

# Is The Honeymoon Over? The Tumultuous Love Affair Between the Museum and the Arts of Sound

## La fin de la lune de miel ? L'histoire d'amour tumultueuse entre le musée et les arts du son

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Art + son = art sonore ?

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Article abstract

*This text considers points of intersection between the arts of sound and visual arts institutions and examines their rapidly changing relationships from the beginning of the twenty-first century to the present day. Combining an autoethnographic approach, drawing on the author's curatorial work with sound-based practices as the director of the London-based commissioning art agency Electra, and sustained observations of broader issues emerging around sound-led work in the field of contemporary art, the text identifies a number of ways in which "sonic substance" enters visual arts institutions. The author considers how these dynamics have changed over the past twenty years and analyses ruptures that emerge along the way.*

# Is The Honeymoon Over?

## The Tumultuous Love Affair Between the Museum and the Arts of Sound

Lina Džuverović

This text considers points of intersection between the arts of sound and visual arts institutions and examines their rapidly changing relationship from the beginning of the twenty-first century to the present day.<sup>1</sup> I highlight points at which “sonic substance” enters visual arts institutions, considering how these dynamics have changed over the past twenty years and analysing ruptures that have emerged along the way. The methodology combines an autoethnographic approach, drawing on my own curatorial work with sound-based practices as the director of the London-based commissioning art agency Electra between 2003 and 2011, with sustained observations of broader issues emerging around sound-led work in the field of contemporary art.<sup>2</sup> Electra is positioned at the intersection of avant-garde, experimental musical communities and contemporary art, and has produced, commissioned, and enabled dozens of projects that involved sound as a medium.<sup>3</sup> As such, this text draws on first-hand experience emerging from curating sound-based practice, at times exposing underlying discrepancies and differing understandings of these practices across the sector.

By highlighting a number of dominant tropes for sound’s inclusion in visual arts spaces, my hope is to expose incongruities, clashes, and stumbling blocks, in order to understand what the difficulties are and reveal the sometimes fundamental contradictions between the needs of sound-based practices and their institutional life across the contemporary art field.

In this text, I ask whether sound as a medium can open up new, perhaps more democratic and inclusive ways for institutions to work with artists who use it, and I examine what, in turn, this may mean for sound’s long-term

1. Whilst being aware of continuing debates around the term “sound art,” I do not use this term, nor is the discussion around the terminology and division of what may or may not fall within this category (or distinctions between music and sound art) of particular interest to me. I write here about a wide range of practices that use sound and my own definition of what does and what does not constitute “sound art” is porous and ever changing, tending to pay attention to work that emerges from experimental or improvisational communities, and more broadly work that uses sound as a primary material. To elide this debate, I have chosen to use the term “arts of sound” introduced by Douglas Kahn (2001).

2. Autoethnographic research is being increasingly used in practice research. Autoethnographies “are highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). In considering the use of personal stories in sociological work, Laslett (1999, cited in Wall, 2008) has claimed that it is the intersection of the personal and the societal that offers a new vantage point from which to make a unique contribution to social science.

3. Electra is a London based contemporary art agency founded in 2003 by the author

of this text and Anne Hilde Neset, which specialises in commissioning, producing, and exhibiting art projects across disciplines, presenting them within the UK and internationally. See: <http://www.electra-productions.com/index.shtml> (accessed December 3, 2019).

inclusion in art canons. By employing similar logics to those of performance, dance, or conceptual art, where the process, or the concept, becomes more important than the final outcome, collaboration and co-creation through sonic practice may have the potential to challenge the growing symbiosis between artistic production and the art market, through its resistance to finished “products” and object-centred work. And, ultimately, I seek to establish whether museums today are seriously engaging with sound-based practice and, if so, exploring how this commitment manifests itself beyond exhibitions and events, through commissioning and collecting. The key question is, how much of the work we may come across in museums today will be present in their archives and collections for future generations to experience and study?

