SOUNDPOOL:
THE MANUFACTURING
OF SILENCE

STEVEN R. HEIMBECKER
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February 29 - March 23, 1996

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front cover: The Forum for the Alienation of Art, 1995, mixed media.

back cover: The Acoustic Field Intensifier, 1993-1994, galvanized 10L fuel funnel, 21 galvanized 1L funnels, galvanized 2L pail, rope, 61 x 61 x 51 cm.

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Soundpool:
The Manufacturing of Silence
some thoughts on the work of
Steven R. Heimbecker

...the modern soundscape...divides itself
into two domains. It divides itself into
the domain that we traditionally associ-
ate with silence, the enabling condition
in which unprogrammed and unpro-
grammable events can take place. That
is the silence of contemplation; that is
the silence where people can get in
touch with themselves. ...

Ursula Franklin.

Within the context of Modernist and Post-
Modernist art practice in the twentieth century,
the use of sound by visual artists and multi-
media artists has a very distinct and complex
history. The introduction of sound as a signif-
cant element in works of art has been viewed as
part of the critique of traditional art activity or
as a vital component in a utopian program.
The representation of sound has also been per-
ceived as a necessary tool for social and political
transformation or principally as an avant-garde
activity. Within the context of the Fine Arts,
the definition of sound as a musical pheno-
menon to be experienced or appreciated in its own
right—autonomous, temporal and immaterial—
has yet to be accepted. For the past fifty years,
particularly within the boundaries of popular
culture, the representation of sound has co-
existed with image in the form of movies, tele-
vision, and computer technology. The abstrac-
tion and liberation of sound from the confines
of music is manifested in the work of many of
the more prominent visual artists of this centu-y. The list of artists and legitimate composers
who have used sound as a component of indi-
vidual works or as a focal point of larger
endeavors is comprehensive.

Beginning with Futurist Luigi Russolo, here
are some of the artists who can be
cited: Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters, the
Dadaists, John Cage, Edgard Varese, Takehisa
Kosugi, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Alvin Lucier,
Jean Tinguely, Allan Kaprow, The Fluxus artists
George Macunias, George Brecht, Dick Higgins,
Alison Knowles, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik and
Al Hansen; Joseph Beuys, Robert Ashley, Bruce
Nauman, Max Neuhaus and Laurie Anderson.
Within our own borders, names that spring to
mind are R. Murray Schafer, Hildegard
WesterKamp, Ian Carr-Harris, Michael Snow,
Rita McKeough, Micah Lexier, Dan Lander, and
the unforgettable Robin Page, whose "second
block guitar piece" consisted of kicking a gui-
tar down the stairs from the Hardware Poet's
Playhouse, past the Museum of Modern Art
and the Whitney Museum and back up the
stairs during the Yam Festival, in New York in
May, 1965.

It is over three decades since the publication
of Silence, by John Cage (1961). The collection
of lectures, essays, articles and anecdotes has
had a profound effect on many artists and musici-
ans. By redefining the nature of silence and
making it the material of music, Cage completely
reversed traditional (European) thinking.
Cage's notion of silence is not constructed in the
fissure or pause between musical notes. Silence
refers to the world of ambient sound that sur-
rounds musical performance - that is, life itself.
Like many of the artists associated with the
Fluxus movement, Cage attempted to narrow
the gap between art and life. Retrospectively,
Cage's position can be seen as a critique of
Modernist art practice, which had encouraged
the separation of art and life through the
endorsement of the autonomous art object.

Since the sixties, artistic exploration of
sound has resulted in an abundance of activity.
Artists' boundaries have been extended aesthet-
ically, socially and politically. We have wit-
nessed, for example, the formation of E.A.T.
(Experiments in Art and Technology) as well as
the foundation of the World Soundscape
Project, an on-going project that studies the
relationship between living organisms and their
sonic environments. We have seen a significant
rise in the production of sonic work, including
sound poetry, audio work, texts, book work,
sound performance, interactive sculpture, ambitious projects like the Banff Centre's Radio Rethink, the use of digital technology, the establishment of sound archives and the growth in numbers of groups and individuals who are interested in the preservation and conservation of sound. During the last decade or so, we have been in the midst of a sonic boom!

