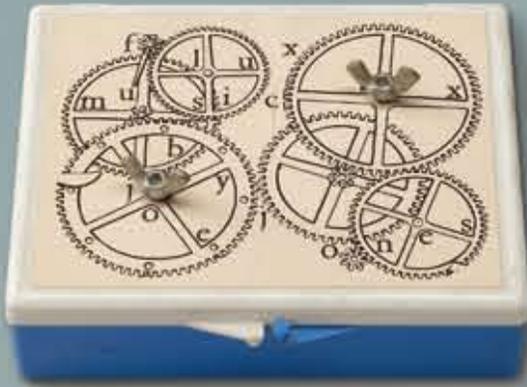


METROSONICS

National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives / 6 May – 28 August 2009





Joe Jones,
Flux Music Box, 1965



File Magazine, 1977

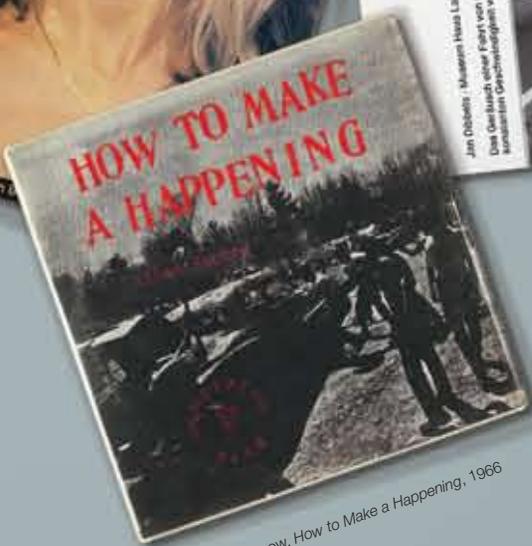


Barbara Bloom,
Reading Lolita in the Dark, 1994

Audio phenomena and technologies have sparked artistic experimentation since the late nineteenth century, but it is only in the 1950s and 1960s that a “sonic turn” could be definitively identified in the visual arts. At that time, a flurry of aural explorations by artists emerged, drawing from influences as wide-ranging as Cageian compositional strategies, Beat poetry, jazz, minimalist music, and new techniques of sampling, collaging, and synthesizing sounds. The issues and interests generating



Jan Dibbets, Afsluitdijk 1969: The Sound of Driving 5 km on a Straight Road with a Constant Speed of 100 km an Hour, 1969



Allan Kaprow, How to Make a Happening, 1966



Les Levine, Wire Tap, 1969

Christian Marclay, Footsteps (detail), 1989



these sonorous, dissonant, and sometimes inaudible works, even after fifty years, strike resounding chords with today's artists. Critiquing the hierarchy and compartmentalization of the arts, sensitizing audiences to the acoustics of everyday life, appropriating and reworking mass media content, interrogating the conventions of music, exploring the aesthetics of noise, orality, and viscosity—these concerns continue to reverberate in contemporary audio art practice.

Canadian artists, composers, curators, and writers have been integral to the evolution and legitimization of audio art. Their pioneering accomplishments include, for example, the theorization of soundscapes (R. Murray Schafer), the organization of sound exhibitions (*Audio by Artists*), the publication of anthologies (*Sound by Artists*) and journals (*Musicworks*), and, of course, the collection, production, and dissemination of audio art in media collectives and artist-run institutions such as Art Metropole. Sound works constitute a distinct presence and abundant resource within the Library's Art Metropole Collection. With over six hundred records, cassettes, reel-to-reel tapes, sound-based multiples, and CDs spanning almost fifty years, the collection contains a vast number of landmark audio pieces by Canadian and internationally renowned artists. The holdings offer a rich heterogeneity of artists as well as avant-garde composers, electronic musicians, performance poets, audio archivists, alternative bands, and media activists. In the approximately five hundred hours of recordings, one can hear more than five thousand individual audio artworks.

The core of the Art Metropole sound archive features works from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, a significant period in which audio art gained legitimacy and acceptance as a medium of artistic endeavour. While some might argue that audio art existed on the margins before the 1970s, by the century's end it had achieved an indisputable centrality within artistic practice, along with an enhanced cultural relevance. *MetroSonics* charts this trajectory from periphery to mainstream, from do-it-yourself production to institutional collection, by focusing on historical and thematic concerns specifically related to audio art. The exhibition draws materials from both the Art Metropole Collection and the Library's ongoing acquisitions. The first two sections reflect on the art historical precedents for audio art in the movements of Futurism and Dada, in addition to interviews with John Cage and Michael Snow, pivotal figures who influenced numerous artists in the realms of theory and practice since the mid-century. ¹ By the time of the rise of Fluxus in the 1960s, music had become a prominent site of interrogation as well as a paradigm for the artmaking process in general. Artists and composers such as George Brecht and Takehisa Kosugi applied conceptual, instructional, and aleatory strategies to deconstruct musical conventions and redefine the potential for sound in art. ²

The remaining sections of the exhibition hint at the breadth and generative thematics of audio-based practices by artists. ¹ The artifacts of sound, especially mass-produced items such as 33 or 45 rpm vinyl records, often serve as the archetype for artists to manipulate, among them Milan Knizak, Christian Marclay, Carsten Nicolai, and Gerhard Richter. ³ Whether altered by painting, burning, or being stepped on, or rendered as an etching or felt slipmats, these works pay homage to the record's iconic cultural status even as they transgress or reconfigure its distinctive circular shape. In turn, many audio

and performance artists rely upon the functionality of records and tapes to document their work and distribute it to a larger audience. ⁴ The voices and live actions of such artists as Laurie Anderson, Jan Dibbets, Allan Kaprow, and Gordon Monahan have been captured in recordings, and so preserve the sonic, temporal aspect of their performances.