The locus of institutional commitment remains in the support, promotion and circulation of predominantly object-based work, being disseminated via the closely linked network of museum shows, biennials, art fairs, private galleries and the secondary market. Today, the rapid dwindling of public funding for the arts (at least in the UK and USA) has led to increasingly symbiotic relationships between museums and private capital, through the heavy presence of wealthy collectors on museum boards and acquisition committees and the ensuing focus on commerce, singular authorship, and collectable art objects.

My work of the last fifteen years has points of intersection between artworks that primarily use sound as their medium and the ever-increasing spectrum of sites and situations in which contemporary art enters the public domain. This research explores not only the frequency and type of interactions with sound-based work, but also critically examines the quality and depth of those engagements. My interest lies, above all, in the democratising potential of sound and the question of what sound-based practices can do differently in museum and gallery settings, compared to more traditional forms of art. Do the properties of sound—an ephemeral, transient, temporal medium, intrinsically geared towards participation and collaboration—open up alternative possibilities in the processes and economies of contemporary art, possibilities that object-based works do not offer?

## **Sound and institutions**

### **a) Recent institutional engagement with the arts of sound**

Visual arts institutions are by no means new to the arts of sound, given the confluence and cross-pollination between music, live art, and visual art throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Artists’ expanded practice from the 1960s onwards has ushered sound in various guises into arts institutions, a road already paved by the Italian futurists in the first decade

of the twentieth century. Sound has been leaking into museums and galleries through artist/musician collaborations, in the form of soundtracks or as “noise” that is part and parcel of live art. Whether it rode in on the coat-tails of Warhol’s factory, video art, art bands, Fluxus, performance art, or simply in the form of artists’ ephemera available as commodities (CDs, records, tapes) in museum bookshops, the presence of sound in art institutions and museums has not been a new phenomenon for some time now.

However, until the start of the twenty-first century, sound in itself had rarely been the focal point of exhibitions and had seldom been placed centre-stage in museums or galleries. The early 2000s saw the beginning of a wave of exhibitions solely devoted to the arts of sound (or work that predominantly uses sound as a medium), which suggests that it was only at this point that visual arts institutions began to engage with sound as an artistic medium *per se*, as opposed to approaching it as a secondary element, or as an accompaniment to visual art or moving image.

In 2000 alone, institutions in the UK (*Audible Light*, Modern Art Oxford and *Sonic Boom*, Hayward Gallery, London), Japan (*Sound Art: Sound As Media*, NTT: ICC Tokyo), and the US (*Bed Of Sound*, PS1, New York) staged several large-scale exhibitions exclusively devoted to the arts of sound. Following in their footsteps, a surge of exhibitions devoted to sound began to appear internationally, in some cases guest curated by external curators specialising in this area. In 2002, the Centre Pompidou initiated and toured a major exhibition titled *Sonic Process: A New Geography of Sounds*, while in the UK, Bristol’s Arnolfini Gallery brought on board curator, musician, and author David Toop to curate *Playing John Cage* (2005). Tate Modern’s commission of Bruce Nauman’s site-specific sound work *Raw Material* (2005), developed for the Turbine Hall, also pointed to a new level of visibility for sound as material in museums. The same year, in London, Electra’s own research and exhibition project *Her Noise*, investigating gender in sound-led practice, took place at South London Gallery with offshoots at Tate Modern and the Goethe Institut London, with online components continuing to this day through the Her Noise Archive.<sup>4</sup>

Numerous notable initiatives followed, such as *See This Sound: Promises in Sound and Vision* (2009–2010), a research-led collaboration between the Lentos Kunstmuseum in Linz, Austria and the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute in Vienna. Claiming that “the former hegemony of the visual has meanwhile given way to a diverse interplay of image and sound,”<sup>5</sup> the curatorial and research team investigated these questions through a substantial exhibition featuring close to a hundred artists, an equally rich catalogue, a symposium,

4. *Her Noise* was a research and exhibition project initiated by the author and Anne Hilde Neset in 2001 with an ambition to investigate music and sound histories in relation to gender, and to create a lasting resource in this area through the creation of an archive. For more information, see the Her Noise Archive, held at the London College of Communications, and the Her Noise blog: <http://hernoise.org/> (accessed December 3, 2019).

