

'SOUND ART MATTER; BEYOND MATTER OBJECT DISORIENTED SOUND ART'

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FOKUS: SOUND ART MATTERS

Abstract

Can 'sound' be 'exhibited' as an artistic object? Is the notion of exhibiting sound not a fallacy, considering the nature and characteristics of sound, predominantly emerging as an ephemeral and immaterial phenomenon? This question problematizes the positioning of sound art in the contemporary field of artistic and curatorial practices, demanding a new set of theoretical approaches and methodologies. Addressing this fundamental question from a conceptual leaning, in this article I will try to examine sound's specific subjective inclination as artistic experience beyond the material object.

Introduction

Intense discussion within the art world about the perception and interpretation of the notion of 'sound art' followed a show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York entitled "Soundings: A Contemporary Score" (2013). It was a collection of sculptures, video pieces, installations and work on paper with audio components¹. Rather than framing sound as medium, event or corporeal vibration, this show, a first of its kind at MoMA, explored sound with a strong emphasis on its material and object-based visual dimension. To artists, critics and thinkers alike, this show accelerated the otherwise dormant debates around sound art's position within gallery- and museum-dominated mainstream public showcasing of contemporary art.

This debate suggests a deep confusion and uncertainty about how sound art is defined. From the perspective taken in this article, however, the central question is: Can 'sound' be 'exhibited' as an artistic object within a gallery? Is the idea of a 'sound art exhibition' not problematic, considering the nature of sound as a predominantly ephemeral and immaterial phenomenon? This very question complicates the positioning of sound art in the contemporary field of artistic and curatorial practices, demanding a new set of theoretical approaches and methodologies. In this article the question will be addressed within a conceptual reformulation of the notion of the sound object in relation to sound art, shifting the focus to listening experiences.

The somewhat contradictory attitudes reflected in the comments made by artists and critics after the show at MoMA explain why the so-called 'exhibition' of sound art triggers serious thoughts about the matter of the artistic object concerning sound. Let us make a brief review of the development of 'sound art' in the historical tradition of Western art. The idea of sound art moves from Luigi Russolo's noise intoners and subsequent experiments by Dadaists, surrealists and the Situationist International, to Fluxus happenings and environments, forming a trajectory that leads to what Seth Kim-Cohen terms "the conceptual turn" (2009) in the post-war period, following John Cage's works with sound-in-itself on the one hand, and the emergence and sporadic inclusion of sound in the gallery- or museum-based arts on the other.

Because of the apparent diversity of what is termed ‘sound art’, there are debates about whether sound art falls within the domain of visual art, experimental music or new media – or whether it falls between the categories. There has been a definite surge in the cultural production and dissemination of sound art in the last few years, which has garnered intense attention; but these intensifying activities have occurred rather “tentatively and ambivalently”, as artist and writer Brandon LaBelle claims (2006).

Where do you belong, sound art? Are you a misfit everywhere?

This ambivalence surrounding sound art history stems from the fact that, more often than not, sound art has been ‘framed’ within the practice, production and showcasing of the visual arts. The problem in this taxonomy lies in the fact that there are basic and fundamental differences between aural and visual representations that we cannot ignore. ‘Sound’ can be perceived as mysterious and ineffable, transient and ephemeral, or immediate and indeterminate in comparison to its implied visual counterparts – the artistic objects that are visible in relation to diffusion of sound in space. Therefore, ‘sound art’ as a term cannot exist in a representational vacuum, due to its inherent characteristics. LaBelle states, “it seems sound art continues to hold an unsettled place within artistic institutions, which could be said to unearth the impasse between an overtly ‘visual’ institutional structure with an intensely ‘sonic’ medium” (LaBelle, 2006, p. 153). He mentions in this respect the comments of curator Bernd Schulz²: “The inexpressibility and cognitive impenetrability of the phenomenal experience make it difficult to secure for sound art the place it deserves in the art world” (2002)³.

