P/P

SPACE AND PLACE: SONIC THOUGHTS, TENSIONS, AND TRAJECTORIES

GAUTAM PEMMARAJU

PROJECTS / PROCESSES
VOLUME I

Series Editor: Senjuti Mukherjee

**Space and Place: Sonic Thoughts,
Tensions, and Trajectories**

Gautam Pemmaraju

SERENDIPITY
ARTS
FESTIVAL

Still from a live performance by Steve Buchanan at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photograph by The Lumiere Project.

Sound Interventions

Curated by Sneha Khanwalkar

Venue Adil Shah Palace,
DB Ground, Old PWD Complex,
Children's (Art) Park

Curatorial Note

Artists *Floy Krouchi, Poorna Swami and Marcel Zaes, Ruchi Bakshi Sharma, Steve Buchanan*
Curator *Sneha Khanwalkar*
Support *for Floy Krouchi from the French Institute in India and for Steve Buchanan from Pro Helvetia India*

The feeling of being intervened has been a constant state of being for me as an artist. Some of these interventions are the mere nature of things which surround me—leaving me with no option of accusing and amending this experience.

It's delusional to make and want a space which remains untouched by other worlds.

My curatorial experience at last year's Serendipity Arts Festival has led me to observe that in the act of placing my intentions and ideas outside for the world and my audiences, I open a portal through which things can enter and interrupt my state of being.

And as I think more about, this reciprocity and exchange between the curator, artists, audiences and the site has always been the case. This time I'm urged to not plant my sound curations in a still space, but to let them scatter and scamper all around Panjim, the heart of the Festival, and pop them where they may not belong.

We showcase sound interruptions ranging from performative to experiential, instinctive to intentional, organic to some very 'technically- sound' works of art, for audiences to explore and experience.

- Sneha Khanwalkar

Installation view of Winds of Change by Ruchi Bakshi Sharma at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

Space and Place: Sonic Thoughts, Tensions, and Trajectories

GAUTAM PEMMARAJU

Living in the twenty-first century, we have often trained ourselves in changing attitudes precisely by using acoustic devices, particularly by listening with headphones. Many of us find it embarrassing that we were only able to discover in this way that acoustic spaces are something in themselves, independent of things and non-identical with real space. While acoustic space is, of course, also experienced in real space, this experience takes place in bodily felt space, in the space of my own presence that is unfurled by the expanse of bodily sensing. In a hearing that does not skip over tone, voice, and sound to reach the objects that may cause them, listeners can sense voice, tone, and sound as modifications of the space of their own presence. When listening like this, one is dangerously open, letting oneself enter the vastness outside, and is thus liable to be hit by acoustic events. One can be carried away by sweet melodies, knocked over by thunderclaps, threatened by droning noises, or wounded by a piercing tone. Hearing is being-outside-oneself and, for this very reason, potentially the joyful experience of sensing one's being in the world, at all.

- Gernot Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces* (2017), 113.

This excerpt from the German philosopher Gernot Böhme's seminal work hints at the broad realignment of how sound is thought of, experienced, and materialised. A slow but inevitable foregrounding of sound in sensorial, material, and conceptual domains over the

second half of the twentieth century, has unfolded in art, literature, and the humanities, not to mention popular culture. Often referred to as the "sonic turn", a shifting of cultural markers and practices that the scholar Christoph Cox describes as "a broad turn in the academy and also in visual and sonic arts",[1] it carried the legacy of a century of theory and practice, during which the plastic arts flourished, and conventions of music and musical performance were challenged vigorously by a wide range of stakeholders. Coined by Jim Drobnik, the phrase "sonic turn" nimbly accounted for these shifts, shuffles, and shimmies, which were taking place in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Across disciplines scholars, practitioners, and artists alike were attempting to grasp sound beyond music, beyond object, beyond material; sound as a legitimate artistic "concern"; and the numerous other iterative descriptions, arguments, provocations, psychic animations, morphologies, typologies, and meanings that would extend our understanding of the auditory realm and the very many things contained within it and without. It would be also the refinement of a sonic ontology that accounted for the exertions and experiments that had come to pass over the twentieth century, including the anxieties and jostling in finding the adequate language to grasp sonic phenomena more precisely. As Cox and other scholars have argued, it was during this time the phrase "sound art" began to come into vogue, drawing as it was from the simultaneously luminous and opaque stream of "sonic flux", characterised by him as "a non-linear flow of matter and energy on par with other natural flows" but "inseparable from concretisation, actualisation, and coding—the various ways it has been seized, slowed, and organised into more or less discrete forms, structures, and entities".[2] Characterising sonic flux as an "immemorial material flow" that goes beyond human expression while being shaped by them, Cox argues that cultural theory has been "largely unresponsive to the sonic" in not adequately heeding its complex and amorphous nature. With the sonic turn, scholarly debates also introduced a reconciliation of sorts with the conventional privileging of the visual arts, of text and image, of representation and fixity, leading to broader institutional change. Greater acknowledgement of sonic concerns would soon open up

space for an area of study within the academy; curators and galleries began to embrace the idea of sound art shows; and the coincident collapse of the global music business in the early 2000s, the rise of digital technology, the internet, and increasing connectivity, propelled a wider interest in sound beyond music and convention.

