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A Wave Across the Auditorium

[some aural observations on spaces, sound and art]

Katharine Norman

Wherever there are vibrating molecules there's the potential for a wave across the auditorium. When it comes down to it, an auditorium is simply a *space* in which sounds travel and listening can take place. Physical space is a given: and since sound not only occupies but depends on physical dimension, it is only natural that nearly every work of, or including, sound, addresses it in some respect. And while a variety of other spaces might be involved in the arts of sound, they all assume at least one pair of ears. This short tour presents choices that are eclectic, and not always intended as typically representative. But all, to my listening mind, address spaces of one kind or another. But first, where — in which space— to begin: music or sound art?

[here]

[So let me start the story here (*a space present to each of us, in different ways*)

Personally I share sound historian Douglas Kahn's discomfort with (the variously interpreted term) 'sound art'

(Kahn, 2006, p.2), in that the 'genre', somewhat like its artistic close cousin, 'installation art', appears sometimes to have been a retrospective moniker applied by a canny establishment. I also share Kahn's view that 'craft, discipline, and virtuosity, even a healthy pretense for profound and improvisatory insight would go a long way at improving all the arts of sound' (Kahn, 2006, p.10). (It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it...) But I don't want to fill space with slithering between definitions just now, other than to remark that the division between sound art and music is, in my opinion, both problematic and equivocal: the two lie back to back on a Moebius strip that nobody can, or perhaps wants, to disentangle. Possibly the distinction is relatively unimportant. Here I shall be indiscriminate in my listening.

[inside-out]

from a quite ordinary subject position (*that is, the space I occupy*). I am sitting in my room (*an absent space, to you*), trying to articulate

'I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed...'

The opening of Alvin Lucier's text for *I am Sitting in a Room* (1970)

I am Sitting in a Room retains an influential allure for so many composers and sound artists. Why does this work prove so attractive to interested listeners who discuss it, recreate their own versions, or simply come across it on the internet to their listening delight? *I am Sitting...* is oddly uninflected by its place in time, in comparison to other contemporaneous works. Ageless, despite its reliance on technology now superseded by digital tools, it articulates personal, physical and, yes, social spaces through the simplest of means. Lucier sits in a room and records himself speaking his text. He plays the recording back into the room while re-recording, and then reiterates this process repeatedly until the accumulation of room resonances creates a web of reverberant pitches. In an example of recursive genius all round, he describes the process he is undertaking in

order to undertake it. Listening to the result is to encounter the trembling molecules of space, gradually revealed right before your ears. And yet this is far more than a simple 'process composition': listening to it is also to encounter — 'in a room 'different from the one you are in now' — the physicality of a 'remembered' room; Lucier's thinking and speaking presence, and his stutter. This latter 'impediment' is transfigured in its instrumental role, triggering the musicality of vibrating air in a bounded space — so instead of turning away with slight embarrassment we tend forwards, and long to listen. Several spaces are reconfigured.

Of course it all comes down to reconfigured listening. Any magician could inform you (but probably will not) that at root there's no mystery to the 'directed' twist of perception that can render 'reality' different for a while. But in what way can listening be 'different'? Jim Drobnick, in his introduction to *Aural Culture*, a collection of essays about and by artists working in sound, offers the notion of 'listening awry', acknowledging this transposition of Slavoj Žižek's 'looking awry'. While Žižek elucidates Lacanian theory through cultural studies (largely film), Drobnick's phraseology simply retains, as he says, 'the imperative to attend to things not straightforwardly, but from an angle, from an "interested" rather than objective perspective... by listening awry we may also reflect upon the myriad meanings of murmurs and cacophony, and how the act of hearing is itself conscious, implicated, and subject to cultivation.' (Drobnick, 2004, p.11).

At one level listening can never be less than 'interested' and hearing, of itself, never is. Listening is the interpretation of things heard; its fallibility, and the cognitive tensions that can ensue when listening is 'frustrated' have been much explored by composers. This is particularly true of those composers interested in Schaefferian theories of 'reduced listening' (*écoute réduite*) in which, very broadly speaking, there is a preoccupation with the perceptual (and cognitive) effect of hearing sounds that are objectified by abstraction, being edited or processed in a manner that removes them from their source. But Drobnick's appropriation is a nice one, in particular with regard to the opportunity sound affords artists to 'cultivate' not only listening but also an acknowledgement that each hearing individual brings a different set of skills and susceptibilities to a work.

