



Catherine Béchard

BETWEEN SOUNDS AND ABSTRACTIONS

Sabin Hudon

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A Response by Deanna Radford

Between our commonly shared understanding of every-day household objects as they are physically and culturally constructed, and, the manipulation of these objects, their meanings, and capabilities, lies *Between Sounds and Abstractions*. Comprised of two playful and sensitive kinetic sculptures or *objets sonore*¹, *The Voice of Things* and *Au bout du fil* were created by Montreal artists Catherine Béchar and Sabin Hudon and were on exhibit at [aceartinc.](#) from October 14, to November 12, 2005.

The duo creates what they name as acoustic territories with their works and give specific credence to the old question: if a tree falls in the forest and there is nobody around, does it make a sound? The viewer is an essential contributing component to each of these works. While at first glance, the space that Béchar and Hudon have made is quiet and fragile in appearance; the space has been built for play. In musical terms (whether it is with rock or classical or electronic), the traditional performer-to-audience framework has been collapsed and twirled about... remixed, even. In literary terms, the duo as writer, promise action-packed authority to the viewer.

Should sound be a concrete thing, Béchar and Hudon bring it to life, allowing the viewer, quite literally, to see the sound being created and importantly, to be a participant in its creation... "Why can't sounds be visible? Would the feedback from ear to eye cause fatal oscillation? Can you remember the first sound you ever heard?"² *Sound as abstraction?* There is an entire garden of poetic musings that *Between Sounds and Abstractions* inspires.

Béchar and Hudon explain,

Au bout du fil is an acoustic work inspired by a very simple amplification device of our childhood, the 'string telephone'... [Where] a series of strings are stretched between two steel pails along with a mechanized platform to which paper sheets are attached... The paper rubs back and forth on the strings. In *The Voice of Things* "two huge over-scaled mechanical brooms are suspended and see-saw" backwards and forwards. "As they teeter-totter, they scratch, stroke

and brush against a heap of newspapers... Their rhythms, sometimes very slow, convey a feeling of suspension in time and their excessive size [suggest] a sense of frailty and loss of balance.³

The sheer scale of *The Voice of Things* and *Au bout du fil* creates tension and contrast. What subverts the potentially abrasive elements of pure tension and contrast alone is the synaesthetic possibility that is in the space all around. There is some kind of magic happening with *Between Sounds and Abstractions*. How do those giant machines work? It's as if their makers zapped the insignificant items that comprise their works from the corner of a room, from the everyday landscape of our lives and dropped them in a new location where they are seemingly oversized, conjuring scenes from *Fantasia* and *Dancer in the Dark*. While the household items that make up each work within *Between Sounds and Abstractions* are in some regard, the stars of the installation, a video camera, MAX/MSP and Soft VNS software are an igniting force in making it all happen. Suspended from the ceiling, the objects are showcased in their new station. The placement causes the viewer simply enough, to consider the objects in a way in which they do not ordinarily.

[...] Ancient life was all silence. In the 19th Century, with the invention of machines, Noise was born. Today, Noise is triumphant and reigns sovereign over the sensibility of men. Through many centuries life unfolded silently, or at least quietly. The loudest of noises that interrupted this silence was neither intense, nor prolonged, nor varied. After all, if we overlook the exceptional movements of the earth's crust, hurricanes, storms, avalanches, and waterfalls, nature is silent.^{4, 5}

The space created by *Between Sounds and Abstractions* is like a magnifying glass; take one look and mundane becomes magnificent, fragile becomes tactile and quiet gets a little louder: "The resulting space lets us listen to the music of sounds produced by various materials occupying our daily experiences. These amplified micro-sounds inhabit the space, weave a tale about the precariousness of time..."⁶ Seeming larger than life, the sculptures move ever so slowly and take on a whole new shape with a collective voice forming with each person who visits. But, what about the vocabularies that typically come to mind when one looks at a broom, a pail or a piece of string? *Efficiency, cleanliness, work*. While the common expectations for efficiency, cleanliness and work can be associated with mechanization and machination, these objects, funnily enough, seem anything but efficient in the traditional sense of word: of output and commerce. The dawning of the new era of [electronic] sound, as painted above in 1913 by Futurist Luigi Russolo has perhaps, come full spectrum and has folded into itself, into our minds⁷, and beyond.

