

Gordon MONAHAN: Seeing Sound: Sound Art, Performance & Music 1978-2011

Gil McELROY

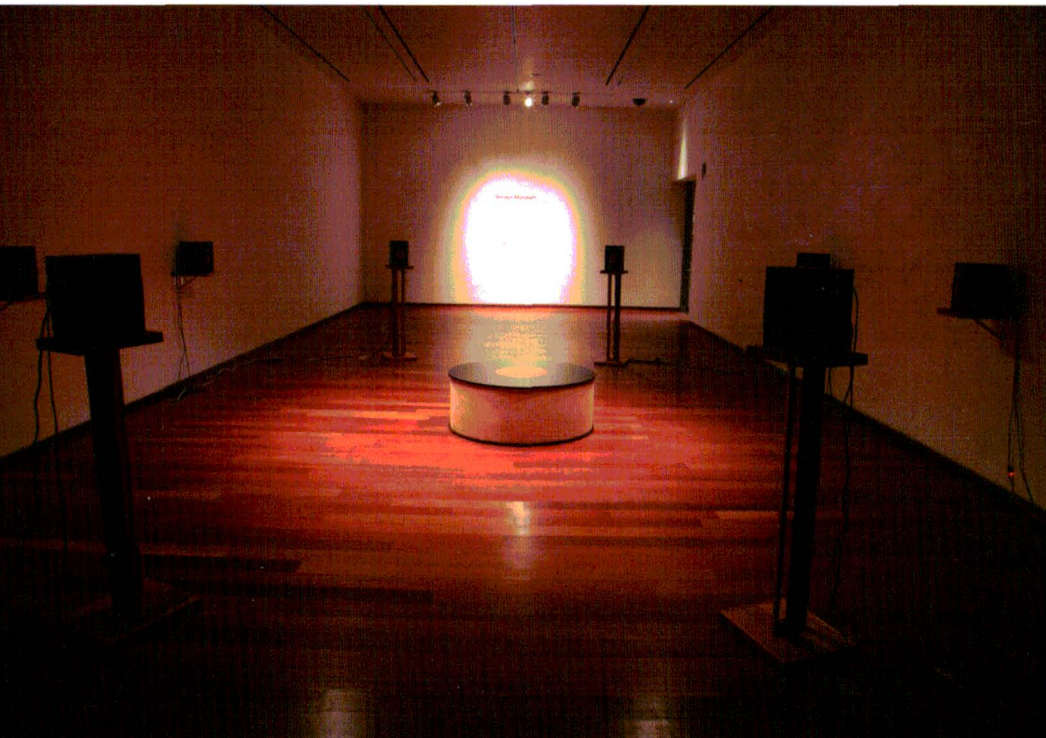
Meaford, Ontario-based composer and artist Gordon Monahan has been a fixture on the New Music scene since the mid-1980s, and much like his mentor, composer, writer and artist John Cage, he has not restricted himself solely to working in the realm of the sonic. His compositions are, more often than not, integral to performative and installational pieces in which he seeks to undermine the preconceptions and assumptions we bring to the proverbial aesthetic table about how our aural and visual worlds connect.

Recently, seven Canadian galleries (as well as one in Berlin, a city where Monahan lived for quite some time) collaborated on a major retrospective exhibition of his installational/sonic works created over the past three decades. Two of those galleries were the MacLaren Art Centre in Barrie, Ontario, and The Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa.

At the McLaren, Monahan installed two works, one of which took full advantage of an existing architectural feature of the building. *The Chimney Effect* (2011) comprised a steel and glass box that Monahan installed in the opening of the lobby fireplace. The natural movement of air up through the chimney flue lent itself to an Aeolian (wind-powered) musical instrument courtesy of several piano strings laid across a small gap in the box through which air would flow naturally.

It wasn't an overly visual work, and if you couldn't or didn't hear it (which was the case during my visit to the gallery, when the gap in the box had been closed for some reason, preventing air from flowing across the strings and consequently ensuring no sound emanated from the work), you would have never noticed its presence.

