(Is there such a thing as) Sound Art and its Development in Hong Kong? A Research Proposal

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Introducing development

To speak about the development of anything requires an understanding of the present state of affairs. Although there has been an increase of interest in the production and presentation of sound works by contemporary art organizers\(^1\) in Hong Kong in recent years, this has not been met with a concomitant intensity of thinking over what sound art is and can be, let alone the nature and quality of listening itself.

It wasn't long ago we saw the dismantling of our last public mechanical turret clock in the Star Ferry Clock Tower. It was not only the concrete structure that was demolished, but also the vibrating sounds of the bells and their social and cultural meanings that were permanently wiped out of our public space. Alain Corbin has written a fascinating book called *Village Bells* about the community functions of the sound of bells in 19th century French villages. Art critic Wu Hung (巫鴻) has also analyzed how clocks and bells in Beijing have had, historically, multiple social and political functions. It is true that we have new bells installed in the new clock tower of the Central Pier. But they sound quite different from the old ones. I was fortunate to be accompanying the engineer invited to Hong Kong to inspect the dismantled and new bells in 2006. He works in the company that also takes care of London's Big Ben. One day, in the Central Pier clock tower, the engineer swept a key around the new bells. The sound was shrieky, high-pitched. He said it would take a while for these new bells to sink into the warmer and thicker sound that older bells would offer. I understand The Hong Kong Museum of History has recorded the sound of the old bells, but how much does the recording of a sound reveal its quality in relation to its surroundings? If we consider sound as always manifested in and as space and registering the flow of time, the act of preservation is always a premature (and belated) one. To appreciate sound requires not just a list of sounding objects, but also sensitivity to listening as a multi-faceted experience that weaves the individual, social, historical, political and cultural.
Research background - from practice to theory

This is a qualitative research on sound in art by artists. In a broad sense, it aims at identifying, analyzing, offering interpretations, and theorizing sonic, oral and aural practices by artists in the fields of installation art and performances, sometimes known as live art, both of which significant elements in contemporary art in Hong Kong.

Ideally, it would constitute the first part of a larger research, which may also gradually include the larger realm of sound as art, larger in terms of the scope of relevant fields (e.g. performing arts, various specialties of design, etc.) for the presence of artistically-creative use of sound, and larger in terms of the problematic – sound as art invites question of how sound has historically and conceptually become abbreviated or legitimized as sound art, in the aesthetic experience in listening and how it is similar to or different from aesthetic experience in other realms of human life etc. But first, sound in art, and in specific kinds of art forms.

More specifically, the research aims at understanding artistic practices that work with sound as a determining rather than illustrative element in their works and their meanings for artists. It does not seek to apply existing theories of sound art, produced predominantly in the West, to practices in Hong Kong, not that they are not useful, but that the inquiry of sound art in
and of a specific place would benefit from aiming at different theories, different angles, different debates, from within. Such differences may in turn inform, modify, even displace existing ways of theorizing the subject-matter, rather than the other way round. Specific cases do not only illustrate theories, but make different ones.

Theories from the West (predominantly Europe and the US) have their strengths and limitations. Many sound artists would tell how they have been inspired by and moved away from Raymond Murray Schafer’s pioneering soundscape studies. He systematically analyzed our radically changing soundscape (or acoustic environment) as a result of modern ways of living in the 1970s. His ideas are partly visualized by the drawings. Schafer’s works have come under much controversy because of the way good sounds are distinguished from bad sounds, as if sounds can be evaluated in themselves. Other thinkers draw a direct causal relation between what we listen to and how our capacity to do so is changing. Composer and pioneer of electronic music Karlheinz Stockhausen found the “acoustic pollution of the world” more serious than visual pollution, rendering most people “acoustically deaf,” a comment that echoes Theodor Adorno’s in the 1930s, who blamed mass production and reproduction of music for causing “regression of listening”. This phenomenon of mass society is relevant to the understanding of sound art, especially the aspect of sound as art, which may become the second stage of this research as earlier mentioned – when does sound become art if sound belongs to more and different aspects of life other than art? Massification describes a process of production and
reception, which offers answers to how art travels, but none to the nature and quality of art itself. On the other hand, what is heard remains subordinate to what is seen, hence inadequately massified – cameras are more common than audio recorders as memory and prosthetic devices that extend our bodies to the urban world.