[outside-in]

my thoughts (*a space where I exist*) about sound, art, and the stories that spaces tell, can tell, or might tell. But it's just not happening. My mind's a blank (*a space that appears to lack anything of especial interest*). I blame this mental impasse

In cultivating listening, technology is so often of assistance, be it via panpipes or programming, on vinyl or CD, through the virtuoso maelstrom of a multichannel performance, or the understated ‘clack’ of a Japanese bamboo fountain. Now that so many of us have an iPod in our pocket, or some such method for transporting whatever sounds (and listening choices) we choose from one place to another, it’s easy to forget that the facility easily to record and replay sound is comparatively recent. Though nature recordings on vinyl had been around for quite a while, it was not until the 1950s that informal field recordings on tape became a feasible prospect. By the late 1960s various groups and individuals, and perhaps most notably the World Soundscape Project headed by composer R. Murray Schafer, in Canada, were, in keeping with the spirit of the times, collecting environmental sounds as a way of documenting, and politicising, the changing nature of the modern sonic environment. Their recordings of environmental spaces served as a commentary on the behaviours that created, threatened or changed them: the ‘acoustic ecology’ of the world. Many composers and sound artists, including some associated with the WSP — notably Barry Truax and Hildegard Westerkamp — have brought the same thinking to creative work.

Field recording can bring the outside in, with the result that comprehension of both may change. ‘Soundscape’ compositions exploit this propensity, and often celebrate locality, frequently by idealizing environmental space. Often the selected sonic environments already have an inherently attractive aural profile, whether rural or urban in character. So Hildegard Westerkamp’s *Talking Rain* is an intricately composed montage that invites the listener’s immersion in West Coast rain, focusing on the ‘beauty’ – the aesthetic appreciation – of this natural phenomenon’s transformation of aurally perceived space. Luc Ferrari’s *Presque Rien* series, on the other hand, composes from ‘almost nothing’ – that is, apparently ‘almost’ untouched and uneventful environmental recordings, with no particular focus on engaging animal calls or sounds, though often including snatches of voice or background human presence. By contrast Judy Klein’s *The Wolves of Bays Mountain* shares the environment, and social space, of wolves, integrating documentary recording and synthesized or processed sound. Many of these works might seem somewhat uncomposed but in fact are often highly organised, with sound materials tweaked and tuned carefully in the aural equivalent of colorist painting. So mundane experience becomes ‘saturated’ and vibrant, and listening gains the immediacy more common to visual experience: the world lights up with sound. And the space that ‘soundscape’ work ultimately illuminates is of course societal, enlarging the listener’s awareness of — to adopt Murray Schafer’s phrase — the ‘tuning’ of the world.

[dislocation]

(*a seemingly untraversable space*) partly on the plumber who is busy working in the bathroom next door and punctuating his hammering with out-of-tune arias. He is a nice plumber, with quite a nice voice, but he favours Elvis in alternation with Simon and Garfunkel. It's hopeless; his presence (*an aurally defined space*) defeats my attempts

In London's Trafalgar Square I stared out at the traffic while listening to the sea breaking on a shore. The shore was most certainly not a distant one, to my perception, since the amplitude was well-adjusted to both mask the surround traffic noise and give the sensation of being 'to scale'. Bill Fontana's *Wave Memories* (1999), transfers one sonic environment into the space normally occupied by another; what immediately emerges is perceptual dissonance as to place. Both sight and sound seem here and now: 'real'. Fontana has made a lifetime's work from relocating aural spaces, taking further Cage's dictum to let sounds 'be themselves' by this ostensibly simple contrivance. And in this new, perceptually divided space, listening 'becomes itself' with an insistence that most Western listeners, so wedded to visual experience, only associate with sight.

'Most people use their visual perception to tune out and not pay attention to ambient sounds of a given space. By carefully placing naturally occurring environmental sounds in a space where they normally do not belong, this perceptual masking technique is defeated and people are confronted with sounds they cannot ignore.' Fontana in interview with Jøran Rudi (Rudi, 2005, p. 98).

