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ON SOUND ART
RICHARD GARET IN CONVERSATION
WITH SETH CLUETT

MoMA CURATOR BARBARA LONDON
TALKS ABOUT 'SOUNDINGS:
A CONTEMPORARY SCORE'

SONIC PHILOSOPHY
BRANDON LABELLE
CHRISTIAN MARCLAY

SUSAN PHILIPSZ

PAMELA Z

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Richard Gareth, *Working with sound in real time*. Performed at MAAS, 2013. Photo: Ana Devora. Courtesy of the artist and Mandragoras Art Space, New York.



Richard Gareth in conversation with Seth Cluett. *MAAS Talks 2013*. Photo: Ana Devora. Courtesy of the artist and Mandragoras Art Space, New York.

ON SOUND

Richard Gareth in Conversation with Seth Cluett

Richard Gareth is an interdisciplinary artist based in New York City who uses sound as a main resource in his artistic practice. Within Gareth's exhibiting projects one may encounter stand-alone objects, installations and multi-channel space interventions that invite observation on the conditions of sound and its reception into the processes of listening, immersion, communication, information noise and time. Furthermore, Gareth utilizes these same approaches with time-based performances, and he has an extensive list of CD publications of what he refers to as "Sonic Constructions."

This conversation is a continuation of an event that took place on March 30th, 2013, when Gareth engaged in a discussion with sound artist and theorist Seth Cluett at Mandragoras Art Space | MAAS Talks, (www.mandragoras.org)¹. In this conversation Gareth and Cluett not only expand on key elements of sound artistic practice discussed during MAAS Talks, but also focused on Gareth's participation in "Soundings: A Contemporary Score" at The Museum of Modern Art², and on his approaches to working with sound and the state of sound art in the art world today.

Seth Cluett - How did you get started exploring sound in your work?

Richard Gareth - It was a process that started about 25 years ago. I feel that I have always been very sensitive to music and sound since I was a very young boy, and listening to music has been always a very important part of my life. When I was 16 years old my father gave me an electric guitar, which I did not know how to play, but that never stopped me from attempting to express myself through it. Before having a multi-track device and way before even working with computers, I worked with my guitar, pedal effects, a boom box and a tape deck. I would play the guitar and record to tape and multi-track in that manner; it was all very archaic and experimental. I was making noise tapes and passing them around among my close friends. At the time I was part of the early youth punk scene in South America in Caracas, Venezuela, so there was a positive reception from my friends, who were very open-minded and equally sonically curious. After that, I learned how to play the guitar and was part of various bands over the years.

When I started going to art school in NYC in the late 1990s I was already moving away from playing musical instruments and venturing fully into art making. It was at that point that I started making connections between sound material (outside of music) and art. I became very interested in sound and the possibilities of sound as a material for art making. I also became very obsessed with learning how experimental sound expanded away from music and was exposed to work that approached sound in a more materialistic and process-based manner. Subsequently, experimental music and sound art became primary areas of interest for my artistic practice.

S.C. - A substantial number of artists who work with sound, myself included, have a performance practice alongside their exhibited work though. And while performance practices are not wholly unique amongst artists generally, what do you think about this

prevalence of performance amongst artists working with sound?

R.G. - For me, performances are very important because they are absolutely tactile and direct, free, pure and charged with risk. I like the direct connection with a space, the material in a time-limited or temporal condition, the physicality that it involves, as well as the direct connection with the audience. I feel there is something very special and liberating when I perform—I also love how performance offers a connection with the constantly evolving present moment. But I also think that performance is completely different than working in the studio and getting work ready for installations. In those cases, the process is more constrained, and the overall structure explores form over time. In my practice, performance also has to do with the colliding experiences of being an experimental composer inspired by visceral art and avant-garde music from the 20th century, the exploration of sonic materials, as well as my work as a visual artist.

S.C. - Is there something about sonic material that lends itself to time-based presentation? Is it a relationship to or against music? Is there something performance does that gallery-based work can't do?

R.G. - I think that sound-exploratory practices that deal with material, the nature of sound, poly-layered sources and everything that encompasses creating work that has sound as a main component lends itself to time-based presentations; sound and time cannot be separated from the work. I feel that the developments of 20th-century avant-garde and experimental music in Europe and America has very much influenced performative sound practice, but it all depends on intent. I think that performances may exist in different environments and last from a few seconds to hours: They can be subtle and almost not present, or very bold and very present. I think that it has to do with one's own practice and developments to choose what kind of work one does and how to tailor performative situations. I think that everything related to a performance becomes part of the work, so it is the responsibility of the artist to compose the situation in which the performance would take place. Galleries, museums, public spaces and other alternative environments host sound-based performances quite often, while some activate social space and some do the opposite.

