Sound art and the gallery: Material, body and space

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Sound art and the gallery: Material, body and space

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
Abstract

This research project is focused on sound art, and the material qualities of sound. The aim of this project is to employ the methodology of reflexive praxis, to better understand 'sound art' and how it communicates in the gallery context. Two mutually informing streams of research have been applied; textual analysis and creative practice. Through their combined use, the relationship between 'sound art'; and the gallery can be understood in theory based analysis and discussion, and in practice. Drawing on exhibitions such as *Of Art & Music* and *Wet Sounds*, this research attempts to locate the practice of 'sound art' in relation to different contexts of display, as a way of understanding how the gallery shapes communication. It also describes the material quality of sound; specifically how sound relates to space.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

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An extra special thanks to my family for always being there, even when I don’t appreciate it. And to my parents for teaching me the value of education and showing me that learning is a life long process.
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Introduction

This research project is centered in the practice of sound art and how it communicates within the gallery context. The project is also concerned with my own creative practice, which utilises sound as a material, and how it communicates and interacts with the gallery. This is carried out through practice-led-research, which combines creative practice and textual analysis. Sound art can be defined as any creative practice that utilises sound, with sound being understood in its relationship to space. Sound and space are intrinsically related, as they are mutually informing—with sound being shaped by space and interpretation of space being shaped by sound (LaBelle, 2006, p. 149). Further discussion of the definition of sound art can be found in chapter one, where the dialogue surrounding the definition of sound art is mapped, illustrating the differing and at times conflicting definitions of sound art.

Sound art is an increasingly prominent practice, with a vast number of high profile sound art specific curated exhibitions occurring within the last few years. On the international stage, many Australian sound artists are highly regarded, yet sound art is little discussed and referred to within Australian contexts of critical discourse (Last, 2009, p. 3). This research project will map out the key concerns of sound art in the gallery context through an analysis of the nature of sound as a material in creative practice, and how this communicates within the ideological framework of the gallery context. In this research the gallery is primarily discussed, analysed and understood through Brian O’Doherty’s analysis of the gallery as white cube (1999). O’Doherty’s analysis argues that the gallery context is steeped in a history of display which acts as an ideological frame through which the gallery is understood. This ideological framework shapes not only the aesthetics of the gallery space, but the way an artwork communicates and a gallery visitor perceives and interacts with these works.

1 This exegesis will see the gallery visitor referred to as many different things. O’Doherty refers to the spectator, and many sound theorists to a listener or audience. I will primarily refer to the viewer, a term commonly used in discussion of the gallery. Each of these terms have slightly different definitions, but for the purpose of this research they serve to describe the gallery visitor. The term viewer recognises the inherently visual nature of the gallery space, referencing the contextual and material
This research is an investigation of two key research questions, formulated at the proposal stage of this project. These questions are: ‘How does sound art communicate within the ideological framework of the gallery?’ and ‘How does my creative practice, which utilises sound, communicate within the gallery context, and what role does the body play in this communication?’ This exegesis will explore the interactions of sound art and the gallery context, identifying how they interrelate with one another, and how the viewer experiences them both as individual, and interacting agents. My practice will then be discussed in relation to sound art and the gallery, examining how it communicates within the gallery context. My practice primarily takes the form of sound and video installation, with a specific focus on the experiences of the body. I am especially interested, and specifically engage with the body of the viewer, attempting to blur the boundaries between the viewer and the artwork, this blurring of boundaries forming an immersive experience. Immersion and the immersive are terms commonly used within discussions of virtual reality; they refer to “…being surrounded in an engrossing total environment” (Store, 2009, December 9). This definition can easily be applied to the relationship between viewer and artwork, with a viewer being surrounded by an engrossing constructed experience. The immersive qualities of sound are also discussed, in relation to the two exhibitions in this project Tentative Resonance and Resonant Body. These exhibitions have provided me with the opportunity to explicitly engage with the gallery context and reflect upon the ways in which my practice communicates within this context.

The decision to focus this exploration of sound art in the gallery context is informed by my creative practice. Given that the gallery is the primary context of display within the visual arts, it is the most common space in which my practice will exist. I have, therefore, used this project to map out the paradigms of the gallery space, exploring the potential forms that it can take. I am especially interested in those spaces that sit on the borders of the gallery context, and how the ideologies of the white cube exist in such unconventional and non-traditional spaces. This interest is clearly visible in the third chapter of this exegesis, which details the creative component of this project, and the galleries that this practice will exist in. Both Spectrum Project Space and YMCA HQ Gallery are unusual gallery spaces, and the decision to work in such spaces reflects my interest in exploring the boundaries of the gallery.

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differences in the gallery and sound art. These differences are discussed in the second chapter of this exegesis.
The methodology I will be employing in this research project is one of reflexive praxis. This practice-led-research project involves textual analysis and creative practice. The analysis of texts that deal with both sound art and the gallery, such as LaBelle\(^2\), or O’Doherty’s texts, have informed my creative practice, and my creative practice has, in turn, informed my understanding of these texts.

