The aesthetic ear: sound art, Jacques Rancière and the politics of listening

Matthew Mullane*
Department of Art History, Hiram College, OH, USA

Abstract
If we are to value “sound art” as a worthwhile creative form and a legitimate fragment in the history of art, we must move away from debates of nomenclature and forge ahead to critically examine sound’s aesthetic and political potential. Approaching “sound art” as a problematic and unnecessary term, what follows is a simultaneous survey and refutation of recent publications on the topic and an assertion of sound’s aesthetics via the theory of French philosopher, Jacques Rancière. Heard through the writings of Rancière, contemporary work in sound breaks out of its exclusive sphere and reveals itself as a vivid commentary on the everyday and a keen activator of “heterogeneous” political elements. Framed by an overview of the details and import of Rancière’s recently translated collections is an analysis of four active artists whose work engages the “aesthetic ear” and proves itself to be more than merely sound-for-sound’s sake.

Keywords: contemporary art; sound studies; sound art; Christian Marclay; Toshiya Tsunoda; Janet Cardiff; Janek Schaefer; Alan Licht

As the role of sound in contemporary art has grown to beget its own niche in the realm of sound art, so too has the theoretical vocabulary required to successfully describe these new works expanded and changed. Approaching the world aurally and spatially negates an art ontology that focuses upon a single object or viewer; instead, sound art disperses the cone of attention and blankets the nebulous relationships with our everyday sound and social environments. By encouraging an active listening relationship with one’s space, effective sound-based artwork enlivens the seemingly prosaic, underlining the inherent aesthetic and political potential of common experiences. However, talking, let alone writing, about sound is a challenging endeavour and most recent surveys and discussions of sound art have been too entangled in delineating the boundaries of the subject to truly investigate the medium’s importance. Furthermore, the definitions that have been drafted have been confining and the critiques offered outdated. Although sound art embodies certain vestigial elements drawn from conceptual art, Fluxus, minimalism and experimental music, the language used to describe contemporary works in sound must be mindful of separating itself from

*Correspondence to: Matthew Mullane. Email: mullanemt@my.hiram.edu

This paper was presented in an altered form in April of 2009 at the 7th Annual Cultural Studies Association Conference in Kansas City, MO, USA.

©2010 M. Mullane. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/), permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Journal of Aesthetics & Culture, Vol. 2, 2010 DOI: 10.3402/jac.v2i0.4895
pure historicity and endeavour to highlight its unique aesthetic and political impact.

From this vantage point, I wish to posit sound art as a potently critical medium, capable of expressing ideas and revealing perspectives not merely concerned with sound as a sensory phenomenon. Culling definitions and critiques of sound art by Alan Licht, Paul Hegarty, Brandon LaBelle and others, I wish to purport sound art as a medium that is more than a specimen of postmodern interdisciplinary arts, more than what its deceiving moniker implies. Buttressed by Jacques Rancière’s recent aesthetic writings on what he calls “critical art”, I will clarify sound art’s core objectives and its flexibility as a practice through individual analyses of four active artists whose work engages contemporary themes via the aesthetic ear.

Sound art, as an independent term, is a young one; its origin by name dates to the 1980s, but was not fully realised in practice until the 1990s and not committed to the typical institutional exhibition strategy until the first years of the new millennium.¹ Due in part to the confused curation of these millennial exhibitions and to the scatter-shot PR programming of progressive or “out” music publishers, sound art has become erroneously synonymous with mediocre contemporary experimental and electronic music forms.² Read any digital or printed music review publication and one is bound to stumble upon a bland musician being falsely inflated by the term “sound artist”. Reacting to this unmitigated and largely unreflected upon growth of sound art, several writers have recently devoted themselves to charting its winding history in order to situate it as a legitimate, although at times confusingly defined, practice. Such surveys have been greatly beneficial in outlining the history of sound’s role in exhibited art and in doing so correcting some of the PR gaffes mentioned above. However, the critical terminus of these generally art historical texts rarely extends beyond tracing nomenclature and offering compilations of like-minded artists.³ In order to understand how sound functions as an artistic medium and as a valid contemporary voice, we must understand its aesthetic means, its socio-political ramifications and move beyond mere cataloguing.