S.C. - How much of a role does context play?

R.G. - Regardless of what the approach might be, I think that it doesn't have to do with the context itself, but rather with what one does with the limitations that one encounters in these spaces—whether it is proper isolation, equipment, acoustics, lighting, sonic disruption, the tone of the room, production, you name it. I would say that the biggest obstacle that I have found in my years of artistic practice is the difficulty of having to compromise too much and not being able to overcome the limitations that I have encountered. It all comes down to production and proper sensibility coming from the presenting organization that allows artists to produce the work



Richard Gareth, *Undercurrent*, 2012, sound installation, modified tape player, treated audiocassette, loop, amplifier, two speakers, 10" x 18" x 15", continuous running. Courtesy of the artist and Julian Navarro Projects, New York.

the way it needs to be. If a gallery, a museum or an independent cultural producer understands what the work is and what it needs, then the proper platform for an accurate performative execution is established, and if it isn't, the work will suffer. No matter how good it gets, I feel there is always some level of compromise.

You work in a variety of media as well though, but to focus on just two, on the one hand you are a composer and on the other an artist working with sound. How do you delineate the difference between these? Is it a matter of function and intent, material, environment, context, the means to an end, the signifier?

S.C. - I don't actually see myself as any of these things individually, but rather the work I've been producing for the last 10 years has existed somewhere on a continuum between photography, sculpture and composition. I'm formally trained in all three disciplines, but even though I began with music when I was younger, the shift towards the broadening of my output developed organically from my interests in technologically mediated experiences of time, memory and lived or inhabited space. For my practice, the idea is always the point of departure, and the idea determines the medium and materials. A lot of artists working in sound avoid acknowledging a connection with music, but I believe music (broadly conceived) is capable of inhabiting a complex and productive critical position and that the

construction of auditory material for focused consumption by an audience has a lot of potential. My drawings and my performances deal with similar issues—failure, physicality, loss of memory/action in the face of technological development—and I feel at home expressing myself either way. They get at the idea from different sides.

I understand you have a piece in the upcoming "Soundings..." exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art. What will you be showing? Is this work related in any way to the pieces I saw/heard at Julian Navarro Projects at MAAS this past spring?

R.G. - Yes, I will be showing an installation piece titled *Before Me* from 2012. This work consists of a Fender head amp, a dual cone speaker cabinet, a turntable, a clear crystal marble ball, a shotgun microphone with a stand and a light bulb. The work embodies a sonification process and is comprised of (with the exception of the microphone and the stand) street-found material objects. The work emerged from exploring the sonic potential of each of the single objects within a relational structure while taking into consideration what each object is and how it participates in a shifting importance within our culture of consumption and waste. I considered purpose, function and context and how these materials lose their place over time within the shifting economy and progressing technologies.

This work belongs to a series that explores materiality and objects, information theory, background noise, commodity and function. All of these works are primarily object-based, mechanical in nature, and autonomously emit sound. *Before Me* was meant to be part of my solo exhibition "Extraneous to the Message" that took place from March to April this year at Julian Navarro Projects at MAAS, in Long Island City, New York, and then Barbara London, the curator of "Soundings: A Contemporary Score," selected the work for inclusion into the exhibit, so MoMA will be premiering the work.

You mentioned technology in your work. What is the connection with technology in your work? I believe that in a work of art everything matters and nothing should be gratuitous. Do you see technology as a tool, as a part of the work, as a piece of the puzzle that the spectator is supposed to absorb and assimilate, or the means to an end? How relevant is the technology an artist uses?

S.C. - My work rarely focuses on technology explicitly. I tend to focus implicitly on technology by using sound to put pressure on the role recording plays in shifting individual and social memory or by producing something electronically and juxtaposing it against something produced by the hand (drawing perfect circles) or the voice (singing perfect sinusoidal sound waves). I'm very conscious to limit how the technology I use is read in the work; I try to control how legible the implications of that technology are. I think the worst scenario happens when an artist doesn't choose—choosing not to choose is a choice. Not considering the implications of audible/visible technology in media art creates a messy *mise-en-scène* for the person experiencing the work.

