Modernist and Postmodernist Arts of Noise, Part 1: From the European avant-garde to contemporary Australian Sound Art

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Abstract

The broad aim of the paper that follows is to test the claim of critics such as Miriam Fraser and Steve Connor that the modernist deconstruction of the music/noise dichotomy has entered a distinctively postmodern phase. The article below therefore traces the history and poetics of this dichotomy from the modernist avant-garde to contemporary Australian postmodernist Sound Art, moving from a discussion of the ideas of Russolo, Cage, Boulez and Schaeffer, to a close reading of Ros Bandt's "Stack" (2000-01). These themes as expressed in contemporary Australian composition are then explored in Part Two below.[1]

If a weed is a plant in the wrong place, noise is sound in the wrong place and time. The oxymoronic concept of an "art of noise" therefore announces a project both of rehabilitation and of defamiliarisation: of finding a place for noise, rehabilitating it as music, and of putting art's nose out of joint, rearranging the familiar face of music. The fact that the phrase "the art of noise" was trademarked by a self-styled 'postmodernist' techno-pop group in 1983, some seventy years after Luigi Russolo published his Futurist music manifesto *L'Arte dei Rumori* (*The Art of Noises*), is a salutary reminder of two other oxymorons: "the tradition of the avant-garde" and "the commodification of the avant-garde."[2] The early twentieth century avant-gardes such as Futurism, Dada and Surrealism defined themselves *as* avant-garde precisely by turning their backs on tradition and commodified culture, the past and kitsch. Any investigation of a postmodern "art of noise" therefore has to acknowledge the routinisation and mainstreaming of the avant-garde's repudiation of musical paradigms and precedents over the past century—its tradition of anti-traditionalism—and to be on the lookout for ironic quotation and pastiche of such 'radical,' 'originating' gestures in contemporary practices of sonic rehabilitation and defamiliarisation.

Commentators have often lamented the paucity of conceptual analysis in writing on 'experimental' music, its tendency to comprise little more than formal description, chronology and quotation of composer statements.[3] Our two part paper approaches the arts of noise from the perspective of a particular question: can any useful distinctions be drawn between 'modernist' and 'postmodernist' deconstructions of the noise/music dichotomy?—and it seeks some answers in a selection of recent noise art by contemporary Australian composers.[4] Its main reference for the modernist aesthetics of noise is what has been described as the 'downtown,' 'avant-garde' modernism associated most famously with John Cage, rather than the 'uptown,' 'academic' modernism associated notably with Pierre Boulez. While these two strands of musical modernism were historically intertwined (not least at the Darmstadt Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik where the Boulez and Cage schools famously crossed paths in the 1950s), and while there is, as we shall see, an important point of convergence in their aesthetics, the strands are often distinguished on the basis of the 'downtown''s concern with the aleatoric and unscored and the 'uptown''s concern with the scored and predetermined.[5]

The modernist aesthetics of noise—from Russolo's Futurism through Pierre Schaeffer's musique concrète to Cage's *4'33"*—was developed around two main dichotomies, those of art/life and tradition/modernity. Russolo's manifesto (1913-16) insisted that the canon of Western classical music

had become hackneyed and stale to contemporary ears; concert halls had become "hospitals for anaemic sounds"; and revitalising music meant incorporating the noises of modernity, the cacophonous soundscape of contemporary techno-culture, into the sonic repertoire of music. Embracing the anti-aesthetic and pitting modernity against tradition, the Futurist project was essentially a colonisation of everyday urban industrial acoustic experience for aesthetic consumption—a project that corresponds to Peter Bürger's characterisation of the "historical avant-gardes" as movements to sublate the art/life dichotomy that was entrenched in nineteenth century aestheticism and to reinject into everyday experience those qualities of imagination, irrationality and sensuous pleasure that bourgeois society had ghettoised in its institutions of Art.[6] The Futurists embraced the machine as prosthesis, a welcome extension of the human body's powers—of motion, communication, production and destruction—hence they also welcomed that by-product of machine-energy, noise. Russolo maintained that ears attuned to the complex polyphony of urban industrial environments were ready to take "acoustic enjoyment"—hear music—even in "the newest noises of modern war," including gunfire and the screams that often followed it.[7] Its fascist affiliations aside, the Futurist art of noise functioned conservatively to reconcile human ears to an increasingly abrasive and invasive acoustic environment by teaching those ears to listen 'musically,' which meant to defamiliarise machine noises, autonomise them, bracketing out their 'referential' or 'expressive' links to functional sources. As the founder of musique concrète, Pierre Schaeffer, put it when glossing his 1948 compilation of steam train noises, *Étude aux chemins de fer* (*Railway Study*): "you only need to know how to listen … the whole art is to hear. Because they [the noises] are extraordinary to listen to, if they are approached in that special spiritual state that I'm in at the moment."[8]

