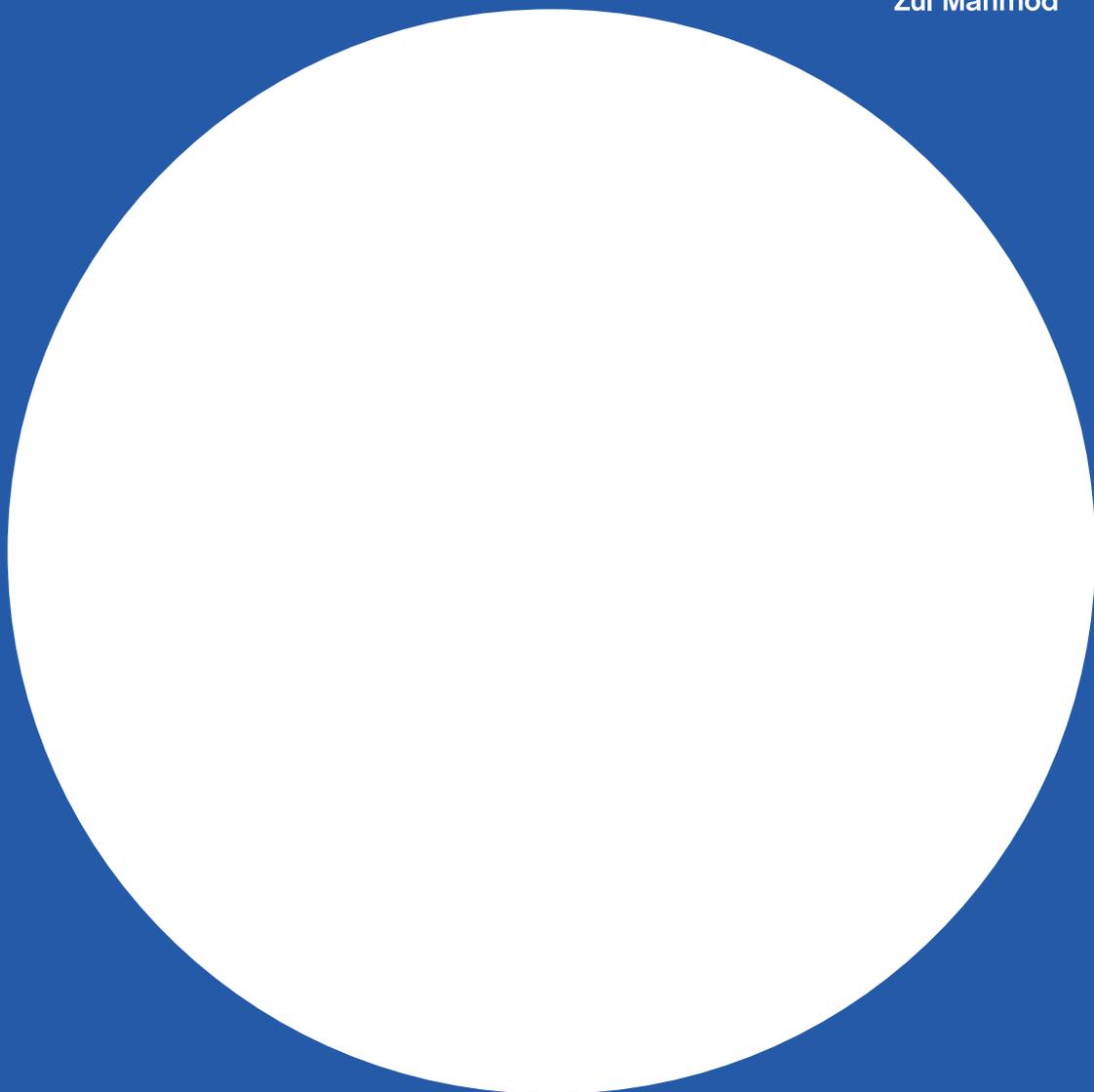


# SOUND

## LATITUDES AND ATTITUDES

Curated by  
Bani Haykal  
Joleen Loh

Song-Ming Ang  
George Chua  
Gulayu Arkestra  
Joyce Koh  
Kai Lam  
Mohamad Riduan  
Darren Ng  
The Observatory  
Joel Ong  
Ong Kian-Peng  
Brian O'Reilly  
Shaun Sankaran  
Dennis Tan  
Evan Tan  
Zai Tang  
Mark Wong  
Zul Mahmud



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Mohamad Riduan, *Hijrah* (detail), presented at *Bridge: Dari Utara ke Selatan* (*Bridge: From North to South*), Jendela, Visual Arts Space, Esplanade, mixed media installation, dimensions variable, 2013. Photo: Muhamad Wafa

## FOREWORD

The seventeen artists and musicians whose work is represented in *SOUND: Latitudes and Attitudes* are also variously researchers, performers, educators, mentors, curators, theorists, writers, critics, entrepreneurs, and producers. Spanning several generations, many are internationally recognised for their influential and often challenging work in sound and music. The artists' interests range widely, from noise, folk music, field recordings and esoteric instrumentations to archival research and documentation. Each encourages an active sense of listening, and explores the generously open-ended 'uncertainties' of sonic arts.

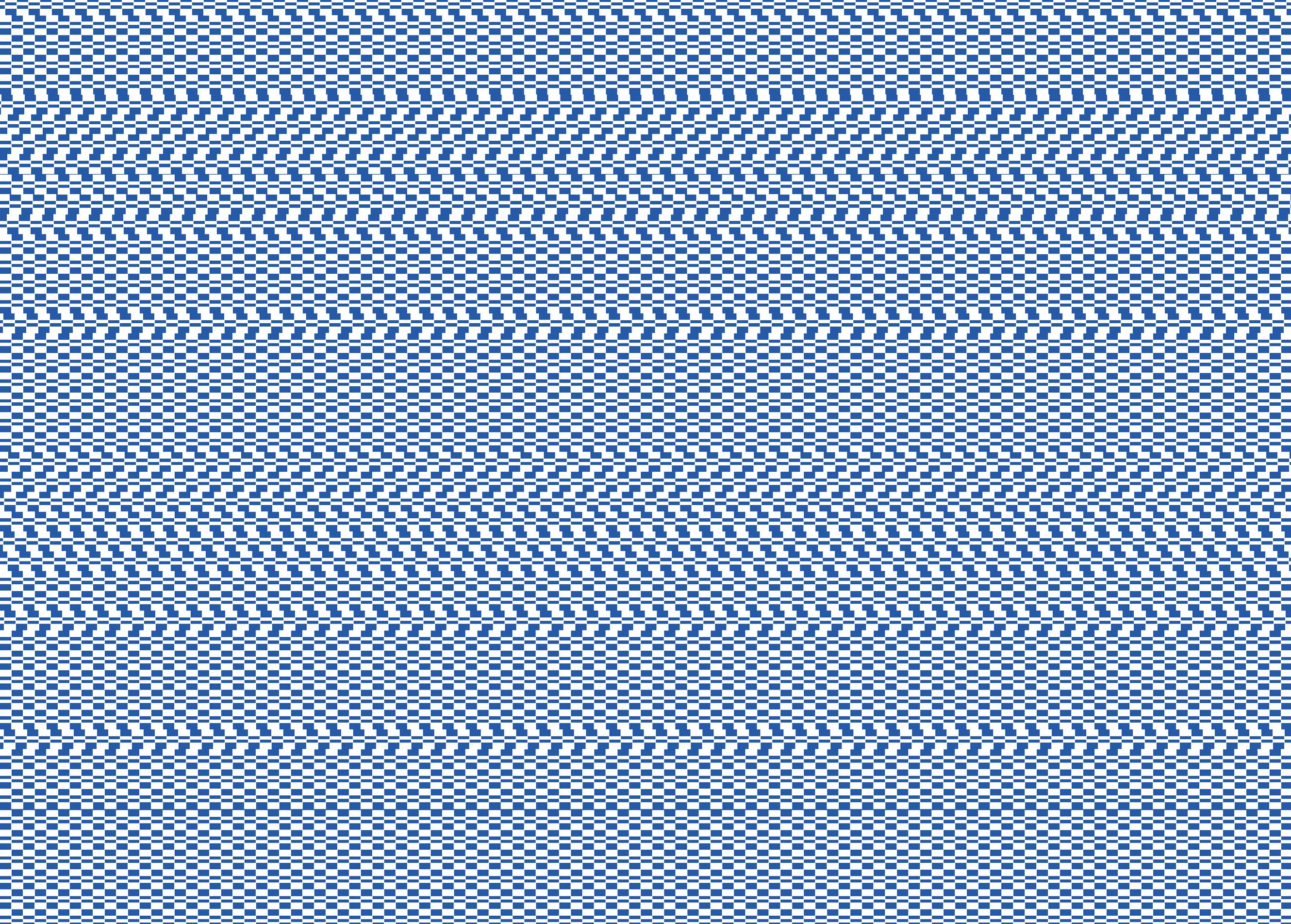
Curators Bani Haykal and Joleen Loh have worked closely with the artists in the development of this exhibition. Together they have carefully negotiated questions of language and display to realise a project that is ambitious in scope and the information it shares imaginatively with its audience. Each of the artists works intensively with sonic material and we sense this intensity in the temperament and complexity of the exhibited material and in the range of practices we experience through the exhibition.

The curators have been conscious that Singapore's recent history of sound in the arts has been overlooked in exhibitions and criticism. They have attempted to redress this especially through the contributions of specialists such as artists and archivists Mark Wong and Koh Nguang How. I would also like to acknowledge Charles Merewether, the director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore from 2010 to 2013, for his introductory text, which discusses the wider international context of experimental music and sound art.

In the environs of an art school that places experimentation and creative innovation at the forefront of education, it is fitting that the basic premises of *SOUND: Latitudes and Attitudes* are construed around interdisciplinary work, collaborative practices and experimental forms. Here, installations, music, performance, writing and curating intertwine in and near the Earl Lu Gallery, which is situated in an unusually discrete mezzanine within the dynamic architecture of the LASALLE College of the Arts building.

Our thanks go to the generous supporters of the exhibition and catalogue: the National Arts Council, the Arts Fund, B Cube Entertainment, and the Singapore Biennale. Sincere thanks go to curators Bani Haykal and Joleen Loh for their creative and dedicated work on this major project, as well as to all of the ICAS staff for helping to ensure its success. We congratulate the artists and warmly thank them for their enthusiastic collaboration with the curators and the entire ICAS team.

Bala Starr  
Director, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore



[...] open yourself therefore, window  
and you night, spring out of the room  
like a kernel from the peach,  
like a priest from the church  
[...] let's go to the community park  
before the rooster starts crowing  
so that the city will be scandalized [...]  
– Tristan Tzara, *Înserează (Night Falling)*, 1971

*SOUND: Latitudes and Attitudes* celebrates the value of sound, noise and music in our lives. The curators have asked artists to lead us as their audience, taking us out of ourselves physically to enter willingly into an experience of the sonorous world. It is a proposition as to how 'sound emanates, communicates, amplifies and silences, [...] an active ingredient in influencing the way we experience the world we live in, both audible and inaudible.'<sup>1</sup> Sound lifts us up, out, beyond; it allows for flight from the humdrum reality of the spaces that surround us.

Modernism was borne under the wings of modernisation and with it came the release of a world of sounds that were both the product of an industrial age and human intervention. In 1913, the Futurist artist Luigi Russolo published his manifesto *The Art of Noises*. While different from the aesthetics of sound, *The Art of Noises* originated in the engine room of modernisation and out of the vibrant life of modernist culture, as well as twentieth-century music by musician-composers such as Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Erik Satie and others. Later, the eminent art historian Rudolf Arnheim wrote, in 1936, that one of the chief artistic tasks of radio was 'the rediscovery of the musicality of sound in noise and in language, and the reunification of music, noise and language in order to obtain a unity of material.'<sup>2</sup>

The new era had brought with it a world of sounds emanating out of nature, the material world of objects, and the man-made modern world. The filmmaker Jean Epstein had already imagined this when he wrote that 'through the transposition of natural sounds, it becomes possible to create chords and dissonances, melodies and symphonies of noise, which are a new and specifically cinematographic music'.<sup>3</sup>

There was the sense that a modern and truly contemporary culture could embrace sound, noise and experimental music, a world that was different, alive. It would be like collage or a mixing of syntax representing the vibrancy of the city and mix of cultures. Tristan

Tzara, the great Romanian artist, and one of the founders of Dada, loved sound and experimental music, and spoken word in any language. In the Dada-based Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Tzara used Aranda songs (an Aboriginal group based in Central Australia) drawn from German translations by the linguist and anthropologist TGH Strehlow whose life work revolved around the region. The idea of chance, so dear to the Dadaists, was essential to the potentiality of sound and experimental music to be used in the way pieces of paper had been first used in collage.

During World War Two, the French composer Pierre Schaeffer worked on improving the understanding of the field of audio-communications and radiophonic techniques so as to broadcast more effectively the Resistance movement. New technologies were developed that included microphones, phonographs and magnetic tape recorders.

After World War Two, what happened then was not to be repeated in verve, excitement and innovation with the flowering of the Concrete movement. Composers like Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, Olivier Messiaen, and Edgard Varèse amongst others championed concrete music. It began to spread as far as Brazil and developed strongly in Japan, Germany, and elsewhere in Europe and North America. In the early twentieth century, the movement involved artists from across a spectrum; these were artists who had been making objects, sculpture, painting, prints or writing poems, who discovered this other world of sound, noise and experimental music that they could explore. Poetry, most especially, appeared to have the closest bond in its ability to be thought of in terms of its brevity and economy of language along with its reflective iteration of daily life. There was a reformulation of the harmonic, a rethinking of what the harmonic might mean in the mid-twentieth century. The composer Pierre Henry, who was instrumental in combining Concrete and electronic music in the postwar era, wrote that 'musique concrète was not a study of timbre, it is focused on envelopes, forms. It must be presented by means of non-traditional characteristics. [...] one might say that the origin of this music is also found in the interest in 'plastifying' music, of rendering it plastic like sculpture ...'.<sup>4</sup>

During the postwar period, the exchange between Tokyo and New York was intense and led to some extraordinary concerts presented at the Suigetsu Center in Tokyo involving Nam June Paik, Yoko Ono, John Cage, David Tudor and Takehisa Kosugi.<sup>5</sup> Cage's idea of chance and indeterminacy were influential and the concerts at the Suigetsu Center took the mixing of art, sound, voice and acoustic

music further than it had ever been presented before. A composer and violinist, Kosugi had been a member of Group Ongaku, a small Japanese experimental group that, in the late fifties, released tapes of their recordings based on sounds from nature, from timber yards, their living rooms and kitchens with the sounds of clinking glasses, of spoons and pots.<sup>6</sup>

From the mid-seventies on, the music scene grew in many different directions. Computer technology had developed making music systems more accessible, superseding analog synthesizers and allowing for greater control over composition, scoring, sound processing and the development of electronic music. Notions of duration, repetition, notation, and performance became more important. Listening environments too became more significant in artistic practices in regard to both perceptual and physical acts of listening in space.

