
*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

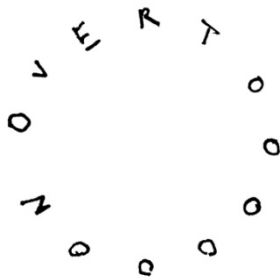
In conversation with Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, Nikita Gale, Jennie C. Jones,
Aurélie Nyirabikali Lierman, Jennie C. Jones, Marina Rosenfeld, Lauren Tosswill, &
Hong-Kai Wang

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

Episode 05: Aurélie Nyirabikali Lierman

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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.]

Aurélie Nyirabikali Lierman: I am curious what you mean with the word, sound art.

Bill Dietz: Sure. Yeah, and this is really the starting point that I've been going from in all these conversations, which is, of course, that it means so many things to so many different people now, in different contexts.

But I've been trying to at least start from a really specific place, which is the term, as it developed in some exhibitions in the late '70s and early '80s. At MoMA in the late '70s, I think Barbara London curated a show that was explicitly called "sound art." And then in Berlin, there's the "Fuer Augen und Ohren" show, these kinds of Klangkunst early things in the early '80s as well. As I understand it, I think that's really where this very specific term, the specific lineage comes from. And of course it branches out in a lot of different ways. In any case... Sorry, that's too much of an answer, but I guess I wanted to sort of start small and what I think now at this moment where I really want to think about what the term means or how useful it is or for who it is useful. It's maybe, for me, interesting to think about how also even at the beginning in the process of specifying, maybe it also excluded or limited.

Aurélie Nyirabikali Lierman: Yeah. So I do understand the historical stuff that you just explained, but I think maybe I fell into this whole thing from a different angle. Yeah, I started off as a radio maker, a journalist for mainstream media, and I only then became a composer. No, then became a singer, then became a composer, and then gradually discovered the possibilities with sound art. It's one of your questions you had: I never introduce myself as a sound artist, unless people ask me, "What do you do?" Then I might say also amongst others, I do sound art, but I prefer to use the word radio art or radio artist. And I don't think they have to be different necessarily, but I do believe that with radio art, there is a potential that it's more inclusive in several ways.

I mean, when I hear sound art myself, I know it's about focused listening or some context that is similar to a museum setting, but with sound art, besides only the focus, I can also imagine that it's narrowed down to one sort of sounds that are allowed, so it becomes immediately a sort of prison.

Whereas I think in the beginning, sound artists wanted to get some freedom, I assume. Maybe away from the art scene, but maybe also away from the music scene. So when I hear the word sound art, I also think right away, "Oh, if I say this to a person, they will think that I'm just dealing with sine waves and just dealing with bleeps." And I think you could categorize them two ways, sound art these days. At least with electro-acoustic music, you have the German and the French scene. That's how people usually divide it. And the German scene would be more derived from all the experiments that Karlheinz Stockhausen has tried with the bleeps and the sinus waves and et cetera. And I find it very fascinating, the synthesizer approach you could say. And then you have the French musique concrète thing, and I think I want to combine both.

And I have the feeling with radio art, using the term radio art, I can use the more abstract sounds and as well allow concrete sounds, have a musical context, have a non-musical context, have something that looks like a concert, but can also be more a performance or an installation art situation. So for me, it is more freeing when I use that word. And the other thing is also the more sociological aspect that comes with using that term, radio art; you already are aware of an audience or of how you send something or broadcast something and the context that

comes with that. So I have the feeling that with sound art, people are really focused on their art and on themselves and on the scene and on the bubble, on the niche. And with radio art, I have the feeling that I am obliged to think, but what does it mean in a larger context within the world? So yeah, I rarely use it, the word. Rarely.

Bill Dietz:

But I love how in a way you grab onto that early moment of expansiveness, of the moment when it was something freeing and when it wasn't a strict thing, it was meant to actually open up space. That's great. So it's making the general-ness of it generative again or something like that.

Aurélie Nyirabikali Lierman:

Yeah, I think maybe I started using the word radio art more deliberately even, after I had a conversation with a classmate who's completely into abstract sounds. Anything art had to be completely abstract because it was for him very stupid to try to make something that relates to humanity. And I thought, "That's so insane." You are human and your audience is human. So even if you make something abstract and now you make it even sound like I don't like abstraction, it is still human.

I was like, "Come on, guys." So I thought, "No, no, no, I really don't want to become so rigid that I can't allow myself to have a phase of abstract and a phase of more concrete or more tangible or more recognizable sounds or materials," whatever it is. I mean, I always was embracing my background as a radio maker, as a documentary maker. But then with that conversation, I realized I really want to make a statement with that and show the potential with sound art in its largest way imaginable, including him, the person that I had a conversation with. And anyone else who is interested in using sound as a medium.

Bill Dietz:

I mean, this is an even better answer than my question, so I don't know, but yeah, if you don't have this idea that you're working in a pure void or in an airless room and that you are part of the world and that the materials one is working with or using have implications, and they might touch people in certain ways or they might make people think about very particular things and things like this, then there's different pressures on the forms that take...