Artists' interventions into popular culture frequently express a conflicted desire to critique as much as to emulate. The art band, for instance, functions as a readymade cultural model and a pre-eminent context for collaboration by artists, whether as producers of groups (Andy Warhol and The Velvet Underground), musicians themselves (Rodney Graham, Mike Kelley, Martin Kippenberger), or album-cover artists (Robert Longo, Raymond Pettibon). ⁵ More directly employing the postmodern strategies of parody, appropriation, and sampling, audio-works by Joseph Beuys, Douglas Gordon, John Oswald, Pipilotti Rist, and Althea Thauberger subvert the ideologies infusing the cultural industry of popular music. ⁶

Monologues and storytelling have been fruitful means by which to experiment with identity, captivate audiences, and convey personal information. Examples by Art & Language, Barbara Bloom, Sophie Calle, Les Levine, and Kelly Mark, among others, demonstrate the range of affective styles and textual meaning implicit in the basic activities of reading, speaking, and listening. ⁷ The final section foregrounds the networks and presentational modes advantageous to audio art and central to its current proliferation. ⁸ Correspondence from the art band Throbbing Gristle testifies to the extensive personal connections Art Metropole's founders cultivated with international artists and audio providers. The portability of cassettes (and now CDs) inspired a dispersed audience for sound-based publications like *Audio Arts*, and the relatively easy distribution of audio art exhibitions such as *Audio by Artists*.

As a whole, the artifacts in *MetroSonics* echo the protean interests of artists engaging with sound over the past century. These items also track a burgeoning genre of practice that has now earned a respected presence – melodious at times, noisome at others – in what used to be the hushed interior of the museum.

– Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher

Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher form the curatorial collaborative DisplayCult, whose recent exhibitions include *Odor Limits* (2008), *Listening Awry* (2007), and *Do Me!* (2006). Drobnick and Fisher teach at the Ontario College of Art & Design and York University, respectively, and have edited the anthologies *Aural Cultures* (2004) and *Technologies of Intuition* (2006).

CHECKLIST

The materials in this exhibition are drawn from the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives and from the Art Metropole Collection, gift of Jay Smith, Toronto, 1999. Consult the Library's main desk for the availability of listening stations.

1

AUDIO ART HISTORY

John Cage, *John Cage Speaks Mureau*, S Press Tape #14, 5-inch reel-to-reel audiotape, 1972.

Marcel Duchamp, *Esquivons les Ecchymoses des Esquimaux aux Mots Exquis*, small-format 33 rpm record, 1968.

Musica Futurista, two 33 rpm records, 1980.

Michael Snow, *The Walking Woman* (interview by Wendy Michener), small-format 33 rpm flexi-disc, 1966.

2

CONCEPTUAL MUSIC

George Brecht, *Water Yam*, selections from 96 cards in plastic box, 1966.

Philip Corner, *Some Silences*, 15 unbound pages, 1983.

Albert M. Fine, *Piece for Fluxorchestra*, selections from 24 cards in plastic box, 1966.

Fluxus Anthology: 30th Anniversary, 1962–1992, eight audio cassettes and booklets in wooden box, 1992.

Joe Jones, *Flux Music Box*, plastic box with music-box mechanisms, 1965.

Takehisa Kosugi, *Events by Fluxus*, selections from 18 cards in plastic box, 1987 [1964].

3

RECORD AS OBJECT

Milan Knizak, *Broken Music*, melted 7-inch record painted gold, 1983.

Christian Marclay, *Footsteps*, stepped-on 33 rpm record covered in dust and footprints, 1989.

Christian Marclay, *Slip Mats*, two felt discs, dye-printed with a photogram of each of the artist's hands, 2005.

Carsten Nicolai, *Mirrored Sound*, EN/OF #29, etching accompanying 33 rpm record, 2005.

Gerhard Richter, *Tri-Star*, grey paint on 45 rpm record by Isa Genzken, 1979–81.

4

SOUND AS/IN PERFORMANCE

Laurie Anderson, *Let X = X*, 33 rpm flexi-disc, 1982.

Jan Dibbets, *Afsluitdijk 1969: The Sound of Driving 5 km on a Straight Road with a Constant Speed of 100 km an Hour*, 45 rpm record, 1969.

Diamanda Galás, *Diamanda Galás*, 33 rpm record, 1984.

