
*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

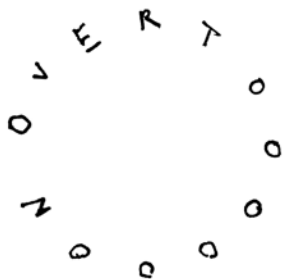
In conversation with Benjamin Piekut, Nikita Gale, Jennie C. Jones, Aurélie
Nyrabikali Lierman, Benjamin Piekut, Marina Rosenfeld, Lauren Tosswill, & Hong-
Kai Wang

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

Episode 03: Benjamin Piekut

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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:

Before we set this up, I sent everyone the link to the Max Neuhaus essay¹ and this particular quote that I pulled out, which I'll just read, which is from 2000 actually, which is kind of late. Max says, "I think we need to question whether or not sound art constitutes a new art form. It's as if perfectly capable curators in the visual art suddenly lose their equilibrium at the mention of the word sound. These same people who would all ridicule a new art form called say, steel art, which was composed of steel sculpture combined with steel guitar music, along with anything else with steel in it somehow have no trouble at all swallowing, sound art. In art, the medium is not often the message. Much of what has been called sound art has not much to do with either sound or art."

And I guess what I think with this quote and with him is clearly in the late seventies or whenever that sort of formal origin moment for sound art is in New York or in Europe, there was a certain need for the term at the time for certain people [for the term]. I'm curious about that need and how

¹ "Sound Art?," first published as an introduction to the exhibition, "Volume: Bed of Sound," P.S.1, New York, July 2000, <https://www.max-neuhaus.estate/en/sound-works/sound-works-texts/sound-art> (accessed March 20th, 2024)

that maybe also connects to the exceptionalizing discourses and conversations about sound in general, about, as Jonathan Sterne would say, the audiovisual litany, et cetera, something like that. Whether you see a direct link between those things or whether that particular historical need at that moment came from something else.

Benjamin Piekut:

Yeah, I think it's funny you bring up Jonathan Sterne because he was just at Cornell last week, and in fact I said goodbye to him less than 24 hours ago. We hosted him for a couple of days. So his work is always on my mind and even more so lately. I mean, I think that Neuhaus is obviously pointing at some problem or dissatisfaction with the term sound art that I think it is shared by almost everyone who has anything to do with sound art. Wouldn't you say that's true?

Bill Dietz:

Yeah.

Benjamin Piekut:

And I would repeat something that I think other people have said, which is that one of the problems with the discourse about sound art is that it's never properly defined its object of study or discussion or commentary and that results in a certain incoherence of the discourse. Now, for me, and in my project that I'm working on right now, my questions are always one step before in priority.

And in this case, that means: what has to happen in order for sound art, the concept, to be felt a need, as you put it really well in the late 1970s, to what does its appearance respond? What set of conditions make it necessary for a certain group of people in a certain context? And once that concept has emerged or been articulated, and it's not necessarily just the word, it's a little bit more than that, but once it has been articulated, it can become the site that hosts all of these disagreements we keep having. You know what I mean? And it at least orders the discourse around a pole or something.

So to me, in trying to frame a project in the historiography of sound art, I think of a history as a sequence of events that tells a certain kind of narrative. And what I've come to realize is perhaps the most significant one of those events is the historical emergence of the concept itself, which then makes possible commentary on previously unordered or differently

ordered events from the 1920s, the 1950s, the 1960s. And this is the same move that Lydia Goehr makes in the incredible book, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, about the work concept around 1800. And her famous example, or her famous question, "Did Bach create musical works?" And the answer is essentially, yes he did, but only after 1800 after he had been dead for 50 years.

Bill Dietz:

And there's something great in that in connection with somebody like Max Neuhaus or Maryanne Amacher David Tudor who are people who were doing what has been retroactively deemed sound art way before 1978 or whenever the Barbara London show at MoMA is. They've been doing that for 15, 20 years at that time.

