

# SoundEffects



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## **Facing sound – voicing art**

Experiences of audiovisual art in the art museum

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## Abstract

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*This article is based on examples of contemporary audiovisual art with a primary focus on the Tony Oursler solo exhibition *Face to Face* in Aarhus Art Museum AROs, 2012. My investigation involves a combination of qualitative interviews with visitors, observations of the audience's interactions with the exhibition and the artwork in the museum space, and short analyses of individual works of art based on reception aesthetics, phenomenology, and newer writings on sound, voice and listening. The focus of the investigation is the quality and possible perspectives of the interaction with audiovisual works of art, articulating and sounding out their own 'voices'. This methodological combination has been chosen to transgress the dichotomy between the aesthetic or hermeneutic artwork 'text' analysis and cultural theory, which focuses on the context understood as the framing, the cultural acts and agendas around the aesthetic 'text'. The article will include experiences with another exhibition, *David Lynch: The Air is on Fire* (Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, 2007 and Kunstforeningen Gl. Strand, Copenhagen, 2010- 2011). The two exhibitions are fundamentally different in their integration of sound. My field of interest concerns the exploration of sound as artistic material in audiovisual combinations and those audiovisual works of art that might cause a change in the participatory strategy of the art museum towards the audience.*

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This article is based on examples of contemporary *audiovisual* art with a primary focus on the Tony Oursler solo exhibition *Face to Face* in Aarhus Art Museum AROs in Denmark in March-July 2012. My investigation involves a combination of qualitative interviews with visitors, observations of the audience's interactions with the exhibition and the artwork in the museum space and short analyses of individual works of art based on reception aesthetics and phenomenology<sup>1</sup> and inspired by newer writings on sound, voice and listening.<sup>2</sup> So the focus of my investigation is the quality and possible perspectives of the interaction with audiovisual works of art, articulating and sounding out their own 'voices'.

This methodological combination has been chosen to transgress the dichotomy between the traditional aesthetic or hermeneutic artwork 'text' analysis and cultural theory, which focuses on the context understood as the framing, the cultural acts and agendas around the aesthetic 'text'. The article will also draw on and include experiences with another exhibition, *David Lynch: The Air is on Fire* in Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, March-May 2007 and Kunstforeningen Gl. Strand (Danish art exhibition gallery), Copenhagen, September 2010-January 2011. The two exhibitions are, however, fundamentally different in their integration of sound.<sup>3</sup>

So the field of interest and my main investigation is not about so-called sound art,<sup>4</sup> but concerns the exploration and use of *sound as artistic material* in audiovis-

ual combinations and those audiovisual works of art that might need and cause a change in the participatory strategy of the art museum towards the visiting audience. So inductively and based on the sound practice of two concrete exhibitions I will examine the significance of (intentional) sound in the context of the art museum. From there I will raise some more basic curatorial questions, which these days are raised by the use of sound in contemporary art. Which interaction and participatory effects may the presence of sound forward or strengthen when the audience meets and experiences intentional and technologically mediated sound in the otherwise silent museum halls of the white cube,<sup>5</sup> and how may we understand that in a wider cultural perspective? Thus, my point of departure is not the institutional view, but the ears and eyes of the visitors.

Finally the article ends by pointing out perspectives and possibilities for the listening visitors and strategic consequences of the increasing use of sound as (part of) the artistic material in contemporary art for the art museum – as well as the broader social, cultural and epistemological context of the phenomenon of audio-visuality in works of art and museums. Here I will draw on the writings by Steven Connor on the overall increase of mediated and disembodied voices – what Connor calls *panophonia* – and the concept of *ventriloquism* which I find productive in the process of understanding sound as *voice* also in the art museum. A part of the conclusion will be the question of methodology and knowledge creation when investigating sound *and* art, art museums and the question of further perspectives and interests in the *audiovisual* field of contemporary art. So my investigating principle is *inductive*,<sup>6</sup> taking as my starting point the concrete and singular phenomenon and from there arguing that my conclusions are partly valid and prevailing at a general and theorising level.

## The air was on fire in Paris

When I visited Fondation Cartier in May 2007, I had been inspired by a feature and review in the Danish newspaper *Information* about a new and the first retrospective David Lynch exhibition made especially for the Fondation Cartier in Paris. The newspaper feature started like this (my translation from Danish to English):

The sound is anxiety-provoking, suffocating. ‘It gives me a headache’, an elderly woman complains, while she tries to concentrate on hundreds of small drawings, some of them strictly geometrical in Mondrian colours, others extremely organic with strange black holes, emerging from innumerable drawing lines.<sup>7</sup>

Entering the modern, concrete exhibition building with three open and minimalist floors (a grey cube) in May 2007 I was mentally prepared by the formulation above and, to some extent, by my earlier experience with music-and-sound analyses of

David Lynch's films; but I was not *sensuously* prepared for this exhibition's audiovisual set-up. The sound was indeed overwhelming. Large, dark and gloomy, it spread into and occupied the entire exhibition space, sometimes pausing, though, during my wandering about in the different parts of the exhibition. Soon I mentally began to combine the gloomy and big artificial soundtrack/*soundscape*<sup>8</sup> with the very different works of art – especially the large paintings which seemed intertextually to draw on the themes and motives in Lynch's films – as if this *soundscape* was a filmic underscore soundtrack. This function I knew beforehand; it is meant to 'tune' the experience of the filmic space to fit a certain mood, which in the case of Lynch's films has been characterised by the compositions of Angelo Badalamenti and his special spatial design of the unknown, the unconscious and the uncanny through a broad and deep frequency music- and *soundscape*, composed and acting primarily through the vertical category of large space and without much (if any) rhythmic or temporal accentuating.<sup>9</sup>