Praxis can be defined as the merging of theory and practice. Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist philosopher, described a ‘philosophy of praxis’ that involved “The unification of critical theory and revolutionary practice” (cited in Oliga, 1996, p. 217). Praxis, therefore, can be viewed as a tool through which creative practice can find conceptual and theoretical grounding, while simultaneously informing this grounding. Praxis is “The practice of a technical subject or art...arising out of the theory of it” (Brown, 1993, p. 2321). An engagement with praxis is inherent in my creative practice, as its materials and content directly reflect upon the theoretical discussion from which I draw my research. As a research methodology, praxis is made more valuable through its combined use with Reflexivity. Their combined use, or hybridisation, “...can answer institutional criticisms that research into personal creative practices is essentially narcissistic” (Crouch, 2007, p. 105). Creative practice, in my experience, is an intensely personalised process. Through an engagement with these methodologies, I am able to relate my practice to a broader social field, beyond myself.

Reflexivity is a concept discussed and explored extensively by Anthony Giddens, who writes: “The self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences; in forging their self-identities...individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences” (Giddens, 1991, p. 2). Reflexivity can be understood as a way of negotiating the subjectivities of the self. This is carried out through an individual’s constant consideration of how they are impacted upon and in turn how they impact upon the multiple contexts they inhabit. As a methodology, reflexivity provides the artistic researcher with tools to negotiate their personal contexts, especially valuable given the subjective nature of creative practice. “Researchers need to evaluate how intersubjective elements influence data collection and analysis. Reflexivity— where researchers engage in explicit, self-aware analysis of their own role—offers one tool for such evaluation” (Finlay, 2002, p. 531). Given that “It is the task of methodology to uncover and justify research assumptions as far and as practicably as possible” (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002, p. 31), Reflexivity is especially valuable as it offers a vehicle through which the researcher can question and

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2 LaBelle’s *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (2006) gives a thorough overview of sound art practice, its historical development and material qualities. This text has acted as a stable base from which my further research into sound extends.
reflect upon their own assumptions. This, I would argue, is vital to creative practice, and is certainly extremely important within my own research.
Chapter One

Sound as material: A conversation between sound, space and the body

This chapter will address the practice of sound art, and the material of sound. The term sound art is employed to describe a plethora of sound-based practices, with much debate regarding its definition occurring within the surrounding discourse. The lack of consistency in the definition of sound art is often attributed to the interdisciplinary nature of this practice, with sound art being "...framed by the context[s] of art and music and their respective experimental edges" (LaBelle, 2006, p. ix). Within the separate creative realms of music and visual art, the necessity for a separate category of sound art is often questioned, with suggestions that sound art is simply a form of experimental music (Cox, 2007). Max Neuhaus is widely acknowledged as a pioneer of sound art and one of its foremost practitioners, yet he is reluctant to associate his practice with the title of 'sound art', as he believes that the vast majority of sound art works "...have little to do with art" (2000, p. 3). The separate realms of art and music are often ‘flung’ together, forming “…a category which can include anything which has or makes sound and even... [then] most often what is selected is simply music or a diverse collection of musics with a new name” (2000, p. 2). These criticisms echo a larger concern for the practice of sound art; the difficulty of locating and understanding this practice within the separate creative realms of visual art and music. I would argue that much of the discourse surrounding sound art approaches the interdisciplinary space of this practice from the perspective of only one of these creative realms. The vast majority of discussion surrounding sound art approaches this practice from a background of music, with sound art often being overlooked within visual art based contexts of discussion. Therefore, it is my intention to privilege those analyses that draw from both visual art and music.

Neuhaus sketches a definition of sound art through an intersection of composition and space, with these terms being central in their respective creative fields. “Traditionally composers have located the elements of a composition in time … [sound art is] locating them, instead, in space, and letting the listener place them in his own time” (1994, p. 34). Thus it could be argued that sound art is, in its explicit engagement with space, site-
specific. Sound artist and curator Stephen Vitiello further develops upon Neuhaus’
definition in a discussion of his practice, writing “Music can be defined by sound in
time, while sound art may be defined by sound in space ... exploring sound as a
physical medium rather than a temporal one” (2004, ¶ 5). This research will, therefore,
define sound art as any creative practice to which sound is an integral material, where
sound is understood in its relationship to space.

This definition is perhaps more broad than Neuhaus or Vitiello’s as it only requires
sound to be an integral component or material, rather than the sole material. As a result,
sound art practice as defined by this research project may take numerous and varied
forms ranging from sound and video projection, to more complex sound sculptures and
sound installations. Sound is an integral material in my creative practice, but is rarely
the sole material. I would argue that the artist’s understanding of the relationship
between sound and space is vital, whether a committed sound practitioner or using
sound as an integral component of their work. Within this research, sound is separate
from sound art in that it represents a material rather than a practice. Sound describes the
vibration of sound waves through space. Sound is an inherently aural event, being heard
or listened to. Sound can also be felt, as in the case of low frequency, bass sounds such
as those produced by a sub-woofer, as the sound wave is able to permeate the body. The
term aural can be defined as “… relating to the ear or to the sense of hearing” (“Aural”,
2010). Similarly, the visual can be defined as relating to the eye or vision.