Seemingly, these *objets sonore* are sentient. More likely though, the motions that these objects engender have so much character because of their movements and they are taken from child-like objects and ideas. The call and response arrangement of the works is musical and lends itself to a kind of characterization that can be perceived as endearing. With the right number of viewers at any given time, the sounds generated by both sculptures blend together. Imagine an orchestra of these strange instruments, or, a band at the very least. Indeed, "In 1915, [Thomas] Edison had used a programmed selection of phonographic music for factories to determine the extent to which it would mask hazardous drones and boost morale."⁸

In praise of noise : a new intensity

After the Industrial Revolution machines became louder: in earlier times, violence and noise came principally from war, the sound of battle. Some noises are now heard everywhere: car engines were never designed to create sound, like pianos or violins: their noise is due to their materials. We live today in a world of clamour and noise, so bruitiste elements logically took their place in music composed under those specific historical conditions. This concept of noise is usually associated with revolt or at least with the idea of the destructive (or jubilatory) power.

Noise - an undesirable disturbance additional to the signal and useful data, in the transmission channel of a data processing system. Noise a set of unharmonious sounds.⁹

The synaesthesia that is at work with *Between Sounds and Abstractions* brings many elements of play and mischief to life, turning questions of work/play, noise/quiet and performer/audience all around. Where journalist Joseph Lanza wrote about the history of "Gebrauchsmusik... meaning 'utility music' or 'music to be used.'... Music for elevators, offices, stores, and housecleaning..."¹⁰ we can take pleasure in knowing that such possibilities are now so much more diverse than this. In a poetic fashion, Béchard and Hudon achieve their goal of creating synaesthesia, of "sound matter as palpable matter"¹¹—an immersive and fun experience indeed.

Notes

1. *Objet sonore*, "Sonorous object: A Term coined by Pierre Schaeffer to describe the smallest self-contained particle of a soundscape. Though it may be referential (i.e., a "bell"), it is to be considered as pure sound, independent of its source and of any semantic content. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (Eds.) *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (Continuum, New York, 2004, p. 103)

2. Pauline Oliveros, *Some Sound Observations* Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds) *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (Continuum, New York, 2004, p. 103)

3. Catherine Béchard and Sabin Hudon, artist statement and project description

4. Luigi Russolo, *Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto* (1913) Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (Eds.) *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (Continuum, New York, 2004, p. 103)

5. Anna Friz, *Heard but Unscene, women in electronic music*
<http://dpi.studioxx.org/index.php?id=37> (21.09.04)
"Italian and Russian Futurists saw that the advent of industrial modernity had wrought massive changes in society, and believed that through the continued development of technology a new, expanded consciousness could be realized. What they failed to address were the political and social implications of technological development and implementation. Consequently their Futurist utopias were shattered by the dystopic reality of fascism, totalitarianism, and the new killing machines of WWII."

6. Catherine Béchard and Sabin Hudon, artist statement and project description.

7. Christof Migone, *Volume (Of Confinement and Infinity) A History of Unsound Art* Nicole Gingras (Ed) *Sound in Contemporary Canadian Art* (2004) (éditions Artexes, 2004, Montréal, Québec, p. 81)

Canadian sound artist Christof Migone contributes a beautiful and challenging piece to *S:ON*, on the art of sound transmissions. Migone writes; "sound epitomizes leakage, sound confirms the porosity of space." He quotes Paul Celan:

SPEECHWALLS, space inwards-
Spoiled in upon yourself,
You holler yourself through all the way to the last wall.

Threadsuns, trans. Pierre Joris
(Sun & Moon Press, Los Angeles, 2000, p. 227)

8. Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy-Listening, and Other Moodsong* (Picador, USA, 1994, p. 13)

9. Anonymous, translated from the French by Michael Novy. *An Anthology of noise and electronic music / second a-chronology 1936 - 2003* (Sub Rosa Records, 2003, Belgium)

10. Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy-Listening, and Other Moodsong* (Picador, USA, 1994, p. 16)

11. Catherine Béchard and Sabin Hudon, artist statement and project description.



The Voice Of Things, 2004-05.

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Critical Distance is a writing program of **aceartinc.** that encourages critical writing and dialogue about contemporary art. The programme is an avenue for exploration by emerging and established artists and writers. Written for each exhibition mounted at **aceartinc.** these texts form the basis of our annual journal Paper Wait.

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Deanna Radford is a Winnipeg based writer and radio programmer. She is a contributing organizer of Send + Receive: A Festival of Sound and is the Executive Director of the GroundSwell new music series.



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