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*This is a journey into sound/Bring the noise.*

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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**Abstract:**

The aim of this thesis is to survey the discussions around the position of sound art within the broader arts, and to explore strategies and research areas within fine art and my own practice, so as to identify new areas of enquiry and develop my work within this field. I investigate the phenomenology of vision and hearing and contrast the different ways these two senses operate as primary sources of perception. I analyse the privileging of sight and the dominance of the visual in art institutions. Ideas of the literal and model subject within installation art are explored and the convergence of these subjectivities is overlaid with this phenomenological research, in order to develop a direction within installation art. The lack of authoritative sources in this field, beyond the few relevant texts, has meant that my research has employed respected new media and the Internet as a second tier of sources. I also analyse my own practice as an example of how sound art activates extramusical ideas. My research concludes that sound art has much to reveal to the broader arts community about perception and the creation of meaning, and also that there are many prospective avenues of enquiry within fine arts for the inclusion and analysis of audio based work.

**Keywords:** sound art; phenomenology; hearing; privileging of sight; subjectivities; extramusical; perception.

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*Sound saturates the arts of this century, and its importance becomes evident if we can hear past the presumption of mute visuality within art history, past the matter of music that excludes references to the world, past the voice that is already the source of its own existence, past the phonetic taskmastering of writing, and past what we might see as hearing.*

(Douglas Kahn, 1990.)



Figure 1. Members of Fluxus Internationale playing the piano.

### ***This is a Journey Into Sound: Bring the Noise***

Sound has a way of penetrating or leaking into all areas of the gallery, of colonising space it may not be expected or invited into. This thesis explores the territory located between sound art or experimental music (a definition still up for negotiation), and visual art; an 'interstitial' zone as it were, explicitly activated by 'leakage' from both these fields.

I investigate the gradually expanding position that sound art occupies within the wider fine arts field and reflect on some of the reasons that have slowed its admission. I examine justifications for its inclusion and the case for the continuation of this acceptance. Rationales for understanding the common privileging of the visual over the aural are considered, as are the strategies practitioners and curators have developed to overcome this. Some space is devoted to the science of sight and hearing and how the differences in these effect our creation of understanding in the world. Phenomenology is then discussed as a paradigm for the development of a meaningful installation practice. I trace the ongoing course of my practice and the development of a shared visual and aural language that employs the ideas that have surfaced in my research. The rock and roll audience is discussed within the context of my practice as an exemplar of the literal subject and therefore a valid ingredient in installation based sound art. . This is especially necessary if sound art is to develop towards the contemporary installation art goal of engaging a convergence of the two subjects, the ideal and the literal.

### **School's Out For Summer!**

While undoubtedly not a universal truth, there is often a twenty or thirty year lag between an art movement and its definitive texts appearing, a tendency that is certainly in evidence in the case of sound art. This canonical omission has occurred, even though sound art from its outset in the 60's engaged many of the same dialogues as the wider art community. Christoph Cox points to these particular shared concerns notably "Minimalism's emphasis on immersion and relationality, Conceptualism's dematerialization of the art object, and the turn toward site-specificity in general"(Christoph Cox. 2007)<sup>1</sup>. It is a measure of the paucity of scholarship in the field that my research yielded only a small number of recognized texts that document

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<sup>1</sup> Cox, Christoph. (2007). *About time, Christoph Cox on Sound Art*. Retrieved Jan, 24, Nov 2009, from <http://www.artforum.com/inprint/id=18807>

and critique sound art. Although I have drawn heavily on those few published texts that do exist, the lack of material from authoritative sources necessitated my investigation of respected new media and the Internet as a second tier of sources. The advantage that these other avenues of research provide over traditional texts is that they include access to audio and this facility is essential to a practice that is focused on listening. Furthermore, this institutional neglect — and sound art's subsequent flourishing in alternative media — is fitting for an art form so aligned with DIY, but it has, nevertheless, made the writing of this thesis a little like a naïve improvisation. This could be entirely appropriate, as American free jazz saxophonist and drummer Hal Russell stated in 1992, "What do you do if you don't know nothing? IMPROVISE? What do you do if know too much? IMPROVISE!" (The Hal Russell NRG Ensemble 1995).<sup>2</sup>

### 10,000 Words In a Cardboard Box

A starting point for research into the position held by sound art within the wider fine arts community must be the views and experiences of those practitioners actively and critically engaged in this field.

One of the fundamental areas open for debate is one of nomenclature. What defines a work as sound art and not as experimental music? There are many different positions taken in this battle for theoretical territory. Are boundaries best drawn with works related to a spatial experience defined as sound art and works which relate to a temporal experience defined as experimental music? Is the separation based on the nature of the time activated by the work, episodic versus durational? Does the environment that the work is presented in define its position in this debate and furthermore, how does the medium of delivery effect this?

Electronic musician, sound artist and academic Stephen Vitiello describes his sound art practice as "exploring sound as a physical medium rather than a temporal one."<sup>3</sup> Artist Max Neuhaus puts it slightly differently: "Traditionally composers have located the elements of a composition in time. One idea which I am interested in, is locating them, instead, in space,

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<sup>2</sup> Russell, Hal. (1995) The Hal Russell NRG Ensemble, *The Hal Russell Story* [CD] Munich; E.C.M.

<sup>3</sup> Vitiello, Stephen. (2004) Quoted in *Sound Art Now an online Symposium*. Retrieved Jan, 24, Nov 2009, from [http://www.artforum.com/symposium/id=6682&page\\_id=2](http://www.artforum.com/symposium/id=6682&page_id=2) Stephen Vitiello is a sound installation artist (the 2002 Whitney Biennial), electronic musician (CDs on New Albion Records), archivist at the Kitchen NYC and sound programs curator (the Muse d'Art Contemporain de Lyon).



and letting the listener place them in his own time.”<sup>4</sup> The problem with defining sound art like this — as work solely dealing with sound as a physical or spatial entity — is that it places too much emphasis on location and space, so that the works become essentially site specific. While this is certainly the case for a lot of sound installation, it leaves out pieces like Janet Cardiff’s ‘Audio Walks’,<sup>5</sup> for example, which are as much about sound occupying time as they are about the occupation of space.

The sound tracks in these ‘audio walks’, played by personal devices through headphones, reference and operate in a similar way to an audio guide at a gallery or museum. The work engages with a subject’s experience of ‘site’ in a concrete way, Cardiff’s audio telling the participant to, turn left at the statue, go down the concrete stairs etcetera. The sites are specifically chosen and it is the cultural elements of these particular environments that are inspiration for her intriguing mix of narratives. The participant hears pre-recorded ambient street sounds from the same locale mixed with music and factual, metaphorical and fictitious spoken word narratives. Cardiff describes this as being “in order to create a new world as a seamless combination of the two”. An example of this is her ‘walk’ *Her Long Black Hair* (2004). Here Cardiff includes real and imagined material, words and song, from old New York as the participant is instructed along old routes in this city. As a result, Cardiff is activating a response to both the spatial and the temporal, or ‘the here and now’ of the subject. These artworks clearly slip between the simple definition of sound art as spatial and experimental music as temporal.

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<sup>4</sup> Max Neuhaus quoted from a discussion with Brandon La Belle in Tuned City Symposium in Berlin in 2008. This passage occurs @ 10minutes into the one hour talk. Retrieved 28 January 2009 from <http://www.max-neuhaus.info/audio-video/>.

<sup>5</sup> Janet Cardiff is a leading sound and installation artist. In this ‘walk’ Cardiff also gave the subjects a series of photographs to look at at particular moments in the narrative and so superimposes onto the visual field as well. Details, quotes and images of her work here and following retrieved Jan, 24, Nov 2009, from <http://www.cardiffmiller.com/index.html>



fig 1. Still from Janet Cardiff's  
*Her Long Black Hair* (2004)

Another contested demarcation is founded on the way that time is manifested or activated within the work; this posits experimental music as episodic and sound art as durational. Unlike the previous definition, (where sound art = sound in space and experimental music = sound in time), this bypasses any discussion of the spatial. If the work exhibits temporal aspects that could best be described in musical terms like tempo, meter and acceleration, then it can be referred to as 'episodic' and, so the argument goes, it has enough features of musicality to be defined as experimental music. Examples of episodic work could be Derek Bailey's improvisational work with The Spontaneous Music Ensemble <sup>6</sup>, which interrogated methods of playing so as to activate listening and an understanding of musical phenomena. An essential focus of his research is pulse, meter and rhythm, therefore his work would be deemed, under this definition, experimental music. Sound art, conversely, could be defined as work in which the temporal element is better described as activating notions of 'duration'.

A clear example of a durational work would be a piece such as Jem Finer's *Longplayer*, written for the millennium celebrations in London. It began at midnight on the 31<sup>st</sup> December and is intended to last 999 years. The work is composed for a set of singing bowls, a type of bell, played by both humans and machines. A continuous digital version has been playing online since this time.

*"Longplayer grew out of a conceptual concern with problems of representing and understanding the fluidity and expansiveness of time. While it found form as a musical composition, it can also be understood as a living, 1000 year long process – an*

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<sup>6</sup> Derek Bailey (1930-2005) was a leading experimental and improvisational musician, guitarist and author. Bailey, Derek. (1993) *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice*. New York, Da Capo Press, [ISBN: 0306805286](https://www.dacapo.com/9780306805286) )

artificial life form programmed to seek its own survival strategies. More than a piece of music, *Longplayer* is a social organism, depending on people – and the communication between people – for its continuation, and existing as a community of listeners across centuries.”<sup>7</sup>

So, following the reasoning that sound art is ‘durational’ and that *Longplayer* is durational as well as engaging with extra-musical ideas, it seems appropriate that this work falls into sound art territory. But, again, it is possible to find sound art practitioners whose work operates on both sides of this episodic/durational divide. A precursor to this ‘durational’ work of Finers is La Monte Young’s *Dreamhouse* (1993–2009)<sup>8</sup>, which he describes as “permanent and everlasting”. His specifically durational works developed from a desire to break with what minimalist composer and music theorist Wim Mertons describes as the “traditional romantic-dialectical musical model.”

