

1-1-2012

All night silence: Live experimental sound in New Zealand public art galleries

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Recommended Citation

Ballard, Su: All night silence: Live experimental sound in New Zealand public art galleries 2012, 54-59.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/creartspapers/423>

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All night silence:

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Su Ballard

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There is no music in New Zealand.¹

In Dunedin, people blunder in and out, changing their seats and holding audible conversations with one another at the very moment when there should be a dead silence.²

Since the late 19th century there have been issues with the presentation and reception of sound and music in New Zealand public art galleries. During the first New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition in 1889-1890 there were numerous musical events designed to prove New Zealand's position culturally and socially on the world stage. Audience members would spend the day traipsing around the enormous pavilions of the exhibition pausing to engage in a performance before blundering out to the next event. This mobile audience knew something about the relationship between music and art. Art was silent, static and contained within the walls of the gallery, and music was not. Music was dynamic, and formed part of a public programme which

a listener could choose to attend for a specified duration.

The question of exactly how to listen to music in galleries was not only troubling audiences in the colonies. In Europe early 20th century audiences were also learning new ways to listen. On 8 March 1920 a group of musicians known as the *Nouveaux jeunes* performed part two of Eric Satie's *Musique d'ameublement* in the Galerie Barbazanges in Faubourg St-Honoré, Paris. Designed to complement an exhibition of children's drawings, Satie's 'furnishing music' was written for a mobile audience

1. Alfred Fitchett (Anglican Dean of Dunedin), 'Musicians and Musical Taste in Australasia' *Australasian Review of Reviews* (Australasian edition), 7, 7 (July, 1895), pp.29-36. This and the following references are drawn from an essay by David Murray 'Fitchett's Fallacy and Music at the New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition, Dunedin, 1889-1890' *New Zealand Journal of History*, 42, 1 (2008): 42-59.
2. Louisa Baker *Otago Witness*, 9 January 1890, p.41. cited in Murray, 47.



Adam Willetts' 'solarbot' at work in The Physics Room as part of the 'Cinema of Pure Means' exhibition. (Photo: Mark Gore)

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All night silence

perhaps just a little like those wearing 'rude Reeftonian boots' on the West Coast of New Zealand.³ Satie's muzak was intended to fill the space enabling conversation and conviviality; as comfortable and invisible as the furniture in the gallery. Audiences though, never behave, and the furniture music was deemed (by Satie) a monumental failure. The audience remained still and silent, listening. Satie's performative and sonic incursion into the gallery did not shift the ground of the gallery from an image dominated cultural space, where audiences look, watch and despite the noise, remain silent themselves. Live music remained a separate experience to that of visual art, and one to which the audience behaved according to predetermined rules. Nearly 100 years later Satie's furniture music has become a standard object for elevators and telecommunication holding patterns, moments where (ironically perhaps) the audience is fully immobilised and trapped in nonspace. However, Satie's approach to live sound in the gallery did introduce two central experiences to experimental practice that continue to resonate today. Satie not only demonstrated that music was a material and cultural form with its own forces and behaviours, but that music and sound in the gallery are always part of a process of negotiation, whether with an audience or the other artworks and expectations that surround them.

Live experimental sound in New Zealand galleries has a history as long as the public galleries themselves. Significantly, like the examples above, this tradition continues to sit outside the main halls of contemporary art. Sound and music remain a part of carefully curated and defined public programmes or one-off special events organised by groups from outside the gallery, and only occasionally mark small incursions in the dominating visual silence of the gallery. Despite this, the lists of performers (both national and international) that have passed through New Zealand's public galleries are not just impressive, they form an acclaimed archaeology of experimental music and



sound. And, in the past ten years there has been a great friendship between the experimental sound community and the

3. Murray cites music reviewer Judith May's frustration at the accompaniment of 'rude Reeftonian boots' to an 1896 concert on the West Coast by local pianist Gertrude Cadzow of Chopin's *Valse in A flat*.

public programmes of a number of key art institutions in New Zealand (including in particular the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Christchurch Art Gallery, The Physics Room, Adam Art Gallery, Artspace, Auckland Art Gallery, and St Paul Street Gallery).

For listeners the experience of live music in public programmes is predominately one of the museum at night. When much of the gallery is blocked off

by soft velvet bollards, and when listening to silence becomes itself 'aesthetic' rather than an un-remarked feature of the normalising structures of a white cube, different sensations are activated. As audiences for sound our experiences enable a new form of conviviality within the enduring sombre halls of the white cube. Satie's efforts have not gone to waste, but the nocturnal occupations of performance



The 'Bunker' at Christchurch Art Gallery. This access point to the underground carpark was the site of the 'Subsonic' sound series. (Photo: Peter Vangioni)

mean that the cultural forms of sound and image remain discrete and a number of questions remain as to the role and ongoing positioning of live experimental sound in the gallery.