Sound art is at once art and music, whilst existing as neither. Its emergence can be
traced through both of these realms, first through the 1950s in the experimental music
of musicians such as John Cage. Cage began to explicitly engage with the relationship
between sound and space, thinking of sound as something which is felt and negotiated,
and which has an inherent link to the space in which it is recorded, produced and heard.
This engagement first became apparent in his use of silence as a compositional tool,
making the sounds of the space increasingly important. He writes: “All I am doing is
directing attention to the sounds of the environment” (1995, p. 98). This recognition of
the relationship between sound and space is the basis for the majority of sound art, and
is at the centre of this research project. Cage continues to be a major influence in sound
practices, and is widely discussed within sound theory. Within the realm of art, sound
began to be considered, almost simultaneously with Cage’s experimentation, through
performance, installation and site-specific works (Licht, 2009, p. 4).
The term sound art is employed to describe a plethora of visual and aural events with broad and, at times, conflicting definitions. For the purpose of this research, sound art is broadly defined as any artistic practice to which sound is an integral part, where sound is understood in its relationship to space. In this definition, sound is not required to be the sole material of a work, but can be a key component. As a result the forms of such practice may range from sound and video projection, to more complex sound sculptures and sound installations. The artist’s understanding of the relationship between sound and space is vital, whether a committed sound practitioner or they use sound as a component of their work.

As a material, sound is complex and difficult to manipulate. Sound spreads through space, vibrating through walls and doorways, bouncing off corners and mingling with other sounds. It is experienced in the body not only by the ear, but also through physical sensation of vibration. The relationship between sound and space is mutually informing “The sound-space interplay is inherently conversational... when sounds occur, they are partially formed by their spatial counterpart, and spatial experience is given character by the eccentricities of sound events” (LaBelle, 2006, p. 149). The communication between sound and space is so diverse and complex, that sound becomes three dimensional, or sculptural. Sound theorist Berndt Schulz writes: “sound has become material within the context of an expanded concept of sculpture... for the most part works that are space-shaping and space-claiming in nature” (cited in Licht, 2009, p. 3).

The relationship between sound and space within sound art is embedded in a history of acoustics and acoustic architecture in music. Acoustics are concerned with how space impacts upon the delivery of music through vibration and reverberation of the environment (Grueneisen: 2003, Thompson: 2004). Concert halls, for instance, are designed with very specific intentions regarding the amplification of sound for an audience, while recording studios are designed with sound purity being of the utmost importance. Through specific decisions regarding architectural materials and shapes, different acoustic qualities can be achieved. Acoustics and architecture have seen considerable technological and industrial advancement, stemming from a “...compulsion to control the behaviour of sound” (Thompson, 2004, p. 2). An example of such advancements includes acoustic-specific building materials. These advancements seem to have had little impact in the white cube as a whole, despite
sound being an increasingly common material in the gallery. I argue that though sound is an increasingly common material, with a history of use in the gallery, it is considered by most as a secondary element. An illustration of this can be seen in the works of many video artists. Video is often extensively developed and edited, with considerable time spent refining the image that will be viewed, while the sound is a simple track, or raw recordings. It is not my argument that sound become a more central part of an artist's practice, but it's material nature be better understood thus providing the artist with better tools through which to make work.

The harsh angles and hard surfaces of the gallery space are not conducive to sound, privileging architectural and aesthetic elements of the visual. The ideologies of the white cube grew from a "...strong desire for an uninterrupted line of sight ... Sound was simply not conceived as a condition of these visual art spaces" (Kelly, 2009, p. 7). Walls are smooth and white, rather than soundproofed and architectural shapes are clean rather than acoustically appropriate. The contemporary gallery space is vast and varied, ranging from small artist-run-initiatives to large-scale institutional art museums. Sound exists in the gallery through numerous ventures of creative practice, yet the gallery is a difficult sound space, continually reverberating and echoing.

The viewer, and the viewer's body, interacts with both the artwork and the gallery space. Sound is to be understood and negotiated by the body; therefore "...the acoustical event is also a social one" (LaBelle, 2006, p. x). The body perceives and experiences sound, by being in the presence and space of sound. "The sound wave arriving at the ear is the analogue of the current state of the environment, because as the wave travels, it is charged by each interaction with the environment" (Truax, 1998, p. 15). But, it is not just the environment which shapes sound, but also the body. By being in a sound space, a body (viewer, listener, audience) becomes an agent of that space, shaping the sound and modifying the experience for themselves and others. One of the material qualities of sound most often discussed, is its ability to transcend the boundaries of space for the viewer, by evoking "...a sense of being and place" (Emmerson, 1998, p. 135). Through the viewer's negotiation and perceiving of the sound in space, it is possible for them to be at once part of the space, and dislocated.

3 Sound is a material not only in sound art, but in new media and similar experimental and technology-based practices.
from it, shaping sound while being transported. It is necessary therefore, to think of
sound art not only in relation to space, but in relation to the viewer and body.

