important today; elemental in the re-thinking of what makes up musical composition.

There is also a fundamental shift in conceptualizing the instrument which is born of the technology of the latter half of the 20th century, particularly with the advent of the computer. The tape machine begins to be thought of as an instrument. Certainly a microphone is considered by many artists today as a primary instrument. And with the advent of the computer, the ability to capture and manipulate sound (or anything else that can be reduced to data) is amplified exponentially. Computers also provide the calculating power to create sounds that had not previously existed. Though audio synthesis began as an analogue adventure in a few discrete laboratories run by visionary pioneers, it explodes into the marketplace and the art world at large when it communes with computer technology, particularly the personal computer. The creation of new sounds or radical modification of existing sounds through any number of powerful and fascinating off-the-shelf filtering systems is commonplace today. However, one of the most interesting things about the computer as an artistic tool is the opportunity to interpret any information by translating it into a common language: computer code. In this translation process, a sort of hyper-synaesthesia ensues in which all the trackable components of experience can be captured, processed and re-expressed as a different experience (i.e. sound becomes visual, motion becomes audible, any discrete activity can be calculated and

repackaged for the senses). Subsequently, interface and instrument design start to define new models of musical (and overall artistic) activity.

New models of musical activity imply new ideas of structure, of methods for construction. It is not surprising to note that with the introduction of new material into the musical lexicon, new and innovative thinking about how that material works compositionally also arises. In the 1950s, John Cage with indeterminacy and chance operations, Iannis Xenakis with stochastic composition, Karlheinz Stockhausen with statistical composition all begin to model methods of composition that more and more lead the composer away from the traditional role of constructing an exacting map of what a musical piece sounds like toward a place that more readily accepts the free-ranging material now at the composer's hand. Again, it is Cage who breaks most radically from tradition by introducing intentional randomization as an integral part of the compositional process. If the world we perceive is in great part the result of the random behavior of the universe, should the art we make conform to that process? Isn't absolute determinism an inaccurate reflection of the universal order? With this line of questioning Cage directly challenges the traditional thinking of how a musical work is structured. But it is with the rise of the Conceptual Art movement in the mid-1960s that not only is the how of composition redressed, but the why.

If art is to be socially relevant, the Conceptualist declares, it must transcend the notion of the aesthetic object. The Modernist's pretension that formalism is the true realm of Art, with its champions (such as Jackson Pollock) formalizing their innermost workings in bursts of expression, is rejected. Form is grammar, content lies elsewhere. Content lies in ideas. And ideas lead to critical thinking which unifies artistic endeavors with philosophy, psychology, politics, sociology, ecology and environmentalism, indeed any human pursuit in which the mind is critically engaged. Art in general becomes a meta-structure for cultural goals. Composers now need to ex-

plore how the world operates and use their work to reflect that exploration, which, of course, harkens back to Cage. Field recordings are not just aesthetic objects, but philosophical reverberants. Game theory as a compositional practice models processes of social organization and human interaction. So, much as the computer offers an opportunity to translate information from one medium to the next, the artist now thinks of the same translation when creating work: how is ecology reflected in sound, how is social organization reflected in compositional structure, how is political activity reflected drama, etc. As music had previously opened up to all sounds, the art world now opens up to all disciplines. Though the art object continues to be produced and the intuitive manifestation of the individual remains at the core of the artistic impulse, the notion of the artist as social observer and commentator begins to be central to art practice in general.

There is another interesting ramification of the Conceptual Art movement which has an impact on the music world (and the new Video Art world as well). The Conceptual Artists, mostly from the ranks of the Visual Arts, in their anti-establishmentarianism revolted against the "gallery system". In their refusal to create aesthetic objects merely as commodities for consumption they sought to leave the art gallery behind. They preferred, theoretically at least, to dematerialize the work. Art's true merit lay in its ideas, not in the objects which are the byproducts of those ideas. A (perhaps metaphorical) vacuum was created since the presentation and sale of an idea was (intentionally, from the artists' perspective) problematic. Music and video thus had an opportunity to present themselves in a new forum: the gallery environment. As this new forum beckoned to the musician, it created the need for a new form and that form became the installation. It is perhaps here that Sound Art truly comes into its own as music gets the opportunity to manifest itself in a way that is less about performance and more about existing in time and space.

The art installation is a product of Conceptualism in that it seeks to be a work of art which is not an art object. It is an environment. It is a place where the audience is participating, or, rather, completing the art work through experiencing the environment. In the context of music it is the opportunity for publication without performance. It is also the opportunity for an audience to engage work in their own time, the time they spend walking through the space, rather than be presented with a form that can only be engaged in its own time. The performance of a piece of music and the recording of a piece of music, in contrast to the installation, behave exactly the same, both being fixed in the temporal relationship they will have with the listener. This new audition environment frees the listener from that fixed relationship. Stay for five minutes or stay for five hours, the decision is the listener's. The installation also offers a different spatial context from the traditional music performance, be it live or recorded. A traditional music performance will expect the audience member to have a static spacial relationship to the sound, even if the sound is spatially animated and moves about the performance space. The listener's position in the space will only incur minor variations in experience, and that is the goal. The installation, however, invites the listener to create his or her own spatial relationship to the piece by moving through it and creating an individualized path or sequence. This intended personalizing of the experience is the uniqueness of the installation as a mode of publicizing a work of art.

So the areas of material, structure, intent and mode of publication seem to be key places to look in trying to distinguish how music might have come to be considered Sound Art. The protestation that Sound Art is as much a semantic move as anything else is at points supported in the following interviews, but then again, the artist working in the post-Conceptual Art world may see no distinction between works of self-expression and works of social critique, they are part and parcel of the same activity. Just as the notion that the sound of traffic or the wind is musically on par with the sound of the guitar or clarinet is no stretch for the post-Cagean musi-

cian. The landscape of audio composition today is as broad and rich as it has ever been and the artists working in that landscape utilize many new and fascinating ideas in their pursuits, challenging traditional notions of music, listening and awareness while creating new compositional standards and aesthetic milestones as they go.