Today it is not unusual to think of the artist as a multi-media practitioner, involved in a diversity of activities ranging from conventional sculpture to installation to production of electro-acoustic environments. Steve Heimbecker exemplifies such an approach to contemporary art making. During the past few years, Heimbecker has completed several pieces that address sound issues such as questioning architectural spaces or investigating problems concerning mediation of the body image. In general, Heimbecker's work covers a wide spectrum of activity including object-making, performance, sound and music concerts, collaborative works and the production of audio cassette tapes. Rather than employing analytical or theoretical models to underscore his work, Heimbecker uses intuition, experimentation and response to events and experiences in everyday life. His work often combines elements and approaches derived from past styles, yet it nevertheless conveys freshness, spontaneity and charm.

_The Acoustic Field Intensifier_ (1994), which was exhibited at Memorial University Art Gallery in St. John's, Newfoundland, as part of Sound Symposium 7 _Lend me your ears: Sound City Spaces_, functions by separating the sounds in a sonic field. The piece is fabricated as an apparatus to be worn while engaged in the activity of listening. It is, more or less, a performance costume. Made from recontextualized fuel funnels, its theatrical and whimsical appearance is reminiscent of Futurist sculptural megaphones and other contraptions associated with the Dadaists.

_Home Security_ (1993) is another whimsical yet critical installation that uses a variety of found materials and technological devices: mechanical toy puppies, infrared motion detectors, bird-baths, a plant and miscellaneous household hardware. _Home Security_ consists of a series of automated sculptures triggered independently by each unit's motion detector. The sculptural components have been constructed from colorful mechanical puppies perched on posts (recycled closet rods), which are embedded in bird baths. An infrared motion detector is placed immediately behind the soft fuzzy toys. The slightest detection of motion sets off the barking dogs. The installation's ironic stance reveals society's fixation with insecurity and possessive behaviors. The absence of idealization and preciousness (aesthetization) in this
particular piece prevents the viewer from experiencing comfort and reassurance. The mechanical barking dogs become a source of irritation. Heimbecker’s use of banal materials reveals both the absurdity and pathos of a society governed by fear of attack from violent external forces. In our society, pets sometimes double as guard dogs!

Metaphenophone (*It’s all Greek to Me*) (1994), a site-specific installation, was shown as part of the exhibition *The End of Modernity*, curated by Annette Hurtig at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary. She says of the artists in this exhibition, “Employing the new technologies and the detritus of our material culture, they investigate and illustrate the dissolution of conventional categories and canons, and the abjection, dystopia, and vast potential of our times.” Heimbecker’s installation employs numerous optical and sonic devices such as closed circuit T.V., an audio surveillance system, amber-colored mirrored tiles, and spotlights, arranged as an interactive audio-visual feed-back loop. *Metaphenophone* allows the observer to experience the act of viewing. This experience is reinforced when we discover the presence of amber mirrors placed amidst the various spaces and collections throughout the museum. We see ourselves as viewers engaged in an act of recognition. The gallery thus becomes a context for self-examination.

Heimbecker uses technology for the purpose of making the viewer more self-conscious. As with all systems of communication, the possibility of developing self-consciousness is always mediates by the way in which the subject is represented in language. In the visual arts, for example, the structure of the image plays a large part in the construction of identity. The system of electronic reproduction in Heimbecker’s installation has the effect of distancing the viewer even further from his or her desires. *Metaphenophone* transforms the viewer into a semiotic ghost trapped within the self-perpetuating process of technological reproduction. The viewer’s image becomes suspended, fluctuating between the inherent naturalism of the mirror and the disembodied product of the machine (television).