I experienced the exhibition like this, until I accidentally saw another visitor activate one of several identical devices standing and spread around on the floor of the exhibition space like yellow sculptures and without any instructions or explanations. It was a yellow standard (pylon) about one metre high and equipped with a mechanism that was easy to press or slap. Once I saw it reactivated by another visitor starting the *soundscape* (having paused for a short time), the other visitor and I looked at each other and smiled. After that I also now and then activated the sound device, which started a longer sound composition running in an unpredictable kind of loop. It felt appropriate to activate it when it sometimes ran out, and still more visitors did so. From now on the *soundscape* was not given to me as a constant atmosphere,<sup>10</sup> but a possibility with which I might interact to create an atmosphere or ambience. For most of the two hours of the visit someone activated the sound: a 'wall to wall' *soundscape* or *soundspace* reaching out to the audience and their interactions and thus tuning and transforming not only the exhibition space, but also the sociality amongst the audience-spectators. So even though the soundtrack was designed and staged by the artist David Lynch himself, it can be discussed whether it is part of the artwork or a curatorial add-on with a rather great effect on the experience of the exhibition as well as the works of arts. As I remember it, I did not get a headache, but my visit and live experience of the exhibition was intensified and probably prolonged, and afterwards I bought the CD with the exhibition soundtrack entitled *Soundscape*, designed by David Lynch and produced by his sound engineer Dean Hurley. Afterwards, playing the CD at home and consulting the visually and textually well-equipped and huge exhibition catalogue book I could recollect (re-enact) my live experience of the exhibition.

## **In Copenhagen the visitors liked to talk: an empirical research pilot set-up**

In 2010 the Danish art exhibition hall Gl. Strand in Copenhagen announced the reopening of the newly restored building with the David Lynch exhibition from Paris. I primarily chose it as a pilot case for my research project about sound and contemporary art; here I could test the interviews with visitors based on my earlier Paris experience of the exhibition. But it also turned out to further qualify my understanding of differences in curatorial practice between the David Lynch and the Tony Oursler exhibitions concerning sound (see below p. 6 ff. about sound in the Oursler works and exhibition) as well as the similarities and affirmation concerning the visitor's engagement in discourse about their sound and listening experiences.

My semi-structured qualitative research interviews<sup>11</sup> were based on 11 questions<sup>12</sup> beginning with quantitative and therefore relatively neutral questions (duration and number of visits) before moving on to qualitative questions in a free dialogue about the interviewee's experience of the exhibition, which senses the exhibition had activated, a specific work of art that made a special impact. Then followed questions such as the following (but in free succession): Had they noticed the sound and activated the sound devices? How had the sound affected their interaction with the works of art and the other visitors? And did they often attend exhibitions of contemporary art like this one? I ended the interviews by asking the interviewees about their relation to sound and music in general (home, in the city, at work) and, finally, which overall impression they would assign to their visit to the Lynch exhibition.

The interviews were recorded in the open café next to the exit – with a lot of activity noise surrounding us, making the situation safe and comfortable. I had no problem recruiting people for the interviews on their way out,<sup>13</sup> and I did not disclose my specific sound and research interest or purpose until after the interviews. The general output from the interviews was partly the pretesting of the qualitative research interviews, partly making some visitors stay and socialise in the café. I was under the clear impression that the visitors were keen on talking about their experience of the exhibition, and they formulated many interesting reflections about it, especially when we reached the complex questions about the sound, its effects and their interactions with it. Several of them mentioned the 'sinister' filmic reference (to Lynch's film) and the same filmic sound effects which the installed interactive sound device had had on their experience of especially the large paintings of the exhibition – how the soundtrack might 'follow up' on a visual motive like 'murder or suicide' in a painting, and this was followed by what they heard as 'a shot' on the soundtracks of which some were running non-stop and were not dependent on the visitors activating them.

The same talkative and communicative activity characterised the final questions about the interviewees' relation to sound in their personal life; here many expressed problems with sound and noise and problem solving by 'masking' noise with music or looking for silent and quiet 'oases' in the city. Out of 15 interviewees only one complained about 'the noisy sound' in the exhibition, but the sound volume was lower in Copenhagen than it had been in Paris and the consequent set-up and effect were rather different because of the changed exhibition space, which – distributed on three small and wooden floors in this very old building – dampened the sonic set-up and the acoustic (spatial) reverberation of Lynch's 'soundscape' and made it less dominant with a smaller effect.

The methodological ground was set for my next and more detailed qualitative, empirical study.

### ***Face to Face in ARoS: Interviewing visitors at the Tony Oursler exhibition,<sup>14</sup> June 2012***

The multimedia works of art of this internationally well-known American artist are famous for their 'Talking Heads' or dolls: the use of video projected audiovisually and animated faces talking, babbling or 'voicing', projected on to different sculptural forms and into composite three-dimensional installations and transmitted through loudspeakers.