What follows is a concentrated review of contemporary literature on the subject, its objectives, its shortcomings and finally its alternative in approaching the matter through aesthetics, particularly Rancière’s recent art theory. By invoking Rancière, it should be clear that I am not concerned with “sound art” as an isolated methodological or art historical footnote; I am rather intrigued by sound as a vehicle for aesthetic experience and political activation. I consider sound art capable of being critical art, or rather, art that Rancière claims “intends to raise consciousness of the mechanisms of domination in order to turn the spectator into a conscious agent in the transformation of the world”.⁴

Alan Licht’s 2007 book Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories hints at such an aesthetic programme by concluding with a vaguely optimistic sentiment: sound art “can potentially point to the kind of cosmic consciousness that so much art aspires to”.⁵ Unfortunately, this observation is left dangling at the back cover and is never elaborated upon; it is treated like an exhausted response to the complicated question of sound art’s importance, and yet it is the correct answer. Despite being a wonderful repository of historical photographs and other documentation, Licht’s book, perhaps the most widely known in the field, is too preoccupied with classifying sound art as a restricted set of practices to continue this line of thought. Licht instead battles with separating music and visual art from his titular subject so that he may place it in a transcendental position “between categories”. This untangling of verbiage muddles the critical potential of sound art and leaves many of the artists and their works unexamined. From the outset he draws a set of rigid definitions: “Sound art belongs in an exhibition situation rather than a performance situation”, “Sound art rarely attempts to create a portrait or capture the soul of a human being or express something about the interaction of human beings”, and “Sound art, then, rejects music’s potential to compete with other time-based and narrative-driven art forms and addresses a basic human craving for sound”.⁶ Kenneth Goldsmith, in reviewing Licht’s book, too champions its import as a historical document, but cautions that these stringent “precepts don’t hold up”.⁷

Licht’s categorisations are easily eroded because they do not treat sound art as a viable contemporary art form, but as a fringe element quarantined to its own special space in the gallery and on the
bookshelf. Although Licht is obviously invested in the topic, by surgically removing sound art from the theories and themes that envelop the rest of the contemporary art world, he is ultimately undermining its legitimacy and doing a disservice to the artists involved.9 Applying theory to artworks must not be done so microscopically; if it is an effective piece it will hold up to rigorous and wide-ranging appraisal. Much of the criticism levelled at sound art has honed in on its perceived methodological and conceptual myopia: Joe Milutis, a professor of sound art at the University of South Carolina, notes that “the sound art that has emerged from galleries has attempted to define itself by exclusion”.6 In his 2007 history of “noise”, Noise/Music, Paul Heagarty argues sound art as “something porous and very hard to describe but . . . it is too self-contained, and sets up the listener as self-contained”.10 I am not supporting all sound-based artwork without discretion; there certainly are works being exhibited that tumble into these pitfalls. Yet, the above criticisms fail to analyse work on an individual basis within the context of the contemporary milieu. They take instruction from the notion that sound art is a specialised and precisely defined genre, which in turn limits the depth of their critique. The approach is narrow and contained, not the art.

Superficial definitions perpetuate superficial criticisms, leading then to no stable point of understanding. Hegarty’s assertion that “sound art . . . is kept at a level of sufficiency, the presentation of sound in its own right, in a rejection of formal experimentation and judgment alike”, reads like a counterpoint to Licht arguing sound art’s human-less operation and negation of possible narrative.11 Likewise, Milutis’ “exclusion” comment stems directly from the arbitrary condition that sound art must be in an ordained exhibition space and draped in the pretense that follows it.12 What this discourse highlights is a fundamental lack of panoptic scope, or in other words, a perspective on the practice of sound art that incorporates it into the major streams of contemporary art and theory. Meanwhile, much has been written about sound art as it is bound to art and music history; the standardised tale now fixes it in a web surrounded by conceptual art, the visual impact of minimalism, the racket made by early Fluxus happenings and the musical experiments forged by a generation of composers working with electronics, silence and the liberation of noise.13 Each genealogical point can be traced to work being made today, but what makes said work more than just a compilation of its influences and worthy of discussion?

Sound art functions via listening; this is an obvious but easily overlooked (overheard?) point. By listening, we interact with sound, the medium of sound art, not only as “phenomenon”, but also as a conduit of information. In the past few decades a bevy of books have been published hoping to reinvigorate our consciousness of hearing, and its more concentrated brother listening, in a culture that is primarily, and sometimes overwhelmingly, visual.14 Interesting reads no doubt, however, they too often concoct the ear as a mystical appendage that (solely because it has been all but forgotten) is supposedly capable of tapping into a holistic universal awareness that our eyes cannot. They construe listening as a sensuous primitivism that provides a calming singularity to our lives’ rabid multiplicity. Many musical experimenters from the 1960s onward have also carried this banner, each with their own idiosyncratic projects: Pauline Oliveros’ “deep listening”, La Monte Young’s almost endless drones, and others sought to extract the listener from their personal situation and transport them to a plane of pure experience.15 I do not contend the point that our ears are sometimes forgotten and the sounds around us taken for granted, but I do not consider hearing a more exalted sense; both eye and ear are equally able to transmit information. Sound art’s critical importance is indebted to its ability to communicate the everyday experience and comment on contemporary happenings via sound not as its own end, but as the means towards criticality.16 As such, sound art treats the ear as an aesthetic organ just as visual art does the eye; it empowers one to hear the complex structures we live for, against and persistently with. Sound art’s own aesthetic potential liberates it from the aforementioned historical and methodological exclusion, rendering it an utmost inclusive art form capable of expression and keen investigation. Perhaps it has been assumed that the writers I mentioned above have forgone all mention of aesthetics in relationship to sound art; this is not true. However, what is true is that very little page space has been offered to its discussion. Furthermore, what has been offered up are but discreet
and unelaborated upon references to relational aesthetics, a term and concept that is very easy to deploy but often done so too nebulously to be of any effect. Hegarty concludes the 11th chapter of Noise/Music with the following unnamed allusion to Nicolas Bourriaud’s system of relational aesthetics: “The disjunctions are mostly in the relational aspect of sound art (how it makes us aware of relatedness and our position as related to environments), in its other relation to the visual arts and its homes, in the relation set up between a here and a there in the representing of sound from somewhere else and another time”.17 Despite his criticisms, this is Hegarty’s appeal to sound art’s disjunctive potential, its potential to be what he defines as “noise”, a disruptive and transformative entity that “we are forced to react to”.18 Yet, the fact that “noise is negative: it is unwanted, other, not something ordered” makes sound art or rather successful sound art in Hegarty’s definition, nothing but a sample of institutional critique trying to gnaw at something from the inside out.19 Its relational radius then seems very limited; it extends from the gallery to another gallery or perhaps a museum but beyond, it withers. Per Bourriaud, however, relational art extends itself and creates “relations outside the field of art (in contrast to relations inside it, offering it its socio-economic underlay): relations between individuals and groups, between the artist and the world, and, by way of transitivity, between the beholder and the world”.20 This schema goes far beyond the gallery and would consider successful sound art more than a disruptive noise.

