

## “Non-Cochlear Sound”

DIAPASON

Marcel Duchamp notoriously dismissed modern painting as merely visual, calling instead for an “antiretinal” art that would “put painting once again at the service of the mind.” In his recent book *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art* (2009), Seth Kim-Cohen levels a parallel charge against sound art. From its inception in the late 1940s, Kim-Cohen argues, sound art has been almost exclusively concerned with sound as sensuous material and hence has failed to take the Conceptual turn that has marked the visual arts over the past four decades. The “non-cochlear” practice called for in the book’s subtitle would cure sound art of its aural fixation and instead place it in the service of “politics, economics, sociality, gender, and power.”

What would such an art sound like (or how would it otherwise manifest itself)? To find out, Kim-Cohen issued an open call and received more than one hundred and sixty proposals, from which he selected nineteen (by established sound artists and newcomers alike) for this exhibition at Diapason, one of the few spaces in the world dedicated exclusively to the sonic arts.

One might have expected the exhibition to be nearly silent. Yet “Non-Cochlear Sound” was surprisingly noisy, filled with chatter and clatter from myriad speakers and amplifiers attached to video screens, desktop computers, and film projectors. Even so, it communicated its content primarily via text, that medium problematically privileged by Conceptualism as a direct route to ideas and the mind. Explicit references to classic Conceptualists (Bruce Nauman, Marcel Broodthaers, John Cage, Robert Morris, Mel Bochner, et al) were abundant. Yet, for the most part, such allusions were compensatory, efforts to acquire depth by association. G. Douglas Barrett’s *Violin Tuned D.E.E.D.*, 2010, for example, simply remade Bruce Nauman’s already fairly lame *Violin Tuned D.E.A.D.*, 1969, with a different tuning, the shift from *dead* to *deed* allegedly “inviting a consideration of the issues of property, ownership, and labor currently relevant to music and its institutions,” as the artist explained in his wall text. Barrett’s project and text were symptomatic of a general tendency in the show: grand claims made on behalf of works that could neither support nor provoke them on their own. Heather and Seth Warren-Crow’s *Grayface*, 2010—a performance in which various readers gave voice to a silent video collage of clips showing early-twentieth-century entertainer Al Jolson and others delivering Jolson’s famous phrase “you ain’t heard nothin’ yet”—was claimed by the artists to explore “the power of the sonic-cinematic apparatus,” “the multiple meanings” of the phrase, and its ability to invoke “an unattainable, yet already delivered, sonic power.” But it did no such thing, its relentless repetitions only emptying the phrase of meaning.

The most engaging pieces in the show dealt with translations across media and sensory modalities. A crumpled pile of waxed paper, used by Foley artists to simulate the sound of fire, was elegantly displayed in a Lucite box by Chris Kubick and Anne Walsh as both a delicate, diaphanous sculpture and a sound recording, kin to other hunks of matter (records, tape, etc.) that are inert and silent until animated by human hands and technologies. Along similar lines, participants in Rob Mullender’s video *Said Object*, 2010, attempt to decode—via touch, sight, and even taste—a curious object that seems to be a plastic model of a sonic waveform. Though plenty interesting, such translational projects have been key elements of sound art practice over the past few decades—in the work of Christian Marclay and Steve Roden, for example—and indeed central to the whole history of experimental music, from Earle Brown’s graphic scores of the early 1950s to the video scores of Marina Rosenfeld and the sculptural scores of Jennifer

Walshe. Such work is surely “non-cochlear” in the sense that it leaps across the differences between ear, eye, and hand. But with this and most sound work, the dichotomy between idea or mind (occult notions both) and the sensory or material is surely misplaced: This work is sensuous and material, or it is nothing at all.

—Christoph Cox