5. From the See This Sound press release at: <https://www.lentos.at/html/en/528.aspx> (accessed December 3, 2019). The project research website can be found at: <http://www.see-this-sound.at> (accessed September 25, 2019).

and a thorough online research space. This was followed by the equally ambitious *Sound Art: Sound as a Medium of Art* (ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2012), an exhibition with a substantial accompanying catalogue.

Institutions with a special interest in the study of avant-garde practices have equally focussed their energies on sound-based shows, such as Poland's Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź with its extensively researched *Sounding the Body Electric: Experiments in Art and Music in Eastern Europe 1957–1984*, curated by the museum's own curator Daniel Muzyczuk and guest curator, the academic David Crowley, held in 2012, later touring to London's Calvert 22 Foundation in 2013. More recently, MoMA held its first sound-based exhibition *Soundings: A Contemporary Score* (2013), which featured the work of sixteen artists, while London's Tate Modern staged a more modest exhibition focussed on the voice, *Word. Sound. Power.*, taking place in Tate's project space in the same year, showcasing the work of seven artists. Recent exhibitions such as *Listen Hear: The Art of Sound* (2017) at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (Boston, MA) investigated the spatial properties of sound with a host of predominantly North American artists' installations, while *Hacer La Audicion (Hear Here): Encounters Between Art and Sound in Peru* (Lima Art Museum, 2016) claimed to be the largest exhibition to date to deal with sound in Latin America. The question of sound and gender, which I will return to later in this text, was investigated at Nottingham's New Art Exchange in 2018, with an exhibition *Sounds Like Her: Gender, Sound Art & Sonic Cultures*, which featured seven female artists working with sound.

In tandem with the proliferation of sound-based exhibitions, a number of artists working with sound began to receive prizes and high-profile accolades. Susan Phillipsz's work *Lowlands* (2008–2010) earned the artist the prestigious Turner Prize (2010), Britain's art equivalent of the Pulitzer. The increased visibility and mainstream success of artists such as Haroon Mirza, Céleste Boursier-Mougenot, Christian Marclay, and Lawrence Abu Hamdan, with high-profile exhibitions and biennials, are also signs of the art world's readiness to embrace fluid practices. One could argue that Christian Marclay's Golden Lion award at the Venice Biennale in 2011 and his much publicised 24-hour exhibition of *The Clock* (2010) at Tate Modern in 2018 indirectly brought attention to sound-based practices through the ever-increasing visibility of this artist, who is deeply immersed in experimental music communities, even if his practice today straddles both music and art contexts. Most recently, the resounding success of this year's Lithuanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, the experimental participatory opera *The Sun and the Sea* (2019), which won the artists Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė, Lina Lapelytė,

and curator Lucia Pietroiusti the Golden Lion, demonstrated the possibility of an experimental and unconventional work being universally accepted at the very highest level within the most visible contemporary art platform.

The multiplicity of outputs listed above make it clear that sound is no longer the poor cousin of the visual arts, despite the often awkward and uncomfortable relationship the two may share. As musician and academic Seth Cluett of Columbia University remarked in 2013, at that point he had counted “128 sound art exhibitions in museums worldwide from 2000 to 2009, up from just 21 from 1970 to 1979”<sup>6</sup>—a rough estimate at best (it is unclear what the parameters of “sound art” in Cluett’s research were), but nevertheless a telling observation, pointing to the rapid increase in shows concerned with sound over the past twenty years. While exhibitions like the ones mentioned above, along with a myriad of performance evenings and concerts that are now regularly held in museums and galleries, mark a significant move towards institutional engagement with sound, they do not automatically guarantee profound and long-lasting institutional support (which would manifest itself through producing, commissioning, or collecting) for artists working in this area, nor do they necessarily open up the playing field to a wide spectrum of practitioners.