As a theoretical perspective, relational aesthetics bolsters an art that endeavours to inform its viewers of society’s waning interpersonal cognisance and activate an informed response to it. It is an art that “no longer wants to respond to the excess of commodities and signs, but to a lack of connections” and thus “intends to create not only objects but situations and encounters”.21 According to Hegarty, sound and sound art are relational and though the works described below (by Christian Marclay, Toshiya Tsunoda, Janet Cardiff and Janek Schaefer, respectively) may also be considered as such, I wish to consider them outside of this defined context.

Brandon LaBelle, writer and sound artist himself, invokes relational aesthetics as the theoretical crux of his 2006 book Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art: “It is my view that sound’s relational condition can be traced through modes of spatiality . . . This no doubt stands at the core of the very practice of sound art—the activation of the existing relation between sound and space”.22 LaBelle’s relationalism is founded on sound’s inherent qualities of spatiality; following his equation, sound is a social and site specific, and therefore democratic and open to the relational input “between the beholder and the world”.23 Though LaBelle, like Licht, goes on to tell the history of sound art and similarly juxtapose it between visual art and experimental music, he does so with a keen sense of sound’s aesthetic progression while deftly handling sound art as a practice that extends beyond its own noise. Following his history, we witness sound art (and art in general) enmeshing itself more and more with everyday experiences. From John Cage’s seminal 4’33’ (1952), to musique concrète’s reinvention of recorded sound (c. 1951), to Fluxus’ invasions of the prosaic and so on up to today, sound as it is used by artists has been continuously approaching a point of conceptual and methodological cohabitation with our own lives.24 This progression has been one driven by equal forces of abolition and expansion: the abolition of a hierarchy that values certain sounds over others and the consequential expansion of means and subject. The result is an equalisation and democratisation of the ways in which the sound functions in art and may be approached in the everyday.

Rancière’s aesthetic–political programme, outlined in the recently translated The Politics of Aesthetics, Malaise dans l’esthétique and a constant influx of various lectures and interviews, leaps from this key intersection. In his schema, all critical art and the effective relational art that is subsumed by this category, is political because it functions on the same level as a politics that “exists when the figure of a specific is constituted, a supernumerary subject in relation to the calculated number of groups, places and functions in society”.25 Just as relational art appeals to the common person via situation, installation or sound, Rancière’s politics is concerned with the “subjectification” of the demos or the “process by which a political subject [the individual] extracts itself from the dominant categories of identification and classification”.26 Bettina Funcke describes his politics further as one that “doesn’t
just signify institutions of power, or government, or law. The political order doesn’t only define relationships between individuals and goods; it determines the apportionment of that which is common.” As it is a common politics, a stringently democratic politics, the sphere for both political activation and aesthetic experience is the same; there is no careful separation of the two for the sake of upholding either postmodernism or rigid definitions of what art is or is not.

Always inside and always commenting on the common, politicised art is conflated with its own “heterology”, referring to the way that a work “undoes the sensible fabric—a given order of relations between meanings and the visible—and establishes other networks of the sensible, which can possibly corroborate the action undertaken by political subjects to reconfigure what are given to be facts.” Politicised heterological or heterogeneous art assumes that both art and politics exist in the same sphere and interact with the same structures. Where Bourriaud’s aesthetics strive to disturb them. For Rancière, this sphere of interconnectedness is aesthetics at its very core and the existing art, what he dubs “critical art”, populates it on an equal standing with every other active entity.