In traditional music there is a clear development of narrative tension within the work, building to a resolution at the end. A message, or what is often referred to as a ‘musical argument’, is being communicated by such work. Minimalist composers like La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Phillip Glass and Steve Reich dispense with this narrative or representational based work in favour of what they term non-representational music. For Glass, this is music that “has disposed of traditional concepts that were closely linked to real time, to clock-time. Music is not a literal interpretation of life and the experience of time is different.” These particular artists work began before the term sound art had entered the lexicon. However, using the ‘experimental music as episodic’ and ‘sound art as durational’ definition above, the work could be referred to as sound art. The minimalists all however, use fundamental musical ideas of repetition and the pulse in their work, using these tools as a way to destroy the paradigm of the musical argument. In effect, removing the dramatic tension as it were and producing pieces about process rather than a prescribed resolution.

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<sup>7</sup> Finer, J, Levin, J, Eshun, K, Wertheim, C, Wertheim, M. (2003). *Longplayer*. London, Artangel. ISBN 1 902201 12 6. Also, retrieved January 24, 2009, from <http://longplayer.org/index.php>

<sup>8</sup> La Monte Young is a leading American minimalist composer and musician, see also note 20 on Tony Conrad. Details for the work *Dreamhouse* (1993–2009) can be found at, <http://www.melafoundation.org/DHpressFY09.html> Retrieved January 24, 2009.

Riley's accumulative processes assume a fundamental distinction between micro-level and macro-level. Continuous change is achieved by inserting new elements into the basic form that is repeated and the pulse displaces attention away from the details of form towards the overall process. (Mertons 1983 p310)<sup>9</sup>

Even if the goal is to break with traditional dialectic music and its methods of creating meaning within a piece, a practice such as Riley's could still be described as experimental *music*, because the investigation of temporal elements in a given work remains 'episodic'.

There are artists and writers who feel that all of the previous definitions are unnecessary. To these practitioners, often from a classical background, the work that has been designated as sound art or experimental music should instead be termed contemporary music. It is certainly possible to argue this position for a number of reasons: formal musical analysis can be brought to bear on anything sonic, and it is possible to score even the freest improvisation. Even if the work is not scored it will still refer to sound (or its absence) and the western music establishment has been analysing, categorising and creating taxonomies for the aural since the days of Aristotle. This new work is just taking time to be absorbed. New York-based artist and composer Marina Rosenfeld puts the argument this way. "From Satie to Stockhausen to Maryanne Amacher, extreme duration as well as conscious consideration of space, rooms, architecture (in Amacher's case, arguably, the architecture of the body) have added up to expansions of the field of musical composition." (Rosenfeld 2004)<sup>10</sup> Rosenfeld argues that ideas from the visual and other arts have been "recuperated" into the fold of musical composition and goes on to say: "Perhaps sound art can be distinct from music only as long as the content of the sound is taken into account. Part of the problem is that the history of music includes and involves so much . . . and the definition of sound art, as it stands for the moment, always seems to include something exclusionary".

The argument for recuperating all of sound art into contemporary music has a clear logic, the music establishment having had the most experience with this part of the sensorium, it is

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<sup>9</sup> Mertens, Wim. 2004 Basic Concepts of Minimal Music. In *Audio Culture Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (p310) New York and London: Continuum.

<sup>10</sup> Marina Rosenfeld quoted from online symposium Sound Art Now on Art forum website, Retrieved January 24, 2009, from [http://www.artforum.com/symposium/id=6682&page\\_id=4](http://www.artforum.com/symposium/id=6682&page_id=4)

the case however that a large part of the history of auditory practice has occurred with little or no communication with the contemporary musical establishment.

Since the mid eighties, I have been actively involved in the DIY / post-punk / improv' noise community in Dunedin. Such musical subcultures grow, as in other parts of the world, as a reaction to having few legitimate, or appealing avenues of creative expression and little interest from the local media. To a large extent post-punk in New Zealand has relied on fanzines, music magazines and album liner notes for its scholarship and these similarly DIY media have provided training grounds for some of the scholarship that is developing now. Dunedin's alternative music scenes, though developing in relative isolation, have nonetheless, produced a prolific cultural legacy of internationally recognised music and practitioners.

There are a small number of academic environments that seem able to engage with both the sound art and experimental music communities. Alvin Lucia (b1931), whose work *I am Sitting in a Room* (1970)<sup>11</sup> is recognised as a major sound artwork, has been a Professor of Music at Wesleyan University Connecticut since that time. Like Lucier, many important practitioners have spent time teaching at various art schools and music colleges. Even so, most sound artists do not experience the teaching of leading sound practitioners, one exception being author Douglas Kahn who was a composition student of Alvin Lucier. So, rather than via academic tutelage or mentoring, experience and knowledge in the field of sound art is acquired through playing with others, and accessing existing recordings. Access to information is mediated through both random and premeditated social connections and is unique to the individual. While there are musical zones of interest shared between practitioners and consumers and localised subcultures, or 'scenes', do develop, it is also possible to move independently from one scene to another. Within these scenes the opportunity for a self-taught individual to influence others is high. It is an environment with a markedly different set of freedoms and restrictions on the flow of information. Deleuze and Guattari's description of the rhizome in *A Thousand Plateaus*, is as apt description as any of the way knowledge passes within these sound art communities:

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<sup>11</sup> In this 1970 work Lucier recorded the sound of himself saying "I am sitting in a room recording the sound of..." Taped this, replayed it into the room, taped that, replayed that and so on through many iterations till the voice itself was rendered unrecognisable and the room sound is left. The iterations in sequence are the work. Rerecording Lucier, A. (1982). *I am sitting in a room* [CD] recorded by Lucier at home in Connecticut: Lovely Music, Ltd. New York.

The rhizome is an acentered, non hierarchical, non signifying system without a General and without an organising memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states... Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, with binary relations between the points and the bi-univocal relationships between the positions, the rhizome is made only of lines: lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes a metamorphosis, changes in nature. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.21)

Not only is it unusual for knowledge to pass from the music academies to this rhizomatic network of practitioners, it is also a rare thing for a performance of improvised noise, or a tone field work to occur in a music conservatory, they are — and this is a salient point — more likely to be hosted by an art gallery. While the field of sound art has developed in a way that is free of some of the strictures associated with academia such as restricted access and hierarchies of information status, the trade off for this freedom has meant that practitioners have been forced to look elsewhere than these music academies for support. This has lead to much of this new work being framed within and influenced by fine art paradigms. The artist and composer Carl Michael von Hausswolff ...

...but, as I said, the bubble had to pop. The artists working with sound couldn't sit around for much longer and got a bit tired of doing bar gigs and cellar installations. The energy of Merzbow, Hafler Trio, PanSonic, the Mego gang, and the rest of the thousands of artists developing spoken word, frequency investigation, field recordings, and superleveled sonics just had to get out there; and it seems like there was a response to it. A positive one. The concert halls can now be seen in the rearview mirror, and their directors are standing there with their pants down. There was a time when electronic-music composers actually wanted to perform their music in these places; but I think that time is gone. The acoustics are not good enough, and the spaces are not flexible enough. Sound installations and new electronic music

fit better in the environment of the Kunsthalle with a curator who might not get the point but still is open to something new.<sup>12</sup> (von Hausswolff 2004)

Once again an attempt to categorise work under a theoretical heading or to divide the territory between the larger fields of music and art fails. This situation is probably the result of the multiple paths that practitioners have taken in their development, mostly without any input from either music or art institutions. Some artists, for example Los Angeles based multimedia artist Steve Roden are not waiting for a theoretical heading to legitimize their work. It is just important that practitioners get on with it.

“In some respects it would be nice to see this discussion of ‘what sound art is’ fall away from the thing, just as the discussions of things like ‘Is painting dead?’ seem finally to have vanished. I don't want to end up overprotective of a kind of sound-art territory.” (Roden 2004)<sup>13</sup>

While Roden's is an understandable position, it seems the definitions of sound art and experimental music will be open to ongoing interrogation. I would argue this is a healthy thing, and this debate is in fact helped in some ways by the lack of a dominant text. In the case of my own work, I consider it to be sound art, due to its engagement with an essentially fine arts discourse. It evinces aspects of phenomenology, interrogates the role of the gallery as a physical and institution space and challenges us to reexamine our privileging of sight. These ideas sit well within the discourse of fine arts.

An important issue for sound artists in their engagement with the fine arts institutions is the disconnect between the motivations, art histories, methodologies and technical requirements of their practice and the knowledge base of these areas within the institutions themselves. The institutions ability to formally analyse and listen is often, as a result, seriously lacking. Most sound artists would admit to a certain chagrin at the lack of understanding within the wider arts community of what they are doing and more importantly why. It is also frustrating to experience sound installations where the artist or curator have been almost wilfully dismissive with the visual field sometimes leaving it completely up to designers or

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<sup>12</sup> Carl Michael von Hausswolff quoted from online symposium Sound Art Now on Art forum website, Retrieved January 24, 2009, from [http://www.artforum.com/symposium/id=6682&page\\_id=0](http://www.artforum.com/symposium/id=6682&page_id=0)

<sup>13</sup> Steve Rodin quoted from online symposium Sound Art Now on Art forum website, Retrieved January 24, 2009, from [http://www.artforum.com/symposium/id=6682&page\\_id=4](http://www.artforum.com/symposium/id=6682&page_id=4)

audio visual technicians to determine this. While this situation is improving as curators with a broader experience of sound art emerge and as the critical mass of international sound-focused exhibitions and research builds, I still believe it is worth examining where and potentially why this blind spot occurs. It is also worth noting the activities of the fine arts community that have contributed to sound arts development.

Despite a perceived lack of in-depth engagement with sound art, the fine arts establishment provides a vital space for sound art practice to develop. The art galleries of New Zealand have provided a forum for a sophisticated array of experimental practice to occur.

In 1998 the Dunedin Public Art Gallery hosted American sound artist Tony Conrad (b.1940). His performance, using treated string instruments, consisted of a series of long, slowly modulating minimalist drone works.<sup>14</sup> For those members of the Dunedin experimental music/sound art community this was an event of considerable interest. It provided a 'text' to work through over the next few years.

