

Hearing Things (objects)

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Two Exercises

Consider an object. Call what is not the object “other.”

Exercise: Add to the object, from the “other,” another object, to form a new object and a new “other.”
Repeat until there is no more “other.”

Exercise: Take a part from the object and add it to the “other,” to form a new object and a new “other.”
Repeat until there is no more object.

— George Brecht, *Water Yam*, Fall 1961

The thing (the object)

George Brecht’s 1961 text score, *Two Exercises*, draws attention to the problem of circumscribing things and their surroundings. Where does a thing begin and its exterior – or “other” – end? Brecht seems to suggest that there is no actual distinction or separation, as one can gradually become the other as they add or subtract from one another, or that an object and its other are variably identifiable at singular points in time. Brecht commands the reader/potential performer to “consider and object” but does not define what an object is. One could, then, think he is referring not necessarily to solid, three-dimensional, tactile objects, but rather to “sound object.” In both cases he is, above all, outlining a method of composition, of putting things (and “others”) together.

What this short text brings to mind regarding sound and its organization is the problem of material versus the finished piece. One could regard the starting object as both the material and the finished piece, in which case there would be no composition, no combinatorial operations, but there would indeed be a piece. This decision, the decision of considering that something is an object or a piece (a larger construct), could be taken at any point in the continuum of Brecht’s additive and subtractive processes.

For a long time I have had a similar dilemma in the process of making music or sound pieces – that of deciding where the piece begins and the material (the object or originating sound) ends. In other words, how and when does one consider or decide what the object and the “other” are. Is a single sound a finished piece? Does one have to go all the way to the point where there is no more object or no more “other”? Or can one stop at any point along the process?

I think when one considers a single object or sound, one can decide there is a "piece." I have done pieces where single sounds, or objects, are presented as complete pieces. But then the problem of regarding sounds as objects comes up, and it would be fair to say that sounds are never objects. Sounds are, rather, attributes or properties of objects. Lately, then, I have begun approaching the dilemma not by considering sounds but the objects that cause them as starting (or finishing) points in the process of composition, refuting Pierre Schaeffer's dictum that by virtue of (virtually or conceptually) removing causality one creates a "sound object." The thing is the sound and the sound is the thing.

The proliferation of things (objects)

"Our relationship to the accumulation of objects
is as profound and as significant as our relationships
to each other, to language, and to time and
space, and as complex."

— Pearce

Private spaces become "museums" through the imperative of daily consumption. Most of the objects that make up our private collections are added deliberately but many get in inadvertently. The objects in these collections are for the most part transient, disposable, and leave our museums as soon as their practical function is fulfilled. Some of them stay with us for various reasons, and accompany us for longer time periods, sometimes for a very long time. This process of "thickening" and "thinning" that our private museums constantly go through could be understood as an ongoing realization of Brecht's Two Exercises.

Things (objects) seen and heard

In the realm of sound composition and art in relation to the notion of objects, I could draw some examples from a long tradition in contemporary art, inaugurated perhaps by Marcel Duchamp's ready made objects (some of which allude directly to sound), of presenting objects as works of art or as the materials used to make other works of art. There are also works in the histories of experimental music and sound art, which, to greater or lesser degrees, focus on the straightforward presentation of the sounds of objects. These works do not use the sounds as strictly compositional materials but regard them as autonomous compositions, and do not regard the objects instrumentally as expected to produce a wide array of sounds. They do not use things as pointers to other things or ideas, or at least they do not seem to press the point.

In Annea Lockwood's *The Glass Concert*, a concert and performance piece, Lockwood makes sounds with multifarious glass objects in an attempt to reveal their intrinsic musicality; in *La Caccia*, a gallery installation piece with extensive instructions for a potential (albeit improbable) performance, Italian composer Walter Marchetti, exhibits an abundant collection of bird calls accompanied by a tape composition using the sounds they make, thus placing the actual objects at the forefront of the work; William Anastassi's *Sound Objects*, which I discovered very recently, presents a series of objects with speakers reproducing instances of

sounds they can produce. There is also the use by Alvin Lucier and David Tudor (particularly in his *Rainforest IV*) of objects as resonators (a subtle form of sounding an object).

I find all of this works interesting because they move away from conventional compositional intentions by just presenting the sounds of objects – or, in the cases of Lucier and Tudor, sounds “through” objects – as such and not as materials in the construction of more elaborate sounds or structures.

Things found and made

In the last few years I have made or installed objects with minimum doses of addition or subtraction. The first of these pieces uses inflatable rubber balloons (which I have used extensively as sound producers) as resonators by attaching small vibrating motors to them and presenting them on two occasions: *Rumor* (2010) and *Rumor II* (2013). I have used them also to generate a drone in *Looking Upwards* (<http://clocktower.org/show/ricardo-arias-looking-upwards>), a live performance piece presented at Experimental Intermedia Foundation in New York City in March, 2011.