One hundred years after Russolo, the art of sound, experimental music and noise has continued to expand through the many facets of contemporary art practice and legacy of the twentieth century. This project is an ongoing celebration of a world of almost impure experimentation, no longer guided by the acoustic limpid purity of harmonic melodies. It takes the domain of listening further, takes its audiences further into a world of experimentation, into a world where the arts intermingle with and articulate the contemporary moment of urban life.

- 1 Curators Bani Haykal and Joleen Loh, exhibition proposal, 2013.
- 2 Marc Battier, 'What the GRM Brought to Music: From Musique Concrète to Acousmatic Music', in *Organised Sound*, 12 (3), 2007, pp. 189–202.
- 3 *ibid.*, 2007, p. 191.
- 4 Michel Chion, *Pierre Henry*, Paris: Fayard, 2003. Henry worked with Schaeffer amongst others during the 1940s, including a collaborative production of *Symphonie Pour un Homme Seul* in 1950 and then went on to write the score for the first 'musique concrète' for a short commercial film *Astrologie ou le Miroir de la Vie* in 1952.
- 5 Frank Zappa appeared on the popular variety TV show *The Steve Allen Show* in 1963 where he performed an experimental music piece *Playing Music on a Bicycle*. The piece was not dissimilar to John Cage's *Water Walk* that was presented on another TV show *I've Got a Secret* in 1960. Cage created music on the show by using a bath tub, a rubber duck, an iron pipe, a water pitcher, a goose-call, kitchen blender, watering can and ice-cubes, a vase of roses, five radios, a piano, and two cymbals.
- 6 As much an artist as a musician, Kosugi became a founding figure of the Fluxus movement in Japan, and worked internationally as a Fluxus artist and was later a key member of the Taj Mahal Travelers in the early seventies.

## Just Outside Our Hearing Joleen Loh

The soul is lonely and weary of its existence.  
To reaffirm its existence in a silent landscape,  
sounds are made but not necessarily music.  
If we observe the wolf that wails in the  
middle of the night, it simply wants to  
express its existence. A reaffirming sound is  
made, while everybody else is provoked.  
When you hear something provocative,  
it is not necessarily noise.  
– Zai Kuning, *Conference of the Birds*, 2006

There is, said Pythagoras, a sound  
the planet makes: a kind of music  
just outside our hearing, the proportion  
and the resonance of things – not  
the clang of theory or the wuthering  
of human speech, not even  
the bright song of sex or hunger, but  
the unringed ringing that  
supports them all.  
– Jan Zwicky, *Practising Bach*, 2011

Why listen?

Let us put aside the at-times convenient but all too clichéd argument – that you may close your eyes, but not your ears. That the analogy is also all too literal is not new, for sound is not only registered through our ears but also through our bodies and our brain. Listening is more than merely physical.

Listening is an act of engagement with the world around us. It generates connections between us and our surroundings with such multiplicity, orienting us as one amongst many other listening bodies. Unlike hearing (the perceiving of sounds), listening is resolute, venturing outwards to the vibrancy of things outside of oneself and drawing inward, bringing our attention to self and surroundings as one. For Jean-Luc Nancy, to listen is to be conscious of an expansive, open mode of being in which the distinctions of interior and exterior, 'I' and the self of the 'other', collapse. Drawing our attention to the subject – or listener, if I may call him or her that – who becomes aware of his or her surroundings, Nancy writes:

'To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, *at the same time*, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from

me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside, and it is through such a double, quadruple, or sextuple opening that a “self” can take place. To be listening is to be *at the same time* outside and inside, to be open from without and from within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other.’<sup>1</sup>

That is to say, sensorial matter can mediate and animate new relationships between a subject and its environment, connecting a constellation of spaces, bodies and objects, should we choose to listen. Stirred from insularity, the self thus becomes interwoven with the world, aware of an increasing participation with things beyond oneself, one that unfolds in time and space. It is listening, as Heidegger underlines, that the human being (*Dasein*) engages with and participates in the world and is made meaningful through connection, defined by its very awareness and openness to itself and its relationship to other entities. He writes: ‘Listening to ... is *Dasein*’s existential way of Being-open as Being-with for Others. Indeed, hearing constitutes the primary and authentic way in which *Dasein* is open for its ownmost potentiality-for-Being – as in hearing the voice of the friend whom every *Dasein* carries with it. *Dasein* hears because it understands. [...] Being-with develops in listening to one another [*Aufeinander-horen*].’<sup>2</sup> Listening is, then, a form of participation too, a giving of attention to the people and world around us – a form of care. It requires effort, an active process that suggests openness to others. For instance, if I am listening to someone speak within a framework of sociality, receiving and engaging in conversation while rejecting others, then to be heard is to cross boundaries, to be acknowledged, to be given attention to.

Yet despite being contemporaneous with the sounds that permeate our body, listening remains full of uncertainty. Between what I hear and the sonic phenomenon or object, I will never comprehend its truth, but can only grasp at its fleetingness, generating an understanding for myself – the meaning of what I hear is always still yet to arrive. Therein lies a contradiction: sound demands our complicity but persistently obstructs understanding. How do we make sense of or find meaning in an expressive medium that, unlike the visual tangibility and ‘stability’ of images, insists on the disparity between what is being heard and what is understood?

More often than not, we pick and choose what we listen to – words spoken to us, music, environmental sounds – looking for familiar signals or signs, quickly affixing mental images to them in an attempt to be able to familiarize ourselves with them, gain mastery over them, categorize and simplify them, or give them

names. But sound resists such simplistic signifiers. It challenges and expands our thoughts without necessarily generating a reality of lived experience, allowing for imagination to probe at meaning. Rather than muting and neutralising these resonances, perhaps listening demands being susceptible to sound’s uncertainties. That is, meaning is perhaps not situated in the ability to equate what is listened to with reasoning or comprehension – connecting perceptible registers and the intelligible register – but it is found within the straining towards possible meaning itself. Rather than casting aside that which cannot be easily grasped, it is perhaps within this tension that we may engage a resonant meaning. After all, listening is not simply about engaging with the familiar.

Sound rejects any attempt that, whether intended or not, flattens its complexities and resonances. This is exactly why critical discourse does badly in dealing with sound. As Salomé Voeglin pointed out: ‘[critical discourse] is the very opposite of sound, which is always the heard, immersive and present. Its language relegates the sonic into a position of attribute: sound is loud, clear, silent or noisy, it is fast or slow, but never is it the noun under consideration. Instead it is sublimated to a visual referent, which mutes its particularity’.<sup>3</sup> Any attempt to write about sound – as I do now – is an exercise in this very contradiction. Ultimately, the search for meaning within sound must remain, first, a strategy of critical and intuitive listening, of experience, rather than of reasoning or of discourse.

### **SOUND: The exhibition**

The considerations of listening – of subject, an economy of relating, attention, communication and meaning – that inextricably contour the sonic arts, and how to facilitate a space in which audiences may experience and encounter various forms of sound in a non-linear manner, was central to the conceptualization and development of the first edition of *SOUND*. Developed together with Bani Haykal, *SOUND* aims to be series of exhibitions and programmes that will provide a platform on which to engage with sonic arts, with each edition focusing on specific approaches to sound or aspects of sonic activity. The first edition, *SOUND: Latitudes and Attitudes*, explores a vast array of sonic expressions by various practitioners in Singapore whose practices share the use of sound as a medium or subject. Featuring works by visual artists, musicians, composers, performance and media artists, the exhibition engages with a wide scope of sonic works that invite various possibilities of listening. The exhibition consists of five components in and outside of the gallery space including curated listening stations, a series of changing

installations, sound performances, a selection of sound scores, and an archive.

The works featured as part of the listening stations, or audio points, are representative of this broad spectrum of sonic sensibilities, from stillness to noise, random to structured forms, and personal to collective interactions with sound. They invite listeners to experience sound on a more intimate level. This spectrum of sounds is experienced not only across the listening stations but within the gathered compositions that continually shift, washing in and out of the private realm of the ears. It encourages a concentrated listening, introducing alternative instrumentations, electronic possibilities, silences, found sounds, and noise. It spans a field that is divergent in how it challenges or extends sonic paradigms, and it was necessary to include artists who were often conceptually and creatively opposed. From the works of Joyce Koh to Gulayu Arkestra, Shaun Sankaran's work as Mindfuckingboy to Darren Ng, The Observatory to Zul Mahmod, and more, the selection of work for the listening stations also makes manifest the complex entanglements between experimental music and sound art. Their works are placed in relation to one another not to resolve a gap but to facilitate the connections that draw such tensions out.

Developments in sound installation have allowed for sound to be seen further as a medium of art. Bridging sound and the visual (or giving sound an object, so to speak), sound installations move away from the durational towards the spatial conditions around them. They pursue a heightened perception of spatial relations and provide for a temporal experience that is separate from that of the concert experience. Space is intensely bound up with how and in what ways we experience sound, and this is explored in varying degrees through a series of changing sound installations by Mohamad Riduan, Zul Mahmod, Ong Kian-Peng, and Darren Ng.

Coinciding with each change-over of installations within the exhibition space are a series of sound performances by Mohamad Riduan, Zai Tang, Shaun Sankaran, Kai Lam, Brian O'Reilly, George Chua, Gulayu Arkestra, and Dennis Tan in collaboration with Delphine Mei. The performativity of sonic material probes sound as a specific medium in its articulation, expansion or escape from conventional musical parameters, moving away from sound as object to integrate with environmental noise, social and acoustical dynamics, to meet the viewers in their minds, to be completed in the mind. Some of these performances particularly explore sound as a social, interactive medium that activates various relational exchanges between the

work and audiences, between individuals within a crowd, seeking to inspire a form of sociality.

The exhibition also features a selection of visual scores rendered in various formats. Music scores, or sheet music, have been used as guides to performing a piece of music, and for studying and archiving musical compositions. Where modern musical notation may prove to be rigid and authoritative, not to mention that comprehending them also requires a literacy of modern musical notations, composers and artists have turned to alternative means of expressing sonic ideas and the relationship between sounds. These include modifications to conventional stave notations as well as the use of graphs, drawings, paintings, and various forms of graphic notations. They often rely on forms of abstraction or basic indications of sonic arrangements that allow for more open interpretation, offering various entry points into performing and understanding a work. The works brought together in this section provide insight into the artists' processes of working with sound and their visualization of the relationship between sounds.

Enriching the exhibition is an archive developed by artist Mark Wong, titled *Finding Sound*. It is conceived as a temporary space for uncovering and analyzing the complex yet often overlooked history of sonic arts in Singapore. For Wong, it is an attempt to '[look] at the ways that a nascent sonic culture has formed out of the strands of experimental music, academic music, noise and underground music, theatre, and performance art'.<sup>4</sup> It comprises a series of new video interviews, photographs, event collaterals, and recordings of past events and audio releases, with annotations by Wong.



Tang Da Wu with music performance by Joe Ng, *To Make Friends is All We Want*, BigO Concert, Singapore Music Festival, 1989. Photo: Koh Nguang How

Included in the archive are documentations and collaterals of events particularly during the late 1980s and early 1990s, which saw a shared spirit of enquiry and experimentation, often through the work of collectives and collaborations. Such instances include the

collaboration between experimental musician Joe Ng and artist Tang Da Wu for a performance *To Make Friends is all We Want* during the Singapore Music Festival in 1989 which took place along Orchard Road. Another example is *The Time Show*, a 24-hour event held on the eve of 1990, organized by The Artists Village at their studio in Ulu Sembawang. It saw a broad spectrum of practitioners come together including, for example, a joint performance by Khairul Anwar and the Late Comers, *This Time 12 O'Clock Comes Later than Scheduled*, a collaboration between theatre practitioners, musicians, sculptors, painters, and performance artists. The Artists' General Assembly, a week-long arts festival that took place over 1993-94 organized by 5th Passage Artists Ltd and The Artists Village, also witnessed various exchanges between alternative art and music practitioners, working in collaboration or in mutual support of one another's experimentations.



Left: Khairul Anwar and the Late Comers, *This Time 12 O'Clock Comes Later Than Scheduled*, The Time Show, The Artists Village, 1989-90. Photo: Koh Nguang How



Right: Gilles Massot and Philippe Radoux, *Good Evening, My Name is Michael Peuh 18 18.7*, performance at the wedding of Ronni and Uta Pinsler, 1985. Photo: Emily Ng

The archive also features glimpses into artist Koh Nguang How's solo exhibition *Monuments for Trees* at The Substation's garden in 1990, during which he collaborated with experimental music duo Corporate Toil (Joe Ng and Wong Fook Yew) for their performance *Certain Earth Screams*; as well as *Body Fields*, also a New Year's Eve event in 1992 organized by 5th Passage Artists Ltd during which, as Koh Nguang How pointed out, Convent Garden's musician Jason Tan created sounds using his body and found objects, in his collaboration with XYLVA's Daniel Joseph.<sup>5</sup> I list only a few of many examples. While it can be argued that the use of sound in performances during the '80s and early '90s was not driven by an interest in sound alone, as pointed out by Lee Wen and Zai Kuning, these sounds were not a superfluous additive to performance, rather they activated an active perception that brought situations and relationships into play through the immediacy of sound within a performative matrix. This mirrors a Cagean sensibility in which

music expands to become increasingly open-ended as a means rather than an end.

Many sonic stirrings in Singapore have also gone undocumented, or are overlooked and forgotten. The body of work of artist Gilles Massot, who moved from Marseille and has been based in Singapore since 1981, is one example. Massot conceived of and organised the Art Commandos, who during the Festival Fringe of 1988, performed and created installations across various public spaces, encouraging a spirit of artistic experimentation including working with sound through improvisations with DIY music instruments and sound-makers. Another example worth mentioning is one of the earliest sound and light performances in Singapore, *Good Evening, My Name is Michael Peuh 18 18.7*, by Massot in collaboration with musician and sound artist Philippe Radoux in 1985. The performance, created within the context of multimedia art collective Talking Eyes, took place at the wedding of the hosts of *Magic Night*, Ronni and Uta Pinsler, who commissioned the performance. The performance was a progressive build-up of lights and sounds, generated using unorthodox instruments such as tape recorders, a TV set, two-way radio transceivers, cymbals, and text read whilst lying on the ground.<sup>6</sup>

These events are largely overlooked for various reasons, not only because little was written about sonic experimentations. Massot points out that his practice then (and now) was broadly multidisciplinary and that this resulted in him falling outside the radar of people writing about the visual arts in Singapore.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, considerations of national identity were a key concern at the time and Massot, who had only arrived in 1981, did not fit comfortably with the then-present viewpoints of the local art scene however transnational it may have been in its origins and development. Worthwhile sonic stirrings such as this that can further understandings of the development of sonic arts in Singapore have often not been written about, and many have taken place in underground or at alternative venues, with little documentation to speak of.