Benjamin Piekut:

Exactly. And I tend to think... I mean, my project at the moment is to talk about that very fertile period, which has brought me back to it over and over and over again between about 1960 and 1980 and try to understand all the different ways that music as a category is being displaced. And yes, that process reaches some kind of point where a new concept feels necessary. Ultimately, as I have told you before, I think that that concept is necessary in order to corral a set of developments in the arts so that music can continue otherwise untroubled, which is exactly what I think happened. And in that sense, I regard sound art as historically a conservative category and I think it still is in a way.

Bill Dietz:

There's a wonderful quotation for Robert Ashley², I'm not exactly sure when it's written, but about that moment on the music split of what you're describing, because in music history, there's a kind of return to the concert hall. It's like "we're

² "But around 1970 there was a palpable turn toward conservatism in every aspect of American life and, predictably, the artist led the way... Composers renounced the 'theater' of music of the nineteen-sixties. Steve Reich wrote a book saying as much, 'We have to get back to reality.' That meant getting back to the five-line staff and what it meant. And it meant getting back to 'recitals.' So, we still have recital halls. More, in fact. The postwar boom in higher education produced hundreds, maybe thousands, of all-purpose recital halls in new colleges and universities. The Law is expressed in the architecture of the culture. It could be different." From "We need more *music*: Opera versus Recital," in *Outside of Time: Ideas about Music* (Cologne: MusikTexte, 2009), p. 146-148.

done with the avant-garde." Steve Reich goes back to the concert hall, Philip Glass is doing his symphonies. There is this kind of restoration moment sort of in tandem with that.

Benjamin Piekut:

And in the jazz field: Jazz at Lincoln Center. I mean, to come back to Jonathan Sterne and all of his research, of course the period we're just talking about with Amacher or Tudor, or in my case, what I've been researching lately, the Judson dancers who developed all these really interesting ideas and approaches to sound without music (in my kind of contentious formulation), to go beyond or to put that 20 year period in a longer history, we would need to go back to the sort of modern scientific isolation and institutionalization of a research program around something called sound.

I think the lines are long and indirect, but the moment of sound art's conceptual emergence in the global north in English around 1980 is nonetheless related to Helmholtz, Edison, Bell Labs, psychoacoustics research around the telephone industry, deaf research, stuff like that - the emergency acoustical society in the late twenties.

So we need to have all of that for there to be this great big category known as sound, which had been known before, but according to somewhat different terms. And sure enough, it eventually produces the need for an art of sound: that which had previously been known as music, which had its own science, musicology or whatever you want to call that.

You know, it's interesting, something I found recently that I wanted to mention is some pages of Yvonne Rainer's notes from when she attended Richard Maxfield's course electronic music at The New School, and it was in the autumn of 1960. He taught that course I think two or three times. In other words, he subbed for Cage, for Experimental Music, but then he also taught his own course on electronic music. And I found notes in Rainer's papers for either the whole course or whatever number of lectures that she attended. And it looks like the day one kind of overview had Maxfield enumerating the properties of what he called or what Rainer notated as the usual definition of music as including rhythm, melody, harmony, tambour, form, dynamics. And then below that, he seemed to have said that his class would be studying something else, not the usual definition of music and Rainer has noted that as "the art of sound."

And then there are a series of equivalences where what used to be called rhythm is now called duration, what used to be called melody is now called the succession of tones. What used to be called harmony is the vertical relationships of tones, right? So in this funny scrap of historical evidence, I think we're seeing, if not the beginnings, then some early moment where artists are trying to think about what an art built on the science of sound would look like, and the authorities that they draw on are these people who have written textbooks on acoustics.

Bill Dietz:

I don't know if it's really helpful or a good idea for the conversation, or if it's too much because I think this is great in a very organic way, but would it even be meaningful or possible or would it be too boring or reductive to just give a tiny sketch of your project? Because I think we're sort of talking within it or next to it, and there is this much more coherent project that you're in the middle of.

Benjamin Piekut:

Well, the coherence remains to be determined, but no, it is true. I'm always in the middle of it right now. No, the project is short. It's a short book, but it is trying to be methodologically precise and its goal is to kind of define the terms upon which a history of sound art could be thought. So it moves at a rather large scale, I guess. And it comes in three parts.

