

Women in Sound Art, 1980–2000

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It is still true that unless she is super-excellent, the woman in music will always be subjugated, while men of the same or lesser talent will find places for themselves. It is not enough that a woman chooses to be a composer, conductor or to play instruments formerly played exclusively by men; she cannot escape being squashed in her efforts – if not directly, then by subtle and insidious exclusion by her male counterparts.

Pauline Oliveros¹

From 31 October to 12 December 2015, Rumpsti Pumsti, a record store in Berlin devoted to experimental music and sound art, hosted an exhibition of early works by the German artist Christina Kubisch (b. 1948), one of the world's foremost sound artists. The *Vibrations* exhibition focused on a series of works titled *Dirty Electronics* that Kubisch created between 1975 and 1980 in which she paired orchestral instruments with vibrators. On the floor were four wooden boxes each holding one flute and one vibrator, creating a jittery, buzzing flute quartet. Mounted on one wall was a photograph of a cello with a vibrator held to its strings. On another were technical diagrams. Kubisch, best known for her works with electronics, had produced intricately detailed diagrams of how to construct and use vibrators in various musical settings.

On the surface, the works on display in *Vibrations* recalled the wit and irreverence of Kubisch's earlier conceptual works, including *Emergency Solos* (1974–75), a series of recitals in which Kubisch played the flute with various implements including boxing gloves and a gas mask. In retrospect they signalled a more profound shift. By pairing symbols of the male-dominated Western art music world with symbols of women's sexual liberation, Kubisch gave form to the idea that women could no longer be excluded from the elite ranks of Western art music, and indeed might represent its undoing.

The vibrations of Kubisch's 'dirty electronics' embodied the metaphorical noise of women's growing presence in what had overwhelmingly been the domain of white male elites, subverting that elitism with humour and wit. *Vibrations* winked at symphonic music, minimalist sculpture, 1960s

drone music, electroacoustic composition, and other traditions excluding women in part through long-held ideas about who, and what, should be taken seriously.

Vibrations was notable for other reasons. Of the fifty events and exhibitions held at Rumpsti Pumsti as of October 2020, only ten per cent were by female artists. This is not to impugn the enterprise. Rumpsti Pumsti has brought attention to the work of female sound artists and composers through its outstanding collections. Rather, this figure is representative of wider trends in the sound art world, wherein female artists have been persistently and grossly underrepresented for over half a century, and where it is still common to find major festivals, group exhibitions, compilation albums, edited volumes, magazines, and anthologies in which women and their work barely register.

In this chapter I explore the contributions of female sound artists and composers during the final two decades of the last century, with a view to examining the larger vibrations – the conceptual, aesthetic, and technical disturbances – of their work. The curator Barbara London wrote in her definition of sound art from 1979: ‘Sound art pieces are more closely allied to art than to music, and are usually presented in the museum, gallery, or alternative space.’² This definition appeared in a press release for the 1979 exhibition *Sound Art* curated by London at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which notably only included works by female artists: Laurie Anderson, Maggie Payne, and Julia Heyward. In ‘The Forgotten 1979 MoMA Sound Art Exhibition’ the sound artist Judy Dunaway (b. 1964) remarks that this was the first time the hybrid term ‘sound art’ was used in the title of an exhibit at a major museum – a seemingly important fact that is conspicuously absent from existing histories of sound art. Dunaway asks whether definitions of sound art were constructed in such a way as to exclude key female figures who did not easily fit within certain definitions or categories, like Laurie Anderson or Yoko Ono, who in some canonical writings on sound art were deemed ‘crossover artists’ or ‘too pop’. She wonders:

Does the evolution of the genre itself contain exclusionary behavior? How did opportunities denied to women and practitioners of diversity affect the trajectory of the form? How did interpretations of work that seemed ‘outside the aesthetic’ define the histories? Would broadening the definition of the form allow for a more accurate picture of the history?³

Following from London’s definition and building on Dunaway and other feminist scholars’ work, in this chapter I consider the contributions of female artists whose work is principally aligned with visual arts traditions including

sculpture, installation art, conceptual art, and performance art. I explore their innovations in space and environment, new technologies, voice and vocality, and conceptualism in sound art. I revisit the work of artists including Laurie Anderson, Maryanne Amacher, Genevieve Cadieux, Annea Lockwood, Alison Knowles, Miya Masaoka, Yoko Ono, Liz Phillips, Laetitia Sonami, Hildegard Westerkamp, and Pamela Z, asking how their sonic practices and listening practices challenged social, cultural, and aesthetic norms. I take seriously Pauline Oliveros's powerful claim that not only were female composers (here extended to 'sound artists') directly stymied in their efforts to gain entrée and recognition by their male counterparts but also these exclusions occurred in subtle and insidious ways. My aim, again, is not to impugn, but rather to examine the mechanisms of exclusion that have produced a marked and seemingly intractable gender imbalance in sound art – one that persists despite the remarkable inventiveness of female sound artists and the efforts of feminist scholars to recover their work and to reorientate sound art canons.