There's no transition in Fontana's re-placing of ambient sound. But transitions — movements over time — are fundamental in gauging dimensions, and dimensions define space (of various kinds). It has been a while since sailors measured fathoms by the length of an outstretched arm, but we still move from one end of the room to the other, if only in our minds, to gauge its extent. (Shall I sit at the front or the back, or half-way down? Will I be able to hear from here?) For most of us, complex 'multi-sensory' transitions are how we chart our position and ultimately adjudge our safety in a space. Most transitions probably start and end at 'seeing', but even the endpoint of aurally-initiated transitions is commonly visual: we hear the ambulance approaching and await its visual arrival around the bend; we look to see which window has been smashed. Sonic artists have for years (at least since French composer and researcher Pierre Schaeffer's 1940s explorations) considered the phenomenological implications of only alluding to aural-visual transitions — teasing the ears with the familiar timbre of a now invisible object or, at the other end of the scale, with abstracted sonic gesture that now lacks even an imagined possible source.

[disorientation]

to plumb for ideas (*one space obliterates the other*). Admitting defeat, I depart for a walk in the drizzling rain (*a transfigured space*), first grabbing a couple of apples from our neighbour's tree in case Meg the

Removing the visible object (actual or imagined) enables deliberately 'failed' transitions; these re-align listening towards a different consciousness of timbre and gesture. And, as with Fontana's work, the perceived 'here' becomes a place that, lacking reliable intelligibility. Once intelligibility is bracketed out of the picture, listening can edge towards surreal places. It is interesting that Fontana chooses to speak of confrontation, an avowedly visual metaphor, in relation to perceiving his dislocated environments. Within the context of experiencing art, dislocation is all part of the spatial 'fun', or can be. Outside that frame, the absence of fully sensory transitions is often no fun at all. Reality becomes untrustworthy. For John Hull, blind after years of fading sight, there is now 'nothing to mediate between the intangible sounds of voices and the immediate contact of bodies, body contact becomes all the more startling. A handshake or an embrace becomes a shock, because the body comes out of nowhere into sudden reality....' (Hull, 1992, p. 56). Consider his choice of words: 'immediate contact', 'startling', 'shock', 'out of nowhere', 'sudden reality'. He is evidently attempting to convey an experience in which his consciousness is momentarily reconfigured, without warning or explanation in this world without transitions. What Hull is really describing is a loss of temporal (via spatial) *experience* — and with it the consciousness of his position in relation to the world. This 'lack' of experience threatens his own identity.

Art that is motivated to elicit that disorientation, is not concerned with the process of transition, or with starting from the 'known' world. Instead it deals with abstraction beyond thoughts of physical space. Extremes, it seems, can take you there. 'Long and loud' dislocates spaces through temporal 'obliteration': the reconfiguration of durational experience. After a while, temporal space extends to everything, or nothing. But without measurable extent, there is no space to fill. There is no place to be. No space at all. Giving oneself over to this kind of obliteration can divert spatial awareness to the inner landscapes of phenomenological experience. It is no surprise that composer Francisco López challenges what he calls the 'pragmatic goal' of the more conventional 'soundscape' composition. His compositions are often long, relentless and explore extremes of timbre (through filtering, for instance) or are performed at extreme amplitudes in total darkness. To him, composers wedded to the soundscape approach seek a 'supposed, unjustified integration of the listener with the environment' (López, 1997). López, along with a diverse collection of artists who work in

different manners at the various extremes of sound — whether minimalist, glitch, noise or ‘lowercase’ low amplitude, tends to promote the deliberate ‘disintegration’ of experience as a means to gain access to a purely phenomenological space:

‘I do not defend sonic matter as an aesthetic or conceptual category, but as a *gate* to different worlds of perception, experience and creation.’ (López, 2004)

[an interior aside]

*cart-horse is in her paddock (a space within
a space). She is,*

Come inside now. In a darkened room I view vast caverns and endless shadowy tunnels with bated breath. I have no idea how this space should look or, more importantly in this context, what the ‘wrong’ thing would look like. I am nervous, and quite lost: I do not know this space at all. I am being explored by sound. Not only that but I move my exploring mind within spaces I evidently regard as separate from myself. Bladder, kidneys, ovaries, womb — the ultrasound wand illuminates them by sonic means as it leads a way through this alien land.

