

Swinging Sounds: Gordon Monahan deconstructs the worlds of music and art

Submitted by Magenta on Tue, 10/25/2011 - 00:18 in [Features](#)



Gordon Monahan: Theremin Pendulum (2008): Installation view. All images courtesy the artist and the Doris McCarthy Gallery, Toronto. All photos: Toni Hafkenscheid.

By **Earl Miller**

*Gordon Monahan, an established Canadian composer and sound artist, resides in Meaford, Ontario, and has lived in Toronto, New York and Berlin. Since the 1970s, he has exhibited and performed across Canada, the United States, Mexico, Europe and Asia. Monahan's work often involves deconstructing a range of instruments and acoustic devices from pianos to loudspeakers, and reconfiguring them in a way that dramatically differs from their conventional performative use. His work also involves incorporating sound into public spaces that have remarkable acoustics – for example, a grain silo or a cliff overlooking the ocean – but that are unconventional for listening to music. Monahan is currently the subject of an international retrospective touring to eight galleries across Canada and one space in Berlin. Toronto-based art critic Earl Miller, who contributed an essay to *Seeing Sound*, the exhibition catalogue for the retrospective, talks with Monahan about how the retrospective came together, some of his influences, and how he straddles the realms of art and music.*

Earl Miller (EM): You are currently in the midst of the most extensive retrospective for a sound artist in Canada. How do you feel about it? How did it come about?

Gordon Monahan (GM): The retrospective has been important for my career. It's been an opportunity to bring together several large-scale works that I haven't exhibited extensively in Canada. In addition, it's helped position my work within the Canadian visual arts scene as opposed to the experimental music scene alone. And yet, it isn't a comprehensive retrospective since certain pieces cannot be mounted in the available spaces, so we chose mountable pieces reflective of different periods and types of work.

The idea of this retrospective started some years ago in Berlin with Carsten Seiffarth. He had a small commitment from the DAAD Berlin Artist-in-Residence Program and planned to pool finances with other institutions and to publish a book, *Seeing Sound*, that would accompany the retrospective. In the end, the DAAD funding didn't come though due to the 2008 financial crisis. However, Linda Jansma, from the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa, had already initiated the Canadian tour and had secured funding from the Department of Canadian Heritage. Without Linda, it wouldn't have happened. Still, Carsten's gallery, singhur-hoergalerie, a non-profit artist-run centre that puts on sound exhibitions at a variety of sites in Berlin, will hold an exhibition in a public space in 2012, as part of the retrospective. And Carsten, along with Linda, was co-editor of *Seeing Sound*.



EM: Until this retrospective, you've most often performed outside of the gallery system, notably in public spaces. How do you see yourself positioned: in the art world, in the music world, or in a grey area between the two?

GM: I am primarily a sound artist, but I am a composer and musician, too. It depends on the context. If I perform in a band, I'm obviously a musician. But as a sound artist, I can work in the multidisciplinary area between the visual arts and music.

I started out specifically in music. The genre of sound art comes more from musical than from visual art origins, but in the intervening years, there's been more of a crossover.

EM: Can you describe your recent work? How does it connect to your earlier work?

GM: The work I've done over the years has a specific lineage. For instance, I've been working with long piano strings for many years. Meanwhile, some of my media-based pieces have evolved because the technology has evolved. When I started out in the late seventies, there were no computers. Sound artists made electronic music using analog synthesizers and reel-to-reel tape recorders. Usually, the context was dry and academic. In those days, most people would laugh if you said you were going to an electronic music concert.

EM: You take apart – deconstruct – and then come up with new uses for the piano. What led to this approach?

GM: One aspect of sound art is to look at instruments not as what they are meant to be, but as machines that produce sounds. The piano is one of the most complicated instruments around. While it is a keyboard instrument, I can turn that around by using a piano as either a machine or a sculpture that produces sound; in other words, I deconstruct what a piano is meant to be. I can also use it as a soundboard without using its strings.

EM: Your work also involves rebuilding loudspeakers. Can you discuss this?



Speaker Swinging: 1987 performance at the Music Gallery, Toronto. (Lights attached to the speakers create light trails in this time-exposure photo.)
Photo: Dwight Siegner

GM: Another tendency in sound art is to take technical equipment and deconstruct the contexts and concepts of its use and design.

