

Where are we going? Is Ellen Fullman leading the way?

Introduction

What has happened in music since the modernist era of the sixties? Is it true that visual art has taken the lead in a development where music is way behind?
What is all that talk about Post Modernism?

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? The phrase is not only the title of a painting by Gauguin – the father of modern art; it is also a container of three important questions in discussing the future of art and music.

And if we look at the development of visual art in order to compare it to audible art, what has happened since the modernism era, the “golden age” of modern art?

Background

In 1981, the American art historian Douglas Crimp wrote an article in the magazine *October* where he announced the death of painting.

By doing that he fired the final fuse in the debate that had started back in the sixties, and which led to the death of the whole of the Modern Art and the birth of the Post Modern Art. And from that moment on, painting was no longer an art form, but a technique among many other techniques, such as photography, video work and installation.

Today the artist works with concepts or main subjects, such as *identity and stereotypes* as in the works of Cindy Sherman, or *criticism of the western society* as in the works of Paul McCarthy.

The idea is to evoke the question within the audience, and sometimes the evocation itself can be the work of art, such as an elaboration or a platform for certain discussions, as in the works of Rirkrit Tiravanija and Jeremy Deller.

How is this comparable to music? What happens if we think of staged music, as of painting, only as a technique? How could we relate to Audible Art where the concert is only one of many aspects of output? What other techniques could there be? In what sense can an artist of Audible Art deal with certain questions and specific concepts?

The work of Ellen Fullman

In 1980 Ellen Fullman began developing an instrument she called the Long String Instrument, a huge instrument that demands an area of 21.4 × 1.5 meters (about 32 m² – comparable to the size of a small apartment).

“Tuned in just intonation, the Long String Instrument produces a rich orchestral sound played by rubbing strings with rosin-coated fingertips, exciting the longitudinal mode of vibration. In the longitudinal mode, vibration travels along the length of the string. [...] (Two) rows of about 30 strings terminate into each acoustic wooden box resonator. Performers walk in pathways between banks of strings. The location of the performer’s contact with the string produces a secondary tone: the frequency of that portion of the string-length to the bridge of the resonator. A glissando of overtone production unfolds as the performer walks – sometimes even dominating over the fundamental tone. When multiple strings are played at once, the complexity of overtones emerge as a matrix of higher pitched harmonic relationships that can seem to transform a single chord into a sequence of multiple chords. The listener senses motion in the sound – cascading overtones glide over the rooted fundamental like a river moving past: always changing; yet remaining the same.”

If you attend a performance of Ellen Fullman, you will see her placed between the two rows, moving back and forth along the strings. The sound she generates through the strings will differ depending on where she is placed, and the sound will differ depending on where you as a listener are seated.

As always, the sound will resonate in the room where the performance takes place. But since the reflection of the sound changes depending on where and how the string is played, the room will also be integrated in the creating of the sound.

The result becomes somewhat sculptural, where the distance to the performer and the reflections of the room help to create the three dimensional body.

Ellen Fullman's *Sound sculptures* are based on the fundamental pitch of A2, 110 Hz, "because A is the key for female voice in North Indian music".

But this is only a base, a platform for the sound sculptures to take off from.

And though the performance is clearly defined in time – it will start and end at a certain points, based on the linearity of the score – , and even though the sound might develop towards dramatic peaks, the steady base or fundamental still gives the performance a meditative feeling.

The sound bears resemblance to Minimalist music, for example the music of LaMonte Young and Steve Reich. But there is a big difference: where the Minimalists want you to pay attention to the gradual changes and the meditation in the slow development, Ellen Fullman's *Sound sculptures* give you a variety of sounds, where every different situation is interesting: "It is the quality of the sound itself that is the most important element in my music. The conceptual architecture functions as a support for the revealing of the physics of string vibration. The purpose of my performance is to transparently unveil that which already exists."

And not even the way she presents her work is fixed:

"I am concentrating on performances. In earlier years I composed music for multiple players on the Long String instrument. More recently I have focused on solo work, trying to refine my own performance articulation with the intention of again making ensemble pieces. I also do collaborative improvisations with other musicians playing their own instruments."

Conclusion

It is Ellen Fullman's devoted work with mainly one subject – the quality within the sound – , the focus on her own constructed instrument and the liberation from the traditional ways of display that in my opinion places her work in a new field of Audible Art – a field referable to the Post Modernism of visual art.[□]

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[□] The quoted texts are taken from E-mails send to me by Ellen Fullman. The term *Sound sculpture* is my own expression and not referred to by Fullman in the correspondance.