

Art History and Sound

Workshop series *The Listening Art Historian*



Reproducing Sound - Reinventing Image

Thursday 14 March (10.00 – 12.00)

Research Forum South Room, The Courtauld Institute of Art, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 0RN

ABSTRACTS

Brett Brehm (Northwestern University, USA): *Listening to the Nineteenth-century City*

In 1857 Jean-Georges Kastner, a French composer and ethnographer of urban sound, suggested that the originality of a city's voice is to be found within that city's noise, its "sonorous chaos", as he describes it. This claim, from Kastner's *Les Voix de Paris*, a study of street cries in Paris and other cities, prefigures more recent scholarly investigations into the concept of a 'soundscape,' a term employed by art/architectural historians, scholars of literature, and contemporary sound artists alike. This paper examines how the sounds of a city, and of modernity more broadly, can be uncovered in certain works of visual art and literary texts of the nineteenth-century. It begins with a critique of some of the key terminology and theory for this kind of work, concepts of the acoustic, the soundscape, and the question of "sound as such", an issue Jonathan Sterne has highlighted in his recent survey of "sound studies" scholarship. Whereas much of the scholarship on changes to urban life in the nineteenth-century attends to singular shifts in the visual field and the emergent spectacle of modernity, the claim will be made for equally important changes in the aural field, ones that demand different ways of looking and reading. Drawing from examples in poetry (Baudelaire and Charles Cros in particular) and early urban ethnography, concepts of an aural dimension in photography will be addressed, as in Nadar's imagining of an "acoustic daguerreotype" as a means to "see noise." Following the lead of scholars who have, adapting from Benjamin's essay on Atget and photography, theorized an "acoustic unconscious" as counterpart for Benjamin's "optical unconscious," it will be suggested how Atget's photographs might provide us with a means of seeing the acoustics of Paris at the turn of the century.

Brett Brehm is currently working on his doctorate in comparative literature at Northwestern University. His research interests center on critical theory, the relations between the arts, representations of the built environment in nineteenth-century literature and art, theories of urban space and sound. In his dissertation, he is looking into theories and representations of the acoustic, soundscapes of modernity, with a focus on urban consciousness and on media in nineteenth-century literature and art.

Adeena Mey (University of Lausanne and ECAL/University of Art and Design Lausanne, CH): *Listening and Looking beside. On the 'Parasonic' and the 'Paracinematic'*

The work of the visual artist Christian Marclay draws from music and sonic culture and is known for its mixed-media work, including assemblages of records' covers, deformed music instruments, videos and installations. With or without the actual manifestation of sound, he creates back and forth trajectories between the sonic world becoming mute and the auralised visual sphere. The cultural historian Steven Connor has described the set of relationships between the aural and the visual created by Marclay as operating in the "domain of the parasonic", yet without elaborating further on this notion. However, its usefulness to think about artworks that participate in both the visual and sonic spheres, with none of the latter overriding them – and which thus raise questions about the very corpus to which they belong: that of art history and visual culture and/or sound studies – might be appreciated by being brought close to another hybrid category: paracinema. The latter, first coined by experimental filmmaker and performer Ken Jacobs in the 1970's and recently revived by the film scholar Jonathan Walley "identifies an array of phenomena that are considered 'cinematic' but that are not embodied in the materials of film as traditionally defined" (Walley) and explore a space at the intersection of artist's film, performance and conceptual art. Hence, broadly, both the parasonic and the paracinematic are analogous in their formulation and both assert an escape from their conventional material, and coextensively, from the very categories by which scholars apprehend them. Drawing on Marclay's and the paracinematic work of Anthony McCall, this paper will discuss epistemic possibilities and insufficiencies in art history and associated disciplines as they might appear when analysing such practices that posit themselves outside of or beside (para-) traditional mediums. Finally, by addressing the intersections and analogies of sound and visuality through the parasonic and the paracinematic, this paper will also discuss the fashioning of academic corpuses and their legibility in relation to disciplinary formations and their methodologies.