The first piece in which I re-contextualized loudspeakers was *Speaker Swinging* (1982). Live performers swung three speakers in large circles while I transmitted live-generated electronic tones over the speakers. Swinging the speakers manipulated the sound. Over the course of a 25-minute performance, various sound and lighting events occurred, including moments of total darkness, which accentuated the "fear factor" inherent in the work: the audience's fear of the moving speakers. The speakers became more than just speakers. They were integral to the sound performance: they were a moving sound source that instilled fear, they seduced through repetitive hypnotic motion, and they resulted in the Doppler effect (a change in frequency when the speakers move further away from the listener).

Loudspeakers can potentially function as musical instruments that produce sound. Once I thought of *Speaker Swinging* that way, I could manipulate loudspeakers as I would a musical instrument. I then followed *Speaker Swinging* with a speaker catapult piece I built in 1986.

What could I do with the speaker next? The answer came in the late eighties and early nineties with the *Music From Nowhere* series. I took a collection of vintage speaker cabinets and removed the speakers from the box, replacing them with mechanical sculptures that produce sound. Hearing these sounds coming out of the speaker, one assumes they are audio recordings, but walking behind the speaker cabinet, one will see the sound sculptures through a plexiglas window and realize that they are hearing

real sounds. The irony is that audio itself is an imitation of real sound, an electronic fabrication or simulation of recorded or amplified sound; therefore, the real sounds in these speaker cabinets are by definition fake audio.

An obvious influence for me at the time was Christian Marclay. He was doing the same thing with records.

EM: Who else has influenced you?

GM: Alvin Lucier is a sound artist and composer who has significantly influenced my work. He was the first artist I knew of who used specific scientific phenomena in sound art – almost like a science experiment turned into an installation piece. He demonstrated there was a possibility of using machines in combination with space to make or manipulate pure sound. For instance, in his famous piece, *I Am Sitting In A Room*, he recorded his voice and then repeatedly re-recorded that recording until the particular acoustics of the room rendered his speech unintelligible.

EM: Can you discuss how the notion of the science experiment relates to your work?

GM: While a science-based approach comes most directly from Alvin Lucier, I had studied science for two years at the University of Ottawa before enrolling in the music program at Mount Allison University in Sackville, NB. And, there's science in electronic music: pre-synthesizer electronic musicians were using lab equipment. Then, there's the part of sound art that goes back to the fifties when David Tudor and others had to build synthesizers. They were self-taught at electronics.

I also used electronics for sound art including machine-based sculpture. As I collected more and more surplus electronics with my partner, artist Laura Kikauka, I gradually realized we were junk collectors.

EM: Didn't you open an electronics store at one point?

GM: Laura and I, along with Bastiaan Maris, did open an electronics surplus store in Berlin called the *Glowing Pickle*, which we ran between 1993 and 1995. The *Glowing Pickle* came about because we had been collecting large amounts of electronic surplus that East Berlin technical institutions and factories were throwing out. We decided that to make room for more stuff, we should try to sell some of what we'd collected, so we opened the surplus store. But, just to guarantee we made some money, we decided to sell drinks, including multi-coloured vodka shots served in test tubes displayed in centrifuges we'd collected from the local East German hospital. The *Glowing Pickle* was a parody of a store. We



Stereo Jingle: From the series *Music From Nowhere* (1989 - ongoing). Installation view, 2008.



Piano Airlift (1988/2006): Installation view.

hoped to sell some of our inventory, but that wasn't the point. It was to create an environment where people wondered whether they'd actually walked into a store or into a bar disguised as an art installation.

EM: You've spent considerable time in Berlin. When did you live there? Has it influenced your work?

GM: Laura and I moved to Berlin in 1992 and lived there full-time until 2006. We still keep a studio there. Berlin is a great influence on me since it's a capital of sound art with prominent exhibitions and a large audience. Coming from New York, I realized how large the audience for sound art in Berlin really was and is.

EM: Your work often involves the landscape. What is the significance of the landscape?

GM: Its importance relates to harnessing the natural forces of the environment. If I perform in a space outdoors, I want built-in drama. St. John's Harbour and the Claybank Brick Factory National Historic Site in southern Saskatchewan have provided me with built-in drama.