The Adam Art Gallery's *Sound Check* programme has, over the past two years provided another forum, of interest to the fine arts community, for considering sound. Within this were a series of *Sound Circuit* projects taking sound art out of the gallery into the environs of Wellington.<sup>15</sup>

The fine arts community has provided a measure of support for the sonic arts over the years however I suspect that this acceptance into the gallery environment is at times tokenistic: The institutions gain a measure of credibility with their stakeholders for being interdisciplinary and the sound music scene is well-connected and aware of events, and so a crowd is almost guaranteed for the gallery that hosts such sound art events. Galleries are therefore able to attract an alternative and often-younger audience without having to do too much more than open the gallery after hours and provide some security.

Performers/practitioners are often more than willing to be involved as this ends up being an environment away from pubs with the commercial imperatives they entail, and in a social

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<sup>14</sup> Conrad has been a leading member of the international sound art community since playing with La Monte Young, John Cale, Billy Name, and others as a member of Theatre of Eternal Music in the mid-sixties. The antecedents of this group were in the Neo-Dada aesthetics of Fluxus and John Cage noise music. Conrad is also a respected avant-garde video artist, experimental filmmaker, musician/composer, teacher and writer. See his site for details [http://tonyconrad.net/index\\_mon.html](http://tonyconrad.net/index_mon.html)

<sup>15</sup> I participated as a performer in two of the projects that were part of this, Dion Workman's *Sound-Ness* and Kaleb Bennett's *Total Information Awareness Project*.<sup>15</sup> Being involved in the delivery of other artists practice and experiencing discussions of their wider practice and strategies first hand will, I am sure, inform my future work.



place where relatively free experimentation is permitted. It also has a measure of credibility with the wider community — both parties gain something from this exchange. So while the fine arts community has gone some way towards the ideal of a ‘heterogeneous arts’ there is still a clear need for a broader, more informed engagement.

The expansion of sound arts participation within the wider arts is a move that is enhancing fine arts as a whole. This is especially the case when the curators, theorists and practitioners develop purposeful dialogues with each other. Discussion enlivens the discipline in a similar way that challenging the dominant position of the male European artist or theorist has had. By allowing new forms of dialogue into the field, art significantly improves its capacity to be meaningful. Sound, as a new claimant for a place at arts table, has the ability to bring to bear a different set of tools to the questions contemporary art engages.



fig 3. *Dale's Sea Rhythms*, installation view.



fig 4. *Dale's Sea Rhythms*, detail.

### Splash, Now I'm Home

In the middle of 2008 my practice had reached an impasse of sorts. The sorts of issues of mentioned earlier in this text became a clear point for critique. Important issues such as the absence of established scholarship, the degree of scepticism as to whether sound art research should be occurring within an arts institution, the lack of knowledge of sound art history, and the ways of reading sound art seemed poorly understood or received by most. This led me to question whether new strategies of engagement were needed. I became aware that the initial impressions of sound installations by non-sound art practitioners are by and large visual.

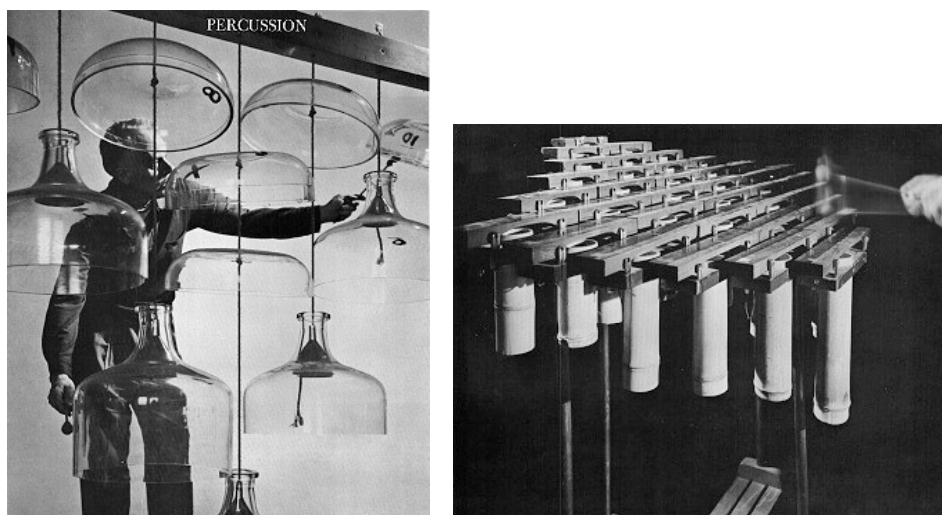
The work *Dale's Sea Rhythms* made at this time was based on the simple premise; to make sound visible. Using various mundane materials I set up a series of standing waves in a shallow layer of water (see figure 3 and 4 above). The vibrations in the water being the result of an audio track moving the speaker cone below the dish, the different notes and timbres of the audio causing different shaped patterns. In this piece the focus of the audience settles on the detail of the installation materials and the simple kinetic movement of the water.



fig 5. Installation photo from Tony Nicholl's exhibition *Aletheia* (2008). detail photo by Jeremy Booth.



fig 6. Rafael Toral performing at Serralves Museum, Porto. (2005). Featuring the *White Cube*, manipulated by João Paulo Feliciano. Photo by Pedro Lobo.



figs 7&8. Harry Partch with *Cloud-Chamber Bowls* and *Diamond Marimba*, (1950-51), photos by Fred Lyon.

Since creating the work, I have come to appreciate that the work made a non-visible vibration visible and in so doing utilised a strategy within sound practice that I am familiar with, but disinterested in pursuing, A strategy that could be termed as being 'synaesthetic'.<sup>16</sup> I have achieved little more than a simple trick, and on reflection, the effect is not unlike like the ubiquitous example of an *iTunes Visualizer*<sup>17</sup> - a software programme that creates a visual accompaniment to music. A recent example of work manifesting this synaesthetic translation, (amongst other ideas), was Tony Nicholl's exhibition *Aletheia* (Enjoy Gallery, 18 Sep 2008 - 4 Oct 2008) In this series of work the sound, often almost inaudible, drives different highly crafted mechanisms that act as 'visual amplifiers', (see fig 5). In Nicolls' work, variations in a simple sine wave vibration with amplitude almost too small to see, are made visible through the action of various levers. These kinetic works employed a simple palette of materials with minimal but sophisticated fabrication to produce visually eloquent objects. It is the aesthetics of vibration that one is made aware of in this work.

This tactic of embedding sound in a highly visual field has often been a way for sound artists to reach audiences. A similar way to achieve this is to create fantastic instruments and examples of this exist from the Futurists' *Intonarumori* or noise machines, through to Harry

<sup>16</sup> Synaesthesia is a phenomenon where the evocation of one kind of sense impression occurs when another sense is stimulated, for example, the sensation of colour when a sound is heard.

<sup>17</sup> Tm and © apple inc. etc.

Partch (1901 – 1974) and his various “corporeal instruments” <sup>18</sup> (see figures 7 and 8)

This well colonised field of auditory practice includes present day practitioners such as performance and installation artist Rafael Toral (b.1967 Portugal) <sup>19</sup>. Using home-built electronics, light and photo-receptor cells, Toral’s performances feature physical circuit bending and feedback manipulation, (see fig 6). While what is heard is not significantly different from what one might hear from an accomplished synthesiser player, the physicality of the performance, the unusual nature of the instruments and the way the body of the performer is implicated however engage with a larger audience than may have been the case otherwise.

Sound artists from Tony Nicholls through Harry Partch to Rafael Toral have created significant and influential work and it is a simplification to describe this work as merely making sound operate visually using curious instruments and dramatic performances. It has however served the purpose of showing the strategies I choose not to utilize in my work. I am less interested in this type of strategy and more interested instead in the act of hearing. It is easy for the visual field to overwhelm the aural, as is the case with my first works, and it is the way this sense hierarchy operates which is one of the main concerns of my practice.

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<sup>18</sup> Harry Partch was an American composer, writer, hobo and instrument designer. His instruments were developed as part of his seminal studios of microtonal music. Details and images for these instruments retrieved Jan, 24, Nov 2009, from <http://www.corporeal.com/instbro/inst05.html>

<sup>19</sup> Details for Rafael Toral and image in text retrieved Jan, 24, Nov 2009, from <http://www.rafaeltoral.net/> see also details about his Wellington N.Z. show, retrieved Jan, 24, Nov 2009, <http://happywellington.blogspot.com/search?q=rafael+toral>



fig 9 *Stack O' Gee 1*. Installation view.



fig 10. *Stack O' Gee 1*. Uncovered.

### Abba Zaba

Concurrent with, and articulated in the same exhibition space as *Dale's Sea rhythm's* is another sound exploration. *Stack O' Gee 1* consists of a stack of sixteen domestic speakers playing five different audio tracks, through a haphazard collection of found domestic speakers, (see figures 9 and 10 above). I created audio for the work made up of noisy distorted guitar tracks, a drum track and vocal recordings of sound artists, John Cage, Derek Bailey, Christian Marclay and Max Neuhaus, talking about their work. It is possible to hear the separate tracks by moving around the speaker stack. The stack is covered with black cloth in an attempt to elevate the importance of the sound.

I was concerned with investigating my own 'disposal' — this is a term first used by writer and improvisation process teacher Markos Zografos.

... your 'disposal' of personal attributes that you have the ability to use, your uniqueness. I say "disposal" because, for the sake of originality, it is an aim to have no clearly defined piece of information in your memory storage to reference. That is, if you are aiming toward your own style you do not want to simply riff out other people's styles. If you are not seeking originality then this is not so important. So at

your disposal is your 'junk heap' of musical information; a mud of experiences and imagination-entwined fodder (Zografos 2004)<sup>20</sup>.

My intention with the work was to create an aural metaphor for my 'disposal' and for the complexities of this to be evident. It is an experiment with layering a miscellany of personally significant soundtracks so that they resist being easily separated and take on a character of their own, a character that develops as the tracks play.