Critical art is the point of intersection for the political, the aesthetic, the everyday and any other number of conceptual areas that an artist wishes to interact with. Its ideal shape for Rancière is in an art that “must negotiate the tension that pushes art towards ‘life’... borrow the connections that provoke political intelligibility from the blurry zone between art and other spheres... and it must borrow the sense of sensible heterogeneity that feeds the political energies of refusal from the isolation of the work of art”. In my thesis I expressed a wish to posit sound art as an art form capable of such criticality and in doing so push it away from the quarantine of its given definitions and towards an understanding of its aesthetics. In order to do this I must clarify why and how I am using Rancière’s “aesthetics”, and further explain how I am applying a more readily visual theory to the aural.

Rancière’s writings are at my foundation as his perspective on contemporary art is wide but erudite, allowing many arts to operate in a pluralistic and egalitarian space but not without a check of critique. Reviewing his recent major publications, Jean-Philippe Deranty claims that Rancière is “reticent towards recent attempts to define a specific status and function of the artistic image”. Such a generous philosophical handling of the functions of art has been exceedingly attractive to a contemporary art market that continues to push interdisciplinary forms and refuse boundaries. In March 2007, Artforum spotlighted Rancière’s impact on working artists, curators and critics with a lengthy interview and a Kristin Ross penned preface to his work entitled “Regime Change”, suggesting him as the new figurehead in popular art theory. Despite what some may call an oversaturation of attention by a market eager to explain its often difficult to explain multiplicity, Rancière’s writings have nonetheless proved their relevance not necessarily as a plan of action but as a guidepost to the shifting landscape. Because his definition of aesthetics is “not grounded in the rules of proper representation, but in relation to the world itself”, contemporary art, in its many, many forms, is empowered to act in the everyday, making its relationships and capability to disrupt those relationships as expansive as politics. His liberal aesthetics widens artistic scope by combining what is possible with what is actual, thus making both seemingly limitless. This is where I wish to place sound art, not in a safe and sterile space of careful definition, but in the reality of the human political contact. Yet, Rancière’s aesthetics are primarily preoccupied with the image, the visual and the eye; how can we listen to the aesthetic?

Rancière positions contemporary art at the apex of an ongoing 200-year deconstruction of the “representative regime of art”, a paradigm that ordained the “arts’ proper forms” and “separated the fine arts, qua imitations, from other techniques and modes of production”. Out of the shadows of the representative regime grew the aesthetic regime of art. In his translation of Rancière’s The Politics of Aesthetics, Gabriel Rockhill provides an enlightening appendix of terminology including a detailed definition of the aesthetic regime of art: “By promoting the equality of represented subjects, the indifference of style with regard to content, and the immanence of meaning in things themselves, the aesthetic
regime destroys the system of genres and isolates ‘art’ in the singular”. Mirrored here is the oft-repeated history of modern sound that leads to what we know as sound art. But what we know today has been treated awkwardly in this new regime; it is more often met with questions of definition or shallow exclamations about its own technology than given solid analysis. The culprit is not the writer necessarily so much as the term, sound art. If we are to consider sound art a contemporary art form, we are to also consider it within the aesthetic regime of art, within a regime that ushers in “the demise of the ontological scaffolding ordering (separating yet connecting) the different arts, genres, vocabularies, subjects on the basis of the ontological scaffolding of social oligarchy”. The effect is a clearing out of cluttered nomenclature; gone are genre placeholders, gone are terms that only function as means for advertisement and finally gone are discussions about the boundaries of these terms. Sound art is not “sound art”, it is art that utilises sound to, as Rancière notes, play the “game of exchanges and displacements between the world of art and the world on non-art”. It is art. Just “as the visual arts are liberated from the constraints of representing action, liberated from the hegemony of language” in the new aesthetic regime, so is art that appeals to the ear so that they may both “claim to present the world itself” in an aesthetic pursuit.

Therefore, I have used the label “sound art” as a reference point to the literature I have commented on, not as an agreement to its validity; it is a confusing and obsolete notion. The ear is an aesthetic organ, not only a receiver of phenomenon. It functions in our day-to-day experiences by aurally mapping what we consider normal, abnormal, meaningful, etc. This mapping is what Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible”. Rockhill further describes it as a “system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made or done”. Art that targets the ear in order to disrupt the “meaningful fabric of the sensible” is then a political and critical art, not only a “sound art”. Effective visual art functions through these channels by radicalising what we already are familiar with, constructing “meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations”. Effective aural art travels those same channels.