It was decidedly different upstairs



Gordon MONAHAN,
*A Very Large Vinyl LP
Constructed in Acoustic
Space*, 2007-2008.
Computer with MAX/MSP
software, computer inter-
face, loudspeakers, bench,
dimensions variable.
Photo: courtesy The
MacLaren Art Centre.

where Monahan had installed *A Very Large Vinyl LP Constructed in Acoustic Space* (2007-2008). It's by no means a new work; Monahan had installed versions previously in Victoria and Regina, for instance. But here at the McLaren, it was visually reworked from previous incarnations. The concept was simple: establish a series of speakers in a circle within a space, and place the viewer/listener at the centre. One of Monahan's compositions—created especially for this work—emanated from the speakers in a circular manner, moving consecutively from one to the other at the speed that a 33 1/3 LP recording would rotate on a turntable.

Early versions of the piece included a chair placed at the centre of the sonic vortex, but for the McLaren show, Monahan created a small circular bench painted to resemble an LP recording and set it in the centre of the gallery space. The primary sonic element of the work thus had visual reinforcement in the form of the bench, furnishing the cue

for our conscious awareness of the aural structure he'd established for the work.

Conscious awareness is one thing, physiological experience quite another. What Monahan ensured we would experientially undergo, here, was the disconcerting shifting and motion of the space around us. There was a disconnection between what we could see—the stillness of a room with a bunch of speakers on stands set in a circle around us—and what we heard—an ever-moving swirl of sounds emanating from unfixed locations. We were situated smack-dab at the centre of an aural vortex entirely at odds with our fixed visual surroundings, and it is in such discrepant situations of mismatching and discordancy that the possibility of metaphor occurs.

Nausea too is a not-uncommon response to the stresses imposed by incompatible aural/visual stimulation. *A Very Large Vinyl LP*



Constructed in Acoustic Space ends up playing upon the possibilities of a kind of primal "fight-or-flight" responses we might have: either fight to find an aesthetic reconciliation between the visual and sonic and so adapt the body to its surroundings, or utterly surrender to the piece's physiologically demanding and upsetting effects and be forced to depart this space. Either is actually an appropriate and meaningful response to the work.

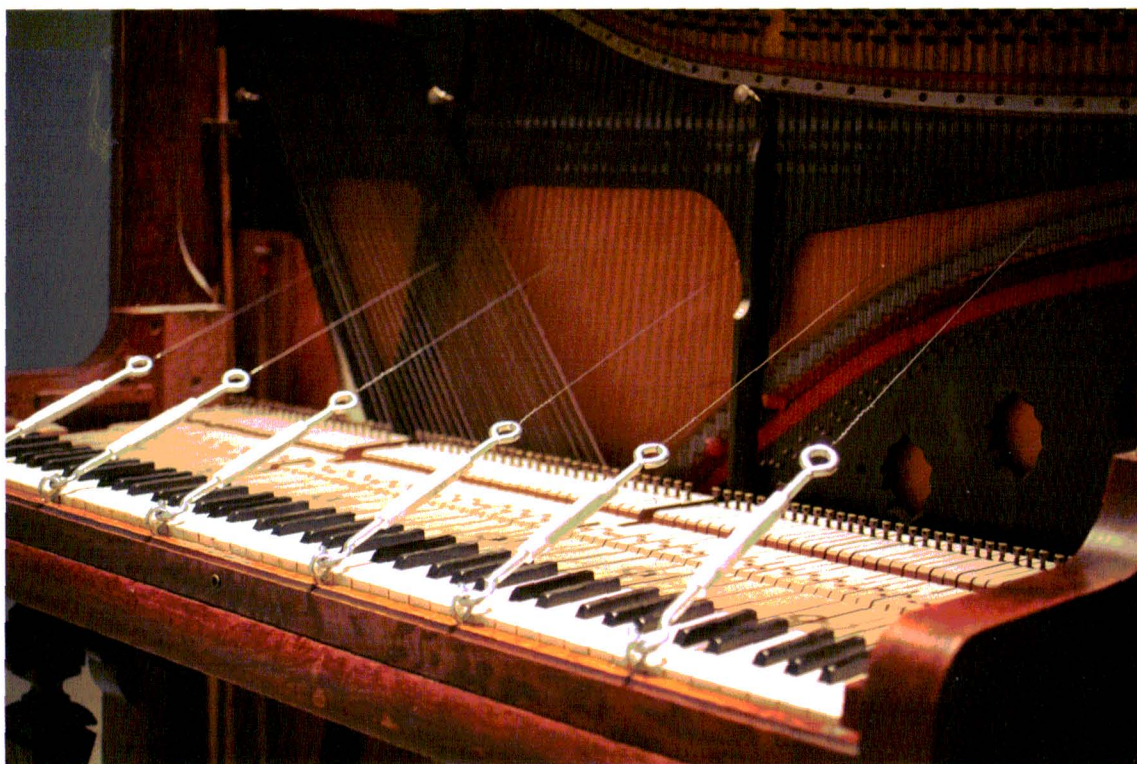
Gordon MONAHAN,
The Chimney Effect,
2011. Steel, glass, piano
wire, chimney, 150 x 70
x 30 cm. Photo: cour-
tesy The MacLaren Art
Centre.