Tony Oursler was originally a musician inspired by John Cage, and he later came to work with music groups like Sonic Youth, David Bowie and sound artists Tony Conrad and Stephen Vitiello. He has composed sound poetry and worked with various text and language models with the intention of making the audience engage in dialogue with the sound of his works. Visiting Tony Oursler in his studio in New York,<sup>15</sup> he told me that this was only the second time that someone would write an academic text about the sound in his art.<sup>16</sup> This was indeed surprising, but it also confirmed my assumption and the outset of my research project: that the use of sound in contemporary art is generally overlooked and overheard in non-sound-expert academia.

My qualitative interviews with 16 visitors<sup>17</sup> to the ARoS exhibition were executed parallel with the set-up in Copenhagen. This time I was situated at the end of the exhibition in a large and open area, but in a context that included the rather loud exhibition sound from three works of art close by as well as sound from several works some distance away. I 'caught' the visitors on their way out, sitting at a small, round table with a sign in front of me with my name and title/institution. Also here I interviewed the visitors in pairs (and couples) of two – which gave a laid-back and socialising dialogue character to the interviews. Since this was quite a different

exhibition with very different audiovisual works of art and with each their individual and integrated ‘voices’ (which were not at all controllable by the visitors), the nature of my dialogue with the interviewees was rather that of talking about the personal and single memorable works that had made the strongest impression or effect. My questionnaire was the same, though, but the dialogues were still more varied, following the principles of the ‘semi-structured’ interview.

Generally, several of the interviewees commented on the overall noisy set-up, which was considered too much only by an elderly couple; the middle-aged and the younger visitors found it attractive or had ambivalent feelings towards it. It was striking that several (almost all) found the presence of sound exciting, funny, vitalising, cosy, human, crazy, strange, moody and uncanny. They generally characterised the sound effects as producing identification, ‘convincing you’ that the sculptural forms were live, sharpening and intensifying the senses.<sup>18</sup> Many had from the exhibition an overall impression of humour/irony as well as uneasiness/uncanniness – one visitor formulated this as ‘strange – a constructive confusion’. Some characterised it as ‘surrealistic’, ‘crazy’, ‘feeling insecure’ – others as ‘both alluring and repulsive’.

When asked more specifically about the sound effects, many of them revealed a high degree of reflective sensuousness: ‘you are driven by the sound but also kept back, captured’; ‘which sound relates to what?’; ‘the sound fills us and the space’; and ‘the sound gives life to the artwork’. When asked how they interacted with the sound, some interviewees answered, ‘you dare let your hair down’; others, ‘when you think about it, you follow the sound’; or ‘we rotated, walked around inside it – to grasp all of it’; ‘they try to speak to you – address you’; ‘they became alive to me’; ‘you have to listen very carefully – too much volume – I could not hear what was said’.

Some of the same persons also said that they were ‘art ignorant’, but that this art exhibition had been ‘a positive experience’. But I also got comments like, ‘I was glad to get out into the normal again’; ‘it started something’; ‘constructive use of sound’; and ‘it speaks to my own creativity’.

When I several times walked around the exhibition and observed the other visitors (with and without a video camera with special microphones), my observations confirmed the overall impression presented above, especially concerning their experience of being partly directed and driven, partly captured and surrounded by (immersed into) the sound. Still the observations with video camera were problematic, since they were not able to follow and fully register the visitors in their circling and unpredictable movements following the transitory and transgressing sound. This was only possible without the video camera, where I got a better overview of the space and the visitors’ movements inside it.

When I asked the interviewees about their relation to sound in general at the end of the interviews, it revealed the kind of work, home life, education, spare time

etc. that constituted their personal context and basis of reflections, comments and utterances. For example, the two young men who worked in a day care centre, where they had learned to ‘find focus in the noisy sound’, or the young couple – she was an electrician and he was a car painter – who in their spare time worked back stage with music bands and, therefore, were familiar with listening – ‘sound is manifold, music, noise, voices’ – and able to mentally shut out noise – they considered the exhibition to be ‘the most peculiar thing I have seen – wow’; or the middle-aged woman who was a watchmaker and trained in ‘listening carefully for one sound, not hearing all the watches around her’, whereas her female friend would often seek out oases of silence in the middle of Copenhagen where she lived. It was the latter who claimed that the exhibition ‘speaks to my own creativity’ and, thus, would have liked to revisit the exhibition. But more importantly, they were all very honest about their life with sound and able to reflect on it, apparently brought about by their exhibition experience and our dialogue about it. Still, I will not go any further in trying to combine and interpret the individual connections between their utterances about the exhibition (the installations) and their relation to sound in life in general. The most important research outcome here is that it worked and seemed natural and straightforward for the interviewees to relate to two otherwise separate issues – art and their own life world – during the interviews.

Here I will – for the time being – end my presentation of the empirical data I collected through the semi-structured qualitative interviews and my general observations. I will return to the interviews and their methodological status – especially concerning the visitors’ ways of speaking about, interacting with and understanding the exhibition in relation also to a larger sociocultural context.