Heterogeneous art of the twentieth century wielded polemics as its primary tool, mocking the art world as too insular and too self-distracted to be involved with the everyday world. Rancière cites Dadaist collage, Wolf Vostell’s photographic juxtapositions, Hans Haacke’s museum tags and many others as examples of the heterological predisposition to shock the viewer into awareness of “violence behind the happiness of consumption”. Art projected itself as a parallel to the real world, allowing for sharpened intersections where it’s own self-criticism “blended with criticism of the mechanisms of state market and domination”. However, the pointed shock intended by this work has invariably been dulled over time and replaced with a certain “humorous distance”. Overlapping the polemical strategies of the past, Rancière observes four unique themes of contemporary art that push “yesterday’s dialectical provocations towards new figures of the composition of the heterogeneous”: the game, the inventory, the encounter/invitation and the mystery.

Explored below are four active artists whose critical work engages these themes and employs sound to do so. For the purposes of continuing my analysis, I am borrowing the open lens of Rancière whose vocabulary appraises contemporary art not on a basis of media, style or even on a spectrum of good/bad, but instead with only a consideration of its criticality. Adopting this viewpoint, the below analyses offer a glimpse of sound’s critical ability and its aesthetic capacity to express varying concepts, stories and emotions.

LAUGHING QUIETLY: CHRISTIAN MARCLAY’S GAME

There is no answer to the question “What is funny?” How could we possibly define what is inside and outside of that slippery sixth sense, humour? The more appropriate question is in fact “Why is it funny?” “What” implies that only certain scenarios can be humorous, but humour is contextual; what is funny in a certain location or sequence is merely part of the serious routine in another. “Why” considers this context and asks us to evaluate the humorous based on juxtapositions. Creating humour is a process of juxtaposition, a process of conceptual collage where one unites...
seemingly disparate elements to showcase their absurd connections. For the artist, it is a game whose playing pieces are the infinite "spectacles, props and icons of ordinary life" presented in a way not to shock, but to amuse and "sharpen our perception of the play of signs". The artist becomes, in essence, a cultural DJ blaring mixes and remixes of a game system we are all involved with.

Taking this artist-as-DJ image to its most literal level, Christian Marclay's (American, b. 1955) work strives to synchronise our ears to sign identification through his own brand of sign subversion. His early work grew out of an attachment to the turntable and its vinyl partner, the record. Cutting and gluing records together, placing records on floors, scratching, bending and breaking records; all the methods to evoke sounds outside the groove and other than what was originally intended. The juxtaposition of the original intentions of the recorded medium and Marclay’s own subversions construct a game where the meaning of the record is suspended in an amalgam, lost in the constant flux of the mix. The flux is what Rancière dubs the "undecidable"; it is what we enjoy playing with and through this play we derive humour. In the mix, humour rebuffs the predictability of music and sound in media, inversing and juxtaposing how we read signs through a new contextual frame.

Marclay’s record-oriented work functions as a light-hearted critique of how we interact with the medium. From the record itself, to the cover artwork each is evaluated as a sign and a simultaneous appeal to the eye and ear. Continuing this line of investigation, Marclay’s video work détournes film footage of specific sound events via repetition or combination. His 1995 piece Téléphones serialises short snippets of telephone scenes from an array of films. But the call is never resolved, there is no “Goodbye” and the humour, the absurdity of a chained phone call between a cast of vastly disparate characters highlights not only the tropes of the film medium, but also the sounds of our own similarly patterned interactions. The piercing ring of the phone and the dull answered “Hello?” of the actor or actress registers with what we consider normal and yet this normality is disrupted by its own repetitiveness.

Expanding repetition into seamless interaction, his 2002 piece Video Quartet montages brief sound moments from film, be they loud objects, singing or instruments being played and projects them onto four separate screens creating an aleatoric “quartet”. The result is filmed musique concrète, a noisy conflagration that removes the original narrative context and situation of the sounds and recasts them as players in an endless jam session. Our eyes and ears dart from screen-to-screen, but the heterology is never finalised. As the aural fabric of the film is torn apart, humorously mimicked is the cacophony of our common experience; a critical line is drawn between the transplanted film clip and our capability to make sounds. The critical pen blurs the world of art and non-art, allowing us to laugh, play the game and become a likewise DJ to our own personal sound environments.

COMMON VIBRATIONS: TOSHIYA TSUNODA’S INVENTORY

“Field recording” is a somewhat abstruse term for a very simple concept: capturing sound. The line of separation between field recording, studio recording and instrument recording is minor as all are concerned with capturing a sound in space in a way that is able to transmit both object and its interaction with a given environment. Yet, field recording as it is referenced today is more often associated with the guerilla tactics of film and radio sound producers who position microphones in our everyday places. These techniques have proved to be a rich vein for artists wishing to rebroadcast and hyper-realistically radicalise the prosaic sounds we encounter on a daily basis. Due in part to the boom in experimental electronic music, its continuous transition towards a more natural aesthetic, and the growing affordability of the technology, field recording has become a key methodology in contemporary sound-making.