I would like to extend my most sincere thanks to the artists who conceded to participate in this inquiry. The thought and care and time they offered was gracious and the ideas and experiences relayed are enlightening.

N.B.Aldrich

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Jeph Jerman

NBA: Your background is as a musician, how did you start using field recordings as a mode of expression?

JJ: Actually, I think I started with tape recorders and sound-makers that I found around my parent's house. I don't think I ever separated these ways of working with sound. It was after I began playing "conventional" music that I found out that other people frowned on weird noises. I don't really hear field recordings as expressive. It's sound, and one listens to it.

NBA: But don't you think that there is great emotive potential in natural sounds and that's why it's so alluring as material? Aren't they inherently full of expression?

JJ: Perhaps some people hear them this way. Emotive potential lies in the context that sounds are placed in. Each listener will get something different from a sound depending on taste, upbringing, etc. How is it possible to know what the wind means with its sound? Another way to put it: the thing that the sound of wind expresses is the wind.

NBA: Do you consider the pieces you produced as Hands To music?

JJ: At first, I decided that Hands To wasn't music, simply because the pieces I was working on didn't seem to fit into any a priori idea of music. There was also at the time a lot of playing with ideas about what sound does to the listener physically. Friends argued the point with me, and these days I'd be more inclined to say that the Hands To works definitely are music. They are sounds, arranged according to my own likes and dislikes, and set into a

context, albeit a sometimes rather obtuse one!

NBA: So would that be a working definition of music for you? Sounds arranged and set into a context? Is there an audio art which isn't music?

JJ: No, I don't think so. But again, it's up to each listener to decide. I suppose that we could separate sound into categories of "human-made" versus "natural", or "nature-made", and then art would be the human-made, sounds arranged and put into a context BY HUMANS. I don't think that any audio art made by people cannot be called music. It depends on what one has heard and what one is willing to entertain. If a person enters a room which contains a sound installation, and doesn't really listen to it, then perhaps this installation for them could be denoted "aural wallpaper". Music is a judgement made by each listener. I don't think that the idea of sound being expressive is "wrong", it's just not the way I think. I have come to this perception after many years of working with sound, trading things with others, listening constantly...this is what works for me.

NBA: Could you elaborate on the ideas you were working with regarding what sound does to the listener physically?

JJ: I was interested in the things William Burroughs wrote about, and tried a few of them out. Taking tape recorders into large crowds of people to see what happened. Using the record-playback-record method to interfere with street preachers. I made tapes using nothing but human body sounds and used them on occasion to try and alter my own and other's bodily responses by playing the tapes directly into someone's body and monitoring the result with a cheap biofeedback monitor. I was also, at the time, interested in the emotive potential of sound divorced from its origin. I was processing sounds in such a way as to make their origins unknowable, wanting to know if the emotion of these sounds carried through without one knowing their source. For example, a piece on the LP Vinhilation used sounds

from the atom bomb tests made by the U.S. in the 1940s, coupled with Robert Oppenheimer's voice intoning: "Now I am become death." The voice was buried so far under the other sounds as to be undetectable. It seemed to work sometimes. I guess what I'm getting at is that it is the mind which gives, not perceives, meaning, not the sound.

NBA: Would you mind talking a little about how you go about structuring compositions? I suspect in the performances you do now there is a lot of improvisation, but the arrangement of the pieces that use recorded material must be quite a different process. Any thoughts on the difference and how you approach that difference?

JJ: Yes, my performances now are improvised, taking into account the room in which I am making sound, and whatever else is going on. The structure of the older compositions, the Hands To recordings, etc., was pretty intuitive. They unfolded through whatever process I was working with. In the earliest work, it was using loops and a small sampling keyboard to build washes of "emotional" sound. As I moved into using field recordings exclusively, the structures were still intuitive. Sometimes they deal with how sounds relate to each other inside the piece, but more often it is the result of assembling something on tape and then asking: "what's next?" There is no template or form I'm working to fill in. I start with sound, not idea.

NBA: Do you consider yourself in the "acoustic ecology" group of recording artists? I'm thinking of Eric La Casa, Seth Nehil or Francisco Lopez, for example.

JJ: Not a bad bunch of guys to be associated with. These labels cannot be avoided, and striving to discredit them is just spending energy needlessly. Where is the labeling? I have referred to myself as a musician most of my life. A sound artist? Okay. How about listener?

NBA: The acoustic ecology association is generated, I suspect, from your choice of material, both in the field recordings and in the choice of your recent performance instruments which tend to be found (or collected) objects of natural origin. How did you start thinking of these particular objects as instruments? There are some native American references here, are there not?

JJ: Yes, I see the correlation, and I don't deny the connection of my choices of sound-making tools with an ecological point of view. I am careful however to point out that said POV was not my "starting point". I fell in love with these sounds. Quiet sound has always drawn my ear more than blasting volume. There are native American references because they clicked in my mind, and seemed to relate to whatever I was working on at the time. Yes, the ideas of a people living "closer to nature" were involved, but also the Indians less complicated world view and symbols. Their talk of "spirit" and the unknown that is everywhere evident. I would not attach these kinds of ideas to my work now.

NBA: I'm curious about the printed insert in the nazha CD. You seem to be requesting the listener take a specific approach to the CD, or to your work in general. Is there a way of perceiving your work which you think may not be assumed by the listener? Do we listen today differently than we may have in the past?