The interaction between viewer, sound and space is, in fact a three-way relationship,
with each element informing the other. Having explored and defined this relationship,
the gallery context, and how it shapes this interaction can now be explored.
Chapter Two

Sound and the gallery space

The gallery and exhibition contexts are established paradigms of art production and display. The gallery context privileges the visual, with architectural decisions being made in relation to aesthetics and visible space, rather than acoustics. Sound is difficult to manipulate in the gallery context, with the aesthetic ideologies of the white cube creating an angular, acoustically difficult space. In its material nature, sound has a strong connection to space. Despite the difficulty utilising sound in the gallery space, it is possible to negotiate the differing paradigms of sound and the gallery through a considered creative practice that is sensitive to the relationship between sound, space and body (particularly that of the viewer, when discussing the gallery context). This chapter will discuss the relationship and negotiation of differing contexts of sound and the gallery, and how these relate to the body. The exhibitions *Of Art & Music* and *Wet Sounds* are two differing approaches of sound and the gallery, with Brian O'Doherty’s analysis of the white cube being the basis of the employed definition of the gallery.

The term ‘gallery’ is extremely broad, taking a variety of forms. A gallery can range from a small artist-run-space to a large institutional context such as the Art Gallery of Western Australia. Often large-scale institutional galleries, government run and purpose built space prescribe more closely to the ideology of the white cube. While John Curtin Gallery is such a space, it is also a unique in that it has been designed with versatility in mind. The space can be remodeled in a number of different ways, which means that the space can be shaped according to the works contained within. (“About the John Curtin Gallery”, n.d.)

The white cube is a term used to describe the ideological framework of European contexts of display. O'Doherty's analysis states that “The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere...the work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself” (1999, p. 14). It is necessary to recognise that this quote does not refer to O'Doherty's opinion, but to the generally prescribed principles of the gallery space. In fact, O'Doherty's articles are critical of these
normative values in the gallery space, which encourage a clean, sterile and artificial environment. These principles that dictate the ‘white cube’ form are rigorous, creating defined parameters through which the viewer and the artwork can interact (p. 15). These principles dictate a space where “The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white.... The art is free, as the saying used to go, ‘to take on its own life’” (1999, p. 15). O’Doherty argues that the authority of such a space, and the history from which it is born, results in a code of expected behaviour or etiquette for the viewer, limiting their experience of the work to very strict parameters. The gallery is not a neutral vessel of display, but a constructed environment based in values of aesthetics.

The ideologies of the white cube privilege the visual. For example, speakers are often placed aesthetically: with less priority on the way the body experiences sound in this space. The white cube is a stark, clean space, designed to provide artworks with enough space to exist independently of one another, allowing them to communicate individually. This is nearly impossible to achieve with sound as “…the hard square surfaces of the gallery do not manage sound well; it echoes around the space, bumping into sound that has crept out of adjoining galleries, and in the process it interferes and merges with it” (Kelly, 2009, p. 7). Sound is an integral part of the gallery space that cannot be avoided. It is the very nature of sound that it is everywhere, with noises from the street, footsteps and the quiet conversation of the viewer permeating the white containment of the gallery. Of Art & Music and Wet Sounds present very different contexts of display, and their contrasting experiences offer considerable scope to examine how the gallery context shapes the experience of creative works for the viewer.

Of Art & Music, an exhibition shown at John Curtin Gallery (JCG) in early 2009 was one of the key events of the 2009 Perth International Arts Festival (PIAF). Ideologically, John Curtin Gallery inherently promotes the ideals of the white cube, by conforming to norms of museum architecture that promote concepts of ‘high art’ and ‘spiritual experience’ (Giebelhausen, 2006). Yet, it is also able to exist outside of these values, being versatile in its design and acting in a way that is sensitive to the concerns of the artwork. Of Art & Music’s association with two institutions with high cultural capital (John Curtin Gallery and Perth International Arts Festival) positions itself, and the works contained within, as valuable pieces of cultural production. Surprisingly, the relationship between sound, space and the body (viewer, artist etc.) is well considered.
The gallery was remodelled into three separate, sound dampened rooms, creating spaces that were sensitive to the works contained within. Though it is an ideological complex space, JCG is an appropriate space of display for sound as it can be modified from insular to intermingling sound according to the needs of the work, a luxury not afforded to all gallery spaces. Janet Cardiff’s *The Forty Part Motet* (Appendix 1) is a sound installation that directly engages with the aural qualities of the space. Cardiff’s installation featured forty speakers on stands, which were grouped into choirs of five, positioned in a broad oval around the room. The forty speakers in this installation each represented the voice of one member of the choir, isolating each voice, and dislocating the seeming unified voice usually experienced. Cardiff writes, “...listening to a concert you are normally seated in front of the choir, in traditional audience position. With this piece I want the audience to be able to experience a piece of music from the viewpoint of the singers” (“The Forty Part Motet”, 2001, ¶ 3).

