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*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

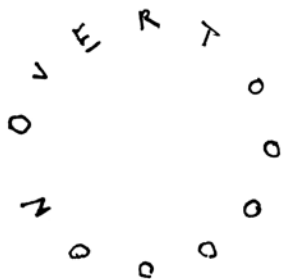
In conversation with Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, Nikita Gale, Jennie C. Jones,  
Aurélié Nyirabikali Lierman, Benjamin Piekut, Marina Rosenfeld, Lauren Tosswill,  
& Hong-Kai Wang

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

## **Episode 02: Budhaditya Chattopadhyay**

Released on February 22nd, 2024

*Audio Transcript*



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## 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:**

Where I found myself starting a few days ago in the very first recording was with something that I think we touched on in email already, which is not speaking about sound art in some generalized, vague way, but rather starting from a very provincialized notion of sound art. That sound art is a thing that comes from a particular geopolitical place at a particular time in the late '70s in New York, and Europe, and places like this. And I think the other thing, the other thought that I had is that if, at the time, when the term itself is fixing and becoming codified, it was meant to specify something, it's also of course come to exclude a lot and to limit. And so I guess I'm just really curious about your relationship with that particular history, or maybe even as a practitioner, as an artist, if you readily even call your work sound art.

**Budhaditya Chattopadhyay:** I never call my work sound art. Yeah. I mean, for me, sound art as a coinage doesn't exist. Because the way I grew up, sound was everywhere. Sound was embedded in everyday practice. And often, that manifested in creative expressions, different ways of voicing, singing, addressing the public, different objects that are part of everyday life. And in that everyday embeddedness of sound, I found moments of rapture, moments of epiphany or transcendence. Just take the example

of Dhrupad performances, because my family were trained in Dhrupad. It's an ancient form of performance in South Asia. My mother was a Dhrupad singer...or later, Rabindra Sangeet singer, so I grew up with music and the kind of innovation one can do in the voice. That is also artistic expression, right? Aesthetic expression. So sound as an artistic expression, a creative means to express yourself, an aesthetic experience, a thoughtful critical engagement with the world, these are all around me such that I never thought of taking sound out of context and posing as an art object separately.

**Bill Dietz:**

No, that's so great. I mean, from that much more expansive appreciation of sonic aesthetic experience, how do you relate to this formal Euro-American sound art tradition? Is it actually that relevant for you? Is it something that you draw on? Or is it something that you're maybe almost incorrectly lumped in with?

**Budhaditya Chattopadhyay:**

Yeah. Growing up, also in late boyhood or early youth, one could encounter a multitude of different artists and their work presented online on MySpace, later SoundCloud...when MySpace was just beginning, when through internet and the world wide web, we could meet so many artists online. And at that time, I was not thinking about sound art as a coinage. I was thinking sound practice. Practice with sound. As simple as that. And I called myself audio practitioner. But 2012/2013, was a watershed year, when Barbara London curated "Soundings" at MoMA and that made, as a coinage, sound art in the foreground. It was like there was big currency around sound art, and museums were slowly waking up to sound art, it felt like.

And then 2015, [inaudible 00:04:35], the curator of Centre Pompidou, gave a keynote in the Media Art History Conference in Montreal. I was there. I heard her keynote, and she mentioned that the next 10 years will be the era of sound art, and there will be so much funding, festivals, publications, curatorial activities around sound art. She proclaimed that the era of sound art is in front of you. That was 2015. So 2013, '15, this period of time, sound art as a coinage came to the foreground. And I was engaging with this idea, "What do I mean by sound art when I say it? Sound art?" Because during Soundings in MoMA, many artists worked with sonic objects, visual objects which present sound. A visual object hiding a

sound object behind them, or some were paintings or scores of sound wave. So very visual in nature.

