

Sound as Narrative

- Teresa D. Gale

Portable listening devices have transformed aural experience into something infinitely malleable. On the morning commute or in the living room La-Z-Boy, listeners can customize their own physical listening spaces. Suffice it to say that the experience of listening to a recording of John Coltrane is different on a crowded bus than it is at home in a plush recliner. In either case, the desire for control and isolation—of oneself and the sound itself—are motivating factors in the act of headphone listening.

If modern aural experience is characterized by seemingly ever-changing physical spaces, then how does sound-based artwork function in a gallery, a relatively fixed setting, both physically and ideologically? Furthermore, how do sound-based artists, whose work is immaterial and can't be bought or sold, subsist in a field that thrives on commodity exchange? A case in point: Adam Pendleton.

Poet, performer, sound and visual artist, Pendleton is best known for his brightly colored paintings minimally adorned with prose—either his own words or text appropriated from others. These paintings hang on white walls and are affixed with price tags. Conversely, Pendleton's installation work has little to do with commodity and much to do with experience. In his 2004 project *Being Here*, exhibited at the University of Illinois, he integrated elements from his paintings—namely color and language—into a hybrid form of narrative. The installation included visual and aural components, spoken and written word, Pendleton's own prose combined with that of an author he admires, and text and images contributed by audience participants. Both this installation and his painting explore similar conceptual territory: using language to convey emotion. Yet modes of presentation have great effect on audience reception. That is to say, the experience of reading text is vastly different than hearing it spoken.

Pendleton spoke to his audience in *Being Here*—not live, but via a set of recordings heard through portable CD players. His voice was at once soothing and charismatic. Through his prose, he made assertions and posed questions. He invited his listeners to relax and surrender to his words. Just his words and nothing else.

During my conversation with Pendleton, we talked a lot about sound. He affectionately referred to sound as a medium with unique capabilities, notably the potential for user immersion and evocation of imaginary visuals. We discussed how aural and visual material functioned together in *Being Here* and what his ideal response to the piece would be. I asked him to be a third party to his own work (a difficult if not impossible stance to take) and to describe how he would approach *Being Here* if he came upon it in a gallery setting. He replied, "I think I would just *listen*." He said that if he were to do the piece over again, he might omit the visuals and only use sound.

There is something to be said for *just listening*. The desire to be told a story is cultivated early in life (and even before birth, as pregnant mothers are now advised to read to their babies in the womb). Yet in a few short years, storytelling ceases to exist in the lexicon of acceptable human activities. Along with handstands and food play, it is admonished as "childish" and hence reserved for those under the age of 12.

To characterize aural storytelling as childish is a misnomer. Better said, the practice of narrating and listening is rooted in a childlike desire for creativity (a desire which,

incidentally, is not absent in adults, just more readily encouraged in children). Spoken language invites the creation of fiction on both the telling and receiving ends. Listening requires patience and a certain level of surrender, but it is not an entirely passive activity. A listener is constantly engaged in the construction of her own imaginary visuals and in the personalization and completion of the story being told.

If Pendleton had his druthers, I wonder if he would simply tell his stories; that is, *aurally*, in the absence of any visuals. This would be a big leap to take for any artist operating in a visually biased world. For now he seems to have struck a balance in his work, following conventions of the traditional art institution while also exploring its periphery. He endeavors not to sacrifice his creative intention for the sake of commercial viability, acknowledging that the pressures of capitalism are sometimes too strong to avoid.

Within the framework of the traditional art world, sound is carving out a niche for itself. In its de-emphasis on materiality and the physical art object, it follows well in the path of time-based, site-specific work, and other ephemeral media having earned legitimate "art" status within the last 50 years. By insisting its audience do something other than look, sound-based art maintains a polemical stance.

Sound still carries with it the stereotype of being more parochial and less enlightened than its visual counterpart. Sound is validated within the metanarratives of science and engineering, particularly in the context of sound reproduction technologies and their historical evolution. Yet little cultural study has been done on the human practices associated with sound.

The *experience* of sound, both as an interior, personal listening practice and an exterior phenomenon shaped by social and cultural influences, merits further discussion, particularly as it relates to narrative art forms. How do we receive and understand sound-based artwork in the context of cultural institutions whose vernacular favors the terms "viewer" and "gaze," whose privilege is bestowed on the visual, and moreover, on the material object?

Listening is a learned practice, as is looking. Museum and gallery-goers have been taught for years to revere art from a distance—that they should look and not touch, let alone listen. Getting someone to physically engage with art, much less wear a mechanical device such as a pair of headphones in order to experience it, may seem like an onerous task given the weight of art history. But more and more, audiences are willing to oblige.

Sound art is gaining entry into non-traditional spaces, activities, and distribution networks. Listening devices such as Walkmans and iPods have encouraged this. While Apple has recently popularized the concept of personal listening, the practice is not a recent phenomenon. Modern headphone listening rearticulates an act that originated 200 years ago with doctors isolating sounds of their patients' bodies through stethoscopes. Whether done for purposes of scientific study or entertainment, headphones enable the idea of selective listening: the choice to focus on one sound while filtering out other "interfering" noises.

Considering the smashing success of the iPod, there is evidence that people want to receive creative content through their ears. Now if only more artists would open their eyes to this.