

Sound Monuments: Rethinking Public Memory

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Many commemorative works seek to make the past ever-present; alive – the theory being that an historical event cannot be forgotten if there is a physical object to mark its existence. Although that point may be contentious, the challenges of representing the past are manifold, partly because of our potential inability as citizens of the *now* to connect with that *then*.¹ Complications only multiply when representing a history of collective trauma. How do audiences engage with those representations? Have we fully explored the potential for addressing questions of collective trauma with a wide range of media? What possibilities exist in contemporary art outside of conventional sites of remembrance? Although sound art isn't the first thing most of us think of when we think public memory, the medium provides new ways of exploring how we connect to history.

A non-traditional sound art presents a compelling theory of public memory, one uniquely capable of “conveying the past into the present,” to quote philosopher Henri Bergson.² By virtue of duration, and through the experience of listening, past

¹ Ethical challenges are another concern in representing trauma. I want to focus on examples where there has been an attempt to seek public acknowledgment by a survivor or group of survivors, so as to illustrate an authentic voice of consent and empowerment regarding the notion of publicly addressing traumatic events. In a 2004 talk at UC Santa Barbara, Geoffrey Hartman, project director of the Fortunoff Video Archives of Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, illustrates this notion well when he notes, “The worry about who could talk for the witnesses resolved when they began to talk for themselves, instead of letting historians or third parties talk about [the Holocaust].”

Geoffrey Hartman, “Holocaust Testimony in a Genocidal Age” (paper presented at The Taubman Symposium in Jewish Studies, University of California at Santa Barbara, 2004).

² Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Hampshire and New

and present merge into a continual becoming. The past is no longer just past, it is now – in effect, the past *becomes*, and therefore may be more accessible to us in the present.

It is true that film and video use duration, but it is not my current interest here to add to what is already a sizable discourse on the visual and memory. Cinema, for example, has long been likened to dreams and memory, thanks to its ability to realistically represent life. Sound art, on the other hand, has proven harder to categorize (partly due to its infancy relative to visual art). Listening requires time and a kind of continuous presentness, as does remembering, as does seeing. Why, then, have we barely scratched the surface of how to think about sound as it pertains to visibility, memory, and trauma; seeing and not seeing, hearing but not listening, listening but not hearing, and so forth? What can sound art teach us about addressing and representing trauma?

This new sound art employs listening as metaphor for witnessing. It is what Seth Kim-Cohen, author of *In the Blink of an Ear: Towards a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art*, calls “a non-cochlear, conceptual sound art”, and this sound art may or may not employ performed, recorded, or synthesized sound as we know it.³ For example, a recent sexual assault awareness event known as *The Standing Silent Witness Project* gains particular traction here. Live, silent bodies gathered to create an ephemeral monument in Chicago’s Daley Plaza with nothing but t-shirts printed with survivors’ stories to denote the purpose of the group’s presence that day. This simple act

York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 1.
³ Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Towards a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art* (New York: Continuum International, 2009), xx.

allowed for the public witnessing of those trauma narratives. In contemporary psychology and trauma theory, *witnessing* is listening to and engaging with another's trauma narrative.⁴

In addition to the facet of witnessing, this new sound art might also employ more familiar, or at least more traditional, experiments in audio or non-audio. Examples could include John Cage's *Silent Prayer*, a silent composition, and also the aforementioned *Standing Silent Witness Project*. Although these two examples use silence in different ways – John Cage's silence-as-ambiance, and the Standing Silent Witness Project's silence-as-lack, each begs meaningful reconsiderations of listening. The goal is to engage listener and performer, if any, in an act of involved listening.⁵ Together they go through a piece as active temporal spectators. Listening here is conceptualized as a potential mode of contemplation, a way to experience through time. In this way, time, and the experience of it, become the focus of the work.

Visual monuments such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. and New York's 9/11 Memorial can act as a way for visitors to engage with histories of trauma. However, are there alternatives to seeing as just sight-based, in the same way that the proposed listening attempts to activate itself as not necessarily, and not only, hearing-based? ⁶ Sound monuments are not in opposition

⁴ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 61-73.

⁵ John Cage, "Silent Prayer" as referenced in Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York: Continuum International, 2006), 10.

⁶ Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, xxi.

If a non-retinal visual art is liberated to ask questions that the eye alone cannot answer, then a non-cochlear sonic art appeals to exigencies out of

to the visual, but the experience of listening could take a more central role in the representation of trauma. Sight and sound, hearing and seeing, all merge into this proposed Listening (capital L), so perhaps I should call it Listening Art.