As an audience member, or viewer, moving around the space, the work is experienced through different lenses. Close proximity to one speaker resulted in viewers experiencing as if that voice was their own and they were a part of the choir. Stepping away from that speaker, they may then become aware of the other five voices in that group, acting in harmony. The viewer’s location in the room shaped the work. Cardiff writes, “I am interested in how sound may physically construct a space in a sculptural way and how a viewer may choose a path through this physical yet virtual space” (“The Forty Part Motet”, 2001, ¶ 3). By engaging directly with the context of space, Cardiff is able to form a sound space that is uniquely and intimately experienced by the body.

The second room housed a collaborative conversation between two practitioners; painter Brian Blanchflower and composer Roger Smalley, titled *Tursiops, Glimpses (An Earth History)* and *Diptych (Homage to Brian Blanchflower)* (Appendix 2). Smalley’s composition was created in direct response to Blanchflower’s paintings, with Smalley attempting to aurally communicate the texture, surface and content of the paintings. These paintings were installed in the space, with the viewer being able to view the paintings while listening to Smalley’s compositions. Blanchflower and Smalley’s collaborative work was also heavily impacted upon by ideologies of the white cube. In this work, Smalley has musically explored the texture, shape and the surface of Blanchflower’s sculptural paintings - in detailed rhythm and vibration. However, the
viewer is unable to follow these detailed textural elements, as they are confined to a low bench, which sits 3-4 metres from the work. Smalley’s composition is played through headphones, the cable of which can extend only a short distance from the bench. In this collaborative conversation, the detail is central, yet it was not possible for a viewer to simultaneously experience both the visual and aural elements to their full potential. In my opinion, the fact that the fine textural qualities of the painting being aurally plotted were not available to the body lessens the impact of the work. Within the gallery, particularly those large institutional spaces which closely adhere to the paradigms of the white cube as discussed above, it is common for works with headphones to be experienced in a ‘listening bay’, where several headphones are grouped around seating. Further engagement with spatial concerns, and an understanding of how sound communicates within such a space could offer a stronger awareness of these concerns for the creative practitioner.

The third room housed a collaborative work between new media artist Adam Geczy, and musician and composer Peter Sculthorpe. Geczy ‘composed’ a video work that responded to the tone and rhythm of Sculthorpe’s Requiem for cello alone. This work, titled Paris Requiem (Appendix 3) featured Geczy’s video and Sculthorpe’s sound. The rhythm of the video footage, which is of the streets of Paris, was ‘composed’ around the musical composition. As a video projection it is typical, featuring a large projection on a distant wall in a dark room. Yet, the distance between the viewer and the work, and the isolation felt by the viewer in the darkened space, is extremely successful in conveying the tone and mood of the work.

Sound art exhibition Wet Sounds (Appendix 4) presents an alternative context of display. Given the tumultuous relationship between sound and the gallery, it is perhaps necessary to consider ways of displaying sound works out of the gallery space, creating new paradigms of communication. UK based travelling sound art ‘festival’, Wet Sounds could provide one such model. Wet Sounds is a crated annual traveling exhibition of sound art, which is based in England. The exhibition is not displayed in conventional gallery spaces, but in public swimming pools. This is because sound “...travels four times faster in the water than in the air, enhancing audio perception and allowing the listener to feel noise through the bones and body, as well as the ears” (Macdonald, 2008). This immersive experience of sound in water creates even stronger bonds between sound, space and body. By immersing the body in the water (which is at once
sound and space), the boundary between body and space permeated by vibration. “The experience of immersion in sound is a strange hybrid, that does not yield easily to the language of space. In the experience of sonorous immersion, one is on the outside of what surrounds one” (Connor, 2003, ¶ 18).

Curator Joel Cahen describes the exhibition as an “…underwater sound festival” (Wet Sounds 2008: National Tour, n.d.), the use of the term festival rather than exhibition makes an important distinction about the way Cahen wishes the works to be understood. They are not to be observed, they are to be experienced in a bodily way. The decision to relocate the sound art context to a public space is important in that it destroys the ideological framework of the gallery space, and the works are allowed more opportunity to communicate in their own way. Cahen points out; “The average person does not get to experience art as it is generally reserved for a niche audience in a gallery” (Wet Sounds 2008: National Tour, n.d.).

Within the contemporary gallery space, which takes vast and varying forms, sound offers unique material qualities to challenge the gallery context and expected values of display. “Sound art responds to two contrary tractions in the practices of making and displaying art. One is the desire to burst boundaries, to tear down walls, to break out of the confined space of the gallery. Sound is ideal for this because of its well-known expansiveness and leakiness” (Connor, 2003, ¶ 1). These examples of the varying ways in which sound and space can interact, only serves to further illustrate the ability of sound to respond to varying spatial concerns. While the gallery context is a complex space for sound art, it is still a valuable context of display. It is vital, however that space be considered as it acts upon the content of work. During this research project, I have had the opportunity to exhibit my work in the gallery, thus directly interacting with the gallery context. The project includes two exhibitions, with the multiple exhibition context providing an opportunity to reflexively engage with my works in the gallery, then further developing them for the second exhibition.
Chapter Three