In the past few years at least, the ongoing closeness between live music and public programmes may simply be because of the convenience for programming that the facilitation of groups like *Altmusic* offer touring spaces. Artspace Auckland, The Physics Room in Christchurch and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery are all responsive to their respective communities, including numerous sound and audio performances as part of their public programmes. Many of these events occur 'after hours' and as a result sound and music remain simultaneously outside of the gallery, yet embedded within it. Acoustic space operates quite differently to visual space, and galleries have embraced the certain constructions required for listening by keeping the two apart. Should galleries be allowed to get a little noisy during the day? In 2009 Christchurch Art Gallery introduced a sound art programme curated by Peter Vangioni. *Subsonic: sound art in the bunker*

included work by Marco Fusinato, Adam Willetts, Bruce Russell, Nathan Thompson, Greg Malcolm, and Peter Stapleton. But the series is still peripheral to the gallery itself. Prior to the earthquake, *Subsonic* was a transitory experience in the stairwell between the gallery forecourt and the carpark.

Wellington's Adam Art Gallery are the only public gallery space to consciously relocate sound to the centre of both its programme and research agenda, with the unique and substantial series of projects curated by Tina Barton and Laura Preston under the umbrella *Soundcheck* from 2007 to 2011. Although the series has been developed within the Adam Art Gallery programme with performances taking advantage of the gallery at the time of exhibition changeovers, it has also included commissioned works that focus on discrete aspects within the field of sound. In this approach to sonic media the Adam Art Gallery have highlighted sound as a medium that moves in-between; in-between other (presumably visual) shows, but also in-between the listener and the space of the gallery. The short programmes

encompassed within *Soundcheck* have also enabled both established and emergent sound artists to explore the possibilities of short and more sustained engagements with a gallery programme.

In addition some attempts have been made to marry the sonic and visual with film and video, such as the *SoundTracks* project run by the New Zealand Film Archive in Wellington. Often though, one media becomes background to the other. This is despite the fact that some of these projects, like Rachel Shearer's *Hold Still*, developed from *SoundTracks* into gallery installations in their own right.

The formation of sound through vibration and resonance makes us keenly aware that sound invades space rather than simply occupies it. It can quickly become object. This was evidenced for many by the early performance of the Sandoz Lab Technicians with Bruce Russell in 2000 at the Robert McDougall Gallery, where dust and plaster began falling from the ceiling in response to the sonic vibrations. Or more recently, when the pop-psych tunes of Sean Kerr shifted from utopian forms of interactive objects into a sickeningly sweet live performance.

No gallery is really a white cube, most have strange fractured zones made of foyers and interim areas that can be stunningly activated with sound. Beginning in 1999 and using fingers coated in rosin which stroke lengths of thin piano wire fastened to the interior walls of the building, Alastair Galbraith and Matt De Gennaro have transformed galleries throughout New Zealand into a series of hollowed out musical instruments that perform the resonant frequencies of the space and the people within it. Galbraith's ongoing performances, like those by Omit, or *Slave Pianos*; shift the dynamic spaces of the audience and performer, and along the way the space accumulates a resonant history that echoes the visual traces of other media.

This essay has mentioned the public galleries in New Zealand which consistently support sound art through their public

programmes. Another essay would address the installation of specific sound works, like Phil Dadson's *Polar Projects* or Clinton Watkins' immersive synaesthetic sonic video installations. We all know it's a false distinction between media to discuss sound without image, yet the division remains. Works like Adam Willetts' guitars equipped with robot servants – themselves endowed with full agency through their ability to make music with the sun – bring live performance out of its nocturnal habitations. Willetts presents the live performer transformed into the furniture itself: Satie's dream come true.

As yet there are as few visual incursions into the public programmes of public art galleries as there are sonic incursions into their permanent collections. What we are not yet seeing is the full integration of experimental sound practice into the dispersed and de-centralised sonic environment that is the gallery space. At its most basic live sound in galleries is an ambient feel-good addendum to a public programme. It enables a sense of inclusivity, and community, but one that does not necessarily have to be listened to by everyone. At its best, experimental sound in public gallery spaces enables moments like Bruce Russell's prophetic earthquake music at The Physics Room in December 2010, or Alastair Galbraith's wire music; both activate the gallery, and leave listeners with profound experiences of all night silence.