Sound Art discourse in England

Dr. Kersten Glandien

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For 10 years now I have worked as a sound and radio art specialist in London. When I first arrived here and looked around in this field, I could not detect anything obvious - no sound art galleries or sound art venues to attract artists or public, no radio programs dedicated to this subject, no written articles in magazines or news papers. So I decided to dig a little deeper. After intensive searches I discovered artists working in sound art and even came across some obscure events. I made contact with them and reported about their work on German radio. I organised two radio art concert series and a symposium at the Goethe Institut London. I started to teach the subject at British and American universities. I collaborated with an independent English radio station. I wrote a theoretical essay on the international situation of radio art for an English academic publication and invited German radio art producers and sound artists to Britain to talk about their work. I also had my brushes with the BBC - to little effect. Over the last 10 years the situation of radio and sound art changed in this country. There are now things to talk about.
So it was with pleasure I accepted this invitation to address this plenary meeting and give you an outsider's view on the current state of radio- and sound art in England.

Reviewing the situation of sound art and radio art in Britain at this time, one thing becomes apparent: much as the situation has changed – radio- and sound art still have one important thing in common - both exist without a discourse.
What does this mean? A discourse provides a connection between people working in the same field. It gives an audience the possibility to access a work. It develops tools to talk about both the work - and what is so vital in this field - about its cultural context. A discourse provides historical references and finally, allows awareness and interest to grow and audiences to develop. In Britain this discourse does not exist and this severely effects the art itself.

Radio- and sound art in Britain is an activity of outsiders.

Coming from different trades, the creators of sound art work at the margins of their fields - be it music, performance or the visual arts, often producing alone in studios and bedrooms. Musicians and improvisers like Peter Cusack incorporate their sound pieces into musical performances often hosted and supported by organisations such as the *London Musicians' Collective* (LMC). Composers of the electroacoustic trade, like Evelyn Ficarra, Mario Verandi or Katherine Norman, play their sound pieces acousmatically in concerts linked to or set up by the *Sonic Arts Network*, or collaborate with dancers or video and filmmakers. Other composers such as John Wynne move outside all scenes and rely on CDs and events abroad to make their work known. Performance artists such as Hayley Newman, or audio artists like Bill Furlong present their sound works in clubs or gallery settings. Visual artists such as Darrel Viner and Max Eastley incorporate sound into their site specific installations and sculptures. Other sound artist such as Robin Rimbaud (aka Scanner) and Matt Rogalsky move in the club and lap top world. All these people are to a great extent outsiders in their own fields and also know very little of and about each other - unconnected and often unappreciated.

Recognising these outsider works under a sound art perspective, and looking at what they have in common despite their different starting points, requires a different approach, and this in turn demands a discourse.

The rare sound- and radio art events made a point of bringing works from different fields together, as for instance, in the *Sound Works Exchanges* at the London Goethe Institut in 1994 and 1996.

Britains first experimental radio station - *Hearing is Believing* (curated by Anna Douglas) went on air in 1995 and gathered activities from different realms for broadcasting.

The *Engaged - Radio Issue* (1998) edited by Martin Spinelli and Rachel Steward provided an insight into British as well as international radio art, as did the two radio art series at the London Goethe Institut (1997 and 1998). Annexed to these series was a symposium, at which theoretical and practical issues of radio art were discussed.

The Restricted Service Licence station of the LMC, *Resonance FM*, made a strong case for experimental sound works in 1998. It encouraged and commissioned radio art productions, invited radio artists and presenters from abroad, hosted discussions on sound- and radio art and realised a live telecommunication project

with Canada. *Resonance FM* was on air for just over a month and had a broadcasting range of only three miles. However, it was simultaneously streamed over the Internet.

The organisation *Art Angel* was for a long time the only one to set up extensive sound art events and to invite exponents of the field from abroad - for instance, they made the *HG*-Installation at the London Clink by Hans Peter Kuhn and Robert Wilson possible.

The BBC set up the mini-series *Between the Ears*, which was described by one of their producers as an artistic outlet for BBC and BBC attached producers (imaginative features) and very occasionally brought in outside sound artists (Tacita Dean).

Since 1999 *The UK & Ireland Soundscape Community* has been expanding its activities in the field of environmental sound.

With the breaking of the new millennium Britain finally experienced its first sound art exhibitions: *Sonic Boom*, at the Hayward Gallery London and *Audible Light* at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford.

In the last years sound- and radio art finally became an issue. But with its patchy and fragmented existence, people are still not meeting it on its own terms.

<u>What is missing is a discourse.</u>

Without a discourse we don't know what to make of the sound pieces we encounter.

We might not even recognise them - they might go unnoticed, like the truly wonderful Sound art work *8X3* by sculptor Derrell Viner installed at Dilston Grove 2 years ago, which passed without making a ripple in the British art world - or the *Colourscape Music Festival* in London this summer.