The related project of 'glitch' in popular music seems to perform a similarly rehabilitative function. An aesthetic of imperfection, glitch inverts the relation of foreground and background, and proposes making music out of the imperfections in technologies of sound production and recording that sound engineers have traditionally struggled to eliminate. Beginning with 1960s rock musicians integrating feedback and distortion in their performances, glitch continued with rap music's incorporation of vinyl glitches with the 'scratch effect,' and Yasunao Toné's inauguration of the CD glitch effect in 1985 with his razor-sliced and scotch-taped CDs.[9] But it remains an open question whether glitch actually functions to reconcile consumers to imperfections in sound recording media—as Eliot Bates illustrated when he reported finding a two CD set of experimental electronic music (including tracks by the glitch maestro, Oval) for sale at a discount because the surface of one disc was scratched.[10] We may prefer our imperfections perfectly reproduced—the musical equivalent of preferring one's denims pre-frayed by Versace: a characteristically postmodern preference for a quotation or simulacrum of imperfection, rather than the 'real thing.'

Three decades after Russolo's manifesto, Cage's *4'33"* was still engaged in the avant-garde storming of the 'Western' barricade between art and life, music and noise, but conceiving it less in terms of modernity's rejection of tradition than as a deconstruction of the dichotomies of nature/culture and accident/design. *4'33"* was famously inspired by Cage's 1951 visit to a Harvard anechoic chamber in which he discovered that the total silence he had anticipated was in fact dominated by two noises: those of his own nervous system and his blood circulating. With *4'33"* Cage put his signature on silence, eliding the gap between music and life, and announcing two, related things: the death of the author and that everything could be music. For Cage, opening up the parameters of music to accidental noise meant evacuating self from sound, so that music could no longer be apprehended as authorial self-expression or a communicative act. Ceding compositional control to tossed coins in the final movement of his *Concerto For Prepared Piano* (1950-51), Cage effaced intentionality and insisted that properly "aesthetic" or "musical" listening was not a decoding of sound into sentiment or meaning but a formalistic attention to the "objective" properties of sounds—pitch, duration, timbre, rhythm and so on. He called this allowing sounds to "become themselves."[11] His elision of the art/life and nature/culture dichotomies included writing pieces for natural instruments—amplified plant materials in *Child of Tree* (1975), water-filled conch shells in *Inlets* (1977)—chosen partly because their acoustic properties were unpredictable: the water-filled conch shell would sometimes gurgle when tipped, sometimes not: "So the rhythm belongs to the instruments, and not to you," Cage said.[12] As he put it in an interview, "Art is not an escape from life. It is an introduction to it."[13] Constructing music as a mode of listening and not an intrinsic quality of certain sounds, Cage redefined it as "an attentiveness to the sheer immediacy of an absolutely contingent conjunction of incidental sounds."[14] In short, Cage's modernist deconstruction of the binaries of life and art, noise and music, nature and culture, accident and design, consisted in putting an aesthetic frame around a sonic accident or event and inviting audiences to apprehend its "autonomous" acoustic properties (of pitch, texture, duration etcetera),