6. Cited in Delany, 2013.

#### b) Sound studies as a maturing field of study

In parallel with the above (and other) museum and gallery exhibitions, over the past twenty-odd years we have witnessed the proliferation of literature about sound culture, shaping a rapidly developing field of study in its own right. Key cultural studies publications such as *Wireless Imagination: A History of Radio and Sound in the Twentieth Century* (eds. Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, 1994) and Douglas Kahn’s *Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (2001) have been instrumental in contextualising key sonic moments in the art of the twentieth century and in laying the foundations for a new awareness of aurality as a *bona fide* angle in the study of cultural and artistic phenomena. Several years later, in their volume *Audio Culture: Readings In Modern Music*, Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (2004) wrote about the emergence of an audio culture, a culture made up of “musicians, composers, sound artists, scholars, and listeners attentive to sonic substance, the act of listening and the creative possibilities of sound recording, playback and transmission,”<sup>7</sup> thus providing this nascent field of study with a term, soon to be critically discussed by a number of academics. Terminology soon developed further, to include “sound art,” “audio culture” or “sound culture,” all of which continue to be actively debated in academic publications, such as

7. Cox and Warner, 2004, p. xiii.

8. For a discussion of the term “auditory culture,” see Kane (2015).

the Sound Studies series (Routledge), the recently launched *Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture* (University of California Press), and a special issue of *Parallax Journal* edited by James Lavender (2017), amongst others.<sup>8</sup> A surge of sound culture anthologies followed, including Alan Licht’s *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories* (2007), the *Sound Studies Reader* edited by Jonathan Sterne (2012), Marie Thompson’s *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* (2017a), as well as numerous publications covering different aspects of audio or sound culture by authors including David Toop, Cathy Lane, Salome Voeglin, Brandon La Belle, Seth Kim Cohen, Steve Goodman, Diedrich Diederichsen, Steven Connor, Rob Young, Geeta Dayal, and others.

Equally, the prolific and continuous work of academic research centres has grown, such as the excellent work of the Creative Research into Sound Arts Practice (CRISAP) research group at the London College of Communication in London, UK, founded in 2005, or Aarhus University’s Center for Sound Studies, Belfast’s Sonic Arts Research Centre, as well as certain research strands of the Paris-based Ircam research centre.

### c) Whose sound culture?

With this sketch of institutional engagement with the arts of sound and the theoretical body of literature it has provoked, I observe that already at this early stage, only a few years after the field has begun to come into its own, a critical evaluation in terms of inclusion and diversity has become urgent and necessary. Questions of race, class, and gender have rarely intersected with the more visible manifestations of sound culture, at least as far as mainstream arts institutions are concerned. We have yet to see an intersectional approach to sound-based practices in museums and galleries.

Having established the undeniable acceptance of sound-based practices in visual art contexts in broad strokes, a more pertinent question emerges, as we find we must ask whose sound practices we are encountering once they enter the museum’s walls. The dominant voices within sound-based practices appear to belong to well-educated, white male authors, following the same structures of privilege that can be seen in the canon of contemporary music as well as contemporary art. For instance, it is somewhat shocking to encounter Alan Licht’s compendium *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories* (2007), whose chapter “Sound and the Art World” astoundingly knits together an almost entirely male history of avant-garde sound-based practices, listing only a handful of female protagonists. However, some writers, including Salome Voeglin, Cathy Lane, Louise Grey, as well as the

ongoing work of the Sonic Cyberfeminism group, and especially the writing of Marie Thompson (2017b) on whiteness and sound culture, are working to counteract this tendency toward a white-male dominated canon.

But regardless of these investigations, black, queer, feminist, networked, egalitarian and decolonial sound practices continue to be few and far between in museums and galleries. Is this a contradiction of the democratic potential of the arts of sound that I pointed to in the introduction, and is there anything that can be done about it?

### **Moving forward: the many ways the arts of sound are entering the visual arts establishment**

How does sound actually appear in contemporary art? Here I map out a number of dominant tropes of institutional engagement with the arts of sound—they fall into overall categories, which I detail below. Sound is present in myriad ways, with actual exhibitions of the arts of sound being least significant—despite the focus in the literature on this aspect. Even though the categories discussed below increase the visibility and profile of sound-based practice, a closer analysis reveals that in many cases the inclusion of this work creates a platform for superficial engagement that is unlikely to result in a deeper integration in the long run. The question remains: how much of this work will become an integral part of the legacy of the arts of sound? Such a legacy would only be possible through inclusion in permanent collections and the creation of substantial catalogues making the work available for scholarly study in the future.