Once more, audiences respond to the visual character of this piece. Some read the covering cloth as a signal to ignore the structure, while others remark that they find the shrouded form intimidating. The ability to hear the different pieces depending on where the audience is positioned is not registered. Seemingly, the audience make no attempt to discern what is playing in the space, (and this was not mentioned in the discussions that followed the last showing,) even though the audio, while being of low fidelity, is relatively sophisticated and dynamic. The small audience that has experienced the work' for the most part agree, that it is not as intriguing as *Dale's Sea rhythm's*, even though this other piece is sonically and conceptually less complex.

### **Stop Children, What's That Sound?**

I have observed the typical fine arts audience will respond to the object qualities of the technologies used in any artwork, as a way of accessing the ideas. In the case of a sound artwork delivered through speakers, they will look to the type of speaker, the supporting furniture, and consider: Is it a found readymade? Is it high-tech? Is it purpose built? The colours and textures and spatial placement of objects are also looked to as entry points into the work. This is especially the case if the sound is not loud or bombastic in some way or very minimal and at the ranges of our aural perception. What this means is that a large portion of the audio palette struggles to be heard above the visual in a meaningful way. This unexpected outcome of my research and critique sessions lead me to further develop strategies for the reception of sound art by such audiences.

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<sup>20</sup> Excerpt from the transcript of a lecture presented at the Keys National Piano Competition, Brisbane Convention Centre, Australia, 17 October, 2004 and published online on the Perfect sound Forever website. <http://www.furious.com/perfect/improvtechniques.html>



fig 11. Audience in blindfolds at Francisco López performance, (2000). Photo: Atsushi Koyama.<sup>21</sup>

One strategy to enable the aural field to assert itself is to present the sound ‘accousmatically’ a term radio engineer-turned-composer Pierre Schaeffer<sup>22</sup> uses in deference to the ancient akousmatikoi; disciples of Pythagoras who were made to listen to their master’s voice while he was hidden behind a curtain. This enforces a shift in the sense hierarchy and so compels the audience to find meaning by listening, rather than seeing.

Another strategy used in sound art to deliver the work is to use headphones (see photo, above). However this risks what Brandon LaBelle<sup>23</sup> refers to as “the transposition of one reality on to another, and the fostering of an alteration of truth.” Like the blacked out or ‘accousmatic’ space, the putting on of headphones also suggests a certain formality/profundity. This effect has been discussed by Brian O’Doherty as the aural equivalent of art’s white cube, where art is isolated from the surrounding and comparatively distracting visual world by the empty and starkly minimal gallery space. O’ Doherty problematises the white cube as a space for art:

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<sup>22</sup> French composer, writer, broadcaster, and engineer Pierre Schaeffer (1910-1995) was one of the leading pioneers of musique concrete, where the early technologies of e.g. phonographs and magnetic tape and speaker arrays were incorporated into composition as valid instruments,

<sup>23</sup> Brandon LaBelle is an American sound artist and theorist whose text *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (2006) is one of the few significant texts in this field. He gave a workshop in 2008 in Wellington as part of the Adam Art Gallery’s “Sound Check” programme.



The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is "art." The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself... Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of aesthetics. (O' Doherty 1999)<sup>24</sup>

In her Audio Walk pieces discussed earlier, Janet Cardiff usurps this potentially problematic artificiality by making the use of headphones intrinsic to her audio guides. Also, she uses binaural microphones to capture the audio used for the guides — when creating the recordings she positions these in a mannequins ears which she carries so that the information from the aural field more closely matches what the walker would experience if they were walking with the actual guide themselves, rather than a pre-recording. As a result of this, the mimetic element is subsumed within the experience.

For a section of her work sound artist Christina Kubisch has taken the use of headphones further and modified this familiar piece of technology so that the headphones sample the environment and relay that information in real time to the individual as sound.<sup>25</sup> Using built-in coils that respond to electrical fields these head-sets translate or 'hear' electromagnetic fields. These various immersive environments are made by passing audio in the form of electrical currents<sup>26</sup> through wires configured into these settings . These currents produce the fields (see photo below). The technology in the headphones converts the changes in the electromagnetic fields into sound that the wearer can hear. More recently, she has begun incorporating the background, or 'ambient' electromagnetic fields created by the electricity in the built environment, going on to arrange walks where it is only this 'ambient' field she is concerned with. Both Cardiff and Kubisch's works have a clear antecedent in Max Neuhaus's seminal *Listen Walks* in the late 1960's. After stamping the word 'Listen' on the back of each member of his audience's hands, Neuhaus lead them on a premeditated route though New York City with the intention that they pay attention to the soundscape during the walk.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> O'Doherty, Brian. (1999) *Inside the White Cube: The ideology of the Gallery Space*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>25</sup> Image and details retrieved Jan, 24, Nov 2000 from [http://www.christinakubisch.de/index\\_en.htm](http://www.christinakubisch.de/index_en.htm)

<sup>27</sup> To see and hear Max describes this work and others to Brandon La Belle in a public sound symposium go to <http://www.max-neuhaus.info/audio-video/> Retrieved 28 January 2009.



fig.12. Janet Cardiff, *Villa Medici Walk*, (1998)



fig. 13. Christina Kubisch. *Magnetic Forest*, Kyoto, (1991)

For both these artists the technology is inseparable from the work; the headphones act not as tools for *replacing* information, but rather as a mechanism for *hearing* information in the world.



fig. 14. Oskar Fischinger working with *Ornament Sound* strips, (1932). © Elfriede Fischinger Trust.

### The Beauty of Time Is That It's Snowing

Synaesthesia – as discussed earlier in my analysis of my first work – is a phenomenon in which one kind of sense impression is evoked when another sense is stimulated, for example, the sensation of colour when a sound is heard

In his article “Lost in Translation” Christoph Cox (ArtForum October 2005)<sup>28</sup>, critiques this presenting of sound art practice within a ‘curatorial paradigm of synaesthesia’. I agree with Cox, who judges most of this work as not achieving its stated aims and as maintaining the elevated status of the visual. Synaesthesia as a neurological phenomenon also favours the visual, while amongst its manifestations it is common for sounds to cross-trigger optical responses, it is rare for sights to have a corresponding aural response. Synaesthesia is idiosyncratic in its nature. The colour or visual effect one ‘sound to vision’ synaesthete sees with a particular sound will be different from another. Its subjective nature points to its weakness as a model for translatability.

Synaesthesia more properly belongs to another class of consideration where private experience is mistaken as public, such as the schism involved in the voice one hears while speaking versus the voice others hear, or the celestial music and cosmic vibrations heard by a person at the time of death as opposed to the gurgling death

<sup>28</sup> Cox, Christoph. (Oct 2005) *Lost in Translation: Christoph Cox on Sound in the Discourse of Synaesthesia*. retrieved, from ArtForum site <http://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=200508&id=9502>

rattle heard by everyone else. (Kahn, 1990)<sup>29</sup>

Digital technology theoretically lends itself to the synaesthetic discourse, because it has potential synaesthetic facility. All information, whether it be a sound, an image, a film or even a brain scan can be recorded as binary information in a computer. This information can then be converted into different media from its original source, as an example, the different densities of brain tissue can be measured by magnetic resonance, and this information can become an image. In this image one density may be arbitrarily assigned the colour blue and another density red depending on the 'synaesthetic choices' of the person at the controls. Cox feels, however, that many of the artists and curators use this 'cross-triggering' i.e. using one set of variables from one data set to generate another data set in a different media, as a paradigm to make, commission and curate works that do little more than create accompaniments that are almost arbitrary. These sound/visual works operate more as performative works and less as interrogative sound works and therefore the gallery and artist are not being as truly interdisciplinary as they may think.

Cox finds two notable exceptions in the work of German abstract filmmaker Oskar Fischinger and American new media artist Scott Arford (b.1967). Fischinger, in his circa 1932 work *Ornament Sound*, (see Figure 14) marked film strip including the sound strip running along the edge of a film strip so as to "produce corresponding bursts of multi-textured and variously pitched noise", then, using the projector, converted them from visual to aural.

In a contemporary parallel, Scott Arford's *Static Room*, (2003), can also be thought of as interrogating sound via synaesthetic means.<sup>30</sup> Arford initially generates diverse audio-visual static, then, by merely swapping the leads over, this is fed into the audio output of the audio visual apparatus. What is created as a result is a range of noise and effects from dense blasts to drones. Discussing *Static Room* Cox notes:

The translation is effected not by the conversion of color and sound to a neutral digital substratum, or by the idiosyncratic sensual associations of the artist, but is,

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<sup>29</sup> Kahn, Douglas. (1990). *Noise, Water, Meat; a History of Sound in the Arts*. p.122

<sup>30</sup> Scott Arford is new media artist currently based in the San Francisco. It is also worth looking at his *Total Static Takeover* project as a form of interesting new media conceptual art. Image retrieved Jan, 24, Nov 2009, from (<http://www.7hz.org/projects/sr/movie.html>)

rather, effected simply by the routing of the electronic signal and the medium of display. Herein lies the true potential for a sound-art discourse steeped in a multisensory approach. Where indirect and arbitrary digital translation too often attempts to elide the differences between media and sensory modalities, this direct, analog translation does the reverse, intensifying sensory differences and the materiality of the video medium. (Cox *ibid*)

Synaesthesia will continue to be a strategy amongst many practitioners and curators but I find myself drawn to the area of phenomenology and sound and the processes of subjectivity hinted at by neuroscience.

The best sound works neither reject the visual nor succumb to it, but instead amplify differences among media and sensory modalities, drawing attention to sound as a semiautonomous power. They are complex engagements with the visual that intensify the moment of translation and the movement of metaphor (in Nietzsche's sense of the term). For the silence of the visual can cut two ways. It can stifle or, as John Cage taught us, powerfully disclose sound. (Cox, *ibid* )

If sound is a 'semiautonomous power' as Cox claims then at this point it seems essential to look at how this power operates.



### Non-Alignment Pact: Next Works

For the next work in this series *Trial Disposal* I developed an installation in a studio space approximately five by six metres, with a relatively low acoustic tile ceiling. This space was predominantly used as a blacked out space for viewing slides and film. I decided against utilizing the 'accousmatic' function that the room offered because, as my projects have progressed, I have become less interested in isolating the sound from the visual and more in fusing these two fields.