Artists who listen have responded in a multitude of ways. Consider the celebration of machine and vehicular noises in the 1910s in *The Art of Noises* with its author Luigi Russolo...
embracing the expressive qualities of sounds in urban and industrialized life. This recognition of
the expressive qualities of sound and noises was furthered in the 1960s with Fluxus artists and
composers like John Cage. There are also movements like the "Musique Concrete" pioneered by
Pierre Schaeffer during the 1950s, which emphasizes the sound itself rather than its meaning or
melodic function in a musical piece.

Hong Kong’s experience is no exception to the large-scale social and cultural changes
of our times that had taken place as long, gradual processes, changes as manifested in the
technologization, urbanization, and acceleration of life. But these processes are far from even.
For instance, the slow and quiet noise art scene in Hong Kong⁴ may be an indication of how
difficult it is to engage with Western and Japanese sonic expressions of noise, perhaps precisely
for the reason that noise, undesirable in Hong Kong society, is so overwhelming that there is too
much of imaginative resistance to make the art of noise possible. Hong Kong’s sonic environment
offers routine and repetitive public announcements that instruct commuters how to sneeze and
what shoes not to wear while in train stations, looped background music in restaurants and
shopping malls, ticking sounds of audible traffic signals at every corner of the street... When
these sounds become too much to bear, we shut them out by plugging our ears with MP3-
played music. Cultural critic Rey Chow (周蕾) has argued, in the context of the walkman, how
this “autistic” mode of listening empowers the individual. But one is also compelled to ask, isn’t
using sound against sound analogous to be using poison against poison, only without the healing
effect? A lot remains to be studied about the multi-faceted meanings of sound in our social
environment and when and how sound in art is embedded in it.

Music and its experimentation have also contributed a lot to the development of sound art in
the West, but the past twenty years of sound art have also witnessed a radical push from those
insisting on keeping the proper name of sound art and its difference from music. Even sound
artists who are musicians by training are beginning to doubt the reach of the idea of music as
one among many ways of organizing sound. One example is the concept of “sonic art” proposed
by Trevor Wishart. A composer by training, Wishart has a background of working with live
sound, vocal techniques, and in recording studios. He uses the phrase “sonic art” to include not
only music and electro-acoustic music, but also “text-sound” and “sound effects”. Think of how
rappers work with rhymes even without music. Sound artist Slavek Kwi says, “The term ‘sound-
art’ suggests more options than ‘music’. Sound-art includes music and anything else dealing with
sound-media.” In the anthology Sound by Artists (1990), a book that uses braille on its cover,
editor Dan Lander makes the precise point that for a critical theory of sound to emerge, “the
urge to elevate all sound to the state of music will have to be suppressed.” This is not to say that
sound art establishes itself by trashing the conventions of music practices. It is rather to reveal
the disciplinary disloyalty and dynamic imprecision of the term sound art and its multi-faceted
nature. While Hong Kong has seen sound works created by artists with music composition
background, like Kawai Shiu, Samson Young, John Drever, works by artists without a music
composition background have also been prominent, e.g. installations by Anson Mak, Kingsley
Ng, Phoebe Hui, Cédric Maridet. It would be interesting to find out when the former would and
would not address themselves as musicians/composers, or sound artists. This phenomenon
again suggests that the Western experience cannot be imported wholesale to understand the
historical and cultural situation here and how it relates to conceptualization and theorization.
Research problem – exploring sonic expressions by artists

If music is on the qin, why is it silent when placed in a box?
If music lives on your fingertips, why do we not just listen to fingers?