#### **1. Musician/sound artist as entertainer at an exhibition opening or party**

Established sound artists and musicians are regularly invited to DJ at openings or provide “soundscapes” for parties or openings, yet it is ludicrous to imagine the exact opposite situation, whereby a painter would be asked to provide paintings as “wallpaper” for someone’s concert. This form of engagement emerges from the traditional model in which museums have modern composition/improvised music evenings for specific groups (friends of the museum, patrons), while the audience looks around at the show, wine glass in hand. The focus is on the visual work in the exhibition while the music serves as a way to enhance the evening.

Example: Inauguration of the Arsenal in Montreal in 2012.



9. For further development of this point, see my critique of this exhibition (Džuverović, 2002).

## 2. Musician/artist collaborations in exhibitions

This model allows for a deeper engagement with the arts of sound, although it demonstrates a lack of confidence on the part of institutions, as they rely on the visual artist to act as a kind of guarantee against the riskier investment in the sound artist.

Example: *Sonic Process: A New Geography of Sounds*, Pompidou Centre (2000).<sup>9</sup>

## 3. Performance or education departments bringing sound practice into the building: music as a way to “reach out to new audiences”

Often the smoothest in-roads into museums for less established practices are via education departments or performance/live art initiatives, which tend to have more freedom, as they are less closely scrutinised by the institutional agenda, pressures and budgets, and rank lower in institutional hierarchies. Obtaining institutional commitment for a one-day event is always much easier than for a six- to eight-week installation. In my own experience of collaborations with a range of institutions through Electra, performance and education curators have often been our most sympathetic partners.

Examples: “Late at Tate” series (Tate Britain); “Adventures in Music” (Whitechapel).

## 4. Exhibitions of popular music

Exhibitions that explore the cross pollination between music and art have been very popular over the past decade. These shows often feature rock memorabilia, such as guitars and other instruments, or draw on the “cool” factor of the musicians—many have been truly blockbuster exhibitions.

Examples: *Music Is A Better Noise* (MoMA PS1, 2006); *Sympathy for the Devil: Art and Rock and Roll Since 1967* (Museum of Modern Art Chicago, 2007); *Play it Loud* (Metropolitan Museum, 2019).

## 5. The visual artist who is also a musician and includes music or sound in his/her museum shows

Household name artists who also happen to be musicians or heavily engaged in sound practice frequently bring improvisational or experimental sonic practices into their gallery exhibitions. Perhaps making for the most natural and favourable way for sound cultures and communities to enter into museum and gallery spaces, these works are frequently included in retrospectives and solo exhibitions, receiving equal treatment with the other works by the artist.

Examples: Artists such as Rodney Graham, Martin Creed, Christian Marclay, Carl Michael von Hausswolff, Cameron Jamie, Jutta Koether, and numerous others.

The opposite movement also happens, when artists primarily known as musicians branch out into installation and visual arts, examples being Peaches, Jim O'Rourke, Kim Gordon, and Lee Ranaldo (in collaboration with Leah Singer), to name but a few.

## 6. Sound art exhibitions

Some of the most prominent exhibitions showcasing sound-based work over the past decades have been those that engage with the arts of sound as a genre—these are often more formal outputs where the work is contextualised within the narrower definitions of “sound art” and the focus is on the properties of and relationships between sound and space. Although these exhibitions tend to be the best environments for exhibiting sonic work, as they guarantee a relatively high level of commitment from the institution (resulting in technical and financial support for the installation and the needs of the work), they may, at the same time, marginalise the work, by contextualising it as “sound art”—an artform that exists within its own niche. For those not actively interested in sound art as a genre, there would be little reason to visit such a show. In my own experience of approaching institutions with Electra's projects, I have come across responses such as, “But we already did a sound art show a few years ago”—meaning this area of practice was “ticked off” the institutional agenda for the time being.

Example: *Frequencies [Hz]* (Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, 2002).

## 7. Sound and vision, shows about the senses, and synaesthesia

Synaesthesia, a neurological condition in which two or more bodily senses are coupled, has proven to be a popular starting point for exploring the relationship between sound and image.