*and makes short – and very
resonant (inside her is a cavernous space) – work of*

Was that too close for you? Too up close? The resonant spaces inside are our own unknown. We rarely hear them. Or we try not to listen. It’s just too personal.

Inuit throat singing, an art that is intended more as a sonic endurance game than music, involves two women standing or crouching opposite one another, articulating sung syllables in a fast alternation. The sound is extraordinary, a breathy hocket that is certainly attractive in its rhythmic to and fro. It used to be that they sang *really* close up, mouths nearly touching, so that one singer’s sounds would resonate right inside the other’s throat. Inevitably, throat singing was banned by uncomprehending Christian missionaries, for around a hundred years. But now the practice is re-emerging, and celebrated if only as a rather self-conscious attempt to regain a particular cultural space.

the apples before aggressively
investigating my pocket for more (*a*

Is this now far enough away? Or are there still too many uncomfortable implications?

A stream of flatulence builds a crescendo, rising from a quiet innocuous patter to a gravelly, animalist fart explosion, patently issuing from quite the 'wrong' orifice for musical sound. This is music from another mouth. Listening moves uncomfortably between humour, disgust, discomfort, and fascination, all the while skirting various taboos. Christof Migone's *South Winds* is an act of spatial bodily transliteration scored for the unknown regions. The sounds that signal spaces we can't reach. The sounds that, in civilized society, we 'ban' from our sensibilities. An Artuad anal aria. Most of his performance and CD works explore sounds from the places where we do not normally go, or at least not in public: the clicks and crunches of cracking joints, the farts, the peeing, slobbering — the whole repertoire of bodily eruptions and eructation. Art that attends to the body's problematic spaces is not often concerned primarily with composing the sounds produced, but Migone's work truly is music, and so confronts the weight cultural mass of aestheticized sound: in a wilful challenge to 'acceptance' he casts his repertoire of revulsion in works that have a sophisticated ear for sound and form.

hidden, possibly concealing, space).

We stand, silent, either side of the fence that demarks our territories

Was this brief outburst too disgusting for words? Or do you have a sneaking desire to poke around in there some more?

[bodies that move]

(together in a space defined by conventional boundaries) and we both, I presume, hear the wind in the trees and the cockerel that pipes up intermittently in the distance (*relative spaces, the here and there*). Eventually Meg walks away, bored with my fruitless company, and I stomp back towards the English village I now call home (*a space in which to safely rest*). Back at my front door (*the transition from public to private space*) I brace myself for further plumbing serenades. I must get on, there's no time to procrastinate (*a temporary space*). But wait,

People in headphones are shuffling back and forth in what seems, to the outside observer, an absent-minded Brownian motion. They are mostly silent, smiling as they pass each other, occasionally laughing or exclaiming briefly for no apparent reason. Up on a windy concrete terrace at London's Hayward Gallery (one of those Brutalist buildings that were so eager to grab the democratic space) they are alone together, moving in a disconcerted fashion, in a space defined by listening.

Referring to sound art, Leigh Landy attests (and I concur) that 'dramaturgy is virtually a *sine qua non* of this art form' (Landy, 2007, p. 162). Sound art entails the choreography of both sounds and listening bodies, in a context that always has (some kind of) extra-physical dimension. But who moves the body in space — the artist or the listener, the sounds transmitted or the participant? Perhaps we are all shuffling back and forth together. Christina Kubisch's Hayward Gallery installation, one of her 'electronic walks', was part of a landmark festival of 'sound art', *Sonic Boom* (2000). Sounds were triggered by the individual listener's movement in a space. Up on that bleak terrace, I and my fellow travellers encountered sounds recognisable from the real world, and created personalised montages by, literally, moving from one to another. Meanwhile, the London skyline continued (with all its accompanying urban sounds) and the Hayward's rather tired concrete belied the scenarios conjured by the sounds — horses, people, birds. Temporarily confined within the physical architecture, each listener was almost entirely preoccupied with finding ways to chart an internal course through listening. Instead of avoiding rocks and promontories, this voyage entailed seeking out invisible presence, in the hope of a collision. It happens all the time, in particular in works that encourage a contributory role: in Paul de Marinis and Rebecca Cummins' work, *A Light Rain* (2004), participants each take an umbrella and enter an artificial rain shower, lit to produce a rainbow. As their umbrellas break and divert the water, musical sounds are triggered. Site-specific sound works that invite 'play', cooperation, and community involvement of this kind are often not so much concerned with making music as with empowerment, with providing a microcosmic metaphor for the same on a larger scale.