At the heart though arguably, it is sound's own nature that distinguishes itself. Its spatio-temporal characteristics, physical attributes, evanescence, potency of suggestion and signification, its immateriality; these all surely pitched the growing regard for sound in a competitive counterpoint with the visual. It is further to these tensions, these fractious, forensic investigations, that the theorist Seth Kim-Cohen introduced a testing of the boundaries. Arguing for a "non-cochlear" approach to art and echoing Marcel Duchamp's idea of "non-retinal" visual art, Kim-Cohen draws attention away from the sound object, the material and perceptual features of sound, to "everything that has normally been proscribed by undue attention to the sound itself". It has been fifteen years since Drobnik pointed to the sonic turn—a self-conscious echo of W.J.T. Mitchell's "a visual turn"— as heralding in the emerging field of the sound studies as "an aural equivalent to visual studies" which functioned as "a site for analysis, a medium for aesthetic engagement, and a model for theorisation".

A REASON FOR SOUND

Traditionally there has been sparse attention to sonic matters as an artistic concern in India although, over the last decade there has been growing attention to sound art from curators, galleries, and art institutions. In popular culture and cinema, the visual has held sway over imagination and artistic production and sound beyond music has rarely been engaged with. In cinema, the soundtrack was driven by dialogues, songs, and background music—in that order of hierarchy.[3] This broad trend began to change in the digital era, as globalised connections allowed for more immediate creative exchanges and appropriation. Since 2012 an annual sound art and electronic music

festival titled *Sound Reasons* has been ongoing, with the sixth edition held in 2018. This multi-city event saw several works travelling to Mumbai as well, notably the Swiss artist Zimoun installed a work at BDL Museum. In a note for the last edition, the curator Ish S says that the emphasis of the works is on "a curative dialogue with other mediums" wherein the listener is drawn away from the sound object and towards its "generative phenomenological possibilities". Further, "listening *into a* world, in order to hear what all it could be" is asserted as a critical objective. In 2013, Khoj Studios organised two sound art shows—one a residency titled *Auditions* and the other, a showcase of sounds representative of the soundscape of the subcontinent titled *LISTEN, my heart, to the whispers of the world*—in acknowledgment of the growing interest in sound art. Both shows featured a wide range of artists contributing works and *LISTEN...* also featured an important figure whose work shaped the development of the field of acoustic ecology, Hildegard Westercamp.[4] The Kochi Biennale has also seen sound art works on show. Notably, presentation of work by Yuko Mohri and Camille Norment in the 2016 edition of the biennale drew quite a bit of attention. These survey shows have successfully introduced a wide range of artistic work to Indian art patrons and lovers, and has also, importantly, served to popularise the very term itself. Despite the many contestations that continue to vex many, sound art as an institutional category is no longer an unfamiliar term.

A welcome inclusion to the Serendipity Arts Festival 2019 programme was a set of artistic works included under the title *Sound Interventions*. The popular film music composer Sneha Khanwalkar is credited as a curator of this category of works that also simultaneously appear under the "Music" disciplinary section of the festival. The four works presented under *Sound Interventions* can be seen as having been "programmed" in, or perhaps even extemporaneously aggregated, given the absence of any kind of curatorial idea or intervention. While the choice and the reasoning of why these works were selected remains elusive, and an argument for a curatorial position cannot be made, what can be said is that an institutional mandate to include artists creating sound related works, or sound art, can only be a positive step.

But what is sound art? Is it art with sound(s)? Or is it art which has something to do with sound? Is it even a legitimate artistic category? These contentious questions have for long troubled many, and consequently, various scholars, artists, and others have grappled with them.

SOUND ART

The sonic thinkers and artists Bruce Odland and Sam Auinger (collectively O + A) recall a 1991 visit to Trajan's Forum—the last of several imperial fora of ancient Rome. Beyond the imperial arch, they set about listening to the various sounds of the antiquated complex, describing the sonic situation as "a devastating mess, creating major cognitive dissonance between the eye and the ear". In the market gallery they chanced upon a stash of amphorae and dropped a microphone into one. To their astonishment, they heard what sounded like hundreds of heavily processed ringing church bells. Describing their fortuitous discovery as a "jaw dropping, profound, deeply mystifying and very real" experience, O + A had hit upon a fascinating and semiotically loaded sonic artefact:

> "We had stumbled on a simple fact of physics. When bombarded by the sound-pressure levels of modern traffic, the amphora from ancient Rome was functioning like a harmonic resonator. It was selecting those parts of the sound vibrations coming from buses and Vespas, horns, voices and sirens that matched its dimensions and re-resonating them into a pool of beautiful melodies and harmonies. It was, in fact, a huge Helmholtz resonator (a closed airspace with an open hole that, because of its volume and the size of the opening, resonates to specific frequencies in reaction to broader sound vibrations outside, like the gourds on a marimba, or a plastic bottle when you blow across the top) changing traffic noise into music".[5]

This anecdote and the sounds they heard which they then employed

Still from a live performance by Floy Krouchi at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photograph by The Lumiere Project.

in a sound installation, point to a very fine intersection between material culture and imagination underscoring numerous sonic concerns that swirl about in the realms of scholarship, art, and music. The sound contained within the amphora was just a perturbation away from being unleashed into other realms; its chimerical lack of fixity only finds containment through material, space, time, and of course, imagination. Many such discoveries, interventions, and artistic projects have over the decades demonstrated this remarkable, indefinable vitality of sound.

