

What is Sound Art?

'Sound art' is a term for a diverse set of art practices which utilize sound and listening as the subject matter and material.

Among the wide variety of forms that might be grouped within the category of sound art (depending on whom you ask) are: kinetic sounding sculpture, automatons, experimental radio, sound installations (often utilizing site-specificity), guided sound-walks, instrument making, graphic scores, sound poetry, video art, acoustic ecology / phonography, and even works in which sound is implied rather than explicit. Many sound art works could be described by using more than one of those descriptors.



It is hard to define the borders of what is and isn't sound art. There are two reasons for this: because of the variety of the forms it can take, and because of the fact that sound art exists somewhere between music and the visual arts, predominantly outside of both, but with some overlap over porous borders. As author Seth Kim-Cohen wrote: "sound art ... must be distinguished from music on the one side and gallery arts on the other. The borders are blurry, which means that IT is blurry." The fuzzy nature of the term and the plurality of the field has led to such circumstances as some musical groups adopting it as a marketing buzzword, further confusing matters.



When one looks back at the work that is now discussed within the context of the category of sound art, it would include many important works from the early 1960s and through the 1970s, although most histories of sound art cite the 1980s as the origin of sound art as a discrete practice. The earliest known usage of the term 'sound art' was in 1983 with an exhibition at the Sculpture Center in New York entitled "sound/Art".



Sound art's history is shared with that of experimental music and with contemporary visual arts, linking Futurism, Dada, Fluxus, Bauhaus, Post-Modern and Relational art. Among the many key figures in this history are the Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo, who envisioned the use of industrial and military noises to comprise a new kind of music at the turn of the century, and composer John Cage who, in his works and lectures (partially under the influence of the teachings of Zen Buddhism as well as of the painter Robert Rauschenberg) conceived of no difference between noise and music, proposing that everyday sounds are as worthy of attentive listening as any composed piece of music. For Cage, given that there is music, this does not necessarily mean there is a 'not-music'.



A theoretical discourse about sound art has only barely begun, and presents a number of internal conflicts, especially about its role in relation to music. Sound art must be distinct from music, or its usefulness as a term is probably nil, but drawing the border between music and sound art is difficult. As York University Associate Professor of Arts & Cultural History Leslie Korrick states, "sound art may concern itself with music, but music itself is not necessarily sound art". Countering this, musician, sound-artist and listener Jeph Jerman suggests that "I ... think that any audio art made by people cannot [*not*] be called music". The need to declare sound art distinct from music appears to contradict Cage's ideas about music and 'not-music'.



Sound art often raises beguiling questions through its conceptual explorations of dynamic relations and barriers between the listener / spectator and sound in temporal flux within space. This exhibition, entitled "Sound Through Barriers" notes the overlap of the category of sound art over the borders between visual arts and music, and the physical border-crossing ability of sound such as through a wall. Also explored are spatial and temporal border crossings, and the ability of sound to pass through more conceptual walls such as those between the exhibition's visitors and the artwork, between each piece of art and the other works collected within this space. Artworks were selected which did not require being sealed off in isolation, separated from the outside world, acknowledging and benefiting from the fact that there are other sounding works within the space, and a listening public that is itself contributing to the sound environment by the mere fact of being present. The ultimate purpose of this focus on sound's barrier-crossing abilities points to an intent to raise awareness of the listener's experience with the sounds of the world outside of the art gallery walls of this exhibition, in every day life circumstances.