### ***Face to Face in ARoS: Tony Oursler’s polyphonic hell of weirdos and figments***

The exhibition in ARoS (March-July 2012) was a comprehensive solo exhibition made by Tony Oursler especially for ARoS,<sup>19</sup> and it focused on the face and its manifold expressions and ambiguities. Several of the sculptural dolls consist of only eye(s) and mouth: a personification or incarnation of the audiovisual. Others have an animated, sounding face, but a ‘dead’ body (made by cloth or the like). Some works are constructed as a montage with multiplications of the same face, but combined with different polyphonic voices. Some speak in an understandable language, and some are vocalising, babbling, crying, sighing and screaming. Some of the works of art also operate – at a low volume, though – with a surrounding or contextual soundscape, whereas other installations are fitted with a soundtrack played at an overwhelmingly high volume and therefore placed in a separate semi-closed exhibi-



tion space. All of this means a huge field of floating sound (and visuals), which in a space with relatively heavy acoustics like the one in ARoS might be overwhelming. Lise Pennington, the curator of the exhibition, told me that they had received some complaints from the visitors about the noisy sound.

According to my own small and qualitative investigation above, only a minor percentage of the visitors (one couple) complained about the noisy sound, whereas many of the guests uttered their accept and even enjoyment of the sounding exhibition as a new experience, witnessed also by a certain sociality and ongoing liveliness in the exhibition space. A minor but remarkable number of works were mute or silent, but they were at some level invaded by the sound connected to the surrounding works. They were referred to by several of the interviewees as extraordinary, impressive and memorable, partly because of their silence and muteness.

In the following I will analyse three individual works of art chosen for their specific and different ways of addressing the audience-visitors and because they are representative of the supposedly different strategies, principles and possible effects of the works. Still they have in common that they are all centred on directly addressing the audience, not necessarily in a vociferous way, but insisting on and calling for interaction, sympathy and possible identification of the audience-spectator. The analyses are based on a phenomenology,<sup>20</sup> which understands the 'object', that is, the artwork of the analysis, 'as a subject' which may raise or ask questions to the audience and the analyst, the latter understood 'as an object'.

### **Analytical sketches: the works of art and their voices**

In the installation *Bell Deep*<sup>21</sup> a life-size chalk-white church bell lies on the floor. Moving waves of blue-green light wash over the bell and the three white walls in the small semi-closed installation space, which you may walk into. In the background of a continuous soundscape – a mix of background noise, bell resonance and the murmur of water – a man's head is seen live at the bottom of the bell. He addresses us, reciting something using pleasant American English words and moving his head inside the bell – to and fro and from side to side. Now and then he pokes his head further out of the bell towards us, so that it grows in size, and he begins to bash it against the inner sides of the bell. Ding dong, it sounds, and we, the listening audience, also feel empathetic pain in our heads, even though the man's bell clapper movements are, of course, an imagined activity which can only be carried out because the man's head is an image projected from the projector which we see standing on the floor, and the sound of the bell is a recorded sound, which emanates from the loudspeakers. It is rather difficult to hear and understand what the bell man actually says, partly because of the relatively low volume, partly because of the intruding sound from other works of art. If, on the other hand, we focus on the

blue-green waves on the walls, floor and bell, we might through imagination and identification feel ourselves transferred to a place under water, where the sound of a voice is in fact not linguistically distinct, but distorted and unclear. We find ourselves assigned to a lingering wait and placed in a direct exchange with the suffering ‘bell man clapper’ – not least because the sound of his head (banging the bell) not only hits our ears, but also our bodies; the sound is directionally ‘pointing out’ his head and bell (‘there’) and we are inside ‘here’ in the sound; the sound waves hit and surround us in the installation space. This bodily sensation and perception of the sound makes the effect of *presence* strong and adds an extra live dimension to the video projection of the ‘man in the bell’ and the ‘water’. But why is a man talking to us and bashing his head like a clapper against a bell? What is he doing and saying to us, and why are we ‘under water’?

One of the interviewees pointed out and characterised his experience of the installation as follows. First he passed by it and did not notice it, did not hear anything (‘strange how sound can be hidden’, he said); but when he returned, ‘he started to get excited’. This is almost like my own observations in 2012 and earlier in 2005, where the artwork was exhibited for the first time, also in AROs.<sup>22</sup> Many visitors pass(ed) by it without noticing or focusing on the subtle sound and projection set-up. But (if) returning, they were/are either captured in interaction with the audiovisual installation or – as another interviewee formulated it – overwhelmed by the sound and want to get away from it – ‘the sound (the voice) makes you more involved’, this interviewee said.

In the installation *Guilty* a woman’s ‘dead’ fabric dress body lies flat on the floor with its ‘live’ video-projected head under the corner of a mattress. Her tongue is hanging out, she licks her lips lasciviously until she begins her presumptuous and by now aggressive communication articulated first and foremost through the timbre and prosody of her voice: ‘I can feel it ... I know what you wanna do ... I know ... I can read your mind, every thought ... You can’t keep it secret’, she says quite loud and distinctly, while looking straight at us. This is almost clear and precise speech, rhetorical, insinuating and accusatory, as she flips and turns each individual sentence in several degrees of intensity, from a whisper to a shout, and with various rather small but significant and ‘crazy’ variations and modulations in the vocal expression. This illusion works. If one focuses and listens to these differentiated and fine-tuned vocal modulations and follows their facial companions, one must feel like a participant in an addressed communication, accused by a forsaken, lonely and frustrated woman, who may be comical in an excessive way, but also extremely striking and assertively ear-opening. But why is she lying underneath a mattress, and why is she so enervating and excessively accusing (us?) in her voice address, but not in her bodily address? What does she want from us? Is she crazy or does she just express a new kind of normality?