As Cox argues, the entrance of sound as a legitimate artistic medium was not without "some considerable anxiety about this new guest" from visual art institutions, galleries, and museums.[6] Nevertheless, institutional support became increasingly visible and several exhibitions showcased sound related artistic works under the emerging rubric of sound art. The writer and musician David Toop curated a group show titled *Sonic Boom: The Art of Sound* in early 2000 which featured thirty artists. His remark on sound art—a greatly contested and imprecise term, defined mostly by curatorial positions—is of great relevance here. The term's lineage may be related to a 1983 show titled "Sound/Art"[7] but it begun to gain traction in the mid '90s and its currency was linked to its German precursor *Klangkunst*. In a conversation with artist Christian Marclay whose own sound-related works fascinatingly explore the history of sound recording and the "incapacity of the image to supply its sonic content",[8] Toop says: "One of the things I've always said about sound art, or so-called sound art, is that it's homeless in a way. It doesn't really fit in any existing set up. It's a very uneasy fit with the art world. And it doesn't exist until it comes to life within some environment or the other".[9] Cox describes the term as a "thorny label about which many artists, and curators and critics have misgivings". The pioneering artist Max Neuhaus—who gave up a career as a musician and composer to create sound installation works—argued that it was a fad and that "we need to question whether or not Sound Art constitutes a new art form". Additionally,

"These same people who would all ridicule a new art form called, say, 'Steel Art' which was composed of steel sculpture combined with steel guitar music along with anything else with steel in it, somehow have no trouble at all swallowing 'Sound Art'".[10]

Neuhaus had made a clear distinction between music and his later work of sound installations. This distinction was linked in no uncertain terms to the experimentalism that preceded him— from the Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo's zealous enterprise of recovering noise in his "Art of Noise" manifesto; Pierre Schaeffer's formal, structural and conceptual recalibration of the idea of music composition with his *musique concrete*; John Cage's didactic and performative inclusivity of sounds and silence beyond music; the Fluxus artists who programmatically challenged seriality and western convention by looking eastward; to numerous other forms of artistic and theoretical solidarities in favour of sound. Neuhaus sought to untether his artistic project from conventional organisation of the sonic and hitch adventurous and adventitious rides with sounds that one chanced upon and sought out: "The most important point is that in music the sound is the work, and in what I do the sound is the means of making the work, the means of transforming space into place". This important conceptual practice of exploring the relationship between space and sound was, as Cox argues, a way of bringing Cage's ideas out of the concert hall and into the world outside. In doing so, Neuhaus created one of the most enduring works of public art (and arguably, sound art) in 1977—the iconic "Times Square".

Brandon La Belle posits the "activation of the existing relation between sound and space" as residing at the core of sound art. Sound thereby, he argues, "*performs* through and with space". He observes interestingly that "the sonorous world always presses in" given how sound operates through space, time, material, bodies, and minds. At the outset of *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* he proposes a definition,

despite echoing the commonly stated notion that sound "seemingly eludes definition, while having profound effect".

> "Sound art as a practice harnesses, describes, analyses, performs, and interrogates the condition of sound and the processes by which it operates".[11]

In Seth Kim-Cohen's proposition, sound art is in opposition to conventional western music with its structural formalism of twelve notes of a chromatic scale, tonal hierarchies and other normative standards.[12] Kim-Cohen argues for a "sonic idealism" of an "expanded sound practice" where nothing is out of bounds. Brian Kane has pointed out that this argument tends towards Peter Osborne's definition of conceptual art which "questions the institutions of the art world, the relations of artist to spectator, and the act of art making itself, emphasising process over product, the meaning over the physical artefact". Cox has also pointed to this kinship and conflation with conceptual art in the history of sound art by alluding to "the dematerialisation of the art object" of the mid-1960s onwards when artistic attention shifted away from the production of the object to the production of the idea or the concept, and the words and discourse to express it. In this shifting, material process also gained traction. Many artists and practitioners of the time were responsible for these many maneuvres and Cox points to Robert Barry, Robert Morris, Michael Asher, Bruce Neumann, and the collective Art & Language.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF HISTORY AND INFLUENCE[13]

In Panjim's oldest pre-Portuguese structure, the Adil Shah Palace, the French artist, musician, and researcher Floy Krouchi, set up two performances on consecutive days. In the courtyard of the medieval palace that belies the Islamic roots of the Bahmani Sultan Yusuf Adil Shah who is said to have built the palace around 1500 CE, Krouchi

