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Sound art: Artists of the new wave

Susan Philipsz's sonic installations have been nominated for the Turner Prize – and sound art is taking over galleries across the land. It's time to sit up and listen, says John Kieffer

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Sound art: Artists of the new wave





With the appearance of Susan Philipsz, an artist who works primarily with sound, on this year's Turner Prize shortlist, it seems that we may have a new kid on the cultural block – sound art. Philipsz's artworks often consist of nothing more than an empty gallery and a recording of her own singing. Elsewhere, she builds soundscapes into unusual locations, playing her recording of "The Internationale" in an underpass, piping her work into Tesco supermarkets and around the Acropolis or, in her most recent commission for Glasgow International Festival, playing the Scottish lament "Lowlands Away" under three bridges on the banks of the River Clyde.

While acknowledging the clout of Britain's perennially controversial art prize and welcoming the increased attention for sound art, the truth is that the kid's already a proper grown-up. But what is it? Is it conceptual art, music or installation art, noise, silence? Where does it come from and does it matter?

If we ignore the hanging of a decorated bird flute in a tree several millennia ago, we might well start the story of sound art with

Western art movements in the early-20th Century. Something was clearly in the air as the Futurists and in particular Luigi Russolo introduced noise intoners into concert performances – boxes containing mechanical devices and sound generators, adorned with levers and speakers with the aim of producing crashes, snorts, gurgles, scrapes and the like. Elsewhere, Marcel Duchamp – arguably the original installation artist – took the notion of sound as raw material to a further level of abstraction by creating imaginary sound sculptures. Roll forward 35 years or so and John Cage, whilst fully immersed in the multidisciplinary world of the Black Mountain College in North Carolina, dispensed with melody, harmony and recognisable musical structure itself and explicitly beckoned in the whole world of sound to music-making. Music was now everywhere and anything.

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Moving on to the 1960s and 1970s, the notion of sound art as a distinct art form begins to take shape with the emergence of American artists such as Alvin Lucier, Gordon Mumma and Robert Ashley. Lucier in particular, with his almost forensic investigation of the nature of sound itself and his acute sense of spatial awareness, remains a major influence on the current

generation of sound artists. The extraordinary Maryanne Amacher trod a parallel path to Lucier, covering a wide range of work, including, in 1967, a number of sound installations linked by telephone networks.

An overview of the current sound-art scene is full of interest and diversity but profoundly unhelpful in defining what is a particularly slippery art form, including as it does pieces involving sine wave generators, lectures, wildlife recordings, public space, bell ringing, electromagnetic fields and even the odd folk song.

Recent months have been notable for Céleste Boursier-Mougenot's guitar-playing finches at the Barbican, a walk-through aviary where the birds created a soundscape as they perched on various instruments. Also of note have been Florian Hecker's exhibition of electro-acoustic works at the Chisenhale Gallery and Katie Paterson, whose transmission of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata to the moon and back and recordings from inside a dying Icelandic glacier have marked her out as one to watch, or listen to. Elsewhere, Bill Fontana has just installed his River Sounding in the light wells under Somerset House. And in the coming weeks Chris Watson will bring the sounds of the rainforest to the Palm House at Kew Gardens, John Wynne will take his recycled speakers, player piano and vacuum cleaner into the Saatchi Gallery to become the first piece of sound art in the collection, and Paul Rooney will open McKenzie, in Liverpool.

Other recent landmarks include the UK's first exhibition of sound art, Sonic Boom, at the Hayward in 2000, curated by David Toop, Bruce Nauman's enormous, invisible, babbling sound sculpture for Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in 2004, and former Pogue Jem Finer winning the PRS New Music Award for Score for a Hole in the Ground in deepest Kent.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, sound art, like so much of contemporary

culture, will prove hard to pin down. Maybe that is part of the fun. One thing that we do know is that sound art can be as much to do with the act of listening and perceiving the world in a new way as it is with making the work. Sound is hard to ignore. As those of us who live in cities know too well, it can get right inside you and do all kinds of things to your mind and your body without first asking for your permission. Whilst not providing an antidote to this everyday aural assault, an engaging piece of sound art, whether in a gallery or elsewhere, can certainly sharpen your senses.

There is no canon that you need to learn to experience sound art. Some sound works will reach out and grab you, while others will invite quiet contemplation. Amongst the public, the responses to Fontana's show, a thoroughly immersive installation made of sounds and images culled from the Thames and its environs, have ranged from delighted to disinterested. Boursier-Mougenot's and Hecker's exhibitions could not be have been more different from one other: one also offering a visual feast, the other a fairly minimalist affair; one creating a situation where random events can happen, the other a carefully designed sound environment. Crucially though, both sounded wonderful.

Chris Watson's installation in Kew, reflecting the sounds of dawn and dusk in the rainforest, will be diffused at a volume level close to the reality of the natural environment. Needless to say, the sound of a howler monkey in close proximity, or a thunderstorm, is likely to prove bracing even at these levels.

Susan Philipsz's inclusion on the Turner Prize shortlist is cause for celebration. Those of us who have long been immersed in the world of sound, and are investing in its future, are grateful to the Turner Prize judges for bringing the genre into the limelight. Now an art prize for listening – there's an idea...

John Kieffer is the creative director of Sound and Music (Soundandmusic.org)

For further reading: 'Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories' by Alan Licht (published by Rizzoli)

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