Sound art in occasional guest appearances, sneaked into survey exhibitions of foreign art - such as the recent exhibition of contemporary Japanese art at the Hayward Gallery, or of young American art at the Barbican centre - often goes unnoticed. Art critics reviewing such shows are completely at a loss when coming across such works in a gallery setting. So it simply gets no mention. Lost for words are not only the critics, but also the presenters. When a short excerpt of Peter Cusack' s soundscape *Your Favourite London Sounds* was presented in the arts program *Front Row* on BBC Radio 4, the presenter clearly had no language in

which to talk about it. He could not relate it to anything of its kind, or to the concept of soundscape for that matter.

Without a discourse we not only do not know how to *talk* about sound art, but also don't know how to *listen* to it. Listening to such conceptual sound pieces as Matt Rogalsky's *Harvesting the gaps between the words*, we might wonder what is so interesting about it.

In other words, without a discourse there is no adequate presentation of the work or adequate critique. We won't be able to meet these pieces on their own terms. Like Peter Cusack' s soundscape work being met simply on a *subject* level: presented in programmes about the sights of London. Or sound pieces are presented as *exotica* - a look into an unknown world that does not reveal itself to us. So pieces get treated as oddities. This kind of misconception we find quite frequently.

The consequence of a lack of discourse is that great opportunities such as the sound art exhibition *Sonic Boom* at the London Hayward Gallery last year are missed. By being unaware of the developments and intrinsic rules of sound art on a curatorial level, a rather narrow musically based and complacent approach was taken, which largely ignored the international achievements in the field. Unfortunately the lack of a discourse combined with a widespread celebrity pop-attitude in the British art domain allowed the self-created hype around that exhibition to prevail and to penetrate the public consciousness. Since without discourse we can't tell good from bad, all works enter a vast pool of *factuality* without value. If there is no discourse we not only can't tell quality and relevance from their opposites, we can't tell - full stop. What happened at the South Bank left many sound artists and visitors quite frustrated, which unleashed a harsh critique of this exhibition from the participants of the *School of Sound* conference this year in Glasgow.

If sound art or radio art gets any discursive attention in Britain, such as the article in *The Guardian* three weeks ago, it often has a quite ignorant and parochial feel to it. And let me tell you, I am quite familiar with such an island mentality having lived behind the iron curtain for most of my life.

If the mediators of Sound and Radio art, the organisers, producers, presenters, curators, critics and lecturers are not getting on the case, art itself will suffer.

And one footnote about education: Despite an increasing interest in sound art amongst young artists trained in this country, sound- and radio art are not taught in

British art colleges as a special subject. We have to be aware of the fact that, if there is no discourse, the phenomenon does not exist. Discourse is critical.
Faced with this discursive vacuum in their own country, British radio- and sound artists sought a discourse elsewhere. From an outsider position in their own country they went outside - to the continent. They joined the international discourse of sound art. They approached radio stations abroad with their work, they set up their sound installations overseas. They gained recognition abroad.

So where does radio and especially public radio come into it?
Radio is in a position to help facilitate a discourse. New developments in arts and culture do not happen automatically. Very often it takes a long time for new things to get accepted. But sound- and radio art are by no means new phenomena. They both go back to the beginning of the 20th century. As an exclusively acousmatic media radio not only proposed a new way of presenting music and speech - out of thin air, but suggested a combination of music, sound, text and noise. It helped to emancipate sound and to foster an interest in it. Radio helped to develop a *culture of listening* that could trust sound - not to speak over it, because one is afraid of being boring, or playing just short excerpts, because one thinks it might not match our short attention span. Radio helped to sharpen our listening, to midwife a new form of perception.

When, a few decades ago, artists, musicians, sound creators and radio producers discovered the radio again for their sound productions, radio gained a new lease of life - as an old but still experimental medium. And remember, Britain had its share in innovative sound work - as created by the *Radiophonic Workshop* and by sound artists such as Max Eastley and Hugh Davies in the 70s, or even earlier with Ewan MacColl and Charles Parker's *Radio Ballads* (1957-1964). This all lay dormant for a while and now we in Britain seem to be reluctant to *challenge* and to *develop* a public. We fall back time and again on the argument that radio must provide a public "service ", meaning it should ”follow listener demands”. But in fact, serving the public well also means introducing it to new things and providing a discourse about it. Otherwise the public loses out and we are not only not serving, but seriously depriving it. We all wonder about the future of public radio in our rapidly changing media world, so why not develop its most characteristic and irreplaceable aspects: its sound aesthetic, acousmatic side, for instance. Radio art could play a

vital role here as it aspires *"to realise the possibility intrinsic to the medium"*. I would therefore like to claim in the words of Arnold Schönberg: *"the right of a minority in the face of this entertainment delirium. One must be able to distribute the necessary things too, not only the superfluous ones."* This could be an aspect of the future of public radio.

- Peter Cusack: *Your Favourite London Sounds*, 1998 -2001

This soundscape was realised in collaboration with *Resonance FM* and the ORF. This radio station will take part in the *Access Radio Pilot Project*. The English Radio Authority granted the LMC a Pilot Project Licence for 2002. The organisers of *Resonance FM* intend to put Radio and Sound Art right at the centre of their broadcast activities.

- Matt Rogalsky: *Harvesting the gaps between the words,* 2001
- John Wynne: *Upcountry*, 1999