An Interview with Gordon Monahan

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by Michael Waterman

Gordon Monahan is a Canadian artist living in Berlin who since the 1980's has become a major force in sound installation and avant-garde performance. With a background in music and physics, he began his career as a pianist and composer influenced by the American experimentalists John Cage and David Tudor, and premiering pieces by James Tenney and Udo Kasemets. In 1981, Monahan composed Piano Mechanics, a piece for acoustic piano which explored such phenonema as frequency interference pattern and piano resonance with an originality that inspired praise from no less a figure than John Cage. Further experiments in acoustic phenomena led to his seminal performance piece Speaker Swinging (1981) which explored the sonic impact of resonant frequency moving through space (the Doppler effect) through the dramatic physicality of performers continuously swinging speakers around on long cords. Music From Nowhere (1989), an installation of 'fake speakers,' continued Monahan's fascination with the speaker as cultural symbol. Influenced by an encounter with Seattle-based sound sculptor Trimpin at the Banff Centre in 1990, Monahan began to work with computers. Through constructing large-scale sound installations, he has systematically explored the possibilities of MIDI-control interfaces and Max patches to trigger both sound sequencers and mechanics. The flip side of Monahan's self-described avant-gardism is his love of kitsch, which has flowered in a number of collaborative performance and recording projects in Berlin. These include his popular underground social club Schmalzwald (1996-2000), the exotica "irritainment" collective KB Zed, and an over-the-top lounge-pop cover-band Fuzzy Love.

In May 2003 Monahan presented two new works at the Open Ears Festival of Music and Sound in Kitchener. Both the installation When It Rains and the performance piece New and Used Furniture Music employ Monahan's MIDI-controlled mechanics. They are connected by their use of water droplets as a percussive sound generator on amplified everyday objects. The performance also included a variety of other elements such as motor-powered sheets of metal, pick-ups and motors on long lengths of piano wire stretched by pneumatic pistons, real time video projection with roaming cameras, and a theremin interface to his MIDI-control system. Everything was deftly (if somewhat deceptively) orchestrated by Monahan who assumed a persona residing somewhere between encyclopedia salesman and lounge lizard, occasionally interjecting overtly lip-synched, cryptic dialogue. I reached Gordon Monahan on tour in Italy.

MW: In comparing your installation When It Rains with your performance New and Used Furniture Music there was, to me, a cohesion - a simplicity of means - in your installation that stood in contrast to your performance, which came across like a three-ring circus of visual and sonic effects. Can you describe the different concerns you have in conceiving performances vis a vis installations?

GM: Yeah. Well, I think there are two different things about installation, though they cross over. One thing is that you can build something based on a simple idea that can remain simple without having to get into anything too layered or complex. On the other hand, with performances, I think that while something very simple and minimalistic can work, it becomes more difficult to find a really simple and minimalistic idea that will carry for a bit of time to keep an audience's interest. So the way I've approached it, which may be sort of obvious to you, is that I develop a lot of these simple, minimalistic ideas and then overlap

them or layer them in the performance, which then leads to a more complex form. It gets away from the idea youÕre talking about in the installation.

MW: I sensed that there were elements of other sculptural installations in your performance...

GM: Yeah.

MW: And youÕre bringing them together in a way thatÕs different in the performance than in the installation.

GM: The big concern for me is to try to keep things simple. IÕm a strong believer in performing, and not in the sense of entertainment per se - for the sake of entertainment - but I think that does play a role.

MW: In performance thereÕs a different relationship to the audience than there is in installation really, where people can come and go. TheyÕre not a captive audience.

GM: On the other hand, IÕm interested in the crossover, in the hybrid form of installation/performance.

MW: Your Speaker Swinging seems to me to be a simpler performance as far as the number of elements involved.

GM: ThereÕs an example of something thatÕs really simple, just a straight idea that can be complex in its simplicity. But those kind of ideas come along only once in a couple of decades, or whatever. I had that idea back in 1980/81, and worked with it over the years, kind of developed it...but kept it simple, and I think it still works. I still do perform it, maybe once a year when IÕm invited to do it.

MW: Has it changed much over the time youÕve been performing it?

