Kevin Concannon, "Sound Approaches to Public Art," *Media Arts*, Fall 1987, p. 19.

Wave Organ, by Peter Richards and George Gonzalez (San Francisco, 1986). Photo: Susan Schwartzenberg.

commentary AUDIO

SOUND APPROACHES TO PUBLIC ART

Kevin Concannon

Over the course of the last twenty years, public art has evolved from the "turd on the plaza"—usually selected by an architect— to a truly public art that engages its public from the artist selection process to the functional relationship of the work itself to its audience and its surroundings. While only twenty years ago successful public art meant large-scale sculpture that complemented its architectural host, today the once-almighty architect is frequently hired as part of a design team that also includes artist and landscape architect. The mandate is still the same: to create a building that is at once functional, "user-friendly," and sympathetic to its surroundings. In part a reaction to the severe formalism of International Style architecture, this recent trend has coincidentally created a new forum for sound sculptors. And the future sounds even brighter with the concurrence of *Public Art in America '87* and *New Music America* this October in Philadelphia. The two conferences, attracting public art professionals and sound sculptors respectively, have concocted piggybacked sessions and events that promise to inspire even more sound sculpture in public places. As novel as this possibility may strike some in both fields, there are natural affinities between them, and even a bit of history.

In 1966, three years before the installation of the first NEA Art in Public Places project (Calder's *La Grande Vitesse* in Grand Rapids), Harry Bertoia installed his singing fountain in the River Oaks Shopping Center, Calumet City, Illinois. A pioneer in the field of sound sculpture, Bertoia stumbled upon the sonic possibilities of metal sculpture by chance several years into a successful career. While working for Knoll Associates, he designed the classic Bertoia chair. His frequent architectural commissions brought his large-scale sculpture into a variety of public spaces, most prominently the Saarinen Chapel at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where his metal screen sculpture provides a foil for the dancing reflections of light that animate the central altar. Eleven years later he created his first major commissioned sound sculpture—for a shopping center.

This piece was the culmination of his researches into the sonic character of different types of metal. For this piece he selected Tobin bronze rods for their bell-like sound. The sculpture was activated by the wind blowing through the many lengths of bronze protruding from the fountain. The water itself had little effect on the sounding quality of the piece outside of the incidental counterpoint of the trickling water to the deeply resonating sound of the reverberating metal. The design of the fountain sculpture posed two interdependent formal problems for the artist. The first and most obvious was the scale relationship of the sculpture to the surrounding architecture. Bertoia's happy relationships with architects and numerous successes with architectural commissions was rather unusual at the time (and even today for that matter) and might be best explained by his considerable experience as a designer. While Bertoia had by this time demonstrated a remarkable instinct for architectural commissions, the fountain sculpture posed not only spatial problems, but sonic difficulties as well.

The scale of this piece affected not only the fountain's relationship to its physical surroundings, but the sound that it produced as well. According to biographer June Kompass Nelson, Bertoia selected heavy rods and was prepared to muffle them (the sound that they produced as the wind hit them) because of the legendary strength of the Chicago-area winds. In fact, the sculpture could barely be heard. Bertoia later claimed that he could have improved the sonic character of the sculpture by extending the rods. Nelson further speculates that such an adjustment would have also improved the piece's relationship to its surroundings. Whatever the shortcomings of this piece, it represents a milestone for sound sculpture in America, predating a trend still emerging today.

Doug Hollis, whose sound sculpture has been discussed in these pages previously (*Media Arts*, Fall 1985), has worked frequently creating sound sculpture for public places. In 1978, he built a temporary wind-activated sound sculpture in Omaha as part of a project sponsored by the Joslyn Museum. The night his piece was completed, it was destroyed—apparently by vandals. (Some close to the project claim that the piece in fact succumbed to a storm.) Upon hearing of the mishap, local residents immediately began sending unsolicited contributions for its reconstruction. In 1980, Hollis returned to build *Wind Organ*, a series of stopped organ pipes tuned to the prevailing summer winds of the area. To Hollis's mind, the piece formed a "bridge between the landscape and sky," translating the force of the wind into song. Since that time, he has begun to incorporate walkways and seating areas into his public commissions, creating "sound gardens."

