
*Overtoon – Platform for Sound Practitioners
presents*

**Instead of “sound art,” say: abrasion, a dirge,
willed from the other side of a leaky room,
undisciplined, celebrative, dangerous, always
emerging.**

An 8-part Podcast by Bill Dietz

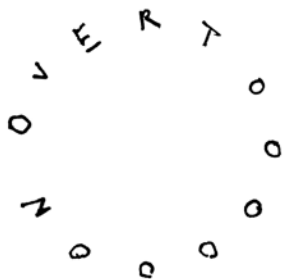
In conversation with Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, Nikita Gale, Jennie C. Jones,
Aurélie Nyirabikali Lierman, Jennie C. Jones, Marina Rosenfeld, Lauren Tosswill, &
Hong-Kai Wang

<https://overtone.org/podcasts/instead-of-sound-art-say/>

Episode 04: Jennie C. Jones

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Audio Transcript



Audio Intro

[Sounds of a cassette tape mechanism and tape hiss, followed by voices of all eight participants in the series uttering variations on the word "sound" and "sound art." More cassette tape sounds, followed by the voices of all eight participants simultaneously saying the word "SOUND" in a loop. More cassette tape sounds, followed by "male" and "female" computer voices read the complete title of the series ("Instead of "sound art," say: abrasion, a dirge, willed from the other side of a leaky room, undisciplined, celebrative, dangerous, always emerging.") and the Episode Number. Cassette tape sounds cut out.]

Conversation

[Throughout the conversation there is series of unpredictably and frequently shifting virtual audio backgrounds – atmospheres recorded by Bill Dietz & Bryce Hackford including children playing outdoors, howling wind, a public bus trip, rain and thunder, nature sounds with a distant saxophone, a quiet field, electrical buzz, and an outdoor scene populated by cicadas.]

Bill Dietz:

I guess the way I've been sort of starting these conversations has been to not let sound art be this nebulous, vague thing that can mean anything, but to say there's this particular history from the late '70s when particular people thought the world somehow needed this term and they had their reasons for that. And of course a lot has changed and there was maybe even questions at the time as to how needed that was. But just to make sure it's this specific thing, this funny specific history, which of course has gone in a million different directions and means a million different things now. But I'm curious: do you ever even call any of your work "sound art?"

Jennie C. Jones:

[Jennie's dog Nina barks] ...she's very aware when I'm on the computer and immediately starts acting out.

I feel like because I went to the Art Institute of Chicago in the '80s this term was there because we had 4D. We had to take 2D, 3D and 4D, and the fourth dimension was performance art, sound, video. So I was lucky to have that imprint, but also then it had all these parameters on it...it had a lot of electronics and a lot of hardware attached to it, and that made me think that just listening and having ideas about sound was not [sound art]. That was something else. And maybe that was something that was private in the studio and not a thing that

was part of my work. It is so specific.

And when I saw your email, I thought of this one moment I had with George Lewis, who I talk about all the time. He was actually at the art institute, but I didn't study with him. I would just see him walking around with his little fro and a button down Oxford and he would always be holding an oscilloscope or something. He started a talk that we did together by opening up the Tate Modern's website and scrolling through their definition of sound art and scrolling through the artists that they highlight. He just looked at me and said, "Where are we?" It was such a simple exercise, but to see that such a specific origin story didn't really encompass 90% of sound and music production around the world, it was so much like, "I don't know electronics, so I can't participate," or something.

Bill Dietz: No, but that's really such a thing because I think, like I was saying, there was this apparent need to create this new genre, or term, or whatever. And obviously it was meant to specify something, but by specifying it also excluded so much, I think. And that's become so achingly apparent over the years.

Jennie C. Jones: When you talk about this web, all these different directions, can you see a trifecta of directions, or is it ... I'm just curious from your perspective.

Bill Dietz: I think there are, but I don't know for me how helpful they are. There's for sure this techie, also kind of bro-y thing that's maybe connected to media art that is still I think in Europe. And parts of the US, but maybe much more so in Europe. Very well funded, has its own institutions. And strange because it has its own standards, too. In that world, maybe your work doesn't have to be about anything. I don't even know what that means, but ... Then I think for me, there are kind of interesting, weirdo outliers. People like Max Neuhaus or Maryanne Amacher or David Tudor who kind of came through the end of "classical composition". They started by making pieces for instruments, but then they ended by making these situations and these other things.