Kim-Cohen describes sound art as the unwanted child of music (2009). He has pointed out the boundaries, tendencies and specific shifts in post-war sound art practice after Pierre Schaeffer’s experiments with *musique concrète* and John Cage’s experiments with silence, paving the way for a conceptual turn. Following the established research and scholarships in sound and site, such as Murray Schafer’s work (1994) at Simon Fraser University, terms such as soundscape and acoustic ecology were used to describe specific sound practices embedded with a strictly environmental aesthetics. I have argued elsewhere (2012, 2014, 2016), however, that these practices were inherently constrained within predominantly musical structures and ecological concerns. These practices with recorded and composed soundscapes do not substantially contribute to the so-called conceptual turn that the emerging sound art would subsequently experience.

Sound art seems “less esoteric” in the contemporary “new media art” environment, because of our “newfound comfort with the immaterial world of pure data and information flowing through the cyberspace” (Dayal, 2013). The “new media” allow for the separation of sounds from their locations, and facilitate their travel across globally dispersed networks as digital data and information. Sound that is disembodied from its locational specificity falls within multiple layers of mediation across multiple levels of reception and interpretation outside of place, time and context in the new media environment, whether in an audio-streaming network on the internet, a multi-channel sonic environment, a telematic performance, or an exhibition in augmented space of an interactive installation work. It is evident that, in this space of constant and itinerant flow, the production and reception of sound over greater mobility and interactivity lead to its interpretation as a fertile and more alive auditory situation, rather than being posed as static material of a ‘sonic artefact’. Hence, I may assume that sound art is more comfortably discussed within the object-unspecific, essentially immaterial and multiply interpretative ‘new media art’ paradigm. Such positioning of sound

art within the contemporary art context is necessary to comprehend my following conceptualisation of what I term an ‘object-disorientation’ of sound.

The case of the object-disorientation

Often we become absentminded, or experience a trance when listening to certain sounds. These sounds can be as mundane as everyday occurrences — we usually do not attend to them in our daily activities. However, some of these sounds may quite randomly induce us to elevate ourselves to some other perceptual planes perhaps not directly related to the object, source, signification or site of these sonic occurrences. These sounds open the doors of the layers of reality into another world beyond their intended immediate meaning or sonic objecthood. It needs to be understood why these sounds manage to unsettle us in such a way that we experience an elevated state of contemplation and meditative mindfulness. It seems these sounds are not the specific cause of our becoming thoughtful while enjoying a sense of poetic detachment from immediate reality; rather, somehow a fertile ‘auditory situation’ unfolds around us as the sounds occur. The subtle formation of an auditory situation transcending the sonic object or the material is the point of curiosity in this article.

This fluid world of sound, as impermanent as it might seem to the ears of a listener, may open hidden doors and obscure entrances that invite further perceptual meanderings, disrupting the epistemic object with an immediate meaning that the sounds would otherwise embody. The epistemological problems and ontological questions embedded in an expansive mode of listening suggest an object-disoriented behaviour of sound, which manifests itself in an explosion of multifarious meanings, interpretations and mental states dispersed outside the sonic object. Let me elaborate on what I mean by this ‘object-disoriented’ behaviour of sound. To do this, we need to go back in time and excavate the term ‘sound object’. Pierre Schaeffer, arguably the founder of *musique concrète*, coined the term ‘sound object’ (*objet sonore*), paving the way for a new kind of perception — “acousmatic listening.” To Schaeffer, the ‘sound object’ was an intentional representation of sound (Demers, 2010) to its listener. With the rise of new audio technologies, the ‘sound objects’ recorded on magnetic tape or other media no longer referred to a sound source, hence the musical exploration of the ‘acousmatic experience’ of sounds that one hears without seeing the causality behind them. The emphasis here was on the reduced listening state instead of causal listening, if we borrow Michel Chion’s terminology (1994). The problem here was the imposition of the word ‘object’ over ‘sound’. The intrinsic flaw in reduced listening, as Schaeffer conceptualised it in *Treatise on Musical Objects*, was that it assumed that sound had an “a priori ontological foundation” (Demers quoting Kane, 2010, p. 43) separate and distinct from any cultural or historical (or even personal) association it might have subsequently acquired. According to scholars such as Joanna Demers, this assertion is problematic on both practical and theoretical counts. Listeners indeed have difficulty hearing sounds divorced from their associations; but at the same time, it is nearly impossible for the human listening faculty not to ascribe a multiplicity of causes to a single sonic phenomenon. In practice, the listener is almost certain to simultaneously create imagined gestures or link a sound to its illusory myriad of sources, evoking some kind of contemplative and thoughtful imagery in this process of mental resonance and mindful personalisation of sounds into poetic-contemplative listening states.