Sound Art, Space, and Environment

The year 1980 marked a watershed phase in the career of Maryanne Amacher (1938–2000), an iconoclastic American composer and sound artist who pioneered aspects of sound installation art, site-specific sound art, and psycho-acoustic composition. In June 1980, Amacher, who had been exploring the relationship of sound to space since the mid-1960s, staged her first architecturally scaled work, *Living Sound (Patent Pending)*. This multimedia installation, which included textual, sonic, and visual elements, spanned the entirety of a vacant mansion in St Paul, Minnesota, where it was presented as part of the New Music America festival.⁴ Amacher, who made the conceptual leap of distinguishing between 'air-borne' and 'structure-borne' sound transmission as compositional parameters, used architectural structures and materials to both transmit and modify sound. In *Living Sound (Patent Pending)* she staged each room individually and in connection to a larger suite of interconnected rooms, putting into practice her concept of 'audjoined rooms'. This work also put into action her uniquely forceful sonic aesthetics. She wrote:

The entire ground floor of the house was full of a spectacular sound – incredibly loud, and unbelievably dense. It poured out of giant loudspeakers, circulating throughout the rooms, out the doors and windows, down the hill, past sedate Victorian mansions. A visitor who stepped 'off limits' into the kitchen was literally slammed up against the refrigerator by the force of the energy. Others felt

themselves pushed, as if by acoustic pressure, out into the garden, where the entire house was heard, sounding, as a gigantic instrument.⁵

Amacher's approach was visceral and charged, finely attuned to sound's physical and material properties and its energetic potency. Her aesthetics broke with tradition in embracing dramatic expression and narrative form. Whereas sound installation art of the period was characterized by minimalist abstraction, Amacher created intensely vivid, dramatic scenes that audiences could inhabit, an experience she likened to 'walking into a cinematic closeup'.⁶ This aesthetics underpinned her *Music for Sound-Joined Rooms* (1980) series, where she used architectural structures to create 'intensely dramatic sound experiences', which, she wrote, 'cannot be created any other way: a form of sound art that uses the architecture of rooms, specifically, TO MAGNIFY THE EXPRESSIVE DIMENSIONS OF THE MUSIC'.⁷

Amacher not only staged sound works across entire buildings; she also created works that connected multiple spaces and places through sound. She developed the concept of 'sonic telepresence', producing works in which multiple, often distant sites were connected using what she called 'real-time telelinks': microphones transmitting sound continuously from one location to another. These sonic transmissions helped to establish what she called 'tone of place'.⁸ Amacher worked at the scale of the architectural, the telematic/virtual, the urban, and even the inter-urban. With *City-Links* (1967–88), a series of sonic telepresence works that took shape in twenty-one parts over a period of twenty-one years, she placed microphones in remote locations, 'sometimes between cities and even countries', in one case continuously transmitting sound from a dedicated channel in the Boston Harbor to her own studio for a period of three years.⁹

Amacher equally worked at the level of the human body and sensory perception, developing novel modes of psychoacoustic composition: works that explicitly engaged with the physics of sound and the psychology of hearing. She pioneered techniques in the realm of auditory distortion products, creating music from otoacoustic emissions or what she called 'ear tones', that seemed to emanate from listeners' ears themselves.¹⁰ Her forays into such uncharted territory were notable for their inventiveness, their rigorous testing of psychological and acoustic phenomena, and the striking ways in which they reconceptualized relationships between sound, place, space, and architecture.

The German-born Canadian composer, radio artist, and acoustic ecologist Hildegard Westerkamp (b. 1946) shared Amacher's interest in

exploring the ‘tone of place’, albeit in the very different context of soundscape composition. Westerkamp was a core member of the World Soundscape Project (WSP), a research group founded by the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer in Vancouver in the late 1960s. With the WSP, Westerkamp developed the key concept of ‘soundwalking’, which she described as ‘any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment’.¹¹ Soundwalking has since become widely used in soundscape studies and sound art, underpinning countless research projects and artworks. Westerkamp developed a distinctly inclusive approach to soundwalking, conceiving of the ‘participatory soundwalk’ as an activity that might be done by anyone, whether alone or as part of a group. Her inclusive ethos was apparent in the soundwalking exercises she presented in her influential article ‘Soundwalking’ (1974), where she suggested that soundwalking was something anyone might do in order to develop their sense of ‘aural awareness’, to become more attuned to their relationship with their everyday sonic environments, or simply for ‘fun’.¹² Westerkamp’s use of non-specialist language and her inviting, friendly approach demystified what in other hands might have become overly theoretical and specialized. While her own soundscape compositions – including, notably, from this period, *Cricket Voice* (1987), *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989), and *Beneath the Forest Floor* (1992) – were widely influential, Westerkamp did not seek to elevate the status of composer over that of the listener or participant. Rather, she understood the relationship between composer and listener in fundamentally dialogical terms.¹³ In similar vein, she developed a conception of soundscape composition as a dialogue between composers and sonic environments, one in which compositions ‘emerged’ from sonic materials instead of resulting strictly from composers’ intent.