rather than its semantic potential, its expressive or referential properties. Yet, as many commentators have pointed out, Cage's determined absence of determination was itself a rigid intention and, in practice, his strategy of de-subjectivisation, which ostensibly allows the object world of noise—a synecdoche of "life itself"—into music, simply shifts the burden of music making intentionality onto another subjectivity, that of the audience.[15] Meanwhile, the 'uptown,' 'academic' modernism of Boulez and his fellow hyper-Serialists (Stockhausen, Xenakis, Maderna, Pousseur, Messiaen and their American counterparts, Babbitt, Hindemith, Sessions, Carter and Krenek) could be said to have approached the deconstruction of the art/noise dichotomy from the opposite direction from Russolo and Cage: instead of erecting an aesthetic frame around aleatory or natural noise and proposing that audiences listen to it as music, the Serialists wrote scores for traditional instruments and electronic gadgetry that turned the sonic ingredients of music into noise, thereby conferring the same aesthetic status of 'autonomous' sound object or sonic 'objectivity' on the outcome, undertaking the same freeing of music of 'extraneous' meaning that the 'downtown' avant-gardists aimed for by different means. As Michael Nyman remarks of the similarities between Cage's efforts to drain music of personality and cultural baggage by renouncing compositional control, and Boulez's efforts to achieve a similar result through the rigorous application of Serialist formulae:

> certainly Cage's opinion that chance procedures bring about "a musical composition the continuity of which is free of individual taste and memory (psychology) and also of the literature and 'traditions' of the art" sounds not dissimilar from Boulez' intentions behind *Structures livre 1a* for two pianos (1952) to "eliminate from my vocabulary absolutely all trace of heritage."[16]

Breaking the Wind: Ros Bandt's *Stack* (2000-01)

An early Cage admirer, the Fluxus group member La Monte Young, traces his *Composition 1960* sequence—written after contact with Cage in Darmstadt in 1959—back to his fascination with sounds of long duration which he learned from listening to the wind from inside the log house in which he grew up. The results included *Composition 1960 No. 7*, consisting of two notes (B and F#) "to be held for a long time" (Young organised a five hour performance in 1963) and it is a fair guess that the audience's experience of this wind inspired, modernist work would have resembled readers' experience of language in Gertrude Stein's high modernist prose, which renders words increasingly unfamiliar and opaque the more they are repeated, turning them into intransitive sonic objects—"pure sound."[17] The Australian Ros Bandt (born 1952), like her compatriots Alan Lamb and Sarah Hopkins, has also used the wind as an instrument, but with very different results. Since her early sound sculpture installation, *Winds and Circuits*, at the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre in Melbourne in 1977,[18] Bandt's wind has become increasingly a 'postmodern' wind—allusive, quotational, layered with social memories and capable of referring with pathos or irony to specific cultural locales—rather than functioning as a signifier of Nature or of the universally and abstractly Aesthetic.

Bandt was a founding member of the World Forum For Acoustic Ecology set up in Banff in 1993,[19] and has always conceived of her work as investigations of sonic spaces, immersing herself, her acoustic instruments and her recording equipment in such constructed, non-natural spaces as concrete cylinders, water tanks and wheat silos.[20] Her early forays into sonic sculpture were essentially modernist explorations of the formal properties of sounds for their own sake in such environments, when manipulated either on site or in the studio; but her more recent compositions are designed to mobilise all the potential social meanings of noises in specific environments, while allowing that such meanings are always relative to the experiences and interests of different social groups, and raising questions of the kind Bandt formulated in a recent seminar on her work (summarised here by John Jenkins):

> It might be a truism that every sound is site-specific, and inhabits an acoustic space. But what function does it serve in a wider social and artistic sense? What are its various meanings? How do these meanings differ for owner-inhabitants and users of the space, and for visitors to it? How does space contain place? How are sounds a part of this? What is unique to a particular sense of place? How do heritage, history, stories and "weaves of relationship" become a part of it? How can all these elements be articulated?[21]

