

January 9, 2000

## **It's Sound, It's Art, and Some Call It Music**

By KYLE GANN

WHEN the performance art genre appeared in the 1970's, the playwright and novelist William Hogeland commented cynically, "We already have a performance art: it's called 'theater.'" One could similarly dismiss the term "sound art" as just a vaguely glorified name for weird music. And yet "sound art" has served as a useful historical euphemism, a safe harbor for works too outre for the ever-conservative classical music world.

Now the Whitney Museum, as part of its "American Century" exhibition, has put together a sound art exhibition of recordings, running Tuesday through next Sunday. Curated by Stephen Vitiello, the show is titled "I Am Sitting in a Room: Sound Works by American Artists 1950-2000," named in part for one of the most accessible electronic music works ever made.

The work in question is a 1971 audio tape piece by Alvin Lucier consisting of the composer reading a text that begins: "I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice, and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech . . ." Like a mantra, those sentences return again and again, gradually blurring with each repetition until all you hear is a potently ringing wash of sound that is, actually, the room being played like a musical instrument.

Popular even among people who have no other interest in experimental music (Mimi Johnson, who produced the recording, calls it "Alvin's 'Bolero'"), "I Am Sitting in a Room" is a classic of sound art if anything is. The term seems to connote the activity of working directly in sound, without musical notation or interpretive musicians as intermediaries. Thus one category of sound art is audio works made by people with no training in music, such as visual artists; the exhibition includes sound works by the sculptor Bruce Nauman and the conceptual artist Vito Acconci, whose creepily sexual text recordings deserve more notice from musicians anyway. There are also works by superbly skilled musicians but made outside traditional musical processes: Steve Reich's pioneering phase-shifting piece "Come Out" will be familiar to many listeners, but fewer will have heard Terry Riley's hypnotic "Mescaline Mix," dating from 1961, which is the very first tape-loop piece and arguably the first minimalist piece as well.

Most sound art, then, tends to be electronic, though some is vocal- or text-oriented. In this latter category fall most of the works by Fluxus, the loose-knit group of conceptual artists and composers gathered under that surreal umbrella in the 1960's by George Maciunas. Next Sunday's program in particular is dotted with Fluxus figures like Alison Knowles, Philip Corner, George Brecht and Dick Higgins, whose "Danger

Music No. 17" consists of himself screaming as loud and long as possible. Since 1991 Mr. Vitiello has worked as an assistant to Nam June Paik, a former Fluxus composer who evolved into video work, and his familiarity with the crazy Fluxus repertory is formidable.

Other sound art works are more conventional in their sound sources but are simply meant to be heard in recorded rather than live format. One such included in the exhibition is an hourlong tape by the eccentric pianist Glenn Gould called "The Idea of North," a radio piece of oral history based on recorded interviews about Canadian identity, which Gould scored as a musical work for radio. Another is a tongue-in-cheek, jazz-accompanied spiel by the 1950's radio personality Ken Nordine, a guided visit to a museum of sounds.

More radical in this context is the inclusion of a series of field recordings by Bob Bielecki and Connie Kieltykya, featuring ambient aural phenomena like radios and dogs heard over waves at a lake. Honoring Mr. Bielecki is a real coup for the exhibition, for as one of New York's most creative recording engineers, he was involved in about a third of the works in the show. "When I met La Monte Young," Mr. Vitiello explains, "I mentioned that he and I shared the same sound person, Bob Bielecki. Young grabbed me and said, 'You realize Bob is a genius.' "

What one will not hear at the Whitney are intricately-determined works considered classics of that forbiddingly intellectual genre "electronic music," like Milton Babbitt's "Philomel," Morton Subotnick's "Silver Apples of the Moon" or even the early pioneering tape works of Otto Luening. Instead, we have a rare, 86-minute spoken text recording of John Cage; Laurie Anderson's early works from the 1970's; a 1975 guitar-feedback piece called "Metal Machine Music" by Lou Reed, impressive in its rich textures, and a new work by the quintessentially postmodern vinyl collagist DJ Spooky. The show will also include recordings of a few peculiar anomalies of relatively conventional performed music, like a movement from Glenn Branca's Symphony No. 1 for electric guitars, an excerpt from Meredith Monk's solo-voice performance piece "Our Lady of Late" and even Philip Glass's entire, 206-minute "Music in 12 Parts," played by his ensemble.