This work incorporates numerous elements, beginning with 160 small (four cm diameter)

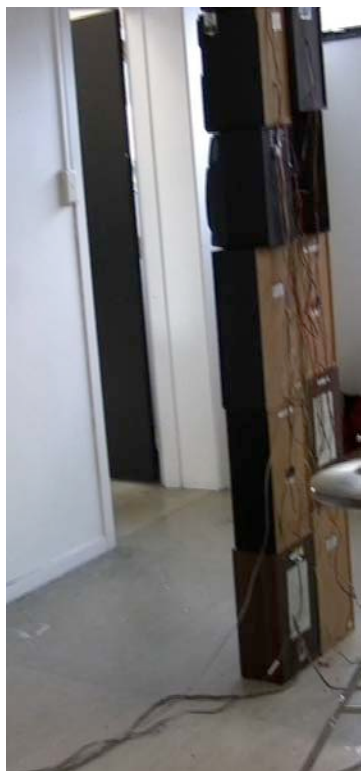


black, chrome and gold, four-ohm speakers. These are wired in circuits of four parallel pairs in series so as to create a circuit that reads eight ohms across, the output rating of the (computer controlled) mixing desk and the amplifiers I am using. With this work I am once more attempting to construct a visual representation of the idea of an improviser's 'disposal' so instead of using audio I have made myself, I use eight

tracks of a series of other work from genres such as pop music, free noise, funk, hardcore, folk and country. By using the mixing desk and software it is possible to output these eight different tracks simultaneously to the array of speakers. It also enables considerable control of the levels and tone of each circuit and the longer duration layering of different audio. The large number of speakers provide many sculptural options, as they function also as magnets, I experimented in the build process with clipping them to each other and to various metal objects, finally settling on clipping most of them to a large mesh frame removed from a double bed base. This I called *Skimboard*. My intention with the rather unsystematic layout of these across the mesh grid is to visually illustrate an infection of sound, the speakers and their trailing wires like 'rhizomatic' viruses or even, to take the metaphor further, 'earworms'<sup>31</sup> with the bed as metaphor for the body, (see figs 18 and 19).

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<sup>31</sup> An 'earworm' is the name for a portion of a song or other musical material becoming 'stuck' in one's head, repeating compulsively within one's mind. A more scientific term for the phenomenon, 'involuntary musical imagery', was suggested by the neurologist Oliver Sachs. See Sachs, Oliver. (2007) *Musophilia: Tales of music and the brain*. New York: Knopf.



figs. 15 and 16. *Trial Disposal; Stack O' Gee 2*, (2008)  
installation details.

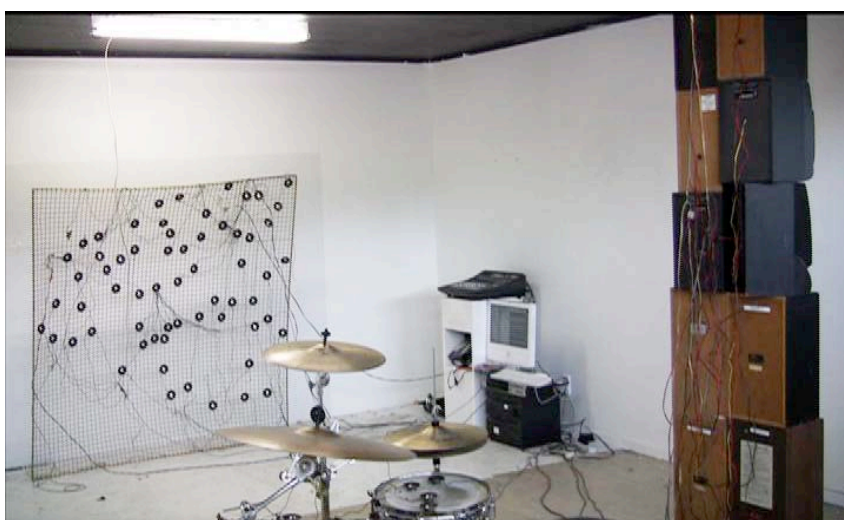
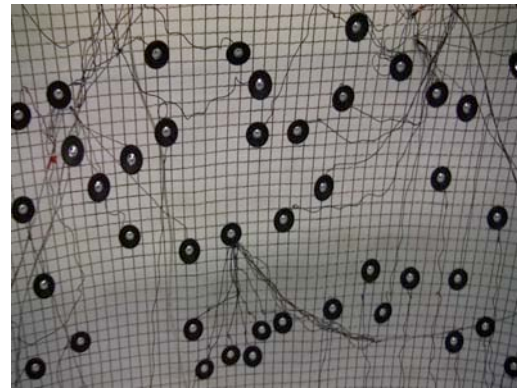


fig. 17. *Trial Disposal* (2008)



figs. 18 and 19. *Trial Disposal; Skimboard*, installation view and detail

Re-utilising the domestic speakers from the previous work, and adding more, I have created a column two speakers wide, this stacked high enough to end above a gap in the ceiling, where a tile has been removed (see fig's 15 and 16). Because of the connection with the earlier work I have titled this *Stack O' Gee 2*. As with the small speakers I have wired these into groups that read eight ohms across, these powered from a collection of found domestic amps and players. Here I have used my own series of noise recordings, mostly distorted guitar, produced for this purpose. These are low fidelity, made by using broken, found gear and employing an old reel-to-reel two track found outside a charity shop as my distortion. These abject things, with their 'arte povera' aesthetic sit more comfortably with my work than the seductions of an expensive Gibson guitar with a Fender amp.

Even though such prized instruments are dependable as well as sophisticated, my aesthetic is, in a way, an instinctive distancing of my work from the excesses of the enormous and dominating international music industry. Aloof from the technical skill hierarchies inherent in that industry, because there is no need to know how to play a diminished seventh or the guitar solo from *Stairway to Heaven*, one is free to forge new paths. This DIY aesthetic has been part of the alternative Dunedin music scene for years and it is a familiar methodology that suits my aims. The speaker stack attempted to make clear that the quality of these objects is arbitrary, while the audio is significantly more meaningful.

Like the small speakers, the tracks are randomly distributed through the speakers so as to make it difficult to ascertain where a particular sound is coming from and so this enables multiple experiences.





figs. 20 and 21. *Trial Disposal; Tonebeat*, installation view and detail.

The third main element in the room is *Tonebeat* (see fig 20 and 21 above). This is a drum kit set up as if about to be played, complete with sticks at the ready. The kit is encrusted with a dozen more of the small speakers. These play different stereo recordings of me playing fairly primitive rock drum parts, inspired by drummer Sandy Nelson and his teen beat albums of the late 1950s'. To me, Nelson epitomizes the exuberance of pop and its raw viscosity. The drums resonate in sympathy with the speakers placed on their skins.

The work has become a relatively resolved set of almost discrete sculptural elements, which I had come to see as being both visual and aural gestures hinting at various aspects of my practice. The bed of disposal alluding to my 'spontaneous composition'/improvising and the sources thereof, the drum kit unsubtly referencing the pop/rock and roll element of my practice and the stack of speakers carrying the suggestion of the more abstract noise side of my work. At various times during the installation process the various elements had been a lot more entwined and chaotic. The room had felt more dynamic and the readings of the space from the various visitors were more wide ranging and surprising, one visitor reading the shiny speakers on the bedframe as a fetishisation of the body metaphor and therefore standing in as the debauched sex/rock and roll persona. There had been a lot more wire on the floor not arranged in any particular way, and these interconnecting wires reinforced a sense of the rhizomatic relationship between the various aspects of my work and the work felt less mannered than other works and the ideas more embedded. As the work became more organised I felt that the gaps in my knowledge with respect to visual art and installation in particular made the more conscious decisions ironically less intelligent. Again there was a disconnect with the visual field but this now was about my lack of understanding of visual

codes rather than another's ignorance of the sonic. Rather than continuing to experiment in the area of sound art installation, at this juncture I found myself drawn again to the area of phenomenology and sound and the processes of subjectivity hinted at by neuroscience.

### **Free Your Mind...And Your Ass Will Follow: Phenomenology**

Phenomenology describes the nature of our perceptual contact with the world. It is concerned with providing a direct description of our experience.

For French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty,<sup>32</sup> perception is active and is a combination of the information we choose to take in from our surroundings, all senses being implicated in this action, and what our consciousness brings to bear on this. The two processes are intertwined. In a similar way he also considered the separation between the subject and the object to be in error. "...the thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually in itself because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity." (Merleau-Ponty 1945)

In the mid 1960's some early installation artists such as Robert Morris and Michael Asher used these ideas to develop 'minimalist' work that asked the viewer to become aware of the act of perception. In their works the audience is made aware that the meaning they take as a result of their experience with the work, is as much about their thought processes, as the information contained within the work itself. This work was later criticised for, amongst other things, its narrow subject position and I will discuss this later in this text.

There have been significant developments in the study of sensory perception and processing in the last few decades. These advances in techniques and technologies notably M.R.I. scanning<sup>33</sup>, have lead to greater understandings of how we manufacture our uniquely-held reality. By combining information we absorb from our surroundings with our recall of previous sensations and also (most significantly) our recall of learnt ways of understanding, we recreate our version of the world. This research has shown the extraordinary sophistication of this conjuring trick but also its need for many assumptions and abstractions. The philosophical method 'Phenomenology', a theory that considers our understanding of the

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<sup>32</sup> See Merleau-Ponty's (1908-1961) *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) trans. by Colin Smith, (1998) London. Routledge 1998.