Westerkamp’s inclusive approach shaped soundscape composition and acoustic ecology in important ways. The Canadian theorist and sound artist Andra McCartney (1955–2019), who made early feminist interventions into the field of sound studies and wrote extensively on Westerkamp’s work, remarked that some soundwalks ‘shift power relationships between artists and audiences, acknowledging the varied listening experiences and knowledge of audience members’.¹⁴ McCartney noted that soundwalking excursions at new music festivals and conferences were marked by an unusual ‘openness’; people who did not necessarily feel comfortable participating in discussions about avant-garde music due to lack of musical training were more likely to engage in ‘wide-ranging discussions’ in connection to soundwalks.¹⁵ McCartney likewise drew attention to the unusual gender balance of soundwalking communities, noting that ‘many of the major figures in the field of

soundwalking are women, unlike with many other areas of electroacoustic sound art – a gender balance that arguably owes a debt to the inclusive tone set by Westerkamp in the early days of the tradition.¹⁶

The New Zealand-born, US-based composer and sound artist Annea Lockwood (b. 1939) has been lauded for her conceptual sound art practice as well as for her compositions and installations derived from environmental sound sources. From the early 1980s, Lockwood created a series of ‘sound maps’ that acoustically charted, in striking detail, rivers including the Hudson (1981–82), the Danube (2001–5), and the Housatonic (2009–10). Lockwood’s vibrant sound maps support her claim that she treats ‘each sound as though it were a piece of music in itself.’¹⁷ She has said, ‘For me, every sound has its own minute form – is comprised of small flashing rhythms, shifting tones, has momentum, comes, vanishes, lives out its own structure.’¹⁸ Lockwood’s idea of treating individual sounds as ‘music in themselves’ is evident in *Sound Map of the River Danube*, in which the undulating melodies, shifting textures, and dynamic and complex rhythmic patterns of river sounds emerge as profoundly musical. In preparing this sound map, Lockwood studied local and state maps of the Danube, interviewing locals whose lives were intertwined with the river’s. Their voices are imbued with a deep musicality, with their shifting tonality and affect combining with environmental sounds to create rich soundscape portraits that traverse environmental, social, historical, and political registers.

Lockwood’s compositional process is rooted in meditative, focused listening. Thus, although she recorded the Danube for a period of months, she did not record continuously or in a haphazard way. Rather, she gathered material slowly and deliberately, aiming to reveal the rich variety of sound-worlds comprising the river and its attendant communities. She says:

I need to take a significant amount of time at a site to settle my brain and body down and refocus all my attention on the soundscape. Gradually it comes into focus and I begin to pick up the softer sounds, then such aspects as the coincidental connections of one pitch in the river with the same pitch elsewhere in the environment. Then I start recording.

And simply, the longer I listen in any one spot, the more I hear, as we all do.¹⁹

Sound Art and New Technologies

Female composers and sound artists made key interventions in the realm of new technologies during 1980–2000, whether in instrument and interface

design, with the creation of technologically mediated sound art works, or in cultivating a feminist approach to sound technologies.

In 1991 the American sound artist and composer Laetitia Sonami (b. 1957) gave her first performance with the 'Lady's Glove', a glove-like controller outfitted with numerous sensors including accelerometers, transducers, ultrasonic transmitters, pressure pads, and a microphone. These sensors tracked the minutiae of hand movements, enabling Sonami to control sound through movement and gesture. Sonami explained that the system was designed 'to allow for multiple, simultaneous controls. The sounds are now "embodied", the controls intuitive, and the performance fluid.'²⁰ While the system is technologically robust and complex, Sonami also created the 'Lady's Glove' to trump expectations in masculinist computer music and electronic music communities, saying that she initially originally conceived of it as 'somewhat of a joke, a response to the heavy masculine apparel used in virtual reality systems'.²¹ Her 'ladylike' evening glove controller mocked the too-serious, exclusionary nature of certain male-dominated music scenes, creating a cognitive dissonance through the design of a wearable technology that was equally coded 'feminine' and 'high tech', and in which musical gestures and electrical signals were performed by, and filtered through, a female body.