--Su Shi (Song dynasty, 1037-1101)

In a talk on the Prajnaparamita, or Heart Sutra, speaker Master Kong (衍空法師) coined this poem as having Buddhist sensibility. He used it to talk about how sound comes about as a combination of elements in harmony: the qin, its strings, the person. It is their serendipitous encounter that makes sound possible, not any one element individually. In fact, there is no such thing as sound as such, but only sound as these other elements meeting in specific space and time. It is a useful reminder of how sound is always in and of something else – contained, stretched, bounced, played, etc.

For the purpose here, I differentiate between two types of places where sound art took place in the last several years: one type is where the general norm for it is silence, while for the other type, the general norm tends to be ambience. While the first is usually regarded as a neutral standard, the latter tends to become a coercive or exigent condition (depending on where one stands) for the works.

Plate 6
Kacey Wong, Mind Stir
By places in which silence is the norm, I mean such places as conventional contemporary art venues, e.g. museums, galleries, art spaces. For instance, the year 2008 to 2009 had witnessed the production of "Site: Seeing" (2008) in Osage Kwun Tong with Hong Kong artist Kingsley Ng’s Record: Light from +22° 16’ 14 +114° 08’ 48 and Singaporean artist Zulkifle Mahmod’s Sonic Encounter. Ng also presented sound installation Musical Wheel in the same year, at Osage Gallery. Osage Soho presented "Urban Episodes" (2008), with works by John Levack Drever, Anson Mak, Cedric Maridet, and Samson Young. In the same year, Phoebe Hui created “Translucent Noise” after winning the Bloomberg Emerging Artist Exhibition (2008). The same scheme by Bloomberg in 2007 presented sound works by Chris Lau and Samson Young. In 2009, Para/Site Art Space’s “Hong Kong Sound Station” (2009) with audio works on CD by eleven artists – Vito Acconci, John Levack Drever, Phoebe Hui, Steve Hui, Keith Lam, Leung Chi-wo, Edwin Lo, Anson Mak, Cedric Maridet, Kingsley Ng, and Kurt Schwitters. Earlier, in 2006, Hong Kong-based French artist Cédric Maridet presented “I/O Flows”, which worked with the humming of air-conditioners, in the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre.

The second kind of place is non-conventional contemporary art venues. These include "Around sound art festival 2009" presented by soundpocket, curated by myself, with artists Mike Cooper, Phoebe Hui, Jaffa Lam, John Lee, Jason Lim, Jerome Joy, Donna Ong & YC Teo, Beatrix Pang, Kacey Wong, Kawai Shiu and Hong Kong New Music Ensemble, Akio Suzuki, Yan Jun, and Miki Yui. Some of the installations and performances were presented in abandoned houses and beach in Tung O and the village of Motat, Lamma Island, Hong Kong. Sound sculptures, such as Kacey Wong’s Empty Mind which appropriated clockwork devices and Jaffa Lam’s bronze Sound Tree, were installed in private outdoor areas in the city. Installation work by Beatrix Pang and Pang Siufung inspired by glass bottles, wood, and lighthouses was installed at a bookshop. In 2007, habitus presented “in mid air, sound works hong kong 2007”, curated by myself, with works by Felix Hess, Robert Iolini, Anson Mak, Cédric Maridet, Kawai Shiu and Anthony Yeung, Tse Su-mei, and Yuen Cheuk-Wa. Hess’s work Cracklers was displayed in an empty residential house in Cheung Chau. Mak’s installation work Meditation was presented in the passageway between the third and fourth-floor staircase in the Hong Kong Arts Centre. Yuen’s work Water Reclamation was presented at the foyer of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, and was re-presented in the lobby of the Broadway Cinematheque in 2008. Kawai Shiu and Anthony Yeung’s work Still Moving was installed in an equipment storeroom at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts.