In a word, and perhaps appropriately for the Whitney Museum, the "I Am Sitting in a Room" exhibition promises to be a look at late-20th-century music from the visual-art point of view. Nothing wrong with that -- it is certainly a rich and interesting point of view, and a refreshing change from the new-music world's frequently solipsistic view of itself. Like most of the lay public, practitioners of the visual arts don't care much about the technical analysis of music, but they are more receptive than most musicians to imagination and unconventionality.

Mr. Vitiello himself is a guitarist and sampler composer who has performed with Pauline Oliveros and the cellist Marie Frances Uitti, but until recent years most of his work consisted of sound scores for film and video. He excluded most studio-made tape works because, he says, "I wanted pieces that had more to do with performance than composition, works made to be performed. A lot of it is people moving away from the written score."

One refreshing aspect of the sound program is that, except for a slight bulge in the Fluxus area, it isn't skewed toward any particular part of its 50-year domain (though Mr. Vitiello admits a paucity of works from the 1950's, a particularly barren decade for music). Younger composers are generously mixed in among the classics, including the San Francisco performance artist Pamela Z, the electronic performer

Laetitia Sonami and Nic Collins, a Lucier protege now working in Chicago but formerly active in New York's downtown scene. New Yorkers may want to note the natural-sound collage by Jim O'Rourke, who is getting credit lately for rejuvenating Chicago's improvisation and electronic scenes.

THE program offers almost 100 recordings -- some rare, some commercially available, some not heard publicly for decades -- of works by American composers made between 1952 and 1999. The recordings will run in the Kaufman Astoria Studio Film and Video Gallery, on the Whitney's second floor, every day from noon to 5:30 p.m., and to 7:30 p.m. on Thursday. For those who might balk at spending five hours a day listening to recordings, the gallery is being rearranged to make it easy for listeners to come and go during the five-and-a-half-hour programs without disturbing other audience members. Lights will be kept low, chairs will be fewer and less densely spaced than for video screenings. Mr. Vitiello opted against including video/ music or film/music works, however, because of a feeling that, in our highly visual culture, we already pay too little attention to sound for its own sake.

Still, there will be a couple of performance components, one during Annea Lockwood's "Sound Map of the Hudson River," a two-hour recording of rushing water collaged from several points along the Hudson; plus a possible presentation by Maryanne Amacher, one of the most original sound-installation composers, who is rarely heard because her works take up entire buildings. Downtown, the Knitting Factory will present a festival related to the exhibition, the New York Festival of Electronic Composers and Improvisers, from Jan. 18 to 23. The festival opens with some of the same people featured in the Whitney exhibition -- Pauline Oliveros, Tony Conrad, plus the excluded Mr. Subotnick -- before veering into the usual free improvisation and noise bands: Elliott Sharp's Tectonics, Suicide, Pan Sonic, DJ Food and so on.

When listeners rebelled in the 1920's against calling Edgard Varese's compositions "music," he offered the term "organized sound" instead. "Sound art" has similarly given radical composers room to breathe; some granting organizations, like the Guggenheim Foundation, have created a sound art category for composers not conservative enough to win music prizes. But as digital technology continues to invade all aspects of music making, the line between "music" and "sound art" is already blurring, and unlikely to hold: the Knitting Factory's mixed line-up suggests as much. While the Whitney's "I Am Sitting in a Room" exhibition won't be everyone's idea of what late-20th-century music was about, it is appropriate to open the 21st century with a creatively revisionist view of its predecessor; soon, all new music may be sound art. Bypassing the moribund high-modernist tradition, the Whitney is offering a view of music not only likely to be engagingly controversial, but also full of possibilities for 21st-century response.

Photo: Charlotte Moorman performing John Cage's composition "26' 1.1499" on Nam June Paik in October 1965. (Peter Moore/(c) Estate of Peter Moore/VAGA, NY.) (pg. 41); The composer Alvin Lucier at a Manhattan performance in 1997. (Chris Lee) (pg. 42)