A feminist approach to sound technology can be traced in the work of the Japanese American sound artist, composer, and improviser Miya Masaoka (b. 1958), whose wide-ranging practice includes instrument and interface design, wearable technologies, and sonifying the behaviour of non-human lifeforms including plants and insects. In the 1990s Masaoka developed the laser koto, extending the traditional Japanese koto by adding four laser beams, light sensors, and infrared sensors, which enabled her to trigger pre-recorded koto samples by plucking beams of light. In another early project with lasers, *Ritual with Giant Hissing Madagascar Cockroaches* (1995), she lay naked on a massage table while thirteen giant cockroaches crawled on her body, across which stretched an array of laser beams. The cockroaches' movements triggered pre-recorded samples of their own hissing sounds, with increased roach activity mapped onto an increasingly dense soundscape.

Masaoka's work has been concerned with confronting constructions of gender and race in Asian American communities. In *What Is the Sound of Naked Asian Men* (2001), for example, she invited eight Asian men – who, she noted, are not often portrayed naked in public – to lie naked while wearing physiological sensors that tracked their heart rate and brainwave activity; she created music from these biosignals. Crucially, Masaoka does not conceive of such works as merely 'sonifying biodata'; rather she

connects them to deeper spiritual and political philosophies. She has described her works that translate the behaviour of plants and insects into sound as ‘almost like Shinto animism revealed sonically by technological means. Plants and insects become animated and exhibit deeper parts of themselves, their spirit – a kind of consciousness. We are part of our environment; our music is part of the environment. Everything is interconnected, everything is alive.’²²

A feminist and inclusive approach to technological design has informed the work of the American sound artist Liz Phillips (b. 1951). Phillips created a distinct body of interactive sound works spanning a period of more than four decades. In 1981 she was hailed in the *New York Times* as ‘rapidly emerging as one of the best-known practitioners’ of interactive ‘environmental sound installation’.²³ Her sound installations were particularly distinguished in mapping people’s movements onto the processing of sound materials. In *City Flow* (1977), Phillips translated the movements of human foot traffic inside a pedestrian mall in Manhattan – and vehicle traffic outside the building – into an electronic soundscape that the *New Yorker* described as ‘caus[ing] the imagination to run free’.²⁴ In the interactive sound and light installation *Echo Evolution* (1999) she used ultrasonic range finders to detect audience position and movement, mapping those parameters onto the colour and flow of light in neon tubes as well as the processing of sound. The critic Paula Rabinowitz has suggested that Phillips’s audience ‘cannot simply look at or listen to her work; people’s tangible engagement with it . . . makes the work’.²⁵ Rabinowitz emphasizes the social dimension of Phillips’s sound art practice, singling out its ‘resolute sociality’ and ‘joyful accessibility’ – characteristics not typically associated with experimental sound art.²⁶ The accessibility of Phillips’s work is especially noteworthy given that many of her installations rely on complex technological apparatus. However, rather than fetishizing the technological dimension of her work, Phillips demystifies it, going so far as to hide the electronic circuitry in installations so that audiences do not feel alienated or intimidated by it.

Like many female sound artists who work with new technologies, Phillips has experienced various forms of gender-based discrimination. Curators, presenters, and audiences alike have assumed that men who happened to be in the same room as her designed the electronics in her works, and, as she says in an interview with Charles Eppley, some even questioned whether she possessed a basic knowledge of electronics.²⁷ Such experiences of discrimination and exclusion have been even more extreme for female sound artists of colour working with new technologies. The African American vocalist,

composer, and sound artist Pamela Z (b. 1956), who has developed a distinguished body of works for voice and electronics, has said,

whenever I was selected to be on a program on electronic music or I was on a compilation CD . . . I would be the only woman. Everybody else was men – white men . . . And the same was true for my other colleagues, women that were doing these things. And it was not that we weren't doing it, it was just that our work was not getting respected and represented.²⁸

Z speaks to the idea that women have been triply excluded from worlds that span composition, new technologies, and the avant-garde: domains that have historically been gendered male and racially coded white.

Voice and Vocality

Female sound artists and composers have radically transformed conceptions of voice and vocality, whether through developing innovative vocal techniques, recuperating orality and storytelling in genres where these were diminished, or exploring the material, affective, and cultural dimensions of the voice in novel ways.