One of the interviewees confirmed that *Guilty* could have this effect when I asked them to mention some special and impressive installation: ‘it invokes thoughts and feelings like “why doesn’t anybody help her?”’, one said about his own reaction. This installation was impressive, one that almost all the interviewees remembered very clearly.

Quite a different voice and sound experiment is evident when the voice in *Snake* (SSS)<sup>23</sup> plays with and investigates what can be done with a voice. The snake creature which is a woman’s voice (!) hisses all the s sounds in words like misty, slippery, sly, while she cunningly investigates and improvises rhymes and wordplay, inserting babbling, la-la-la singing and stuff and nonsense rhyme à la childish exploration and language games, but with a decidedly adult voice (timbre) and articulation, asking for instance, ‘where did you go?’ This is abnormal and poetic speech, which we without problems can accept and ascribe to the s- and snake-like creature, whose body (and ‘face’) is nothing but eye and mouth. But why is the face=body? Here the video projection’s animation of the snake sculpture – combined with the sound of a voice exploring the sound of language – establishes anthropomorphism when attributing the very human (which is the voice and the language) to a very special, biblical animal or creature. And why does a snake speak like that, as if it is stuttering or just playing frivolously with language? What is she (it) playing at?

In contrast to the hitherto mentioned and most of the installations, some have no voice of their own. The most spectacular installation and the one most of the interviewees commented on was the installation *Eyes*.<sup>24</sup> It consists of a number of single projected live eyes of different sizes hanging down from the ceiling, looking, blinking and floating like globes (planets) in a dark space, in which the only source of light is the projections themselves. Since there are only eyes and no mouth projections, no sounds or voices are directly connected to this installation. Though the installation space is distantly invaded by voices and sounds from the surrounding installations, *Eyes* is experienced as a silent installation without sound and certainly without voice(s). But why have these single eyes been ripped out of their faces and made eyes=faces? What are they looking for – who are they looking at and why?

A few visitors found it beautiful; several found it scary, uncanny and overwhelming, like surveillance. It seems that the vocal marking and insurance of human address and interaction – related to the audiovisual exhibition context as a whole – are so negated and absent here that several of the interviewees ‘could not cope with it’ and had to leave the installation quickly. It might be that the uncanny and threatening experience comes partly from the sudden relative silence, partly from the not-possibly-identified or the not-possibly-interacting-with silent characters of this installation.

One visitor concluded about the exhibition and the works of art as a whole, ‘The exhibition creates and deconstructs the illusion’ – the illusion of being made of

living creatures, I will add, of literally being talked to and interacting with audio-visual subjects, being a questioned and involved object.

## **‘Who will give answer to the call of my voice?’<sup>25</sup>**

### **Theoretical perspectives**

The artist and theorist Tony Conrad is, as mentioned earlier, so far the only one who has theorised about and published academic work on sound in the artwork of Tony Oursler. Why is that, I may ask, when audiovisual sculpture and his way of using voice are obviously so important, if not the most distinguishing artistic concepts (and material) of his art production? The easy answer is that sound is difficult to analyse, especially for (fine) art theorists, as there has been no thorough or serious attempt to include sonic material or aspects in the art theory tradition that could match the historical and elaborated visual theory and analysis tradition. The most valid answer is threefold. 1) The presence of sound material in contemporary art *in museums* is relatively new for the museums and galleries,<sup>26</sup> and the theory or discourse about listening and sound in art and museums has yet been developed without empirically or properly including the *experienced context* of the art museum. 2) It is impossible to analyse or theorise sound as material and component in art as if it was an (ontologically) stable object, since it cannot be fixed or demarcated, unlike the visual and sculptural material. Sound is transitory, its reach and space is indeterminate and varying, so it also needs a theory of interaction, listening, sensation and reception, since sound waves invade and spread in space, hit and surround bodies, penetrate ears. Its ontology is dependent on someone listening and therefore closer to ‘acoustic epistemology’ or *acoustemology*.<sup>27</sup> Hence, it cannot be analysed solely as ‘text’, but needs to be studied as process and through discourse in context: with other materials and other media and the spatial context, be it a museum or any other exhibition space. 3) Finally, sound material and concepts relate to a sound culture outside art – like visual art material relates to visual culture, and audiovisual art material to audiovisual culture. It seems obvious that the exploration of sound in contemporary art coincides with a broad cultural condition, where mediated sound is everywhere (in mobile phones and media, the Internet, computers, advertising and the public space) and also digitally available as material.<sup>28</sup>

Steven Connor names this cultural state ‘panophonia’,<sup>29</sup> paraphrasing and updating Murray Schafer’s concept of ‘schizophonia’,<sup>30</sup> which means split voice or ‘the generalized condition in which sounds, but in particular the sounds of voices, are dissociated from their sources’.<sup>31</sup> Connor’s agenda is partly to discuss the actual perceptual naturalisation, but not yet technical perfection of the dissociated voice as we experience it in film synchronisation, voice dubbing and other media features, partly to understand our way of hearing ‘voice’ in all kinds of sound. Connor and