Many such events, including those I've mentioned above, were related to us in conversation, based on personal experiences, encounters, and memories. It is for this reason that *Finding Sound* also ventures to explore oral tradition as a gateway to preserving memory and 'passing down' local knowledge of Singapore's sonic culture. This is explored through a series of interviews with artists, archivists, musicians, academics and observers of the sonic field. It attempts to piece together various positions and personal investments in sonic arts that overlap and contradict, offering audiences a glimpse into

a complex history from different viewpoints. Far from being born out of systematic research, it is, rather, a space to reflect on various fragments of local events and developments in the sonic arts from the 1980s onwards, revisited through the individual experiences of its participants and observers. It abounds in personal stories, forgotten stances, suppositions, names, and memories. This search for the intersections between sound's and the visual arts' intersecting trajectories is an attempt to understand the beginnings of sonic arts in Singapore – one that is unraveled to be questioned, probed, and diagnosed.

*SOUND* is the realization of an exhibition we wanted to see and hear in Singapore. Despite the many intersections of sound's and visual art's trajectories, there has not yet been an exhibition dedicated to the scope of divergent developments in sound in the arts, so to speak.<sup>8</sup> Today, there remains a divide between sound and the visual arts, with sound works often taking the back seat when it comes to thinking about art and exhibition-making.<sup>9</sup> This exhibition, in its first edition, seeks to explore the sonic languages of various practitioners in Singapore, an invitation to listen to a range of sonic expressions. Consider this a first attempt.

- 1 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2007, p. 14.
- 2 Paul Heggarty, *Noise/Music: A History*, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2007, p. 206.
- 3 Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art*, London: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 2010, p. 14.
- 4 Mark Wong, email corresp., 2013.
- 5 Koh Nguang How, pers. comm., 2013.
- 6 Gilles Massot, email corresp., 2013.
- 7 Gilles Massot, email corresp., 2013.
- 8 In this respect, the alternative contemporary arts space The Substation has been crucial to the development of sonic arts in Singapore. It has for many years been the fertile middle-ground between visual artists, musicians, and performers, and has continually supported sound art and experimental music activities.
- 9 This is due to several reasons including, as artists have pointed out, the lack of sound curators and suitable infrastructure in galleries, lack of critical discourse or writing about sound, and the sustainability of sonic practice, to name a few.

## If You Gave Sound a Chance, Everything Else Would Not Matter Ian Woo

We make sounds everyday because we are alive. We also make sounds in an attempt to signal to someone.

On the road, horn signals can vary from culture to culture. One honk, two honks and, depending on their rhythmic duration, horns can evoke extreme reactions between traffic order and mayhem. I do not like the sound of car horns but, of course, some are more pleasant than others. I reckon the Mercedes Benz makes a pleasant honk, especially if you use it in short stabs. Just a 'bimp'; there is something inherent within its tremble and bass frequencies with velvety bottom notes and highs that resonate clear as a bell.

So what other sounds do I like?

I like hearing the sounds of those myna birds singing in the morning. I also like to hear the sound of different motor engines starting every morning. You can just hear them from all directions from 7.30 in the morning. These sounds stand out to me because they are the first sounds of the city I hear upon waking. Before this realisation, I was asleep.

Do I hear sounds when I am asleep? Do I hear sounds when I dream?

The following are a recent selection of personal anecdotes of sonic encounters with musicians and sound artists from Singapore. These examples are not definitive, but rather reflect influences and positions in which sound as art is explored in this island city. The examples could range from performative abstractions to socially inspired sound assemblages within spaces.

What is the soundtrack of one's dream state?

I am thinking about Zai Tang's *Sacred Soundscapes* (2010), an installation at the Esplanade Tunnel Link where, as you walked through the interior corridor, you would hear segments of sounds that were sampled from the city. These included sounds of people, nature and animals of Singapore. I have no direct visual relation to the source of the recording, its location, or occupants. Just sounds that are captured on a digital recording device, and played back onto speakers within the tunnel – the sounds of two spaces twice removed.

Like photography and painting where light and liquid morph and situate a new image separate from the source, so are recorded sounds merged, where the sonic ambient and the recording machine

form a new audio materiality. As I walked through the Esplanade Tunnel Link, there were many people walking with me. The crowd was annoying, all those chattering and shuffling sounds, and at some point I wished the work were installed at a quieter location. Of course, one man's contemplation is another person's noise. But an ideal place and time was not the desire for this work. Perhaps, my desire for contemplation was exactly what Tang wanted to provoke, to bring to light the fact that the world is getting crowded.

*Sacred Soundscapes* also reframed our stereotype of audio sounds being played back in commercial and public spaces. We have heard countless easy listening music songs being projected in malls, shops and buildings, constantly used as psychological decoration to bring an element of calm to our routine shopping habits (my current favourite is the looped music at the NTUC Fairprice supermarket). With this installation, the framing of sounds was itself in constant flux. Real time and staged sounds were allowed to mingle, suggesting an open reading of what we think we know. I believe Tang's work was aimed at intertwining our sonic memories of the sacred (natural) within the white noise of the everyday. Depending on where you were positioned while experiencing the work, you might have found your sacred voice.

I also remember attending *Frottage*, an experimental music gig at the Pigeon Hole organised by hard-core punk party starters 7x0x07 together with Singaporean record label Ujikaji Records ('Ujikaji' means experimental in Bahasa Melayu). Three parts of the local band The Observatory were performing a piece of electronic music. It was a riot, a cacophony compared to their usual sets. I sensed that it was like The Observatory's day off, where they got to play whatever they wanted you to listen to. After the gig, Vivian Wang from the band came up to me and said she sometimes feels really bad for their audiences. I asked her why and she said that it was like they were torturing the audience, as if they wanted to see how much music and noise they could tolerate.

Well, no one walked out, but perhaps it would have been uncool to do that since it was The Observatory that was performing and, also, no one would want to give an indication that they were 'not open' to 'art'. The music they played that night was more akin to a sound experience. It was effects-laden and heavily layered; I remember that at some point, there were voices, and even those were saturated with some sort of distortion device.

I am citing The Observatory here because their members were off

springs from the history of Singapore's alternative music scene in the late 1980s and '90s. This was a time when the first line-up of punk-influenced bands like the Opposition Party, Stomping Ground and The Bored Phucks were making rock 'n' roll sounds that were naïve and raw. It was a pervious and nervous sound played to a city that most of the world believed had no sense of art or any kind of culture. I believe many local bands who made music at this time planted seeds in a new generation of independent and progressive sound seekers. It was also a time when we were introduced to a performance by the American avant-garde influenced rock band Sonic Youth; an event that influenced a generation of music lovers to detune their guitars and find new ways to discover sounds from their usual instruments. I remember suddenly seeing and hearing solo performances by musicians playing the guitar laid flat on its back or on a tabletop.

There were also ad hoc 24-hour noise and punk performances in the early millennium where bands and configurations of curious musicians would pair up or perform solo acts of improvised sounds. Experimental music events like *CHOPPA* (organised by Tim O'Dwyer, Darren Moore and Brian O'Reilly) and *PLAYFREELY* (organised by The Observatory) were created to provide audiences and musicians a space to interact and to discover new ways to perform with their instruments. There was a sense of unlearning as well as risk-taking. There were nights where the performance or 'set' was lost on the audience, but there were also nights where the performers discovered new sounds that excited the audience. The Observatory understood the importance of developing this research for new sounds. Formed from various influences of pop, progressive rock, jazz and the avant-garde, they are at the forefront of tweaking their compositions to include new presentations of song formats and musical arrangements.

The further use of new instrumentation and prepared sound objects can be seen in various performances that were held and curated by Charles Merewether at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore from 2010 to 2013. Cross-disciplinary wind instrumentalists like Bani Haykal, Tim O'Dwyer and Mohamad Riduan were experimenting with the acoustics of space, the physical body and the use of sound to 'paint' and activate the relationship between the body, object and the environment. All three artists work with wind instruments as sound generators. They are constantly looking for ways to discover new acoustics within the history of prepared instruments, all from breathing, blowing and channeling wind to preparing the instrument to activate and even, at times, play itself.

I would like to cite a particular performance where Haykal and Riduan played opposite each other. The performance was akin to witnessing a live sound laboratory where the projection of sounds was released from various objects in the room. The work conjured an imaginary stage set, an unknown location where sounds were heard as a form of signal. I witnessed a situation where projected sounds were coming from various parts of objects and corners of the gallery, providing the audience with fresh ways to move around the space and experience within themselves a cubist manifestation of real time and space.

Apart from the use of instrumentation to simulate body, object and space, there are also examples of artists using more immediately physical parts of their body to articulate sounds as art. The human voice is the most immediate sound in our everyday vocabulary of sound usage. In fact, we talk so much that speech becomes simply a way to transmit language and meaning, but what about the grain of the voice, that which is heard as a textural device? AnGie Seah uses the voice to sing, often in relation to a filter device she has prepared. Submerging her face in a bowl of water, she utters, sings and screams with dynamic variation generated by bubbles and murky delays. When not submerged, the voice rises like primal wind, often like a drone from the past. Does this voice belong in this city? The voice repeats its guttural pronouncement repeatedly, each time revealing new shapes and surprises.

Ang Song-Ming is often identified as a visual artist because much of what he presents is often seen and heard in an exhibition space. I once attended an exhibition he was a part of, *In the Flesh: New Contemporaries* at Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore in 2010, where I witnessed the artist generating YouTube disco songs in a gallery setting as part of his work *Do You Wanna Dance*. I spied a disco ball, suggesting that we were supposed to dance to the songs. I did my bit to Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' but the crowd did not pick up on that; I left soon after but was told that later in the night the crowd got the hang of it. Another time, I saw this video of Ang tuning and assembling a piano. In the video, due to the process of assembly and tuning, random sounds of the piano were heard accompanying the act of assembly. Observing another person's manual labour of constructing an object that we associate with the making of music history became pertinent. Seeing and hearing this conjured within me a meditation on art and the everyday.

There is a strong instinct to bring people together with music in Ang's work; there is a naïve and sentimental sensibility to explore our

strange, hidden relationship with the music of our time. The meeting and re-examination of music cultures that divide our everyday aesthetic barriers are important starting points for Ang's practice. I have to add that after experiencing his work, there are times when I am not sure if Ang's work is about music or sound. Perhaps it is about the music we love but will never understand. Often, even the great composer does not fully understand his music. But we need it in our lives. Like Karaoke culture, those who believe in it will participate and know that it will take us to a better place.

I will end this essay by stressing that the element of sound is challenging in terms of its presentation. Being in the realm of sonic nuance, many of its presentations could easily be misunderstood as indulgent. The world is also getting smaller, therefore simulations of sound and image are becoming common entities in our lives. So, how then do sound artists discover better ways to bring their work to our attention?

I believe that there are many resources that we need to explore in order to learn about how sound might be presented in its best light. Artists need to understand that in order for their sound works to be fully appreciated, critical and relevant production components will need to be investigated. On the other side of the spectrum, audiences need to be ready to see and listen to the work of artists. More importantly, they need to put aside their time to wait for the sound – it is my firm belief that if they gave sound a chance, everything else would not matter.

So do I hear sounds when I am asleep? Do I hear sounds when I dream?

I dreamt a silent dream last night. I also remember there was a sound from my head present throughout the dream sequence. I think it was that of the dream narrator's voice.

### Leaving Zero

The path to becoming a good listener is often far from being smooth and homogenous. However, in my attempt to fathom the whys and wherefores of the act of listening, I have discovered that there is no 'big' secret or mystery behind it all. For that matter, it is no 'small' secret or mystery either: 'big' and 'small' can be construed as a dichotomous pair, arising from the same judgement of the past, failing to recognise the insignificance of each other at present. Granted that there are in circulation anecdotes and myths about the trials and tribulations of someone embarking upon or who had embarked on such a journey, anyone can become a good listener. It is, ultimately, a matter of choice. There is no restriction as to who can, has, or lacks the ability, or is suitable as a candidate for becoming a good listener. There is no moral imperative to be a good listener or to be a certain kind of listener. It may transpire that what one chooses to listen to or the way one chooses to listen is an entirely different matter, which incidentally may or may not bear any consequence on choosing to become a listener in the first instance, but differ only in perspective from making a decision to embark on the journey. In other words, to become a listener is to listen (stating the obvious maybe), but not to be dependent on what is put together, i.e. how it is composed or how it is done. These factors might be contemporaneous to one another, but they could be considered separately, spaced out in the course of time, located in a spatial-temporal dyad. Suffice to say there was a point when I had made a decision to become a listener, making a choice to attend concerts, visit galleries and museums, seek new experiences in experimental music and sound art. Let us call this point zero.

The concept of zero is important in this analogy of becoming a listener or, for that matter, becoming anything – playing the role of daughter, wife, or mother, for example. Zero symbolises a turning point. It is a symbol in place of a former identity or an abandonment of that identity already in one's possession, for example that of a 'non-listener' in the case of becoming a 'listener'. That is to say, if I had ever considered becoming a listener, I am already a non-listener, carrying with me an imaginary (negative) zero (point of departure). Regardless of whether the identity of a listener is represented by a positive number, say 1, or a decimal fraction like 0.1, it can easily be grasped as a departure from zero, going from a non-listener to a listener. In the same metaphor, the ambitions or desires to become a listener can be visualised in terms of negative numbers, e.g. -0.1, -1, etc. to imagine tracing how near or far one has travelled to arrive at a point of departure (namely 'zero'), a juncture to make another decision. Hence, for me 'leaving zero' represents

the concept of becoming and resembles the activity of counting, which incidentally plays a crucial role in understanding organised sound – pitch, rhythm, harmony, and so on.

### Zero Shift

On counting, or 'leaving zero', it is taken for granted that in our quotidian encounter with numbers, we have at our disposal ten symbols – 0 to 9 – to represent the quantifiable things/objects we have the desire to put together or to organise. Take for example the act of grouping apples plucked from a tree. So, 1 apple plus 1 apple equals 2 apples, or '2(1 apple)'. We are taught in elementary school that this number system is called the 'denary system', sometimes the 'decimal system', to mean 'base ten'. For every ten counts of one, represented here by '1 apple', a zero will be left (deposited) in the place of the 'units' or 'ones' and, subsequently, the place of the 'tens', 'hundreds', 'thousands' and so on, shifting from right to left. Hence, 9 apples plus 1 apple equals 10 apples, representing ten apples, and 19 apples plus 1 apple equals 20 apples, representing 20 apples, or more precisely 'two times ten one counts of apples'. It requires no huge leap of the imagination; for a second time, a zero is left in the place of the 'units', superimposed on a previous zero, still denoting a 'ten times one count of something' in terms of its place value. But since the symbol 0 remains the same, the trace of the palimpsest becomes invisible. We could make this explicit by expressing it as:

$$2(101)$$

By the same token, when we imagine a 2 in the denary system, the elaborate expression is:

$$2(100)$$

Now the trace is made visible!