Pamela Z, whose vocal training was in classical song and opera, expanded the expressive possibilities of vocal performance by setting the voice in myriad multimedia contexts and through her seemingly exhaustive examination of the socio-politics of voice. Among Z's large-scale performance works, *Voci* (2003), an 80-minute suite, comprising numerous segments, approaches voice, she writes, 'as anatomy, as character, as identifier, and communicator'.²⁹ In *Voci* Z explores how vocal characteristics like timbre, tonality, and accents are used to mark social difference and maintain social hierarchies around race, class, and gender, as in the racialized vocal profiling that has underpinned housing discrimination in the United States. She further explores the ways in which different 'types' of voices (such as 'politician's voice', and 'radio voice') are socially and culturally constructed – and how different musical traditions reflect deeper ideas of what is considered beautiful or desirable in a voice. Like many of Z's works, *Voci* is humorous, audience interactive, and inventive in its approach to new technologies. Z not only uses a wide range of software and hardware (including body-worn BodySynth sensors, MIDI controllers enabling her to modify her voice using physical movements) but also critically examines vocal technologies, including voice synthesis software, and asks how the voice itself is a technology for social control.

George E. Lewis sees Pamela Z as ‘part of a generation of women sound artists . . . who reassert the human need for exchanging stories in a logocentric culture that has privileged written over oral modes of discourse’.³⁰ Indeed, novel constructions of voice and storytelling are at the heart of several female sound artists’ work. Laurie Anderson (b. 1947) created experimental narrative forms at the intersection of storytelling, vocal performance, and new technologies; Hildegard Westerkamp incorporated her own voice into her soundscape compositions, a genre in which the sound recordist’s body is typically hidden; and Janet Cardiff’s (b. 1957) binaural audio walks invited listeners to follow the sound of her close-miked voice, and inhabit stories in which real and fictional worlds intersect uncannily.

The voices of female sound artists have been distinguished in directly embodying a transgressive sonic aesthetics and politics. One might think of Yoko Ono’s screams, characterized by Shelina Brown as ‘politically charged instances of abject sonic art’;³¹ or of Laurie Anderson’s use of vocal disguise in her performances with the vocoder (voice synthesizer);³² or Janet Cardiff’s whispering voice, recorded and reproduced, in many of her works, in such a way as to seem to occupy a place inside listeners’ heads. It is not only the sonic or material qualities of these voices that distinguish them, however, but also the ways in which they reveal and resist social, cultural, and aesthetic norms. Laurie Anderson’s vocal personae, for example, often perform a gender-bending role. As Lucie Vágnerová wrote, in Anderson’s ‘Voice of Authority’ the artist transposes her voice down two octaves, performing a kind of ‘audio drag’ that plays on ideas of gender, voice, and power.³³ Anderson has said, ‘I loved to use the lowest setting on the Harmonizer, a digital processor that lowered my voice, to sound like a man . . . When I spoke as a woman, [people] listened indulgently; but when I spoke as a man, and especially as a bossy man, they listened with interest and respect.’³⁴ By contrast, Yoko Ono’s screams can be read as feminist protest. In the context of white, male-dominated avant-garde scenes Shelina Brown hears Ono’s voice as ‘unleashing a subversive vocality that threatens to destabilize . . . the gendered and racialized sonic codes that delineate acceptable modes of vocal musical expression’.³⁵

Many female sound artists have explored the material and affective dimensions of the voice in ways that challenged aesthetic norms. The sound installation *Broken Memory* (1995) by the Canadian artist Genevieve Cadieux (b. 1955) featured a disembodied female voice heard in various states of anguish and despair from inside a trapezoidal glass structure. Cadieux conceived of this glass structure as a ‘body’ for the voice,

thinking of glass as ‘skin, the frontier between the exterior and the interior’.³⁶ When the installation was exhibited at the Tate Gallery in London in 1995, several reviewers were highly critical if not outright dismissive. *The Independent*’s Iain Gale wrote, ‘The woman is clearly very unhappy . . . she’s been crying non-stop. It’s a terrible sobbing from the gut that rises in a hysterical crescendo [and] make[s] you want to shout “stop.”’³⁷ Gale described this *cri de coeur* as ‘played interminably’, versus the more neutral ‘repeated continuously’ associated with the numerous works by male artists that are celebrated for the simple use of repetition or looping. Mistakenly attributing the voice in *Broken Memory* to Cadieux herself, Gale accused the artist of fakery, suggesting that she ‘[made] herself cry’, and asserting, ‘this, surely, is not real anguish’ and claiming that this (perceived) inauthenticity inspired in him ‘a very unpleasant feeling’.³⁸ Writing about the same work for *Art Monthly*, the critic Mark Sladen took issue with the idea that the voice in *Broken Memory* was supplied by an actor, not by Cadieux herself. Ironically, the charge Sladen levied against Cadieux was also one of inauthenticity. He wrote, ‘Who owns this pain? We all do, baby. I find this kind of thing both manipulative and unconstructive’.³⁹ Sladen further compared Cadieux’s installation unfavourably to the work of a male contemporary (Damien Hirst), and concluded, ‘I find Hirst’s work more effective’.⁴⁰