Naturally, participatory interaction queries another (generally) physical space: that between performer and listener. Unusually, Janet Cardiff's *Forty-Part Motet* (2001) illuminates this divide by purely spatial interaction: not interactive in the conventionally accepted sense of 'making things happen'; it simply occupies a significantly defined space and invites listeners to enter it. But in doing so this piece of sound art inveigles its way into challenging what listening, music and performance can be. Placed in a gallery space, forty loudspeakers mimic the spatial distribution of the five eight-part choirs required to perform *Spem in Alium*, a motet composed in the late 1500s by Thomas Tallis. Tallis's motet is already a wondrous object of sonic architecture, in which the forty individual musical lines weave a varied polyphonic texture, sometimes dense, sometimes with only a few lines 'active' at one time. By arranging the loudspeakers in imitation of the choirs, Cardiff not only provides a musical 'performance' in which the human body is replaced by the technological

‘simulacrum’, but invites the human listeners to transgress: to cross the divide between stage and audience and ‘enter’ the performance. Approaching one or other speaker the listener encounters fragments of polyphony in solo isolation, and also the silences in individual parts, as lines cease and then restart. This is the antithesis to what contrapuntal music conveys as its listening ‘product: the way it normally fills musical listening space. Instead the frail humanity of a fragmented solo — the record of an individual body contributing to the community of performance — is made explicit, even down to the chatter of choir boys before the performance begins. The listener, now a solo explorer, is at liberty to listen to, and direct, this deconstruction of performance.

Composers and artists who work ‘in space’, designing aural landscapes for a particular physical architecture, assume the listener’s ambulatory presence just as an architect designs buildings in anticipation of, and in service of, human activity in a space. Installation artists such as Robin Minard and the visual-sound artist Carsten Nicolai, make works that fuse sonic and visual dimensions to such a degree that sound and listening become part of spatial design. A unique example of integrated space, sound and listening is found in the work of Maryanne Amacher, whose site-specific installations explore the spaces that intersect when the ear meets architecture. Works are specifically designed for particular locations, with sound ‘characters’ placed precisely, to create perceptual effects that result from the coincidence of hearing and architecture. By a psychoacoustic illusion, the listener to Amacher’s complex, high amplitude sounds can encounter the sensation that their own ears are emitting sound. As the intense sparkle of Amacher’s ‘Third Ear’ music (as she calls it) strikes the ears, the resonant spaces of external and internal architecture meet.

[within]

a new email message has come in, providing an excuse for a brief escape. Renee, a fellow student on a distance learning course (*a shared virtual space*) suggests I might like a piece by Alvin Lucier that she has recently encountered for the first time on the web (*a space that offers words and sounds*). I smile,

Listening is rarely the solitary means of measuring dimension when the lights are on. Electroacoustic music is often performed in a darkened space, projected from a mass of loudspeakers arrayed around the audience. Changes in reverberation, amplitude, and frequency of sounds not only create new and arresting timbres but

manipulate each listener's perception of the extent and nature of the surrounding environment. A voice speaks close up, whispering in your ear and then the same voice is suddenly distant, but shouting; six inches from your face a sheet of glass crashes into a thousand invisible pieces, before trickling away as a myriad tinkling bells. And this in a matter of a few seconds (a malleable space in perceptual terms).

It's no accident, I think, that a great deal of sound art and electroacoustic music features the speaking voice, transformed in ways that affect the dramaturgy of the listening space, and often the speaking voice is articulating memories, or remembered emotions, or inner states through stories, poetic texts or imaginative prose. That is, it is a narrative voice. My anecdotal experience suggests that the number of electroacoustic 'concert' works that exploit recordings of the singing voice as material is far exceeded by those featuring speaking voice, even if the words spoken are deliberately unintelligible. Francis Dhomont, Paul Lansky, and Trevor Wishart are just some influential established voices that come to mind here, but of course there are many more, and many artists within sound poetry and performance whose work tends towards electroacoustic concerns (for example Jaap Blonk, the late Henri Chopin, David Moss). A voice comes out of the dark to speak into the listener's ear, whether words are intelligible or not. And when the bodily source is removed the result is unmediated intimacy.