Bandt's 2004 installation *The Listening Place* is one of her more literal applications of this principle of foregrounding the semantic and narrative dimensions of sound, being a language based

work: a municipal park bench positioned over acoustic plates (speakers) that play a continuous sixty minute loop of what Bandt calls "sonic profiles of the users of the park," with their disparate voices, accents, stories and comments, interwoven with ambient sounds and the word "listen" in various languages. But her insistence on the sociality of sound and the place specific character of its meanings and values extends to her noise art works that employ natural sounds, such as those of wind and water. Bandt's nature, however, is always already culturally loaded, if only by the socio-political meanings that her use of eco-critical language brings to interpretation of her found sounds—as when she adopted the rhetoric of eco-activism, following her recent work *Aquarium*, to speak of efforts to preserve some of the "endangered sounds" of the deep ocean, as if the ethical mission of the noise artist were to conserve the variety of the world's sound species by protecting the pollution threatened places in which such species of sound can be heard.[22] While Bandt successfully makes the general point that the acoustic dimension of experience, no less than the visual, tactile or olfactory dimension, is an integral aspect of our environment and hence should be equally integral to the politics of environmentalism, she seems in danger of taking her own tropes too literally at times, given that the very record-ability and reproducibility of sound means that "endangered sounds"—unlike Bengal tigers or bottlenose dolphins—can be preserved on disk or reinvented with the flick of a switch. A work such as Bandt's *Stack* (2000/1), which builds on the found-sounds of wind in a chimney stack, could thus be said to address itself as much to town planners, conservationists, politicians and corporate shareholders as to any Milton Babbitts among Bandt's audiences and, in doing so, to insist on raising precisely those political, economic and ethical considerations that musical modernism deemed antithetical to Art.

Stack features in Bandt's web based Australian Sound Design Project (2001), whose stated aims include:

> Alert the community to the importance of heritage acoustic sites and the possibility that existing sound can be endangered. Re-evaluate place[,] including original ownership issues[,] as a basic[,] fundamental necessity of sound designers. Open debate on the private and public interface and how it affects sound design practice.[23]

Stack takes its title from a fifty five metre high chimney stack designed to extract exhaust fumes from a traffic tunnel running under Melbourne's CBD and constructed as part of the City Link road system, with which the Victorian State government undertook to ease the city's traffic congestion by privatising certain public roads and granting toll levying rights to a business consortium in exchange for their adding new toll ways. Bandt's CD notes for *Stack* describe the chimney as "an environmental disaster," spewing exhaust fumes over the city centre, and they indict the profit motivated process by which the public-private capitalist partnership "developed this site in an aggressive unsubtle way; a way that is not sustainable."[24] Describing *Stack* as "an elegy for the Lost Soul of a City," a city "busy polluting its own nest," Bandt adds: "How people relate to place will define their identity. The sounds of these sites give a small indication of the volatile changing relationships humankind has with it"—i.e., place.

It was during the construction phase, before the chimney was in commission or the tunnel opened to traffic, that Bandt appropriated the stack as a musical instrument—as wind funnel, echo chamber, noise generator and amplifier. Building on the principles of musique concrète, she made the site itself a sonic generator, capturing sounds from the cylinder, its external supporting grid and "internal resonant surfaces of experimental concrete, along with ambient noises of the extractor fans and the builders working" on the structure. She also brought a variety of unusual instruments into the site, including the eighteenth century viola da gamba, medieval flutes, the Indonesian gender or mallet instrument, and a variety of other percussion, with which—together with her own voice—she improvised sounds that she recorded for manipulation and remixing in the studios of the ABC.[25] The resulting, sixty minute electroacoustic work for radio comprises six pieces which Bandt designed and mapped in an elaborate graphic score whose drawings derive partly from the structural features of the cylinder itself (and which are included in the CD notes). For four of the pieces (1: "Red," described as "rhythmic pulses in red paint and electrified steel"; 2: "Black Hole"—"sonic underground"; 4: "Grid"—"electrified metal"; and 6: "Stack"—an "aerial spiral mix of 1-3"), Bandt electrified sections of the chimney's steel frame to create novel percussion timbres, some of which closely resemble the sounds of tinypilpa, the traditional Aboriginal clap sticks made from highly resonant hardwood and struck together in a heart-beat-like rhythm. This implicit evocation of the pre-European owners and culture of the site, combined with other sounds connoting multiple historical layers and cultural differences in the aesthetic uses of sound, are presumably intended to signal the complex 'multicultural' heritage of a migrant dominated 'postcolonial' city such as Melbourne, whose delicate

cultural "ecology," Bandt implies, the dollar driven corporate investors and politicians were culpably careless of when they pushed through their "environmental disaster."