Heimbecker’s earlier works have included the fabrication of a number of objects. *Density No. 2* (1990), consists of twenty-six “Ariel Harps,” or stringed sculptures. Eight of these are free-standing while the remainder are wall-mounted. Individual “harps” can be activated by a modified computer keyboard. Sound is generated by tuning sound sources into real time. Each “Ariel Harp” acts as an antenna. As part of the international exhibition *Tuning of*
the World (1993), Heimbecker constructed eight sculptural structures containing discrete speaker systems which were suspended from the gallery ceiling at the University of Calgary’s Nickle Arts Museum. The work is entitled The Acoustic Line as the Crow Listens. The installation reproduces the sound recorded simultaneously from eight sites located along a linear mile. One of the more interesting notions the work plays upon is how the compression of time affects the articulation of space and vice versa. In a world in which time appears to speed up, space appears to shrink, resulting in a miniaturized version of the world.

The subject of Heimbecker’s latest project, Soundpool: The Manufacturing of Silence (1996), takes the form of a multi-media installation. It combines many of the features of Heimbecker’s previous work in a larger and more ambitious format. The piece consists of eight similar sculptural objects, which Heimbecker refers to as “Axis Speakers,” built to produce a sub-sonic effect for its audience. As in former pieces, Heimbecker’s work utilizes an interactive component. In the construction of each sculptural unit, Heimbecker makes use of recycled hardware materials such as industrial storage shelving. Canvas awning, which acts as a membrane, is attached to large, square metal frames. The surface of the canvas is decorated with designs appropriated from the inside of paper envelopes, where they function to block out light and prevent inquisitive eyes from recognizing or reading the enclosed contents. In the case of each sculptural unit, sound is produced by the motion of the electrical motor. This in turn activates the painted canvasses and causes a noticeable movement of air as well as a mechanically produced visual vibration. Heimbecker states that “whatever final results occur, this installation will produce a significant physical, visual and sonic effect, which is intended to bring the audience to the name of silence.”

Like many of Heimbecker’s previous works, humor and parody play a vital role in the construction of meaning. They are also essential factors to consider in the light of interpretation. The work appears to be formulated as a paradox. Silence is not manufactured by this assortment of disparate hardware. Even the optical vibrations of the canvasses do little to appease our anxieties and offer the peace and quiet of meditation. Heimbecker’s installation mimics the industrial and its promise of salvation. In a gallery setting, the sonic sculptures appear like props in a scene from the theatre of the absurd, remnants of a past ritual, bizarre yet intriguing.
Metaphenophone (it's all Greek to Me), 1994, mirrored tile, steel, plastic, wood, closed circuit t.v., audio surveillance system, signal processor, 126 square metres.

When looking at Heimbecker's work in general, I am reminded of two artists from the sixties - a decade with which I am familiar. The artists in question are Jean Tinguely and Walter De Maria. Tinguely was noted for his huge self-destroying machines, such as the piece constructed in the Nevada desert in 1962, Study for an End of the World. After the early auto-destructive work, Tinguely went on to fabricate many non-functional machines from recycled industrial materials. Like Tinguely's work, Heimbecker's works are always playful, and they possess a strong sense of humor. The piece I would like to make reference to by Walter De Maria was contained within a small collection entitled An Anthology, edited by George Macunias and Jackson MacLow. Meaningless Work consists of a paragraph which outlines De Maria's approach to art making. In the true spirit of Fluxus, he outlines a performance piece that consists only of moving information from one file to another, then transferring it back again ad infinitum. Heimbecker's work can be viewed as a continuation of the tradition from which these works spring.