The first is to clarify what it means to write a history of aesthetic concepts, and that bounces a lot off of Lydia Goehr. And the second part is concerned with taking seriously the idea that artists engage in conceptual work in the register of practice rather than the register of discourse. So I try to take account of artists working in a lot of different forms in the 1960s and 70s who I think are working through the implications of the displacement of a category like music, even if they weren't explicitly commenting on it in those terms.

And then the third part of the book zooms out and tries to understand the relationship between those local, and one might even say provincial debates that culminate in the emergence of that concept known as sound art around 1980, how we understand the relationship between that moment and the broader global contemporary field that has structured thinking in the history of contemporary visual art since 1965,

which is essentially a question about how we understand or make sense of the simultaneity of multiple temporalities or relationships to histories of capitalism and socialism in the last a hundred years or whatever. So ultimately, that will lead me to try to figure out how to talk about sound art outside of the global North and what its relation is to the continuing hegemony of concepts that emerge in the global North for structuring and orienting a global contemporary art market. In a nutshell, that's the project.

Bill Dietz: No, that's great.

Benjamin Piekut: Let's talk about the third area.

Bill Dietz: Yeah, yeah. So one thing that I think also touches on this notion of sound vis-a-vis music in its kind of technicity or scientific or something like this that I've been super interested in, which is I think maybe all the more so the case in Europe, is the proximity of sound art and media art and both being also joined in their reliance on public support, like public funding, big European institutions, specialist institutions. Not necessarily a reliance on the art markets or on commercial structures. And I guess what's sort of funny to me in that is if that that maybe has something to do with an implicit or explicit assumption about a value inherent in these kinds of art, these kind of... Or that it's somehow culturally useful, which is I think sort of a clunky way of putting it. But there's something funny in there about the complicated continuity between the work concept and sound and some fundamental, particularly European idea of what is valuable.

Benjamin Piekut: Yeah, no, I agree completely. This gets at something that I've been thinking about a lot lately, and even more so this week just because of Jonathan Sterne's visit. And that is the relationship between sound studies and sound art and I think that there is a relationship, and it's been very hard for me to figure out what it is. I mean, I once told Jonathan the title of a paper that a student of mine wrote, and that title was, "Is Sound Studies to Sound Art What Musicology was to Music?" And he replied, "I hope not."

But I think that ultimately I've come to realize that the

relationship between those two formations has to do with taste and now I'm coming around to the question of value and what is valued in different discourses of art and how they're institutionalized and while there's a special relationship between sound studies and sound art in Europe, moreso than in North America, because I think that in Europe in higher education, it's more likely for artist practitioners to be producing these PhD thesis in some kind of critical practice as well, which often relates to sound as a scientific field of study.

And I think my way into trying to understand that relationship through the lens of taste came to me in making a little contribution to a commemorative conference for Trevor Pinch, the great scholar of science and technology studies, and the historian of the mode synthesizer, and my colleague and friend who passed away recently. We had an event at Cornell in his memory and honor, and I was thinking about Trevor's commitment to sound studies as a way of bracketing the aesthetic, the category of the aesthetic, that sound studies would do stuff other than study music. However, Trevor as a person was obsessed with music and loved music and devoted a lot of his life to making music and talking about it and listening to it.

And in thinking about sound studies as one of the quite late post-war interdisciplines, that sent me back to one of the first post-war interdisciplines and that's cultural studies. Stuart Hall said in one of his many retrospective accounts of the Birmingham Center, the founding of the Birmingham Center of Cultural Studies, that one of their missions had been to unmask the presuppositions of humanist traditions that were existent at the time they were organized, as those humanities were organized into disciplines in the late 19th century. That is, scholarly conversations completely determined by a very distinct set of values about what makes good art good and why you should appreciate it.

