

Matthias Osterwold

Music From Nowhere

Gordon Monahan's Fluxoid-Solenoid Objects

The loudspeaker is far more than just a technical apparatus for the broadcasting of sound. It is an omnipresent profane oracle; a universal medium for the acoustical appropriation and interpretation of our world. Lautsprecher sind das Ohr zur Welt. Through loudspeakers we hear things/events/appearances distant in space and time (stored past) - and we magnify (but not necessarily clarify) 'live' things in our immediate presence.

Loudspeakers give us our daily music (whether we want it or not, there is no escaping it), but inversely, they help us, by the special way we make use of them, to define something that we call lifestyle and that we regard to be individual: Tell me what music you are listening to, and I will tell you who you are. As a component of lifestyle, loudspeakers are still more effective than TV screens, and they are even more universal than TV screens: TV screens need speakers, but speakers don't need TV screens.

It doesn't matter whether broadcasted sounds acoustically depict a real event or if they are a synthesized product of the electronic or electromagnetic circuits themselves: whatever comes out of the speaker is virtual. It is mostly a prefabricated simulation of reality, which does not exist outside the network of the media and their technologies. What we hear in, let's say, pop and classical music recordings was never played or performed the way it sounds - "Hi, Fidelity!" - but it has been mixed, edited, overdubbed, sampled, electronically modified or synthesized. It is never what it pretends to be. And therefore, in a way, the history of loudspeakers, their design and their sound qualities is not so much a history of growing fidelity in sound reproduction but rather an exposition and reflection of preferences and fashions in musical styles - and sounds - in social history. Meanwhile the idea of predominance by loudspeaker music gets fixed more and more. Music is not live anymore for most of us. Music comes from the loudspeaker in the same way we might think that food comes from the refrigerator and electrical energy comes from the power plug.

As a composer Gordon Monahan - following his own statement - has "focused primarily on the acoustical and phenomenological properties of sound rather than on traditional compositional concerns such as pitch or rhythmical relationships". And from that he derives his concern with the technology of sound production and reproduction, and the psychoacoustics of hearing. He has been named, with full justification, a "sound constructivist working with sculptural aspects of sounds and acoustics", but, we must add, he works equally as a deconstructivist and a constructivist. Whatever his work has been so far - the famous Speaker Swinging, the piano pieces Piano Mechanics or This Piano Thing, his aeolian or his aquaeolian installations (The Aquaeolian Whirlpool) - the approach is similar, in that by investigating the inherent structural features of an acoustical principle or musical instrument he arrives at a redefinition of the seemingly well-known object or phenomenon, uncovering its very essence.

In his ongoing series of loudspeaker objects "Music from Nowhere", using readymade loudspeaker boxes from the 1940's to 70's, Monahan incises the umbilical cord of his loudspeakers and cores the innards, that is to say, he cuts the loudspeaker cable, removes the heart (the actual speaker), and places inside the speaker cabinet electrically operated machines that produce mechanical sounds. These are mostly driven by solenoids, electromagnetic devices that work on the same principle as loudspeaker coils, or motors

that are pulsed by electronic logic circuits. A loudspeaker coil could translate these logic circuits into sound (as with a synthesizer) but here instead, a mechanical device is put to work from which sounds and tones arise.

What is happening here? From a 'real' loudspeaker with its 'fake' content, we get a 'fake' loudspeaker with 'real' musical content. The loudspeaker here is no longer media; instead it becomes an autonomous system that develops the aura of a loudspeaker-object with its own historical form and individual character. These loudspeakers have their music within themselves. Music from somewhere becomes Music From Nowhere. When they all play together, from the various simultaneously activated objects arises an orchestral composition with a constantly varying, non-repetitive musique concrète, a sound that is paradoxically at the same time 'lo-fi' and 'hi-fi'; to be more precise, simultaneously 'no-fi' and 'best-fi'. Thereby the recipient hears the sound without its electromagnetic transmission (and the change inherent from this process), but certainly doesn't notice this at first. He takes the 'fake' for a 'real' loudspeaker. This strategy of subtle deception becomes transparent only when the gallery viewer arrives at the end of the exponentially curved row of objects, and upon turning around, sees into their naked eviscerated backsides wherein farcical, functionless, fantasy machines are placed. From their backsides the loudspeakers become showcases, vitrines, aquariums for technical beings who give off peculiar sounds; a certain feeling of compassion for these imprisoned creatures is inevitable.

Disconnected from the stream of global communication, we recognise the loudspeaker for what it is: a projection aperture for the feelings, longings and fantasies of the receiver (a loudspeaker is based, by the way, on a similar principle as a microphone, and can even be used as such); a secretive object shrouded in aura that calls up the spirits of its former users and maybe even the broadcasts of its previous life. We anxiously await the stereophonic expansion of Music From Nowhere. A loudspeaker is not a loudspeaker is a loudspeaker.

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