JJ: A very good question. I am concerned that we do not listen at all. The notes that accompanied nazha were largely at Manifold Record's request. They thought that the sound quality was not up to snuff and requested that I write a disclaimer. The notes are instructing one to listen, not to use the sound as wallpaper or an emotional mnemonic prod, which is what music has become. If one is thinking critically, annoyed by "poor" sound quality, or anything else at the time, one is not listening. I gave a copy of nazha to

a friend who had trouble with it, wanting to know my intent and saying that she "had no frame of reference" to be able to listen. In other words, she didn't know how to listen without having some intellectual concept to hang on. If I said that my intention at the time was to make a piece of Sound Art, would that change how you perceive it?

NBA: I think it might, for me.

JJ: It's that I never think of these things when I'm working. It is all after the fact, and usually others who do that kind of thinking.

NBA: Have you ever done work geared for publication other than CD and/or performance, like installation work or sound design? Might the context in which the piece is presented affect its sense of being music?

JJ: Yes, I've done a few installations. I'm looking into doing more of them, as I like the idea of not being the focus of the thing. I also like the notion of setting something up which can run indefinitely. My dream is to have my own building with slowly changing sound installations, different for each room. Sure, context could change one's sense of what one was perceiving. perhaps we could eventually just drop the term music altogether, or, realize that what gets played on our radio and television broadcasts isn't music, but public self-promotion on a grand scale.

NBA: You seem quite committed to separating out the work of art and the commodity in the entertainment marketplace. Can the artist, or art, find a comfortable place co-existing between the two in our current social environment?

JJ: I very often doubt it. I think that creative work and commerce are opposites. The impulses for each originate in different parts of the brain. Art is

the end result of a human creative process. Commerce is the attempt to better one's position in life through material gain.

NBA: Earlier you said: "it's sound, and one listens to it, which strikes me as a very Cagean notion of how to engage both sound and the world in general. I also noted you quote Cage in the liner material on the Second Attention CD. Was John Cage much of an influence on your work?"

JJ: I went round and round with Cage, reading and listening to his stuff from a very early age. I was unimpressed for a long time because I didn't understand anything about it. In recent years I have come to study Cage's point of view and am surprised at how close it is to things I've been feeling more and more, but haven't been able to voice. So, Cage has probably been an influence on me, at least in the sense of encouragement.

NBA: Who would you list as influential in shaping you artistically?

JJ: I'm always at a loss when it comes to this influence question. I always say that the thing that got me really seriously started working with sound was an old Ken Nordine record, Word Jazz. I know that everything influences us in some way, so probably everything I've ever heard or seen has influenced me.

NBA: Other than music or sound influences, are there any other critical keys to you as an artist you consciously (or subconsciously) use: painters, poets, philosophies/phers, geographies/phers?

JJ: I read a lot of biographies of artists, naturalist writing and books about natural science. I'm very interested in "fringe" science, people like Tesla, Reich, Schauberger; archeology, geology, and many books about Zen Buddhism and related fields. I am very interested in consciousness and our un-

derstanding of it. Perhaps a lot of my work stems from these studies.

NBA: But you don't feel your work specifically addresses these issues, they more form the environment from which the work emerges, would you say? You apply ideas of awareness and perception to the work as opposed to discussing them in the work?

JJ: The ideas float around in my mind, so to speak, and so the work exists alongside them. I try hard not to apply any ideas to a collection of sound that I've recorded or performed (very difficult, I know) by not including any written information with a work when it enters the public domain. Anyone wanting to know what it's all about has to contact me. When I perform, I believe my task is to "forget myself". Perhaps the work does specifically address issues of awareness and perception by its very nature, but maybe this just comes with the territory. If people ask about what I do, I usually say that I am offering a chance to listen. When placing this activity into a reproducible medium, it becomes the property, intellectual and otherwise, of the person listening. I guess what it comes down to is whether one believes in an objective viewpoint or not. I do not. I know that there is an objective reality, but human perception is most often closed to it. For me, the important thing is listening. What happens when we listen?

Annea Lockwood

AL: Sound Art. I find it a useful term, but why? I apply it to the pieces I make using electroacoustic resources, and which I intend to be presented in galleries, museums, other places in which sound is, increasingly, conceived of as a medium per se, like video, lasers, but not as performance. For example, I'm currently working on a large audio installation, a Sound Map of the Danube, which I think of as Sound Art. I also recently finished a commission for the All-Stars band, which it wouldn't cross my mind to call 'sound art'. That's the big difference for me, between music and Sound Art. There's some distinction to do with the conceptual, also. I think maybe what's termed 'sound art' doesn't intend connection to the linguistic. Eventually, all styles of performance music become languages, even Cage's anti-linguistic works, as people become more and more familiar with his intentions and sound worlds. Nevertheless, perhaps the term was pragmatically conjured up for/by museum curators to account for sound's acceptance into their world.

NBA: Could you describe your use of "linguistic" here? Is the language the musical structures that we have created and now use to describe 'musical' ideas (ie, scales, interrelated rhythmic patterns, large-scale forms, etc.)?

AL: I think of music as built like a language because it is often structured to carry a flow of interrelated 'ideas' (rhythmic motifs, chord progressions, timbral ideas, etc.) which tend to create an audio narrative - often at the emotional level as well as perceptible structural levels. Feldman, in particular, is an exception to this, at least for me.

NBA: Is Cage's work anti-linguistic in the sense that it purposefully sets out to select material and organize it in a new way?

AL: Cage intended, as I 'read' him, to disrupt that narrative flow, letting 'sounds be sounds'. But it's hard not to hear/create connections when listening to a piece of his, simply because we're wired to look for them.

NBA: In the soundmapping work you do, I should probably say in the pieces made from sound recordings in general, is there a sense that the audio material itself sets the work apart from music?