Likewise, sound scholar and early phenomenologist Christian Metz expressed serious doubts about the object specificity of sonic phenomena in scholarly thinking, thereby challenging Schaeffer. Metz focused instead on the ‘characteristics’ of sound, emphasising the

problematic aspects of locating sound's object-oriented or location-specific meaning. He stated that "Spatial anchoring of aural events is much more vague and uncertain than that of visual events" (Metz, 1980, p. 29). In classical sound studies, scholars such as Rick Altman have already underpinned the issue of sound's problematic relation to its object or source, emphasising its interpretative nature following its means of production: "Sound is not actualised until it reaches the ear of the hearer, which translates molecular movement into the sensation of sound" (Altman, 1992, p. 19). Altman speaks here of a sound event as defining the trajectory of the essential production and subsequent reception of sound. Its narrative, as Altman terms it, is hypothetically bound to the source that produces it. These sound sources, or the sounding objects when producing sound, are spatially defined or connected to a site, but are not rendered until and unless they are carried by a medium (such as a tape recording) to reach the point of reception and subsequent interpretation. By the same token, a sound is remediated whenever it is digitally converted from its analogue recording source into the digital format. Digitisation further dislocates sounds from their sources, turning them into discrete data. Sound contents enter the domain of constant travel, flexibility, and flow at different stages of digitalisation towards reaching a saturation state of an assumed 'post-digital' ecology, during the process of which they are freed from the object or source. Sounds thus, in the contemporary post-digital condition, imply mobility and subsequent object disorientation. The process of interpretation is, however, more complex than it appears at the perceptual level. Contributing to this discourse, new media scholar Frances Dyson argues, concerning the 'sound object', "first—find a way of discussing and representing sound unhinged from the visual object, second, find a device (the tape recorder) that will somehow enable such a representation, and finally, mask the mediation of that device by arguing for an ontological equivalence between the reproduced sound and the original sonic source" (Dyson 2009: 54). This ontological equivalence might be difficult to achieve for a wandering listener for whom a specific sound presents a multitude of amorphous listening states, leading to a sonic explosion of object-disoriented but mood-based streams of contemplation in a nomadic condition. These listening states are not rooted in the immediate sonic reality; rather they transcend the mere recognition and knowledge about the source or object of sound. They move towards a realm of fluid thinking processes that unsettle the epistemic and ontological structures of sound. This problem of ambivalence prompts Christoph Cox to investigate sound's unsettling behaviour outside of the object. Jean-Luc Nancy has aptly called such transcendental behaviours of sounds "beyond sound" (Nancy 2007: 6) in similar arguments with Cox, who maintains his perspective on the mobile and virtual world of sound: "[A] strange world in which bodies are dissolved into flows, objects are the residues of events, and effects are unmoored from their causes to float independently as virtual powers and capacities" (Cox, 2013, p. 6). This mobile and contingent world of sound originates from corporal sites, evolving spatially and temporally, but becomes illusory, turning into disorienting auditory situations. Deleuze and Guattari use the notion of nomads and nomadology (1986) to think through such states of de-territorialised experiences. These perspectives suggest disruption in the sense of site-specificity or object-hood of sound in the perception of an unfolding auditory situation for an individual listener.