arranged monitors around the audience gathered there in an attempt to envelop them with sound, rather than place them in a conventional stereophonic relationship. With an original Fender precision bass guitar modified and augmented over time to include over forty sensors and other microprocessor driven electronics that assist in affecting the sound, Krouchi's solo set-up included devices and elements that fed the guitar with an array of possibilities. The artist employed an electronic bow, or EBow, to induce forced continuous vibrations of the four strings of the instrument, allowing for sounds that cannot be reproduced by strumming or plucking of the strings. Krouchi also used other extraneous objects to strike the strings such as steel wool and wooden sticks. Additionally, the artist used hand gestures with a Theremin-like device to set-off more guitar sounds. With foot pedals and patches triggered from a laptop, the augmented bass guitar is able to respond to a variety of tactile and electronic influences and gestures. Harking back to John Cage's prepared piano techniques—a technique of altering the piano sound by placing objects on the strings—Krouchi's use of mundane objects seek to explore their transformative, transgressive abilities upon the bass guitar. Cage intriguingly linked these efforts of preparing his piano to a desire "to possess sound". But a practical motivation for Cage was the inability to play between the twelve notes of the chromatic scale. This indeed is a central aspect of Floy Krouchi's performance. Conceptually, sonically, and sensorially, Krouchi's project explores what she terms the "microlife" of tonalities that exist in-between formal notated tonal positions. Seeking the lush, redolent spaces in the immediate neighbourhood of *shrutis*, Krouchi simultaneously mines her western experimental legacy "to give life to electronic sound", as she describes it. Beyond this, at a very fundamental aesthetic and conceptual level, lies Krouchi's decade-long training in the *rudra veena* from the recently deceased master Pandit Hindraj Divekar. Krouchi transforms the bass guitar into a hybrid instrument that sounds like a *rudra veena*. Her ability to dig deep into the bottom end of the frequency spectrum and inhabit a complex realm of sonic space within a chosen temperament brings the bass guitar strikingly close in sonic kinship to the ancient instrument of Indian classical

Stills from a live performance by Floy Krouchi at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photographs by The Lumiere Project.

music, with all its attendant mystical and mythological allusions.

Krouchi's two sets unfolded very similar to a Hindustani classical performance, with an introductory *alaap*, which glided into a *jod* and then a *jhala*. In a parallel invocation, slow single notes with flavours of electro-acoustic affectation worked their way upward and onward, eventually to give way to a pulsating phrase with an increase in tempo and then a texturally dense rhythmic exposition, curiously coincident with classic hard-rock/heavy metal rhythm guitar sections. This strange dynamism, sonically opulent in presence and drive with distorted and over-modulated sounds, overwhelmed the courtyard, and the itinerancy of prepared sounds came into their own in the composite sonic space.

Krouchi's primary training is in electro-acoustic composition from a Paris conservatory. Consequently, she draws her lineage from the wave of French experimentalism of the first half of the twentieth century. Her practice is densely linked to the pioneering twentieth century radio broadcast engineer and experimentalist Pierre Schaefer, whose works and ideas paved the path for numerous artists who followed.[14] Composing mostly for radio, opera, dance and installation, Krouchi's practice is also linked to another figure of those times—the iconoclastic Luc Ferrari, a colleague of Pierre Schaefer and Pierre Henry at RTF's *Groupe de Recherches Musicales* (GRMC). Conceptual elements of *musique concrète* are more than apparent in Krouchi's work; the acousmatic presence of mundane sonic fragments and objects are not merely ornamental features in the overall composition, but are in fact material components of the performance which shape its sound and its very idea. Another interesting element is that of radio sound art or radio art, which can be traced back to the work of Hans Flesch, who founded the iconic Berlin Radio Hour. His radio drama work created in 1924 titled *Zauberie auf dem Sender: Versuch einer Rundfunkgroteske*, referred to in English as *Radio Magic* or *Wizadry on the Air: Attempt at a Radio-Grotesque*, featured "a cacophony of words, sounds and music".[15] Part of the Weimar era tradition of *Hörspeil* radio plays, with corresponding forms across Europe

including BBC radio dramas, Daniel Gilfillan describes them as "plays with imprecise notions of spatio-temporality, feedback distortion, physical presence and ethereality...".[16]

This sonic, spatio-temporal feedbacking distortion are dominant features of Krouchi's work titled *FK Bass Holograms*, which references her augmented bass and a conceptual-metaphorical allusion to her sonic project. Its ethereal, otherworldly abstractions that rise out of the body of the sonic textures can perhaps be regarded as synesthetic holographic sonic projections that pervade the atmosphere of the performance space. Yet another parallel, one of legacy and spirit, can be drawn with La Monte Young, the Fluxus artist and composer who was influenced profoundly by his Hindustani classical music teacher, Pandit Prannath. Like many of the pre-sound art avant-garde artists, Young's experimental ideas and works challenged the very foundational conception of music. Looking eastward, particularly to drone and *dhrupad* traditions, some of his work incorporates Indian classical music. Similarly, Krouchi's practice synthesises this sonic pre-occupation with drones and extends the idea to microtonal explorations and deep engagement with the 22-*shruti* form of Hindustani classical music. The allusion to avant-garde jazz pianist Cooper Moore's album title as the heading of this section is both an acknowledgement and a literary device to evoke this rich intellectual, artistic, musical, and conceptual kinship that Krouchi's work has with many strands of sonic experimentalism. It is all these layers of sound, experience, signification, and experimental legacy that imbue Krouchi's deep-listening performance piece (an installed work in some ways) with artistic heft.