While I check through this text I read in my internal voice, and the room around me recedes a little in my consciousness. Of course our usual appreciation of the wider environment is often metaphorically 'darkened' to some extent by other activities that become the focus of intent. Sometimes the focus includes listening: the telephone, the confessional, and the to and fro of conversation. Bill Viola's *The Threshold* (1992) does offer the peculiarly public intimacy of the church confessional, imitating the paradoxical spatial arrangement of a private space nested within the public 'body' of the church. The participant enters an enclosed room built inside a gallery or public area, on the outside of which an electronic display scrolls news headlines constantly. Inside this enclosed space the sounds, and sights, of the now external public area recede. Black and white footage of sleeping individuals, hugely larger than life, is projected on each wall. The sounds of their breathing form a quiet accompaniment. Since sleeping people are generally not particularly active, and the room is dimmed, visual preoccupation gradually adjusts and recedes and listening progressively consumes the space, filling it brimful with the intimacy of sleep — a threshold between conscious and unconscious presence. So many of Viola's works explore passing across the threshold from one place to another, most often at some level between life and death. Here the viewer/listener's physical movement from one space to another, and from one perceptual focus to another, forms an explicit physical analogy. The bawling world outside continues, but while inside this space within a space there is some timeless breathing room — an immensity, it seems.

[remember]

remembering this work that I know and
love, but haven't listened to since ...well, for years (*across a
recollected space*)

'To localize a memory in time is merely a matter for the biographer... For a knowledge of intimacy, localization in the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than determination of dates.' (Bachelard, 1958, p. 9)

So forget about the time. Pick up the phone and give me a call. Listen, you're quite safe — nobody else can hear. It's growing dark again, and it's just you and me. Everybody's doing it: that train carriage is full of noisy individuals who feel themselves transported to a private space. Sound installations and performances that incorporate mobile phones tend to perform a self-reflexive commentary on the constant ringing that accompanies our digitally-infused lives (at the time of writing, find some at http://www.flong.com/texts/lists/mobile_phone/) but less often investigate this trusting, overtly emotional region that phone communication can access — and which telephone-sales people know only too well. Like the diary or journal, or the personal blog, our phone calls are personal, one-to-one. Integrating physical, social and individual mental spaces, and in a quite surreptitious manner.

Memory Machine, an installation by composers Cathy Lane and Nye Parry, draws on this relationship. Part installation, part oral (and aural) history, part composition, the work invites participants to contribute memories through speaking into a 1950s-style telephone handset, in fact a disguised microphone. This inspired choice of faux retro technology immediately encourages thoughts of 'memory', and alludes to the 'trusting' intimacy of phone conversation. Although the resultant sonic collage does not issue from the phone itself or necessarily relate directly to the material just recorded, the participant is already primed to listen. The aural results are not sophisticated, and this is part of the charm: the processing techniques used are relatively simple and the collage is largely layered playback of recorded material — but it is the act of remembering that takes precedence, and the mental spaces of past and present coexist, merge and jostle — on several levels. Now that there are more and more tools for easy archiving and documentation, the world is choc-full of reminiscences, memoires, diaries and so on, quite often in sonic form. Finding or recording memories is not a problem. But while content is easy to create, and locate, the emotions that arise from remembering — *feelings* — are harder to place: they are an epiphenomenon that bleeds into the present time and space. As a hybrid work, part-way between aesthetic object and oral history project, *The Memory Machine*, goes some

way to exploring this seemingly intangible place, through sound.