So they thought of cultural studies as a radical intervention into that discourse of value, and its situatedness in colonial modernity, in short. And clearly, a similar kind of critique is happening in sound studies because music is not a welcoming category, was not a welcoming category for someone of Trevor's generation with his musical interests in electronic music and prog rock and stuff like that. So that kind of repulsion of music and its histories is probably reflected in the

flight from music and its institutions of predominantly women. That's where, to me, it's the clearest, into some other space and that space being somehow organized around sound, I think.

Bill Dietz:

I really like this. And there's something funny that I've sort of had my... I can't think of the right phrase, but I've sort of been half thinking with this Max Neuhaus article. That there's something maybe also a tiny bit reactionary in it, vis-a-vis what you're just saying about a flight from music as a sort of humanity, so to speak, whereas the rejection of sound art and its minoriness or as a particularly material thing that might be necessary for others, there's something actually kind of really conservative in that, there's something in an embarrassment about sound art being too body or too specific or not high enough or not good enough in a certain sense. And I think of course, in practice, that's not necessarily the case at all. I think a lot of what Neuhaus was actually just talking about is bad art, which is maybe a different question, but at the same time, there's something of a refuge of sound art that is maybe interesting a little bit in the way that you're talking about. Also in the Barbara London show, I think in '79 or '80, whenever that is, it's all women.

Benjamin Piekut:

Yeah, right. I mean, I'm just thinking about the dancers again, and Rainer and Forti and Steve Paxton and Deborah Hay and all these people. Let's say just for argument's sake, inside of the aesthetic domain, one uses technique to avoid making bad art. One applies good rules that will lead to good art, and that may require the expertise of someone who's trained in those rules. And that's what I say in this article I just finished on this subject. That's what a musician does who's trained in the tools of music to solve musical problems.

But for Rainer and the other dancers, the expert who applies not expert knowledge and tools to help them solve problems is not the musician solving problems of music, but the sound engineer solving problems about acoustics. How to get the signal from a body mounted microphone to the loudspeakers in 1965 when that's actually not...without a wire, when that is not an easy problem to solve. So yeah, I think this just goes back to what we're saying about the instability of evaluation and which kind of authority can be brought to assist.

Bill Dietz: Well, and one funny thing, again with Neuhaus and vis-a-vis this, and also in relation to the question about financial value, is that Neuhaus is maybe the only sound practitioner who really made it in the art world, who had the support of Dia and had major financial success, and so in a certain sense, the standard of value there is actually quite specific: it's of art in the fancy art world sense.

Benjamin Piekut: That's a really good point. I had never really considered that. I mean, the question of what kind of institutions should host sound art or foster it or support it or interrogate it, I mean, I think that's a really interesting one, and it's not... As a historian, I have less to add to that conversation about the contemporary moment. I suspect that it's really going to be people like you who are defining the terms of that conversation through whatever institutional means you will have.

Bill Dietz: I don't know. I mean for me, the big question in terms of the context for hosting this conversation even, is sort of like how to build an institution, a real institution, around these questions, rather than some kind of defined notion. Like how to build these kind of open questions into the structure of the thing.

Benjamin Piekut: This is again where maybe the adjacent situation of sound studies could be illustrative. Sound studies has not yet made a scholarly society. Yes, there's a couple of journals, and there's one specifically called Sound Studies and others that are clearly pitched in that direction. However, for the most part, sound studies remains a rather unordered and undisciplined area where people meet from other disciplines and interdisciplines, it's never quite acquired disciplinarity. And that might be one of its strengths. The endorsement of the scholar happens elsewhere in their home discipline of anthropology or in music studies or in communications. You know what I mean? It doesn't do any endorsing itself. And I wonder if that provides some model of thinking about what an institution does inside the space of sound art and in relation to commercial galleries and museums and that whole set of structures.

Bill Dietz: No, that's great. And somehow, I think to consciously articulate it this way seems important because sometimes some

of the limitations of both sound studies and sound art are that that sort of undisciplined state is less a conscious choice than a kind of consequence of other things...

Benjamin Piekut:

Yes, no, absolutely. Yes.

Bill Dietz:

But to really affirm that in full awareness is really...