An evolving creative practice

In this chapter, I will be engaging in a reflexive analysis of my creative practice as it relates to this research project. Giddens (1991) explains reflexivity to be a negotiation of the subjectivities of the self. A methodology of reflexivity requires "...researchers [to] engage in explicit, self-aware analysis of their own role" (Finlay, 2002, p. 531). The artistic research model is a negotiation and communication between two distinct methods of research, that of textual analysis and creative practice. Negotiation of the subjective nature of creative practice can be achieved through a reflexive engagement with the creative process that allows the practice to be positioned in relation to theories and texts. This creates a mutually informing relationship in which creative practice and textual analysis inform one another. This chapter will illustrate how my creative practice is informed by theories such as O’Doherty’s white cube. Artworks that have played a crucial role in the evolution of my practice such as Ulf Langheinrich’s Waveform B and Janet Cardiff’s The Forty Part Motet will also be discussed. This research project includes two exhibitions; the first, Tentative Resonance was shown at Spectrum Project Space, Perth in October 2009. The second, Resonant Body is to be shown at YMCA HQ Gallery, Perth in June 2010.

This project has seen an evolution in my creative practice, reflecting an evolving understanding of the relationship between sound, space and the body. The beginning of this evolution can be located in my experience of Ulf Langeinrich’s Waveform B (Appendix 5), a sound and video installation shown at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts during the 2007 Biennale of Electronic Arts Perth. This large-scale work was installed in a darkened space where strobe lights and projectors created a large flickering blue image on the floor, which seems to “...come loose from the floor, hover and drift” (Whitelaw, 2007, September 21). A low rumble reverberated around the space, with the visual and aural seeming to oscillate against one another, permeating and consuming the viewer in an immersive sensory experience (“I took a deep breath...: BEAP 07”, n.d.). My immersive experience of Waveform B made me aware of the physicality of sound, as I felt the rumble on my skin, and in my flesh. The body has always been a focus of my creative practice, but it was upon reflection of my experience...
of Waveform B that I began to explore the possibilities of sound as a material and how it relates to the body. It is these explorations that led to this honours research project.

Primarily, my practice takes the form of sound and video installation, using the body to create both the visual and aural elements of my work through sound and video recording. I use sound to shape and construct immersive sensory space, and am interested in how an audience experiences these bodily sounds, and how they negotiate space in relation to these sounds. One of the primary questions being asked in my research is; 'How does my creative practice, which utilises sound, communicate within the gallery context, and what role does the body play in this communication?' Given that the project is centered on the gallery context, exhibition of works provide an opportunity to reflexively engage with this context. Over the course of this research project, there will be two exhibitions, the first a collaborative exhibition titled Tentative Resonance, which took place in October, 2009. And the second, a solo exhibition titled Resonant Body, taking place in June, 2010. These exhibitions will illustrate the progression of this research in their evolution, with Resonant Body reflexively building upon concepts and processes from Tentative Resonance.

Within the context of this research project, Tentative Resonance presented an early opportunity for me to work within the paradigms of the gallery context, and reflect upon how the gallery context shapes viewer experience and actions. It was therefore my intention to utilise the experimental nature of Spectrum Project Space, approaching the exhibition as an opportunity to experiment and explore the possibilities of communication for sound, within this context. As a gallery that supports experimental practice, Spectrum Project Space is by no means a traditional gallery space, however, while challenging the expected values of art and art production it is still framed in the ideology of the white cube as defined by O'Doherty (1999). Despite being an architecturally complex space, with several unused air-conditioning vents and radiators, as well as small ledges and indentations on some walls, it is easily identifiable as a gallery and conforms to certain expected features such as white walls and fixtures, and simple concrete floors (O'Doherty, 1999, p. 15). Yet, it is not just the physical construction of the space which frames the gallery, but the expectations of the viewer. The ideology of the white cube expects certain things of the viewer such as keeping a respectful distance from the artwork or speaking in a hushed voice.
While many who visit Spectrum do not necessarily strictly adhere to these values, they frame the viewer’s actions. For instance, one of the major challenges of my practice in the gallery is the cautiousness with which works are approached and physically engaged with. There is a sense of unease with touching or getting too close to the works. In the case of *Tentative Resonance* there was considerable risk that the speakers themselves would become ‘art objects’, and that they would be viewed from a distance – limiting the physical experience of the vibration. Within the gallery, cabling such as that used for speakers is usually hidden or minimised. In *Tentative Resonance*, cables were used to mimic the architectural patterns of the floor and ceiling, running across walkways and up the wall. Audience members were forced to step on or over the cables to move through the space, thus making the audience aware of how their body interacted with the works.

