

ELECTRO SCENE:

a cartography of the links between images and sounds in the contemporary electronic scene

a book edited by roberto paci dalò & enrico pitozzi
publication, Italy: 2011

INTERVIEW CHAPTER WITH RICHARD CHARTIER

Untitled (angle.1) (2009) realised in collaboration with the visual artist Linn Meyers dissipates a well-known misunderstanding, that brought on by the argument about the quality and nature of the relationship between sound and image. In areas such as those of sound installation and video arts, the misunderstanding arises when the artist thinks he can create an artwork by simply laying together images and sounds. Your work is a very interesting example of an integration and resonance between image and sound. Could you speak about this aspect of the problem?

Contemporary art installation and performance tends to privilege the visual. In many ways, what we see determines what we hear, in these contexts. Linn Meyers and I had extensively discussed this issue—we didn't want to just do "a soundtrack to a drawing."

I see so much of this type of "let's add sound because we can" mentality to contemporary art work. That approach very much bothers me because it feels lazy and lacking intention.

Instead, we wanted to infuse the space with a sound that moved like the lines in her drawings, to create a unified space where optical and sonic patterns would intersect in organic ways. Our original concept was to create a raised platform that extended to each edge of the gallery space. Linn's drawing would cover the surface of the platform, and the tones of my work would emanate from below, with high frequency tones also issuing from around the edges. Linn's drawings, much like sound, emanates from certain "activity" points and dissipates as the lines move away from these origins. The key was for the platform float, visually and acoustically, and yet still be anchored.

Budget issues forced us to re-conceptualize, however, so we looked for new formats. The front gallery space was bisected by a gentle 40-foot, custom-built horizontal arc, which created very interesting acoustic effects, as well as optical plays on the senses. The effects were due to the general nature of an arc with sound and the very fact that the viewers entire field of vision was engulfed in these complex rippling lines.

So I posed the question: What if this kind of space could be folded, allowing the viewer/listener to walk into it?

Linn and I decided upon chevron, fifteen feet deep and eight feet tall, which would act as a sound chamber and drawing surface while creating a space to enclose the public and also reference our original idea of the flat platform. We attached eight audio transducers to the back surface of the walls, which transferred discreet sounds directly through the drawing to create a unified, sensorial space.

The chevron bisected the drawing yet connected it, an gallery visitor was drawn into it. It acted like a kind of vortex, once inside auditory and visual shifts happened depending on their location and movement. The lines on the walls seemed to undulate.

In an aesthetic dimension, according to me, you work in a sort of a mathematic arrangement of composition. In this sense, you materialize the frequencies giving an almost tactile character to your sound, like in your work Direct.Incidental. Consequential (1998) or in different level in Absence (2008): a form of "acoustic surgery". Could you talk about a physical (or organic) dimension of sound in your concept of composition?

My work often begins with a form that necessitates a sound. Having trained as a painter and designer, I tend to look at sound. It's not quite synesthesia, but I don't think of what I create as Music with a capital M. In an interview, I once went so far as to say don't see myself as musician at all, but a composer—what I meant by that is I consider myself more a composer of elements. I always use the term formed in the liner notes of my recorded work. This term captures the perhaps sculptural or physical aspect of how I compose.

Sound IS physical; the high and low frequencies in my work can feel tactile because they are actual "objects" in a room which the listener feels and hears. It becomes about a navigation of spaces. In a performative sense, my work less of "putting on a show" and rather is more like manipulation of interiors, physical and sensorial.

In this way you are constantly seeking a physics of the sound, perception level of a sounds, of the variation created by

relation between sound and silence. In other words, this is the definition of an inaudible background texture that makes the audible stand out and be perceived. What emerges here is a subliminal dimension of the artistic process, coming out of the artwork and overwhelming the audience. Could you speak about this relation in your composition between audible and inaudible?

In much of my early work I am dealing with something in the context of nothing, setting discreet sounds very much apart from each other, as well as playing with the ideas of perception and anticipation... the act of listening itself.

While it's certainly not the goal of my work to manipulate listeners, I do try to create an experience in which they can hear the building blocks being arranged, as opposed to demanding they just sit back and be performed at.

A work like *series* is very strict in its use of silence as a compositional element. My current work uses more spaces of implied or perceived silence, a silence that is not actually silence. A quietness that belies actual activity...sometimes beyond standard perceptions... someone once called it "a violation of expectations." It could be described as periods of "inactivity," or likened to markings across a sheet of paper, background and foreground. I see this process as very linear at times, like a visual score.

Your works are based on the meticulous process of reduction. According to me, your vision is concentrated on the molecular structure of the sound. Please, could you speak about this aspect? Could you speak about material dimension of a sound, for example in Further Materials (2008)?

When I begin working on piece, the forms become complex and layered and are then reduced. The layers and complexity act as kind of like searches, or delineations, of some final form. Sketches on top of each other as if on tracing paper, gathered and erased, realized in sound.

The complexity still remains but if, say, there had been an underlying rhythm or timing to a piece, that element often becomes a ghost layer, an implied rhythm. Each work goes through numerous versions before I feel it is final—though nothing is ever completely final. When I perform works live I use elements from these pieces to create a new whole. The ghost layers are often removed completely and do not resurface. I find myself wanting to revisit works because there is always something I can adjust even slightly to make it more like what I want.