<sup>33</sup> The first MRI images published appeared in scientific journal *Nature* 242 in 1973 (pp.190-191). MRI were first used on a human 4 years later in 1977.

world as dependent the processes of perception, predates and reinforces these scientific conclusions. Merleau-Ponty formulates perception as active and a combination of what information we choose to take in from our surroundings, all senses being implicated in this action, and what our consciousness brings to bear on this. He sees these two processes, the sampling of the environment and the processing of this information as intertwined. Similarly, he also considered the separation between the subject and the object to be in error, saying “the thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually in itself because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity.”<sup>34</sup>

My interest here is in a re-examining of sensory hierarchies and phenomenology with respect to the place of the auditory within fine arts practice. We see an action and perceive it as instantaneous with our perception of it. The bird passes the window at the exact moment it catches our eye. In English we say “I see what you mean” equating vision with reality. Likewise a ‘visionary’ (their extra perception extending out into the usually dark future!) is endowed with an extraordinary grasp of how things really are.

According to film theorist Christian Metz,

...our syntax and entrenched sensual hierarchy hold us in thrall to a metaphysics according to which sight and touch signify being and presence, while sound—spatially vague, materially elusive, and temporally ephemeral—signifies absence and can only have the status of a secondary “attribute” in relation to a primary visual and tactile “substance.”(Metz 1985)<sup>35</sup>

This aligning of what we see with how things are, is an abstraction that serves us well and is a sensible way of dealing with the considerable visual input we are given. Obviously what we are not doing is registering the time it takes for the signal (reflected or transmitted light) to get to us. For example, the sun is not where I ‘see’ it. It is in fact where I will see it in eight minutes and twenty seconds.

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<sup>34</sup> Merleau-Ponty quoted in Claire Bishop’s book *Installation Art A Critical History* (2005) Routledge: New York.

<sup>35</sup> Christian Metz also quoted in Claire Bishop’s book *Installation Art...* The quote is from Metz, Christian. (1985) *Aural Objects in Film Sound: Theory and Practice.* , eds. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

The more we find out about our macro and micro surroundings the more thought is required to maintain our understanding. It is a strangely difficult concept to process, this delayed reality, which is further complicated by the fact that we are actually seeing an array of existences. The further away a thing is, the further into its past we are observing. Most of us are aware however that sound travels to us. We see the lightening flash and most of us know the sound of the thunder comes later and we may count the seconds to calculate how far away the cataclysm was (every three seconds of delay between the sound and vision equates to approximately one kilometre).

We scan a relatively small field of vision<sup>36</sup> using a ray of focus a few degrees across and from this we manufacture our so called view. By moving and turning we increase our optical range and so convince ourselves that we know at any moment what is happening in our surroundings. We need this illusion of full comprehension to feel secure and any threat to this is considered significant.

Even the colours we see are an abstraction of vibrations too fast for our neurons to process as complete data. We are able, by comparing responses to the energy of these frequencies in what are called the cones in our eyes, to array these ultra fast vibrations in order. The rainbow is the array of these frequencies that we make visual in our minds eye. Red light has a frequency of around  $4.5 \times 10^{14}$  hz, which means that it vibrates 450,000,000,000,000 times each second. Violet has a frequency of  $7.2 \times 10^{14}$  Hz. This extraordinary analogue compression enables us to extract the kind of essential information we need from the light field, of say, the ripeness of fruit or the chance of rain in an evening sky.

We use a completely different mechanism to analyse the aural information field; the neurons that assess the frequency of sound fire at the *same* rate as those sounds.

Stereoscopic vision seems to have been evolved so as to enable a relatively accurate depth of field capacity. While we cannot see the panorama available to those, like the horse, who has almost 360 degrees of horizontal of sight, and we cannot see what is behind or even above or below us, we have a much better chance of catching a ball (or food) thrown to us.

Sound however is read from all points on the sphere and we are able to compare the different times that a noise of interest reaches each ear to locate which direction on the

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<sup>36</sup> The human field of vision is an oval shaped cone approximately 200 degrees on the horizontal axis and 130 degrees on the verticle.

vertical or horizontal axis it has come from. As stated, life presents itself to our eyes as a stage set before us, sound as theatre in the round.

Possibly the biggest handicap to absorbing information from the world about us, especially before we developed our own light sources, was that we are almost completely sightless once the sun goes down. It is then that our other senses step in to fill in the gaps.

We all understand our sight is relatively easily subverted and there are many visual illusions contriving to convince us not to believe everything we see yet we persevere. In the context of this argument, there are two more salient differences between these two senses. We *feel* sound through our bodies as well as our ears. Certain low frequencies can even make us physically sick by causing vibrations in our organs. We can also, with our voices and bodies, project back into this world, (clap your hands, say yeah!<sup>37</sup>) The ancient Greeks hypothesised that our eyes may project beams of light into the world to see. To paraphrase Aristotle in *Timaeus*, “Okay, then why can’t we see in the dark?”<sup>38</sup>

Douglas Kahn sees sound as enabling us to enter into the world.

Moreover, the voice is a good way to project perception into the world because it shares sound with hearing. The sound of the voice returns. If not in the voice itself then in the union of utterance and audition, and it creates the constitution and collapse of space required of a sentient getting outside of ourselves. (Kahn 1990 p28).

My intention here is not to create an oppositional state where I expound the virtues of hearing over sight. It is however, essential to know what processes and blindspots there are in perception so as to find a way forward for my practice. It also became clear that I needed to engage with installation scholarship and practice as a way to increase my understanding of the relationship between sound, song, avant-garde music<sup>39</sup> and visual arts practice.

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<sup>37</sup> Clap Your Hands, Say Yeah is also the name of an indy-rock band based in New York famous for achieving success in 2005 via the internet rather than through the usual record company channels.

<sup>38</sup> For those of a more metaphysical bent there is the idea of the scopophilic eye or the attacking gaze made famous by Laura Mulvey in her analysis of films like Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom* (1960) and John Carpenter’s *The Eyes of Laura Mars* (1978). I do not wish to discuss this here as it would confuse matters considerably.

<sup>39</sup> I use this term as it is defined by Michael Nyman in *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, (1974) New York: Schirmer.

### **Hey Hey Hey Hey: Installation Art and Phenomenological Experience.**

Rosalind E. Kraus *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1977) and Lucy Lipard's *Six Years: The dematerialisation of the art object* (1973) both provided a critical introduction to sculpture and installation. Then Claire Bishop's *Installation Art: A Critical History* (2005) allowed me to begin the process of incorporating these ideas into my practice in earnest.

Bishop's book has the familiar 'blind spot' common to a lot of otherwise excellent art texts in that sound installation artists and their research do not figure in the analysis of this area of contemporary art practice. The possible reasons for this narrow focus are covered elsewhere in this thesis and it seemed that there were other ideas present in this text worth pursuing. Her focus, for example, on the experience of the audience or subject was familiar to me from my professional life within museums and galleries and this became an important jump off point for the development of my studies. I have worked as a manager, designer, concept developer, and writer at a science centre and then as a freelance exhibition consultant. For the six years prior to this study I was an exhibition installation manager at Te Papa Tongarewa, The Museum of New Zealand and during this career I have given a considerable amount of time to the ideas of exhibition content delivery, interactivity, and what Te Papa calls 'Visitor Experience'. Therefore while Bishop's framing of installation practice in her introduction in terms of "four modalities of experience that installation art structures for the visitor – each of which implies a different model of the *subject*, and each of which results in a distinctive type of work." are a sophisticated enhancement of these museological discussions, the concepts and language. It felt like a convergence of various streams of my learning up to this point.

### **The Girl is Mine: The Ideal and the Literal Subject.**

The first English translations of Merleau-Ponty's *Philosophies of Perception* appeared in the early 1960's and some of the early installation artists used the ideas within to develop minimalist work that asked the viewer to become aware of the act of perception. In such installations the audience is made aware that the meaning they take as a result of their experience with the work is as much about their own thought processes as the information contained within the work itself.

The mechanism of perception defined by this model was eventually seen as too narrow and fixed in time and space, or the 'essentialist here and now'. Too much importance was placed

on the immediacy of this perception within such works. The practice of artists such as Dan Graham and writings of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, amongst others, called this into question. This approach to making work was seen as not allowing 'difference' or histories into the definition of perception, of not allowing multiple subjective positions and notably as excluding all but the 'western heterosexual male'.

With the benefit of hindsight, ideas that that fall out of favour can, when revisited, still have things to reveal to us. Writing in the 1990's about the rehabilitation of the strategies of Minimalism Bishop states: "the 'phenomenological' type of installation art returned as an explicit point of reference for contemporary practitioners who now seek to incorporate identity politics and 'difference' into the perceptual agenda; these artists address time, memory and individual history in ways that are arguably truer to Merleau-Ponty's thinking than the reductive interpretation offered by Minimalism." (Bishop 2005 pg76).

Bishop describes the subject as being able to exist within this rereading of phenomenology as not only the universal/idealised subject but also the actual/literal/present subject. Olafur Eliasson is an example of an artist engaging with this broader phenomenology and the power of the subjective position to affect a shift in the viewer/listeners understanding of the art/gallery experience.

Eliasson quoted in Bishop:

I think that the museum, historical or not, much too often is exactly like 'The Truman Show'. The spectator is tricked and neglected with regards to the museum's failure to carry out or enforce its responsibility by means of the way it discloses its ideology of presentation. Or to put it more straight: most institutions forget to let the spectators see themselves seeing. (Bishop 2005 pg77)

I believe it is the audience awareness of 'hearing themselves hearing' that is critical, and also the galleries' slightly limp and therefore 'non-responsible ideologies' with respect to sound that I wish to engage.



fig. 22. Olafur Eliasson *Lava floor* 2002  
Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France, 2002.

I need the live part of my practice to be significant both within an experimental music context and to the individual figure in the audience, and this desire aligns completely with Bishop's description of the converging literal and idealised or 'model' subject. The 'model' subject I am aim to engage is the same as that which is brought to bear at the instant of improvised playing. An unstructured and shifting aural continuum I have absorbed through my ears and body and mind over the years — the 'disposal' that is mentioned earlier. In the words of the always-erudite Bruce Russell, accessing this font within an improvisation requires "reacting with the subjective Will to the eruption of the Contingent bursting through the opening thus created in the fabric of the Necessary."<sup>40</sup>

As far as the 'literal' audience is concerned, they are that individual audience member in the room with the installation or performance. A subject with their own, completely idiosyncratic, responses based on their experience, physiology and enculturated learning. Work should also be specifically directed to this literal subject.