STOCHASTIC FORMS

Another welcome addition to the programme *Sound Interventions*

was a somewhat unsettling "durational sound and performance installation" which confronted notions of personal and shared space through a "body of actions". With both deterministic and randomized performative elements to it, this piece presented staged and confrontational spatial situations forcing topographical and psychological breaches of the shared space of performer and audience. In the old PWD (Public Works Department) building in Panjim, the artist Poorna Swami presented a performance work titled *The Long and Short of It*, which is a collaborative work with Marcel Zaes. In the upper level of the repurposed office of four conjoined rooms, four performers performed a script which had them darting in straight lines across the lengths of each room, from one to the other, on occasion falling on the floor, facing one another, gesturing marks of position/space/volume, and placing lights in a sequential pattern upon the floor. They performed vocalisations and discrete sonic acts by periodically shouting out at audience members to move out of the way as they prepared to run across a room or from one to another, while waving with their hands to reinforce the vocal instruction. They rasped sibilant transient blows of air into microphones placed in the rooms and picked up guitar amps and shook them vigorously to create abrasive distorted sound fragments. On occasion the performers also directly faced an audience member, in an "in-your-face" position, and posed questions to them: "Have you ever seen this before?" or "Has this ever happened before?" On occasion, a performer would drop a microphone on the floor. These physical and sonic acts were underscored by an intense feral individualism; the performers seemed not really to be performing for an audience and their cognisance of bodies beyond their own was limited to removing obstructions to their single-minded kineticism. As they moved about following a pre-determined set of instructions, which Swami says are a result of rigorous workshops, the seventy minutes long performance unfolded in seven timed cycles. In collaboration with the physical performative acts, a designed soundtrack played through monitors positioned across the rooms. A texturised sonic scape with low-end droning hum, amplifier overload, and other

distortions created from the equipment used in performances, this soundtrack marked the beginning and the end of the performance time. The artists describe the soundtrack as "an immersive soundscape of heavy, delicate, distorted, and sustained noise".

The aesthetic reconfigurations of noise and its deployment in the realms of music and art in modern times can be traced back to the Italian futurists of the early twentieth-century. Filippo Marinetti's 1909 tract *Manifesto of Futurism* set the stage for the often referenced radical essay by Luigi Russolo in 1913—*The Art of Noise*. Russolo's programmatic repudiation of soft, melodic music which caressed "the ear with suave harmonies" was in favour of the machinistic realism of the times:

> "This revolution in music is paralleled by the increasing proliferation of machinery sharing in human labour. In the pounding atmosphere of great cities as well as in the formerly silent countryside, machines create today such a large number of varied noise that pure sound, with its littleness and monotony, now fails to arouse any emotion".

Several others joined in these futurist sentiments, including Ferruccio Busoni and Francesco Pratella. Russolo went on to collaborate on a noise machine with the painter Ugo Piatta; they built a series of *Intonanumori*, grand noise generators that were able to replicate numerous sounds that these iconoclasts wished to celebrate. From thunder, howls, crackling, roars, whispers, screeches, explosions, buzzing and hissing, the sounds of modern machines, the noises of modernity, were stridently reimagined as markers of a new way of being and a new music that could be thus created. Over the course of the twentieth century, this zealous challenge to conventional music took on its own life across Europe and North America, as artists, thinkers and experimentalists began to explore artistic and didactic possibilities. John Cage's opening up of the sounds beyond music, not to mention his thoughts on traffic sounds, are linked to these developments. Additionally, Cage's practice also led to a rethinking

Still from a live performance of The Long and Short of It at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photograph by The Lumiere Project.

Stills from a live performance of The Long and Short of It at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photographs by The Lumiere Project.

of privileged perspectives in a performance space and as several scholars have argued, artistic attention shifted away from the object to the surrounding environment, to multiple perspectives from a single one, and from a body to others occupying a shared space[17]. Brandon La Belle says this "describes the very relational, spatial, and temporal nature of sound itself". Noise (and later glitch) has become a prominent aesthetic element within a wide variety of sound practices. Artists across the world have engaged deeply with noise. I will mention here the Japanese artistic movements of Onkyokei and Japanoise as particularly interesting in this regard. Several contemporary music artists including Yoshihiro Hanno, Carlsten Nicolai, Ryoji Ikeda, Kim Cascone, are but a few working with noise-glitch, while there is a long list of those who create sound installation works with noise features and elements (see Cox again).

The Long and Short of It is a result of the combined efforts of Poorna Swami, a choreographer, dancer and writer, and Marcel Zaes, an artist and a researcher who works in the disciplines of music, installation, and performance, as well as creating "post techno beat music" solo works. At the outset, Zaes says, their backgrounds did not come into play since they eschewed disciplines and genres; they chose form and subject matter over the discrete parameters of "sound", "space", and "bodies": "We started as two artists with obviously different areas of expertise and different media of expertise, but we met on this fertile common ground, which was our deep shared interest in conceptual and formal approaches to critical topics that matter". Their starting point was a gallery space in Bangalore and a set of conceptual rules that they devised.

In an interesting parallel at a visual art section of Serendipity Arts Festival 2019, a short film (and accompanying material) brought to life the experimental animated film *Syzygy*, by the recently deceased Indian artist Akbar Padamsee. In *Syzygy* a series of independent marked points are connected with one another with animated lines. It becomes apparent as one views the work that there are many ways to recalibrate the connections between any given two points, and similarly there are a

large number of ways these connections, between other points in space, can animate. The kinetic quality of lines travelling between two discrete points is linked clearly to a pattern, an order, or set of constraints. This constant shifting of possibilities, of lines and emergent patterns, which erase themselves only to be recalibrated in yet another iteration, was strikingly reminiscent of the manner in which the performers of *The Long and Short of It* incessantly moved, marked, re-marked, and thereby reformulated the Cartesian space of the conjoined rooms at the Old PWD Complex. This recalibration of space, and the inherent stochastic qualities of the composite performance, which saw audience members moving, shifting, and engaging with the space beyond the instructions of the artists and the performers, became the central performative outcome. It is in this spatial wrangling through exclusionary territorial claims, and the audience engagement with space and bodies—their own, their fellow attendees, and the performers—that the composite performance presented its dominant challenge. The corporeal ferality of the performers, who were increasingly enervated by their demanding exertions, added a bold, emotive, and psychological texture to the performance. Swami says that a lot of narrative content emerged during the development of the project. Personal stories were exchanged, notions of "land" and "home" were discussed, performers discussed political events of significance to them, and other memory exercises were conducted. In a psychic sense all this perhaps entered the atmospheric realm of the performance in a metaphoric feedback loop.