Performing them live is a way to work through additional variations of processes. Live performances often lead me to rethink existing works or provide sketches for new works. Manipulating elements, for example, from the piece "Location" (from *Two Locations*) has led to other released works. Sometimes this could be just a way something is overlaid, an effect, a stretching, or even how a small fragment can be looped. I believe accidents can also lead to greater things.

This is why I don't feel I would be able to craft pop songs...I just have a very hard time not revisiting processes.

The title *Further Materials* (like its predecessor *Other Materials*) merely refers to the nature of these CDs being a collection of works from compilations, materials which exist outside of full releases.

In this prospective, in Series (2000) but also in Direct.Incidental.Consequential (1998) at different levels your composition process is based on sound relief. Please explain this concept and the whole process that brought up this modality of composition?

Direct.Incidental.Consequential, my first release, is very electrical...the soul of electricity. It was a starting point to express the themes I had been pondering between 1993-1997, when I stopped working with audio. Prior to 1993 I had been only working with synthesizers. I stopped working with sound and focused on visual art, which in turn inspired me to revisit sound. Sound programs and equipment such as laptops became more accessible to me. I once again became interested in the space/time issues and the program I started working with was very visual. I no longer needed to work in real time. I could, as one of my pieces is closely titled, "arrange between patterns."

Series and *Type.Of* (which was an extension of the *Series* sessions) are the two releases that I would define as the most strict and perhaps difficult to listen to. The very simple overlay of the pointillist sounds and the more flowing waves divides one's attention, in that one has to listen or perceive them in such different ways. The discreet incidences pull perception away from the time flow. *Series* was really just about stripping down my composition to the bare minimum needed to formulate this time/space perception gap, and I've even never performed it live, due to its extreme nature.

It seems to be, in your work, the predominance of a "latency" of the sound that develops starting from an intervention on

the temporal and spatial dimension. At different levels, in Series (2000), in the Incidence (2006) and in the Specification. fifteen (2006) the process is a "modulation time phenomena". The sound – or the form of time – is not pulsated, but is modulated, in perpetual movement as a wave. Therefore to think the sound as an aesthetic of the time, in which the time takes form, even if unstable...could you expose your position in sound-time elaboration?

Series is very much about the space between the "incidences" of sound. There is an aural perception of rhythms in those works which sets up expectation with the listener and twists timing a bit. In performance there is a tendency for members of the audience to lose time perception. Often I will have people approach me after a live event and they will ask why I only played for 15 minutes, when in actuality I had been performing for 40 to 45 minutes.

I have long been fascinated by traditional drone based work and its effect on perception. Incidence is an example of working with this type of sound field. But is not my intent to use pulse or modulation more predominantly for a reaction. Nor is it my intent to create a physical reaction in listeners.

The conception of the molecular dimension of a sound is an intervention on the space of a sound [internal space of a sound as a frequency, texture of a sound, acoustic-quality ...and also external space of a sound as a disposition of a sound in the "material" space]. Could you speak about the relation of a sound and space in yours works?

There has been noted a relationship of certain works of mine to Cage's "4:33". In this piece (and others) Cage intended for the listener to pay attention to the sounds around them, the incidental sounds of everyday life. I prefer a listening environment of seclusion for my work. It has never been my intent to force people to listen to my work in a certain way, but it does benefit from a quiet environment. My works are not intended to be played loudly, as many of the frequency ranges I utilize can become distorted. But each minute sound or fragment I use should be heard.

In this moment on the electric scene, according to me, there are two tendencies: an internal organic line in which the materials are organized in order to outline a narrative fabric; on the other hand, an external organic line in which the materials operate towards abstraction. Nevertheless, the two layers above mentioned (the sound and the visual) are not opposed to each other, but they're both inscribed in a system of shades. In your conception of a sound, there is a relation between an anti-narrative line and sound composition?

I try to stay away from any concrete narrative. The sounds I design are intended to create an "internal analogy", in which the work describes only itself and avoids external references. Of course, each listener comes from a different background and defines differently what is "making" the sound, so there is never an absolute. But the subject matter of my work is self-contained. It is highly structured, like a completely abstract formalist sculpture. While each recorded composition has a defined progression over time, there is not defined progression in my installation work, where loops interact over hours and hours.

There is, according to me, an attention about impermanence of things in your works: the fluid characteristic that crosses, both visually and soundly, your intervention for the collaboration works (I think with Dmitri Gelfand and Evelina Domnitch for the Camera Lucida project for example). Could you speak about this ephemeral dimension?

Any impermanence that can be perceived in my work extends from my aesthetic choices of sound. They can be deemed fleeting. I focus on sounds that might be missed or overlooked. And I've long been attracted to the scientific and formalist works of my friends Dmitry and Evelina, which are non-illusionary and yet appear and dissolve in mysterious ways. Their work merely is, and is unknowable.

In your composition process the sound is conceived for giving form to a directly increase strengths and tensions that become perceivable by the senses ("immersion" for example). Could you speak about the sound conceived as activation / modification of the perceive state of the body?

I am interested in composing sound works that are immersive and at the same time create a singular focus, or a shift in focus. So much of what is audible around us is lost. Perhaps I can in some small way shift listening to a more liminal level.... hear with our subconscious instead of hearing with our eyes... or at least retraining to listen in other ways.