Toshiya Tsunoda's (Japanese, b. 1964) rich decade and a half of recording is a highlight of this tradition. Tsunoda’s focus is not on the macro level; rarely does he reproduce massive spaces and reverberation, instead he works on a micro level. The resonances and vibrations, the tiny buzzes and windy thrusts that populate our listening field, these are the actions that he pursues and recreates with an almost scientific detail. He experiments occasionally with the installation format, but his work can be more readily found on CD. The notes
for his 2004 album “Scenery of Decalcomania” read like a laboratory report, a testament to his unflagging dedication to detail: “An event causes vibrations to travel through a certain space and the vibrations affect this space. Or to put it another way, a space is made to appear through vibration. A similar example; the stain of paint on textured paper is pressed into a new surface, a decalcomania”. Setting-up microphones in pipes, bottles and adhered to sheets of metal, Tsunoda manifests space through sound and collects the data. Such an approach encapsulates Rancier’s invention theme where “the artist is at once an archivist of collective life and the collector” who strives to create a stock “which evidences the potential of objects’ and images’ collective history [and] shows in this way the relationship between the inventive gestures of art and . . . of living that constitute a shared world”. Tsunoda’s recorded scrapbook of aural decalcomania impresses upon us the objects and scenes of a shared world. What is handed to us is incredibly modest; the artist recognises the futility of shock and the power of materials that we all share. Heterology is presented as a rupture of the sensible not by disjunction, but by joining the sensible and showcasing the “collective historical potential” of places and things.

In interview, Tsunoda describes the concept behind “Scenery of Decalcomania” as means to demonstrate “the inseparable relationship between the experience of perception and the target of perception”. The documented and collected variability of sound experience due to placement is explored as an analogue to human variability of perception and comprehension. A metaphor for political activation, for Rancier’s “subjectivisation”, is “decal’ed” or impressed upon our aesthetic ear. The inventory is therefore not merely a static body or dusty museum collection, it is a body that invites dynamic re-appropriation of the distribution of the sensible.

WALKING THE LINE: JANET CARDIFF’S INVITATION

Propelled by the intriguing dual spatiality of sound and our personal interaction with space, Janet Cardiff (Canadian, b. 1957), alone and in collaboration with George Bures Miller, has spent nearly 15 years crafting audio narratives that guide participants through hazy dramatisations of and confrontations with the everyday. Calling these pieces “sound walks”, Cardiff arms listeners with a Discman and headphones, and guides them through real-life spaces via a binaural recording that blends field recordings, sound effects and vocal narration. Walks have been woven through crowded metropolises and tucked away in lush countryside and yet no matter the setting, Cardiff consistently strives to activate what Mirjam Schaub calls a “point of friction between you [the listener] and the world”. Schaub’s wonderful The Walk Book, a dense textual primer to this area of Cardiff’s work, warns that her walks are “an irreproducible experience”, yet the succinctness of concept makes it at least imaginable.

That intangible quality, the sensation of “almost” is fundamental. In conversation, George Bures Miller, who works as an equal collaborator and technician to many of the walks, underlines this notion: “I like the idea that we are building a simulated experience in the attempt to make people more connected to real life”. As the listener is wearing headphones playing recordings drawn from the very same environment he or she is at that time navigating, a parallel scenario is constructed where “we cannot immediately assign what we hear to the outside world or the world inside the headphones”. Cardiff’s own voice orchestrates the walks, acting simultaneously as narrator and guide, shifting from romantic observations and memories recalled to directions of where to next walk, look or sit. Her voice carries the invitation and in it we place trust; where is she taking me, how will I get back, what will I find? Following her we sign “an individual pact with the voice out of apparent mutual regard” and continue, thinking that she is speaking to us one at a time, personally and singularly.

The loose narrative that is draped over the real inhabited space and offered to the listener nullifies Licht’s definitions of sound art; the walks are often situated outside of the gallery space and injected with a palpable humanity. If it were locked in an exhibition hall, it would stagnate, Daniela Zyman agrees: “a Cardiff site is not static; instead it is a net of possible references and relationships between the inner space of the walker and their external environment”. The imprint of relational aesthetics is visible here and from this Rancier fashions the “invitation/encounter” theme. Within this framework, “the artist-collector institutes a
space of reception to engage the passer-by in an unexpected relationship”.67 Cardiff’s “space of reception” is New York City, Münster, the Villa Medici, the woods of Wana˚s and others, each a stage for “Cardiff’s method of plucking the drama from the screen and conveying it through the headphones” so that “real life takes on an almost exemplary quality”.68 This is Cardiff’s heterology; through dynamic story-telling she disrupts the distribution of the sensible and informs us of our inherent political being by casting us as the story’s main character. By listening we transform our space from centre of commodity into an arena for Ranciére’s game between art and non-art. There is no shock of heterology, no sudden “awareness” granted; this would be disingenuous. Instead, an uncanny sensation is expressed that situates us on the razor-thin line between reality and virtuality, again acutely disrupting the distribution of the sensible.