Joe Jones, *Solar Music at Sierksdorf, Ostsee, Early Morning, Sunday, 1 April 1984*, seven black-and-white photographs and audio cassette, 1984.

Allan Kaprow, *How to Make a Happening*, 33 rpm record, 1966.

Gordon Monahan, *Speaker Swinging*, 33 rpm record, 1987.

Ian Murray, *Radius Etch – Flock Repetition, 1970*, audio cassette, 1979.

5

ARTISTS' BANDS

Destroy All Monsters (Mike Kelley, Cary Loren, Dave Muller, Jim Shaw, and Xavier Bousslron), *Backyard Monster Tube and Pig*, CD, 1998.

Robert Longo, cover for *The Ascension* by Glenn Branca, 33 rpm record, 1981.

Yoko Ono and John Lennon, *Give Peace a Chance/Remember Love*, 45 rpm record, 1969.

A.R. Penck, cover for *Die Rache der Erinnerung* by Werner Büttner, Jörg Immendorff, M. Ohlen, A. Ohlen, A.R. Penck, and Martin Kippenberger, 33 rpm record, 1984.

Raymond Pettibon, cover for *Rubbing Souls and Scratching Holes* by Super Session, small-format 33 rpm record, 1992.

UJ3RK5 (Kitty Byrne, Rodney Graham, Colin Griffiths, Danice MacLeod, Frank Ramirez, Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, and David Wisdom), *UJ3RK5*, 33 rpm record, 1980.

Andy Warhol, *Andy Warhol's Index (Book)*, opened to 45 rpm record with Lou Reed's photograph, 1967, and juxtaposed with a facsimile poster for the Exploding Plastic Inevitable from *Aspen Magazine* 1, no. 3, 1966.

6

INTERVENTIONS INTO POPULAR MUSIC

Joseph Beuys, *Sonne statt Reagan*, 45 rpm record, 1982.

Douglas Gordon, *Feature Film*, book and CD, 1999.

Rodney Graham, *The Bed-Bug, Love Buzz and Other Short Songs in the Popular Idiom*, CD, 2000.

Rodney Graham, *What Is Happy, Baby?: Musique*, CD, 2000.

Rodney Graham, *This Is the Only Living I've Got (Don't Take It Away from Me): The Rodney Graham Songbook*, 2006.

John Oswald, *Plunderphonics*, 33 rpm record, 1988.

Pipilotti Rist, *Remake of the Weekend*, book and *We Can't*, CD, 1998.

Althea Thauberger, *Songstress*, CD, 2002.

Paul Wong, *Prime Cuts*, 45 rpm record, 1981.

7

READING AND SPEAKING

Art & Language, *Music-Language: Corrected Slogans*, 33 rpm record, 1976.

Barbara Bloom, *Reading Lolita in the Dark*, diptych and audio cassette, 1994.

Sophie Calle, *La Visite Guidée*, book and CD, 1996.

Les Levine, *Wire Tap*, three audio cassettes, 1969.

Kelly Mark, *I Really Should...*, CD, 2002.

Maurizio Nannucci, *Parole/Mots/Words/Wörter*, small-format 33 rpm record, 1979.

Bernar Venet, *The Infrared Polarization of the Infrared Star in Cygnus*, 45 rpm record, 1968.

Lawrence Weiner and Peter Gordon, *Deutsche Angst/Where It Came From*, 45 rpm record, 1982.

8

AUDIO DISTRIBUTION

Audio Arts, *Live to Air: Artists' Sound Works*, three audio cassettes in card box, 1982.

Audio Arts, *0782 272121: Six Works for the Telephone*, audio cassette, 1986.

Audio Arts, *Stuart Brisley: Georgiana Collection*, two audio cassettes in black box, 1987.

Audio by Artists Festival 1986, poster and two audio cassettes, 1984/1986.

File Magazine 3, no. 4, Punk Rock issue, 1977.

High Performance no. 23, *The Record: Artists Doing Songs*, two 33 rpm records, 1983.

Throbbing Gristle, *Zyklon B Zombie/United*, 45 rpm record, letter, and envelope, 1978.

FRAMED POSTERS

Audio by Artists Festival, poster for the performance of Gerald Ferguson's *Choral Reading*, 1986.

Christian Marclay, poster from *Footsteps*, 1989.

VIDEO

Dan Graham, *Rock My Religion*, 1983–84, colour videotape, 60:00.

NOTES

The curators would like to thank Peter Trepanier, Sarah D'Aurelio, and the staff of the Library for their indefatigable assistance during the preparation of this show. AA Bronson, Ann Dean, and Andrew Zealley kindly shared their thoughts about Art Metropole and its history. Our appreciation also extends to Murray Waddington and the National Gallery of Canada Research Fellowships Program, which provided opportunities for the curators to conduct research and explore the collection of audio art.

¹ Because of space limitations, several categories of sound works in the collection – such as experimental and electroacoustic music, soundscapes, concrete and performance poetry, and underground bands – could not be included in this exhibition.

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32

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Cover image: Michael Snow, *The Walking Woman*, 1966