In the worded form, 'ten apples' is easily construed as the abbreviation of 'ten one counts of apples'. However, the symbol '10' (read one-zero) in '10 apples' is 'ten one counts of apples' only in the denary system that we take for granted in our everyday operation, granted that we can actually have ten apples to arrange and it matches with 'ten' in the denary system. '10' is 'two times one count of something' in the binary system (base two) with only two symbols (0 and 1) to work with, and 'three times one count of something' in the ternary (base three) when there are only three symbols (0, 1 and 2), four in quaternary (base four), five in quinary (base five), and so

on. Hence, what we call an actual group of ten apples in symbolic terms – ‘10 apples’ – is affective (feels good) only when it correlates to a ‘ten one counts of apple’ in a particular base (denary).

In each number system, the symbol ‘0’ takes on a different value, depending on the base of that system. It is this zero taking on a different value with a shifting base that helps illustrate what I meant earlier by ‘a symbol in the place of a former identity or an abandonment of that identity already in one’s possession’. ‘Leaving zero’ is a multi-base affair. Carrying on from the ‘binary’ example of a ‘non-listener’ (zero) becoming a ‘listener’ (one), we might say that the identity of ‘listener’ could be represented again by a ‘zero’, this time as a ‘non-experimentalist’ on the journey to become an ‘experimentalist’ (one). The person who was once a ‘non-listener’ always carries with him/her the point of departure (zero), but is now a ‘non-experimentalist’. There is no mind-body (actual) separation because it is the base of zero (point of departure) that has shifted, and hence on the surface nothing has transformed, unless made explicit. The above could be expressed as:



Thence,



A shifting of the base, or the basis, can thus be understood as a perspective based on a previous perspective.

Another example would be to imagine ‘leaving zero’ by 10; hence it could be a move by one, two, or three steps, etc. depending on the ‘base’ we are counting in. We are always carrying around with us a ‘negative zero’ (an invisible, implicit and undeclared point of departure) but unless we make explicit our ‘base’, we do not know how far we have progressed in becoming a listener, an experimentalist or whatever we have chosen to become. Following on from that, we could declare ourselves as type ‘10’ listeners, and unless we are prepared to demonstrate the basis of type ‘10’, we are only of type ‘10’ in appearance or semblance. For example, I am a hipster because I am a hipster in appearance, or I merely resemble one.

‘I am a listener’ is merely a declaration. I have a choice of whether or not to declare myself as one, or continue to let what I hear wash over me and we would be none the wiser. Often when I introduce myself as a listener, I would be asked, ‘what do you listen to?’ And, even more so, I would be confronted with, ‘what kind of music do you listen to?’ Such questions often reveal the expectations of the questioners. What interests me is how the identity of being a listener is linked to the activity of listening, contextualised by the identity of certain forms of organised sound. This dyad of contemplative-philosophical inquiry is what I consider to be a ‘singularity’ symbolised by negative infinity with a base of infinity in the concept of ‘leaving zero’, on the basis that at the juncture of being asked these two questions – ‘what do you listen to’ and ‘what kind of music do you listen to’, a myriad of identities beg to be defined. And these identities are all infinitely and/or infinitesimally variable in the imagination but as I am sympathetic to the questioner’s implicit notions of ‘(non-)listening’ and ‘(non-)music’, I shall entertain the epistemological journey in answering those questions.

In the initial question, it is implicit when being asked ‘what do you listen to’, that the questioner already has in mind a correlate of what it means to listen. In my mind, a negative number represents the ‘implicit correlation’ because the answer-value resides in the imagination/fantasy of the questioner and I. If the questioner proceeded to demonstrate the answer-value in a concrete form, making it an ‘explicit correlation’, now represented by a positive number in my mind, then the efficacy of her demonstration will be proven by returning the identity of ‘what it means to listen’ to ‘zero’. At ‘zero’, I can then decide whether to reassure her if ‘this’ or ‘that’ was what she meant by ‘to listen’ in a concrete form, perhaps by me describing in words, notating, singing, whistling, or playing an instrument, to present her with an approximation of what I have listened to.

Similarly, in the second question, when being asked, ‘what music do you listen to’, it is implicit that the questioner knows, or at least has an idea of what is meant by ‘music’, or ‘what music is’. Again, the identity of ‘music’ she holds true is represented in my mind as a negative number (an undeclared point of departure). Indeed a set of negative numbers representing what I construe as ‘listening’ and ‘music’ is constantly floating in my mind, unseen by the questioner. To meaningfully discuss the activity of listening is to thus instigate a move into the realm of demonstration/verification (agency-contingency dyad), of doing something to return to ‘zero’ in both our minds. Let us call this cycle of activity ‘inscribing zero’.

Arguably, the innate possibilities 'to listen to' and 'to appreciate X' are only because these concepts are already in circulation (reciprocated in a semantic-pragmatic dyad) or, more crucially, the agencies for doing so are at our disposal in actuality. One does not need to pretend 'to listen' or 'to appreciate X' to listen and to appreciate X. Hence, when we decide to listen and to appreciate X, we are in effect exercising a contingency, in other words, 'to rectify' what it means conceptually to listen and to appreciate X. The conversation that ensues from listening to a piece of experimental music or sound art becomes an actual agent 'to demonstrate/verify' the identity of what it is 'to listen' and 'to appreciate X'. The concept of 'inscribing zero' here denotes the 'actual performing/doing' of something that reinforces the notion/identity of the 'doer' and the 'actual doing', terminating in the end result of what was performed/done. For example, the 'inscribing zero' of a pianist is located in the actual playing of the piano, allowing us to actually see and hear the cause and effect of a piano being played by a person who claims to be a pianist. It is of interest to note that 'inscribing zero' makes no pretence of actually doing something, but the end result may or may not go unnoticed in the mind of the beholder (questioner/listener/reader) due to the effect of the shifting base explicated in 'zero shift'.

## In Conversation with Joyce Koh Bani Haykal

Dr Joyce Beetuan Koh is a Singaporean composer and educator whose artistic work spans various forms, from concert music to interactive sound installation. Working in both acoustic and electronic media, she has collaborated extensively with choreographers, theatre directors and visual artists in numerous interdisciplinary projects. In the following interview, Koh speaks with Bani Haykal about her journey as a composer, her processes and values.



Joyce Beetuan Koh, installation for *Locust's Wrath*, dance performance in collaboration with The Arts Fission Company, Singapore, wood frame and plastic strings, series of 5 screens of various sizes: 240 x 280 cm, 240 x 190 cm, and 240 x 120 cm, 2013

**Bani Haykal: Let's start by talking about your work from a broader perspective seeing that you are involved in projects that cover different grounds and disciplines. How do you distinguish between music, sound art and design?**

Joyce Koh: I was trained primarily as an acoustic composer. The process involved many years of practice in counterpoint and harmony. This practice formed the foundation of my attitude towards music within the framework of concert music. It determined the approach I took when I dealt with musical material. Nevertheless, when I began to investigate electronic music in 1996, my attitude towards music changed. Music became sound to me. Sound became a complex

entity with various components. It became an object that moved in time. It has frequency, amplitude, timbre, energy and spectrum. The idea that sound is a physical phenomenon has since shaped my compositional thinking.

Prior to investigating electronic music, I was already working with the concept of timbre, exploring and thinking about sound as a timbre quality. As early as 1991, I had organised groups of instruments in such a way that I could create a specific, or perhaps unique type of complex sound. Only such a combination could bring forth the particular sound I wanted. It seems like a natural evolution to have first thought about sound as timbre and then as a complex entity where timbre is but one of many parameters. The year of music computing study at the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM) in Paris was an eye-opener. I worked on a project for accordion and live electronics. The idea of real-time digital processing fascinated me. And how risky working with live electronics was! Each performance had a different shape. This uncertainty or rather instability drove the adrenaline to a high level. It's live electronics that I'm working with and not a fixed medium. Ah! I've never looked back since. I still investigate sound – sound as sound – with all its universal truths. There will always be form, direction and shape in music.

In 2010, I created the work *On the String* for live performance, pipa, harpsichord, fourteen string instruments and two new interactive sound installations. This was a collaboration with two other artists: Khiew Huey Chian, a visual artist, and PerMagnus Lindborg, an interactive-sound designer. The installations began as physical objects. Through the course of the composition, they became interactive sound objects. By the time of the production, they had transformed into musical instruments.

It's true that I'm expanding my scope. Nonetheless, at the core, I remain the same: my focus is on sound as a 'complex', with various components and behaviours.

**BH: Do you also pursue this approach when you write for acoustic instruments?**

JK: Yes, definitely. An example is the accordion concerto I composed in 2003. The interesting thing about the accordion is the paradox between its two independent keyboards and the shared bellow. This effectively means that there can only be one (common) dynamic level. I have imagined what it would be like to be in the bellow, and

embraced by two enlarged and oversized [accordion] arms. This image of embrace eventually determined the spatial distribution of instruments, in particular the percussion instruments. This arrangement produced a stereophonic effect. At the same time, the physical layout of the four percussionists – one on each wing of the audience and two on stage – accentuated the effect. To extend this notion of space, musical motifs were passed from one percussionist to the next sequentially in a circular motion to create a 360-degree surround movement.

I'm interested in architecture; especially how a certain space determines musical movements, as well as enhances musical behaviours. I apply these approaches to my compositional thinking.

**BH: Was this concerto performed in Singapore?**

JK: Yes, we had two performances: in Stavanger, Norway, and in Singapore. Both were performed in 2003 – ten years ago!

**BH: Are you often invited to present works like this again?**

JK: It is indeed easier to get a commission than to present a performance a second time. The accordion concerto was a co-commission by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and the Norwegian accordionist Frode Haltli with funds from the Norwegian Arts Council. Frode performed both times; first with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra conducted by Okku Kamu, then, the Stavanger Symphony Orchestra conducted by Susanna Mälkki. The Norwegian Radio presented a live-performance broadcast.

In fact, Hong Kong will be broadcasting the Norwegian performance on Radio 4 on 26 October 2013. Almost all of my works have been performed at least twice by different musicians in different cities. I'm very happy about that.

**BH: And in Singapore?**

JK: Few and far between. Why?

**BH: The reason I ask is because I come from a band background and bands typically carry the same set list to be used at all their gigs for a certain period, so I wonder if there is a discrimination against locally composed works in the contemporary scene. I mean, why can't a work be repeatedly performed in the same way that a band would with their music?**

JK: You're absolutely right, Bani. Just imagine: I have built up my band, developed a repertoire and an ensemble sound. It is natural that when I go on tour I take this repertoire with me. In some cases, I might even commission a composer to write especially for our specific band sound, which the band will showcase on tour. You would have imagined that this would apply in Singapore. Ask any international orchestra – they would be doing this. But not ours.

**BH: Your work has a strong presence outside of Singapore, and that's great. You would think that it should have the same presence here. I think a work needs to be heard often, or at least more than just once.**

JK: Why do you think so? Let me turn the question back to you: why do you think it's important?

**BH: I wonder how much a composer or artist's work can contribute to our cultural landscape and how we perceive, understand and listen to sound. I think being able to listen to or experience a work more than once is necessary to develop a more meaningful understanding of it, or a more meaningful relationship with the composer through the work. Why can't it be played more than once? I don't think it's a matter of how well one understands sound or whether they have an in-depth knowledge of it, but it's more about being able to cultivate or nurture an appreciation for sound and music, that to me has a significant effect in cultural formation.**

JK: Perhaps it has to do with how sound is in fact the least developed artistic form. The visual arts, encountered through seeing, are often considered the most developed. One can buy 'visual arts', but rarely sound. Sound is time-based; this means you have to dedicate time to listening to the sound – let the time and sound pass, so to speak. You can have a painting on your wall. You can choose when you wish to see it. It is certainly not the case with sound. The ears are the least developed, but the most sophisticated faculty. Sound is the most complex. And because it is complex, it is difficult to be absorbed or even to comprehend immediately.

Of course I would like my music to be performed a lot more in Singapore. I suppose the kind of music I compose does not yield immediate appreciation. Unlike popular music, my music does not lend itself to foot tapping. But the time will come when the audience is able to go beyond tunes and beats.

**BH: I'd like to draw a parallel situation with those in the 'underground'**

**or alternative scene. The only reason I'm drawing this parallel is because of the nature of the work itself. I wonder if space is a huge issue or constraint when it comes to performing or presenting these works?**

JK: Definitely, but space is only one aspect. I believe the composers of the 'underground' scene are the musicians themselves most of the time. They compose and perform, which is in fact the traditional procedure. Similar to folk or traditional music, the pipa player is both the composer and performer. He or she performs and composes for his or her instrument. However, in art music composition situations, the relationship is different. The composer writes the music and another performer or musician performs the music. His or her music will return to the drawer if it is not performed. From this perspective, the composer is at the mercy of the musicians. Musicians who are not interested in new music are a major factor in obstructing the development of contemporary music practice. Musicians, who are interested in extending themselves and learning new techniques, will put in the hundred hours needed to achieve them. I think that if you don't play new music, your technique will be limited. The framework of concert music is different from that of the 'underground' or alternative scene. I don't suppose we should compare them too closely.

**BH: As a challenge, would you take on the role of a composer for the alternative scene? For instance, would you consider composing a piece for noise group Circuitrip?**

JK: No, I wouldn't. They are happy in existence where they are and they would want to write their own music. Why would they need someone to tell them what to do? I wouldn't want to disturb them. I am a strong believer in self-motivation. If I were a musician looking to improve my technique – and by improving, I mean to go beyond Tchaikovsky's violin concerto, I would examine the work of Dmitri Shostakovich, Salvatore Scarrino or György Ligeti. As a student composer, I would study the music of Elliot Carter, or Helmut Lachenmann, for example. It must come from within you. Today's musicians can look to living composers and ask them to write for them, for their specific technical repertoire. In a nutshell, the desire must come from the motivation of the musician.

**BH: How was that journey or that crossover for you from the acoustic to the digital realm?**

JK: It's not so much a crossover as it is an expansion. I like to think

that I'm continuously 'upgrading' myself, never content with what I know. If one day I feel drained, I must feel able to rely on what I have learnt before. In every project that I undertake, I know it will be hard work to find new experiences and strategies.

For the last twelve years, I've been involved in interdisciplinary projects. I don't work with sound effects, or in a decorative manner. Sound is central to these projects. It is what drives the visual work; for example, in the 2010 work *On the String*. My collaboration with Angela [Liong] from the Arts Fission has become an evenly balanced effort between music composition and choreography. She has been very trusting of the sound world I provide. I suppose that's why our collaboration has been sustained and rich in seven years of working together.