And for me personally, I guess that history has been interesting, but also I don't know. I think one of the big problems for me, and this came up when I spoke last week with

Ben Piekut, is the severing of music history from supposed sound history, as though you can do that.

Jennie C. Jones:

That's huge. That's it. I mean, that's kind of the crux of it because there's only so many entry points. And in a way, that is the most accessible, the most universal, the most understood by anyone, any person on the street that has a favorite song, whatever. But then those doors start to close so quickly and they go through academic channels and also through technological channels that start to get more and more and more narrow. And that's when I feel like I don't really want to call myself a sound artist... I feel like I'm a visual artist who uses sound as a material. That's what I've said, just in the same way that I don't really still really think I'm a painter. I think I'm a conceptual artist that uses paint as a material. And I think that it could be seen as a cop out, but it also is kind of like ... It's more about the utility of things to convey something, like finding a means to convey an idea, concept, or emotion. It's been more emotional. I think it's been more emotional the last couple of years than it is about hard ideas.

Bill Dietz:

But that's one of the things that I think is so interesting and so sad about this partitioning of sound artists, these special spheres, because not just music, but sound is a place in all kinds of genres and different historical paths of it where there can be this kind of complexity of emotional "expression" or nonverbal expression. And I mean that not in a romantic or sentimental way, per se, but those things as forms of intelligence that maybe we don't have the most immediate language for or maybe they're culturally devalued or something like that. But these are the most important areas of life in a way.

Jennie C. Jones:

Absolutely.

Bill Dietz:

And music and sound are places where one can deal with these kind of nonverbal things so precisely, actually.

Jennie C. Jones:

Yep. And at one point I would think that visual arts practice had permission to say that, but it is so ensconced in language. And so trapped in criticism and a very linear history, that that super fundamental way of expressing something outside of language gets language put on it. And that's exactly what happens with music theory as well.

But when you were talking about sound art, the most blatant kind of translation for me was just that white box, and how sound lives in this white box. And the show I had at The Kitchen was the first time there was a white box inside of a black box. That was super meta. And to have that situation where the organization, the history, the people there were able to facilitate anything that I was wanting to craft. And that still remains such a unique platform because otherwise, how does it enter those spaces?

So then it becomes about architecture, it becomes about physics and acoustics. And that's when I only go so far, like all of us, to understand acoustics in any physical space you enter because someone says, "Hey, you make sound. Put something here..." It's going to be different everywhere you go. And then headphones are horrible, and seeing cables on the floor... All of that is like 25-year-old discussion for me in terms of starting predominantly as a visual artist and then tiptoeing into letting my listening practices in my studio become part of the work, which is basically what that was. And then immediately in that white box situations, it's like, "hide the cables or show the cables?" I mean, it's A or B. Then is that a sculpture? If you put the speaker in the middle of the floor with the cable attached to the wall, is that the piece? Do we sell the speaker? I mean, really ridiculous conversations for something that starts as a way to fill a space with an energy, really.

Bill Dietz:

And one of the things there that's come up in some of these talks, too, but that I keep thinking about is there are all these logistical questions, material questions, like you're saying, but the white box thing is also a question of value. How something becomes audible or legible as something worth paying attention to in a certain sense. And I think there's something in the term that has that problem in it, too. It's like it needs to have a name in order for it to be deemed worth paying attention to or something like this. And there's some kind of trap there, I think, where it's like there is so much sonic and musical intelligence in the world that doesn't need the white cube. And yet, it can also just go sort of unheard or unappreciated in a big way.

And how to turn our attention to where these kind of other intelligences are happening or creativities or virtuositities even without molding them to fit into these modes that have all these other histories and all these other problems. I guess it's a

question of recognition or even in an old fashioned way kind of representation, like how something becomes recognizable and valuable. Sorry, that was a bit of a rambling.