*Tentative Resonance* was an exhibition of works by fellow student Nathan Peake, and myself. The exhibition combined two distinctly different material practices; Peake's highly reflective process painting and my bodily sound installation. Working with the liminal space that exists between audience and artwork, this exhibition examined the resonance of vibration between the body and space and the meditative qualities of reflection. Each painting and sound work in the exhibition acted as a constituent component of an immersive sensory experience. The exhibition attempted to blur the boundary between audience and work as the viewer is confronted, surrounded and reflected by the body, creating an environment in which the self is examined. During the development of the exhibition, the form and content of the works was constantly evolving. However, there were some key elements and intentions that shaped the work. These were to make the audience aware both of their own body, how it moves through the space, and how this experience is formed or shaped by the exhibition and gallery context.

Just as *Waveform B* acted as a catalyst to my understanding of the material nature of sound by making me aware of its bodily qualities, Janet Cardiff's *The Forty Part Motet* (discussed in the previous chapter) represents an important moment in the evolution of this project. Cardiff’s work allowed the space to play a role in the construction of the

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4 The term ‘art object’ refers to an artwork which has “…been made in order to be a thing of beauty in itself or a symbolic statement of meaning” (“Glossary”, n.d., ¶4). There is a danger of the speaker being ‘observed’ rather than experienced and engaged with, looking rather than listening or feeling.
listener's experience through the use of multiple sound sources, activating the entire space for the viewer. As an audience member moved through the space they experienced the work in different ways. Cardiff writes: "Enabling the audience to move throughout the space...reveals the piece of music as a changing construct. As well I am interested in how sound may physically construct a space in a sculptural way and how a viewer may choose a path" (Cardiff, 2001, ¶ 3). My experience as a viewer of this work solidified the importance of space in the use of sound as a material, a fact that has become integral to this research project. It is the material nature of sound that it interacts with space, as sound cannot be contained by a frame, unlike a painting, but is contained in space. A sound is not the same in every space, it echoes and reverberates, "...when sounds occur, they are partially formed by their spatial counterpart, and spatial experience is given character by the eccentricities of sound events" (LaBelle, 2006, p. 149). The works in Tentative Resonance reflected upon this fact, as I experimented with the spatial qualities of the gallery and how sounds related to this space.

There were two sound works in Tentative Resonance, the first being a collaboration between Peake and myself. In this work, titled Water (Appendix 6), a speaker was placed under a highly reflective painted surface on which a thin layer of water was poured. As the speaker produced deep bass sounds in the steady rhythm of a heartbeat, the surface of the water vibrated and rippled. In this work sound was made visible and interactive as an audience member perceived himself or herself in the reflection of the sound, while being close enough to the speaker to physically experience the vibration of the sound. In order to perceive the subtle shapes being formed by vibration in the water, the viewer had to come close to the work, bringing them within range to feel these vibrations in and on their body. This work drew upon the relationship between sound and the body and the ability of sound to permeate the body, blurring the boundary between artwork and viewer; sound and body.

The second work was a large-scale sound installation that traveled through the entire gallery space. The work used recorded internal sound of the body such as digestion and breathing. These were then manipulated and played back through sub-woofers that produced a low, hollow sound with intense vibration, which can be felt by the body in close proximity. The body experiences different sound frequencies in different ways; low frequency sound is experienced as a more intense vibration than high frequency sounds. Sub-woofers produce a lower frequency sound, creating works that can be felt
as well as heard. These speakers were positioned in strategic points around the gallery with each speaker playing different sounds. The speakers were quiet, with some of them silent for long periods of time. As the viewer moved from the entrance to the back of the gallery space, they followed a journey of changing sound. The sounds in the front room were primarily heart and lung sounds – easily identifiable bodily sound. As the viewer moved into the second room, these sounds became less identifiable, while still being easily recognisable to the audience member as of the body. As the audience member travels further into the space, sounds from the gallery are introduced. This sound is at times indistinguishable from the sounds of the body. The changing nature of the sounds, becoming more ambiguous and increasingly spatial as they moved through the gallery, attempted to map an evolving experience for the viewer as they moved from room to room. In this installation I reflected upon my experience of Cardiff’s *The Forty Part Motet*. The placement of speakers within the space reflected architectural and spatial elements, with acoustics being closely considered.

It was not until I began working in the gallery that I became aware of one of the most difficult elements to negotiate in the gallery-sound relationship, that of acoustics. “The hard square surfaces of the gallery do not manage sound well; it echoes around the space, bumping into sound that has crept out of adjoining galleries” (Kelly, 2009, p. 7). It was my experience that the gallery is an extremely difficult context in which to work with sound. It was not until I began to explicitly engage with the architectural, material and acoustical elements of Spectrum Project Space that I was able to control and manipulate the sound installation. This speaks to a broader argument made in this research, that an engagement with space is vital to the practice of sound art and use of sound as a material.

Within the context of this research project, *Tentative Resonance* acted as an opportunity to engage with sound in the gallery context, developing the creative component of the project. The intention of the two exhibition opportunities was to reflect upon and further develop my practice, with *Resonant Body* further refining concepts. Thus, it is my intention to continue to develop the interactions between the visual and aural that exist in *Water*. In an examination of sound and the gallery, sound theorist Steve Connor writes: “The visual... correlates of sound art have become more rather than less important in art galleries” (2003, ¶ 24). The gallery context is framed in an ideology that privileges the visual, with aesthetics rather than acoustics being valued, and thus the
visual is always inherently present. As sound has become increasingly common in the contemporary gallery context, the visual has become no less important. My intentions for Tentative Resonance were to focus on the material qualities of sound in the gallery, better understanding the interaction between sound and space. I decided that I would remove those visual elements commonly present in my practice, which I am most comfortable and competent in using, such as video. This made it possible to fully immerse myself in sound as a material. In Resonant Body I intend to re-introduce video, developing the interaction between sound and video which lies at the core of my practice as a whole.