What for you was in the earlier work, maybe limiting or what was interesting for you to expand on, and what "sound art" allowed you to emphasize or get closer to in a way that's more the core of your work?

Aurélie Nyirabikali Lierman: Well, one thing, what is a shame with mainstream radio and public radio is that you are limited to the time they give during a show. Then because it's very broad mass media, they request that you are informative or entertaining.

So that is what I thought. I think we can do more, and I think we don't realize how much imagination there is within our audience. I still love my time I had there, but I realized there's so much more I can do with sound, both speech and music and anything in between. So I kind of quit for the love of it because I didn't want to leave at the moment where I was already too frustrated. And I had a second passion and it was music. And then in the beginning I was still holding onto the idea of, "Oh, maybe I will make beautiful choir music, chamber music." And gradually realized how I wanted to use my background as a radio maker.

One particular thing happened during my period there as well. There was an older colleague who said... I had made a documentary, and for that documentary, I had used sounds that were not supposed to be on the radio because it has to be HiFi, et cetera. But I knew it made sense for that piece. It had to be there. And he really was angry with me, "How dare you! You younger people, you're allowed to do anything!"

Back then I felt embarrassed because I knew how to make a HiFi documentary, but I knew it made sense in that particular moment for that particular piece to allow myself to use LoFi sounds and to use it in a musical way in some way like allow those textures that come with it than before I knew I was stretching the rules of what you can do with documentary, stretching the rules of what is reality, what realisms can you use within this so-called abstract compositional context.

So I found the freedom that I'd never had in public radio. So in a way, I would say, sometimes I say that I'm a sound artist, most of the time radio artist, and the work that I create more and more, I'd like to present it more as cinema, but for your ears, cinema pour l'oreille. Maybe cinema pour l'oreille is also

kind of reconnecting with the visual art if I think about it now with movies, with land art, with fine arts. But I also say it's never sound in itself. Sound is a medium and it comes from what I want to tell with it. For me, it is about storytelling. Yeah.

Bill Dietz:

I love this idea, this thing you were saying about the radio and the underestimation of the audience's imagination. And for me, that's actually been... It's a big part of my own thinking, but also in some of these conversations thinking about places outside of the formal art world where there is actually immense imagination or immense intelligence in terms of dealing with sound and music. And yet it's somehow in part because of the strict walls of institutions, but also of terms like sound art that don't get understood that way.

Aurélie Nyirabikali Lierman: Yeah, I actually think the advertisement world is amazing with sound. I love watching and listening to it, and also how they sometimes do it within 20 seconds or under 20 seconds. The stuff they are advertising about is not what I'm interested in, but it's the way they tell this story using sounds only sometimes. I'm really fascinated by that.

I see sound art in many things, I would say, and also outside the canon that we know for sure. So I think they will relate to the two schools that I just talked about, and they'll forget about anything that is done outside Europe or outside North America. And I'm just like, "Wow, how is it possible?" If you see sound art from a compositional point of view, you could say that you're more focused on texture, less on harmony, less on traditional rhythms, but texture is something that you hear in so many non-Western musical genres. It's everywhere, I would say. And it's not performed or shown in a white cube because that's one of the things also where I'm a bit careful with saying I'm doing sound art. It's often these white rooms that we already know from museums, and it can be great, but they're also limiting because they're actually not ideal.

If you want to do something with big loudspeakers, it's so wet and it's so boom-y, and I'm wondering, why do we do it to ourselves? Why don't we allow ourselves to have more variety in it? Why does it have to be this white, sterile environment only in terms of the visual impact of a white cube, but also it has to be in a quiet environment? There's no leaking through

from the outside world. So yeah, it's very serious. It's such a serious business altogether. There's very little life in it sometimes, and I do understand some pieces request that. I really, really understand that. But it has become sort of a rule almost that it has to happen in that particular way. And that is a shame.

Bill Dietz:

I mean, I should know more particular cases with your work, but do you look for ways to present your work or to share your work with more broad audiences?

Aurélie Nyirabikali Lierman: I try my best really. Yeah.

Yeah, really do so. My latest piece, the piece that I'm now touring with is a piece for six performers, myself included. It's a binaural setup. I dare to call it a performative installation because it really checks out space, the position of the audience, the relation of the audience towards the performance and towards what's happening throughout the show. But there's definitely also performative element to it. It's quite ritualistic. So for some, it feel more like music theater, but I also deliberately choose the word performative installations that people don't think, "Oh, I'm going to a concert. Oh, I'm going to see some people singing and dancing." It's really thinking about movement of bodies and movement of sound through space. And I've had people who are 18 just starting with school, with college up until people are 80 and who are just really moved by the piece.

And I really don't make any compromise because I am kind of making an immersive piece where a lot is happening at the same time. I took my time to weave it together, but it was always my big dream that I could reach an audience where it doesn't matter whether they are... They have an upbringing in the let's say, Eurocentric environment or not, whether they have... What language do they speak, whether they have an artistic background or... It shouldn't matter. That's my idea. It shouldn't matter. And somehow with the response that I got now from the piece "Umva!" that I'm now touring with, it's like, "I think I might have managed. This is really, really great." And so I think I don't take the responsibility with me from the radio in terms of should I have a piece that is telling truth, but maybe telling truth on a deeper level like can I touch someone and make a difference in whatever way?