How could these works be approached? Below is a list of questions with examples for
indicative purposes for the first stage of this research, which aim at the identification and differentiation of sonic practices in art:

1. What sonic materials are included in the work? Are they collected or made?

   It is common that sound works use pre-recorded materials. These materials could be ready-made or found (heard), that is, collected as field-recording, or originally made. It is possible to regard the making of original sounds in a spectrum of the human body and machine; for instance, the exclusive use of the human voice on one end, and the exclusive use of computer-generated sounds on the other. Between these two poles could be sounds made by playing and playing with conventional music instruments and sounds made by staging a soundful situation like creating a sound effect of thunder by flexing a thin sheet of raw bronze or other metal. Some sounds are made for their meanings; others are not. These materials are then treated in a variety of degrees and nature of alteration, from none at all, and some minimal editing of in and out points, to heavier editing, mixing, modulating etc. Another way of regarding this aspect of treating sonic materials is the spectrum of keeping them raw, possibly with their sources identifiable, and gradually moving along the spectrum to the other end where the sound in the work is delinked from its source. For instance, Edwin Lo's *Auditory Scenes: Tsing Yi* (2009) is a work based on the sound of metal on metal as discrete punches with long ambient intervals in between. The recording was carried out in ship-building yards in Tsing Yi, Hong Kong. The work was intended to be faithful to the actual soundscape of ship-building. Artist So Yan-kei’s *11* (2001)
and Miss Garley (2002) are quite different. They are both metallic towers of some six meters tall standing outdoors. Their interiors are fitted with mechanical devices invisible from the outside, which make pounding sounds in situ and mixed with pre-recorded sounds of different people pounding on hard materials. As I understand from an interview I had with So in 2006, the people were invited to do so with minimal instructions from the artist. So Yan-kei told me she was quite amazed it turned out that different people pounded in different ways, some harder and faster, others less so. Some left intervals between each punch, while others did so continuously. Her work combines the acoustic quality of the materials she uses in situ and sounds recorded elsewhere. To identify what the sonic materials are is to find out where they are from, how they are gathered or made, and what the nature and quality of their sound are.

2. **How would the artists as makers, collectors, or composers of these sonic materials and silences describe each of them?**

This question emphasizes the emic, or insider’s way of describing these sounds in the artists’ own words. An alternative would have been using the received language from music
that already places sound in music and sound as music into such concepts as volume, texture, tone, timbre, pitch... This language might of course be the one some artists would themselves use, but it ought not be assumed that all would. It must be kept in mind that in the latter case, if this language is foreign to the artist, she must be encouraged and invited to speak of her sounds in her way. Otherwise, the use of one dominant way of describing a much more complex reality risks reducing the works to fit into received understandings. For the purpose of this research, namely sound by artists, treating artists as active and critical listeners with their own ways of making sense of sound and their ways of listening is crucial.

3. How are these sonic materials used, reused, organized, and distributed in relation to materiality of space and time, and in relation to meaning?

For instance, in the performance *Public Act of Private Hearing*, artist Leung Po-shan gave aesthetic expression to listening in the public space of the former Queen’s Pier, which was temporarily occupied by activists protesting against its demolition in the summer of 2007. This work was part of a series of performances in which she read from different books like the Basic Law of Hong Kong to one listener at a time, in whispers. At Queen’s Pier, Xi Xi’s novel *My City* was chosen. Sitting among protestors and hunger-strikers, she read the book out loud in Cantonese. Once a page was completed, she tore it off and burnt it in the ceramic bowl in front of her. The juxtaposition of her whispering voice against the politically gigantic (the clear message of advocacy and solidarity), the physically loud (the frequent use of loudspeakers and shouting of slogans), and in terms of meaning, the mono-tonal voices of protests (the exclusion of doubt and dissent13 ) was an artistically powerful contribution to the space. I have written in detail about her work in another paper, which I will not repeat here at length. I quote from it a short paragraph that may be relevant for the purpose here:

*With reference to the need to speak exaggerated by the demand to communicate protest in that space, Leung’s insertion of the primacy of the intersubjective space of listening that sounded out others as they listened revealed the routines at work in that space – the artist’s staged deafness that temporarily offered her immunity from having to address an imagined and abstract public became an answer to the ‘compulsory discursivity’ organizing the sensory economy of the public space.*14

