

Music for the Banal, the Obvious, the Everyday

The interrogation of the object; an eco-acoustic investigation

By Vanessa Tomlinson, Civitella Ranieri Fellow 2011

There are two parts to my practice which sits broadly under the title *Music for the Banal, the Obvious, the Everyday*; both centred around the idea of expanding our capacity to listen – honing in on what we can hear. Hearing is an unconscious act, but to listen and cognise sound is an extremely active process, difficult in a world already saturated with so many layers of sound.

The first part of my practice is to learn to listen to my immediate environment, discerning layers of sound, the presence of sound, and listening to the effort taken to make a sound. This process takes place through sound diaries, meditation, deep listening. And preferably it takes place over hours, days and weeks in the same environment until I can hear the changing seasons, the days of the week, the times of day, the weather. Within this listening a few things have become clear:

- It is virtually impossible to escape the ubiquitous sound of traffic as it permeates even the most rural settings as a drone, extreme bushland as a punctuated event, and the city as an unavoidable hum:
 - The sound of wind is extraordinary as heard through every different tree (the clapping trees/poplars of Western Queensland are a favourite), through each architectural framework, and as it passes by ones own ears;
 - The environment is not tentative about sound. A galah flying overhead is not self-conscious about the peaceful environment in which it squawks, nor is the tractor or the cow. Sounds can sooth, startle, obfuscate and seduce, just as in any musical practice.

The second part of my practice is to collect objects around the site of my intended performance. This can include discarded and wanted manmade objects (metals, glass, paper, plastic etc) or natural objects (twigs, wood, leaves, water etc). Because most objects are found on site, they are reflective of local vegetation, seasonal change, recycling habits, culinary interests, and general perspectives on clutter. Together they form my instrumentarium to investigate and perform upon: my sounding environment. Using percussive techniques - and manufactured factory made mallets - these objects get hit, rubbed, dropped, shaken, scraped, or broken.

This work harkens back to an important chapter in the development of Western percussion – the sound finding days of the 1920s and 30s with composers William Russell, John Cage, Lou Harrison, Henry Cowell using everyday objects as instruments; Russell called for a Jack Daniel's bottle, a suitcase; Cage asks for brake drums (no pitch specified, although the make of drums he used is known), tin cans - graduated, a conch shell¹; Partch constructed instruments made from bamboo, brass shells, steel springs and gourds. This was a time when pitch was the result of what was hit. Modes were the result of the combination of objects hit, constantly reconstructing the harmonic language in not just every piece, but every different performance. This accidental ordering of pitch produces surprising results – it is always interesting, and always correct. The ear tunes to the sounding material,

much as the ear tunes to ones sounding environment. Surprisingly incongruous sounds develop tensions and relationships.

Another trajectory of found sound comes from traditional music's from all parts of the globe where locally supplied objects are incorporated into the music; the Afro-Peruvian wooden box cajón, the cardboard box of Slim Dusty fame, the musical saw used in Finland, spoons from Ireland and Italy, the Indian ceramic bowls – Jaltarang, and the panzi dance from Sichuan province, China, where the plate and chopstick are the main musical feature. There is immediacy in people making music with what is available; the opposite of the refined nature of the violin or the oboe where technological construction is working in sympathy with a desired sound. With locally found objects the sonic outcome is idiosyncratic and open. It is always a question – what sound can I make with that? What music can I make with that?

My work with listening is an extension of that which has been articulated and explored by composers such as John Luther Adamsⁱⁱ, Pauline Oliveros, Annea Lockwood, and environmental improvisers such as Lawrence English and Jim Denley. There is an almost post-electronic perspective on my sound analysis; discerning objective qualities of sound– envelope, amplitude, frequency, spectral analysis, duration - and the more subjective awareness of presence and effort in sound making. Once awareness of subtle transformations in sound has been achieved, this attention can be passed over to the collection of objects, and they become the site for sonic investigation.

Fundamental to this practice, is that each object contains within itself discrete musical properties and potentials. The work is made from exploring these potentials, giving voice to the sonic properties, altering their function from utilitarian to fundamentally musical. The wine bottle is not just a bottle, but a myriad of transforming sounds.

In the building of the instrumentarium, or meta-instrument, not only are the objects examined, but also their relationships are examined. A series of wine bottles form a pitch set and contain subtle timbral variation. When they are combined with a piece of roofing tile, the story transforms. The quality of clay versus glass is called into question, as is the relationship between a wine bottle and a roof. Therefore the larger scale work, *Music for the Banal, the Obvious, the Everyday*, is a kaleidoscopic probe of the potentials of all these objects, which together teach me (and potentially the listener) their relationships, stories and properties.

I choose to sonically interrogate my found objects in three different ways – all acoustic:

- *Dropping*. This process was first investigated in *Practice* (Clocked Out CD001) in 2000, and then later taken to an extreme in Erik Griswold's hypnotic kinetic work *Spill* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DV84tN-Yvc). In *Music for the Banal* the act of dropping can include locally found seedpods, gravel, grass or purchased wheat, rice, lentils etc. In this manifestation the objects are constructed into a static installation, a prepared object, and the dropping items cascade and collide into the construction. Here there is little control of the end point – the individual pathway of a grain of rice – but the intention comes in the preparation of the installation.

- Hitting. The act of percussing on an object is central to this work, and possibly the most intentional sound-making device used in this practice. Years of training have revealed the subtleties and variations possible through transformations in technique, hitting position on the object, hitting position of the stick, dampening techniques among many others. These variations provide an assortment of sonic transformations that make the command such as “hit a snare drum forte” incomprehensible. Where do I hit it, with which part of the stick, do you want a high pitched sound, low pitched, resonant, non-resonant? The *where* of hitting, is perhaps the most comprehensive investigation in this work.
- Ropes. Erik Griswold began rope work with the well-known Strings Attached in 1999. This idea has been mutated in my work, tethering the ropes to a single point and playing them in the air with only the troughs of the sound waves coming into contact with the instruments now scattered on the floor. The resulting sound world is akin to wind chimes, only with a more timbrally diverse palette. The preparations of the floor – usually in zones or families of sound (ceramic, glass, metal, paper, leaves etc) – allows for a degree of timbral control in the sounding of the installation. But the intentional lack of specific control, which I refer to from a post-Cagean perspective as determined indeterminacy, is the central tension in this work. The individual icti, and the ordering of these individual icti are virtually impossible.

There is no doubt that this work challenges one of the central notions of Western Art Music – reproducibility. The artefact of score does not exist in this work, nor is the investigation elementally about improvisation. Or if it is about improvisation, it is certainly not free, but investigative of a specific question. And it also demands that we consider the *where* of music making. The impoverished sound world of so many clean concert halls will yield different music from the potential clutter of a school, or a gallery, or an outdoor space. Outback Australia will produce a different instrumentarium to the pastoral environment of Umbria in Italy. This is reflective, ephemeral work that exists only in its moment of activation, and retains some form of permanence through recordings, and photos. Eventually a larger collection of these works undertaken all over the world will build a larger, as yet invisible, narrative. But for now, the retuning of my ears, the immersion in environment, and acceptance of so many new pitch propositions is the immediate and endlessly varied narrative.

i Cage, John. *Third Construction*. Edition Peters NY, 1941

ii Adams, John Luther. *A Place Where you go to listen: in search of an ecology of music*. Wesleyan University Press, 2009.