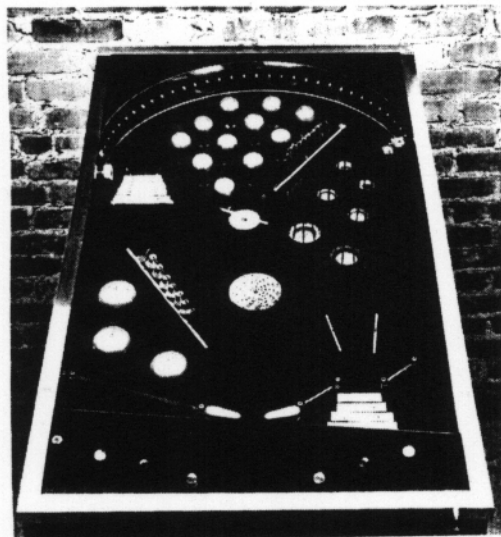Kevin Concannon, "Notes on Sound Art," *Art New England*, March 1986
(Guest Editor), p. 5. (Guest Editorial, p. 3.)

Notes on Sound Art

Kevin Concannon

Bill and Mary Buchen—*Sonic Maze*

Ed Tomney—*Guitar Trees*

Cruising down the highway, the wind whistles through the crevices of your car's metal body, and the engine alternately roars and purrs. Suddenly, the road racing toward you resembles an archaeological dig commissioned by the Department of Public Works; the smooth asphalt gives way to the concrete and cobblestones of yesterday—a jigsaw puzzle of mobile mutilation. Your tires screech, thump, and bang across the treacherous terrain; you can think of nothing but your mechanic's grinning face. The cacophony resonating through your chassis and ringing in your head is music to the ears of Mr. Goodwrench. But for Douglas Hollis, it's the stuff of public art.

As his proposal for the recent *Sound Art* exhibition organized by the Brattleboro (VT) Museum; Hollis offered plans to "score" a bridge (scheduled for demolition) behind the museum. By deliberately spacing rows of steel grating and literally scoring (gouging lines of varying width and depth out of the pavement) the road according to a relative tonal scale, cars traversing the bridge would play a tune transmitted from their tires (as they rolled over the "score").

Due to safety considerations (not to mention the question of municipal liability), *Scored Bridge* couldn't be pulled off in Brattleboro. Hollis, however, is no stranger to exhibitions of sound art. In spite of his prominent and regular contributions to such shows, Hollis is quick to sidestep the label of sound art, preferring instead the term *public art.*

Such identity crises are common in the world of sound art—a world where many visit and so few seem to live. Installation, conceptual, performance, and radio artists, as well as composers, poets, and sculptors have all produced works presented and accepted as sound art. In many cases, the artists who produce the work have training and experience in several specialized fields.

Bill and Mary Buchen (a.k.a. Sonic Architecture) have backgrounds in musical composition and sculpture, respectively. Together they share an interest and expertise in indigenous musical instruments. As Sonic Architecture, they have produced a varied body of work: wind harps, sonic installations, and even a dance record. The record includes various sounds recorded on the streets of Manhattan, a digital rhythm track, and

Mayor Koch's voice—all programmed into a dance fever through a computer keyboard (the Fairlight CMI). The piece that resulted is as indebted to contemporary pop music as it is to the "arty" notion of found sound.

The term *found sound* might well be as close to the heart of sound art as we can cut at this point. A primary interest in sound itself lies at the root of virtually all work that trades as sound art. The Buchen's *Sonic Pinball* plays much like any other such game but emphasizes the sonic "events" that correspond to the (visual) game action. By replacing the less musical aspects of the traditional pinball game with glockenspiel, xylophone, and telephone parts, the player is encouraged to experience *Sonic Maze* as a participatory, if somewhat aleatory, musical composition.