In conclusion, Heimbecker's work is the result of a variety of methodological approaches, which are in fact quite dissimilar. The earlier work appears to be a manifestation of an anti-aesthetic and non-precious approach to materials and forms. How things sound and how things look are of course important to each work. The overall effect of the pieces takes precedence. Since many of the pieces are designed to engage an audience, they appear like works of the theatre or even theatrical machines, whose purpose is to produce effects. As objects to be experienced, the pieces sometimes leave the viewer in a state of ambivalence, especially when the viewer is faced with ambiguity. On the other hand, Heimbecker's public performances and concerts tend to take a more refined and focused approach to music-making. The construction of acoustic spaces seems to be
The Acoustic Line as the Crow Listens. 1993, wooden structure, sound speakers, sound amplifiers, 8-track tape player, 250 square metres.

a serious preoccupation. I am not suggesting, however, that the playful and the serious cannot or should not exist together in the same space. I am, in fact, an advocate of entertainment. In the final analysis, Heimbecker's work is a consequence of his own particular quest for silence, which incorporates a more inclusive and diverse approach to the fabrication of sound sculpture.

Paul Woodrow

References


Soundpool: The Manufacturing of Silence. 1996 (detail),
mixed media, 253 square metres.
Biography

1959. Sprinwater, Saskatchewan
Lives and works in Calgary, Alberta

Education

1977-80 The Alberta College of Art

Selected Solo Exhibitions


1995 Improvisations in Octaphonics, La Chambre Blanche, Artist in Residence, Quebec City, Quebec

Compositions / Improvisations in Octaphonics, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge, Alberta; Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan; La Chambre Blanche (two), Quebec City; Inter Access / The Music Gallery, Toronto, Ontario; St. Norbert Arts and Cultural Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba; Calgary Society of Independent Film Makers / Quickdraw Animation Society / Em/Media, Calgary, Alberta

1994 Ti: Talk St. Norbert, Music and Words '94, Concert Series - St. Norbert Arts and Cultural Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba

1990 Density #2, Ariel Harp, The New Gallery, Calgary, Alberta

1985 Zeitgeist, 2nd Story Gallery, Calgary, Alberta

Selected Group Exhibitions

1995 The Forum for the Alienation of Art, Deuxième Manifestation Internationale Video et Art Electronique, Champ Libre, Montreal, Quebec

Radio Unbound, Human Transistors 2, Festival of Audio and Radio Art, The Timmins Centre for the Arts, Boreal Electroacoustic Music Society / CISR FM 88, Edmonton, Alberta

1994 Lend me your ears: Sound City Spaces, Sound Symposium 7, Memorial University Art Gallery, St. John's, Newfoundland

End of Modernity, Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta

Perf '94, International Performance Art Symposium, St. Norbert Arts and Cultural Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba

1993 The Tuning of the World, Nickle Arts Museum, Calgary, Alberta

Passage, Sculpture '93, Triangle Gallery and Visual Arts Society, Calgary

1991 Feed Back and Forth: life is stranger more to follow..., International collaborative performance project: Helmhaus Gallerie, Zurich, Switzerland; Kultursagi, Winterthur, Switzerland; Radio Lora FM, Zurich; Schedhalle Gallerie, Zurich; Gallerie Theoreetzbacher, Vienna, Austria; Kunstverein Gallerie, Horn, Austria

1990 Between Edges, ACTS, The Works, Edmonton, Alberta

1989 Alliance Showcase 89, Independent Film and Video Alliance, National Film Board Theatre, Halifax, Nova Scotia

The Au, Media Blitz II, The New Gallery, Calgary, Alberta

1987 Soundscape: National Sound Sculpture Exhibition, C.C.M.C. Music Gallery, Toronto, Ontario

Selected Collections

University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta
Foothills Hospital Foundation, Calgary, Alberta
Private collections

Selected Bibliography


Deuxième Manifestation Internationale Video et Art Electronique, (Festival Catalogue), Champ Libre, Montreal, Quebec, (1995).


Media Blitz II, The New Gallery, Calgary, AB.


"Performances in Zurich und Winterthur: Aktive Seltsamkeiten."