EM: Some of your works are based on or incorporate ambient sound – say, *Speaker Swinging*, which you've said was inspired by the sound of a radio in a car driving by that gradually diminished as the car drove away. How and why is ambient or everyday sound important to you?



A Piano Listening to Itself (2009-10):
Installation, 2011.

GM: When you talk about ambient sound, you're referring to natural sound in the environment. As Cage pointed out, ambient sound is everywhere. There's no such thing as "silence." Ambient sound is always around you.

EM: As well as natural sound and the natural environment, you incorporate surrounding architectural space in pieces such as *Space Becomes the Instrument*, which you installed in Massey Hall for Nuit Blanche 2009. Can you discuss this incorporation?

GM: *Space Becomes the Instrument* was a 12-hour performance using specific architectural aspects in a similar way to how I use outdoor public space. I don't need to do much to a dramatic space – either indoor or outdoor – just subtly draw attention to it.

Architectural space becomes part of the performance; it defines the subtlety of a piece. With *Space Becomes the Instrument*, I installed piano strings through Massey Hall from the balconies down to and across the seating area in front of the stage. An eight-channel surround system moved sound through speakers placed throughout the hall. The audience sat on stage – a reversal of seating arrangements in a conventional performance.

EM: You've mentioned drama in relation to public sites. *Theremin Pendulum* (2008), exhibited earlier this year at the Doris McCarthy Gallery, is a gallery piece that likewise contains dramatic elements; in fact, the frenetically swinging pendulum of this kinetic sound piece alludes to potential danger and violence.

GM: The piece is perfectly harmless, of course, but there's an implied aggressiveness. And again, there's an implied element of danger in *Speaker Swinging* with the large loudspeakers being spun around. A natural sense of tension as well as a built-in theatricality are important parts of those two pieces. The darkness of the room in both works plays up a sense of danger.

EM: *A Very Large Vinyl LP Constructed in Acoustic Space* (2007), like *Theremin Pendulum*, utilizes the architecture of gallery space. Another recent piece, *The Chimney Effect* (2011), uses the unique architectural space an art gallery is housed in. Both were exhibited early this year at the MacLaren Art Centre in Barrie as part of your retrospective. What were the differences between the two, architectural and otherwise?

GM: Although those pieces are quite different, they both involve specific elements of architectural space. *The Chimney Effect* uses specific architecture while *A Very Large Vinyl LP Constructed in Acoustic Space* is gallery installed. Multi-channel audio creates the illusion of a large, rotating vinyl LP. Even though the chimney doesn't use electricity, it sounds electronic. The "chimney effect" is a scientific term referring to natural air drafts in a column. It can occur, for example, in a stairwell. The piece utilizes these air drafts to vibrate harpsichord wires. One hears an electronic-sounding high frequency drone.

EM: Do *A Very Large Vinyl LP Constructed in Acoustic Space* and *The Chimney Effect* mark a new direction in your work towards gallery-based installations?

GM: Actually, they fall in with past work. The chimney fits in with a collection of wind pieces I've produced over the years; for instance, a piece I installed in a bell tower in Berlin (*Spontaneously Harmonious in Certain Kinds of Weather*, 1996) used air drafts.

EM: What are you working on now?

GM: In addition to producing the annual Electric Eclectics Festival in Meaford, I'm continuing to develop new works. One of these is *Bug Bytes* at the Tree Museum near Gravenhurst, Ontario, in which I subjectively imitate bug sounds on a synthesizer. I play them continuously on an MP3 player, which is broadcast through a small solar-powered sound system hidden in a juniper bush. Visitors are fooled into thinking they're hearing a rare bird, frog, or bug. Also, I'm working with the Toronto- and Bogota-based curator/dealer, Astrid Bastin, to develop a new gallery-oriented series of works, which will probably be shown in Toronto and elsewhere next year.

The retrospective Gordon Monahan: Seeing Sound opens at the Owens Art Gallery in Sackville, NS on Oct. 29, 2011; the Kenderdine Art Gallery in Saskatoon, SK on May 25, 2012; sinquhr-hoergalerie in Berlin on July 3, 2012; and the Tom Thomson Art Gallery in Owen Sound, ON on Apr. 7, 2013.

Earl Miller is an independent art writer and curator residing in Toronto who has published in *Art in America*, *Border Crossings*, *Flash Art*, and a range of other publications.