Examples: *What Sound Does a Colour Make* (Independent Curators International); *Visual Music* (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.); *Son & Lumières* (Pompidou Centre, 2004–2005).

## 8. New commissions and acquisitions, new galleries

Historically, commissioning and collecting sound-based work has been rare, for a number of reasons, including difficulty in displaying the work in the

existing space; accessibility (sound-based work is often deemed “difficult” by institutions pressured to maximise visitor figures and show accessible work); investment in equipment; sound proofing, etc. At the Tate Modern, for example, it was only with the opening of Tate Tanks in 2012 that we began to see more risk-taking initiatives in the realm of non-object-based work, including performance and sound-based practice.

Examples: MaSS MOCA has commissioned several permanent sound works; the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (Ridgefield, CT, USA) included a sound gallery in its new building (2004); MoMA’s Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Studio (opened 2019).

### **Inclusion—Whose Sounds? Artists as archivists, self-historicisation, and development of networks**

As I mentioned above, the question of whose sound practices are brought into institutions is a critical one. Given the lack of diversity in both the art and music canons, the number of recent feminist and post/decolonial projects that revisit these histories mark a welcome and long overdue development. Projects grappling with questions of race, class, gender or sexuality in sound-based practices have made inroads into institutional programming—even if it will take decades for significant change to occur on a systemic level. The question of who has access and feels welcome in cultural institutions, as well as what institutions can do to decolonise, queer and feminise their programming and acquisition strategies has been asked in relation to sound-based work, although not always as explicitly as is necessary. For example, the current Independent Curators International exhibition *Soundings: An Exhibition in Five Parts*, (2019–2020) curated by first nations curators Candice Hopkins (Tlingit) and Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō), asks the following question: how can a score be a call and a tool for decolonization? The exhibition features newly commissioned scores and sounds for decolonization by Indigenous artists who attempt to answer this question.

But an exhibition at such a scale is an exception. Such investigations are seldom initiated by large institutions, and usually come from smaller organisations, individual curators, or, in many cases, artists themselves, who often have no choice but to step into the roles of archivist, curator, or collector as a way of redressing omissions, imbalances, and exclusions. In many cases, the exclusionary ways of dominant structures has led to forms of self-historicisation and developed archival impulses.

A key example is the ongoing effort in this realm of the British artist Sonia Boyce, namely her *Devotional Collection* project (1999–ongoing): an archive of

sound, ephemera, and wallpaper which investigate collective memory in relation to black British women in music. Similarly, the work of the American artist Renée Green is often dubbed “archival” as it, like Boyce’s, often includes collections of other artists’ materials as a way of bringing these practices into the institution. For instance, her ongoing project *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992) was developed as a result of her close friendship with the German cultural theorist Diederich Diederichsen, who was the editor of the German music magazine *Spex*. The work, one of Green’s many engagements with archives and sound, “interprets Diederichsen’s personal collection of objects relating to African and African American diasporic culture—from blues and jazz to philosophy and hip hop—as well as Green’s music, books and magazines.”<sup>10</sup>

10. Diederichsen and Green, 2017.

A sustained feminist enquiry into sound-based practice and gender, also hinged upon building an archive, can be seen in Electra’s own research and exhibition project *Her Noise*, which attempts to understand and alter the system that strips out all feminist impulses and perpetuates the existing canonical myopia. The archive has been acquired by the London College of Communications Archives and Special Collections, and incorporated into their MA in Sound Art in the form of a module, inviting student responses to the material in the archive—perhaps the most productive outcome we could have hoped for.

In 2019, the exhibition *Sounds Like Her: Gender, Sound Art and Sonic Cultures* curated by Christine Eyene and shown in York Art Gallery, drew on the curator’s research into feminist and sound art from an African perspective. The show aimed to look at “existing approaches to sound art and challenge the Eurocentric and patriarchal frameworks that have informed the discourse on sound art practice and continue to dominate the mainstream today.”<sup>11</sup> This was done through the work of six women artists, each exploring sound as a medium or subject matter.

