

*The following essay is printed in a booklet with the CD 'Saskatchewan Sound Installations' released by Gordon Monahan to accompany three new sound installations and a concert presented in Regina, Saskatchewan, in 2008.*

## **Sound, Place, Space - The Immersive Sound Art of Gordon Monahan**

*Ellen Waterman*

For almost three decades Canadian composer and sound artist Gordon Monahan has been posing elegant and quirky solutions to peculiar questions. What is the musical potential of wind? If audio speakers could speak, what would they say? Answering these and other questions has led Monahan far from his roots as a pianist and composer to explore acoustics, electromechanical processes, digital sound design, and in this new work, multi-channel sound diffusion.

The pieces in this exhibition emanate from Monahan's Canada Council New Media Residency sponsored by Knowhere Productions and the University of Regina's New Media Studio Lab. In 2006 he worked with Knowhere Production's collaborative Crossfiring: the Claybank Project, which brought together different arts groups to celebrate the historical and cultural significance of this abandoned clay brick factory through installations and performances. In 2007, he explored multi-channel sound diffusion at the University of Regina's New Media Studio Lab. This catalogue/CD marks the final presentation of Monahan's residency from February 5 - 23, 2008, including three installations and a live performance.

Monahan's residency encompassed the summer institute and international conference: The Art of Immersive Soundscapes II in June 2007, which brought numerous composers, performers, sound artists, and theorists together to explore the very nature of sound. For me, this context served to bring the distinctive nature of Monahan's approach to sound art into sharp relief. Monahan's sound art is analytical and event oriented, driven by the logic of the processes that he sets in motion to achieve his ends. By drawing our attention to the process by which sound is produced, Monahan's work reveals that the medium truly is the message.

In an article arguing against soundscape (as a concept that reifies sound as materiality), Tim Ingold suggests that sound "is neither mental nor material, but a phenomenon of experience—that is, of our immersion in, and commingling with, the world in which we find ourselves. [. . .] Sound is simply another way of saying 'I can hear.'" Sound is not an object of perception (as the term soundscape implies), but rather "the medium of our perception. It is what we hear in" (11). Sound is a medium in constant flux, perceived not in isolation, but in relation to other sensory stimuli. Ingold's analysis offers a useful way to understand Monahan's emphasis on sound making as analytic process: sound becomes a medium through which we perceive the interaction of space and place.

Separating these terms is a strategy that I borrow from Gascia Ouzounian, who has theorized the role of the listener in sound art. Ouzounian considers space to be a relatively "general" and "sedentary" form of organization, while "place focuses the particular, the situational and the momentary [. . .]. Because space and place produce one another, there is an ongoing interplay between the particular and the general, the momentary and the lingering" (72). In other words, through the medium of sound we perceive physical, spatial qualities such as resonance, harmonics, and directionality, which in turn evoke the virtual qualities of place (myth, memory, history, narrative). And in an interesting inversion, as the works in this exhibition amply demonstrate, sonic space may also be created by illusion

(as in multi-channel sound diffusion), while sonic place may be characterized by the immediate sensory environment.

***Aeolian Winds Over Claybank Saskatchewan***, a video installation exhibited at Neutral Ground Gallery and excerpted on this disk, is a potent invocation of space/place identity. A virtually intact industrial site, the Claybank Brick Plant, which closed in 1989, retains the aura of its heyday between 1912 and 1937—from the original down draft beehive kilns to the brick chimneys and long wooden sheds. The site is littered with tools and wooden brick molds, as though the workers simply forgot to show up one morning. During its 75 years of operation Claybank bricks lined the fireboxes of CP and CN Steam Locomotives, supplied the smelters at Hamilton and Sydney, and were even used in the construction of launch pads and rocket blast testing bays at Cape Canaveral. Situated among the tall swaying grasses of the Dirt Hills of south-central Saskatchewan, the clay of this site was used for long ages by the First Nations People.

A spiritual place of meeting and healing, windswept and watched over by the vast prairie sky, Claybank was an ideal location for Monahan to install his long piano wire Aeolian Chimney. Chimneys became the masts from which various long piano strings were suspended then anchored to the roofs of adjacent buildings. Practically invisible, the piano wires have the remarkable quality of actualizing the wind as harmonic frequencies. To walk down the resonant long wooden sheds, feeling the wind through gaps in the walls and watching the play of light on wooden benches and beams, while immersed in subtle and ever-shifting harmonies is a ghostly experience that evokes the loneliness of this long abandoned factory. Aeolian Chimney takes what is always already present in this place and gives it poetic voice.

By contrast, Monahan constructs an entirely virtual place/space identity with his 8-channel sound installation ***A Very Large Vinyl LP Constructed in Acoustic Space***, also exhibited at Neutral Ground Gallery. In approaching multi-channel sound diffusion Monahan was struck by the current vogue for sound art among visual artists whose most successful works, he feels, often employ very simple ideas. “What would it mean to make sound art from the perspective of a visual artist? I thought, well maybe I would do something with recordings, constructing a simulation of a large vinyl LP” (interview). Eight loudspeakers are arranged in a circle, in the exhibition space. A collage of vintage easy listening records spins either clockwise, counterclockwise, or both directions simultaneously, creating a layered illusion of a virtual vinyl record spinning in space. Monahan owns an impressive archive of thrift store LPs on which his aesthetic of “irritainment” (where pop culture gets down with avant-gardism) is founded. The dizzying effect of this installation is to place the listener on the platter of a virtual record player in perpetual motion.

Another manifestation of Monahan’s interest in arcane cultural phenomena is his exploration of the theremin, an early 20th century electronic instrument that works on the principle of heterodyning, generating a variable frequency by slightly mistuning two radio coils. The player’s hands never touch the theremin’s two antennae—pitch and amplitude are affected by body capacitance, through the proximity of the hands to the antennae. Music is seemingly pulled from the aether. Monahan, who is attracted to the theremin’s mysterious quality, has created numerous works that extend its capabilities. Works such as ***New and Used Furniture Music*** (2003) and ***Theremin in the Rain*** (2005) operate at the intersection of the theremin and Max/MSP, digital sound design software.

***Theremin Pendulum***, exhibited at the 5th Parallel Gallery at the University of Regina, returns to one of Monahan’s early ideas—that of making an instrument speak for itself—

most clearly seen in his classic work ***Speaker Swinging*** (1982). In *Theremin Pendulum*, the instrument literally plays the space. A theremin antenna made of flexible wire is mechanically activated so that it swings spastically as a chaotic pendulum. The sound produced is mixed automatically by a Max patch and broadcast into the room. The Max patch multiplies the theremin in a delay patch that adds 8 virtual theremins to the original, further complicating the dynamics of space/place. A live performance version, *Layered Lines Fading Away*, performed in concert at the University of Regina's Shu-Box Theatre, presents the original 'octagonal theremin' in a stereo mix (the version on this CD). Monahan's visual titles draw our attention to the multi-sensory nature of sound perception, as analysed by Ingold. The idea of a pendulum (further articulated by a light at the end of the swinging antenna wire) suggests the literal drawing of lines through space. Multiplied into a virtual theremin chorus, this trajectory becomes a sonic spirograph.

In the work of Gordon Monahan, sound, space, and place are in constant dialogue, articulating electronic, mechanical, and acoustic processes while evoking poetic and cultural imagery. Rather than fetishizing sound as a "pure" phenomenon, Monahan skillfully manipulates its immersive qualities to create fascinating multi-sensory environments.

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