Pure acoustical phenomena, or more simply put, an interest in the quality of sound itself, is the lifeblood of New England-based composer Alvin Lucier. His *Music on a Long Thin Wire* incorporates an eighty-foot length of piano wire, an oscillator, and amplification equipment. The slightest movement within the installation space will agitate the wire, causing a direct sonic response. Lucier's reputation, however, is that of experimental composer. And, indeed, this essentially modernist approach to sound has been developed as much by the musical avant-garde as by sound artists.

Boston's Richard Lerman, best known for his amplified bicycle concerts, has worked within both contexts. His own work involves homemade microphones and the "amplifications of little sounds into big ones." At this year's New Music America, Lerman plans to perform a concert with amplified soda straws in Houston's Astrodome. The players will not merely be projected sonically but will also be blown up on the video scoreboard as they are performing. This visual element often suffices as the difference between sound art and new music.

As director of the *Sound Art* series at Mobius, Lerman has organized the only regular sound art programming in the area. Last fall, the roster included David Tudor, an experimental composer who began his career as an interpreter of John Cage's works. (Tudor premiered the famous *4'33"*—four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence, "marked" in this case by opening and closing

the piano lid. The content of the piece consisted of the ambient noise in the peformance space.) Cage, of course, will always be known as a composer, but his approach to (unusual) materials might well be argued as a modernist sensibility. For now, context of presentation seems to be the primary criteria for the "distinction" between new music and sound art. Thus, Tudor, long known as a composer, may be presented as a sound artist.

Ed Tomney, for some time now a collaborator with Jonathan Borofsky for multimedia (sound) installations, has worked as a rock musician, filmmaker, painter, and sound artist. One of his current solo projects incorporates *Guitar Trees* into a variety of situations. These *Guitar Trees* came about because Tomney found that he was writing music that required many guitar parts to be played somewhat "mechanically." Hiring musicians to play these parts seemed a bit extravagant, thus the *Guitar Trees*. Mounted on floor stands, the guitars are tuned to pre-set chords using jerry-built capos. Small motors with attached strumming arms play the guitars "automatically." Along with several tape players, electronic instruments, and live musicians, the *Guitar Trees* are interfaced into Tomney's computer. In performance, the computer can select (in either random or programmed fashion) any combination of sound sources, or even alter the "tuning" electronically. Exhibited alone, the *Guitar Trees* work as sound sculpture. When used in performance, they function both as compositional tools and sound sculpture. The mechanized orchestra refers equally to "tape-music" and the "ready-made."

Artist Christian Marclay turns up as frequently in exhibitions of sound art as he does in solo and ensemble performances of new music. Marclay performs with several turntables and piles of old records of all types, creating an aural collage, formally complex and rich in cultural references. He exhibits discs that are cut (with a jeweler's saw) and re-glued in bizarre visual and sonic configurations. On one, two faces (cut from spoken word records) address each other across an orange-colored disc of "muzak." Again, it is the visual component that too often separates his sound art from new music. It may well be argued that the "conversation" that takes place between the two faces (spoken word records) across the (background) music constitutes a musical composition. Marclay recently released *Record Without a Cover*, a recording of one of his performances that also works as an art object. Mechanically etched into the vinyl is a message instructing the owner NOT to store the disc in any protective sleeve. The scratches and pops of the records used in the recorded performance thus develop a secondary "patina."

Boston composer Roger Miller *(Mission of Burma, Birdsongs of the Mesozoic)* has recently released his first solo record. *"Pop" record (evolving)* is a recording of the pops and scratches that constitute the same "patina" Marclay's record exploits. Miller's record, however, contains *only* these pops and scratches. The record is available by special order from Miller, who custom-records each one on acetate (a common material used for "test-pressings" of commercial records) and designs and executes an original graphic for each record jacket. Miller loves the peculiar quality of the acetate because it allows the original pops and scratches to be eaten away by the record-player needle, only to be continually replaced by new ones.

To define sound art as work that exploits extra-musical qualities of sound would have been a fairly useful "test" were it not for the "extra-musical" efforts of Cage. After Cage, the boundaries between all of the arts disintegrated.

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