I was thinking whether this is sound art, and there is a lot of debate. Curators, scholars were talking about it, from Seth Kim-Cohen to Caleb Kelly to Blake Gopnik, Geeta Dayal. They were commenting what they mean by sound art. And there is also, on Seth Kim-Cohen's book called "Non-Cochlear Sound Art." There was a division between sound practitioners all over the European context or in the West, so to speak. I'll come to that later why I call it the West, because sound art is a western phenomenon, so to speak. It's a provincialized coinage only known in the Western world. Outside, nobody knows what sound art is. So it's a western phenomenon, I would say. Western scholars started dividing, making a binary between honk-tweeters and those who are more conceptually-oriented. You know about this debate, right?

**Bill Dietz:** Yes. Yes, for sure.

**Budhaditya Chattopadhyay:** Yeah. So that divided also during post-"Soundings" era discussions of "Soundings" as an exhibition. Artists scholars were dissecting the exhibition. So honk-tweeters and conceptual artists with sound. Even Christian Marclay shifted from being a honk-tweeter to someone who is working with visual objects. So that shift happened because of this pressure to be conceptual in sound art practice. I was, at that time, a PhD student getting to know the field, trying to understand, critically engaging with sound as a phenomenon or an event or an experience. And for me, I felt like sound is always spilling over the visual object. Sound is not framed within this visual object, but it's, by its default way of dissemination, it's always spilling over and making social connections reflected on different surfaces, coming back to you, making a very rhizomatic world, which is constantly unfolding around it. So any museum would be absolutely freaked out...trying to frame sound art in a frame, or a little pedestal on which artworks are presented like an sculptural object is presented on a pedestal. Can sound art be presented on a pedestal like that or within a frame? And that museum as a context of presenting sound...I found it so transgressive because, even though you don't respect the transgression that sound poses as an art object, even then, handling sound in a museum, silent space

even...we all know the white cube structure...it's such tremendously hard work. So of course, museums still are struggling to accommodate sound art in their architectural limitations.

**Bill Dietz:**

So I'm really curious, it's such a great way of putting it, that you present your own coming to sound vis-a-vis this much more broad, expansive, inclusive notion of sonic intelligence, aesthetic experience, et cetera. Has that actually come into conflict with presentational structures in the West? Is that something that you struggle with? Is it a burden to have to try to constantly explain this much broader perspective?

**Budhaditya Chattopadhyay:** Yes. The way of sound art exhibition is understood in the West, or sound art exhibitions are held starting with, let's say, "Soundings" in MoMA, I found it a little problematic.

But coming from music and, of course, not just Indian classical music, Western classical music as well, my 22 years of listening experience, from age 8 to age 30, I would say, roughly 22 years, I only listened to music on the LPs that our family had a collection of...and then I inherited some LPs from my relatives who would collect Vivaldi, Mozart, Beethoven, very conventional music, Western classical music. Later, I heard Gustav Mahler, and that completely blew my mind, growing up early youth. Then I heard Gyorgy Ligeti in the [inaudible 00:11:21] Goethe-Institut library...I used to visit that often, they had a huge collection of CDs. Then I started to collect CDs, cassettes, moving from cassette to CD. So that experience of listening to classical music had, in my mind, sound as an ingredient on which you build an architecture. For me, sound art, if there is any explanation what sound art means to me, is this sonic architecture around me, which has political, social, and temporal, as well as spatial dimensions. You are talking about the time you're living in. You are commenting on that. That sense of reciprocity and oral architecture was something I imagined myself doing in the future, inspired by the masters. And then I came to Europe to study for my Master's, and I encountered so many artists, art organizations, went to exhibitions...

So firstly, the first few years, I couldn't adapt myself to the exhibition of sound idea. I encountered things like Transmediale, where there were many sound art works

presented as part of the festival. Transmediale was my first, so to speak, encounter with the field, the realm of sound art exhibition, et cetera. So I was finding it troublesome: what I encountered. Sound objects with lights coming in and sounds coming in, how to engage with that phenomenon? How to engage with that experience? What does it mean? So, yeah. That was a difficulty. And slowly, I accepted that presentation of sound in my cognitive universe. So, yeah.