The Situationists, whose ideas have attracted the deep interest of urban theorists and artists, employed the concept of "psychogeography" to describe a certain experimental practice of subjective and mindful exploration of (urban) places (Sadler, 1999; Coverley, 2010; Self, 2007). Expanding their ideas into sound studies, we can examine how acoustic geography engages the mental construction of space by an object-disoriented and de-territorialised mode of listening, to perceive everyday sounds for urban navigation as fluid auditory situations. It is no surprise that Nancy has also thought about listening in similar ways. In his

work *Listening* (2007) Nancy underscored how sonic phenomena outline certain situations or contexts.

I would argue that such situations unfold around a sonic phenomenon (or a number of sounds occurring together in a certain place), but, for the wandering listener, the sound may seem to cease signalling its origins as it moves further away from its locative source into the as yet formless 'auditory situation' brought on by a contemplative state of mind. In my recent works, I have discussed the ways in which such situations might unfold spatiotemporally, resonating towards a stream of thoughts and poetic contemplation and creating ripples in the consciousness when a nomadic listener mindfully navigates from one place to another in a psychogeographic, rather than physical, fashion. What I emphasise here is a shift in attention to sounds and their resonating, affecting qualities—in short, a listening to the process of 'how' rather than the immediate 'what-is' of sounds. This special attention can be achieved by being mindful of sound's fluid movements from one state to the other, which produce an elevated experience involving the contemplative state of the listener rather than seeking an immediate meaning for epistemic knowledge. This particular emphasis on the poetic attributes of an expanded mode of listening provides us with a context for exploring the unexpected splendour of everyday sounds and their transcendental potential as artistic ingredients, such as the materials for multi-channel compositional developments. This emergence of contingent moments in the listening experience expands the Cagean idea of chance composition towards a context of fluid interactions with and navigation through ephemeral and ineffable everyday unsitely sounds in the contemporary post-digital condition. As explained earlier, sounds are remediated whenever they are transformed to enter the digital realm. Digitisation further dislocates sounds from their material source, turning them into elusive data. Sounds embrace constant travel, flexibility, and flow at different stages of digitalisation towards reaching a saturation state of an assumed 'post-digital' condition; in the process, they are freed from the object. In the contemporary condition, sounds thus imply unsitely aesthetics of perception and subsequent object disorientation. A non-Western perspective on sound, such as ancient Indian philosophical aesthetics, indeed emphasises subjective resonance as perceived by the listener beyond the material objecthood of sound.

In addressing this fundamental problem of an object-disoriented behaviour of sound while perceiving works of sound art, in this article I underscore sound's specific subjective inclination as artistic experience beyond material objecthood. In order to examine the problematic relationship between sound and the artistic object, I draw attention to the work of a number of Indian philosophers who have divided the sonic discourse in terms of *dhvāni* (sound heard by the ear) and *sphōta* (sound grasped by the intellect). They recognised sound's many possible interpretations beyond the material object or source of occurrence. This perspective helps theorise streams of contemplative states that are potentially generated inside the mindful perception of the listeners experiencing works of sound art. Emphasising the sonic subject's essentially withdrawn, inward-looking and contemplative capacities, I pursue the claim that sound is less closely tied to the Kantian category of substance than vision, and therefore any attempt to frame sound as an artistic object or artefact with which to materially tie the viewer, poses serious problem of a philosophical nature.

Sonic subject

What I listen to and what you listen to may differ from one another at the perceptual level. Based on my own artistic practices with sound as well as a series of community art practice-

based workshops titled “Hyper-listening: praxis”⁴, I have arrived at the concept of what I would like to call the sonic subject or ‘*sujet sonore*’.