So maybe that's something that came through or is shining through in the piece that I just... Yeah, that I'm now touring with. Maybe that is. But I found it super important to be aware of my audience, not to be scared that I'm doing something too difficult or too complicated. I'm also not interested in doing something intellectual or doing something that is just smart. I mean, I'm interested in the intellectual element of it, but it's not for the sake of showing off. Look how smart I am. Look how much research I have put into this to making this possible. Maybe they will notice, and if they don't, that's fine. But if I can have touched them in so many other ways as well, that's the biggest gift for me. Yeah.

Bill Dietz:

Sorry, I don't know, just a few other thoughts, but one is a line that I've maybe cited too often that I love so much. The artist Maryanne Amacher writes somewhere on a little note to herself that she wants to make a kind of work that makes people cry or moves people, not because it's familiar, but because it touches them in ways they didn't even know they could be touched.

Aurélie Nyirabikali Lierman: Exactly. That's what I want. I'm not trying to make something beautiful. Beauty might come from it, but that's not my aim in itself. I want it like this, that people, the way they arrive in the performance installation space and the way when they leave it, they're a different person. That's what I aim for.

Yeah, I think one of your questions was also, what do you think a sound art space should be, or a center?

Bill Dietz:

That's kind of where I was landing.

Aurélie Nyirabikali Lierman: Yeah, so I am curious about pieces by colleagues who are more focused on, let's say, feedback processes with a microphone. I like it. I can really enjoy listening to it and see how it's made and everything. But I have the feeling that... In Dutch, you have the expression, *navelstaarderij* – navel-gazing. There is too much navel-gazing in arts in the sense that, of course, things happen from your own experience, but who cares if there's another piece about this kind of speaker set up or this kind of microphone set up. So yeah, I think it's too flat if it's just on a level of technicalities and technologies, and whether it's HiFi or LoFi, what do you want? At the end of the day, it's still, what do you want to say with this?

So maybe I don't have a clear sound art suggestion, but let's say I have an example from what I experienced some years ago when I was traveling. I was visiting someone in Los Angeles, and this person said, "Hey, do you want to come to this exhibition opening tonight?" And I was like, "Yeah, fine." I had free time and I joined. And then as we arrived, it was completely different for me from any gallery I had been before. And still there were white walls, but it was the whole thing from how you enter in that space. The way you are greeted... I mean, they have the role of host, but they were also themselves. And it was just so liberating to see people who are just having fun. They were singing along with the music. It was a party, it was celebrative. And I was like, "Oh, this is what a museum can look like." It can just be something where you can enjoy and where you can be invited.

And so this was an exhibition for fine arts, and it was created by some people with Afro-American backgrounds and by themselves, for themselves. It was so liberating. It doesn't have to be this sterile environment where you can hardly cough or sneeze or greet anyone where you come to a sort of funeral situation. So finding something like that, and at the same time, still allowing people to go into this trance-like, focused environment as well.

And I think these days people try to have more people with different backgrounds in venues because people are still convinced that it has to happen within the walls of that venue. And I remember traveling in Eastern Africa and in Congo...and...because your question was also, what is sound art? Can it happen outside of sound art environments? And the streets there are just pure sound art, just traveling and having this buzz of noises from everywhere and allowing that to happen in real life. There's some trance element to it as well if you have this loud, noisy streets where there's a lot of stuff happening. I'm not saying that you have to copy that right away, it's a different part of the world where you live, but it's not so divided in, this is now art, this is life. And it's one of the things that inspired me as well, to deal with texture and volume and dealing where do we experience sound and to deal with the geography of sound and experiencing environmental sounds. So we are really focused on one particular way of being able to experience sound and sound arts. And there are a billion options.

Bill Dietz:

I think with this... What I'm always struck by, or I realize more and more is just how incredibly strict and closed the formal sound art or Eurocentric sound perspective is. In a certain sense, that formal space is the small exception. It's the weird thing that tries to exclude everything else. It's actually this small thing where there's so much around it.

Aurélie Nyirabikali Lierman:

Yep. And I grew up with classical music in Belgium. I'm adopted, and I grew up in a family from Bruges, and I love classical music. And then traveling to Eastern Africa and traveling to Congo, I realized there's only one way I dare to listen like this refined harmonic, well-tempered sounds. And then you get this explosion of possibilities like multiple rainbows with colors I didn't know existed. And so I was like, "Oh, wow." And first I was frustrated, why can't they do it the way I know? And then I realized, "Oh wait." There's just a whole of the world that we don't allow. And it's so small. If you come back to what you knew originally. So this so-called freeing new sound art thing, it is just new in the US and in Western Europe in a certain timeframe, and that's it.

Bill Dietz:

Yep, yep.

Aurélie Nyirabikali Lierman:

And maybe it has been there, this kind of variety of sound, centuries ago. I don't know, I can't say that. But...the so-called innovative, hmm, we have to double-check that. Yeah.