**BH: Let's talk about your collaborations.**

**JK:** Sure, but I would like to establish something first. I have been composing since I was twenty. My musical motivation has come from the perspective of acoustic composition. Nonetheless, through the possibilities of digital manipulation and my architectural interests, I have been able to expand small ideas to take on a 3D form. This expansion is most evident in the interdisciplinary projects. The process has provided me with unimaginable energies and new dimensions to the original idea. I'm so glad about the way my language has developed.

**BH: This has been at the heart of your collaborations.**

**JK:** Yes exactly. I've been involved in different types of collaborations. In the work with Angela and the Arts Fission, it has been about understanding each other's process, aesthetics and language. The collaboration has been 'side by side' – where we examine an issue or subject in parallel. The outcome is thus an encapsulation of two processes merging. Angela has allowed me to find my own language, interpretation and sonic counterpoint to dance choreography.

Another person with whom I have undertaken many collaborations is PerMagnus Lindborg, a composer and sound artist. He is also my husband. We met when we were both in Paris at IRCAM pursuing computer music. He too comes from an acoustic composition background. He is definitely much more at ease with music computing and equally strong conceptually. PerMagnus and I have worked together on about eight projects since 2001. Our collaborations are sound-based. In *On the String*, Per and I worked

at the level of concepts and music computing techniques. He designed the interactivity of the installations, while I worked on the overall direction and conception of the production.

**BH: You have sustained very close collaborative relationships that last for long periods. Can you tell me about other collaborators with whom you have such a relationship?**

**JK:** Currently, I am collaborating with Steve Dixon on a project based on TS Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. It is a multimedia production with live performance, images and sounds. I am responsible for the sound design. It is almost operatic. The production features Steve as the only live performer – he recites and begins to 're-live' the poem. On a screen behind him, the poem's imagery unfolds in a stream of visuals. Steve has also produced and created the visual images. The production opens in mid-March this year.

**BH: The attitude you have towards sound and music in your collaborations is that they're not decorative, as you have pointed out earlier. Has this always been the case?**

**JK:** I have a strong language. You can't ignore it. I don't do commercial music. I don't customise music to someone else's taste. I believe there is a strong reason, my *raison d'être*, why a sound should be the way it is. I am uncompromising. I'm not easily moved. You'll have to know my music to want to collaborate with me. You'll have to reckon with it ... but I'm flexible!

**BH: With such a strong perspective on the importance of your musical language, has there been a central influence – a composer, for example – who has helped shape your work, or did your language naturally evolve over time without this?**

**JK:** There are three composers who have influenced my attitude towards sound; Edgard Varese, Ligeti – I love the humour in his work – and of course my teacher, David Lumsdaine. David, an Australian-English composer, is my artistic father. I will always pay tribute to him for he has taught me not only about sound, but also how to relate to the sound, respecting it as a living being.

And Ligeti is Ligeti. I have not studied with him so I don't have a personal relationship with him. I greatly admire the way he is able to transcend the unnecessary seriousness of contemporary music by creating something new such as quirky textures without pretense. I have seen him at work during rehearsals and the way he

communicates with the musicians. All his works are masterpieces to me.

Of course I have not had the chance to meet Varèse since he passed away before I was born. I admire the way he believed that he was writing for the future. He wrote sound for sound itself. It is not just the sound that you leave behind when you go, it is what you do to that sound. That's what I strongly believe in.

**BH:** I have come across a number of composers who are geared towards imagining the future of music and what future sounds might be like. For instance, in Anthony Braxton's work, he's imagining what music might be like, say, fifty years down the road. How relevant are these imaginings or attitudes to your work?

**JK:** I'm not concerned about that. In some ways, I'm hedonistic. I write what I want to hear and do what I believe it should be. I can't predict. I think of music only within my sphere. I'm not interested in club culture; though there can be many unusual sounds, that kind of sound doesn't sustain me at the level of large-scale form. I feel that in order to achieve a convincing expression at the large-scale formal level, it requires time – a kind of time that is not about 'now'. This level needs to be processed and it cannot be done live ... unless you are super! It is seldom that I come across super improvisers who are able to sustain a large-scale form over a long time, and yet carry musical meanings.

If my music stays, it stays. If it doesn't, it will be beyond my control to do anything about it. It will speak for itself, maybe a hundred years later? It is thus not interesting for me to predict. I have many things on my mind that I want to do well. I do not wish to be a clairvoyant.

**BH:** I'm reminded of something Edgar Varèse once said. He said: 'Contrary to general belief, an artist is never ahead of his time but most people are far behind theirs. I was the first composer to explore, so to speak, musical outer space'.

**JK:** Nice one. Wouldn't you agree? What confidence Varèse must have had to be able to articulate that.

## In Conversation with Zul Mahmud Bani Haykal

Zul Mahmud wears many hats: he is a sound artist, sculptor, sound designer and, more recently, the curator for The Substation's Sound Art Open Call. From his education in fine arts to his perspective on education, Zul shares – over two different kopitiam meet-ups in October 2013 – a personal history rooted in the importance of community and a commitment to process.



Zul Mahmud, *Sonic Encounters*, Moscow, sound installation, plastic balls, wires, amplifier, tweeters, variable dimensions, 2010

**Bani Haykal:** Let's start with your background in sculpture and your exploration of sound; did they come together in your artistic practice at the same time?

**Zul Mahmud:** I think sound came later. I started working with sound in 2001. My first introduction to computer music was during my residency in Norway where I saw the work of a Dutch artist. He was making dance music using software, and that's the first time I got into computer music. When I came back, I created sound and visual installations, but I realised that because the visual element had such a strong presence, the sound seemed like it was merely taking on a supporting role. So, in 2004 I started focusing on working with sound. That was when I returned from my residency in Finland.

When I started studying sound, I realised there was so much to learn in terms of electronics, sensors, found objects and materials. There's a lot to discover. At the moment, the works I'll be showing in my upcoming solo show return to a more sculptural perspective, with sound elements within it created by electronic components.

**BH: What was your first installation informed by your background in sculpture and sound?**

ZM: After Finland, there was a group show called *Migration Addict* by Shanghai-based curator Biljana Ciric who was then at Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art. It featured a number of artists from China and two Singaporean artists including myself. That was my first project, which I approached purely as a sound work, and I created a room – a small room – with just sponge. That was followed by my solo work *W.O.M.B.* in 2006, which explored the relationship between space and sound to engage audiences in a process of listening. But the work was not just about listening, it was also very much about a full body experience, the sensuality of materials and vibrations, so if you recreated the work with a set of new materials, it would affect the way you listen to the sounds.

**BH: That's the work that was presented at The Substation?**

ZM: Yes, the one in its gallery. Following *W.O.M.B.*, I participated in the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007 and created a second sound installation titled *Sonic Dome*.

**BH: You also have an interest in performance. Can you share more about your relationship with both installation and performance?**

ZM: I think both have different languages, and audiences encounter or interact with them quite differently. With *W.O.M.B.*, I wanted audiences to be in a safe environment – to be comfortable. I wanted them to fully listen to the sounds created. With performance, and it's something I'm still learning, there must be a method as to how you perform. For instance, Tara is filled with angst and the energy level is very high, and there is Lebanese artist Tarek Atoui too, who practically dances in his performances but it's actually because his work is sensor-based so his whole body movement contributes to the sound. Still, there's a significant performativity there, and that's what engages people. For me, that language is something I'm still learning in order to bring audiences closer to the work. It's difficult sometimes.

**BH: What is your biggest challenge working with sound?**

ZM: [Laughs] I think it's the curators. They usually come from a visual arts background and, as such, tend to present it from a visual perspective, which makes it always challenging working with them. We don't have many sound curators – not even in the museums – who would really see sound works as a sound piece so, on this level, it has been difficult. It's going to take a long time for sound practices to reach the institutions and the general public.

**BH: You would think that since sound art has been in existence for some decades, curators would have rethought the methodologies of how sound can be perceived or positioned.**

ZM: Unfortunately, no, I've found that visual aspects of works have often taken precedence when it comes to curating sound. Take for example a work involving sound: this can be an installation with sound or a sound installation. An installation with sound is a visual work, which merely incorporates sound where sound is not a primary factor; on the other hand, with sound installations, sound is the main focus. When sound is presented in a manner that is heavily influenced by visual art, it can become problematic. Sometimes, I do think the term sound art can be problematic too.

**BH: I agree. It's a sentiment that Joleen and I share and something we've discussed in the development of this project. You remain known as one of the most important advocates of sound art in Singapore. At the same time, you also describe yourself as a sound artist. How do you define these boundaries in relation to your practice?**

ZM: I do find the term 'sound art' problematic – it is difficult to define and is always a grey area. I started noticing its usage in Singapore around 2009. Experimental musicians began to call what they did sound art. Perhaps the term helps to frame or elevate the stature of the work or the musician, as opposed to 'experimental music'. At times, the term 'experimental' may give the impression that the musician does not know what they are doing, which may be an unfair reading, but it still strikes an undesired undertone of semi-professionalism. Also, like any other art form, it needs a definition as it helps people understand it better, and is useful to artists when applying for institutional funding. As for my practice, I feel that my works fit comfortably into some understandings of sound art. The primary focus of my work is sound, they are mostly presented in the context of an exhibition, and often within an installation format that responds to the gallery space and environment.

**BH: Do you think Singapore should have a gallery or a space dedicated specifically to sound or the sonic arts?**

ZM: A space like that would definitely be ideal, but what happens after that? What happens to the works? In Singapore, we don't have a big problem with creating and producing work, but the main question is – what happens next? There needs to be an industry where important and significant works will be acquired by the museums or, if not, collectors. In terms of selling sound works, especially those that are installations, who would buy them? [Laughs] Even with museums it's hard to get them acquired. I suppose this interest in the arts can be cultivated through education, from pre-tertiary education to art institutions, and the media. Artists can't promote their work by themselves.

**BH: We need an ecosystem to support the scene. I heard a joke through a friend who also happens to be a curator. He said: 'it's not an artwork until it's sold.'**

ZM: [Laughs] Maybe, *lah*.

**BH: I'm sure that there are museums and collectors who collect sound works.**

ZM: Of course there are, like in Berlin or New York, where it's more open and there are more collectors as compared to Singapore. Plus, Singapore collectors don't collect Singapore work, they will collect works from Indonesia, Thailand, or elsewhere, because the market value is there. So, when you talk about Singapore work, what is it? What is Singapore art? If this is the situation of the arts in Singapore, sound practices are going to take a longer time to be recognised by arts institutions or be part of national collections.

Also, if you look at institutions like Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and LASALLE College of the Arts, they are more focused on visual arts. If you're interested in sound, you'll have to explore that independently. I do think art can really inform sound practices and is the best context in which to introduce it. There's a lot you can explore, especially in terms of material studies. Take for example Mohamad Riduan who studied sculpture, you can still see its influence in his work. A background in the arts can really enable such exploration between sound and various media. I don't know why LASALLE isn't introducing it.

**BH: You make a very strong point about education and its role within**

**the arts, which begs the question – how come you're not teaching at LASALLE?**

ZM: [Laughs] I'm not qualified to teach.

**BH: But you're talking about paper qualifications, yes?**

ZM: Yes. After having taught at Orita Sinclair for seven years, I felt a bit jaded. Because the owner left, someone new has taken over and, now, the direction has become more mainstream. It's too safe and it's all about the numbers. That's why I left. I feel that institutions should just conduct workshops instead. Actually, those who engage me for workshops in LASALLE are from the Interactive Arts department and now they're closing that and changing it to Broadcast Media. With Interactive Arts, the numbers were declining, but I think, in our current climate, it's more important today than ever before as it can expand to so many avenues including science, performance, and more.

**BH: Moving back to your practice, I want to talk about the use of found objects in your works. I noticed this shift from collage boxes to found objects in your sound sculptures and instruments. From your website, I noticed you've re-used boxes by brands like Crabtree & Evelyn. Can you describe the shift from DIY boxes to more polished exteriors?**

ZM: Actually, it was because my girlfriend bought a lot of these products. So, rather than throwing away these boxes that so much money had been spent on, I thought I might as well do something with them. I turned them into sound devices.

**BH: Do you consider these sound works for sale or are they for personal use?**

ZM: They're both, actually. I have sold some and have used some of them as sound sketches. I think this is where my background in sculpture has come in as I've worked with quite a lot of found objects.

**BH: I do see these instruments as sketches that lead to larger works. Do they exist in different fields for you or is there a connection between these small devices and your sound installations?**

ZM: My method of working, even with installations, has often begun with first working in a sketchbook – my ideas emerge from these small drawings. They're often quite colourful collages. I vent most

of my frustrations through these sketches but when I transpose them to larger works, their expressions become minimal and subtle. So, for me, the process is chaotic. It's the same approach when I'm working with sound. I'll test the electronics on small-scale kits, test these ideas, and then see how they can expand sonically and physically. I suppose, almost everyday is 'R&D' for me – trying to get new electronics and seeing how they work. It could be as simple as using a contact microphone, and I'll approach it from a more sculptural perspective; instead of just picking up vibrations, I would explore the possibilities of using them as speakers. Usually, I do this to change the context of the object and what it is.

**BH: You constantly challenge the materials you use or the concept at hand, always seeing them from a different perspective. Has that always been the process by which you work?**

ZM: Yes. I always try to find new meanings. I think that's where the foundation is for most of my work: to give new meaning to even the simplest of things and then expand it or multiply it to see how it works. I will always try to challenge myself this way.

**BH: How do you think circuit bending has changed since its inception? How has it evolved, if not from a technical standpoint, from an attitudinal perspective?**

ZM: I think the problem with circuit bending today is that most new toys from China come with fully integrated chips, which are hard to hack into. It happened about a year ago, maybe two. I visit Mustafa a lot to get all my stuff, they have very interesting things like these new toy iPads that make sounds. You can buy a couple of them but when you open them up, there's nothing there to work with – no resistors, no capacitors, nothing. Everything is just flat, built within one chip, and that's it. You can't do anything!

Plus, because China is the biggest manufacturer of these toys, everyone in the field is facing the same problem. Artists or musicians are bound to look for alternatives like vintage toys from second-hand stores and the like. However, when people know that these things are in demand, the prices will shoot up too.

At the moment, there are forums discussing how it might be the end of circuit bending. I'll have to resort to different technologies and work with things like guitar effects, and so on, to process and create new sounds. But I think it's really difficult for those in the field of circuit bending as they experiment with sounds by modifying or

customising gadgetry and tweaking knobs. It's now much tougher and very limiting with mass usage of new technologies.

**BH: Do you have a preference for analogue or digital systems?**

ZM: No, I like both. You can really expand a lot when you use both together. With all these plugins, you are able to work with more possibilities when combined with analogue devices. The laptop to me is just another instrument, another tool. I've tried going fully analogue with circuit bending, but when I combine both digital and analogue systems, the texture it gives is wider and it's nice to layer different textures that way. With analogue devices, I use them to create sound sketches so that I can further manipulate them digitally.

