

Stephen Vitiello: The Lost Voice

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In 1999, artist Stephen Vitiello was given a residency in an unoccupied office on the 91st floor of Tower One at the World Trade Center. With contact microphones fastened to the windows, he converted one of the world's tallest buildings into the world's largest microphone, the vertiginous glass curtain acting as a distended microphonic diaphragm. The resulting recordings depict a sound world beyond the reach of most human beings; even beyond the reach of most of humanity's edifices. We hear wind and street traffic, the bellow of a ship in New York Harbor, and can even pick out an occasional voice from the streets a thousand feet below. Unsettlingly, there are several planes in the air, and the building itself creaks like an old wooden ship, straining against the torquing of its frame in the howling gales of Hurricane Floyd. Vitiello also employed photo-sensitive cells at the eye-end of a telescope to translate discreet light sources in the late-night New York skyline into eerie aural ghosts of the visual world.

Tracing the sound of space is Vitiello's most recent venture, but throughout the 1990s he was the sound guy on call for New York video artists. His sound works accompanied video works by, among others, Tony Oursler, Jem Cohen and Nam June Paik. A collaboration with Brazilian artist Éder Santos brought him to the attention of the organisers of the 1998 Per>SON festival. Vitiello was then invited to create a 64-channel audio work in a church in Cologne. Programmed alongside Pauline Oliveros and Scanner, Vitiello leapt

from video accompanist to the first rank of artists using sound in its own right. At the same time, 'sound art' leapt from dank basement sub-category to shiny immanence.

Vitiello is Assistant Professor of Kinetic Imaging at Virginia Commonwealth University – which is odd, given that he doesn't make images, and what he does make would not be considered kinetic in the conventional sense. This, of course, points to a burgeoning crisis in art-historical categories themselves: where to put someone like Stephen Vitiello? Contemporary music? Media art? Kinetic imaging is as good a place as any. After all, sound and sound waves, unlike images, cannot remain motionless. All sound is, by definition, kinetic. And Vitiello's work, in particular, basks in the aura of image, like the afterglow of recently departed visuals.

Although 'sound art' is still a clunky and perhaps reductive tag, it is, in Vitiello's words, 'just defining enough to get people to peek in the door'. If we need this explicit sign-posting – at least for the time being – it is due to the pervasive dominance of the visual, not just in the art world but in all human experience and language. We don't need to look any further than Vitiello's own metaphor of 'peeking through the door', or even this sentence, which 'looks' for examples. According to Vitiello, artists have been working with sound for 'a long time, but there hasn't been an economy for it'. It is only in recent years that galleries and museums have begun to open their programming ears to these noisy interlopers.

In his book *Noise Water Meat*, Douglas Kahn tracks the lineage of sound, unaccounted for in the economies of the art world. But a history of sound art proper – that is, sound making its mark on an economy created in tandem with the works themselves – has yet to be written. When it is, Vitiello's World Trade Center project will undoubtedly occupy a prominent position.

Of course, the destruction of the towers gives these recordings a monumental gravitas. The phrase 'ground zero' takes on additional meaning in this context: the destruction of the Twin Towers was the zero hour, their location the zero place. From this zero, the new epoch proceeds. As we have been told repeatedly since 11 September 2002, 'nothing will ever be the same'. Whether or not we believe the black-and-white simplicity of this sentiment, Vitiello's recordings act as aural portraits of the world pre-9/11; portraits made at the very location of the transformation, perched on the fulcrum between 'then' and 'now'.

From the perspective of 'now', these depictions of 'then' fulfil one of the original promises of Thomas Edison when he invented audio recording. In *The Phonogram*, published in 1893, Edison described the 10 uses he imagined for his new device, including a '“Family Record”, a registry of sayings, reminiscences, etc, by members of a family, in their own voices: and of the last words of dying persons'. Vitiello's recordings are the reminiscences of the fallen towers 'in their own voices'; the last words not of the legion dead, but of the buildings themselves, the architecture which, for the terrorists, symbolised America's capitalist empire, and which now, for the rest of us, symbolise the multitude lost and the zero from which the new world begins to reconstitute itself.

Vitiello has already begun to take a role in shaping the history of sound art. As chief curator of 'I Am Sitting in a Room: Sound Works by American Artists 1950-2000' at the Whitney in early 2000, he included many artists working between hem and cuff of the conservative world of classical music: Alvin Lucier (whose 1971 piece gave the show its title), Steve Reich, Terry Riley and even a radio piece by Canadian pianist Glenn Gould, who normally worked further up the sleeve, closer to the heart of the concert tradition. Non-musicians – many of them better known as visual artists – made a strong showing (or sounding) too. Fluxus was well-represented by Alison Knowles,

Philip Corner, George Brecht and Dick Higgins. Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci, who have each worked in sound, often as accompaniment to their own videos and installations, were also included.

In addition to answering the question ‘who?’ Vitiello has suggested answers to the question ‘what?’ Last April, in an online symposium on sound art on the Artforum website, he wrote, ‘Music can be defined by sound in time, while sound art may be defined by sound in space,’ an idea he confessed to borrowing from Max Neuhaus, father of the sound installation. The philosopher and critic Christoph Cox took issue with this definition, pointing out that ‘sound is irreducibly temporal’ and that such distinctions tended ‘to occlude the profound temporal experience of sound installations’. Still, Vitiello says he stands by the notion. He is quick to point out that it may not work for everyone or for every sound piece, but for him it creates a useful conceptual distinction. He is interested in dialogue between himself and a place, or between the listener and a place; a dialogue carried out in the language of sound.

For Vitiello, the sounds he captures, creates and uses have their own narrative and vocabulary. Much of this derives from the referentiality of sounds, from sonic depictions of their sources: barking = dog, siren = ambulance, thunder = lightning, and so on. The World Trade Center recordings, GCT Loops recorded in New York’s Grand Central Terminal, and Tetrasomia, a web-based piece created for Dia, retain the connection of sounds to their sources, harvesting those connections for their semiotic value. Other pieces, however, erase all material referentiality. Mirror Light, with legendary drone violinist Tony Conrad, and The Light of Falling Cars CD nudge Vitiello’s practice closer to something one could comfortably call music.

Much of his recent work engages directly with the notion of sound in space, often echoing the interior architecture of the buildings in which they are installed. Speakers are suspended from the ceiling, tracing the contours of the space and radiating sub-sonic tones that make the speaker cones vibrate in patterns Vitiello describes as 'nearly choreographed'. The motion of the speakers is sound realised visually, a sly reversal of sound art's tendency to represent the visual aurally. The lines traced by the arrangement of speakers make direct reference to the spaces of the built environment in which most of us spend the better part of our lives, drawing attention to the boundaries that delimit and contain our senses. And at the same time, the organism-like pulsations of the speakers initiate a spatial intervention which can be seen and perhaps felt but, due to a 'blind spot' in the range of our hearing, not heard. Appropriately, for a professor of kinetic imaging, the result is the very image of a kinetic sculpture, albeit one subtly driven by sound.