AL: I can see that my electroacoustic pieces separate into two rough categories: Those in which I am assembling sounds in order to convey a concept; e.g. *Ground of Being* (2000) in which a great variety of sounds initially emerge from a particular central 'ground' sound, then that takes on characteristics of those emergent sounds, suggesting that all phenomena spring from the same source and are not separate from it. *Done for Engine 27*, as an audio installation, i.e. expecting that people could walk into and out of it at any time, in a non-traditional space. Those in which I am listening to what is there, without manipulating it beyond the act of recording, then editing into a continuum; e.g. the *Hudson River Sound Map* and the one I'm working on now, a *Sound Map of the Danube River*. I think of it as paying very close attention to the river, in an attempt to sense its nature. Manipulation would obscure what the river is, of course. However, nothing's actually completely discrete, no? With the Danube, my recordings will eventually become a multi-channel mix, with one site coming from one part of the space, and another, simultaneously coming from another area, so some degree of acoustic blending will result. Still, the structure will be that the work moves downstream - i.e. given by the river and this does set it apart from music, to my mind.

NBA: Is intuition a key factor in choosing and molding the material?

AL: No, intuition is not involved here. One aspect which often guides my choices is commonalities of acoustic properties between two sounds, enabling very smooth transitions between them; but as often, I like sharp juxtaposition.

NBA: The idea that the connections created by the listener construct the narrative is very interesting to me. Perhaps even the idea that the Hudson or the Danube create their own narrative flow (pun intended) as they travel from source to final outlet. Do you consider the (unintentional) narrative a river might offer as you select and order the recorded fragments?

AL: Not really. Listeners' narratives, I've learned, are very varied. Highly personal. I make selections from my takes based on sonic qualities, contrast between takes and, more intangibly, the degree to which a take has vividness, captures the river's energy for me. I choose how long to let a particular segment/sound run; I base that on how complex its texture is and a rough estimate of how long a listener is likely to remain engaged by it. It's important to me that a listener be able to become absorbed by a sound, to really 'enter' it, which takes time.

Chris Mann

CM: I always thought 'sound art' was a career move. John Cage went into mycology because 'mushroom' was the previous word in the dictionaries he consulted when trying to discover definitions of music. Other readers less influenced by oulipou were less interesting in their response, a damning indictment of nineteenth-century philology as practiced by twentieth-century hacks.

NBA: Who is sound art a career move for? The musician moving closer to the visual artist? The poet moving into the recording industry? For it to be a move it must be different than its other, mustn't it?

CM: A career move is a branding exercise. However, while Kodak discovered it didn't sell film, but rather something more generic, memory, the small traders were being small traders and small traders define a move as more than of the same. Work may be interesting and require me, or deem me to be some sort of adornment and basically irrelevant. Branding is an early move in declaring my redundancy.

NBA: How might you discern or decide which work requires you and which deems you irrelevant? It almost seems this wouldn't be knowable until a certain critical juncture where one or the other of you declares the terms of engagement.

CM: Regardless of the color of the invitation (and it is mainly my responsibility to recognize the invitation (meaning is an act of charity bestowed by the observer)), if my participation makes no difference or when work only solicits my agreement, I am irrelevant. The terms of dialogue or the possibility of conspiracy are not in and of themselves necessarily difficult to as-

certain. They may, of course, be composed.

NBA: You have said (written) "meaning has no consistency," would this imply an incident by incident interpretation of where you were relative to work?

CM: While consistency remains the beauty of context, presumably the object of meaning is transparency. It would seem that the way to show compassion to that which fails to exist, is formally (that form is the incident of work).

NBA: In that sense, how would the formal difference between the 'written word' and the 'heard word' construct differing responses in the receiver? I guess I'm thinking specifically, for me, the differences between reading, say, working hypothesis and listening to Machine For Making Sense. I react, behave, quite differently to the two experiences, though I remain very aware of the strong artistic anchor points which connect the two sets of work.

CM: Phenomenology obviously has a lot to answer for, though composing the psychology of perception is something to do.

NBA: Could you describe "compositional linguistics" as you use the term? It seems to be a synthetic of poetry and critical writing.

CM: Sometime early in your educational career at primary school a teacher makes a distinction between language and music. I was away that day and would like to think, probably wagging.

NBA: Interesting. In Poetics, Aristotle says poetry springs from two predispositions of man: imitation and the pursuit of harmony and rhythm, which

would indicate to me that your primary school teacher might have missed the primordial connection between music and language. Compositional linguistics, then, is replugging that connection? That would seem then to imply more an aural function than a written one, true?

CM: Replugging a connection suggests validating a distinction which is different from failing to make that distinction in the first place. Aristotle's imitation is also a euphemism for agreement and agreement as we know is the cheapest form of censorship. Composing sense is about composing social systems (language is the mechanism whereby you understand what I'm thinking better than I do (where 'I' is defined by those changes for which I is required)), and sound is useful if you want your social system to work at night or around corners.

NBA: So you're basically interested in psy-ops?

CM: Rhymes with composer, right?

NBA: A seemingly related quote of yours which I love is: "Sound is an un-analytic model of sense. It is a collaborator with no loyalties, no implications...sound is true imperialism." Could you explain this in a little more detail?

CM: The mouth is a tourniquet regulating blood flow to the brain. Sense is an accidental byproduct. And is therefore the perfect traitor. I mean, I didn't know I thought that. (There is a beautiful recording of Louis Armstrong teaching Lotte Lenya how to phrase Mack the Knife.)

NBA: You studied both music and Chinese in your formative years, I'm curious how the study of Chinese informed both the music and your subsequent linguistic work. I would think it formed a very instructive counter-

point.

CM: I studied Chinese for ten years from the age of ten and for a bunch of domestic reasons this was also my introduction to grammar and so spending much of my adolescence trying to map a non-Indo-European grammar on to English.

NBA: Did that grammatical difference also translate into approaching musical composition differently than you might have otherwise?