As a 'literal' subject, I quickly tire of experimental music or sound art that doesn't engage me at that physical, almost visceral level. I have sat in the audience and visited installations of work that are the aural equivalent of a Car Club meeting. Although I may admire the technical innovation and erudite referencing, such work misses out on an opportunity to engage more thoroughly. The audience could instead be encouraged to feel something

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<sup>40</sup> Bruce Russel quoted in Practical Materialism: Lesson Two. From National Grid # 2. 2006.)



challenging or significant. The special nature of how we process sound and use it to read the world both physically and culturally can, and I believe should, be activated. Something beyond language and vision. The audience should be activated by the sound rather than controlled by it. It is their self-awareness that is important, a self-awareness that if they so chose, allows abandon at the same time.

This is not a 'modernist artist as heroic deliverer of truth' paradigm but something else. I want the 'literal' audience to be moved. I would like them to be aware of their listening and to dance, to rock and roll.

There are sectors of the sound art community whose practice aims to at a disintegration of this literal humanist subject. They operate in an anti-humanist mode. One significant subdivision of the noise canon is sometimes given the name 'Noise/Horror'. This especially includes that deal with the abject or the horrific like Japanese noise group Merzbow<sup>41</sup>, or English death grind band Extreme Noise Terror<sup>42</sup> or some of the second wave 'Black Metal'<sup>43</sup> coming from Norway. By requiring a continual escalation of the volume and violence of this music to achieve the shock value, the ever more tolerant audience reaches a state of paralysis. Contemporary music theorist Simon Reynolds describes this as "Seizure"(...) : "As the barriers in the head get broken down, the noise buff becomes a kind of hip vegetable, ..." (Reynolds 2004 p57)<sup>44</sup>

In this instance, whatever freedom to engage that the listener may have had, apart from the role of passive consumer, has been shut down. Nevertheless, this can be an enjoyable experience, but it harks back to the classical model of the mute, adoring audience entirely at the whim of the artist.

The other area of sound practice which acts to silence the literal subject is harder to define using aesthetic references, but is characterised by the type of venue and methodologies used to deliver its content. These performances tend to require a passive audience actively listening in

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<sup>41</sup> (Woodward, Brett (1999). 'Merzbook "The Pleasuredome of Noise"'. Melbourne: [Extreme](#). pp. 27. ISBN 0-646-38326-4. )

<sup>42</sup> (Extreme Noise Terror are the subject of an article in the musicological essay collection *Bad Music: The Music You Love To Hate*. (ed. Christopher Washburn and Maiken Derno; Routledge, 2004. ISBN 978-0415943666))

<sup>43</sup> Black metal is a misanthropic subgenre of heavy metal. Characterised by complex and confusing song structures, extremely fast and heavily distorted guitar and rapid bass heavy drumming. Screamed lyrics often refer to death and murder and there is a strong anti-Christian content.

<sup>44</sup> Reynolds, Simon. (2004) "Basic Concepts of Minimal Music." In *Audio Culture Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (p310) New York and London: Continuum.

on a performance, where overt or active performativity is shunned. A typical performance of this kind may feature a disengaged player in front of a laptop, moving unseen files and faders. The *mise en scene*, or staging, could be described as wilfully anti-rock. In fact, this appears to be one of the goals. This is a class conflict of sorts. In its idealised form, rock music is open to almost all elements in society. It can therefore, carry associations that may not sit well with those practitioners who feel that their specialised knowledge entitles them to a degree of elitism or control of the way their work is received. By excluding the 'noisier' elements from the performance space or gallery and by silencing those present physically and aurally, the practitioners undermine the literal subject's ability to act. Artists therefore lose the opportunity to engage with their audience in a democratic exchange and run the obvious risk of alienating them. If the intention is to engage, even if the stated aim is one of attacking the audience's subjectivities, then the audience must be there to be engaged.

These concerns are mirrored in Bishop's interrogation of the different ways the subject has been dealt with in installation practice. "Some would argue that this split sense of the 'subject' – both centred and decentred – indicates a failure of installation art" (Bishop 2005). If the poststructuralists, goals are valid then the centred subject should have been dismantled. Conversely installation art, by asserting the need for a viewer in the space of the work, creates a subject whose presence and experience is a focus of attention and as a result this subject cannot be decentred either. This situation can be resolved if the audience for the installations is in fact, both centred and decentred, a state that leaves these two subjective positions in opposition. Installation art, in this resulting state "calls for a self-present viewing subject precisely in order to subject him/her to the process of fragmentation. (...) By this means, installation art aims not only to problematise the subject as decentred, but also to produce it."(ibid)

Bishop sees a way forward for installation practice as a whole and in her conclusion writes, "the degree of proximity between model subject and literal viewer may therefore provide a criterion of aesthetic judgement for installation art: the closer the ideal model to the literal viewer's experience, the more compelling the installation". (ibid)

By making us aware of our own decentred nature and allowing us to explore this within an installation, the work can reveal how we construct meaning in the world and potential new ways to navigate our interactions outside the installation with this knowledge.

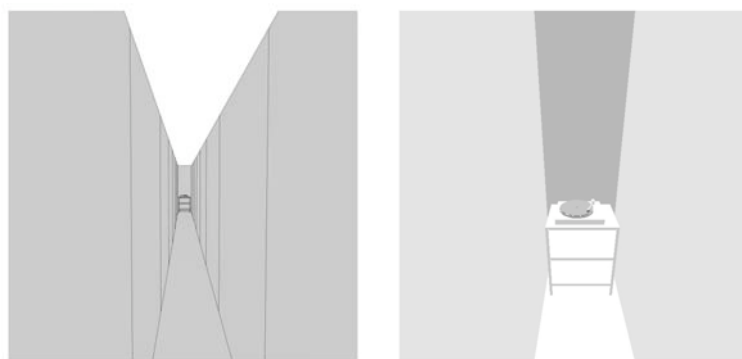


fig.s 23 and 24, CAD drawings of hypothetical model of installation.

#### *Thanks 4 Listening:* Final work - sound corridor

The convergence that Bishop speaks of is the same as that which I aim to experience and achieve in my performance practice. It is also the test that I apply to the installation I made as my next work. Earlier in this process, I conceived a hypothetical installation as a method to test some of the ideas that were emerging from my research.

This virtual installation consists of a long corridor painted white. At the far end of this is a record player playing the music of The Kiwi Animal.<sup>45</sup> As the viewer moves down the corridor towards the record player, the sound that they hear does not, as expected, get any louder. This phenomenon is not obvious and some may not notice the change, as the volume they experience will stay relatively constant. We are more likely to notice a shift in sensory data than if it should change but does not. Critical to this experience however is that the sense of some simple movement (the record) and the sweetness of the music draws them down the corridor.

The two main precedents for this work are Michael Asher's (b.1943) *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, 1969, The Whitney Museum. In a corridor in the Whitney Asher modified the existing air circulation systems in order to increase the air pressure in that corridor. As there was no significantly increased airflow or sound this phenomenon was not immediately perceptible. The delayed recognition of the audience drew attention to the air, as

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<sup>45</sup> An Auckland band from the 1980's that was a critical part of my becoming a musician and a band that occupied a territory containing elements of both art and music. Recordings: 7inch *Wartime* (1983) LP *Music Media* (1984) and LP *Mercy* (1985)

an often-overlooked 'material'<sup>46</sup>. The other precedent being American artist Bruce Nauman's various corridor works, notably the Live-Taped Video Corridor.<sup>47</sup>

Against this model I laid a series of theoretical ideas to see if the work could shed light on them. I also felt that this was a strategy to develop a visual language that could overcome some of the issues that sound artists' experiences in delivering their content. While this may seem like a reiteration of the ideas in this thesis I feel it is a chance to sum up where the discussions have led.

The ideas/questions tested by the 'hypothesis' or hypothetical work were as follows:

- i. The privileging of the visual over the aural — can the work interrogate this?
- ii. Is the maintenance of this hierarchy within the fine arts establishment and the myth of the gallery as a neutral sensory space within which to present art challenged?
- iii. How is sound understood by the visitor within a gallery? And are current curatorial strategies effectively dealing with and interrogating this?
- iv. Due to the proliferation of recording technologies, composed sound exists, for the majority of listeners, in everyday environments. Be this at work, at home or using personal stereos etc. while travelling in between. The 'whitecube' gallery functions as the emotional opposite of this, because it is inherently formal and more like the rarefied space of the concert hall or church. Is this a problem for sound art in the gallery or an opportunity to explore what the familiar means and/or the activation of the unfamiliar? Does the work trigger both these feelings?
- v. Are the Phenomenological ideas about sensory perception and the relationship between how aural and visual stimulation operate, in relation to meaning being made, activated?
- vi. Does the work destabilise the elements of sound, time and duration and what effect does this have? Could sound be used to effect a virtual collapsing of space?
- vii. What is the relationship between pop music and the literal subject in the work?

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<sup>46</sup> Michael Asher is an American conceptual artist and teacher most known for his critiques of the mechanisms of art perception.

<sup>47</sup> For a great introduction to these works see this video of the work, retrieved 29 January 2009 from <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/live-taped-video-corridor/video/1/>.

- viii. Is there a convergence of model and literal subjects that reveals the fragmented nature of the audience's subjectivity in a way that also increases their ability to operate with this new knowledge?

This model along with the texts and online explorations lead to the various ideas I have presented in this thesis. As a hypothetical model it was able to engage enough of this research to be worth bringing into the 'real' world.



The structure of the 20metre corridor consists of 14 existing 'T-section' studio walls with extra panels between (See photo, fig ). Having acted as exhibition walls at various times during their life they are a palimpsest, bearing the marks and multiple re-painting associated with this use. The provisional nature of the overall finishing and its contingency point to the processes and materials that manufacture the illusion of the neutrality of the gallery. It alludes to the space being a test space. There is also the risk that by making the structural elements slick or seductive I decrease the subject's sensitivity to the aural. It is a delicate balance that is attempted here.