R.G. - Do you think about art politics when you make your work? And if so, how do you connect the politics of the materials you use? Is this something that has to do with sound, or do you think that choices based on material should be relevant while paying attention to the history of the material—how this particular material fits within its own independent context. Is it only about the sound?

S.C. - If by art politics, you mean something like painting versus sculpture, then I don't think about art politics very much. I do think about the politics of the space of exhibition, the value



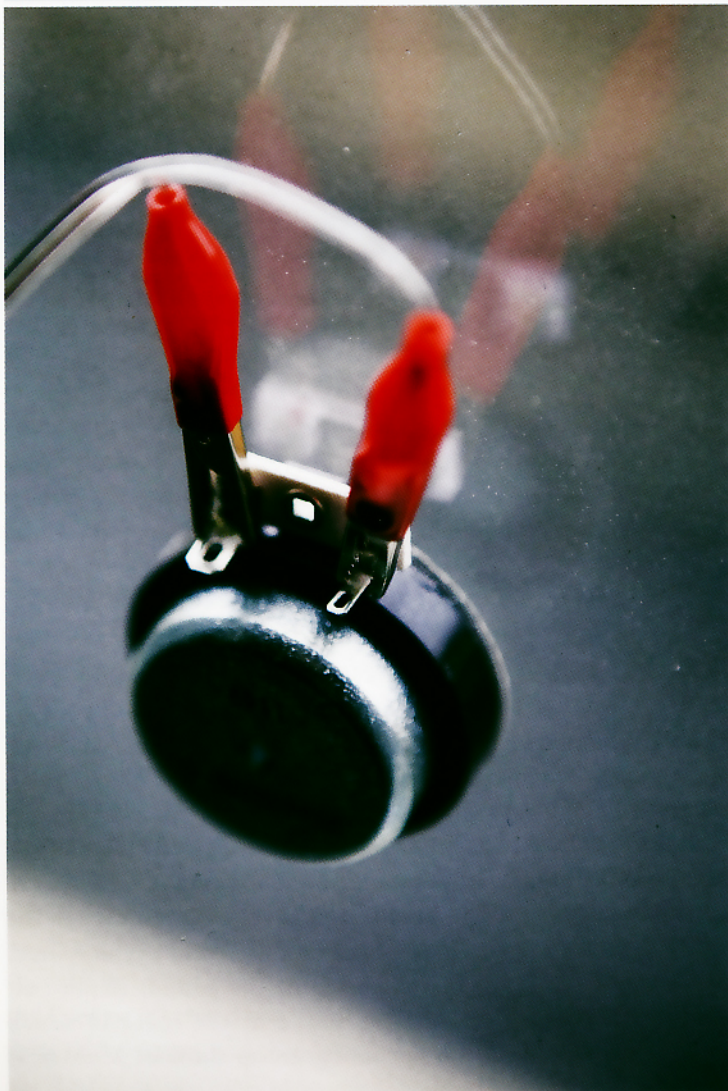
Richard Garett, *30 Cycles of Flux (series), #2*, 2013, sound installation, oscillator, amplifier, 16 speaker-cones, string, 11' x 17' x 21' space dimension, continuous running. Courtesy of the artist and Julian Navarro Projects, New York.

placed on silence in art and music spaces, the privilege associated with hi-fidelity mediated experiences, and the tension between a notion of lived experience of space versus the rarefied focused experience of material in the art and music worlds.

R.G. - I meant simply the general politics that emerge out of the immediacy of the actions that you described. But I was also referring to the politics that are embedded within the material and the aesthetics of the material itself. For example, if one chooses to work with the field-recorded sounds of a nuclear plant or radio transmission noise, one may be inclined towards highlighting the aesthetic quality of the sound alone and ignore the source. Alternately, one may be inclined to first explore and work with that material because of the nature of the source and then later because of the aesthetics. But in a way,

everything becomes initially motivated by the material and its meaning. Does that clarify the politics?

S.C. - Absolutely. Then in that case, I always think about the social/political implications of the sound material. I may not use it or reference it explicitly, but I do believe that even though the audience might not be aware of the exact referent of the source, the acoustic signature (or character of the sound) implies elements of the thing making the sound or the space in which it was recorded. With the upcoming group show at MoMA, it seems like sound has made considerable progress since the experiments of the 1950s and 1960s. What do you think is the status of sound in the art world today?