Tony Conrad<sup>32</sup> talk about (technological) ‘ventriloquism’.<sup>33</sup> Here the Oursler works overtly exhibit the disembodied voice by showing in the open the loudspeakers and the technology (camera and more) behind the ‘living’ face=body sculptural dolls. But whereas Conrad states that Tony Oursler ‘... announces magic’s repenetration, by television, into the phenomenal world’<sup>34</sup> and emphasises his re-establishing of the ‘magic’ and the ‘haunted’ in order ‘to reclaim and reanimate a place for wonder within the real’,<sup>35</sup> Steven Connor ends up concluding about the cultural ubiquitously disembodied and dissociated voices in and through media:

the very same ventriloquism which once made a fetish of the voice now acts to disenchant it ... Ventriloquism can now detach us from a restricted economy of voice, in which voices only ever commingle with each other, to a mixed economy, of mediatic translations and transpositions.<sup>36</sup>

So the difference between the two understandings of the mediated, dislocated (not embodied) voice might be a question of inside which framing this late modern, technological (mediatic) ghostly voice and ‘ventriloquism’ is performed. In the framing of art and the museum this is now explored by contemporary art. In my empirical material it seems that the experienced magic and the reflection on the effects of media sounds of voices are in fact possible; the Oursler exhibition *creates and deconstructs* the illusion.<sup>37</sup> In that way it is up to the audience-spectator to project (in the mental, imaginative sense) the overt technologically mediated voice on to the technologically projected visual face=body, whereas the case of the soundscape in the David Lynch exhibition obviously shows a practice of installing the mood of ‘voices’ through ‘mediatic translations and transposition’ by an overall installed and curated soundscape or filmic underscore, thus disenchanting the sound of ‘voice’. But still, it produced or enhanced some degree of atmospheric agency and sociality where ‘self-enchantment’ through the sound and the sound devices of the exhibition is obviously a possibility, as documented in the Copenhagen interviews and in my own observations at the exhibition in Paris.

## Concluding remarks

In this article I have had a composite agenda: 1) inductively to derive (analyse) what might be at stake when we experience sound in contemporary art, with a specific focus on the use of vocal sound; 2) to set up a methodological ‘triangulation’: the empirical, qualitative interviews, the observations and the reception aesthetic and phenomenological analysis; 3) to explore the perspectives and possibilities of ‘sonification’ of the art museum: an increasing use and amount of intentional sound and voice material in contemporary art in museums, and to relate this to a broader context concerning sound, listening and culture.

After having used this triangulation I find that especially the experience of the empirical, qualitative interviews enfolds some new perspectives for the investigation and research project, but certainly also for the museums and their strategy and ways of presenting *audiovisual* art in their exhibition set-ups. In an article in the Danish journal *Danske museer*,<sup>38</sup> ‘What is art to you?’ (my translation), it is discussed how to involve ‘ordinary people’ in the presentation of sound and video works of art in the Museum for Contemporary Art<sup>39</sup> in Denmark. The author Tine Seligman, who is also a curator, is mainly occupied with how to frame and present the artwork *beforehand* in a way which complies with the expectations of the visitors: what art should be able to do and their need for interacting and discussing their experience with others. It seems that the issue here – as is generally the case in Danish art museums – is foremost about preparing the visitors through the proper kind of presentation, pedagogical didactics and mediation of the artwork. My qualitative interviews, on the other hand, document that the interaction and discussion could easily or maybe better take place *after* the visitors have had their own experience of the artwork, since the presence of an addressing sound or voice works directly and interactively; it ‘speaks’ to the audience, albeit in polyphonic voices. But it might be a good idea to stage the discussion somewhat like my interviews above: using also a sound competent researcher, art historian or someone who simply talks with (makes inter-view with) the visitors about their experience without interpreting the works of art as if they were merely visual objects. Of course, this focus on the interaction of the visitors with the artwork does not only concern art with sound. So the presence of the many voices in an art exhibition could be understood in an inter- and multimedial sense: all art ‘speaks’ with several medial ‘voices’ – heard and mute. The heard and sounding voices, though, seem to speak and are listened to with very great effect by the audience-visitors, as demonstrated in this investigation. It would also benefit the art museums to listen carefully. Concerning the third agenda I have come to the conclusion that whereas Murray Schafer and the sound ecology movement have explored and documented sound in the outside (outdoor) world and historically have had the overall agenda to remove unwanted sound through political discourse about sound and for the sake of saving the humanly embodied sound of voice, the artistic exploration of sound – human and technological – in contemporary art and framed by a resonant ‘white cube’ seems to have other possibilities and perspectives of a similar kind. So my empirical investigations show that it is possible in the art museum to engage with ‘too much’ or noisy sound, shifting intentionally between listening and overhearing adjustment of seeking and escaping the sound, just as we do it, although unconsciously, outside the art museum. But more importantly, the framing of the sounding art museum and art may obviously also provoke and qualify our *discourse* about sound, which is – as we know – highly important, culturally and epistemologically in western late modernity. We need to

formulate and reflect on how we may experience, live in and know the world also through sound – especially when there is and always will be quite a lot of it.