Duration is the accumulation of time – three seconds is only conceivable as a measurement of time because of the first two seconds that combine with the third. Similarly, the accumulation and experience of time are crucial to how we think about memory – memory is constantly building on itself as time passes. However, trauma can violently disrupt the smooth flow of temporal continuity, and the aforementioned “non-cochlear conceptual sound art” may offer unique possibilities for exploring and representing that fact.

During times of trauma, we speak of endurance, but what does that mean? For the purposes of this paper, to endure is to survive; to beat the odds stacked against you – to be pushed to the limits physically, emotionally, and/or mentally. Endurance implies time, that a fixed beginning and end exist. The concept of endurance has meaning specifically as it relates to grief and trauma, two exceptional affective experiences with complicated temporalities. Due to the inherent emotional intensity, to exist in such states is to defy the normal structure of time – some things speed up, many slow down. For example, a recent case came to light of a woman, Flor Molina, who had lived through human slavery in a Los Angeles garment factory. In her testimony to the jury, she repeats, “I was enslaved for 40 days but I tell you it

earshot. But the eye and the ear are not denied or discarded. A conceptual sonic art would necessarily engage both the non-cochlear and the cochlear, and the constituting trace of each in the other.

felt like 40 years.”⁷ Endurance seems to continue ad infinitum. Yet, in most cases these experiences are still largely episodic, implying a jolting beginning and a welcomed end.

What, then, can be said about the relationship between duration and endurance, sound art and trauma? Earlier I mentioned Bergson, whose notion of duration has been influential to this project, and provides an interesting lens through which to view these relationships. Trauma theory supposes “the traumatic event”, which creates the feeling of a distinct *before* and *after*.⁸ On the other hand is Bergson’s notion of the continuous flow of consciousness. It is partly his sense of unfolding that prompted me to explore sound, and more specifically, listening. He writes:

If our own existence were composed of separate states with an impassive ego to unite them, for us there would be no duration. For an ego which does not change does not endure, and a psychic state which remains the same so long as it is not replaced by the following state does not endure either.⁹

For Bergson, there is no starting or stopping, no episodes to be recalled. We mistakenly perceive events as markers of time, when in reality, according to Bergson, all of our experiences flow together. This flow is duration. Rather than defend the concept of “life events”, Bergson favors a seamless, continual unfolding.

Thinking about listening provides the link between Bergson’s duration and the notion of trauma-as-event. Listening in the present is a way to bridge the past

⁷ Flor Molina, Court testimony to jury, published on CNN.com, April 5, 2011.

⁸ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 33-52.

⁹ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 3.

with that present. To endure is also to go through, and so is listening. To listen is to engage, to pay attention, and we can listen as much with our eyes and our minds as our ears. To listen is also, in many ways, to provide support, to share burdens.

Sound art, or Listening Art, has the potential to disrupt and exploit temporality, to dissociate but also bring near, to engage the mind as well as the body.¹⁰ Because of its ability to express accumulation, sound, or non-sound, emerges as a key medium to explore the confounding temporal issues associated with traumatic memory and experience, which may help make these issues more accessible to an audience.

It is not just sound as a material that interests me, but also the act of listening, and of not listening (whether it's with our eyes or ears). In the seminal text, *Audio Culture*, prominent sound artists explore concepts that are particularly relevant to the kind of seeing of sound and silence that I propose. Francisco Lopez writes, "Sound does not document or represent a richer or more significant "real" world; purely the act of listening signifies real."¹¹ This comment touches on the kind of engagement with the world that is at times missing. Listening can be a metaphor for any kind of sensory engagement, really – in the same text, Pauline Oliveros reflects, "Hearing seems to take place in my stomach" – but the most profound implications exist in relation to visuality.

Sound is a way to engage process through listening. To listen is to be present, to contemplate, to connect. Listening is an active process, and can help us to

¹⁰ It also may be uniquely poised to communicate with audiences.

¹¹ Francisco Lopez, "Profound Listening and Environmental Sound Matter." In *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christopher Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum International, 2004), 82-87.

understand the substance of silence, to recognize lack, absence, and invisibility. To actively listen is to identify absence versus presence. For my purposes, that means the absence of voice, the rendering mute of a given experience or reality. Brandon LaBelle, author of *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art*, writes, “The absence of sound is at one and the same time its presence.”¹² It is in the negative space where a voice should be that silence becomes reified, an object in its own right. As both an artist working with these themes and a critical thinker writing about them, I hope to see some of these ideas influence the future of public memory.

¹² Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York: Continuum International, 2006), 219.