As Hollis creates meditative gardens for his wind organs, Peter Richards and George Gonzales built for their *Wave Organ* a small and unusual park at the tip of a jetty near San Francisco's Exploratorium. The *Organ* itself is a series of plastic pipes running into the water and terminating above ground level through a variety of openings in and around an area that looks like a large barbecue/altar. The seating area's platform is constructed of old curbstones and discarded tombs. The headstones and other monuments were salvaged from a redeveloped cemetary from the city's gold baron days. Openings on the rear wall of the seating alcove and periscope-like protruding plastic pipes all around whisper with the song of the lapping waves. Crashing against the submerged pipes, the water releases columns of air through the above-ground openings, creating pings, plunks, gasps, and sometimes thundering booms in concert with the ambient sounds of the area—the waves, foghorns and gulls. The *Wave Organ* is thus site-specific on two counts; while its relationship to the changing tides becomes obvious to the visitor, the use of discarded tombs and curbstones connects the piece to the history of San Francisco.

Much public sound sculpture exploits natural phenomena such as wind and water through acoustical means. The idea of transforming natural phenomena into beautiful sounds dates back much further, in fact, than Bertoia's sonic fountain. Bill and Mary Buchen have studied the multicultural traditions of sound sculpture, incorporating their research into their contemporary installations. For this year's *Ars Electronica* festival in Linz, Austria, they built a series of whirlygigs—mechanical devices that use the wind's power to rotate tuned bells against strikers and strikers against tuned pipes. When installed in series, the various instruments sound together in an aleatory symphony. In their original context, the whirlygigs served a functional as well as aesthetic purpose; they were used as sonic scarecrows to protect crops.

A more thoroughly modern school of artists, however, use electronics to alter space with sound. Bill Fontana records the sounds of given environments and transposes them into unlikely situations. His evolution from composer to sound sculptor began with an interest in field recordings of ambient sounds. For Fontana, "what was especially interesting about ambient sounds was the way in which they inhabited and belonged to environments and acoustical contexts which I found them." This observation prompted Fontana to transpose these sounds from one environment to anot first with tape-recorders and more rec with live telephone cable and satellite links.

Satellite Soundbridge San Francisco-Cologne is a 1987 project that involve linking those two cities for a one-hour radio broadcast. In San Francisco, Fo tana transposed the sounds of the Go Gate Bridge and the animal life on the Farallon Islands, twenty-six miles offs to the Memorial Court between the Sa Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Opera House. Microphones placed o island picked up the sounds of the wa birds, and sea lions as well as the sou of whales and dolphins via a hydraph on the east side of the island. From th bridge came the sounds of cars pass over expansion joints, fog horns blast and water breaking. In Cologne, micr phones linked the Zoo, the Rhine, pe trian streets and Romanesque bell to to the area surrounding the Museum Ludwig.

Park users and passers-by, well-remo geographically from the sources of th sounds, were alternately amused, pe ed, intrigued, and irritated. Loudspea placed high on the Museum building transported people to several differen places simultaneously, leaving them tle less grounded in their actual locat Fontana has used this method of aur dislocation to transform a number of ferent places to effects as varied as t locations themselves. In one installat an abandoned Berlin railroad station buried loudspeakers in the field behi what was left of the station's facade a broadcast the sounds of a distant an very active station, creating a surreal sound sculpture that spoke to the his of the site.

For many electronic pieces, the same hardware is moved from site to site, c ing a different flavor each time. In fac many works of sound art that articula peculiar sonic qualities of specific pl travel from place to place in suitcase They are, for the most part, just so mu hardware until they are installed and tuned to their surroundings.

Christopher Janney's *Soundstair* (19 has traveled around the world as a c pletely portable unit capable of being up on any grand stair in less than on hour. Janney places electronic sensi devices along the edge of an existing stairway, one unit per step. The sense are wired to a computer and synthes triggering a musical note as a perso climbs or descends each step. The s instrumentation, and patterns can be adjusted to each situation. Janney th of his *Soundstair* as a sonic mural w colors can be changed at will. It can enhance an architectural space with imposing an indelible mark upon it. I speaks of acoustically designed stru tures built by the Mayans and the Gr and mourns the contemporary lack o attention by architects to the acousti quality of their buildings.If he has his with contemporary architecture, elec systems facilitating adaptable sonic environments will replace the meticu acoustical engineering lost long ago believes that sound in architecture is sently where light was twenty years a

Sound sculpture's ability to engage broad public depends not so much visual beauty, but on the rediscovery lost magical sounds through the arti hands and ears—and the public's de for an art that speaks for itself and ca directly experienced. It offers to Publ the advantage of not being consider elitist to the field—a public perceptio art is only for those who make, sell, s and study it.

Kevin Concannon produces radio broadcasts about artists and writes frequently about sound art and phonograph records by visual artists. He serves as coordinator of public programs at the Neuberger Museum at the State University of New York at Purchase where he has organized a major symposium, Selling Sites: Process and Consensus in Public Art, *for 24 October 1987. His essay on sound sculpture in America will be published in this year's* Ars Electronica catalogue (Linz, Austria).