CM: My parents did a lot of recordings in the aboriginal and other working class and immigrant communities, so I guess I was reasonably alive to the aural and Chinese grammar was my first experience of the abstracted ordering of these and other possibilities, so it's not so much how it differed from other models, but that it was the model of norm. It's a version of what is a pretty standard experience for the children of immigrants and it has been the case for a while that the majority speakers of English speak it as a second language.

NBA: What were the recordings of? Speech? Music? Was this the soundscape of home for you, your parents recordings?

CM: A lot of recordings were done in our living room (not every, but most weekends) on an old Ferrograph tape recorder and as neither of my parents were particularly technically minded, I became the default recording engineer. Recordings were epic poems in Greek, bush yarns, contemporary Australian poetry, German cabaret, medieval Spanish ballads, standard nineteenth-century flute repertoire, jazz, lyrebirds.

NBA: My understanding of Chinese is very limited, but my impression is that the way alphabetic language represents speech and how pictographic

language depicts speech are quite conceptually and functionally different. I mention this because one of the striking parts of your work to me is, as I mentioned before, how very differently I react to the reading of your writing (I go very slowly) and the listening to your audio work (I go very quickly). Not that there is a specific correlation of how this all works, but how would you characterize the conceptual or functional differences between your written and your spoken work?

CM: Greek science and economics are both modeled on the meaningless Greek alphabet (meaningless in the sense that each letter has been shorn of any other significance) and the implications for politics are pretty obvious. The conspiracy that speech encourages between interlocutors seems to be both more sympathetic and politically volatile and while different media have different functions, I'm particularly interested in making stuff that requires or rewards a second take (which obviously includes asking your neighbor what they think), so reading with a pencil is more fun than without.

NBA: You also seem to be working beyond the notion of the artist presenting a perspective or point of view but using your work as an invitation to investigate the ideas inherent in the work, so the work becomes the starting point, not the end point of the creative process.

CM: Designing tools...or as Brun defines the composer: That without which something would not have happened.

NBA: John Cage used your text for the piece Eight Whiskus, how did that come about?

CM: Cage found 'words & classes' at Paul Sadowski's and we corresponded and later met in Washington.

NBA: Was Cage influential at a point in the development of your work?

CM: There are many attributes of Cage that are important to me (the politics of invention), but particularly his timing.

NBA: What do you mean?

CM: He's in the same league as Buster Keaton.

NBA: Are you a Beckett fan?

CM: "!" Anyone who refuses to write in their mother tongue because it's too poetic is a friend of mine.

NBA: Could you give me a little insight into the working processes of Machine For Making Sense? How much material is prepared and how much is improvised? Are directional indicators prearranged? I always think of Cage's professed dislike of improvisation and how that is sometimes so at odds with my perception of the universe at large.

CM: Apart from one or two pieces that involved stopwatch games, the informing consciousness of Machine was (composing) listening. The only prepared material was the vocabulary that any member brought to the proceedings. Rehearsal consisted of deciding where to eat. Cage was a study in loyalty, though he very properly recanted his anti-jazz foolishness, but don't ask me where.

NBA: When you record MFMS, are you all performing simultaneously? The timing is so furious and the action so organic, I'm curious about whether overdubbing is part of the process. An opportunity for rebuttal of sorts.

CM: One take. Real time.

NBA: When you say "vocabulary" I'm assuming you include text. Do you improvise texts much in your spoken work? When you work with Joel Chadabe, for instance, your readings are of previously written material.

CM: For MFMS, I bring text which is to say a bunch of words in a particular order. Amanda brings a bunch of words, some in order. Jim and Stevie bring instruments which are usefully played in a restricted number of ways and Rik has a bunch of tapes and CDs and a pause button. We all bring muscle memory and a collective history. These constitute a vocabulary of sorts. All decisions or realizations otherwise are improvised. It's the only way I know to set about a conspiracy.

NBA: Indeed. I assume MFMS has a live performance history, is that something that happens any more or is MFMS now defunct? And in that light, does the conspiracy spill over with regularity into the audience, is the kind of activity that MFMS engages in seem to inspire response? It's hard to picture people sitting politely while you all have on with it.

CM: We worked together for I guess about seven years, mainly Australia and Europe, and Jim and Stevie and Rik and Amanda still get together on occasion. Altogether happier with an audience. Studios (including live to air) were not really our forte. We did do a mammoth radio extravaganza taking over a bunch of studios and venues in Sydney, but again that was with an audience.

NBA: And the conspiracy? I assume MFMS was less about entertainment value than other artistic goals, any sense of how those transmitted?

CM: As to whether Machine was a viable model for others, we're probably

the wrong people to ask. Were we useful? Again I'd have to defer the question, but we were asked back. Entertaining? We had fun.

NBA: I certainly didn't mean to oppose merit and entertainment, obviously a healthy combination of the two is very effective. I think of entertainment here in the Neil Postman way, a constructed entertainment marketplace often empty of meaningful (or challenging) content.

CM: Which explains how he is such a McLuhanite: the meaning in the market is the market, a price is just an advertisement for pricing, though the Catholic McLuhan might attempt to answer why one would do something which wasn't fun.

NBA: Is there a reason that America was less of a venue? The classic receptivity question here, I guess.

CM: The economics of playing the U.S. were unsympathetic. A dearth of festivals and general lack of cash. Otherwise, outside the U.S., people seemed less concerned about getting all of it and found the orchestration of levels of comprehension less daunting or less offensive.

NBA: That's an interesting observation. Are Americans constricted intellectually by their notions of being "individuals", meaning, as an English friend of mine once observed: for Americans it's more important to have an opinion than to form one. Is intellectual ownership or singularity a problem in the States? Are we afraid of not getting things? Your work would certainly actively confront that.