In Indian aesthetic theory, the topic of ‘subjectivity’ and ‘selfhood’ being embedded in sonic phenomena has been highly discussed. From S. S. Barlingay’s writings, we know about the concept of *sphōta*, which indicates, “A sound changes into (subjective thinking) and language, and acquires meaning only after a certain explosion of sounds” (Barlingay, 2007, 27), as part of a self-involved mental association in listening. He states in his work *A Modern Introduction to Indian Aesthetic Theory*:

We not only utter sounds, we can imagine sounds. A man can sing a song silently, i.e. he can make a mental division of time without it being perceived by any other person (Barlingay, 2007, 29)

It is no surprise that my experiments show why a given auditory situation appears to a drifting individual listener as liquid and amorphous; newly heard sounds are juxtaposed with sonic memories, triggering the aural imagination. The individual listener becomes elevated from the physical location, and epistemic knowledge about the sound events that occur within the situation becomes open-ended, contributing to an unfixed, malleable and evolving relationship between sound and the implied object when perceived in the listener’s mind. Nancy has rightfully asked, “Why, in the case of the ear, is there withdrawal and turning inward, a making resonant, but, in the case of the eye, there is manifestation and display, a making evident?” (Nancy, 2007, p. 3). Brandon LaBelle has expanded his discussion on listening in this line of thinking, “toward the context in which interpretation must always take place” and pointed out “its potential to foster subjective intensities, from listening to living” (LaBelle, 2006, p. 5).

The answer may be found if we set aside epistemic and ontological issues of recognising the source or ‘object’ of sound and focus instead on the phenomenological, and inward-looking subjective perception of sound within ‘selfhood’ as the listener’s mindful perception; thus we can examine the way memory, imagination and the personal experience of the listener alter the character of sound in its mindful perception. I refer here to the proclamation by the visionary composer John Cage: “Silence is not acoustic. It is a change of mind” (Popova, 2013).

The assumption of subjective propensities of listening, emphasising the essentially self-contained nature of sound as an artistic experience, leads to sound-based artworks being construed within individual, private or personal contemplation. This position may, I admit, ultimately be idealist; moreover, if I begin with the subjective and then try to move towards the external world and toward other listeners, I face a question: is sound in any way public before it is private? This conceptual positioning further problematises the negotiation of the role of the listener in relation to an artwork. If listening is fundamentally subjective, then what is the point of making art – that is, curating a public object or event involving listeners other than the artist him/herself?

Auto-curating

Taking a clear point of departure in object-oriented sound art, and shifting the focus to the individual listener’s own personal experience of encountering and interacting with sound in an artistic context, I propose in this article an alternative methodology of sound art curating,

which I term “auto-curating”. Addressing a practice-based approach, I refer to the recent sound art exhibition “Escuchas” (Listenings, 2015 – 2016) at the Museum of Modern Art Medellin⁵. The 12 multi-channel sound artworks included in this major group event, including my 6.1 channel work *A Day in the Life of a Listener*⁶, were played in loop in a completely dark room of the museum, where visitors were asked to enter and experience the works without any visual reference. This kind of acousmatic auditory situation incorporates the concept of “auto-curating”, which means that I situate the curating of sound art in the higher-level cognitive thought processes between the source of sound and the listener’s mind that apprehends it, framing an experience of situational and immaterial phenomena that are peculiar to sound’s subjective nature of emergence and unfolding at the listener’s end. This method operates, perhaps, in the way artist Yolande Harris puts it in her doctoral thesis: “To create situations where sound can affect and activate people’s experiences in a personal way”. Central to this process is the role of the listener in making an artwork complete. Scholar Tom Rice underlines the personal inclinations of listening: “[l]istening is often described and experienced as a solitary and individual practice, sometimes deeply personal and private” (Rice 2015: 102). My coinage of the term “auto-curating” is based in such private modes of individual listening in the context of sound art, and highlights the participatory and collaborative aspects of listening rather than posing a fixed object in a strictly exhibitory context.