**Bill Dietz:**

There's a really interesting simultaneity or dichotomy or something in there. Whereas on the one hand, this expansive notion of sound that you're talking about that is contagious and always spilling over, et cetera, that refuses to be an object, refuses to be something exhibitable in that way, which is wonderful. But on the other hand, in the West, there's this very intense prevailing idea of sound itself, of pure sound, which I think, in a lot of sound art discourse, has been enforced historically.

I can give an example, which is some of the work of Maryanne Amacher, when she would make installations, she always wanted to have objects, and images, and videos, and things. And they were an integral part of articulating her work exactly as you say, as an oral architecture that is about something, that has content. And she struggled in Europe consistently where curators would say like, "No, no. We just want the sound. It should be only sound." And so there's this funny stuck-in-both-directions problem there with these ways of presenting. Whereas in the gallery, it's like the visual is emphasized because it's the more familiar sensory mode. And on the other hand, you have this extreme purism attached to sound itself.

**Budhaditya Chattopadhyay:** It is something to do with, I think, sound for the sake of sound, or sound as an experience devoid of any associations around it. This comes from perhaps recording technologies. Recording technologies frame the way we encounter sound. Perhaps it's something to do with the sound object, the disk or coming from shellac or the cylinder or later CDs, LPs. That objecthood is embedded in the way we think about sound. And that's also something to do with reduced listening. The way it was understood by Pierre Schaeffer, that sound should be for sound's sake, only sound is important, the texture, tonality. So these are different maybe inspirations through which the

sound object or the sound itself becomes foregrounded in the public understanding or appreciation of sound.

**Bill Dietz:**

I don't know, maybe we can edit this out later if it's not interesting or whatever, just to take a few more minutes of your time. But I'm curious also just about if you feel you have a relationship to genre, to specific musical histories, like you mentioned Dhrupad, you mentioned very particular musical histories, and if those... Maybe not at all in a direct linear obvious way, but if those are still present in your own work?

**Budhaditya Chattopadhyay:**

In an indirect way. I think indirectly, all the experiences, including for me, the migratory experience. As an immigrant artist living in Europe for the last 13, 14 years, trying to build my own space or where I can stand, often the ground on which I stand constantly moves. So those moving grounds, I think they inspire me to think about the sonic in a particular way. So migratory experience is crucial. Secondly, the thoughts, aligning myself with the Non-Alignment Movement, which is a decolonial movement from 1952, 1955, the Bandung Conference. So that lineage of aligning myself with decolonials, anti-colonial struggle historically with the regions of what is termed today, Global Souths. So that alignment with the artists who are coming from the Global South or living in diasporic situations in Europe and in the West, aligning with them, their work, their methodologies, their approaches, ethical, philosophical questions around sound and listening. This was something I've been very much inspired by.

And thirdly, I would say listening to music has been a direct and also indirect inspiration in my work. I don't know how I can actually explain or fathom what I do and how Gyorgy Ligeti's work inspired me, but there is a link, I still am searching for that link. But maybe in a certain way to break out from, so to speak, the constraint of harmony and counterpoint, to break out with an unexpected noise. Gustav Mahler's cowbell is so revolutionary for me because, suddenly [in Mahler's 6th Symphony], there is a cowbell, which is unexpected. You don't anticipate in a late romantic composition, something like a cowbell. And that dynamic shift, that made me aware of the possibility of sound. So, yeah.

Classical music and Dhrupad, of course, Indian classical music. So much to learn from how temporally, spatially sound can be suspended and sound can reconstruct a sense of time and space. But just voicing. Just voicing, nothing else. So this what inspired American minimalist school, this minimalist focus on a particular tone like a Tanpura Drone and that sense of suspension in time, perhaps.