## Notes

- 1 Reception aesthetics and phenomenology (and the theory field between those two) as presented by Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Roman Ingarden and not least Don Ihde; the latter mainly within phenomenology in his book *Listening and Voice. Phenomenologies of sound* (second edition). State University of New York Press. 2007.
- 2 Steven Connor: “Panophonia” and “Photophonics”, both to be found on <http://www.steven-connor.com/>; Mladen Dolar: “The Linguistics of the Voice”; Brandon LaBelle: “Auditory Relations”; Adriana Cavarero: “Multiple Voices” – all three printed in Jonathan Sterne (ed.): *The Sound Studies Reader*, Routledge (2012); Norie Neumark: “Doing Things with Voices” in Norie Neumark, Ross Gibson, and Theo van Leeuwen: *VØICE. Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2010.
- 3 In the Tony Oursler exhibition sound is completely integrated as artistic material with the other visual and sculptural materials, which all together in combination make up the work of art. Thus, Oursler’s works of art are in the outset audiovisual sculptures (installations), whereas in the David Lynch exhibition sound is external to the single artwork. We may talk about an overall soundtrack to the exhibition, created by the artist himself, though, but as a curatorial add-on, even if it may be experienced as part of or integrated with every single artwork.
- 4 Today the concept of *sound art* is theoretically very well studied, researched and developed aesthetically as part of the establishment of a specific art genre. Cf. Douglas Kahn (1999): *Noise, Water, Meat: A history of Sound in the Arts*; Brandon LaBelle (2006): *Background Noise. Perspectives on Sound Art*; Seth Kim-Cohen (2009): *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art*; Salome Voegelin (2010): *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* and more.
- 5 The notion of the modern exhibition space in museums and galleries as a special sensibilities-sharpening frame was formulated by Brian O’Doherty (1976/1999): *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of Gallery Space*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 6 The induction or the inductive principle in research and investigation takes its outset in observed and singular examples and results and where the result is only partly confirming or a basis for theorising on a general level. From the concrete and singular you may derive some (but not a final or generalised) conclusion.
- 7 Tine Byrckel: “Lynch’ning i Paris”. In *Dagbladet Information*, 29 March 2007, p. 14. ”Lynch’ning” is a pun which in Danish means lynch law.
- 8 The multichannel, interactive sound installation component of the exhibition. Audio programme runtime is 58 minutes and 23 seconds. David Lynch: *The Air is on fire*. Soundscape. Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain. Strange World Music, 2007
- 9 Cf. the soundtracks in David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks* and *Blue Velvet*, both composed by Angelo Badalamenti.
- 10 The concept of *atmosphere* was introduced by Gernot Böhme. It understands and tries to describe a given multisensuous and grounding character of an experienced or produced (architectural) space. It is close to the concept of *ambience* or ambient space as used and described by Jean-Paul Thibaud and his Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, where new methodologies for studying ambiances are developed. Cf. Böhme, Gernot (2005): “Atmosphere As The Subject Matter of Architecture” in *Natural Histories*. Herzog and de Meuron,

- Switzerland. Thibaud, Jean-Paul (2002): "From situated perception to urban ambiances". In: First international Workshop on Architectural and Urban Ambient Environment, 6-8 February 2002, Nantes. Nantes: Cerma, Ecole d'architecture, 2002.
- 11 My semi-structured qualitative research interview is based on the methodology developed by the Norwegian social scientist Steinar Kvale (1938-2008) who was a professor in pedagogical psychology and head of the Centre for Qualitative Methodological Development at The Department of Psychology, Aarhus University. He wrote several books on qualitative research and is considered an authority on the qualitative research interview. He is internationally known for his book *InterViews. An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996.
  - 12 See attachment 1 with my questions translated from Danish to English. They were used only to semi-structure the interviews and in accordance with the principles of free dialogue.
  - 13 I was sitting in a corner of the small café next to the exit. I conducted the interviews according to Steinar Kvale (see note 11): the researcher/interviewer should consider and secure, among other things, the following aspects before and during the research interview: the theme of the interview should be focused, specific and descriptive in order to grasp the interviewee's own ambiguities without interpretation, and inside the life world of the interviewees; the researcher should observe and interpret (evaluate) the interview through a multisensuous and multimodal phenomenological approach to get all the nuances; it should be conducted based on a naïve approach, with sensitivity and variation, and the set-up of the interview should be carefully considered and as relaxed as possible. The interview is an 'inter view' between the interviewee and the interviewer (Kvale: 1996).
  - 14 I conducted the interviews after having spoken and collaborated with the curator of the exhibition, who advised me to do the work in 2 x 3 hours early in the evening, where the visitors would all be adults and the exhibition therefore would be free from noisy school children.
  - 15 I visited Tony Oursler in mid-October 2011.
  - 16 He gave me a copy of the manuscript by Tony Conrad (2003): "Who Will Give Answer to the Call of My Voice? Sound in the Work of Tony Oursler", published in *Grey Room* 11, Spring 2003, pp. 44-57. *Grey Room*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press. Afterwards I have not been able to find any other academic publication on sound in Tony Oursler's works of art.
  - 17 16 interviews might seem a small number for analysis, but when conducting qualitative research interviews within the methodology of Steinar Kvale there are no rules concerning the amount of interviews, since it is the qualitative articulations delivered and observed that is the focus of such interviews. Furthermore, the interview is part of an inductive principle (see note 6) where the investigation takes its outset in the concrete and observed singularities and results, and where the result is only partly confirming or a basis for general theorising.
  - 18 This and all the quotations below are transcriptions from my recorded interviews made in June 2012 in ARoS.
  - 19 Tony Oursler's work "UNK" is placed in one of ARoS' permanent "9 Rooms" for multimedia art in the basement.
  - 20 Besides Don Ihde, see also Ferrara, Lawrence: "Phenomenology as a Tool for Musical analysis", *The Musical Quarterly* LXX, 3, pp. 355-373, 1984.
  - 21 "Bell Deep", 2005. Video projection, effects projection, resin, surround sound. 86 x 81 x 86 cm. Courtesy of Tony Oursler. List of Artworks in Lise Pennington & Anne Mette Thomsen (eds.): Catalogue published in connection with the exhibition: TONY OURSLER FACE TO FACE, 2012 ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, p. 136.
  - 22 "Bell Deep" was exhibited in 2005 as part of the celebration of Hans Christian Andersen in the exhibition "Fairytale Forever".
  - 23 "SSS", 2004. Video projection, resin, sound; 100 x 80 x 50 cm. Courtesy of Tony Oursler. Catalogue p. 140.



