

That sound should find such easy acceptance as a medium for the visual artists assembled in this exhibition is persuasive testimony to the powers of appropriation now exercised by contemporary art forms. Artists use whatever they feel is needed as medium; their appetite for new means and dimensions seems to grow concomitantly with the scientific exploration of space, both intergalactic and sub-particle. From our vantage the hybridization of painting and sculpture, begun early in this century with collage and assemblage, appears almost tame by comparison with the insatiable fusion of music, constructions and narrative, invented by the Dadaists in the years immediately following World War I. That fusion has since fueled any number of revivals of performance-oriented "art." The immediate forebears of a good part of the work included here are Oldenburg's and Kaprow's "happenings" of nearly twenty years ago. Their progeny range from Vito Acconci and Laurie Anderson to Tom Marioni. Common to all the work of this genre is the artist's central presence as performer. The principal instrument, more often than not, is the voice. The work's content is fundamentally literary and self-descriptive. A separate, but comparable in its dependence on performance, group can be considered more object-oriented. These are artists who build instruments meant to accommodate analysis both in an inert, sculptural, and in an active, sound-producing, condition: Bob Wilhite, Jim Pomeroy, or Tom Recchion for example. I mention these three because they employ sound in an abstract, deliberately nonmusical way in their work. Their instrument-making peers, by contrast, are very interested in creating music: Susan Rawcliffe, Bob Bates, or Emmet Chapman come to mind. It is precisely here, at the intention to either make or to avoid music, that the artists in this exhibition diverge, irreconcilably. For the musicians, form must follow function. For the others (and these are the artists most likely to have trained as painters and sculptors), function — any sound-making — is subordinate to form.

Yet another style is evident as well. In it, abstract, architectural situations are either built or isolated for uncommonly close attention, in order to enforce an experience of perceptual revision. Michael Brewster, Bill Fontana, Karen Wolff and William Kingsbury work in this mode. Actual spatial definition being their shared intent, they are most logically thought of as sculptors using sound.

But in a wider sense nearly all of the artists shown (or heard) here are sculptors. The instruments they make and the sounds the instruments produce occupy three-dimensional space. The theoretical antecedents for this kind of radically reduced sculpture of inferred mass are found in the work, mostly accomplished in the early and mid-1960s, of such minimalists as Don Judd, Robert Morris, Barry LeVa and Carl Andre. These artists' fundamental reliance on unadorned materials and abstraction based on architectural context almost forced a reaction that would counterpropose elaborate use of erstaz materials and expressionist

form patterning and decoration and/or theatrical uses of architecture — performance art and its instrument making. The work of such tableau builders as Donna Dennis, Alice Aycock, Michael McMillon, et al. are a parallel, if somewhat more traditional, manifestation of the same reaction.

In his investigations of the past seven years or so Michael Brewster has attempted to depict the volumes of a series of particular spaces, usually cubical interiors, in other than visual ways. His "clicker drawings" of a few years ago, consisting of active, randomly sounding mechanical clickers buried and camouflaged at various points in the walls, established his style as an essentially linear one. The snip of the clickers moved quickly from one to the other in a sort of concert the dots drawing. With the introduction of amplifiers in installations at Baxter Gallery, Cal Tech and the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, Brewster expanded his lines to planar configurations by consciously manipulating standing waves. Most recently at Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles he reverted to a single sound emitter within the wall, which made a cackling noise that rippled across the face of the four walls of the room — an aural analogue to a line drawing of the perimeter of the space.

Bill Fontana, a musically-trained artist working in San Francisco, recalls Brewster in his concern for delineating mass through sound, but Fontana has developed an altogether more tolerant, almost figurative, style. Recording ambient sound — vehicles crossing a wooden bridge or the natural cacophony of a rain forest affected by a solar eclipse — Fontana displaced ambience by using his recorded sounds outside their indigenous settings. His method resembles collage in its radical alteration of context, and in its essentially planar quality. His tapes stimulate visualizations beyond our normal sensate reactions; the eclipse moves like a hovering plane above the rain forest, temporarily quieting it. In other pieces Fontana reasserts his planar composition by using time-delayed noise sequences in a predetermined layering over one another.

In a work realized at Morgan Thomas Gallery, Los Angeles in 1977, Karen Wolff and William Kingsbury abridged both linear and planar elements. Eight rectangular dry wall slabs were arranged, obliquely and symmetrically, toward a single upright slab. This central slab served as sounding board for a consistent noise emitted through one set of four side pieces, deflecting it through the remaining four.

All of this work takes the isolation and manipulation of a single sense, hearing, as its subject. Perception itself is scrutinized for inherent meaning. By removing any object of focus, sound acquires tactile qualities. In defining the volume of a space at hand (Brewster), space as recreated in a recording (Fontana), or of an intentionally constructed space (Wolff & Kingsbury), we are obliged to learn spatial fullness and confines more intimately than ever before.