Jennie C. Jones:

No, it's spot on, especially with something that's ephemeral in nature and operating in a space that capitalizes and focuses on materiality. So there's the thing right there. For me, it's always been just another texture, but it was very rarely in that kind of particular art market driven environment. It's not really a thing. It's like something they let me do, but it's not really of interest necessarily. Institutions are different. I mean, putting something in Philip Johnson's Glass House and in the sculpture space there was profound because of being able to push against that narrative, to occupy that space and to think about the years that those structures were built. That was the conceptual in...just what was happening in 1971 when you were building this place to put all of your sculpture. Well, it was like Kent State shootings. There was war, there was political protests, there was a lot of pushing from the Black Panther party, being arrested, people being assassinated.

And so yeah, let's take some of that energy and put that inside of this pristine piece of architecture with the Chamberlain sculpture in the lower level and see. So there's moments where I feel really proud of being able to use sound to craft things in that particular conceptual way, but it's always the prompt is being invited someplace to be a disruptor or to build a connection. So it takes the institution to be open enough to make that possible and be willing to let that sort of expansive shift happen. And without it being like we're in our great age of reparations, so there's definitely some eye rolling with some invitations.

Bill Dietz:

Yeah.

Jennie C. Jones:

Anyway, talk about digression... That was me spiraling into my coffee moment.

Bill Dietz:

No, no. I was thinking about your ... Sorry, I forget the name of the institution, but your Aeolian harp piece.

Jennie C. Jones:

Yeah, at The Clark.

Bill Dietz:

At The Clark. I was thinking about the Aeolian harp piece in relation to what you were writing in the email about the dirge

in a way, about taking these kind of existing structures and ... It's not like a question per se of institutional critique in any kind of historical kind of way, but at the same time not just celebrating them. In a certain sense, taking the fact that this is what we have to work with as maybe an occasion for grief.

Jennie C. Jones:

Yeah, I know. And I was thinking about...I had to read a little bit about dirge because I love that word. And then when I threw it back at you. I was just like, "Wait, I don't really actually know any"...this sort of weird Latin root word history, but it doesn't matter. But I am that person. Any kind of lament or song of grief or sorrow, there's no deeper history than that. Dirge...it's such a good word. And it made me think of drone and dirge relationships. And I snuck in a little tiny line that I still feel like was quite a stretch at the Guggenheim to talk about circular breathing and Roscoe Mitchell and the difference between creating a drone kind of consistent sound through that method versus digital methods versus even a bow on a violin trying to be a continual tone. And I'm still very interested in that. And maybe it's just where we are right now. It feels pretty fucking apocalyptic in the world. And the pandemic was only three years ago and we're already acting like it's yesterday and it's over. And so yeah, dirge is on my mind.

When we're talking about the white box stuff, also that kind of continuous tone is a really generative way to let people come and go from a situation and not put timestamps on it. And I think that still video, sound, all that tech stuff in a museum or gallery setting, it's complicated. And as far back as I can remember, in the '90s even, when you see a black curtain up you're just like, "Do I want to go in there? What's in there? And then how long is it?" And you don't know when you sit down in this dark room with people and you're like, "Should I listen? Is it a listening thing or will the video start again?"

There's a lot of weird anxiety about getting stuck in something that may be five hours long and you don't know what you're being implicated in. But if there's a continuum, it feels like a generous thing because those people that want to sit on the floor for an hour can do so. And those people that want to walk through and just get a little taste of what's happening. So I mean, it's not placating to the audience, but it is a strategy to be generous, I think, to think about that.

Bill Dietz:

It is funny, though, how what you're thinking is in a way, that the structures we have (I keep coming back to this kind of institutional thing and including the concepts, like the concept of sound or the concept of this or that) they're sort of very ill fitting. Even the museum, like you say, the museum as a historical European structure wasn't made for video art or whatever. Wasn't made for cables. And so there are these weirdly fundamentally awkward things that don't fit. And we've been living in Florence for the last few years and when I went to the Uffizi Gallery last, there's great stuff there, but what I was really struck by in thinking about the history of the museum is that place is not really made for looking.

The rooms are too small, so you can never get in the right position in relation to the thing. There's nowhere to sit. There's always too much on the walls. There's never any information about what you're looking at. And so what I came away with (and maybe that's also just the current kind tourist moment of museums, but I think it's somehow in the structure of the place, too)...it's like a place to bask in power in a certain aura of something. And so yeah, this idea of what could even be a space for real looking or listening or ...