**Bill Dietz:** I love so much drawing a line between decolonial methodology and the cowbell in Mahler. It's a beautifully unexpected connection. And just out of curiosity, I think because I am trying to... For myself also just in my everyday life, I find myself more interested in or following sound phenomenon in the world beyond the arts context. So I'm curious where, for you, outside of formal sound art, the most interesting things you hear are happening?

**Budhaditya Chattopadhyay:** Outside of the museum or-

**Bill Dietz:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. A slightly intense example, you've probably followed in the last few weeks, the people around Forensic Architecture, for instance, are doing some incredible audio forensics in Gaza at the moment, which seem, in a way, so much more urgent and vital than almost anything happening in the museum or in art context.

**Budhaditya Chattopadhyay:** Yeah, Cities and Memory would do a lot of works based on street demonstrations across the globe. From Rojava to Hong Kong to Beirut, they have been focused on recording or presenting the screams on the street and demonstrations, demonstrating that sense of urgency is evident in their practice, I would say. They're not thinking of posing those works as art objects for museums. They're thinking of gathering...so public mobilization, activism. And so this is one example that comes to mind. I would also say the smaller pockets of noise musicians, they're expressing their angst today through noise music performances across Southeast Asia and South Asia.

I left India around 2008 to '10. And in the last 12, 13 years, there is a sea change. There are small pockets of performers gathering in a forest or in an outdoor situation, bringing their



self-made, DIY synthesizers, bringing instruments together and jamming and performing, expressing themselves and collaborating with others on a ground-up level. And this is the so-called sound scene across South Asia and more so in Southeast Asia. You know the book by Cedrik Fermont, who is visiting regularly, Southeast Asia, and they're unpacking these practices in a very underground level because there is no institutional space to present their work. So they are doing self-organized setups to gather and do something on the ground. So those practices, I definitely would like to refer to in response to your question.

**Bill Dietz:**

That's great. That's really great. I mean, it connects to maybe a latter direction of questions I had which have to do with the possibility of institutions for making sound. And there are few in the world, and I think it's a great moment to be thinking about what those institutions could be and what's a sound-anchored institution that tries to focus on a more expansive notion of sonic aesthetic experience could be like, or how to do that formally, structurally, infrastructurally. And I'm curious if you have any ideas about that. What would be needed to make such an imaginary institution?

**Budhaditya Chattopadhyay:**

I think an institution would do justice to sound practice in general by breaking their walls. I mean, the walls are the hindrance. Institutional walls, the structure itself metaphorically and also materially, the constraint of the architecture, the way institutions are built. Those are the hindrance for sound to happen or to unfold because sound is feeling like it's contained within these four walls while sounds are struggling to come out of it. But there is always a possibility of leakage. And if an institution nurtures this leakage, then the sound can unfold its own possibilities through various ways of dissemination, manifestation, different contingent transient rhizomatic forms, sound can take in its travels.

So an institution would do good to sound as a medium or experience if they don't want to contain sound within itself. So I'm just giving an example. You can think of an institution with a roof or ceiling on your head, but you can think of without having a roof, or you can consider your garden as the place where you can perform sound, or your backyard, open

backyard, or your window. So it's like the peripheral marginal quality of sound, that's something you can nurture as an institution. It's just a thought that came to my mind.

**Bill Dietz:**

That's excellent. I love that and I hope we can find a way to enact it maybe together. Do you have any other... I mean, I hope that you and I will be speaking much more in the future and such, but I think just for a very excellent small entity that people can listen to, this is a very coherent, wonderful statement.

**Budhaditya Chattopadhyay:**

Okay. Yeah, it was a pleasure to talk to you. I mean, yeah, questioning sound art, this question doesn't arise so much in the discussion. It's taken for granted as sound art. Yes, this is a form that emerged in 1970s from happenings and fluxes, and it is imposed on other part of the globe. You need to accept it and form your sound practice according to it under the convention of sound art. This is a convention of sound art. This imposition I find problematic. So raising question, dissecting the form itself formally is something very refreshing to me. So thanks for that.