11. See: <https://yorkartgallery.org.uk/sounds-like-her-gender-sound-art-and-sonic-cultures/> (accessed December 8, 2019).

It is telling of our institutional practices today that a female-identifying artist of colour must take the initiative to “put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement,” as Helene Cixous wrote,<sup>12</sup> following the adage that if you want something done, you have to do it yourself.

12. Cixous, 1976, p. 875.

Much-needed revisions to canonical histories and practices, it seems, stem from the passionate efforts of individuals and small organisations, not from the established and well-funded players in the contemporary arts landscape. Smaller grassroots networks continue to foster sound-based practices, while institutions continue to grapple with how to engage with them. Aside from Electra, numerous small organisations have supported sound-based (and

13. See: <https://ificandance.org/about/> (accessed December 8, 2019).

14. Attali, 1985, p. 3.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

performance) work for decades, but often remain “under the radar” in the historicization of these practices. To take London as an example, organisations like Café Oto, IKLECTIK and IMT Gallery as well as the radio station Resonance.fm, have been nurturing sound practices in a sustained way for many years, alongside Wysing Arts Centre, one of the UK’s most interesting and supportive cross-disciplinary organisations. Similarly, organisations such as If I Can’t Dance, I Don’t Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution, established in 2005 and based in Amsterdam, “dedicated to exploring the evolution and typology of performance and performativity in contemporary art,”<sup>13</sup> have been instrumental in supporting and exhibiting networked, process-based practices with a strong feminist ethos. These sustained and committed efforts have been the driving force of sound-based communities, with more established visual arts institutions taking fewer risks, showcasing work already tried and tested by these “incubator” organisations.

### Conclusion

The use of “sonic substance” as a primary material for art is not new. We typically call this “music,” and it has been with us for centuries, performed in music halls, opera houses, street festivals, and everywhere in between. In his volume *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985), French economist Jacques Attali traces the social role of music and musicians through history, within the wider framework of listening to our society (as opposed to looking at the world). For Attali, music, or the “noise of a society,”<sup>14</sup> is both a mirror and a prophecy. Attali suggests that if we listen to the sounds of society (its art, festivals, etc.), we will better understand the “folly of men”<sup>15</sup> and see where our society is going. For Attali, the world is “for hearing... it is not legible, but audible.”<sup>16</sup> His notion that our musical process of structuring noise is also our political process of structuring community may oversimplify, but his text encourages a deeper examination of the relationship between society and its sounds, and when sound begins to travel around spaces originally designed to display and preserve art objects, paintings and sculptures, the very nature of the institutions in question—their role, economic models, exhibition and preservation strategies—must be re-examined with a view to accommodating these new types of work. Not only must we then examine the actual sounds of our society, but also sounds in relation to how they change the cultural sphere.

Embracing sound-based practice in a profound way presents a complex task for any institution, but it is not insurmountable if its works are taken as seriously as any other artworks. As the examples above illustrate, any visual arts institution that wishes to truly engage with such practices must

acknowledge that to commission, exhibit, and collect sound-based work will require time, financial, and even physical commitment when these works require an architectural adjustment to the space. The question is whether this particular strand of practice merits commitment and investment on the part of visual art institutions. Do the arts of sound “belong” in a museum, or are they better off scattered across a range of sites: public spaces, performance halls, independent music venues, and DIY galleries? Should these practices be embraced by museums as part of contemporary practice to be collected, written about, and displayed?

Drawing on my experience working collaboratively with a range of institutions, I have found that the success of any sound-based project depends upon the level of institutional commitment to a particular artist and a particular piece of work. Difficulties in delivering successful projects in visual art institutions cannot be attributed to the intrinsic challenges of sound as a medium. Instead, difficulties arise from a lack of institutional resources, time, or commitment to the project. One can only conclude that institutional engagement with audio culture at large requires a paradigm shift and a willingness to commit resources and take risks.

The value institutions ascribe to a work is reflected in their engagement. Which brings us to the core issue: where does the value of any work of art lie, and by what criteria do institutions assign that value?

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L. L. de Mars, sans titre, décembre 2019. Mine graphite sur papier, 30 × 40 cm.