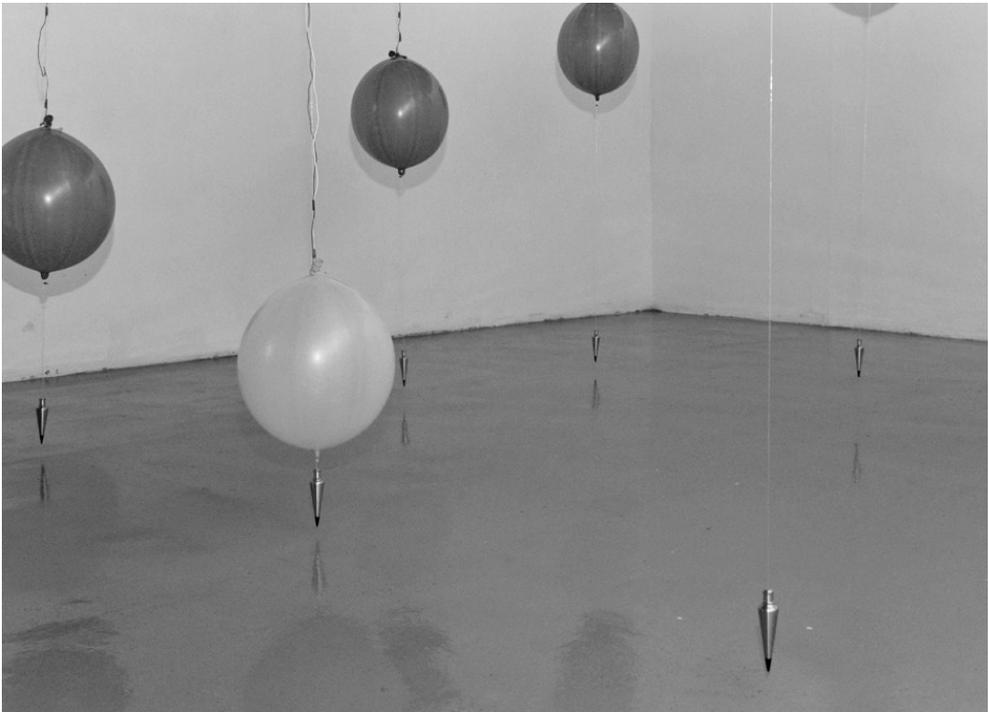


Figure 1 / *Rumor II* (2013)

In another recent piece, I modified a door by outfitting it with hundreds of spring door stops, turning it into a sculptural instrument (silent but potentially quite noisy). *Pas toutes les portes se ressemblent* (Not all doors are alike) is a surrealist, slightly abstracted variation of a common object, and perhaps illustrates Brecht’s Two Exercises more directly than the other pieces I am describing.



Figure 2 / *Pas toutes les portes se ressemblent* (2012)

The simplest yet, for me, the most interesting presentation of objects was done last year when I exhibited a series of mundane, carefully selected objects alongside recordings of short sounds made by/with them and interspersed by relatively long silences, in an installation entitled *Res Facta*. Recently I used some of the sounds of these objects to make *Ornaments*, a piece for the event *You may or you may not be*, a tribute to Erik Satie's *Furniture Music* (<http://www.modelab.info/#!youmaybe/cdea>). This is how I described what I intended to do with *Ornaments*:

Ornaments is a short sound piece that pretends to start placing a few ornamental objects on top of Satie's furniture music. Each object is placed at least on one piece of furniture, and is secured by a "sound thread" that links it to another instance of itself or to another object.

Res Facta, in its installation form, shows objects directly and without any symbolic or semantic intention, detached from their practical function (their technological dimension). This is how I would like to see and hear objects.

A thing is a thing is a thing — Final Considerations

To me when a thing is really interesting is when there is no question and no answer [...]

— Gertrude Stein (p. XII)

There is nothing extraordinary about what I am trying to explain in this short text. In fact there is nearly nothing to be explained, which accounts for the difficulty I have had writing it. I have come to consider objects and their sounds as complete and self-sufficient and that is what I have been trying to do with some of my recent works. I am presenting ready-mades with sound, very much in the manner of William Anastasi's *Sound Objects*, but, of course, very differently as well. I am making "object-poems" in the manner of Robert Filliou, George Brecht, Joan Brossa and many others, but instead of pairing the objects with language I am pairing them with their own sounds, be they implied, potential, recorded and reproduced, etc. I am trying to exalt everyday objects drawn from the maelstrom of things that daily life brings into my private museum. This exercise originates mainly from the pleasure it gives me to simply look at things and to listen to the sounds they make, or could make, or the sounds as can be sounded through them, but it is at the same time a recycling exercise that suggests a concern with an ecology of contemporary material culture.

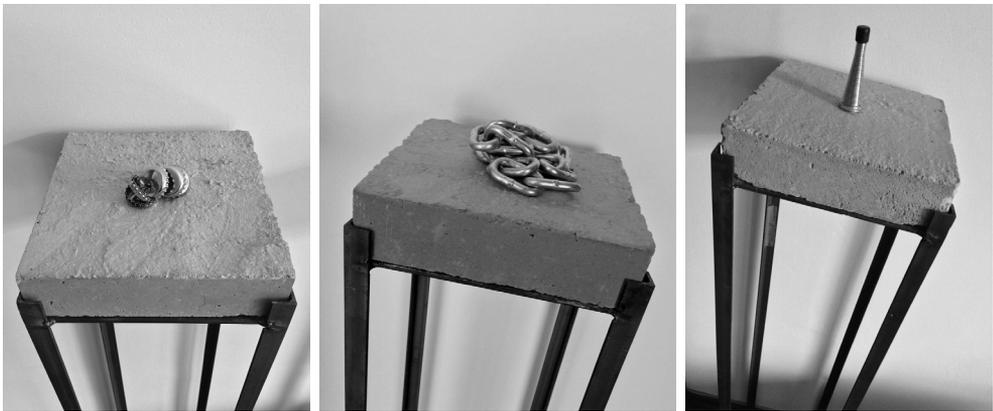


Figure 3 / Three objects from the installation *Res Facta* (2014)

References (Things read)

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