Faced with an object, formal questions on how a thing looks, and why, arise. That they must function in other than a preeminently visual manner precludes appraising most of these instruments by the same critical standards as one might sculpture in general. These contraptions must do something, and they are for the most part more akin to Rube Goldberg than to Brancusi or David Smith. Their roots are found in folk art and where "necessity-is-mother-of-invention." Jim Hobart confesses his maraca instrument — an assemblage of bottles, stones, and bicycle tire on wood — came to him while repairing one of his bike's tires. Prent Rodgers' "aeromembranophone" is a peanut butter jar with a balloon membrane stretched across it. Tom Recchion's contrivances are even more consciously "dumb," a favored avant-garde attitude since the 1920s. In his *Run Bar* a wooden dowel is affixed at right angles to a bamboo tube and "played" by running or walking with the dowel end to the ground. Similarly, the *Nail Shoe*, with its nails protruding downward from a plywood base strapped to shoes, makes sounds as the nails scrape across the floor.

Susan Rawcliffe's baked and painted clay pipes, "ocarinas," have a decidedly anthropological air to them. The instruments, which resemble one known to us as a "sweet potato," were common possessions in pre-Columbian Central American cultures. Tom Jenkins' hand-made wooden tops are another adaptation of folk culture. When spinning, his pieces produce an amazing variety of pitches.

Bob Bates' development during the past four years from painter to instrument-maker and musician is characteristic of the evolution of all the artists in this exhibition. Bates was dissatisfied with the static, unavoidably historical nature of painting as enforced on students of art. His introduction to playing music, by means of a simple pipe recorder, proved exhilarating and addictive. With practice he taught himself a rudimentary tonal structure, then, as a surrogate for accompaniment, he built a pendulum-operated bowing machine with a single string and coffee-can resonator. Set up on wooden stilts to human height and carefully constructed with an eye to exploiting the natural beauties of simple materials, Bates' *Solo Drum* resembles nothing so much as an H.C. Westermann sculpture, as do the two more complicated machines he has since built. Their construction has completely supplanted his painting, although his considerable drawing skills still find an outlet in the relatively complex working drawings necessary to the machines — the *Converter*, the *Fuser* and a yet untitled work. His *Fuser* allows two players, each working a treadle turning a drum that rubs a single string, to produce a range of fluctuating, rather shrill tones from its two sets of forty keys. The mechanism is supported by a pair of highly polished, gently splayed metal tubes, all the working parts beautifully crafted woods and wood laminates. Bates' careful attention to the instruments' finish is directly attributable to his training as a visual artist, something equally true of Stephen

Goodman's and Dennis Evans' meticulously finished instruments.

That Bates insists on building everything he uses, so that his instruments are home-made aggregates, underscores an instinctive empiricism common to most of the artists in the show. Most of them have consciously side-stepped western musical tradition in order to reinvent instruments and tonal systems uniquely their own; they have chosen to reinvent the wheel, musically speaking. The more theoretically-minded, such as Ivor Darreg, have worked out alternative systems of organizing and producing sounds. As with all forms of the avant-garde this resistant, skeptical aesthetic avoids a priori formulations, but unlike the plastic arts, where interpretation itself can constitute a style, music is a fixed repertoire of sounds; interpretation is limited to technique only.

Either to circumvent this limitation or because they are unabashed tinkerers at heart, such artists as Jim Pomeroy, Paul De Marinis and Alec Bernstein employ preexistent sound-makers in their work. Pomeroy's piece *Mozart's Moog*, for example, combines the musical parts of several wind-up music boxes in a single instrument where any combination of melodies, by Ravel, Gershwin, Tchaikovsky and a host of others, can be played and amplified. A tinny Beethoven tune coexists beside a rock-and-roll classic, an artificial synthesis resulting in music to go mad by. Pomeroy's taste for corny puns animates his work, which, beneath its veneer of satire, embodies a fascination with mixing and hybridizing simple technologies.

Subverting technology is one of Paul De Marinis' methods as well. A music theoretician employing state-of-the-art electronics, he chooses to produce parodically uncomplicated electronic melodies. His *Pygmy Gamelan*, a four unit micro-music-maker, plays, synthesizes and amplifies computer-age sound.