THE MEMORY RECORD: JANEK SCHAEFER’S MYSTERY

Janek Schaefer (British, b. 1970) works with mysterious shapes: he dives deep into dusty vinyl stacks to pull out spacious sound washes via turntable manipulation and looping, evoking grainy nostalgia and analogue longing. He records albums of abstract music out of very concrete sources, statements of almost mute indecision and yet Schaefer himself is not much of a mystery. Documented on his website are pages and pages of explanation, lists of equipment, statements of intent and descriptions of process.69 The image of contemporary electronic musician as aloof scientist is pierced through as you look through pictures of his notes, his workspace and even his wedding. Mystery is used as a medium, not as a lifestyle.

He is perhaps most well-known through his recorded work, but 2007s installation piece, Extended Play: Triptych for the Child Survivors of War and Conflict, pushed him out from the more esoteric circles of experimental music and solidified his position as an intercessor between the unnecessarily separated realms of composition, gallery art and music. The piece earned him the “British Composer of the Year Award in Sonic Art 2008,” the “Paul Hamlyn Award for Composers 2008” and the recorded version of the piece was released by 12k/Line records later in the year to critical acclaim.70 Installed at Huddersfield Art Gallery as apart of the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, Extended Play’s conceptual core was born out of Schaefer’s own family experience: “I started my own family in 2005, and have been very aware of how lucky we all are in our own situation/I have been constantly comparing this to the fact that my mum was born in Warsaw in 1942. They say your first few years on earth sets the tone for the rest of your life. How opposite can two beginnings be. It dazzles and inspired me”.71 Drawing from this Polish connection, Schaefer appropriated a piece of “Jodoform” entitled “Tango Lyczakowskie” which was originally broadcast by the BBC during the Second World War and intended to relay special information to the Polish Underground.72 This piece of music was dissected by Schaefer and his arranger Michael Jennings and reconstituted as an extended three-part composition for piano, cello and violin. Each part was pressed onto its own 12” record and placed in one of nine record players situated in the exhibition space. As participants walked around the space, motion sensors cut power to individual record players if one got too close, rendering the composition in a constant state of flux and recasting interruption as a natural and unavoidable fact.73

The historical and emotional duality introduced by Schaefer’s own family biography is abstracted into a universal and arranged in a manner that allows the individual viewer/listener to input their own experiences. The connecting material between the past and present, between the here and there, and between you and me isn’t a material at all, it is sound. Herein lies the piece’s appeal to the political/critical via Ranciére’s heterogeneous theme, the “mystery”. Relating mystery to its partner “symbolism” as a means for suggestion, Ranciére positions it “in opposition to the dialectical practice that accentuates the heterogeneity of elements to provoke a shock, bearing witness to a reality marked by antagonisms, mystery emphasises a kinship of the heterogeneous. It constructs a game of analogies in which they witness a common world, where the most distant realities appear as if cut from the same sensible fabric.”74 The situation presented by Schaefer highlights not the disjunction between today and yesterday but rather the kinship, therefore disrupting the fabric of the sensible by reconnecting its affecting history. Two
worlds separated by time and perception are rejoined through sound. The ear is an enabler of the political where politics is at base a “short-circuit between the Universal and Particular: the paradox of a singular which appears as a stand-in for the Universal, destabilising the ‘natural’ functional order of relations in the social body”.75 Schafer’s particular history is projected as a universal, rendering the historical tissue between his daughter and his mother a critical window for the participant.

And such is the capacity of all political interactions through sound. Rancière’s aesthetic schema explodes any self-limiting definition of sound in art by establishing critical art as a vehicle of heterology for all modes of perception. The Ranciéréan enmeshment of aesthetics and politics embodies itself through the critical disruption of perception; this fact does not limit itself to the image, to the eye. If the seen image is an aesthetic/political gateway, then so too is the heard image. As our personal and environmental identities are constructed by what we hear, critical art, not “sound art”, is given the opportunity to redistribute these facts through the same sensory channels. The four above artists exemplify this. Likewise, Rancière’s four themes of heterogeneous strategy exemplify sound’s variability of method, how different artists choose different routes towards subjectification. Kristin Ross, concluding her Artforum preface, encapsulates this notion and boils down how Rancière’s writings may be applied to always illuminate these different routes, stating that his “work does not offer prescriptions, prophecies or norms for action. But it can make us attentive to the fractures in our own present, the moments when another version of democracy, predicated on dissensus, equality and the emergence of new political subjectivities, may now be perceived”.76 If we are to hear these fractures, what is required from us as participants is a willingness to listen beyond phenomenon, to listen with an aesthetic ear.