What I term “auto-curating” was already planted in earlier practices of sound art that considered sound as phenomena and did not construe its object-hood in the artistic mediation of the production and showcasing of what Kim-Cohen has termed “gallery arts”. An emphasis on the acousmatic experience of sound may shed more light on this method. Take, for example, Francisco Lopez’s performance installations, which are usually set in dark rooms in which he situates himself at the centre instead of the podium. Audiences sit in concentric circles with their backs to Lopez and are blindfolded. The surround speaker arrays are arranged across the perimeter of the room and kept invisible. Audiences are forced to minimise any actual associations with the visual parts of the performance. In the programme notes of his performance *Buildings [New York]* (2001), Lopez writes: “Every listener has to face his/her own freedom and thus create”. Although Lopez’s “passional [sic] and transcendental conception of music” (Kim-Cohen, 2009) and fetishist attention to the purity of sound inhibit the freedom he keenly desires for the audience, he nevertheless opens doors to the negotiation of the role of listener in relation to the artwork by revealing the process of “creation” in the listener’s mind. This process also finds resonance in Luc Ferrari’s works such as the *Presque Rien* series in which he posits a natural social situation for the listener, by denaturalising in the recording what is to be re-naturalised at the listener’s end as a creative process. Kim-Cohen has spoken of Ferrari’s work as providing “raw, phenomenological data” (Kim-Cohen, 2009), a foundation from which “thinking and doing” (Kim-Cohen, 2009) proceed. On the one hand, this process explores the personal or private nature of listening; on the other, it engages with the public and social ramifications of sonic phenomena. We find resonance of this methodology in the work of artist Brandon LaBelle. He records room tones in his apartment and sends it to different architects, asking them to develop an imaginary plan of the apartment. Creating a participatory atmosphere, these practices accentuate the potentially raw subjective behaviour of the listener in relation to a situation.

Auditory situation

What I mean by auto-curating is, then, an extension of the process of extracting and deciphering what happens in the listener’s mind while listening to a fertile auditory situation.

This process may perhaps be partially quantified by the listener's behaviour. This practice expands Don Ihde's notion of the post-phenomenological realm. Ihde has talked about "auscultation" and similar contemporary acoustic constructive technologies for detecting and representing all sorts of bodily phenomena and giving voice to things, the silent and unheard (Ihde, 2009, p. 69-70). Within the theoretical framework of post-phenomenology, Ihde has given a number of examples from contemporary data-sound-image convertibility, by picking up signals from a range of instruments. I would mention the accelerometer that I have used myself to transduce the signal a listener makes.

In a sound art project, *The Well Tempered City* (2010 - 2014)⁷, I employed the ingenious accelerometer to allow the listener's emotive sonic inputs, such as touching, tapping and hitting the surfaces of things and built spaces, to be heard. The work is intended to help understand the emotive quotient of city-dwellers' everyday interactions with pervasive urban structures. The project was conceived as ubiquitous computation of subtle vibration-contents generated by ordinary citizens through everyday interactions such as walking, resting, touching, tapping or hitting the structural surfaces of the city, such as the streets or walls. These surfaces served as the physical interface for citizens' affective interactions with their personified everyday environment. The project employed participation and performative intervention of city-dwellers in the built spaces of the city to generate sonic artefacts, which functioned as the reflections of citizens' immediate emotional situations and the affective context. *The Well Tempered City: Book I* was conceived, produced and exhibited during a fellowship-residency at Jaaga, Bangalore, where the work was installed on-site in a 10-channel live set up⁸.

The following instalment of the project *The Well Tempered City: Book II* was a commission for Museo Reina Sofía Radio, Madrid, featured in November 2014⁹. It formed part of a series of podcasts entitled Modernity and Transduction. *The Well Tempered City: Book II* looked at the concept of transduction in relation to the Indian city of Bangalore and also at the concept of hypermodernity generally in today's cities. The work, which involved a listening mediated by the use of electronic devices, such as the arrays of accelerometers and contact microphones, transduced the vibrations produced by interaction between citizens and the city's architecture into sound sequences. This method created a texture of sounds, which, as it progressed, became denser and richer in variations. Listening to this piece's transformation of listener-generated vibrations into audible sounds revealed a whole spectrum of transfers of individual activity to urban spaces. Something like an artificial respiration of the context, the presence of citizens in the city of today becomes the impulse that gives life to architecture, which as a living body responds with slight movements that convert city spaces into vibrant and geological structures. The work was explicitly based on the participation of the citizens in producing the sound contents, thus contributing directly to the development of the work as an 'auditory situation' (Chattopadhyay, 2013, 2015, 2017) – an open-ended context for public participation and multiple reinterpretations.