Uncomplicated sound generators — single string instruments — enlarged to architectural proportions are common to Doug Hollis' wind harps and Terry Fox's environmental string installations. Hollis' *Aolian Harp*, installed on the roof of San Francisco's Exploratorium, uses stainless steel concave ellipses to funnel wind against taut wire strings. The tones resulting from the friction are amplified through a network of guy wires connected to a cluster of circular stainless speakers. The fluctuating resonance of the wind and the sculptural ensemble of the metal apparatus creates unusually eidetic images for this medium. Fox employs resonating wire strings in such works as *552 steps through 11 pairs of strings*. As set up in his former studio in San Francisco, the long strings of a floor-anchored instrument produced a pulsating, space-filling range of tones when struck by Fox. The floor in this case operated as a resonator. The sound's effect was introspective, and more concerned with psychic, as opposed to purely physical, space — not unlike the role of bells in religious ceremony.

Richard Dunlap is committed to both music and painting, and to their independent existences within his oeuvre. In both activities his strong sense of visual composition is paramount. Dunlap's *Air Columns in C and G*, installed last year at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, was made up of sixteen varying lengths of pipe suspended by wires in front of a wall at angles calculated to produce different pitches when blown into. Its aural capabilities aside, the pipe and wire arrangement combined to make a fine drawing in space.

The ahistoricism and rough logics that nurture many of the other instrument-makers in this exhibition are gently satirized in Bob Wilhite's elegant pieces. Built mostly as part of a series of theatrical ensembles, in collaboration with another Los Angeles artist, Guy de Cointet, Wilhite's instruments sustain attention as modernist sculpture. For the play *Ethiopia*, Wilhite fashioned a cone, cube, and sphere that contained respectively, bass fiddle strings, a player piano suction pump and bagpipe reeds, and a tangle of telephone bells. Wilhite's acknowledgement of the forms of Cézanne was a covert simultaneous tribute to string, wind, and percussion. Within the context of the plays' earnestly nonsensical deliveries, Wilhite's instruments are used as a counterpoint to the actors' voices, and work as a sort of chorus. One particularly interesting piece, a waist-high black cube with a protruding tubular piece, represents a factory — its constant drone activated by human proximity. Here Wilhite proposes sound as locator. Subsequently Wilhite and Cointet collaborated on a large-scale outdoor production seen against the Churrigueresque facade of a building at Cal Tech, where Wilhite sought to cloak human presence by dressing the instrumentalists in black hooded costumes. For this production, *Ramona*, the accompaniment was reduced to a very minimal set of three gongs — a circle, square, and a triangle. Wilhite brought together his entire instrumental output for a concert, dubbed "Chinese Cocktail," at the San Francisco Art Institute, 1978. His latest pieces have been furniture-like painted constructions, reminiscent of Reitveld, which seem to portend a more traditional and exclusively sculptural direction for his future work.

Tom Marioni's various performances have often featured sound components. His drumming on paper, which itself results in a drawing, is directed toward mesmerizing his audience so that he can communicate with them telepathically.

The success of Mike Kelley's carefully scripted and elaborate slapstick pieces depends largely on his incantatory powers. His is a mesmerization using repeated key phrases. Kelley's deductive logic is patently absurd, but by conforming to notions of rational behavior his antics assume wide, metaphorical meaning. So with his props or instruments, such as the "Perspectophone" or the "Moaning Drum." His peculiar inspired combinations of words assume larger than poetic dimensions by Kelley's uninflected droning delivery —

they seem maniacally prophetic. The instruments are similarly uninflected, mostly producing a single sound. In this conjured landscape of flat, aural expanses, every verbal or musical incident becomes singular, unassailable, revelatory.

Anatomically, we are given two relatively easily trained physical media for self-expression, the voice and the hands. Typically the visual arts have relied exclusively on manual facilities. In "Sound" we are confronted with a variety of attempts to multiply the powers of both aural and visual communicators. In its insistent disregard for the traditional boundaries of the arts, the ambition is a relatively new one. But at their best, the results are timeless.

An "ability" to assemble historical substantiation for nearly any position may eventually come to be seen as the common denominator of our period. Painting and sculpture seem to work from an additive model of history, so that with time, successive styles couple onto one another, box-car-like. From outside the discipline, it appears a predeterminism is at work; from inside, the challenge of invention is practically overwhelming. Another view of history might be likened to a cross-section cut. In it, empiricism powers intelligence toward an introspective center. Every artist is taken to be a microcosmic distillation of time, his or her work comparable to a layered section — slices of varying depths from the shared body of self-expression.

Both positions, as well as a good dose of ahistoricism, are present here. All are vital, as the sounds heard and seen in this exhibition attest.

Richard Armstrong

## THE SOUND AND THE THEORY A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ART-MUSIC INTERFACE

The age of specialization is losing its grip on our thinking. As contemporary philosophers and social analysts insist, our world is becoming more and more diversified, multi-experiential, and simultaneous. Phenomena manifest themselves beside, inside, or around one another. Traditional causal logic and all forms of linear, stepwise reasoning and acting have become — well, not obsolete so much as just not enough.