**BH: Let's go back to the early days and talk about your collaboration with Kai Lam under Pink Ark. How did it begin and what was the landscape of experimental sound practices like in Singapore before it started?**

ZM: It was quite vibrant even before Pink Ark because every week there was a gig or an event taking place, many of which were at The Substation and local record store Flux Us.

Pink Ark started because Kai [Lam] and I were housemates at Studio 19 in Siglap. We had known each other for a long time, since our school days, and we tried introducing new elements in our work, which was largely performative and sound-based. We also tried to improvise with performance artists and dancers.

Our logo was actually a pink elephant standing up with its trunk pointed up and the number '69' on its chest. [Laughs]

**BH: Did Pink Ark have any publications or zines that you guys put out? Or, were there other publications other than *BigO*, which touched on the more experimental side of sound and music practices?**

ZM: Actually, when you emailed me, I had just thrown everything away because storage was limited. I had too many things at home, and those had to go. There weren't many publications on Pink Ark although there was a publication *Contemporary Art in Singapore* published by the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore where Pink Ark was interviewed and written about by Russell Storer.

**BH: Why did Pink Ark stop?**

ZM: We broke up was because I was more interested in exploring sound and not so much into performance. Kai was interested in performance, so that's where we went our own ways.

And, back then, when you had these laptops for performance, people thought you were checking your emails. [Laughs]

**BH: That's been a common perception.**

ZM: We have to be open-minded. It's another new instrument, which was already explored by engineers in the seventies. The laptop also presents its own challenges when it comes to performing with it, just like playing a piano.

**BH: The interface is different. Do you think the attitude or the politics have changed? Or are things similar?**

ZM: I think things are still similar. Some habits don't die. We should keep challenging ourselves, rather than spend more time attending to politics. It's tiring, you know? I just read an article where X'Ho commented on music. He said something like: 'I think music is beautiful but the people and their ego makes it very bad.'

**BH: I think there's a lot of truth in that. So, who were the usual suspects back in the early 2000s?**

ZM: There was George Chua, Yuen Chee Wai, Evan Tan, Harold Seah, ASPIDISTRAFLY, Darren Ng, Zai Kuning. For our 24-hour sound art festival that we organised in 2005, *Una Voce*, we only had a few people.

**BH: *Una Voce* was quite a significant event. How did that come about?**

ZM: It started in 2004, when I was in Finland and I went to this festival called *Avante*, which featured video and sound works. Later, I corresponded with Kai and asked, 'Hey, why don't we organise a 24-hour sound festival?' And when I came back, we worked on it. We had a small budget to work with, but we still managed to get a few of the guys on board. We had SAE Institute to support us with documenting the process and we had a good friend, Rosdi, to supply us with sound equipment. Logistics was a killer, but The Substation crew were helpful and they stayed up with me. We had this group

of turntablists, consisting of Akira (Rizman Putra's brother-in-law), Safuan, and Chris (X'Ho). But I caused problems for Chris – it was my fault – because I didn't know he was using CDs! So when he arrived, I was like 'shit, I thought you were on records?'

**BH: Did he perform?**

ZM: [Shakes head]

**BH: Would you do it again?**

ZM: This time? Maybe. There's more awareness about sound now and you can reach out to more people to come in. You can conduct talks and workshops, maybe even conferences as well. With proper funding, I would consider doing it again. I want to pay the artists properly and professionally. And in terms of equipment, we need to get, well, not the koyak-koyak (broken or in bad shape) ones, *Iah*.

**BH: What was the crowd like for *Una Voce*? Do you think another similar festival would garner that same attention today?**

ZM: It was the same usual crowd of artists, musicians, and friends. It could be because we did not publicise the event enough – that was my fault as the budget was really tight. However, I'd like to reach out to a wider audience and break away from that. When you get the same audience coming in, it can develop into something quite insular or, worse, elitist. It should be open to everybody, to anyone who is curious about this art form.

I do think now is a pretty good time for it.



# SONG-MING ANG



## I Might Be Wrong: A Personal Journey Inspired By *Kid A*

I am an artist and I make art about music. I also write occasionally about music. Of all the art forms, music is my first love. So why not just make music instead of making art about music? When people ask me that, my answer would somehow involve *Kid A*, and this essay is a summary of how I got to where I am.

Before I started working as an artist, I aspired to be a musician. Like many teenagers, I got into rock music in junior college, and Radiohead was a band my friends and I shared a love for. *OK Computer* was released in my first year of junior college, and the CD remained lodged in my Discman for months. In Radiohead's honour, I named my high-school band Subterranean Homesick Aliens (although I admit we sounded like a very, very bad U2 rip-off).

When we talk about 'influence' with regards to a musician, it usually means what or who a musician sounds like. For example, people describe Nirvana as a blend of Beatles-inspired songcraft and Black Sabbath's metal riffs; or how Sonic Youth's noise rock draws from The Ramones's *blitzkrieg* punk and Merzbow's sonic assaults. In other words, 'influence' is about a band's sonic aesthetics, and a certain sort of musical lineage.

*Kid A* did make that kind of impact on me. Otherworldly electronic textures, cut-up vocal samples, dissonant horns ... I was blown away by all the things one never expected from a Britpop band. *Kid A* wasn't just rock music; there were traces of so many genres of experimental music. The four-note opening sample on 'Idiotique' made me seek out the compositions of Paul Lansky, while the horns on 'The National Anthem' turned me on to Miles Davis. I studiously delved into the parts that made up the sum of *Kid A* – the Warp catalogue, Brian Eno, you name it.

Consequently, I embarked on excursions into various forms of experimental music – free jazz, modern composition, IDM, noise music, and so on. *Kid A* inspired me to make music, to go as far out as possible. I spent my early and mid-twenties as an experimental laptop musician.

And yet, after some time, I realised that like many 'experimental' musicians, I was merely reproducing established sub-genres of experimental music. In the end I thought I had to ditch being a musician altogether,

because I realised that to be truly experimental, I would have to embrace the spirit of experimenting rather than reproducing the aesthetics of experimental music. It was then that I decided to make art about music, so I could stand outside music while being close to it.

On second thoughts, the impact of *Kid A* on me was not so much an aesthetic one; I was in fact more motivated by its ethos. *Kid A* to me represents a heroic and triumphant reinvention following times of despair. At the end of touring *OK Computer*, Thom Yorke had fallen into depression, unable to write any songs. The *Kid A* sessions were monumentally difficult, and in one instance Yorke turned to Tristan Tzara's Dadaist manifesto for inspiration on how to write his lyrics. Some of the lyrics on *Kid A* ended up adopting a distant, cryptic tone that most probably bears Tzara's influence.

Radiohead had always betrayed an allegiance to other forms of art, such as literature, visual art, and film. *OK Computer* sounds like an aural interpretation of George Orwell's novel *1984*, while their album art from *The Bends* onwards consistently (and brilliantly) complements the themes of the music. I remember also how Thom Yorke mentioned in an interview that 'Exit Music (For a Film)' was inspired by Franco Zeffirelli's film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*.

I moved across disciplines partly to escape what I felt was a creative dead-end, and partly to explore new territories and approaches to music. It's not much different from making music or writing about music; it's just another way of thinking about the subject. I felt extraordinarily handicapped because I had no background and understanding of visual art, but it was also strangely liberating.

Recounting my journey, I cannot help but recall the lyrics from 'I Might Be Wrong', and how appropriate they are as I stepped out: 'Open up / Begin again ... Have ourselves a good time ... Never look back.' Somewhere within me, I feel secretly proud that even though I don't make music like Radiohead, I can claim some affinity to what they do.

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'I Might Be Wrong: A Personal Journey Inspired By *Kid A*' was first published in *PopMatters*, Nov, 2010.

# GEORGE CHUA

Ho Tzu Nyen, Rizman Putra, George Chua, Osman Abdul Hamid, Ray Aziz, Dharma, Andy Lim, Jeffrey Yue, Grace Low and Stephanie Goh, *The Song of the Broken Hearted Tiger*, Esplanade Theatre Studio, 2012. Photos: Olivia Kwok

I was sleeping on the marble floor of my grandmother's place. That was when I became intrigued by all kinds of strange sounds and voices I had heard. They were coming from the ground when I pressed my ears against it.

I grew up in that flat since my parents were busy working. Sometimes I would fall asleep to those sounds and many times I woke up to them. I heard all kinds of conversations, most of which I couldn't understand. I did understand some of those conversations, but was too afraid to talk about it back then.

There were two suicides that happened in that flat. The first happened because, being a young widow, my aunt could not handle her sorrow anymore. The second

suicide was reported as someone who suffered from a form of dementia. She was survived by her husband and child.

There was also a foreign construction worker who died there while the flat was being constructed. There were rumours at home about sounds of the flute being played by the ghost of the deceased. He is supposedly the culprit behind the haunting.

I was curious but I never did hear any sounds made by or resembling that of a flute. Twenty years later I bought several flutes and started playing them at night. It didn't matter if they were musical or not. A few years later, I started working with sound.



# GULAYU ARKESTRA



Gulayu Arkestra,  
*Intromission Polar*,  
The Substation, 2011

Gulayu Arkestra began in Pulau Ubin at a time when Jordan Rais and I were constantly visiting the off-shore island to kick-start The Artists Village's residency programmes. During these preparations, we spent a lot of time on the island and brought our musical instruments with us. To make sounds, we would use a combination of musical instruments (often ethnic), self-made instruments, found objects and household items that would otherwise be considered as junk. Often, our pieces are a result of free-form improvisation or based on folk tales, produced through intentional or sometimes unintentional actions. Since then, we have been working together for over two years as Gulayu Arkestra.

Both Jordan and I started making music together as our band Under the Velvet Sky (UTVS), which was formed in 1998. In contrast to Gulayu Arkestra, what we

did with Under the Velvet Sky was more musical and organised. It was during our post-production for UTVS's first self-produced album *Black Sea Sorcery* in 2008 that we began to experiment with sounds and designing soundscapes. With UTVS, we used various forms of compositional techniques and alternative methods of recording sounds. We rehearsed and practiced primarily in studios, but that has its limitations.

Sound's relationship with space is something that we explored further through Gulayu Arkestra. We recorded and performed in outdoor spaces, Old Changi Hospital, empty houses, gardens, and more. We are engaged with and aware of the spaces and contexts we are situated within, allowing them to influence the sounds we create. Playing in Old Changi Hospital, for instance, led us to turn somewhat organically towards certain

sounds, sounds that were related to the sense of fear and paranoia that we experienced while in the abandoned hospital.

Gulayu Arkestra operates on a concept of openness. Our Arkestra, as the name suggests, is not like a conventional orchestra. Apart from using non-conventional instruments, Gulayu Arkestra also subverts the organising principles, hierarchy, exclusivity, and the performer-audience dichotomy commonly associated with modern orchestras. We often try to involve the public, musicians and non-musicians alike, and there may or may not be a conductor. We actively involve non-musicians as they are, at times, more enthusiastic and open to experimentation than trained musicians, having not been classically trained to make music by following musical notations and instructions from

music scores. They are invited to explore a vast musical spectrum together through unconventional techniques and by playing instruments not as they are usually used. These techniques and the ongoing developments in our sound-making stemmed from a dissatisfaction with the limitations of musical norms. A challenge that accompanies this, though, is trying to innovate with sound collectively. Unlike a professional orchestra which necessitates rigorous training and organisation, not to mention countless auditions to be able to play in one, Gulayu Arkestra allows for interested audiences to be part of its sound-making process. We strongly believe that sound can create new connections between people. That's the social dimension of Gulayu Arkestra. — Arif Ayab

# JOYCE KOH

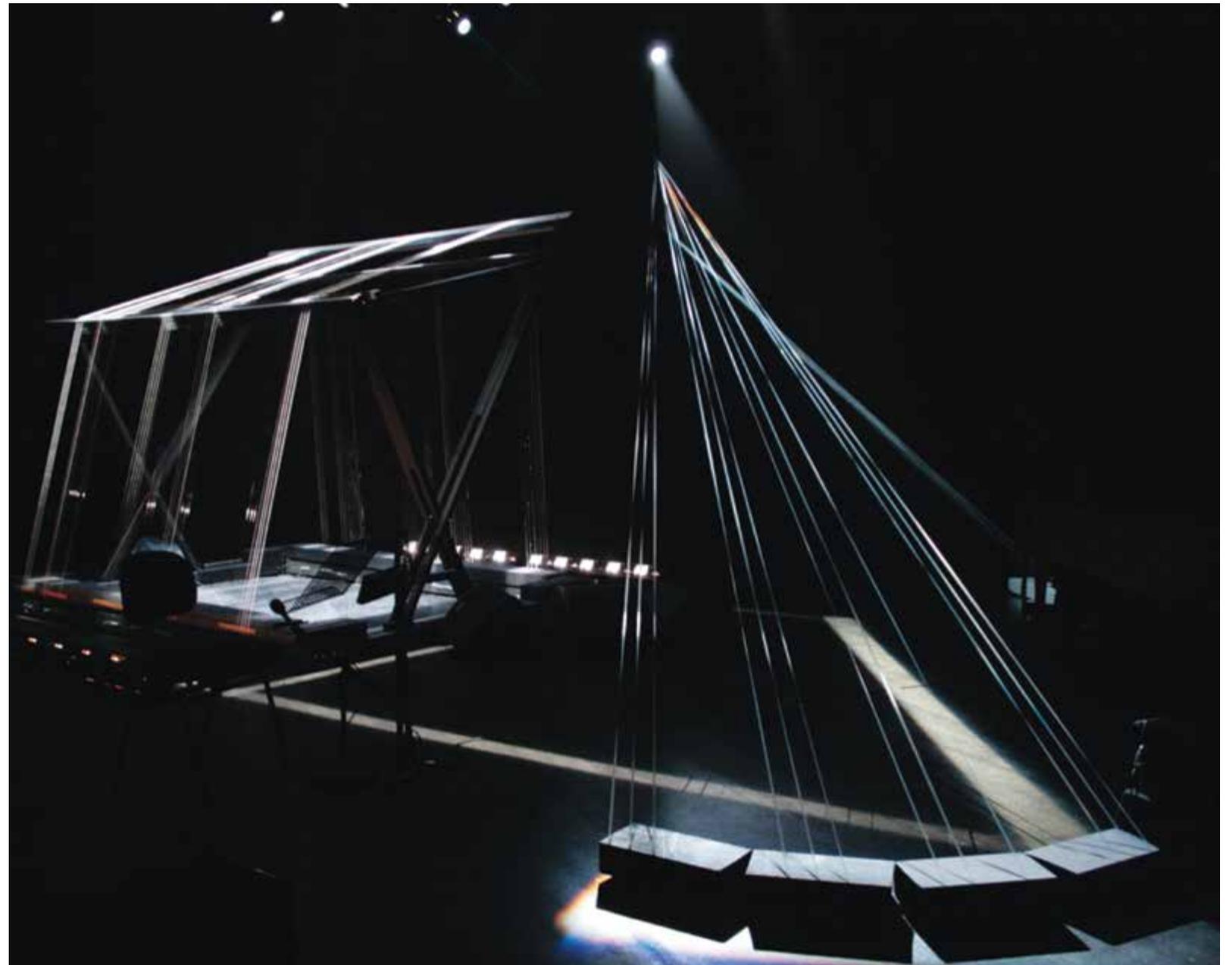
My relationship with sounds started when I was four at the piano. I was fascinated by the resonance of the piano and often imagined the piano as an orchestra with its winds, brass, percussion, harp and strings. I composed my first professional piece at twenty-one; it was a work for two pianos and two percussion instruments. In that piece, I was overwhelmed by the timbral possibilities of the percussion, especially when heard in parallel to the pianos. This led me to think about sound as a complex, and the idea of the composition as a 'sonic canvas'.