NOTES

1. Alan Licht, Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2007), 11.
2. Exhibitions include “Sonic Boom: The Art of Sound” at Hayward Gallery, London in 2000, “FREQUENCIES [Hz]: Audio-Visual Spaces” at The Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt in 2002, and “BitStreams” at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2001. See also, Licht, Sound Art, 11–12.
3. I should reiterate that although I disagree with Licht’s analysis, Sound Art’s collection of photographs and other documentation is invaluable.
4. Jacques Rancière, ‘Problems and Transformations in Critical Art’, in Malaise dans l’esthétique, ed. and trans. Claire Bishop, as Participation (London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Ventures Limited and The MIT Press, 2006), 83.
5. Licht, Sound Art, 218.
6. Ibid., 14–16.
7. Kenneth Goldsmith, ‘The Noise of Art,’ review of Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories, by Alan Licht, Postmodern Culture 18, no. 2 (2008), http://journals.ohioLINK.edu/ejc/pdf.cgi/Goldsmith_Kenneth%2C%pdf%3asn%10531920&issue=v18i002 &article=_tnoa (accessed January 25, 2009).
8. Licht has been a mainstay in the New York scene for years and has amassed a sizeable discography of warped guitar experiments.
9. Joe Milutis, ‘The Biography of the Sample: Notes on the Hidden Contexts of Acousmatic Art’, Leonardo Music Journal 18 (2008): 71–5.
10. Paul Hegarty, Noise/Music: A History (New York: Continuum International, 2007), 170.
11. Ibid., 175.
12. Milutis, The Biography of the Sample, 74.
13. Look to the sound work of John Cage, David Tudor, AMM and countless others who are covered in greater detail by both Hegarty and Brandon LaBelle.
14. Veit Erlmann, ed., Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004) is a recent example that typifies this style of anthropological-cum-acoustic ecological writing.
15. If space provided, there are more historical examples I could give, and even more contemporary, as this style of drone psychedelia and emphasis on listening phenomenon has experienced an underground renaissance in recent years.
16. Licht, Sound Art, 16.
17. Hegarty, Noise/Music, 177.
18. Ibid., 3.
19. Ibid., 5.
20. Nicolas Bourriaud, ‘Relational Aesthetics: Art of the 1990s’, in Right About Now: Art & Theory Since the 1990s, ed. Margriet Schavemaker and Mischa Rakier (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Valiz, 2008), 46.
21. Rancière, Critical Art, 90.
22. LaBelle, Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art (New York: Continuum International, 2006), ix.
23. Ibid., ix-xi. See also, Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, 46.
24. This is not necessarily LaBelle’s thesis, however, the blending of “art” and “non-art” has been a com-
mon theme in modern and avant-garde art-making for the past century.

25. Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum International, 2006), 51.

26. Ibid., 84, 92.

27. Bettina Funcke, ‘Displaced Struggles’, Artforum, March 2007, 284.

28. Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics, 64.

29. Rancière, Critical Art, 84.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Jean-Philippe Deranty, ‘Democratic Aesthetics: On Jacques Rancière’s Latest Work’, Critical Horizon: A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory 8, no. 2 (2007): 230–55.

33. Kristin Ross, ‘Regime Change’, Artforum, March 2007, 252.

34. Ibid., 255.

35. Deranty, Democratic Aesthetics, 248.

36. Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics, 91.

37. Ibid., 81.

38. Deranty, Democratic Aesthetics, 248.

39. Rancière, Critical Art, 86.

40. Deranty, Democratic Aesthetics, 248.

41. Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics, 85.

42. Ibid., 63.

43. Ibid.

44. Rancière, Critical Art, 86–7.

45. Ibid., 87.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., 87–8

48. Ibid., 88.

49. Ibid., 84–7.

50. Ibid., 88.

51. Gordan González and Matthew Higgs, Christian Marclay (London: Phaidon, 2005), 34–7.

52. Rancière, Critical Art, 88.

53. Ibid., 89.

54. González and Higgs, Christian Marclay, 61.

55. Ibid., 82–91.

56. Naturestrip Records Website, ‘Toshiya Tsunoda Reviews’, Naturestrip Records, http://www.naturestrip.com/reviews pages/tsunodareviews.htm (accessed February 2, 2009).

57. Rancière, Critical Art, 89.

58. Ibid.

59. Plop Website, ‘Toshiya Tsunoda Interview’, Inpartmaint Inc., http://www.inpartmaint.com/pdis/pdis_e/plop_e_feature/toshiya_tsunoda.html (accessed February 2, 2009).

60. Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics, 90.

61. Mirjam Schaub, Janet Cardiff: The Walk Book, ed. Thyssen-Bornemisza (Vienna, Austria: Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, 2005), 16.

62. Ibid., 27.

63. Ibid., 18.

64. Ibid., 63.

65. Ibid., 23, 13.

66. Ibid., 11.

67. Rancière, Critical Art, 90.

68. Schaub, The Walk Book, 24.

69. See, http://www.audioh.com for details of Schaefer’s various projects.

70. Janek Schaefer’s Personal Website, ‘Extended Play’, audiOh!, http://www.audioh.com/projects/extended play.html (accessed February 10, 2009).

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid.

74. Rancière, Critical Art, 91.

75. Slavoj Žižek, afterword to The Politics of Aesthetics, by Jacques Rancière (New York: Continuum International, 2006), 70.

76. Ross, Regime Change, 255.