In revisiting these criticisms, I do not wish to imply that sound art by women should not be subjected to the same kinds of critical scrutiny as that created by men. Rather, I seek to highlight the gendered nature of the criticism, whether in terms of the gendered language (‘hysterical’, ‘manipulative’); the punishing tone (‘played interminably’); dismissive commentary (‘This, surely, is not real anguish’); condescension (‘Who owns this pain? We all do baby’); or the unfavourable comparison to male artists, sadly a common trope. These are merely a few of the ways in which the guise of criticism has been used to maintain a status quo, rather than engage in any deep or meaningful way with women’s art on its own terms. With respect to *Broken Memory*, I suggest that it was not a sense of ‘inauthenticity’ that inspired unpleasant feelings in Gale, but rather the combination of a flagrant display of female emotion in an avant-garde context wherein a cool, dispassionate aesthetics dominated, and the fact that this emotion was embodied in a female voice, marked as ‘Other’ in the context of modernist and avant-garde art. As Yoko Ono said, ‘The avant-garde guys didn’t use the voice. They were all just so cool, right? And there was also this very asexual kind of atmosphere in the music. And I wanted to throw blood.’⁴¹

Conceptualism

The rise of conceptualism in sound art owes much to the work of female sound artists and composers, although this connection has not been made in existing histories of experimental music and sound art. While still a student at Sarah Lawrence College in the mid-1950s, Yoko Ono (b. 1933) created minimalist, conceptual instruction scores that comprised instructions for actions that could be performed by anyone. Her first such score, *Lighting Piece* from 1955, read, ‘Light a match and watch till it goes out.’ Ono published over 150 instruction scores in the collection *Grapefruit* (1964), including 60 under the heading ‘Music’. They included *Overtone Piece* (1964), which instructed ‘Make music only with overtones’; and *Voice Piece for Soprano* (1961), which read:

Scream.

1. against the wind
2. against the wall
3. against the sky.⁴²

In the 1960s such scores came to be understood as ‘Event scores’, a term proposed by the Fluxus artist George Brecht to describe scores that, as Alison Knowles has written, ‘involve simple actions, ideas, and objects from everyday life recontextualized as performance . . . texts that can be seen as proposal pieces or instructions for actions’.⁴³

Ono’s best-known work in this genre was *Cut Piece*, which she performed in Kyoto, Tokyo, New York City, and London in 1964–1966. In those performances, Ono sat motionless next to a pair of scissors and invited members of the audience to cut a small piece of her clothing and take it with them. *Cut Piece* has since become one of the most widely discussed works of 1960s conceptual art, and is considered a work of proto-feminist performance art par excellence.⁴⁴ It has been analysed through a myriad of lenses: in connection to Buddhist philosophies of enlightenment-through-selflessness;⁴⁵ as an act of hospitality that can be interpreted through the lens of Asian American womanhood;⁴⁶ as violent confrontation; as striptease; and more. While all these interpretations may be valid, however, none of the scholarly accounts I have seen consider *Cut Piece* in connection to the larger collection of instruction scores that Ono produced between 1955 and 1970. If we refer to that larger output, we find many other works that provide important context for *Cut Piece*, including *Painting Until It Becomes Marble* from 1961, which instructed:

Cut out and hang a painting, design,
a photograph, or a writing (printed or
otherwise), that you like.

Let visitors cut out their favorite
parts and take them.⁴⁷

There is a *different* score in Ono's *Grapefruit* collection that shares the title *Cut Piece* and that appears in the section 'Painting'. It instructs: 'Throw it off a building', the 'it' ostensibly referring to a painting.

My aim here is not to 'set the record straight' on *Cut Piece*; that record is living and evolving. Rather, I suggest that *Cut Piece* should be examined in connection to Ono's larger compositional and artistic output, as is regularly done with works by prominent male composers and artists, but has not, to my knowledge, been done in relation to Ono's score, despite its iconic status and despite such clear and easily discoverable links. *Cut Piece* shares characteristics with Event scores by male artists, including George Brecht, La Monte Young, George Maciunas, Dick Higgins, and Nam June Paik – scores first discussed in connection to experimental music traditions by Michael Nyman, in his influential book *Experimental Music: John Cage and Beyond*. Yet Ono's score does not feature in Nyman's book, nor in several of the key texts on experimental music and sound art that followed. Ono performed *Cut Piece* in 1965 in the context of a legendary recital at Carnegie Hall; and she herself has drawn attention to the musical aspects of the work.⁴⁸ Further, Ono was one of the first artists to exhibit instruction scores, and given that she is a household name it is unthinkable that her work would not have been known to Nyman.