Even before their electronic manipulation, then, Bandt's found sounds are not signifiers of accident or nature but heavy with social history, a history that is mobilised in her compositions—not suppressed or abstracted in the name of Art—in order to conjure the very social, political and ethical issues that high modernism sought to bracket out of music as the anti-aesthetic. Bandt deconstructs binaries of accident and design, wind and music, nature and history, not by proposing an 'aesthetic' appreciation of natural or accidental sounds, but by stressing that her found sounds come already freighted with social meanings, shaped by architecture, the social uses of space in which air moves, the traditions of the locales in which it is recorded. If her work can be described as 'postmodernist' in this respect, however, postmodernism itself is best understood not as a simple rejection of modernist aesthetics but as a critical transformation of them. Art, in the Kantian aesthetic tradition, could be simplistically defined as making something useless out of something useful, and Bandt's *Stack* does this no less pointedly than her modernist predecessors in noise art did, with their ringing telephones, sirens, manual typewriter or aircraft propeller noises. Bandt occupies a chimney stack in the making and claims it, temporarily, for an aesthetic project that lacks any hint of the use value of exhaust vents or traffic tunnels.[26] But Bandt's aesthetic appropriation of an otherwise functional object in the urban industrial environment is—in contrast to modernist appropriations like Russolo's or Antheil's—a self-consciously political gesture which intervenes provocatively in debates about urban design, ecology, the ethics of corporate capitalism and 'PPPs' which privatise public utilities and pollute for profit. Just as the sounds she manipulates for *Stack* are intended to be thick with the 'taste,' 'memory,' 'traditions' and 'heritage' that Cage and Boulez were intent on eradicating from their 'autonomous' art, so Bandt's own assertion of aesthetic 'autonomy'—her valuing the chimney stack purely as an acoustic instrument for making Sound Art—is thick with potential politico-social messages, addressed, not least, to corporate interests that neglect the aesthetic dimension of a city's life or community's environment.

That Bandt has, indeed, not given up on the modernist project of 'autonomising' the medium of sound for aesthetic pleasure—even as she insists, in familiar postmodern fashion, on the locality (not universality), the historical relativity (not timelessness) and the political (not supra-political) dimensions of the aesthetic values of sound—is evident in the obvious tension in her 'composer statements' between a discourse of ethics, civic responsibility and town planning and the discourse of aesthetic 'autonomy' that would value sound for sound's sake, as in this characteristic statement:

> Australia's acoustic environment has evolved as a by-product of other concerns: e.g. commerce, travel, and communication. Sound, because it is invisible, is often left until everything else in a space, the building, the exhibitions, the furniture, the access for people, is decided. It is often then too late to deal with sound sensitively. Sound has its theoretical and physiological requirements as well as being a powerful tool to enhance psychological states of perception. The implementation of sound in the environment should not be a by-product of decisions made for other reasons or vested interests. Every space, whether built or unbuilt is a unique acoustic site that needs careful attention according to its own criteria and the behaviour of and possibilities for sound within it. The acoustic environment could be modified constructively if it were handled in a more conscious way. Acoustic spaces need understanding and sound designs need to be appropriate to them. In the design of public space this is rarely taken into account.[27]

Notes

[1] See Linda Kouvaras's article in this volume, immediately below this essay.

[2] The Art of Noise group comprised Anne Dudley, Gary Langan and Paul Morley, members of the producer Trevor Horn's in house studio band in the early 1980s before they formed the group whose albums were a pastiche of various popular musical genres intermixed with found sounds, studio gimmickry and synthesized beats.

[3] This complaint has been made by, among others, Robin Fox in his "Experimental Music in Melbourne: A definition and historical overview," *Context,* 24 (Spring 2002), pp. 15-32, and by several reviewers of Ros Bandt's *Sound Sculpture: Intersections in sound and sculpture in Australian artworks* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 2001).