Jennie C. Jones:

What is a space for real listening? I mean, there's always an assumption that if you're interested in sound and music and music history that you go to live music, that you love to go see things live. I don't like going to see live concerts and it's always been so ... It's such a weird, embarrassing confession ... I enjoy listening to mediated music because I can be on the spectrum, whatever at home. I can create whatever environment without having to stand next to 1,000 people or wishing someone would turn their phone off or whatever the thing is. So what are those shared spaces anymore for listening? If it's not a live performance and it is sort of a mediated listening session, what does that look like?

Bill Dietz:

I mean, I love listening at home. And I think in a funny way, if not everyone, but most people do. That is the primary experience of music and enjoyment. I think it's whether it's on headphones or on your stereo or whatever. And for me, just also in my own art stuff, that's actually a lot of what I want to think about and try to deal with, is that in a way the live experience or the public public group experience is really the exception for everyone, unless you're a music student going out every night or something. Well, I was just going to say one

funny, a little example. I can never stop talking about Maryanne Amacher, but John Cage asked her to do a sound piece to go along with his eight hour long "Empty Words" text deconstruction piece. Like Cage/Cunningham, her piece was a separate piece and they both happened at the same time. And they did it in late '70s, early '80s. And they both wanted to release it, like a thing.

And she wrote the most beautiful NEA or something like that, grant proposal. And essentially she says a little bit like what you were saying. She says the live experience is actually the worst way to experience an eight hour long piece. If you hear it live, of course there can be really beautiful acoustic things that happen in the room, but at the same time, who sits for eight hours and maintains attention? And then you're going to have that experience once in your life. And if you really want to get into what the work is and feel it deeply and understand it, you need to do it at home. You need to be able to do it in your own time. And so she uses the sort of metaphor of the book, that she wants to think about releasing the sound piece as a book, as a digital format where you can sort of drop in. You can repeat things, you can ...

Jennie C. Jones:

Beautiful.

Bill Dietz:

And yeah, it was not funded, so it never happened...

But I'm so curious. You were saying before about your sound pieces, sort of like your listening practice kind of coming into public space or something like this. But I've always been curious, too, about your relationship with music in a way and how that literally comes into the work. Also, just in the visual work. Not even necessarily in a sound piece, but whether you think of that in an analogy kind of way, or whether there's some kind of material emotional connection, or whether it's just inspiration, or if there is some kind of interesting articulable relationship to ... Because I know how important music is to you.

Jennie C. Jones:

I've been thinking about this a lot, especially because our origin stories shift and change over time. And I feel like the whole thing cracked open when I thought as someone who's a bit obsessed with art history to layer music history underneath it and then to start to see all of the ebb and flow between those two disciplines particularly post-war. So that was my major

spark, was what I was listening to in the studio, was a lot in the late '90s, was really a lot of hard bop, a lot of avant garde jazz and just a lot of weirdos, really. And realizing that how much of that crafting what I was going to listen to in the studio before one made a playlist on your phone was actually this huge important sort of ritual for me. And then it just made me really consider how much listening was a part of my muse, of my process. And that searching for content, that the content was in the room the whole time.

And that it also let me think about my body and Black bodies in space in a different way that was liberating. I never really was a figurative type of person, but it sort of just kicked open a lot of possibilities to embrace the fact that abstraction, the ephemeral nature of things, time, social, political movements, sacred geometry and music notation, and musicians that can read and musicians that play fully by ear: Bird, Dizzy, boom. "Write this down for me." That it's okay to say, "write this down for me." So I mean, it's kind of a cheesy position, but having gone through so much art school and not really seeing the things that I wanted to see. And then taking 20 years to find the courage to make the things that I want to see just to make it myself. The "Just Above Midtown," just let's just do it ourselves vibe.

So yeah, I don't read music. I still love certain graphic elements of music notation. And that repeats in the visual work and that's starting to get weirder and looser and become my own sort of vernacular of crescendos getting chopped in half and turning into these weird, soft, sharp, sculptural kind of things. And a lot less ripping from existing music and looking more at tones and tonal shifts and acoustics and instruments that are not touched by hands and only touched by wind and things like that. But it's been a really strange, surprising, wonderful journey. It's been really weird. There's a lot of surprises that I just never thought I'd be in my 50s and I would still be so excited to be thinking about the same kind of things. That there's a core metaphor and a core juice energy that's still exciting.