Yet another conceptual layer that the artists link to the performance and their work is a counter-posited tension between sound and language. Zaes brings up the vexatious terrain of representation in music versus language, and asserts the fundamental conceptual concern that goes all the way back to John Cage, and further back to the Italian Futurists—sound beyond music. Likening it to a "malleable paint", Zaes argues that sound is similar to how Swami understands bodies in space. The performance space (a gallery in Bangalore where they first staged the work) became an unmarked, undefined vessel or volume with the absence of conventions into which they came in with no predefined roles. As the seventy-minute piece unfolded, it became

more and more apparent that the visual events had taken over and was controlling the participatory experience, even as the pre-recorded sound devolved into a sort of background score, subservient to the sheer physicality of the performers and the numerous manoeuvrings of performers and viewers. The sensory ballast of the sonic experience was overwhelmed by everything else occuring, and the viewer/listener was being coaxed not along the path of deep listening but away from it. I invoke Alvin Lucier's *Vespers* in this regard, where the sonic experience both sensorially and conceptually remains resolutely in place, so as to illustrate the hierarchical situation of the sonic experience. The performance also appeared to have allegorical textures; the performative gestures, the discrete commands and other sonic acts, and the precise kinetic marking and remarking space, appear ritualistic and shamanistic in nature. Ritualistic patterning of mandalas and similar precise geometric practices in eastern mystical cultures have, for long, been seen as sites of confluence of forms of knowledge, whereby mysticism meets ritual, mathematics, art, and more. Who knows what priestly provisioning manifests in the peremptory claims to space and beyond by the artists and performers of *The Long and Short of It*? This is a thoughtful, provocative performance work that poses many futile questions, not to mention of course, ambiguous reactions.

TRANSLATING DANCE

Steve Buchanan is an American artist whose work *StepPer* is a transdisciplinary performance combining music and dance. With two performances staged at an outdoor venue in Panjim, Buchanan presented a one-hour set with an interactive percussion unit that was triggered by gestures on the *2nd Line Reflective Data Tranz Danz Floor*— his own invention. Buchanan is both a musician and a dancer, who cites his biggest influence as the inimitable Sun-Ra and his Arkestra: "it was they who made me realise that you could dance to any music". Born and raised in Philadelphia in the 1960s and 1970s, which as Buchanan indicates was always a big dance town, and influenced also

by the hard funk of the times such as Parliament Funkadelic amongst others, and jazz pioneer Cecil Taylor, his legacy is strongly linked to African-American music and dance during that early period. Having also come under the influence of artists such as Pat Marino, Marshall Allen, Elliot Levin and having studied Ballet, Modern, Afro-Cuban, Haitian, Senegalese, amongst other dance styles, Buchanan was able to imbibe a wide range of influences from both music and dance. Buchanan feels all this was a result of being "in the right place at the right time". Indeed, the times were full of great cultural ideas and mobility and Buchanan harks back to the era as critical. Eschewing theoretical arguments, Buchanan sees himself as an anarchist whose own work and legacy is in sharp contrast with minimalist traditions and arguably, with sound installation and art. Buchanan's work is inextricably conjoined with the dance floor and it is this very fundamental association that was on show at both performances. Primarily a musician who was also a dancer, the development of his portable interactive dance floor dates back to the mid-1990s. It was a friend's suggestion to amplify the sound of his dance steps that set him on the path to find a two-way solution that would facilitate his music to translate to dance and his dance to translate back to music. Buchanan began to research materials and Piezo sensors which would facilitate this and after eight versions of an initial design, he arrived at the current set-up that he carries around for performances. As he dances or plays the dance surface with drumsticks, the motions trigger corresponding sounds and patterns on a drum machine which is resolved and outputted to monitors via a MIDI interface. The earliest recording that Buchanan made with his invention dates to 1995, wherein his steps triggered saxophone sounds of a soft synthesiser. The main impetus was to combine music and dance because, as Buchanan says, "I was doing both all the time" and "it's a stupid separation, this thing with music and dance". As Buchanan notes, prior to his experiments there were tap dancers who were trying to make electronic sounds with their tap dance.

