

Kevin Concannon, "Sound Sculpture," *Media Arts*, Fall 1985, p. 9.

Sound Sculpture

Kevin Concannon

During a panel discussion at the audio art symposium held at the Staten Island Children's Museum earlier this year, Robert Ashley provoked considerable noise from his fellow panelists by referring to them as *sound artists*. Two of those panelists, Liz Phillips and Doug Hollis, are considered by many to be well-established *sound sculptors*. Both Hollis and Phillips have fought against pigeon-holing for much of their careers. Hollis sees himself as a public artist and a poet of sorts. Phillips responded: "I try to avoid describing what I do; I just *do* it." Part of the problem is simply that people have no real idea of what a sound sculpture is. The field of sound art in general suffers from a lack of clear definition and sound sculpture fares no better. The very presence of the word *sculpture* in the term suggests a visible, tangible object. And while such an object often exists as a necessary component of a sound sculpture, more often than not, the object per se contributes little more than a diversion to the desired aesthetic experience. Sound sculpture, above all else, articulates the interaction of time and place.

Resistance to the term *sound sculptor* has a lot to do with natural, conscious preoccupation with the visible world. Hollis uses his sculptures as "tools to talk about a place." For him, sound is a vehicle for heightening perception of the environment. Sound, claims Hollis, serves as a navigational tool more often than most people realize. Doug Hollis would rather be blind than deaf. Ironically, his work is best known through photographic reproduction. His project for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Washington state (*A Sound Garden*), a series of wind-activated organ pipes, might well be mistaken for a George Rickey assembly-line without the benefit of audio documentation or at least some brief explanation. By its very nature, sound sculpture must be experienced first-hand to be experienced at all. *A Sound Garden* operates in direct relationship to the atmospheric conditions at any given moment. It literally describes the "atmosphere" of the site. Hollis sees his role as an artist similar to that of the landscape architect.

Most Hollis projects react directly to the environment. Wind harps and organs figure into his work most frequently, but other pieces have been activated by rain. A singing bridge which Hollis built responds to the presence of pedestrians, who "re-tune" the piece as they travel across it, altering the tension on the wind-activated components.

Kevin Concannon produces radio broadcasts about artists and writes frequently about sound art and phonograph records by visual artists. He is based in Boston.

Liz Phillips works more frequently with audience-responsive pieces. Her indoor installations typically incorporate electronic synthesizers, sensors and amplification. The work was inspired by a broken radio which Phillips owned while she was studying sculpture at Bennington College. As people moved around the room, the signal fluctuated in intensity. She soon began working with capacitance fields in a more deliberate and controlled manner. Today she builds her own models and then consults with an engineer to refine the electronics. *Sound Syzygy II*, installed this summer in a dance studio at Jacob's Pillow in western Massachusetts, offered an unusual opportunity to appreciate the subtle variations and distinct voices which Phillips builds into her own works. While most visitors to Phillips installations tend to be overly curious about the locations and functions of the sensing devices, the dancers who frequented the piece at Jacob's Pillow grew accustomed enough to the piece so that the initial novelty developed into a sincere investigation of the *space*. As *A Sound Garden* describes a place as it is affected by the forces of nature, *Sound Syzygy II* situates a body in motion on an entirely different perceptual plane: sound. *Syzygy* synthesizes time and space as one travels through it.

Both Hollis and Phillips were trained as artists; Hollis worked most often with installations, Phillips with three-dimensional sculpture. And while neither admits to any real musical training or background, Phillips is married to a musician and Hollis cites his experiences at Mills College as an important influence on his work. Hollis, in fact, grew up in Ann Arbor, home of the ONCE festival, base for Robert Ashley before the Mills College avant music scene took off. Phillips, so loathe to label herself, situates herself in "that open space in the art world created by people like Cage and Paik." She has also collaborated with Merce Cunningham's company.

Phillips considers herself a musician only in the sense that she is trying to describe something with sound. What really distinguishes Hollis and Phillips from musicians or composers is the element of place.

The notion of place is inextricably bound to the idea of sound sculpture. Music has been traditionally considered the purest artform because it is abstract. *Sound Garden* quite literally describes a landscape; *Syzygy*, the figure in motion. Music and sound sculpture share the precondition of linear time; music, however, generally exists within a given time frame. Sound sculpture is to a line what music is to a line segment.

Sound Sculpture, as I have thus far defined it, would seem to be a rather limited field. There are, of course, others whose work can be understood within this context. Ron Kuivila works frequently with capacitance fields. Bill and Mary Buchen, under the organizational banner of Sonic Architecture, have been building wind harps and sound parks for some time now.

A lot of work which has been tagged "sound sculpture," has little to do with the work so far discussed. Much of it is little more than three-dimensional sculpture embellished with sound. Mixed media sculpture might serve as a more accurate (if less specific) label.

When Phillips discusses her working process, she talks about "carving out sounds." She spends anywhere from three days to two weeks at an installation site "tuning" a piece. Sound, she claims, is very malleable material. It is the medium of her work. Likewise with Hollis. While most of the work discussed here exists as an object in some sense, organ pipes or electronics as the case may be, the meat of it is the *sound produced* by the object. Work which incorporates sound into something of a broader scope is not sound sculpture any more than a Schnabel is pottery. ●