CM: I like the having/forming distinction. Particularly as regards opinions, the I'll-give-you-my-opinion-what's-the-topic school. And yes, intellectual property is America's largest export, and yes, in an information economy ('knowledge is power' is the advertising slogan of the Education Depart-

ment), missing something, not getting it, is an issue. Chomsky's notions of well-formedness also have something to answer for (though it also helps explain how and why his transformational grammar was originally developed for the Defense Department).

NBA: With Postman and McLuhan and Chomsky we've banged a quick left into media theory, which seems to be the 800-pound gorilla of electronic and information arts. How over-arching in influence do you see media theory today? It takes us back, in some ways, to the origin of this conversation, for me anyway, and the distinction between music and sound art...ideas of music coming from an instrument(alist), being played, and sound art being more constructed as *media*.

CM: There is no media theory. If there was media theory there would be more than one newspaper in this country 'confused' about invading Iraq. Cage: Music is everything we do. Brun: We are interested in the music we don't like, yet. Concerts by phone and concerts by radio meant that when Miles Davis claimed his first instrument to be a turntable, he wasn't lying. The rest, as Wittgenstein has it, is silence.

Alvin Lucier

NBA: You are considered one of the seminal figures in Sound Art. Since the 1960s your work has challenged the fundamental ideas of what musical composition is and what music does. Do you draw a distinction between Sound Art and musical composition? Is there more than a semantic shift in these terms for you?

AL: Arthur Berger, in his recent book, *Reflections of an American Composer*, states that Sound Art "...is not new in the sense of being a new stage in a long tradition, like serialism, for instance, but is new in the sense of being altogether a new art, based on sound but not specifically pitch, which is only one kind of sound." He goes on to reminisce, in a different part of the book, that while on Fulbright in the early Sixties my composition teacher Boris Porena led me to more and more dissonant music (I had been writing in the neoclassical style up to that time) until "...the experience makes one suspect that perhaps Lucier continued the process on his own until he finally arrived at the non-music genre that is sometimes called Sound Art."

Berger was only partially right. I came upon "Sound Art" naturally, as I developed an intense interest in the natural characteristics of sound waves. I lost my appetite for appropriating, extending or transforming previous or contemporaneous musical languages for my own purposes. In my *Music for Solo Performer* (1965) for enormously amplified brain waves and percussion, for example, I decided to jettison certain ideas of structure (which would have been based on previous musical thinking) and let the alpha waves flow unimpeded from my brain to an array of loudspeakers that excited a battery of percussion instruments deployed throughout the space. The speakers were directly coupled to the instruments -- gongs, drums, tim-

pani and so forth -- acting as performers, drummers so to speak, causing the instruments to sound by the direct action of the speaker cones. I eliminated most of the musical vocabulary I had learned in school so that the phenomena could be perceived as clearly as possible. I did retain, somewhere in the work, the "musical" sensitivity, timing, and so forth, I had developed in years of more conventional composing. For several years I had a job as a choral director and was responsible for performances of the great dramatic works of the past.

I don't separate "Sound Art" from "music". I am one person; my ideas come from the same place. I get ideas, then execute them in the ways the material seems to suggest. In sound installations there are no live performers; a configuration is designed and set up, usually in an art gallery, then allowed to sound by itself. Performance pieces, on the other hand, require live players who must breathe, bow and strike their instruments in roughly the same ways they always did, from time immemorial. These works are usually presented in concert halls. In both genres I try to explore one or more characteristics of sound in the most beautiful way I can. I suppose that sound installations are closer to the definition of Sound Art and my performance works, written mostly for performers of conventional instruments, are closer to what is commonly thought of as music.

Sometimes an idea can be realized in two versions. *Music for Bass Drums*, *Pure Waves* and *Acoustic Pendulums*, for example, may be installed for long periods of time. The sweeping sound waves that excite the drumheads are recorded on compact disk and replayed indefinitely; or it may be performed by a player sweeping the waves by hand with an audio oscillator.

The reason I began composing works for players of conventional musical instruments in the early Eighties is simply because several of them asked me to. I have been delighted to do so. I am continually challenged to make

performance pieces which explore sound in as poetic a way as my earlier, electronic works.

Stephen Vitiello

NBA: You are described in your press material as both musician and sound artist. Could you describe what you see as the distinction between music and Sound Art?

SV: Some people resist labels or categories. I generally don't mind them. I just try to be as aware as possible of how that category has been defined historically. I have always thought about Sound Art as relating to space. In some cases, it is an exploration of the acoustic properties of an exhibition site or studio. In others, it has to do with the psychological or psychic presence that I perceive the space embodies. Within those frameworks, I like to record or amplify sounds that might otherwise go unnoticed. In the case of the World Trade Center Recordings, I was interested in the sounds that were outside the window, denied by the thick glass that allowed one to see outside but not hear what was going by. With my recent piece for the Cartier Foundation, it is the sound of light frequencies entering into the room and coming from the lighting grid, which reflect off the sculpture in the room that I am sharing. The concept of time in Sound Art is more open ended. I tend to think of the installation work that I do as Sound Art, while the concerts and CDs as music. These are not absolutes and many of the same interests cross over, but I feel that the point of an installation is to create an environment. A visitor might experience it for a few seconds, minutes or hours and hopefully come away with a memorable experience. The music I make for CDs tends to have more of a conscious structure: A beginning, middle and an end. I don't have any compositional background, so those points are more felt through experience, taste and through listening. I listen carefully and edit to the point that that 6 minutes is exactly what I want people to hear.

NBA: So how an audience member encounters the work becomes a key determining factor in creating of the work itself. Can you describe how you approach structural differences between pieces aimed at more traditional modes of listening, like concerts and CDs, versus gallery or installation work like the piece just up at Engine 27?