[4] Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An introduction to theories of the contemporary* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997); Miriam Fraser, "Making Music Matter," *Theory, Culture and Society,* 22.1 (2005), pp. 173-189.

[5] For a discussion of the similarities between Cage's and Boulez's techniques in the late 1940s and early 1950s, see Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), p. 60.

[6] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. M. Shaw (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1984).

[7] Two years after his first Futurist Manifesto announced the death of tradition and a new Year Zero for Italian art, Marinetti, working as a war correspondent in the Libyan war in 1911, reported: "what joy to see hear smell everything everything taratatata of the machine guns to scream at the top of one's voice under bites slaps traak-traak lashes pic-pac-pum-tumb." A Futurist music quickly followed, incorporating gunshots, screams, laughter etcetera. See Mark Sinker, "Destroy All Music: The Futurist art of noises," in Rob Young, ed., *Under-Currents: The hidden world of modern music* (London: Continuum, 2003), pp. 181-92.
[8] Quoted in Goran Vejvoda and Rob Young, "My Concrete Life," *Wire,* 258 (Aug 2005), p. 46. "Alongside the key concept of 'l'objet sonore,' Schaeffer added 'l'écoute réduite' (reduced listening), which Chion interprets as 'a way of hearing which consists in listening to a sound *for itself*, as a 'sound object,' forgetting its real or supposed provenance, and of the meaning that it may carry." Ibid., p. 48.
[9] Recent discussions of glitch include Sangild Torben, "Glitch—The beauty of malfunction," and Eliot Bates, "Glitches, Bugs, and Hisses: The degeneration of musical recordings and the contemporary musical work," both in Chris Washburne and Maiken Derno, eds, *Bad Music: The music we love to hate* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 257-74, 275-93.
[10] Bates, ibid., p. 275.
[11] Quoted in Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After: Directions since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), p. 96.
[12] Quoted ibid., p. 316.
[13] Quoted in Fraser, p. 184.
[14] Qtd ibid.
[15] As Miriam Fraser has argued, Cage's "displacement of the author-composer in *4'33"* is evidently intended to make room for 'another kind of presence, that of "life itself."'" Ibid., p. 175.
[16] Nyman, p. 60.
[17] The musical comparison with Stein's prose was often made in the 1920s and 1930s by her modernist defenders, notably by the poet William Carlos Williams, also a keen admirer of George Antheil's music.
[18] For a description of the work, see John Jenkins, "Ros Bandt," *Twenty Two Contemporary Australian Composers* (Melbourne: NMA Publications, 2001), http://www.rainerlinz.net/NMA/22CAC/bandt.html accessed 7 Aug 2005.
[19] Ros Bandt, "Designing Public Acoustic Space: Sound designs, a database and website for a more considered acoustic environment," *Australian Sound Design Project* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 2001); http://www.sounddesign.unimelb.edu.au/site/ACMCPaper/ACMCPaper.html accessed 5 Jul 2005.
[20] Ros Bandt, *Sound Sculpture: Intersections in sound and sculpture in Australian artworks* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 2001), pp. 30-31.
[21] John Jenkins, "Ros Bandt—Designing site-specific compositions," *Up Close and Personal Seminar Series* (NMA Publications and Arts Victoria), http://www.rainerlinz.net/NMA/upclose/Bandt.html accessed 5 Aug 2005.
[22] Jenkins, in "Ros Bandt," reports: "Bandt says she is presently excited by the prospect of exploring the sonic possibilities of our oceans and preserving some of their 'endangered sounds.' It seems her early 'tank' pieces have led this composer, literally, into very deep water, and *Aquarium* [2004] might prove a precursor to a range of work to follow." Ibid.
[23] Bandt, "Designing."
[24] Ros Bandt, *Stack,* CD (Carlton South: Move, 2000), CD notes.
[25] Quotations from ibid.
[26] Bandt's CD notes even speak, sentimentally, of the "loss" of the chimney stack as an acoustic instrument once it was put into commission, lamenting that "This space has been artificially [sic] silenced and locked away from human reach"—a strange description of a space that one can only assume is now roaring with the noise of exhaust fans and subterranean traffic.
[27] Bandt, "Designing."