This is but one of the many examples of works of sound art that interpret space (physical organization of bodies in a built environment), time (the insertion of heterogeneous time into homogeneous time as offering one rhythm, one pace, one direction), and meaning (to shout or
4. How do artists perceive sound in terms of other materials in their works, or on the contrary, how they perceive non-sonic materials in their works in terms of sound and listening? How are decisions made to include, enhance, reduce, or exclude sound in a work of multiple elements that share equal importance?

I am thinking of ParaSITE Collective’s work “Navigating the Dot” (2003) presented in the 50th Venice Biennale. The Collective invited mastering engineer and theatre sound designer Anthony Yeung to design a sonic aspect to the installation work of a dozen concrete tubes. Yeung installed microphones suspending from the ceiling of the exhibition venue to pick up live sound and ambience of the space. The sound then went through a digital audio system that gave out reverberations. Why was this sonic element considered necessary? How did Yeung and the Collective think of it as an integral element to a visual and physical structure of the installation?

Another work was I/O Flows (2006), an installation by Ce’dric Maridet. The work collected in real-time the humming of air-conditioners in the exhibition venue, the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre, and distributed the sound in a closed circuit system. What decisions were made to channel some sounds while leaving others out, or in what variety of ways? How was the visual representation of the sonic system related to the sounds made for listening in that space? More recently, Kingsley Ng presented the sculptural work Musical Wheel (2008) in the exhibition “Cross Currents” at Osage Kwun Tong. The pavilion-shaped wheel is itself a string instrument – strings were installed on the outside of the pavilion, and as it turns, the strings are gently plucked to make musical notes. The notes are also captured live with a digital audio system, and played back live in situ. The same questions could be asked: when and how is sound thought of, thought about, in the artists’ creative processes? What decisions have been made regarding the relation of different kinds of sound and other components of a work?

5. What is the nature and quality of the listening experience the sounds by artists offer? What do they require of listeners, in terms of manner (e.g. whether listeners are required to be silent or speaking), bodily comportment (e.g. whether listeners are expected to sit, stand, walk, stay in one place, move around, bend over, put on headphones or other devices
etc.) and change of attention (e.g. whether listeners are invited to shift between listening to sounds in the foreground and background)?

For instance, Leung Chi-wo's *Open Home* (2007) is a series of works that began as audio-recorded interviews of hundreds of individuals giving monologues about their use of domestic space. One edition of the series was presented in home of the artist's friend and critic Jaspar Lau in private residential complex Laguna City, Kwun Tong. About a dozen paper cylinders attached with mp3 devices were placed in the living room – some on the dining table, others on bookshelves among stacks of books and on the floor. As the listener entered, she was greeted with the unison of mumbling human voices. When she went closer to each cylinder and picked up any one to listen to, a distinctly identifiable voice spoke. The listener could also pick up two cylinders at the same time, putting one against each ear. She would then realize one spoke Cantonese, and the other English. She had the option of switching the attention (and identification, if she understood any one of the languages) of her left and right ear to the preferred sound (or language, depending on whether it was indeed language as a system of meaning for her). The many levels and layers of tones and textures stood on guard against each other and against their tendency to become one. The fact that listeners could oscillate their attention between voice and noise, language and pre-language, was productive – the structured openness of the listening experience prescribed by the work kept the dynamic relation between sound and space, sound on sound, and voices between voices alive.

In another work by Cédric Maridet, *la mouvance des flux* (2007) presented in the exhibition “in midair, sound works hong kong 2007”, sounds collected in real-time from microphones set up in different parts of the world were streamed. The artist wrote a specific computer programme that allowed the streamed sounds to move in a circular way when listened to with headphones. The work enabled a strong sense of presence and bearing of the listener in the newly created networked soundscape.