SV: It occurs to me that there is always a very private stage and then a public one. I tend to begin work alone: recording, mixing, waiting, refining (mixing or installation drawing). There is a next stage which is generally collaborative -- working with an engineer to master the recordings or build something that I cannot complete myself. Then there is some form of presentation which is very directly about communication with a larger number of people -- about sharing that private experience and looking to create a format that will be conducive to listening, to experiencing that which I experienced privately.

NBA: Are you trying to conceptualize what the work does in this formative stage, or are you more having an exchange with the material? Meaning, I suppose, are you asking the material to do something, or is it asking you?

SV: It isn't a conscious system, but I would say the latter. I am interested in listening to what is already there. How I might capture the essence of whatever that thing is. For me, it is interesting to look (listen) for what is there that might be brought out of the woodwork, the background, the so-called ambience. I was just thinking about filmmakers who slow down images to show the otherwise missed gesture, the potential beauty of what, without the camera, might go whizzing by. For me there is a similar interest in revealing what is there through some system of digging, scraping away, a personalized form of archeology, if that isn't sounding to self-serious.

I just returned from the Brazilian Amazon, where I captured field recordings for a forthcoming installation at the Cartier Foundation in Paris. I con-

sidered bringing a sound recordist who would have better equipment, more experience with microphones, but I realized that it was very important to be alone. Not to say that I was alone in the forest, I was with an anthropologist and 140 Yanomami Indians, but I wanted to be free of known connections. As I am going through the recordings, I hear things I wish I had done better, but I also hear a sense of discovery that may not have been there if I was working with someone else, trying to work out a schedule, justify why I wanted to record here or there, with this or that, etc. Now the task becomes creating a structure in which to present these sounds that may put the listener in touch in some way with the space. While time is a factor in the CDs and concerts, I really am after the same thing with the CDs and concerts as with the installations. I want to present an immersive experience of sound that somehow connects personal experience to a listener. While the concerts are more contained (timed) than the installations, I often aim to create a similar event which relates context and a spatial experience beyond a set of stereo speakers. Last week I performed at the Cartier Foundation. The concert was programmed as part of an exhibition curated by Paul Virilio. Paul asked that there be a 9-11 focus to my performance. Rather than play in the black box space on the lower level of the Museum, I asked that we (Scanner was my guest-duet) perform in the room with Nancy Rubins' installation -- numerous crushed and burned airplane parts suspended in a cluster from the ceiling. The audience stood and sat under Nancy's installation. Rather than use the recordings I had made of the WTC, I brought a recording of 9-11-02, when NYC and Washington DC observed a moment of silence. The recording has "silence" but also the anxious clicks of news cameras and the sound of wind whipping the audience and dust and dirt around them. We began with that recording and then began to manipulate the sound/silence in a very quiet concert with few peaks but a good deal of atmosphere. One of the advantages of performing in art spaces, rather than clubs is that you have this opportunity to work with and sometimes manipulate the performance space to create a deeper environment. This affects the mood of the audience as well as the

sound which is improvised and becomes a response to, or dialogue with, the space and listeners.

NBA: The expectations of what goes on in the art space can be quite different than of that which goes on in a club. I suspect there is an opportunity in the art space to de-emphasize the pure entertainment factor.

SV: I really love the social environment that forms in sound art/experimental music events. I just find people losing a certain amount of posturing, in order to close their eyes and listen. Clubs offer a lot for one sort of working, performing, socializing, but they are also static. There is very little manipulation that you can do with a club-gig. With museum and alternate space gigs, you may have the chance to put the speakers on the ceiling and the audience on the floor. Placement of stage, volume settings. There is just that much more which is malleable.

NBA: Could you tell me about the Yanomami piece in a little greater detail? Who commissioned the project? What are the specific inquiries or goals of the piece at large?

SV: The piece was commissioned by the Cartier Foundation, Paris. I am currently in an exhibition there, *Ce Qui Arrive/Unknown Quantity*, curated by Paul Virilio. When I came to install this piece I had lunch with the director of the Cartier Foundation, Hervé Chandès. Hervé said that he had just about finished selecting artists for an upcoming exhibition on and with the Yanomami. He said that based on his experience, and the recommendation of the anthropologist Bruce Albert, who had initiated the exhibition, that they should take special note of sound. He asked me if I would make a piece, and if I could go within the next month. This was late November. Other artists in the exhibition include video artists Tony Oursler and Gary Hill, as well as a Brazilian painter and a French filmmaker. It took two and a half days to get there. Once in the village, Demini, I had 6 days to re-

cord, or until my batteries ran out. I recorded about 16 hours of tape, using stereo microphones and binaural mics. The eldest shaman, Lorival Yanomami, spent a lot of time telling me about the sound of the forest. Bruce Albert translated from Yanomami to English. At the moment, I am editing a series of binaural recordings for a headphone piece and, if someone will publish it, a CD. Once that is finished, I will work on a multi-channel piece, possibly 5.1 on DVD Audio. The binaural recordings are fairly ambient -- walks through the forest, with Yanomami children, sitting by a lake. The multi-channel piece will incorporate recordings of Lorival. As he tells me stories, he speaks the sounds of the animals. He will be the center piece around which more environmental recordings spin. I want to communicate something about the richness of sound there without being literal. The voice will just be one element that emerges from the forest's network of sound.

NBA: The microphone, as you were saying earlier, becomes a real part of the creative process. Its presence, via technique perhaps, is irreconcilably embedded in the final product. The technology is a participant, just as in your light readings.

