

SOUND



Edited by Caleb Kelly

Documents of Contemporary Art

window, resonating sympathetically in the conductive mass of the fire escape, and it made her wonder where else was the call to repent in that big rat's nest of vibrating metal called a city.

She finally heard natural radio for the first time during the same year at Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field* in New Mexico, where she camped out and made recordings deep into the night. She was not there to watch lightning – it's not good to be too close to lightning while recording VLF, or in any instance, for that matter – instead she was there on an artistic pilgrimage and because of the isolation the site provided from electrical grid that interferes with VLF reception. Following instructions, she found the Omega tracking signal and knew her antenna and receiver was working. [...]

Douglas Kahn, extract from 'Joyce Hinterding and Parasitic Possibility', in *Re-Inventing Radio: Aspects of Radio as Art* (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2008).

Seth Kim-Cohen

Doug Aitken's *Sonic Pavilion*//2009

[...] Doug Aitken's *Sonic Pavilion* (2009) is located on a thickly forested hilltop in the grounds of the Inhotim cultural institute in Brazil. After five years of planning and construction, *Sonic Pavilion* was up and running when I visited in the third week of August, a few weeks before its October launch. As Aitken explained to me, the unusually long construction time was necessitated by the work's central feature: a hole approximately one mile deep and one foot in diameter. Using specialized equipment, the hole was painstakingly drilled, emptied, drilled deeper, emptied again and so on before being lined with concrete. Aitken then lowered a battery of microphones and accelerometers into the hole at varying depths. At the top, the sounds that result – of the earth's rotation and the shifting of seismic plates – are transposed into the range of human hearing and amplified by eight loudspeakers arrayed around the circular interior of the structure. The printed project description speaks of 'translating' the earth's movement: 'This artwork strives to provide a new relationship to the earth we constantly walk upon and occupy, revealing its mysterious and living dialogue.'

Aitken is not the first artist to turn to the medium of sound in an effort to create, as he put it, an experience with 'no beginning and no end, deep-rooted, pure and direct'. There is a pervasive sense – not just among visual artists who

turn to sound as an alternative but also among artists who work primarily with sound – that the sonic is truer, more immediate, less susceptible to manipulation, than the visual, as if the adjective sound (meaning ‘solid, durable, stable’) should somehow constitute the noun. This tendency has a history. In ‘Primal Sound’, an essay written in 1919, Rainer Maria Rilke fantasizes about dropping a phonograph needle into a skull’s coronal suture (the line created by the fusing of bone plates during infancy):

What would happen? A sound would necessarily result, a series of sounds, music ... What variety of lines then, occurring anywhere, could one not put under the needle and try out? Is there any contour that one could not, in a sense, complete in this way and then experience it, as it makes itself felt, thus transformed, in another field of sense?

Rilke’s fantasy announces the dream of a unified field of the senses, bridging ‘the abysses which divide the one order of sense experience from the other’ and ‘completing’, to use Rilke’s verb, our experience of the world. The implication is that there is a wholeness out there and that any feeling we may have of insufficient understanding is merely a product of our inadequate perceptual faculties in here.

Unaware of the book in my bag, Aitken at one point conjured the name Fitzcarraldo, relating the folly of his project to Herzog’s. Yet while Herzog’s film and Aitken’s installation both offer challenges to the intransigence of the earth, Rilke’s hypothetical experiment offers a way to describe the fundamental difference between them: for Herzog, dropping a phonographic needle into the suture’s groove would be meaningless, except for the act of having done it. The resultant sound would not get us any closer to the ‘truth’ of the skull or its onetime inhabitant (brain, soul, self); it would document only the act *qua* act. ‘Here, in the self-aware presentation of doing something – rather than in the faithful representation of something – resides the only experience to which we can convincingly ascribe the adjective true. Herzog warns against the seduction of thinking that the truth is something out there and that knowing is simply a matter of quantifying and transporting that something in here: ‘Facts do not create truth.’ Aitken’s *Sonic Pavilion*, on the other hand, equates the facticity of sensory experience with truth; but then dodges the responsibilities of this equation, clinging to the justifying premise that, ultimately, there is a something, a telos, backstopping experience.