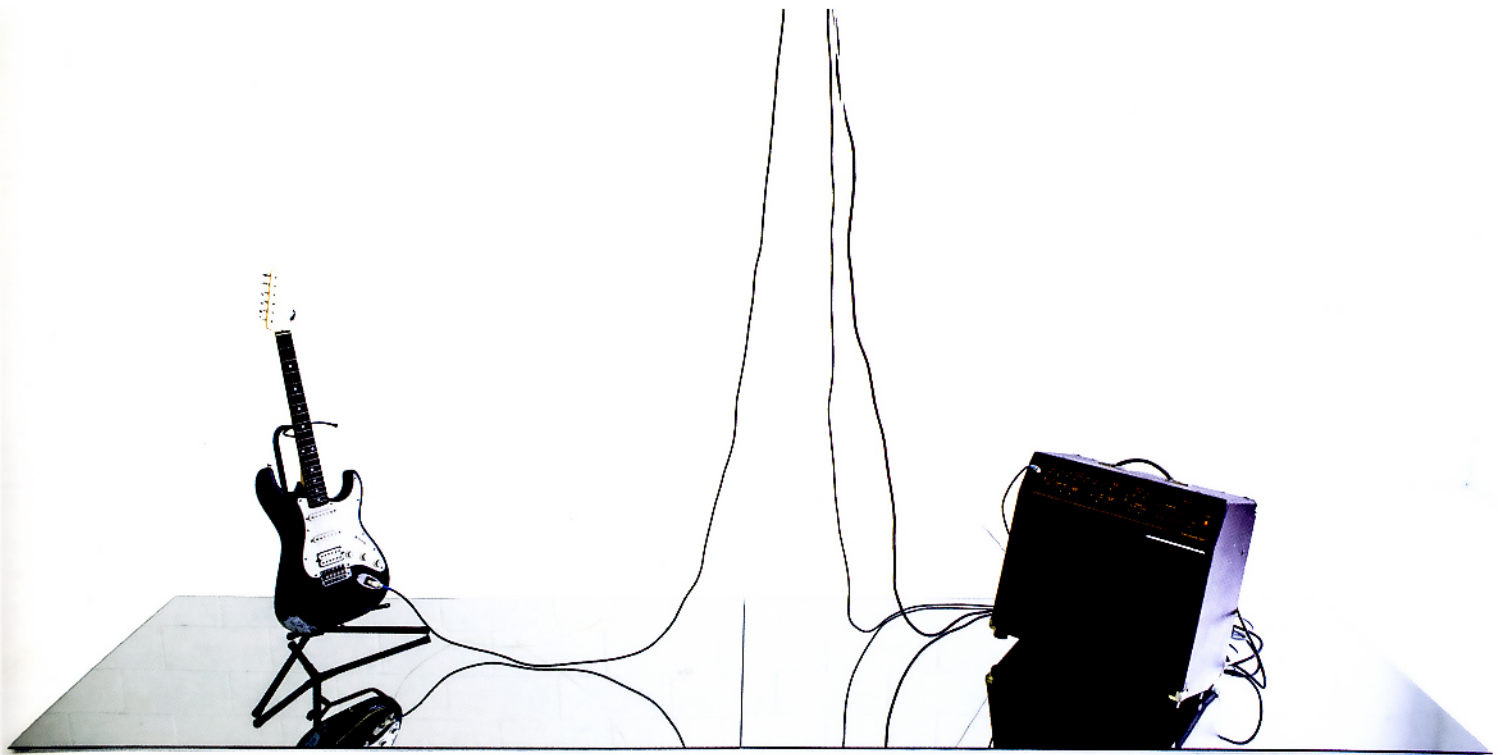
Richard Garett, *Intermedium*, 2013, 4 channel sound installation, 1:02" playing indefinitely, 8 transducers, multi-channel amp, glass, transducers installed on four windows wall, 11' x 50' wall dimension, continuous running. Courtesy of the artist and Julian Navarro Projects, New York.

R.G. - I think sound is a very general word. There are developments in music, and there are developments in the world of fine arts, but in both areas changes concerning sound have been broad, groundbreaking and significant for a very long time. At the same time, I do not think that it is possible to grasp the state of something that is so complex, diverse and in constant flux in a paragraph while still defining the undefined state of sound in the context of the current art world. Still, for a medium such as sound, the developments of industrialization, commoditization, technology and the consumption of high-end technologies for personal use have contributed notably towards bringing us to where we are today.