To give an identity to a sound object, I chose a group of instruments which, when put together, created a unique timbral quality – a sonic character that only this combination of instruments could produce, thus establishing an identity which is similar to the way characters are introduced in a theatrical play.

At Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique, I learnt to work with composition-assisted and real-time processing software. I was able to imagine sounds that had not been possible to be produced by acoustic instruments and dream a larger sonic canvas. The dimensions of sonic space (physical and virtual) became significant to my pursuit.

During my residency at the Herrenhaus Edenkoben in Germany in 2004, I worked with the writer Karlheinz Ott, adapting his novel *Endlich Stille* into a multimedia piece entitled *Sechzehn Wege das Nein zu vermeiden (16 Ways of Saying 'No')*. This idea of the sonic canvas grew to become a 'theatre of music'. That is, whilst the narrative structure of the composition may be based on theatrical devices, the sound objects (effectively the play's characters) are driven by musical identities and relationships. The sonic canvas becomes physical: i.e. the stage.

*On the String* is a consolidation of my attitude and approach to sounds. Inspired by String Theory, I began with questions such as: What if we could hear the sounds of vibrating one-dimensional strings? Or the sonic texture created by various vibration patterns of a string curving space? If these imaginings were audible, what would they sound like? This inquiry led me to define the concept and framework of the project – a systematic musicalisation of certain features of the scientific thought and, through interdisciplinary investigations (music, visual arts, interactive design, instrument design, light), culminate in a multimedia performance. Together with visual artist, Khiew Huey Chian, composer and interactivity designer PerMagnus Lindborg, and instrument designer Dirk Stromberg, we experimented and created two sculptures/instruments, an interactive system and an immersive sonic environment comprised of 67 speakers. Both sculptures/instruments (*The Corridor* and *The Canopy*) were playable as musical instruments, capable of producing acoustic, electronic, and virtual sounds. These sounds were then diffused in order to evoke a sensation of being immersed by sounds moving in space. To enrich the soundscape, I employed two traditional instruments from the East and West: the pipa and harpsichord. The choice of these instruments was determined by the similarities in their sonic characteristics, the transferability of certain virtuosic playing techniques, and the nuances in their aesthetic languages.



Joyce Koh, *Theatre of Music*, Esplanade Theatre Studio, a multimedia production of sound interactivity, installation/instrument, light, pipa, harpsichord, 14 string players, 60 mins, 2011. Photo: Jacqui Rae

# KAI LAM



Kai Lam, *Lullaby for lonely beers*, a collaboration between Yuzuru Maeda and Kai Lam in conjunction with the solo exhibition of Tang Da Wu, *The First Council*, Goodman Art Centre, 2012

I developed an interest in sound through music appreciation. I don't have a preference for a certain type of music genre and I try to listen to as much music as I can from different parts of the world as every musical form reflects its own distinctive language, musical composition and instrumentation. When we deconstruct music, it becomes an organisation of sounds that reflects its own unique cultural make-up. I believe artists should embrace both traditional forms of music as well as experimental and abstract forms of sounds, as they contain universal forms of human expression that continue to transcend technology, certain eras, or art movements.

Sound, to me, is a primal thing – it's the very first sense of human life, beginning from the foetal life that grows inside a mother's body. The essence of sound is its ability to give us an aural experience that informs our cognitive understanding of the spatial. This faculty of perceiving and understanding is innate, similar to how a child would make a drawing of his or her imagination. Sound as a

form of expression is abstract and vivid at the same time, but its invisibility has often led many to deem it as something less important. Perhaps this is why even the academic discourse surrounding sound art or sound in art is still a lot less evident than that of visual arts.

My work is about our hybridity, how we perceive our social and cultural environment and adopt what we see as part of our expression; I'm interested in how this cultural surrogation is built through the processes of performance and proliferates into the possibilities of cultural and political freedom. For me, performance is not made to serve any singular purpose but it is a repeated act of resistance against the dominant cultural hegemony, an authoritarian machinery which systematically oppresses individual freedom and restricts the evolution of human creativity. As an artist working within such contradictions, I seek to articulate my own systems of representation and a humanity that perpetuates the body.

# MOHAMAD RIDUAN



I was trained as a sculptor. My decision to work with sound began as a process based on an intimate relationship with tinnitus ('ringing' of the ears when no sound is present), which I have since I was young.

Sculpture has always been the main artistic medium through which I explore form, while sound is often incorporated in response to the materials used to build the work. The challenge for me is to be sensitive to both elements and to be able to balance both media within the work.

In the search of a personal process of working with sound, I adopted an approach of actively listening to my surroundings, open to what may be considered to others unwanted or excessive sounds. While these unwanted sounds can creep into spaces and irritate many, I try to remain open to these interferences and adapt, sometimes enjoying them for their own sake. I try to appreciate these sounds – both enjoyable and discomforting ones – in any given situation or state of mind.

I believe that being adaptable in any given situation is the way to go. I try to embrace all kinds of sounds that exist or present themselves to me, experiencing and 'consuming' them not just through my ears but also on a physical level with all my senses. I don't suppose I have experienced total silence yet since everything around me is constantly abuzz.

Mohamad Riduan, *Hijrah* (detail), presented at *Bridge: Dari Utara ke Selatan (Bridge: From North to South)*, Jendela, Visual Arts Space, Esplanade, mixed media installation, dimensions variable, 2013

# DARREN NG



AFAR, theatre installation performance, Esplanade Theatre Studio Season, sound installation by Darren Ng (in collaboration with Lim Wei Ling and Lim Woan Wen), directed by Jalyn Han, presented by Drama Box, 2012. Photo: Lim Wei Ling

Charmed by the evanescence of things and the tacet moments in life, my aural penchants reside in the simple, quiet and minimal. My relationship with sounds is often ontological. I like listening to an environment or a space, as it defines and characterises our reality. There is a déjà vu quality to sounds as they weave in between the conscious and the subconscious. It has become a fixation of mine to collect and use them, like a sonic kleptomaniac.

Sounds are vibrations in all physical senses, be it noise or music. These vibrations are not merely heard but also felt and perceived. They tinkle our eardrums and binaural signals are translated into neural signals. Sound vibrates our bodies and is more physical than we give it credit for. As transducing media, we perceive sounds, associate meanings to them, and are both psychologically and physiologically reactive to psychoacoustics.

Sounds are no longer as independent from their listeners as they used to be. As sound producers and receivers, we constantly shape our environment with the sounds we emit and these sounds, in turn, shape our contextual, social, and cultural realities. With the intensification of industrialisation and progresses in technology, our environmental sounds have become more complex. Consciously or subconsciously, this saturation of sounds has conditioned us to filter some away as 'unwanted noises'. As a result, we have taken these sounds for granted, becoming selective and, at times, ignorant listeners.

It is due to this ever growing complexity of sounds that I start to find myself yearning for simpler, minimalistic, quieter and discreet sounds, in search for forms via subtraction and deconstruction. I have also developed a spatial relationship with sound, as I believe we cannot negate one for the other, like a river and its banks. To me, sound is the materialisation of negative space, which is the space we are listening to, divided as such.

In my opinion, there are two kinds of sounds – direct sounds (natural) and indirect sounds (manipulated) – the former being incidental while the latter are intentional. In my works, I often find myself creating contextual 'realities', juxtaposing direct and indirect sounds for my listeners in relation to space. I like to challenge these 'realities' either by alienating listeners from the familiar or transporting them to an unfamiliar aural space, in relation to physical space. In either case, I hope they can (re)discover sounds and find ephemeral beauty amidst this augmented sense of familiarity and unfamiliarity, through intent or chance.

# THE OBSERVATORY

The Observatory,  
Anitya 111:  
*Omnia Mutantur*,  
Institute of  
Contemporary  
Arts Singapore,  
2013. Photos:  
Philipp Aldrup  
for *The Obs: A  
Documentation*



Dharma: It started with the discovery of music from a young age that became an obsession. That eventually led me to the left-field kind of music, which brought upon the realisation that music is not just about rhythmic and harmonic patterns but also sounds. A whole new sonic world opened up with this realisation. Today I find myself constantly trying to find new ways of creating sounds, while also rediscovering old ways. Sound exploration brought about another dimension to the compositional and improvisational process. There is a certain kind of freedom that comes with it and it takes music to another level that I find very intriguing.

Bani Haykal: Music was like a staple when I was growing up, as my late father was a musician. At that point in time, I don't suppose I enjoyed or appreciated the musicality of the tunes being played, they were just a series of

organised sounds that filled our home. Although its harmonic content was most prevalent, it shaped the way I would perceive the world that surrounded home. Being exposed to not just music but also cartoons and films made growing up with music in the background a somewhat abstract experience. I use 'abstract' because I would associate specific sonic motifs or arrangements with actions and intents of people. This developed my interest in the forms of abstraction that have been the basis of my work, where every idea or form can be perceived or adapted into other logics.

Leslie Low: My initial impression of sound probably began when I was seven or eight and experimenting with the record button of a cassette deck, but a deeper awareness of sound only began around the time when The Observatory was first formed in 2001. I had also

just begun working in an audio-post environment. The combination of the two made for an exciting time. I began paying attention to field recordings, sound effects and sound design, and correlating them to the experimentation and composition we did with The Observatory. The recording studio became a means for exploration and investigation toward a deeper understanding of frequencies and how they affect us psychologically. Those formative years have a part to play in our current interest in working with sound as an art form.

Vivian Wang: I got sick of playing standard sheet music and the whole rigidity of the classical tradition. Around the time I started writing music with Leslie, I learnt a bunch of neat audio/studio tricks from him to alter sound. I spent hours experimenting in the studio

at work, discovering ways of producing and altering everything – be it the sound of a voice or an instrument – although, essentially, these were still musical in nature. Nevertheless, it did get me into another headspace for experiencing sound. I became more interested in sound for the sake of sound in contrast to something already imbued with humanistic meaning, like a song. I started obsessing about changing the sound of my modest Yamaha electric keyboard. Using all sorts of devices like computer software and hardware such as guitar stompboxes, I could explore new levels of dissonance by aggressively distorting the original sound source. This was a lot of fun for me as it presented a whole new approach to making music. The creative possibilities had just opened up.

# JOEL ONG



Above: Joel Ong, *Wagon*, site-specific sound installation, kinetic sound devices, 2012. Photo: Lavender Chong

Below: Joel Ong, *Tuning Forks*, sound performance, 2011. Photo: Lynette Tan



Perhaps the most interesting part of my relationship with sound is that it is borne not from an experimental music background, but more from my academic interest in observing and understanding nature, and in critically analysing the perceptual and mediating technologies that govern our systems of knowledge.

My interest in sound art began when I started investigating communicative and signaling behaviours in animals as an undergraduate. I found sound a more salient medium to experience the intricate interactions found in nature in a way that was more embodied and instantaneous than through its mediations by environmental sensors; these sensors were primarily visual and often decoded in a laboratory far away from the actual site of measurement.

Soon after, I developed an interest in the parallel histories of experimental sound practices and science. In particular, I was interested in locating fertile grounds of discourse between cultures of listening developed in modern techno-scientific laboratories, and concomitant artistic practices that were developing within the avant garde. One challenge I face, of which every sound artist or musician is cognizant, is the uniqueness of every site to sound's propagation. So I've found that site-specificity and room/acoustic resonance play a big part in my work (both physically and symbolically). This has especially impacted my designing of feedback systems that are modulated and controlled in the space of the performance or installation in real time.

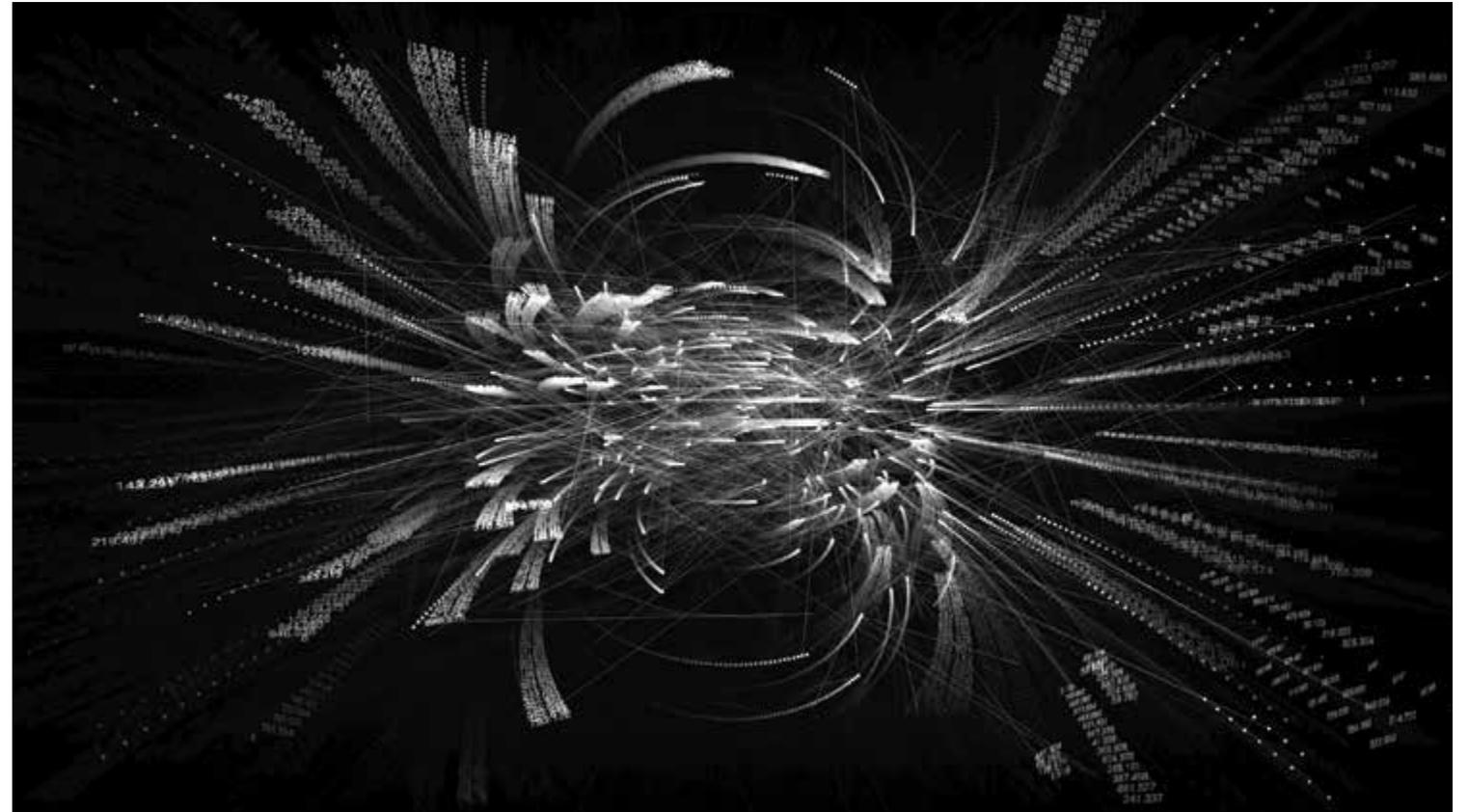
The way to understanding a work of sound art for me can be found in what R. Murray Schafer calls 'ear-cleansing', in stripping down a listening process to pure attentiveness, in discovering and rediscovering sounds in the environment and their minute details, nuances and evolutions in time. Hearing sounds as they are can fold down the cultural constructs of noise and music into more productive denominators like tone, timbre and frequency. Within an appropriate context they encourage the novelty (hearing 'new' sounds in 'new' ways) that one would typically associate with a sound art installation or performance. Of course, this extends beyond any one particular space since sound never really 'dies', it merely becomes too soft for us to hear so the work is never solely about its role in an isolated concert hall as it should be about rediscovering the fundamental act of listening that continues long after the show is over. Angus Carlyle, one of my favourite artists who writes about listening practices for sound in the environment, once compared sound to a mist – when the mist dissipates, we no longer see it as mist but the vapour molecules that it was composed of still linger in the air. Similarly, a sound never really decays or ceases, its energy still exists in minute vibrations of air molecules that continue on, albeit too small for us to hear. The questions of what we listen, how we listen, and through what mediating technologies and acoustic environments we listen, then become a network of considerations for sound artists.