Taking *Cut Piece* as a starting point, we might reconsider historical accounts that trace conceptualism and experimentalism in sound art and music only or primarily to John Cage. While Cage was undoubtedly an influential figure in many circles, including a direct influence for many Fluxus artists, Ono was also an originator of many ideas that held sway in Fluxus. In addition to pioneering the genre of instruction scores, from 1960 to 1961 she hosted – and with La Monte Young co-organized – the Chambers Street Loft Series at her own loft. This concert series at 112 Chambers Street was an important if not foundational forum for experimental music scenes in the United States. Ono was creating conceptual music nearly a decade before meeting Cage, Young, or any Fluxus artists. In 1950 she composed a work (originally in Japanese) titled *The Soundless Music*, the following excerpt of which appeared (in English) in *Grapefruit*:

A floating city
 The second level world
 Upstairs on the clouds
 Mountains and rain roaring underneath
 Like venice, we have to commute by
 boat through air currents to visit
 eachothers floating houses.
 Cloud gardens to watch all day.⁴⁹

Ono specified that her inspiration for such works was rooted in her childhood music studies in Japan, 1937–1940: ‘We received homework in which you were supposed to listen to the sound of the day, and translate each sound into musical notes. This made me into a person who constantly translated the sounds around her into musical notes as a habit.’⁵⁰ Ono’s attention to environmental and incidental sounds was therefore *not* a Cagean gesture. Rather, these proclivities stemmed from her formative experiences and early music education.

The Fluxus artist Alison Knowles (b. 1933) produced a number of widely performed Event scores in the 1960s, including, most famously, *Proposition* (October 1962), which read only: ‘Make a salad.’⁵¹ Some of Knowles’s instructional scores contained musical instructions. *Piece for Any Number of Vocalists* (December, 1962), instructed: ‘Each thinks beforehand of a song, and, on signal from the conductor, sings it through.’⁵² Even those scores that did not explicitly refer to musical or sonic events often emerged as musical in performance. Cecilia Novero has written of the premiere of *Proposition* (October 1962) that Knowles ‘drew attention away from the performance’s more obvious visual aspects by highlighting the sounds of ... slicing, chopping, and cutting’; she suggested that many of Knowles’s performances heightened the sense of hearing ‘in those experiences that are usually already claimed by other senses’.⁵³

With John Cage, Knowles co-edited *Notations* (1969), an important anthology of score excerpts by 269 composers. She also designed the book. In the book itself, however, only Cage is credited as ‘author’. In his preface Cage acknowledges that there were two editors, ‘John Cage and Alison Knowles’, and writes that ‘the composition of the pages is the work of Alison Knowles’.⁵⁴ Knowles may not have been credited as co-editor in the front matter because it was seen as a project conceived by Cage and mostly derived using Cagean chance procedures. Knowles’s contribution may also have been seen as a professional service provided by Something Else Press, which was founded and managed by her husband Dick Higgins.⁵⁵ Still, while the intention may not have been to downplay her

role in the project, the fact that Knowles does not have a single credit line in the manuscript effectively diminishes her contribution. Scholarly sources routinely refer to *Notations* only in connection to Cage.

Seeking to re-centre women's work in conceptual art and performance art, in 1975 and 1978 Knowles and Annea Lockwood co-edited *Womens Work* [sic], a two-part collection of instructional scores by twenty-five female artists. It featured numerous musical/sonic instruction scores, including the Fluxus artist Mieko Shiomi's (b. 1938) *Spatial Poem No. 7* (*sound event*), which invited people around the world to create a 'global symphony' by sending her 300-word reports of the sounds they heard at a specified time on a specified date. A photo documented Christina Kubisch's *Emergency Solos* series – a recital in which Kubisch played the flute while wearing thimbles on all her fingers. Lockwood contributed three scores that are now considered cornerstones of conceptual sound art: *Piano Burning*, *Piano Drowning*, and *Piano Garden*. One of the two scores Pauline Oliveros contributed instructed the performer to create a 'sound map' of a university campus, as well as an untitled, handwritten score that read:

KEEP THE NEXT SOUND YOU HEAR
in MiND
FOR AT LEAST THE NEXT HALF HOUR

The curator Irene Revell regards the *Womens Work* collection as offering 'an invaluable counterpoint to the male avant-garde canon', yet it 'has been rarely referenced and never considered in its own right'.⁵⁶

Women's Inaudibility and Invisibility

Taken as a whole, the contributions by women to sound art explored here not only represent a striking body of works deserving much more scholarly attention but also constitute an important counter-aesthetics to male-dominated sound art traditions. Female sound artists invented novel sonic concepts that remain under-theorized: air-borne and structure-borne sounds; sonic telepresence; audjoined rooms; tone of place; and ear tones – to cite only from a single under-theorized artist's work (Maryanne Amacher). Women pioneered new forms and genres: architecturally scaled sound installations, instructional scores, participatory soundwalks, sound maps, binaural audio walks. And they created works that specifically subverted masculinist sound art traditions and challenged aesthetic norms: dialogical forms of soundscape composition, feminist sound technologies,

works exploring the socio-politics of sound and voice, inclusive approaches to interaction and interface design, and an embrace of narrative dramatic expression and affect in the context of avant-garde and experimental sound art.