My more recent work *Exile and Other Syndromes* (2015 – 2018) also intends to create a 'situation' rather than an 'object'. The work considers mindful aspects of the private mode of listening experience, and explores its introspective capacities for transcending the barrier of immediate meaning to touch upon poetic sensibilities. The work was produced during an artist residency at Kunstuniversität Graz, between September 2015 and January 2016. The pilot version (for 24-channel sound and 4-channel video projection) was premiered at Kunstuniversität Graz, on 19th January 2016¹⁰. In essence, the work transmutes the urban space to reorient the navigational mode of listening involving the listener's contemplation.

The work incorporates multi-channel projection of sound-generated text-visualisation on the screens as moving images installed at a venue¹¹. This specific method of intervention can examine the way in which the memory, imagination and subjectivity of an itinerant listener elaborate the character of sound. The work relies on intuitive capacities of listening, rather than the ontological and epistemological reasoning involved in deciphering the immediate meaning of sound. This belief in inward contemplation and subjectivity available to wandering urban listeners enables the work to explore the poetic-contemplative possibilities embedded in everyday listening in the city for countering the neurosis of contemporary urban living. The particular emphasis on the poetic attributes of an expanded mode of listening provides a context for exploring the unexpected splendour of everyday urban sounds and their transcendental potential as evocative and unfolding situations beyond their site-specific static object-hood. Emergence of contingent moments in the urban listening experience expands the Cagean idea of chance composition towards a context of fluid and nomadic interaction with everyday sounds in contemporary cities. The fuller version of the project will be exhibited at the Screen City Biennial 2017 to be held at Stavanger, Norway, throughout October 2017.

I am currently involved in developing a new project entitled *Expanded Object* (2017 – 2019), in which I intend to trigger a shift in perspective from 'object' to 'situation' in sound art. Through my artistic practice I am departing from the idea of 'sonic object' considering the object-hood of sound in an exhibitory context as an uncertain and mobile 'framing' through which sounds may experience manifold spill-overs to create fluid situations¹².

Critical listening

The artistic consequences of some of these methodologies (e.g. *The Well Tempered City*) can be explained as the acoustic presentation of data collected from subjective sonic perceptions that are manifested in bodily phenomena: what Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook call in their book *Rethinking Curating*, "behaviours and contexts with a post-medium emphasis" (Graham and Cook, 2010, p. 5). Following Ihde's notions of post-phenomenology, and examples showing that all data can be turned into acoustic phenomena, I believe that auto-curating can be a framework within which the curating of sound art can be situated by higher-level cognitive thought processes in the listener's mind. By exploring the listener's behaviour, in the way he/she orients him-/herself within a given auditory situation of a sound art event or context, the process essentially involves mental computation that can be divided into early or low-level perception and advanced or higher-level processing or cognition. The sense modalities provide audio information, which the listener can process creatively in the way what I call "auto-curating", allowing the listener to make sense of the artwork and behave according to the sound data available from navigation and perception of the unfolding auditory situation. It would be worthwhile following what the listener responds to the artistic experience of sound. Young Indian curator Samriddhi Kukreja recalls¹³ her first encounter with sound art in India:

My first encounter with Sound Art was weird, I had never encountered something of this sort; it was strange and yet gripping. It made me experience things that were almost scary but very much required. 'Required' because as a spectator I have felt things as a result of visuals, but when I felt things as an outcome of sound, it was alarming and an unknown sensation waking me up to experience something new - knowing what sound alone can do (2016)

Having the listener at the center, a work of sound art would question the materiality, site-specificity and object-hood of sound, and address aspects of contingency, contemplation, mindfulness and transcendence inherent in listening. Such perspectives in artistic practice would intend to shift the emphasis from 'object' to 'situation' in the realm of sound art. In this context, a sound artist would intend to create contemplative auditory situations as fluidly sonic sculptural forms using multi-channel diffusion of sound for the listener to navigate by privately making mental and psycho-geographic mappings of the unfolding aural space of a sound art event.