Gordon MONAHAN,
*A Piano Listening to
 Itself—Chopin Chord*,
 2009-2010. Piano, piano
 wire, motors, hardware
 fasteners, steel cable,
 wood, amplifier, mixer,
 audio player, dimensions
 variable. Photo: courtesy
 The Robert McLaughlin
 Gallery.

Gordon MONAHAN,
Music from Nowhere,
 1989. Loudspeaker
 cabinet, homemade elec-
 tronic circuits, motors,
 solenoids, pumps, water,
 glass, plexiglass, plastic,
 metal, cloth, dimensions
 variable. Photo: courtesy
 The Robert McLaughlin
 Gallery.

Three separate works comprised the Robert McLaughlin Gallery component of the overall project, one of which—*Erratum Addendum* (2008)—is a purely sonic work installed, here, in the gallery lobby in the form of eight speakers mounted along the perimeter of the two-storey lobby skylight each of which emits singular piano notes at intervals.

The largest of the McLaughlin's exhibition spaces was devoted to Monahan's most recent incarnation of the installational work, *A Piano Listening to Itself—Chopin Chord* (2009-2011). It's a piece Monahan has installed out-of-doors (in an urban square in downtown Warsaw, Poland as part of a festival in 2010), but which lends itself well to an interior gallery installation. For the McLaughlin variation, six very long piano strings were attached high against one wall of a long, rectangular gallery space. Together they sloped downward across the gallery space until they encountered an old upright piano set at the far end of the gallery. Small holes drilled into the soundboard of



the piano allowed the wires to pass through and then be anchored low on the wall immediately behind it. Small electrical motors were attached to each of the piano strings at the high end of things, into which were transmitted recordings of sequences of piano notes Monahan extracted

from works by the Polish composer, Frederic Chopin. Thus stimulated, the long wires would vibrate, their sound sympathetically amplified further by their connection to the piano soundboard at the far end.

Sonically, we responded to the notes of the piano music we heard, and to the buzz of the small motors as they switched on and off. Visually, the long traverse of wires glinting in the gallery lighting and the battered old upright piano dominated our seeing, punctuated by the more minute bouncing movement of the electric motors as they were individually activated. The cool, neutral enormity of this gallery space was reconfigured as a kind of massive musical instrument, but as with other works, what we heard didn't entirely match up with what we saw. The structure of the piano might have offered a visual correspondence to the sonic element (piano music), but this was an unplayable piano, more a found sculptural object than musical instrument. What we heard—save for the shivering and buzzing of the motorized strings—was a sonic element provided from an off-stage audio recording. It had little to do with the installational structure—with the very visuality—of the piece. In between the either/or realms of the purely aural and strictly visual, in the space generated from the discrepancies and even clashes between the two, *A Piano Listening to Itself—Chopin Chord* existed as an aesthetic entity that was worth the struggle to encounter.

At the rear of the gallery at one end of a hallway interconnecting two exhibition spaces is a small alcove equipped with comfortable chairs. It's usually a place of rest and respite. Monahan played upon that function and gave it a bit of a twist with his *Music from Nowhere* (1989-present), an evolving and ongoing work of deceptive simplicity. Visually, it superficially comprises nothing more than an old stereo speaker cabinet set on a small plinth next to a chair. Sonically, it filled this small space with the not-unpleasant sound of running water. The visual cue that was the speaker lead to the supposition that we were listening to a recording being played through it, but Monahan subverted that presumption with actual running water. Inside the cabinet there was no speaker but rather a half-filled tank of water, which was being continuously pumped up to the top of a small rock onto which it would then dribble down and noisily drip back into the tank.

Funny how the sound of falling water can upend a set of comfortable presuppositions and beliefs. ←

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The Robert McLaughlin Gallery,
 Oshawa, Ontario

April 16–June 12, 2011

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