GM: To some extent it has, but in simple ways. I mean, the visual aspect of Speaker Swinging is important, so IÕve worked with the lighting - for instance putting strobe lights on the ends of the speakers and also incandescent lights - working with switching them on and off - sort of going from the standard, traditional theatrical lighting and then flipping that idea over to where the lighting sources are on the speakers themselves. There is a complete contrast in terms of what is going on with the lighting. ItÕs a really simple thing to do, but itÕs effective.

MW: It sounds like a kind of psychological shift occurs.

GM: And working with blackout, so that when IÕm shifting from one mode of working to another the lights would go completely out, which is just like working with the threat idea - people physically being threatened. ItÕs not dangerous per se, but thereÕs this element of implied danger, which is, again, a sort of sensationalist thing to work with.

MW: But it's also presumably driven by your interest in sonic phenomena, by the Doppler effect - the apparent pitch shifting that occurs as the speakers swing on their fifteen foot arcs. I guess if youÕre touring the piece in different venues it has different sonic properties?

GM: A lot of the work I do is oriented that way. Sometimes itÕs very subtle. One element to investigate in performance and installation is the architecture. It's the architecture of the space that ultimately forms the sound that weÕre hearing, and thatÕs a simple idea for people to understand. It's more difficult to decide how to work that element into the piece effectively. For instance with the New and Used Furniture Music, the strings crisscross through the space, outlining the space to some extent.

MW: Right. It's kind of like a cage, isnÕt it?

GM: A little bit, but there are different elements, like several different groups of piano strings going across diagonally, then the simple line of the drips in front, and the sheet metal placed above the audience. You canÕt have something too complicated unless you have a budget to hire people to set the production up, you know. I always have to try to think of new ideas that are going to use a very simple set-up. Otherwise, youÕre chasing after even more funding to try to realize the work.

MW: And yet New and Used Furniture Music certainly didnÕt appear to be a simple set-up.

GM: Believe it or not it is. I mean, ok, so there are twenty-four channels of audio. Twelve of those are the water drops, and then there are pick-ups on the piano strings, and the playback of the lip-synching text - thatÕs all pretty simple so far. Then the sheet metal, and the video of course. There's only four different elements, in fact. But all of these things are fairly easy to set up, and itÕs not that heavy to transport either. So there are all sorts of things that dictate the aesthetics.

MW: Your aesthetics, however, seem distinctly Cagean. In the book Sound by Artists you described Speaker Swinging as inhabiting more than just the genre of experimental music, but rather dealing with the reality of experiment. Yet in your two pieces at the Open Ears Festival, there was little that was aleatoric, random, or improvised. There was a compositional rigour evident in your installation, which was also present, though somewhat obfuscated, in your performance. How important is control of the outcome in your work?

GM: Well I guess it depends on the different pieces. In my more recent MIDI-controlled work I havenÕt really found ways to get that sort of random control, because youÕre pretty much working on a note-by-note realization. All the works are driven by either live-generated or pre-determined sequences, though thereÕs also mixtures of the two. The fact that itÕs all working on electronically organized trigger pulses implies an organized set of sequences or processing of signals. One way to get the aleatoric quality is to set up randomly generated trigger sequences, and that's in the programming. So far, I do a little bit of that mixed with the predetermined sequencing. In both pieces, however, there are ways to play around with these indeterminate things. In When It Rains, I made an accidental discovery at Open Ears. Because of the low ceiling, I had to hang the water reservoir at a certain height which was fairly low to the tubing. This meant that there was very low water pressure in the system since the distance between the reservoir and the tubing was so short. That meant that not all of the valves that were being triggered were actually creating a drop, you know? So the formation of water droplets was completely indeterminate, in fact.

MW: So it wasnÕt playing quite what youÕd written.

GM: Exactly. But it was a nice effect.

MW: There were times when it seemed like there were more drops coming out than should.

GM: Right. There's a pouring out part too.

MW: I wasn't actually sure how much was intentional and how much was random.

GM: ...a little bit of everything. The pouring out is actually a kind of failure in the electronics system.

MW: Oh really?