SV: Definitely. It becomes the instrument, just as the photocell has become an instrument, not just a receiver. I feel like I am learning a great deal with each opportunity, how to use these instruments. In some cases the recordings have not worked out well at all, but I have learned something about the process, or maybe even captured enough in a photo documenting the attempt. With the binaural microphones in particular, I am very aware of my movement, direction, speed. With a stereo microphone I tend to set it up somewhere and let it be, but it is still a choice of microphone, position, duration. I constantly think of dialogue formats -- with other artists, media, technologies, tools. It is what happens with these meetings that is often most enjoyable and intriguing.

NBA: Could you describe the difference between binaural miking and stereo miking and how the difference effects the work?

SV: Binaural recordings are either done with a dummy head: a microphone in each ear of the head, or with small mics on or near one's ears. It is really a recording method designed for playing back on headphones, rather than speakers. Listening this way is much more 3-dimensional. You feel insects buzzing around you, children running by. As someone explained it to me, recording this way is much closer to the way our ears hear as opposed to a stereo or mono recording which is designed for traditional playback, with speakers in front of you not to the side. In the case of this trip, the binaural recordings were much more free-form. I have a pair of mics that I wear on the edge of my glasses, just by my ears (this is an impure binaural by some standards). I would put the mics on and just walk around for 20 or 30 minutes. Maybe starting in the village, walking out to the forest and through a field of insects, back to a small lake, rain starting and stopping somewhere along the way. The stereo recordings were more formal and straight forward. I would set up a good quality microphone on a stand, connected to pre-amp and DAT recorder, aimed towards a fixed target, letting tape run for an hour. With the binaural system I was more open to chance. The recordings are tiny journeys. With the straighter stereo recordings, you have a portrait of a place at a moment in time. The real drawback with the binaural recordings is that you should listen on headphones which is not an attractive exhibition format. You lose the physicality of sound hear when it is being broadcast straight to your ear, bypassing all of the other parts of the body. On the other hand, there is a psychological space that is created that can be quite interesting.

NBA: Would you mind talking a bit about the evolution of your aesthetic choices, perhaps quickly tracing the journey from guitarist to an artist who uses field recordings and transposed light information?

SV: A large part of it all is using what is at hand. Guitar was a natural choice as a teenager listening to rock and roll and punk rock in the mid-to-late 70s. When I started to meet visual artists in the late 80s I was exposed to other ways of working, other ways of thinking. I started to think about using space, thinking more conceptually, non-narratively. As I followed the lines of prepared guitar, I started to find objects that I could amplify through the guitar's pick-ups (fans, vibrators). I bought a sampler and started to sample those isolated sounds, manipulating them, focusing in closer and closer to small details which could be kept afloat through additional electronics (delays, loops). The next step was to get a computer and learn about software from fellow sound friends (John Hudak, Scanner, Tetsu Inoue each taught me a great deal). I've never liked to use the computer solely. I prefer analog processors and find that I understand them and can "perform" with them much better than programming-based software but these take up more space and aren't always easily set-up as quickly as the laptop. In each case, it is a combination of searching for something but also making use of what is at hand. At the moment, I am going through a real aversion to processing. There are a handful of people who I find interesting but I just feel like I've heard enough. Perhaps it is also because I have had an opportunity to do field recordings in some very interesting places this past year. I am really enjoying listening to the pure qualities of natural spaces without any contrived add-ons.

NBA: So is that taking you to a new sense of how to construct a work? It would seem the archeology of this process would be more one of observation and non-intervention than a processing-to-discover method.

SV: I agree, it seems to be a process of observation, of listening, and then looking for a way to present some sort of relevant auditory experience and environment. There were several things that struck me with this trip to the Amazon. The Yanomami have such an extraordinary connection to sound.

The sound is beautiful but more importantly it is rich. Sounds hold a multitude of meaning. The sound of the forest is not simply an idyllic backdrop, it is a presence that tells them a great deal. Generally, I go some place and take something of the sound and then twist it. Here, I don't want to do that with an obvious sort of processing. More, use the potential of speakers and space to create a place that listeners can fall into. The point I have to keep in mind is to try to mirror the intensity and not just the beauty.

NBA: You mentioned your interaction with the Visual Arts community at one point triggered new directions for you. What kind of attitude, meaning direction or position, was made available to you by the visual artist's perspective? Particularly in contrast to a musician's perspective?

SV: A part of what I have learned from visual artists is through collaboration, another is from observation. In 1994, Nam June Paik had me video document a month of Fluxus performances at Anthology Film Archive. I learned so much about performance, spontaneity, finding more playful ways of being on stage. It made me think a lot about how you bring the audience into what you do. I don't know if I've succeeded in any of this, but it has allowed me to think more openly. In addition to Fluxus, I generally turn to Bruce Nauman's work when I am stuck for motivation. I find the intensity and relative simplicity of form really inspiring. Through collaboration with artists, I learned to focus first on concept and context, and on technique second. This worked out well since I was never able to master much technique over instruments (guitar, bass) no matter how much I practiced!

NBA: This seems in many ways to mirror the path of the arts since the mid-1960's, with collusion between disciplines centered around a conceptual concern being a primary impetus for creating new work. Treating sound the way you would light, treating light the way you would a plastic material,

treating a plastic material the way you would sound. Does this coincide with your experience? The notion in the arts that the medium-specific Master Craftsman has in many ways given way to the conceptual practitioner utilizing multiple resources?

SV: Yes, for me sound has become a material to work with. In some cases, it is a matter of locating/identifying a sound. In others, it is about creating it. From there, the form of manipulation is to be determined. There is still craft involved but it is different than the concept of craft that I started with studying guitar, for example. There is a depth and a presence that comes through in good works. It may be hard to put your finger on what it is that makes it so, but you know it is there. This is beyond the strength of machines. I feel more and more connected to classical models of the artist as observer and interpreter, which has changed my own self-image and thoughts of being a musician. As an observer (I should say listener) I try to be aware of my place relative to what I am recording or what I am hearing and take responsibility in how it goes back into the ears or thoughts of others.