This interface between dance and music has grown sophisticated over time. Recently, there have been AI driven developments to
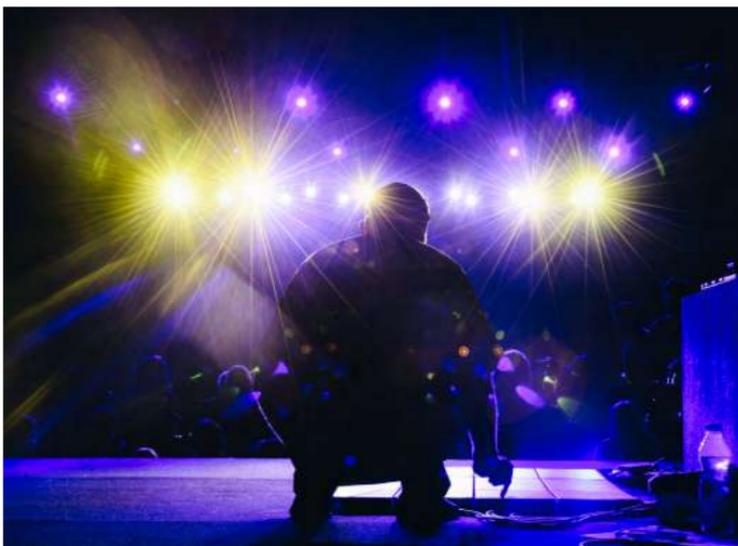
Stills from a live performance by Steve Buchanan at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photographs by The Lumiere Project.

translate dance moves into music. Yamaha Corporation's system employs sensors that translate a dancer's body movements into piano keystrokes. This system was showcased in a 2018 performance featuring the Japanese dancer Kaiji Moriyama accompanied by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra Scharoun Ensemble. But for at least two decades now, dance crews have been experimenting with various dance-music interfaces. From the New York City based Troika Ranch, Scottish Cassiel and Brazil based UNICAMP, there are also other interesting developments such as Music-touch Shoes for the hearing impaired. Ultrasound based systems have also been proposed to find a means to translate body movements into music. While Buchanan does not use wearable instruments or triggers, his performance relies heavily on his skills to translate and translate back from music to dance. The immediate limitation that presented itself at the DB Ground where Buchanan performed was the large outdoor venue. This effectively dissipated the sensory impact of the sound. One can imagine that in an enclosed setting with adequate house monitors, the audience would be able to "feel" Buchanan's steps and music more immediately thereby allowing a more intimate connection with the artist's project. It seems unusual at best to stage such a production outdoors with a seated audience. The FOH speakers also seemed peculiarly muted, driven under, and thereby limiting the impact of the percussive patterns that Buchanan was dancing out and striking out of his device. Conceptually narrow in scope, one can imagine *StepPer* to have a more robust sensory impact in an optimal setting.

SHAMANS, SOUNDS AND WISHES

At great variance to these three works was the only sculptural installation under the *Sound Interventions* programme. Ruchi Bakshi, who works with animation, lenticulars, paper assemblages, kaleidoscopes, and toys, installed a work in the Children's Park opposite the Old Goa Medical College in Panjim. Bakshi fabricated a device made of circular steel pieces interlocked in a concentric manner. The steel pieces rotated at angles to one another propelled

by a concealed motor. The entire sculpture and mechanism was placed in a section of the park cordoned off by an exterior boundary. At the four cardinal points of the boundary, interactive elements prompted those who came to view the work with instructions from a designated starting point to a concluding one. When approached by her friend and curator of the programme Sneha Khanwalkar to create "something with sound", Bakshi decided to draw from her dominant practice of creating children's toys, and tap into her long-standing desire to have "make-believe magic" happen. This motivation is at the core of her extended practice; Bakshi has for long worked with myth, legend, folk tales which have strong narrative allusions to magic and mysticism. The structural element that Bakshi decided was fundamental to conceptualising a work was that it had to have components that moved. Additionally, the sound element that she conceptualised would be linked to the moving parts of the sculpture. This basic scheme was connected to a clear intent to transport the viewer/listener into a parallel psycho-narrative realm, a dreamscape if you will. What would facilitate this transportation would have to be the interactive nature of the sculpture, its physical movement, and the sound itself. The visual, textual, and sonic elements became the three structural and conceptual legs of the work. Underneath the formal elements were philosophical, ethical, and moral concerns that Bakshi thought to be foundationally associated to her idea. Notions of virtue and vice, and the consequences of actions, were thoughts that Bakshi wished to introduce into the viewer's/listener's experience. The installation she imagined, would allow them to "in the middle of noise, kind of talk to themselves". To achieve this Bakshi devised rules and constraints—the primary one being the making of a wish. Evoking the common practice of blowing a birthday cake candle, Bakshi points out that this universal propensity for making wishes— whether at popular religious shrines, pagan or new age communities, in the midst of mundane life by hospital beds, at college examination halls or on football pitches—is a sociological practice of staggering ubiquity. Bakshi's instructions at the first cardinal point of the circular boundary of the installation were to blow into a sensor and make a wish. One then moved to the second point where the wish was

Views of "Winds of Change" by Ruchi Bakshi Sharma at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photographs by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

Installation view of "Winds of Change" by Ruchi Bakshi Sharma at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

written down on a piece of paper. At the third point the participant was instructed to speak the wish out loudly. And at the final point, the written wish was dropped into a box to be shared alongside numerous others to become part of a "tapestry" of emotive, psychological, and experiential imprints.

At the first cardinal point, Bakshi's primary instruction to blow into a sensor set off the motion of the two steel circles which rotate concentrically. A soundtrack, a low mechanical drone with a soft, distant metallic flange effect, played in accompaniment to the revolving steel rings. Bakshi says she wanted to create a safe space for people to participate in a ritual that allowed them to access a sense of comfort—something that they seek out in times of distress. She adds further that it is akin to seeking a hug, but not quite. Bakshi also wanted to link this experience to the element of wind: "I took the idea of a wind chime, made it into a deity, and created a ritual around it". Bakshi draws from her sense that the world is an interlinked community with common anxieties, suffering, and lived experiences. It was her intention to play out her empathy as a game. Also strongly linked to her thoughts behind conceiving the installation was her practice of meditation.