GM: There's too many notes being triggered at the same time, and the MIDI hardware that I have just sort of overloads. A MIDI event consists of a note on/a note off, and the time-space between the note-on and the note-off determines the length of the note. In When It Rains, the notes are very specific, somewhere between 10 and 30 milliseconds long - so, very short. But there may be so many notes that the note-offs wonÕt necessarily come, so then the note-onÕs stay on, and that causes the water to pour out.

MW: That's certainly more randomness than IÕd expected. What about the performance of New and Used Furniture Music? I was intrigued by the way you used the theremin to control the MIDI process. I know that in playing the theremin itÕs difficult to get the note you want. When you are using it to trigger the sequencing does that provide another challenge to controlling the outcome?

GM: Right. ItÕs basically a kind of improvised set-up during the performance. The randomness comes through how the different groups of instruments are being layered overtop one another.

MW: That wasnÕt necessarily planned out?

GM: Very roughly.

MW: Oh really? So there was an improvisational quality in the piece?

GM: Very much so. Just to give you an idea of how that comes about, I had only set up New and Used Furniture Music once before in a kind of rough preview in Berlin. That was the first time I had actually done it. I plan all these things out on paper, or in my head, and then set it up and go for it. There's no rehearsal. So the whole thing is actually a kind of exploration and improvised experiment really, based on a pre-conceived idea of how the structure will fit together. But then having to realize it on the spot without rehearsing it. Kind of a bit hairy that way...

MW: I do a lot of improvisation and I was impressed. I know how it can go. It worked!

GM: Carefully conceiving of the structure ahead of time saves you a lot of trouble later.

MW: Can we talk about how your work has changed over time? IÕm interested in your recognition that contemporary perception of sound is largely mediated by electronic sound generation and amplification. The use of actual water drops in your installation to mimic the sounds of synthesized electronic samples functions in the same post-electronic way as in your early piece Piano Mechanics, where an acoustic piano is used to produce the illusion of

electronically produced sound. Have your ways of addressing and manipulating this social sensibility changed over time? Has the sensibility itself changed, say with the proliferation of computers, or your use of computers?

GM: Definitely. I first did Piano Mechanics before computers were even available. And I didnÕt start to use computers until the late Ô80's, so my thinking has developed completely differently than I would have thought twenty years ago. When I did Piano Mechanics I took a purist approach. I was using the acoustic instrument to mimic electronic sounds, creating a kind of illusion on the piano. I donÕt perform the piece too often, but the last couple of times I have performed it IÕve actually amplified it. I wish I had done that a lot earlier!

MW: But no processing of any kind?

GM: No processing. No, but amplifying, because thatÕs something that has also been a kind of pleasant discovery. For example, New and Used Furniture Music really uses the amplification. You know, I used to use amplification only to magnify the sound to the point where you could hear it clearly. Now IÕm interested in actually pushing things to be a lot louder. You could get into this whole other realm of the power of electronic sounds. At any rate, you know thereÕs limits. In terms of Piano Mechanics you canÕt amplify it too much because you are relying on live mikes that are going to feed back at a certain point.

MW: What I like about Piano Mechanics is the illusion of it being electronic.

GM: Well exactly, you get away from that by amplifying it, but you get into a whole other thing too - more of a powerful sound.

MW: In a broader sense, how do we think of sound now, as opposed to when you were doing Piano Mechanics?

GM: I think we think of it differently...PeopleÕs sense of what they find interesting in music certainly has changed a great deal. The audience for avant-garde music twenty years ago was a fraction of the size it is now. People now want to listen to stuff that was on the fringe twenty years ago. It's not like the music has changed, peopleÕs sensibilities have changed, in that very broad sense.

MW: Certainly the avant-garde influences pop music. For example, using a turntable as an instrument, as opposed to for simply playback, sounds very Cagean..

GM: Exactly. What's now called turntablism was started by Cage. I use the term "pop music" in a general sense. I donÕt necessarily think that the avant-garde is going to be on the top-ten pop hit list, but the audience for ÒalternativeÓ music or Òalternative popÓ is certainly gonna be avant-garde.