It has a solid white polystyrene roof. This ensures a discrete space, narrows the visual field and enhances the audio effect of the sound travelling along the corridor to the person entering.

At the far end is a museum-style audiovisual exhibit. This consists of a white plinth for the record player and a white shelf, holding a pair of exhibition-grade white speakers. A few metres in front of the plinth, a pair of gallery lights which are shuttered to frame the record player only, hang from the ceiling. The supporting electronics, switches and computer are hidden from view.

On the domestic type turntable is a pink vinyl 12 inch LP. The record player is turning and appears to be playing, but on close inspection the needle arm is drawn across, but not lowered onto, the disc. The sound comes from a computer that is attached to the internal amp within the speakers. At ankle height, eight beams of infrared (and therefore invisible) light point, to switches on the opposite wall. When someone passing breaks the beam, the circuit switches a relay, which in turn sends a command to the computer.



fig's 25 and 26, *Thanks 4 Listening* installation details.

The phenomenon of the volume modulation as the visitor approaches the speakers is controlled by a piece of software responding to these commands. By comparing where the last switch was triggered this software lowers the volume of the sound as the person moves towards the source and raises it as they move away. These volume changes are curved and therefore smooth transitions up or down and take a measure of time to move between the two volumes.

The experience the work aims to establish, is one of re-evaluation of the experience of hearing and so using recognisable music is a useful tool as it simplifies (minimises) the aural field, therefore I decided at an early stage to not use audio that I had recorded myself. The test audience of the hypothetical model had found the *The Kiwi Animal* track, of the hypothetical model, unfamiliar and also registered no volume change that couldn't be accounted for in an unknown songs arc, thus making it more difficult to discern my modulations. So, at the point of writing, I am using familiar and highly emotive pop songs.

This type of pop music is directed in a seemingly intimate and personal way at the subject of the narrative. The intention here is to make the visitors to the corridor aware of themselves as the focus of the work. This is reinforced by the sole nature of the experience, as only one person may be in the corridor at any one time.

The physical space of the work alludes to various theoretical and experiential tropes I am hoping to activate. The intention being to create a work that can be read in a range of different ways and that most of these readings make the literal subject of the work aware of

their own listening. The corridor is, by nature, a linear means of passage and this alludes to the narrative nature of the song playing and the experience of the subject as they pass and listen through space and time.

While this work is presented within a fine arts environment and the potential audience is expected to be familiar with reading work in a relatively sophisticated manner, it could be interpreted as the less sophisticated or older processes in the mind that are appealed to in the next process I employ. The visual field, upon entering the corridor, has three elements at its far end that should entice the subject to move towards them. These are elements that I would expect to entice most living organisms. There is a simple moving object in the form of the rotating LP, a pool of brightness from the exhibition lights and a small field of colour caused by again the turning pink record. The primitive visual parts of the brain should respond to these simple stimuli, and in so doing, act as a parallel process to the way some of the information in highly emotional pop music is processed, also in early stage brain centres<sup>48</sup>; those things that make the hair stand on end or get us ready for a night out by heightening our sense of the social. While visual and aural information are also processed in the more 'evolved' centres of the brain, it is the more fundamental processes that have lead to the privileging of the visual that I am trying to appeal to here.

On reaching the source of the sound it may be clear that the visitor's senses have fed them incorrect information and that the gallery experience has in some way malfunctioned. All of this visual stimulation certainly disappears once the visitor turns at the end and heads back to the entrance, it is at this turn that the mental shift between the aural and visual is likely to occur (if it has not already). The sound is now out of sight, but front of mind. On the way in the subject can usurp the agency of the work, there are things to construct meaning out of, but once the turn to leave is made and there is only the partially lit empty corridor in front of you, the audio wrests some of that control back. The aim is for the visitor to become aware in this that they are the unique subject of the work and for the work to be engaging enough so that the whole corridor is traversed and that the sense of anticipation increases as the end is approached.

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<sup>48</sup> Those parts of the brain that we share with other animals and, in our evolutionary development, predate the higher learning centres responsible for language, advanced reasoning etc. See Daniel Leviton's 2006 text *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (Plume/Penguin).

Possibly the journey out will make what is happening clear. It is anticipated that the visitor may experience the work more than once and possibly have foreknowledge of its nature. It is important therefore that the experience of the piece is a recoverable one and that knowing what is likely to occur does not impinge upon this. The moment of phenomenological realisation must be significant enough to enact that perceptual shift, even if it is expected, as that is a prime motivation for the work.

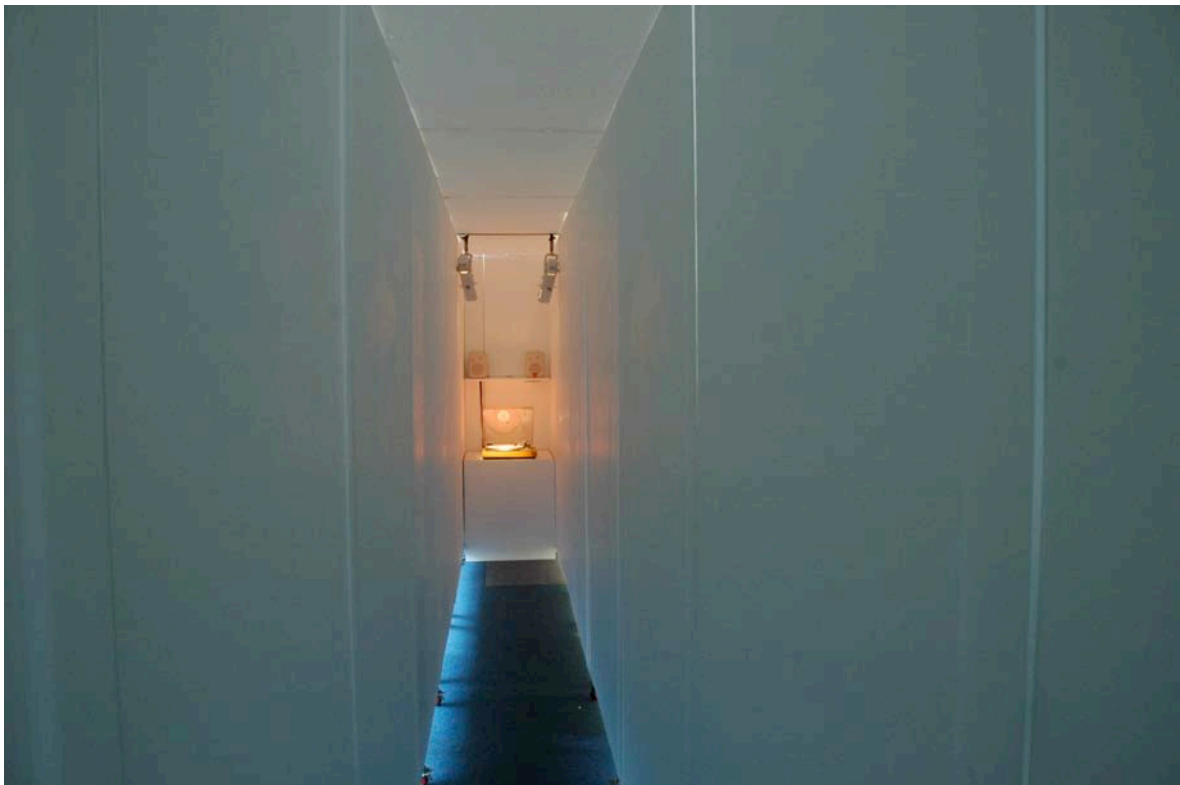


fig. 27, *Thanks 4 Listening* installation detail.



### When I Stop Leaving (I'll Be Gone):

Discussions over the position of sound art within broader art practice will be ongoing.

I am not alone in thinking there is a case to be made for the ideas and not the medium to be the benchmark for artistic validity, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, describe this position thus: "In no way do we believe in a fine-arts system; we believe in very diverse problems whose solutions are found in heterogeneous arts."<sup>49</sup>

Opening up the discourse within established art institutions will be the task of artists like myself who feel their work is better situated within this context because of the type and range of theoretical investigations already occurring there. The music establishment may develop an aligned set of dialogues and many sound practitioners may feel more willing to move in that direction, but for the moment my work locates itself within fine arts.

My explorations of the ideas of the phenomenology of sound and vision have the capability to further blur these boundaries. The *sound corridor* has fulfilled some of the promise of the hypothetical model and exists in an 'interstitial' space, between the two fields of 'visual art' and 'sound art', and informs both territories. Artwork that engages with ideas from both 'visual art' and 'sound art' does require meticulously adjusted calibrations between the aural experience and the visual aesthetic so that there is a self-reflexive synthesis between the aesthetics and narratives of the visual installation and the audio. For both the subject and the practitioner, these shifting visual and aural phenomenologies become a catalyst for meaning and experience. And now I have some new shit with which to 'improvise'.

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<sup>49</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Translated and with a foreword by Brian Massumi, (p,331) London: Continuum.

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- This is a journey into sound* Eric B and Rakim, (1987). On Paid in Full (12 inch 45rpm). Germany: Island Records.
- Bring the Noise* Public Enemy (1987.) On It Takes a Nation to Hold us Back. [LP]. Los Angeles: Def Jam.
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- Splash, Now I'm Home* Erickson, Roky. (1966). On The Psychedelic Sounds of the 13th Floor Elevators [LP] Houston, Texas: International Artists.
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- Non alignment Pact* Pere Ubu on The Moderw Dance. [LP] Cleveland: Blank Records.
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- Hey Hey Hey Hey* Little Richard (1953). On The Rare: Little Richard. [LP]. (1987. Holland: Redita Records *The Girl is mine:* Jackson, Michael. (1982). – Michael Jackson and Paul McCartney On *Thriller* [LP] New York: Epic Records.
- When I Stop Leaving (I'll Be Gone):* Robbins, Kent. On Charlie Pride's 1978 Album Burgers and Fries New York: RCA.

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Figure 21. *Trial Disposal*; *Tonebeat*, installation detail (2008) photograph Cairns.

Figure 22. *Lava floor* 2002 Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France, 2002.

Image retrieved Jan, 28, Nov 2009, from

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