- 24 “Eyes”, 1996. Video projection, resin, sound (sic!), variable dimensions. Courtesy of Tony Oursler, Faurischou Beijing, Catalogue, p. 137.
- 25 This quote is the first half of the title of Tony Conrad’s article (Conrad: 2003): “Who Will Give Answer to the Call of My Voice? Sound in the Work of Tony Oursler”.
- 26 Much so-called sound art and media art is often exhibited and gathered in specific, separate festivals and alternative venues outside the art museum and galleries.
- 27 The concept of *acoustemology* (composite of acoustic and epistemology) means being in and knowing the world through sound. It was introduced in an article by the anthropologist Steven Feld (2003): “A rainforest Acoustemology”, in (Bull, Michael & Les Back eds.) *The Auditory Culture Reader*. Oxford and New York: Berg: 223-39.
- 28 This parallel between the artistic exploration and inclusion of sound as material and the overall audiovisual cultural condition is central for my collective research project *Audiovisual culture and the (notion of) the good sound* (2010-2013), see <http://ak.au.dk/en/> and <http://audiovisuality.au.dk/>
- 29 Steven Connor (2012): *Panophonia*. A talk given at the Pompidou Centre, 22 February 2012 [PDF version], <http://www.stevenconnor.com/panophonia/> downloaded 22.02.2012. Connor defines the present state of the overall present and through technology disembodied voices as a state of *panophonia* which he suggests should replace Murray Schafer’s notion of *schizophonia*. Schafer’s notion – says Connor – implies some form of suffering, which is not the case with *panophonia*: “everywhere-voice-sound” (but without suffering!). The separation of voices from their sources has simply become endemic, but we can still understand every voice/sound as connected to some originating body, according to Connor.
- 30 R. Murray Schafer: *The Tuning of the World*, New York: Knopf, 1977. Later published in 1994 with the title *The Soundscape: our Sonic environment and the tuning of the world*. Rochester Vt.: Destiny Books. Schafer’s term *schizophonia* means split voice conditioned by the technological mediation of sound and voice, see note above. Schafer’s concept of *soundscape*, his publications and pedagogical work inspired both the international artistic work with sound and a worldwide engagement with sound ecology (The World Soundscape Project) which is still internationally maintained.
- 31 Connor (2012): op. cit. p. 1.
- 32 Conrad (2003).
- 33 Ventriloquism is the old performative art of the dissociated voice, where the artist gives voice to a doll (animated by the hand of the artist), thus establishing a double or a ‘schizophrenic’ voice-sound production, but leaving it to the audience to project the two voices onto the two bodies of the artist and the doll. Cf. Steven Connor (2000): *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, Oxford University Press.
- 34 Conrad (2003): p. 56.
- 35 Conrad (2003): *ibid*.
- 36 Connor: op. cit. p. 12. See also Steven Connor (1999): *Michel Serres’s Five Senses* <http://www.stevenconnor.com/5senses.htm>
- 37 Cf. the utterance from the visitors previously mentioned and cited.
- 38 Seligmann, Tine: “Hvad er kunst for dig? – en kvalitativ undersøgelse af folks kunstoplevelse” (Eng.: “What is art to you? A qualitative investigation of people’s experience of art”, my translation) in *Danske museer* (English: *Danish museums*): 2009, 22, no. 6 (2009), pp. 24-26.
- 39 Museet for Samtidskunst, Roskilde, Danmark.

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## Phonogram

David Lynch (2007): *The Air is on fire. Soundscape*. Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain. Strange World Music.

**FACING SOUND – VOICING ART****ATTACHMENT 1****Qualitative interviews**

*Questions translated from Danish to English*

1. How many times did you visit the exhibition and for how long?
2. Do you often visit exhibitions of contemporary or modern art?
3. Describe how you experienced visiting this exhibition.
4. Did you notice (or think about) which senses you activated – and how they interacted?
5. Tell me about a room, space or a work of art which had a special impact or impressed you the most – and how it did so.
6. Did you notice the sound of the exhibition?  
(Only in Copenhagen: did you activate the sound devices?)
7. Which importance would you give the sound concerning your interaction with the exhibition and the other visitors?
8. Did you visit other exhibitions including sound or other sense appealing means and effects?
9. How do you think about sound in your life and your surroundings?
10. Do you listen (much) to (modern) music or sound art?
11. Which kinds of effects did your visit to this exhibition have?