The pavilion is accessed by means of a spiralling, inclined walkway that starts outside, following the contour of the hill, before turning into a winding concrete corridor that appears to move inevitably toward this evasive something. The spiral path continues inside on a raised wooden ramp that doubles as the room’s only seating. As the sloped corridor emerges into the glass pavilion, the earth

appears through the panoramic windows in its primaeval virginity, the Brazilian forest receding endlessly in every direction. When the visitor nears the glass, a lenticular film blurs the periphery of the field of vision as in cinematic depictions of a dream or a memory. Everything – the corridor leading inward like a cathedral labyrinth, the emptiness of the interior, the austere geometry, the foggy visual frame – is designed to induce the impression of unprecedented access to secret sensory experience.

The sound of the pavilion is unpredictable, or, as it is called in music, aleatory. During my visit, the speakers emitted a low, steady rumble. Occasionally, a brief, higher-pitched moment of friction intervened, like the sound of rubbing your hands together in the cold. I take Aitken at his word when he says the primal churning of the audio is the sound of the earth a mile below its surface. But what was I actually hearing? Stone moving against stone? Loose material shifting as solid material beneath it gave way? To pedantically supply this information would reduce the ‘mysterious and living dialogue’ to the didactic monologue of a science exhibit. I found myself relating the sound of the earth to more familiar, worldly sounds: wind across a microphone, jet engines from inside the jet, the massive transformer outside my bedroom window; and to musical and artistic sounds: the Theatre of Eternal Music’s *Inside the Dream Syndicate, Volume I: Day of Niagara* (1965), Peter Ablinger’s *Weissl Weisslich 6 for twelve cassette recorders* (1992), and, most uncannily, *Nurse with Wound’s Salt Marie Celeste* (2003). The sound itself is nothing special: only the suggestion of its source solicits our attention and grants it meaning. Of course, this is always the case: meaning does not simply inhere within the in-itself, regardless of whether it is the thing-in-itself or sound-in-itself. Meaning is only ever produced by the frictions between things. Like every medium, sound derives its meaning from context, from intertextuality, from the play of difference in its conceptual and material strata. It is the worldly, rather than the earthly, that presents the possibility of meaning.

The situation and design of *Sonic Pavilion* insist that there is something sacrosanct beneath the superficial stratum we occupy. The sound emanating from the hole and amplified in the pavilion is the cipher that will unlock the coded mystery of the deep. The Rilkean implication is that a phenomenal entity, like the earth, possesses immanent, essential properties that are consistently expressed across different sensory manifestations. It might be comforting to think that phenomena can be ‘solved’ and that experience can be completed by filling in the blanks in our senses. But confronting the existential burden of knowing that experience inevitably evades completion is surely more honest. *Sonic Pavilion* denies the visitor the privilege of assuming this burden, offering blissful ignorance in its place. Too bad. It’s not every day that an artist is given the opportunity, the site and the resources to dig a mile deep hole in the ground.

Sonic Pavilion comes so close to initiating a genuine act of consciousness, of conscientiousness, of conscience. But ultimately it refuses to gaze into the void at its core, abdicating the responsibility of facing up to what Wallace Stevens describes as nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Seth Kim-Cohen, extracts from 'The Hole Truth: Doug Aitken's *Sonic Pavilion*', *Artforum* (November 2009) 99–101.

Angela Rosenberg

Hearing and Seeing: Karin Sander//2010

[...] The exhibition 'Zeigen. An Audio tour through Berlin by Karin Sander' poses unusual challenges for the viewer. Upon entering it, the Temporäre Kunsthalle appears to be completely empty: because nothing seems to refer to a work of art, visitors are confronted with their own expectations of an exhibition with this title and such an extensive cast of participating artists. However, on stepping up close to the walls, one sees a thin strip of lettering running round the hall in a continuous line, naming all the artists involved in alphabetical order. Big names lie alongside those of young or lesser known artists, each assigned a three-digit number.

By entering this number into an audio guide system – a playback device and headphones of the kind that are standard equipment in many museums today – the visitor can select and listen to any contribution. The titles appear in the display of the device, while the works themselves remain, at least for the time being, invisible.

Karin Sander's exhibition concept poses a challenge not only for the public but for the artists, too. Her invitation requested contributions containing 'acoustic information about a work or working process ... that would translate your work and make it "visible".' Sander, who sent this invitation to several hundred artists, soon outstripped her direct personal and professional circle, using other groups and networks to contact artists unknown to her. Recommendations and extensive follow-up work broadened the circle yet further, not so much systematically as through a snowball effect. Within the short two-month preparatory period, 566 artists replied, ready on short notice to enter into this – for many unfamiliar – terrain. Depending on what statistics one cares to credit, this number is approximately one tenth of the artists living and working in Berlin right now and, as such, may stand as a representative cross section of the Berlin art scene.