In my own work as a sound artist, i.e. in the projects I have mentioned above, sound is spatially organised to intervene into a given space, disrupting the notion of the 'aural objects' or the 'sound object', in order to investigate what I have earlier termed "object-disoriented behaviour of sound" involving generative composition of imaginatively fertile auditory situations as a fluid aural architecture. My compositional and artistic practices instigate such inquiries with a research-based approach to sound creation. I prefer to explore the ephemeral and transcendental nature of sound. The fundamental role that I play as an artist is to intervene in a given situation, incorporating spatial sound practices to alter the perception of the situation by disrupting the sonic navigational mode at the site. This process operates between dissemination of sonic artefacts and exploration of the perceptual and cognitive realm of listening through the creation of multi-channel sculptural situations that are contingent in texture and form, so as to change with the interaction of the listener and the situational contexts. Taking the ontologically questionable experience of the sound object as a critical juncture, I intend to radically reorganise the conventional form of the composition towards a situation for self-reflection and participatory engagement. It is my contention that sound as an artistic medium pertains to this end.

This artistic practice is built on the consideration that sound art is inherently perceptual and participatory, and arguably proposes a new set of hypotheses. I suggest that the given auditory situation of a traditional exhibition or public showcasing of sound art appears to a drifting listener as liquid and amorphous, triggering and driving the aural imagination further away from the intended artefact or artistic object posed in the foreground. Therefore, it is important to create fertile auditory situations where sound can affect and activate the personal listening experience through a multiplicity of interpretations, contemplations and moods at the listener's end, rather than trying to devise a material object or artefact in its so-called 'exhibition' within a visually constrained framing. Taking the ontologically questionable space of the exhibition as a critical juncture, sound artists may process or radically reorganise the conventional form of the exhibition as a space for self-reflection and participatory engagement.

Conclusion

The sound artist transforms him-/herself from the always already 'being' into the gradual 'becoming' of an interlocutor and operates between the listener and the artwork by keeping the listener at the centre of an artwork. The ambition to dissolve the gap between the artist as sole active producer of meaning/truth and the listener as passive consumer, substantially informs "auto-curating" as an appropriate methodology for sound art creation and curating. This process provides a speculative and experimental framework for revealing some of the paradoxes in contemporary thinking about technologically informed sound-based artistic practice for further discourse. As this article indicates, sound art is potentially suited to direct the listener towards the personal or subjective unfolding of an auditory situation, rather than

representing a sound object. The listener engages with the situation through memory, imagination and contemplation, possibly creating meanings that are different from the intention of the artist or other listeners experiencing the same artwork. This position explains the inherent attributes of immateriality, ephemerality and contingency embedded in sound art experience.

- 1. See <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1351?locale=en>
- 2. Curator of Stadtgalerie Saarbrücken.
- 3. In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue Resonances: Aspects of Sound Art, Heidelberg (2002).
- 4. See: <http://budhaditya.org/projects/doors-of-nothingness/hyper-listening-praxis/>
- 5. See <http://elmamm.org/Exposiciones/Lab3/Id/103> and <http://ecos.eter-lab.net/escuchas/>
- 6. See <http://ecos.eter-lab.net/escuchas/artists/>
- 7. See <http://budhaditya.org/projects/the-well-tempered-city/>
- 8. <https://vimeo.com/26643718>
- 9. See <http://radio.museoreinasofia.es/en/budhaditya-chattopadhyay?lang=en>
- 10. See <http://budhaditya.org/projects/doors-of-nothingness/exile-and-other-syndromes/>
- 11. See <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/239155/239156>
- 12. <http://budhaditya.org/projects/expanded-objects/>
- 13. On her Facebook page, 6th December 2016.

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