Despite such important and wide-ranging contributions, there remains a persistent gender imbalance in sound art worlds. It stems partly from a reluctance among critics and curators to embrace or even acknowledge the contributions of women to the field. In Michael Nyman's *Experimental Music*, originally published in 1974, and featuring the work of over fifty composers and sound artists in the mid-twentieth century, almost all of them European American or white English men, only one woman is mentioned: Charlotte Moorman, and then principally in the context of her collaborations with Nam June Paik. For the second edition, published in 1999, Nyman failed to update the text, only adding a preface and a discography by Robert Worby which includes several hundred recordings, none of them by female composers. Nyman did imagine what an updated version of the text could look like, which he tellingly called 'Son of *Experimental Music*'.⁵⁷ Aware of the limited geographical scope of his original study, he suggested that an updated book 'would have to be less ethnocentric'.⁵⁸ Yet he reasserted the centrality of (Euro) American and English composers, writing: "This book is firmly positioned on a US/UK axis since the "tradition" started in the US and transplanted itself into England."⁵⁹

In the final paragraph of that preface, Nyman acknowledges that female composers may have existed at the time of the original publication: 'Some composers – for instance, Meredith Monk, Pauline Oliveros, James Jenney [sic] and Charlemagne Palestine – were invisible and inaudible to a writer/performer whose take on his subject was completely London-based.'⁶⁰ But rather than concede that female composers like Monk and Oliveros should have been included, he clings to his original choices: 'Strangely enough, were I writing *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* today, I would *not* do it any differently . . . Thank goodness I wrote it when I did.'⁶¹ Composers like Monk and Oliveros *were* invisible and inaudible to Nyman because they simply did not register with him. Along with other critics and scholars whose work has produced a significant male-dominated bias in sound art canons, he was insensitive to female artists' work.

Several recent projects have sought to recover contributions by female-identifying sound artists that would otherwise be lost to history. In 2019, Irene Revell and James Hoff re-issued the *Womens Work* collection, and Revell is undertaking a major study of the volume.⁶² Maryanne Amacher's once-obscure writings have recently been published in a volume co-edited

by Amy Cimini and Bill Dietz.⁶³ A 2016 issue of *Contemporary Music Review* co-edited by Georgina Born and Kyle Devine is devoted to the theme of gender and education in sound art and digital musics.⁶⁴ The London-based artist Aura Satz has brought attention to the work of early women in electronic music and sound art through videos, films, drawings, installations, and other original artworks that give new life to their work.⁶⁵

These add to a growing plethora of projects that have increased the visibility of female sound artists and developed feminist perspectives in sound art. They include Tara Rodgers's foundational *Pink Noises* book and online forum; the exhibitions *Her Noise* and *Sounds Like Her*, the event series *Sound::Gender::Feminism::Activism*; the online archives *Ekho: Women in Sonic Art* and *Re.Act.Feminism*; the directory *Audible Women*; the feminist collectives *bunker*, *Fair Plé*, and *studio xx*; the research project *Sonic Cyberfeminisms*; the platform *New Emergences*; the blog *Sounding Out!*; the community project *Re#sister*; the podcast *Girls Twiddling Knobs*; the radio series *Women in Electronic Music 1938–1928*; professional networks *Sonora*, *Yorkshire Sound Women Network*, and *Women in Sound/Women on Sound*; educational initiatives *Women's Audio Mission* and the *DIY Female Musician*; and writings and projects by a wide range of feminist scholars, artists, curators, and presenters.⁶⁶

Feminist interventions serve to rebalance sound art discourses and practices and reorientate male-dominated sound art canons and histories; and they transform the wider cultural and social ecologies in which sound art develops. If we take seriously the idea that perception is ecological – that there is a dialogical relationship between perceivers and their environments – then we could say that, by bringing attention to female sound artists' work, such interventions also increase sensitivity towards that work, increasing the possibility that it will register in the future. Taking our cue from Annea Lockwood, we might identify such a feminist practice as re-hearing and re-composition of sound art canons – a practice rooted in listening, attention, and sensitization. As Lockwood says, 'the longer I listen in one place, the more I hear, as we all do'.

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