Design problems limited the scope of the installation. An interactive element of two resonating tuning forks at the first cardinal point did not work out. The initial intention of using wind to propel the rotating discs was discarded in favour of a motor driven action. The visual effect of the sculpture was limited by the absence of a more elaborate and considered design, although people were drawn towards it upon hearing the soundtrack. Despite the overall issues with design and interactivity, the work, titled *Winds of Change*, proved to be quite popular, particularly with children and mothers who expressed delight with their experience. From *bhavishyavani* machines on the streets which foretell things to come, interactive shamans, to virtual wishing wells, there have been numerous examples of sound/video art and sonic installations that have leveraged similar ideas. In Bakshi's installation, if the elements were at play and the sculptural form, its

material and movement, was the generator of sound (and of possible dreams and shamanic or meditative states), the piece would have found greater critical presence. The soundtrack served primarily as a textural background to the interactive experience and the visual effect of the rotating rings. I will recall here the very fine work Clinamen by the French artist Céleste Boursier-Mougenot, in which differently-sized crockery float about in a pristinely-blue pool and occasionally collide into one another, evoking the thoughts of the Latin poet and philosopher Lucretius. The "unpredictable swerve of atoms" that Lucretius described as *Clinamen*, indicated the greater absence of fixity in the universe and "at uncertain times and places, the eternal universal fall of the atoms is disturbed by a very slight deviation". Bakshi's work stops short of bringing the gravity of her metaphysical concerns to adroitly act upon the presence of her installed work, and her intention to evoke the etheric oneness of humankind and its shared consciousness remains only partially accounted for.

Such metaphysical deviations, lack of fixity, indeterminacy, and the nebulous etheric presence that is only very seldom, and insufficiently, apprehended by human artifice, is at the very promiscuous depths of our sonic worlds. We know so much and yet, we know very little. But our ongoing artistic incursions, excursions, and occasionally inhabitations in the aural realm can only be considered a good thing. As contemporary art continues to increasingly contend with the sonic realm and its diverse concerns, we may well be the beneficiaries of more engaging and artful ideas that reveal to us that which is hidden in the crevices of our sonic worlds.

Notes

[1] Christoph Cox, *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

[2] Cox, *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics,* 43.

[3] Gautam Pemmaraju, "Soundbaazi: The Sound of More Than Music", *ArtConnect: The IFA Magazine* 7, No. 1 (2013), 60 - 81. https://www.academia.edu/26584707/Soundbaazi_The_Sound_of_More_than_Music

[4] "Acoustic Ecology" is a term coined by the Canadian theorist R Murray Schaeffer. Westerkamp was one of his associates.

[5] O+A (Bruce Odland and Sam Auinger), "Reflections on the Sonic Commons", *Leonardo Music Journal* 19 (2009), 63.

[6] Cox, *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics,* 175.

[7] Colleen Hochberger, "Have You Heard of Sound Art: 9 Sonic Artists to Know", *Artspace*, July 25, 2019, https://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/the_hot_list/have-you-heard-of-sound-art-9-sonic-artists-to-know-56168

[8] Christoph Cox, "History of Sound Art", *Barnes Foundation*, January 30, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hh_5_CAySXY

[9] David Toop and Christian Marclay, "Conversations in the Archive: Sonic Boom: The Art of Sound (2000)", *Southbank Centre*, September 18, 2018, https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/blog/conversations-archive-sonic-boom-art-sound-2000

[10] Max Neuhaus, "Sound Art?", *Art Theory*, https://theoria.art-zoo.com/sound-art-max-neuhaus/

[11]Brandon La Belle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[12] Gautam Pemmaraju, "Sound Systems", *ART India: The Art News Magazine of India* XIX Issue I, December (2014), 28 - 37, https://www.academia.edu/26584706/Sound_Systems_Art_India_Lead_.pdf

[13] Thom Jurek, "AllMusic Review: Cooper-More Solo, Deep in the Neighbourhood of History and Influence", *AllMusic*, https://www.allmusic.com/album/deep-in-the-neighborhood-of-history-and-influence-mw0000114939

[14] For further information, see Jonathan Patrick, "A Guide to Pierre Schaeffer, the godfather of sampling", *Factmag*, February 23, 2016, https://www.factmag.com/2016/02/23/pierre-schaeffer-guide/

[15] Colin Black, "Radio Art Sound-Composition: Exploring A Dualistic Binaural Sonic Interplay", *Sound Scripts: Proceedings of the 2009 Totally Huge New Music Conference* 3 (2011), 37 - 44, https://www.academia.edu/4233274/Radio_Art_Sound-Composition_Exploring_A_Dualistic_Binaural_Sonic_Interplay

[16] Daniel Gilfiillan, *Pieces of Sound: German Experimental Radio* (Minneapolis: University of Minessota Press, 2009).

[17] Brandon La Belle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

Biography

Gautam Pemmaraju is a Mumbai based writer, independent filmmaker and creative consultant who works in the areas of history, literature and art. He has published extensively on sound/music production and aesthetics, sound culture and acoustic phenomena. His documentary film *A Tongue Untied: The Story of Dakhani* (2017) on the vernacular satire & humour poetry of the Deccan and history of Dakhani, continues to show periodically at various venues.

ES