A moment or two later she sends a video clip that she's just recorded — a goofy hello from her home in the Netherlands. I laugh and start to type my reply. Before that we had only ever met occasionally by email, but now I actually see and hear her, sitting in her room. **(and it's touching).**]

As I finish writing this I am attending a conference at which a great deal of electroacoustic and computer music has been performed. At some concerts the pieces were presented over an impressive array of spatially distributed loudspeakers (distributed around an equally impressive array of computer music practitioners). Many composers naturally took advantage of this spatial luxury. Dynamic sonic gestures ejaculated into the darkened auditorium, creating an aural blaze that lit newly implied physical spaces with dazzling displays of sonic pyrotechnics. Fewer pieces used this same sophisticated surround-sound to build the immersive space of, say, a slowly evolving ambience, a cradling, or a womb. Public fireworks ruled the day. And yet in a hidden corner of the conference, in another, very small, room, I encountered a most sensitive use of intimate space, one in which — to my ears and mind — physical, social and mental space were intertwined to great mutual enlightenment. *Piosai (Pieces)* by sound artist and composer, Úna Monaghan and sculptor, Nóirín Nic Alastair consists of several waist-high pedestals on each of which stand small bronze sculptures of roughly hewn figures: adults and children, folk musicians, abstract fragments (some pictures at <http://tinyurl.com/5vdafk>). Handling these unpretentious, intimate sculptures brought sounds suddenly into being, as small spherical speakers sitting by the sculptures started to play snatches of remembered history (the family reminiscences of Monaghan's relatives), Irish folk music, and unobtrusive synthesized soundscapes. Tentative and gentle, the sounds were sometimes almost too quiet to make out, and they faded and stopped when I let go of these small but resolutely material representations. In this multi-sensory touching experience I handled the shards of memory, and along with them a new awareness of their fragility. For a few minutes these little worlds occupied me entirely in their small ambience, and drew me into a space of moving sounds.

Such encounters provide reminders that even the most mundane and naïve experiences are replete with meaningful spaces. Too often these hover behind the obvious story, like a greyed-out subtext that remains unseen, or unheard. But perhaps art occasionally succeeds in temporarily reversing this impoverished situation so that the ordinary stories fade and the spaces shine through, relegating the more obvious to a footnote, for a while.¹

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At the time of writing you can listen to an extract of Lucier's *I am Sitting in a Room* at
http://ubu.artmob.ca/sound/source/Lucier-Alvin_Sitting.mp3. The full work is available on CD.

[So let me start the story here (*a space present to each of us, in different ways*) from a quite ordinary subject position (*that is, the space I occupy*). I am sitting in my room (*an absent space, to you*), trying to articulate my thoughts (*a space where I exist*) about sound, art, and the stories that spaces tell, can tell, or might tell. But it's just not happening. My mind's a blank (*a space that appears to lack anything of especial interest*). I blame this mental impasse (*a seemingly untraversable space*) partly on the plumber who is busy working in the bathroom next door and punctuating his hammering with out-of-tune arias. He is a nice plumber, with quite a nice voice, but he favours Elvis in alternation with Simon and Garfunkel. It's hopeless; his presence (*an aurally defined space*) defeats my attempts to plumb for ideas (*one space obliterates the other*). Admitting defeat, I depart for a walk in the drizzling rain (*a transfigured space*), first grabbing a couple of apples from our neighbour's tree in case Meg the cart-horse is in her paddock (*a space within a space*). She is, and makes short – and very resonant (*inside her is a cavernous space*) – work of the apples before aggressively investigating my pocket for more (*a hidden, possibly concealing, space*). We stand, silent, either side of the fence that demarks our territories (*together in a space defined by conventional boundaries*) and we both, I presume, hear the wind in the trees and the cockerel that pipes up intermittently in the distance (*relative spaces, the here and there*). Eventually Meg walks away, bored with my fruitless company, and I stomp back towards the English village I now call home (*a space in which to safely rest*). Back at my front door (*the transition from public to private space*) I brace myself for further plumbing serenades. I must get on, there's no time to procrastinate (*a temporary space*). But wait, a new email message has come in, providing an excuse for a brief escape. Renee, a fellow student on a distance learning course (*a shared virtual space*) suggests I might like a piece by Alvin Lucier that she has recently encountered for the first time on the web (*a space that offers words and sounds*). I smile, remembering this work that I know and love, but haven't listened to since ...well, for years (*across a recollected space*). A moment or two later she sends a video clip that she's just recorded — a goofy hello from her home in the Netherlands. I laugh and start to

type my reply. Before that we had only ever met occasionally by email, but now I actually see and hear her, sitting in her room. **(and it's touching).]**