6. What sources or expertise would artists consult when making works for listening? How would they research, in the broadest sense of seeking understanding, for their works?

For instance, Dutch sound artist Felix Hess, a physicist by training, was first charmed by listening as a way of understanding the world when he encountered frogs calling and listening to each other in Australia. Frogs were his teachers. In 2007, he came to Hong Kong to present his
work Cracklers in the exhibition “in midair – sound works hong kong 2007”, curated by myself. A crackler is a small analog machine that sounds out when it senses air pressure movements – the slamming of doors, flushing toilets, even trains coming towards them from afar. It picks up vibrations in the air before these vibrations are audible as sounds to the human ear. Hess’s works are not interested in making sounds, but in revealing what sound is conditioned by – air. He says, “When you are sensitive, the world opens.” In the same way that frogs are teachers of the artist as active listener, other natural elements like bamboo and rain, the built environment like bridges, human interaction like patterns of speech on a commuter train etc. could also offer deep understanding of sound and listening to the artist. To find out about these realities is to learn about the artists’ individual worlds and the world of sound art.

Conclusion

The research proposal is uncertain whether there is such a thing as sound art and its development. It proposes, however, that sound in art and sound as art have been taking place and more frequently so in Hong Kong in recent years. It suggests that the imperative of having to pin down what sound art is give way to a broader sensitivity of what it could be, so that, as pioneer sound artist Akio Suzuki17 says, “sound, which had been conceptually imprisoned in various spaces, [could be] freed to circle the world.”

Afterword

Today, the likely person to be interested in the development of anything is the investor. For him, Potential determines Present – the former is imagined and earned, the latter, always lacking and in the passing. To seal the gap between Potential and Present, the investor devises a plan. Different investors require different kinds of plan.

In 2008, soundpocket was invited to a panel meeting examining its potential in promoting the development of sound art in Hong Kong. No projected growth statistics or risk analyses were presented, but some plans were explained. Representing soundpocket in the meeting, I was asked if Hong Kong could take leading position in the world of sound art. I had no better answer to this lopsided question derived from the will of territorial occupation but this, “I don't know, but if we could nurture something from here, from the inside, we can venture out.” There are always plans to be made, projects to be had, aligned with the homogeneous time of production and social activities. And then there are ourselves to prepare.
Yeung Yang is Independent curator and Executive Director of soundpocket.

1. The inclusion of this article here is, as far as I know, the first one on sound art. This is also an indication of increasing interest from the contemporary visual art field in sound art.

2. It is common these days for sound art to be included in the field of “new media art”. This research proposal does not include this area.

3. In the information brochure of “Around sound art festival 2009”, I differentiated between sound as a determining element and an illustrative element in works of sound – as a determining element, sound is integral to the integrity of a work, and that it is essential in offering a way of perceiving the work; as an illustrative element, sound could be an unintentional effect or a medium through which other materials or information pass through.

4. White Noise Records and Lona Records have devoted much effort into the distribution of alternative, experimental and electroacoustics music and organizing sound performances...etc.

5. “Site: Seeing”, Osage Kwun Tong, 10 October 2008 to 8 February 2009.


9. “Hong Kong Sound Station”, Para/Site Art Space, 7 February to 3 April 2009.


11. soundpocket was founded in 2008. I am currently its Executive Director on voluntary basis. soundpocket is a charity, and on July 1, 2009, became a one-year grant recipient of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. The grant expires on June 30, 2010.


13. During the protests, a man held a cardboard above his head. On the cardboard were the words “I support the demolition of Queen’s Pier” in Chinese. He sat among the protesters for hours, and later became one of the listeners in Leung’s work. I have written more about it in the paper, “Monumentality as experience: Public Live Art making available real environments of memory” in Vital, International live artists of Chinese descent, Manchester: Chinese Art Centre, 2007.


17. Akio Suzuki began working with sound in his art works in the 1960s. In 2009, he came to Hong Kong to present three performances in Motat and Tung O beach on Lamma Island as part of “Around sound art festival 2009”.