MW: It actually seems that your practice explores both the avant-garde and pop. On the one hand there is an obvious interest in exploring acoustical phenomena and electronically mediated sound characterized by such works as Piano Mechanics and Speaker Swinging. But on the other hand, there is your delight in (and refined sense of) kitsch that comes out in a number of projects, such as your performance group KB Zed, your Berlin club Schmalzvald, and your pop cover-group Fuzzy Love. Do these two, apparently divergent interests, relate to one another?

GM: Well, they do relate because IÕm the same person doing them. A lot of the kitsch projects came about as jokes, and then actually realizing them, having a positive reaction to them, and thinking, "well, letÕs keep on doing some other stuff like this." There's a contradiction in my work, but thatÕs interesting to me. Music should be contradictory shouldnÕt it? If you think of music in a simplistic way as being a struggle between consonance and dissonance (as it has been described) - thatÕs a contradiction itself. Consonance contradicts dissonance. So in the sense of finding contradictory genres to work in, thatÕs like a broader application of the concepts of consonance and dissonance.

MW: It seems as though these two approaches are motivated by different issues. One seems to be about the social condition of music, the other is much more about the physics of sound.

GM: But there is a coming together of some of those elements in New and Used Furniture Music. The theremin for instance, although it has been used in the avant-garde, it's also been used in pop music over the years. I started using it because we had one at the Schmalzwald. We had one on the stage all the time. People would want to come up and play it. I like the idea of having people who hadnÕt played theremin before starting to play theremin in a bar. That person would just be thrown out of any other kind of bar they tried to do it in! But we encouraged it, you know, because itÕs like - ÔletÕs try something thatÕs going to kind of "irritain" peopleÕ - what we called "irritainment." ThereÕs another example - people accepting an avant-garde concept in a popular cultural context.

MW: ItÕs a way of breaking down the barrier of avant-garde music...

GM: Sort of mixing it up a little bit. Think about the example of Satie's Vexations [a short piano piece which the performer is directed to repeat 840 times], and his whole concept of Furniture Music, which when it was conceived in the 1890's was an extremely avant-garde idea. That idea was commercialized by the MUZAK corporation whose easy-listening music is about as un-avant-garde as you can get.

MW: Clement Greenberg said kitsch is the exact opposite of the avant-garde.

GM: ItÕs not a far stretch then to say you can do pop music and you can do avant-garde music.

MW: What's the role of nostalgia in your work? Here, I'm thinking of Music from Nowhere in which you placed acoustic sound sources inside of empty speaker cabinets from different style periods.

GM: It is nostalgia. Ever since I was a kid, I've just loved different speakers that I saw, you know. The loudspeaker is part of our western culture, modern 20th century culture. At the same time it has a popular reference in terms of the style of the loudspeaker relating to any given period of furniture design. You have the 1950's speaker, you have the Ô60's speaker, you have the high-tech looking speaker, you have the old wooden classic cabinets. ThereÕs all sorts of variations. There's an integration of the various elements of furniture design into the whole piece. But the conceptual aspect in Music From Nowhere was to challenge our assumptions about the production and representation of music. We donÕt hear a lot of acoustically produced music that doesnÕt come through a loudspeaker. Yet speakers are boxes - pieces of furniture. You donÕt look at a speaker when youÕre listening to it. ItÕs a kind of oracle. In Music From Nowhere I had the opportunity to play with the symbol of the loudspeaker - just play with it conceptually - by taking out the actual speaker and putting

something else in the cabinet to make the sound. People are gonna assume it's a recording when it isn't. It's like a double negative. Because recorded music is by definition 'not live' therefore it's a representation of music. And the way that pop music is created is a layering of multi-tracking that creates the illusion of an ensemble, yet a lot of stuff may be just synthesized or sampled. So there is actually no group there - there's a fabrication of a group. That's an illusion that's very effectively created that we don't tend to question.

MW: It's like film - when it's all put together we don't question it - we don't really start taking it apart unless...

GM: Unless you want to analyse it.

MW: In our conversation, illusion has come up in even more ways than I had previously considered. There's the electronic/acoustic illusion in Piano Mechanics, the illusion of control in New and Used Furniture Music and When it Rains, the aural confusion created by Music from Nowhere, and even the grand illusion of accessible pop in your "irritainment" projects. Thanks for helping me to dismantle these illusions so that we can analyse it.

GM: Oh, my pleasure.