In this burgeoning age of fluidity, artists — always the heralds of social change — have been expanding the range of their own activities. To supplement (not to replace) the traditional media, vanguard artists from all disciplines have been exploring the areas of potential activity existing between these media. As the roster of "traditional" lively arts has been expanded to include industrial-age media — photography, cinema, video — many new intermediate regions are opened for artists to examine. Between dance and film, for instance, choreographers and filmmakers can collaborate or, individually, borrow one another's materials, techniques, and approaches. Painters and poets can join forces to produce illustrated books, or they may share ideas and come up with visual poetry and artists' bookworks. Happenings, performance art, conceptual art, environmental and installation art, documentation art using written texts, photos, movies, TV, and so many other permutations and combinations of the arts already exist as forms of intermedia, not just combining, but serving to fuse, the various arts' heretofore exclusive domains.

Current musical art combines current musical practices with current visual concerns. But it has its origins in earlier attempts to blend the two media. There are numerous examples of creative individuals who, although noted especially for their work in one art form, were proficient in another. Arnold Schoenberg, Austrian inventor of the twelve-tone method of musical composition, painted in the expressionist manner of his artist friends. Erik Satie, musical collaborator with many of the École de Paris greats, was a deft draughtsman and caricaturist. American pioneer experimentalist composer Carl Ruggles took his oils and watercolors seriously. By the same token, such diverse artists as Henri Rousseau, Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters and the American Synchronist Morgan Russell composed music. Several records have recently appeared featuring interpretations of Duchamp's *Erratum musicale* and the musical version of *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors Even*.<sup>1</sup> Schwitters composed several pieces for the piano; more importantly, his *Sonate in Uhrlauten* was designed as a sonata in true classical form, consisting of four movements and including an introduction, a coda, and a fourth-movement cadenza. Markings indicating pitch, tempo, and dynamics run in a column alongside the stanzas. I say "stanzas" because the *Ursonate* is a poem, a fully written-out poem of nonsense words and syllables.

At one point in his career Russell devised a system equating the

twelve tones of the western musical scale with subdivisions of the color wheel. Such a system of color-pitch equivalents typified a tendency in early twentieth century aesthetics, which sought to establish and formalize relationships between the senses and, by extension, the artistic media. The Russian composer Alexander Scriabin was one of many people to build a "color organ" that projected hues when its keys — corresponding to musical notes — were depressed. Thomas Wilfred was another to work on such a machine, and his famous *Lumia Suite* of shifting light projections is programmed in time along musical structures of thematic development. Wassily Kandinsky, for his part, postulated a pitch-color equation that led to his stage play, *The Yellow Sound*.

These experiments in synesthesia influenced the avant-garde movements of the post-Victorian era, but the Futurists, Constructivists, and Dadaists throughout Europe did not seek tables of sensory exchange rates so much as they sought to express their dynamic world views in as complete a range of media as possible. Futurist painter Luigi Russolo built a battery of *intonarumori*, mechanical noisemakers — howlers, cracklers, roars, bubblers, etc. — for which he and others wrote concert scores. The 1912 opera *Victory Over the Sun* blended abstract decor, abstract music and the abstract language called *Zoom*, which Russian Futurist writers and painters had devised. Similarly, the post-revolutionary *Concert for Factory Whistles*, conducted from a rooftop by a man with semaphore flags, was composed by several writers and artists. Dutch composer Jacob van Domselaer conceived of a musical equivalent for the neo-plastic art of his friend Piet Mondrian, and the American "bad boy of music," George Antheil, was a member of Mondrian's group *de Stijl* for a time.

Antheil's piece de scandale, the *Ballet Mecanique* scored for eight pianos, four player pianos, an armada of percussion instruments and an airplane propeller, was written for the soundtrack to Fernand Leger's film of the same name and emulated its ostinato rhythms and cyclic themes. Satie also wrote music for artists' films, specifically Rene Clair's and Francis Picabia's *Entr'acte* which starred, among others, Duchamp and Man Ray. When German-born Dadaist-Surrealist Hans Richter put together his film *Dreams that Money Can Buy* in New York in the 1940s, he solicited scenarios from artists such as Leger, Ray and Duchamp, and music from composers like Darius Milhaud and John Cage.

John Cage is the creative personality from whom most postwar music-art hybrids — and most other kinds of intermedia — generate. He is the outstanding link between the generations of European avant-gardists who experimented in many media and the intermedialists, in America and in Europe, who have grown so spectacularly in number and influence over the last two decades. Cage, a student of Schoenberg's who was influenced by the wry attitudes and works of Satie and Duchamp — and by extensive