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active listening

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timing is everything. yesterday, i met with frauke and alan to discuss how to approach a piece of writing for soundwalk - and we were sitting in the middle of one of my favorite sounds in the world. the sounds of drinking glasses clinking together as they move along the sawdust floor in the bus boys' carts at phillipe's are like a lullaby of tiny bells. i have been so obsessed with the sounds of these subtle drifting performances for so many years, that my aunt shelley, who is a foley artist, once made me a recording, replicating the sound as a birthday present.

active listening is being open to the possibilities of music and it is being open to these possibilities in spaces outside of concert halls and car radios - for certainly music is everywhere. john cage's writings/thinkings/talkings about sound/music/listening have asked us to consider that anything can be music. i like to tweak this proposition with the thought that although anything can be music, not everything is music. marcel duchamp spoke of the viewer completing a work of art; and that a work of art has no meaning without a viewer to bring meaning to it. and so i think, as active listeners, we can become "composer listeners", as we decide what sounds in the world we are going to ignore and what we will choose to listen to as music. anyone who has stood at the side of a small stream, lost in the sounds of the water flowing over the stones, has already done this.

it seems a necessity, as active listeners, to become sensitive to these things in the world around us that the german poet rilke called "inconsiderable things" (the things from everyday life that most people don't really pay sensitive attention to). standing on a street corner, listening to the sounds of cars approaching and then passing, the repeating crescendos resemble the sounds of ocean waves or the patterns of gentle breezes. these sounds do not only move around us; but also through us; and with sensitive ears, we begin to hear the world differently. we determine the possibilities of such "everyday" sounds for ourselves, and depending upon the depth of our attention to them, all sounds have the potential to evoke profound experiences through them.

frauke and alan and i discuss sound art, and in particular sound installation, and in particular soundwalk. so what does one say to a group of people wandering around downtown long beach in search of their own version of my phillipe's drinking glass experience as a trigger for a deeper listening? and what does one say in relation to the artists attempting to create so many different kinds of audio situations to enable such things to come about? walking around the possible sites with other artists, listening and looking at the city as a series of audible sites (or audio stages); i am thinking about the idea of sound interventions (not in a guerrilla sense - to distract - but in many cases to bring the viewer/listener to a place of deeper connection or interaction with their own surroundings - a sympathetic relationship to site that connects the artwork to it).

frauke alan and i discuss for a few minutes the difference between sound art and music - which for myself, has nothing to do with the style of one or the other. if we look back to cage, then anything can be music - but can anything also be sound art?

(as i hear the beeping of a truck backing up drifting in through the window as i type, do i pause to listen or keep writing?).

unlike the object qualities of a painting or sculpture, sound activates the space it inhabits. sound draws attention to the space and the environment it exists in; and tends to create a kind of intimacy with space (for it shares its presence with the space of a space). sound exists like slowly shifting lights or slightly changing temperatures. it can encourage the listener/viewer to engage with the space differently than if no sound were present. sound can also change the social qualities of space (for soundwalk, most of the spaces are not generally used to house artworks - parks, abandoned buildings, parking garages, buses, restaurants, e.g. - and thus the social interaction within these spaces will be different than they were the weekend before or will be the weekend after). within existing architecture, a field of sound can create a micro architecture - where audio speakers and one's ears are perhaps the thresholds and doorways to another space of wandering. in this sense, sound not only inhabits space, but has the potential to become space.

(the sawing of construction workers next door has just stopped, and the silence points back to the sound that just faded away - i had ignored it until now gone - and now the space has opened up - and all of the sounds that were beneath the sawing have a different presence - birds, cars, voices - i can actually hear them - now, the sawing begins again - this time i am listening.)

so what is the difference between sound art and music? my own piece for soundwalk hopes to transform the dome room into a different space through the presence of sound (again, this hope of creating a micro architecture within an existing architecture). of course, this is very different on the surface than a rolling stones concert - yet, the rolling stones can also transform an empty stadium (existing space) into a frenzied blast of emotion (new space) with their own sound (and a heavy dose of lighting, staging, star power, pyrotechnics). folks tend to want to differentiate between these things in terms of style; but lyrics, rhythmic structures, instruments, noise, silence, volume, field recordings, etc. are either acceptable or deplorable in all forms of music and sound art; depending upon an artist or audience's taste.

i think it has more to do with intentions and context. the majority of sound art tends to work towards the activation of spaces in ways that don't necessarily shift focus to a performer; but reflect attention back towards the existing qualities (sometimes shouting, sometimes hidden) of the space itself (and in particular to the relationship between the space and the sounds being generated within it). a rolling stones concert could happen anywhere - the site is simply part of the deal, determined by the number of people it might hold. this is a very different kind of intention and focus towards site than for the group of artists with whom i walked through downtown long beach, trying to find locations that would inspire our soundwalk artworks.

artists were: listening to the amount of outside noise seeping into a space... wondering whether or not one could interact with these noises or needed to shut them out... thinking about how much of a distraction an artwork would be in one spot or could be in another... or possibly attempting to find a place where sound could secretly coexist with a space and remain relatively hidden except to those with the most perceptive of ears. it is a thin and somewhat fragmented line that separates sound and music - and lately i have begun to question why people are so bent upon

separating the two, as opposed to embracing the territory and languages they might share.

sound art has the potential to expand a person's perception of a space (or perhaps even the world), through the experience of listening - and focused listening heightens the experience - but isn't this also what all great music does. rather than draw definitional lines between the two, i'd rather throw an inspirational net of connective tissue over the voice of blind willie johnson humming dark was the night cold was the ground; the sound of beryllium rods cascading against each other in harry bertoia's sounding sculptures; and the vibrations of the walls, floor, and my own body, inside lamonte young's ever droning dream house. as a listener, these things all seep inside me and they all make me tremble, and this trembling begins with active listening.

if i may be so bold as to make a suggestion, it would be to jettison the endlessly looping discussions moving towards exclusive definitions of sound and music. it really is of no consequence what you call what you are listening to - and definitions lead us towards closed systems and narrow views. rilke also said once that "hands must be gentle to accept the offering" - and i would like to propose that gentle ears and active listening can enable one to have a deeper connection to the spaces and the sounds that surround them - like alice's rabbit hole; one must take notice of certain things, before one can fall into other worlds...

steve roden, july 2005