*Adeena Mey is a Swiss Science Foundation researcher on the project "Swiss Film Experiments" based at the Zurich University of the Arts and the University of Lausanne, where he is a PhD candidate, and a research fellow at ECAL/Lausanne University of Art and Design. He graduated in Aural and Visual Cultures from Goldsmiths College and is currently writing a thesis on the history and theory of exhibitions of experimental cinema in the 1970's, crossing history of art, film and curating. Recent publications include a co-edited volume of the films studies journal *Décadrages on expanded cinema* (forthcoming). He also works as an independent critic and curator.*

Andrew Cappetta (City University of New York, USA): *Attitude not Aptitude: Behaviorist Art Pedagogy and Underground Music in Britain*

Major reforms in British art education in the postwar years, including Basic Design of the late 1950s, the Coldstream Report of 1960, and later innovations by individual artist-educators (such as Roy Ascott, Rita Donagh, Jeff Nuttall) focused on teaching students to develop an artistic *attitude* (mindset, lifestyle, behavior) over an artistic *aptitude* (skill). Inspired by the Bauhaus, these reforms centered on one question: how can art and industry be resolved? An artistic *attitude* could negotiate the seemingly impermeable boundary between the avant-garde and mass culture, since the principles of art could be applied to any experience or activity. In *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, Bernard Gendron defines artistic behaviour as "secondary aesthetic practice". Gendron argues that the cafe, the artistic cabaret, the jazz club and the rock concert were key sites for the development of "secondary aesthetic practice" and the Modern notion of the artist. In all of these sites of secondary aesthetic practice, including the art school, one key connection emerges – the medium of music – which seems to provide the bridge between art and life, or more specifically between avant-garde artistic practices and mass culture.

But *how* is the medium of music able to negotiate this highly policed boundary between the avant-garde and popular culture? Why did it become the medium towards which art students in the 1960s gravitated? To answer these questions, this paper will trace several sites, music groups and artists that developed from the disciplinary collapse of behaviorist art pedagogy. These include London's UFO Club where experimental

pop groups like Pink Floyd and AMM performed; Brian Eno who formed Roxy Music in 1971; Genesis P-Orridge, member of performance collective COUM Transmissions and the band Throbbing Gristle; and the proto-industrial duo Cabaret Voltaire. In all of these examples, experiences with experimental, behaviorist forms of art pedagogy led students to pursue music over another primarily visual medium.

Andrew Cappetta is a doctoral candidate in the department of Art History at The Graduate Center, CUNY, studying 20th century and contemporary art with focus on intersections between sound and visual art. His dissertation, "Pop/Art: The Birth of Underground Music and the British Art School, 1960-1980," connects the development of underground music cultures to pedagogical reforms in the British art school. He teaches introductory and specialised courses in art history at Parsons the New School for Design and the Museum of Modern Art. His writing about art and music has appeared in The Brooklyn Rail, Postmodern Culture (forthcoming), and Bomblog.

Lauren Applebaum (University of Illinois, USA): *Visualising Radio: Teague's Nocturne (1934) and the Façade of Futurity*

This paper focuses on the conjunction of the aural and visual senses in communication technology of the 1930s, seen specifically in a radio produced by American architect/industrial designer Walter Dorwin Teague (1883-1960). Commonly associated with his work restyling Kodak cameras, streamlining Texaco gas stations, and designing Boeing aircraft interiors, Teague is considered the progenitor of the field of industrial design. His work from this period was meant to modernize and visually overhaul utilitarian objects into productive tools for visual merchandising during economic depression. However, I will argue against this traditional narrative of the futurity of streamlining through an investigation of the multisensory.

Teague's Nocturne radio was released by the Sparton Corporation in 1936, a time when soap operas, comedies, and FDR's fireside chats filled the airwaves. Instead of producing another cumbersome wooden console, Teague reconfigured the radio as a gigantic circular plane (46 inches/117 centimeters) with a lulling blue-mirrored surface, incorporating an unusual configuration of the visual into a distinctly aural device. In addition to its acoustic title, "Nocturne," there is a tension between the ocular and aural modes of interaction in this radio, framing my investigation about the way in which this evocation of multisensory engagements speaks to both the limits of this particular object as an ostensibly futuristic device, as well as the fundamental conditions of radio. While representing the forefront of modern design, this radio's façade actually masks its own mechanics and, by extension, the social function of radio as a collectivizing medium, complicating the ideals of individuality it outwardly seems to promote.

Invested in its visual appeal, the Nocturne goes so far as to echo the form of a human eye on a magnified scale. This articulation of the viewing subject suits the ideal of radio as a medium that gathers bodies around the sound it produces, but ultimately disrupts this cozy coming-together in harmony, dismantling the viewer/listener through its sensorial split.

Lauren Applebaum is a PhD candidate in Art History at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign studying American art and material culture from the eighteenth century to 1970. Her dissertation project explores visual and material culture as a site for imagining long-distance communication from the Centennial Exposition to the World of Tomorrow (1876-1939). It investigates the shared concerns and tensions between advancements in technical media and artistic production, framing these developments not as a series of seamless transitions, but as a complicated and awkward matrix of intermediality. Her current research interests deal with issues of the multisensory, specifically through the tension between visual and aural modes of interaction.