Resonant Body is to be exhibited at YMCA HQ Gallery, an unusual gallery space. YMCA HQ is a facility aimed at supporting youth in Western Australia. The gallery, which resides within the YMCA HQ complex, is a multi-purpose space. It is a room that also contains a reception desk and associated materials, acts as a waiting room for a counseling service and is a walkway to another room. My examination of the gallery context recognises the plethora of forms that the gallery can take, and the different ways in which the white cube ideologies may be present. The non-traditional form that this gallery takes provides an interesting and potentially challenging frame through which to reflect upon and engage with these ideologies.

Resonant Body will take the form of a sound and video installation, with both the visual and aural elements of the work being of the body. The work will explicitly engage with the spatial and architectural elements of the space. The gallery contains a small corner cupboard, in which a video will be imbedded. This video will feature what has become a recurring theme within my practice, an ambiguous bodily image, pink and fleshy but not clearly identifiable. The viewer recognises these images as of the body, without being directly linked to a specific body. In this way, the viewer is able to relate the bodily image and sound to their own body. This ambiguous body will also be conveyed through a continuation of Water. However, in this instance, instead of water being placed onto a surface under which a sub-woofer plays, gelatin will instead be used. It is my intention that the gelatin will mimic the qualities of flesh and over the course of the exhibition; the gelatin will develop a skin, changing the surface. It will be a thicker material more inclined to wobble, rather than ripple, creating a link with the intended video work. In the same way, the sub-woofer under the gelatin will play manipulated sound recordings of the body that again link to the ambiguous flesh displayed in the
video. Given the size and architecture of the space, it can be expected that the sound will reverberate and echo around the space. Within the gallery, this has an immersive quality, with sound seeming to fill the space, as though being of the space.
Conclusion

In this exegesis I have examined the practice of sound art, mapping its evolution through the contexts of both visual art and music. The history of sound art can be traced through a vast number of works and movements, with an established body of works through which it can be understood. Yet it is little discussed within the dialogue of these respective creative realms. This is owing to the complex nature of this practice, being at once a part of visual art and music whilst existing within its own space, between these two realms. It is through negotiating both of these realms that sound art can be understood. Combining the key elements of music and visual arts; that of composition and space respectively, creates a frame through which sound art can be understood.

It is vital that those practitioners working with sound understand the relationship between sound and space, as it is impossible to separate one from the other. The relationship between sound and space is mutually informing “The sound-space interplay is inherently conversational...when sounds occur, they are partially formed by their spatial counterpart, and spatial experience is given character by the eccentricities of sound events” (LaBelle, 2006, p. 149). Sound is shaped by space and understanding of space shaped by sound, therefore the relationship between the two must be considered, yet it is so often overlooked or considered as a secondary element.

In this exegesis I have explored the interactions of sound art and the gallery context, identifying how they interrelate with one another, and how the viewer experiences them both as individual, and interacting agents. Within the gallery, the ideology of the white cube, as discussed by Brian O’Doherty (1999), frames the communication of the works contained within it and shapes a viewer’s experience. O’Doherty’s analysis argues that the gallery context is steeped in a history of display that acts as an ideological frame through which the gallery is understood. This ideological framework shapes not only the aesthetics of the gallery space, but the way an artwork communicates and a gallery visitor perceives and interacts with these works. Within the gallery context, the viewer becomes extremely important, as exhibitions are constructed for the gallery visitor. Thus, there is a third element in the sound space relationship; the body. The act of viewing or listening frames the way in which a work is understood.
The analysis of *Of Art & Music* and *Wet Sounds* highlights the varying forms that the gallery takes, and the varying ways that O’Doherty’s white cube ideology shapes viewer experience. Brian Blanchflower and Roger Smalley’s *Tursiops, Glimpses (An Earth History)* and *Diptych (Homage to Brian Blanchflower)*, highlight the difficulties of negotiating these ideologies, and the importance of understanding and considering their role. The relationship between sound, space and the body was not explicitly engaged with, and therefore content of the work was not fully experienced by the viewer. While the ideologies of the white cube are complex, they can be navigated through carefully considered decisions, and an understanding of the sound-space-body relationship.

Over the course of this research project I had the opportunity to reflexively engage with my works in the gallery space, through a multi-exhibition approach to my practice. This approach allowed my practice to evolve in relation to these concerns, by directly engaging with the gallery context.
References


Appendices

Appendix 1a


Appendix 1b

Appendix 3a


Appendix 3b

Appendix 4

Appendix 5

Appendix 6a


Appendix 6b