In music, sounds from the world entered the configuration in connection with technologies that allowed one to sample, modify, reconfigure and synthesize sound. Also, the use of theoretical, process-based and conceptually driven actions welcomed all the sound from instruments, electronics and noise as popular, classical and experimental music expanded on the notions of what music is and how to perceive music. On many levels, these musical practices have informed and filtered into the art world generally; sound also entered through film, video, poetry, sculpture, performance and dance. Sound has been married to visual arts and media, and it has been identified as the sonic component accompanying a work of art.

S.C. - Do you feel like this movement has become more focused recently?

R.G. - Over recent decades it has expanded, creating a divide where artists make work that is exclusively sound based. In sound art, I would say that the ontological experience of sound directly connected with the signifier is a straight distinction that separates sound art from music and permits artists to create work that stands alone. In a way, this has expanded from just listening and redirecting the focus into more specific subjects that expand and go beyond just listening to sonic relationships.



Richard Garett, *Synchronous; the resonance of his voice*, 2013, sound installation, electric guitar, guitar amplifier, sound exciter, audio file, 42" x 30" x 140," continuous running. Courtesy of the artist and Julian Navarro Projects, New York.

There are still fundamental differences that can be relevant to context, function, purpose, social space and politics regarding both and remains very unique and distinctive as well. I consider the one aspect of today's connection to sound that is important is language—language considered in relationship to sound and in terms of its vocabulary, grammar, structure, semantics and aesthetics, and as such a certain level of sophistication has been reached and assimilated by its practitioners and its consumers. As time, developments, technologies, economies and the world around us changes, so does the art that is being created.

S.C. - Because of the focus on the materiality of sound, does it always mean that sound works risk being read as a fundamentally modernist enterprise?

R.G. - I think that sound art urges a deeper undertaking beyond the formalist contour typically found in 20th-century modern art. I also believe that with sound, something similar has occurred to what happened to video when it first came out and has not changed much since the 1950s. When something is new and young its voice reflects just that; as it grows and matures, it reaches a higher level of sophistication that allows the practice to compete and challenge itself and subsequently develop and grow further. Initially, when artists undertook the practice of a new-media approach, everything was exciting, new and cutting edge, but in such situations the processes, aesthetics, forms and autonomous conditions may be enough. As the practice evolves it calls for something else to enhance its refinement, condition and language, because its aesthetics and its autonomous state are not enough on their own. I think we have observed this in many disciplines throughout history, but in contemporary art and with sound art especially, there should be higher expectations from a linguistic point of view that should show growth from the experiments and approaches of the early 1960s and 1970s.

What about you? What do you think is happening with sound art today, especially in New York?

S.C. - I think the most positive trend in the contemporary-art world related to sound is the growing level of curatorial subtlety with the way that sound is being treated in gallery and museum spaces. There has been a monolithic survey of sound in the art world every 10 years or so since 1979 and more than 350 sound-themed group exhibitions since 1966, but it isn't until the last two or three years that there has been a consistently thoughtful curatorial sensibility towards the breadth of expression and effect that sound is capable of. Some of this has to do with the growing number of theoretical texts assisting in the accumulation of concepts and vocabulary for framing sound in art practice, but it also has to do with the maturing of the medium in light of the availability of documentation of the last 40 years of practice. Sound work is starting to define itself less by sound alone and more by a networked complex of interactions that form the work as a whole—each work as different as each artist is from one another. Two great examples of this are Sonel Breslav's "Render Visible" exhibition at Present Company in Brooklyn last year or the group show that will run concurrently with the MoMA show opening August 1st at Lisa Cooley in New York curated by Justin Luke from Audio Visual Arts and Lawrence Kumpf from Issue Project Room. Both of these shows are deeply interested in sound as a component of the work of art as a whole, and the curators in each case are more interested in a coherency of idea than with the mere soundfulness of the work. ■

NOTES

1. Richard Garett in conversation with Seth Cluett at Mandragoras Art Space | MAAS Talks, March 30, 2013. www.mandragoras.org/ A video and a transcription of the conversation is available at <http://www.richardgarett.com/documentation/maas033013/seth_cluett_in_conversation_with_richard_garett.html>
2. Richard Garett is part of the first major American museum exhibition of contemporary sound art, "Soundings: A Contemporary Score," organized by Barbara London, associate curator, with Leora Morinis, curatorial assistant, Department of Media and Performance Art, MoMA. His sound installation *Before Me* will be on view August 10 to November 3, 2013.