The notion of silence, for me, therefore is a question of what we give our attention to. It is inseparable from the writings of Cage, whose seminal piece *4'33"* affirmed his position that silence was not the absence of sound but a silencing of specific cultural or social contexts. It was his desire back in 1961 to tap into the 'inner music' of objects that inspired my work in atomic vibrations in 2011.

# ONG KIAN-PENG

Left: Ong Kian-Peng, *Coronado*, servo motors, microcontroller, acrylic, metal pipes, metal bearings, drum roll, dimensions variable, 2012

Right: Ong Kian-Peng, *Perceptio*, custom software, 2011



I was a late bloomer when it comes to sound. I wasn't even into music in a big way until my first affective experience with sound at the age of sixteen when I borrowed a friend's Walkman. I was hooked, and realising that it offered a new way of experiencing different spaces. It was only towards the last year of my studies at LASALLE College of the Arts that I started working with sound. At that time, I was really interested in audiovisual works, being inspired by the works of Ryuichi Sakamoto and Carsten Nicolai. I started out using sound as data, and translating it into graphical visualisations. My interests in the properties of sound continue today and I have also started to engage with the production of sound as well.

Sound, like most things, has an aesthetic quality. Much like the subjectivity towards visual objects, one person's sound can also be another's noise. The history and politics of noise go back to the 19th century, however I am most interested in noise in its scientific definition. It is a random signal with a flat power spectral density, which means having an equal power within any frequency band. An example of this is the noise from an unused FM radio channel

or the static empty channels of a TV set. Noise, to me, is interesting as a building block for different kinds of sounds like those of wind, fire, sea waves and other synthetic sounds.

Sounds are vibrations and are not limited to a cochlear sensory perception because vibrations travel not just through air but also via different media. When perceiving sound, we are also doing so in a number of combinations including the audiovisual and the audio haptic, for example. That sound is never purely a cochlear experience is one of the defining aspects that underpins my work with sound. Even silence can affect us on a very physical level. I tend to think that there is no real silence. John Cage once wrote about his experience in the anechoic chamber, which I had the chance of experiencing myself recently in Japan. It was deafening. I could not stay there for long. There was sound everywhere, even when there was none; in the anechoic chamber, our bodies became the source of sound. Currently, one of my ongoing research interests revolves around how the human brain utilises multiple senses to form a perception of reality, and how this may be applied to sound.

# BRIAN O'REILLY

[68] In trying to trace the tangled threads that constitute my approach in constructing a particular work, I am drawn frequently to a continuation of a conceptual line of thought first developed by Paul Klee as 'andacht zum kleninen' (a devotion to small things). From the study of the smallest manifestation of form within the every day landscape/soundscape, it is possible to understand (in Klee's words) the 'magnitude of natural order'. Thus, from a study of minutiae and their interrelationships, one can deduce the unseen outlines of complex forms. One of the ways in which I employ this method is to use a minuscule amount of material in constructing my time-based works. I take these slight bits of digital detritus and combine/recombine them to create an arborescent collection of relations tracing outward from the original source. This method creates a database of materials from which the final structure is then created.

Sound on a single plane or aesthetically monoistic in direction of thought often leaves me with a sense of unease. For me, a duality is at least needed to create a work – two or more opposing concepts pulling at a sonic structure until it can crumble no more, leaving only the sturdiest structural elements in their skeletal form remaining, creating the foundation of the work.

My first foray into engaging sound was not only through playing musical instruments or music studies at school, but with a simple brown plastic Fisher Price cassette recorder. This was not only my introduction to removing the casual nature of a sound event from its source, but my introduction to the power of abstracting sounds by warping the speed of recorded materials and uncovering their inner workings.

From these two points, the first of many sonic identities emerged (or as I would find out later 'concepts' as Luc Ferrari would call them). On the one hand playing a musical instrument was about intonation, pitch, melody and rhythm and, on the other, I was drawn to the uncovering of haunted melodies excavated by slowing down a recording of a thunderclap or the wind rumbling the recorder's tiny internal microphone.

The duality of acoustic vs. electronic sounds, pitch vs. texture, improvisation vs. fixed compositions, micro-forms vs. macro-forms are prominent in my thought process. There is always a desire to be within a state of flux, constant reinterpretation and transformation. This was not easily resolved until my uncovering of Pierre Schaeffer's writings and recordings on *musique concrete*. Suddenly, the world of ridged notes and rhythms gave way to shifting sound masses and textures of sound. This was the connection needed to bring together these two seemingly disparate conceptual sound worlds, which could merge and relate to each other to create a cohesive work. This led to the creation of countless new beginnings and concepts in transforming and manipulating sounds.

For example, recently I have been thinking about my own shifting relationship to all that is audible in a temporal sense, not only to my own performing practice and recording but also to the environments I am surrounded by and engaged within. When I was working with the late Luc Ferrari as his music assistant on *Cycle des Souvenirs* in the mid-1990s, we often spoke about the differences between 'memorised sounds' or 'sound memories'. Both phrases in French could be conveniently grouped together as the same two words with vastly different undertones. The first was a term we could use to replace the word 'tape' in a score (for example, 'for piano and tape'), although it has shifted nowadays to 'fixed media' which refers to a backing track of pre-recorded and composed sounds accompanying a performer. The second term held a much deeper meaning, which is quite elusive and cannot be conveyed properly with words. To fully understand it one has to have a direct relationship to the sound materials. Ferrari believed that in addition to the transformation of sounds within an environment, the listener and their relation to these recordings or 'sound memories' shifts on a multitude of levels and degrees, leaving only faint traces of the direct sonic sources. The work that is currently a part of this exhibition entitled *Erosion Intervals no. 11–16* uses this concept in its construction and implementation.



Above: Brian O'Reilly and Naoki Nomoto, *SUPER DELUXE*, performance at the Tokyo Festival of the Modular, Tokyo, 2013. Photo: Dairo Koga

Below: Brian O'Reilly, performance at The Substation, Singapore, as part of the duo BLACK ZENITH, 2011. Photo: Gregg Tavares

# SHAUN SANKARAN



Left: Shaun Sankaran, *Dream State Vision Promo*, 2012. Photo: Natasha Noor  
Right: Shaun Sankaran, *MFB by Silent Infinite (Abigail)*, 2010

Growing up, the radio was always switched on and I was constantly exposed to music, people talking, or the static that was in-between switching the channels. That was what probably got me started with working with sound. My relationship with sound is based on pushing boundaries, taking it as far as I can to create something different. I feel that working with experimental music is a risk – it goes against fear. I use sound as a medium to express how I feel or, more specifically, a kind of state that I am in. The inconsistencies of sound usually trigger me to make music and noise. To basically turn any type of sound into music is beautiful. Not everyone is going to like it because it's not what people hear everyday or would consider 'music'.

For different projects, specific auras are created to stabilise or destabilise the environment. I use my music to evoke emotions and transport audiences to another

kind of state without having to even move. One of my projects *Dream State Vision* is a break from the world of static and noise, an ambitious piece of music that drifts alternatively between the visceral and conceptual. It may be described as slow, comforting and like a dream-like trance. Keeping Erik Satie's *Furniture Music* and Brian Eno's ambient music as historical forebears, I focus on the act of listening itself, pushing the listener inward, inside the body and self to experience art as a means of flight.

As for projects under the alias Mindfuckingboy, they are like a jungle war zone where you have to be alert – there are so many sounds and it pushes your limit of observation to the maximum where you switch off. Being easily bored with the normal structures of music, noise has always been interesting to me. When I create noise, it's more about opening up my sound palate without the

use of basic instruments like the guitar or bass drum or vocals. I'm opening it up to many other things like the sound of pipes, rain, breath, machines, anything at all that when pieced together, is a harmony of chaos.

On the other hand, I am interested in silence and the inaudible. I would consider the inaudible to be in the range of anything below 60 Hz, bass frequencies, or the ones that people can't really hear but instead feel. Currently my music is moving into the heavier side. I've been using more bass frequencies than before because to involve feeling and hearing sounds as part of an experience creates a greater impact.

In the beginning, a constant challenge of working with sound was choosing the 'right' equipment or instruments, followed by actually learning how to use them, but it got much easier after familiarisation. Being trained as

a sound engineer also helped in terms of manipulating sounds to how I wanted them. However frustrating the exploration process of the instrument/equipment was, it led me to discover how much I could do with what I had or owned. Now, the challenges involve incorporating messages and meanings into my works, tweaking and handling the equipment according to the message I want to send to the listener.

Sound is everywhere, even when you're not listening to music, there's the sound of crickets, construction or the wind. Being attentive to your surroundings is key – you will hear things you cannot even see and that's the beauty of sound.

# DENNIS TAN

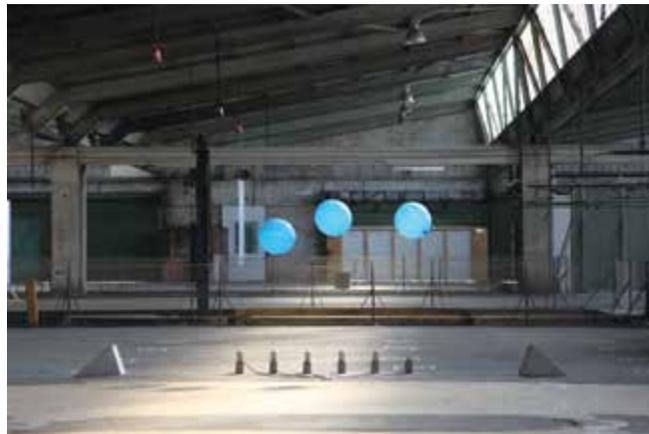
Dennis Tan, *And Time Goes On*, 4-channel sound installation, loudspeakers of 10 cm and 45 cm, metal wires, plinth, 190 x 25 x 23 cm, 2009



I express my work in different areas of sound and music. The development of my work within the scope of sound art came from a background in music and studying in film school. Both of these areas have informed my explorations in the synthesis between visual and sonic elements, and the symbiotic relationship between them. To me, sound is both abstract and concrete and it is at the intersection of sonic elements, materials and form that my interest in sound art develops. Sound, for me, is a medium and a concept that can be used to decode universal themes through installations, sculptures and objects. I draw my inspiration from the semantics of sound and observations of its physicality. In my past works involving objects and installations, I have used loudspeakers not only as a means to project sounds but have also treated them as 'sound bodies'. These sound bodies draw upon rhythmic patterns of speech amongst groups of people, and have been used to explore themes of power struggles. Through these sound bodies, sound goes beyond being something to be listened to, and is also used to represent physical states of bodies and actions.

The other aspect of my sound work relates closely to music. Since my introduction to the software Max/Msp, I started using the computer as a tool for music creation and improvisation. Employing self-made acoustic

Dennis Tan, *Balancing on a Thin Line*, installation, 3 blue balloons, 6 motors with propellers, concrete, metal wires, microcomputer, 300 x 450 x 50 cm, 2010. Photo: Sebastian Ziegler



Dennis Tan, *A Rainbow Crosses His Path While He was Looking for His Reflection in the Water*, 8-channel sound installation, loudspeakers, white cables, amplifier, 600 x 120 x 120 cm, 2007

instrumentation, sine waves, field recordings and sampling techniques, I formed the group Sonic Kitchen in Germany. We created environments using live sampling, attempting to correlate music of the past, present and the evolving future within our performances. The endless possibilities of working within the digital realm have allowed me to build and design programs suited to my needs. This interaction between man and machine is part of my research into the ergonomics of instruments and software design, impacting the playability of these modern instruments such as computers and their controllers.

On the other hand, my performances often explore the relationship between man and machine, and also explore and subvert conventional musical notations. My continuous search for different sounds has led me to the world of DIY electronics, often used in my performances. In electronics, voltage passes through various components, generating a variety of pitches, tones and waveforms. DIY electronics have enabled me to experiment with sonic properties further and devise new sounds using relatively inexpensive devices. In 2012, I conceptualised a series of electronics workshops, *Let's Make Noise*, and have conducted them in both Eastern Europe and Asia. One rule in DIY electronics is employed here: If it sounds good and it doesn't smoke, leave it be.

Dennis Tan, *Perpusila*, 12-channel sound installation, loudspeakers, cables, amplifier, dimensions variable, 2008



# EVAN TAN



Evan Tan, Darren Moore, Matin Fellani, Shaun Sankaran, Yuen Chee Wai, *PLAYFREELY VI*, Goodman Arts Centre, 2011. Photo: Martin Chua

I have been interested in music recording since I began playing in bands years ago. The ability to record a band in multi tracks and to be able to mix them properly afterwards gives an immense sense of control. When recording hardware was displaced by digital audio workstations on computers, I had the opportunity of learning how to use one when I was working for the National Archives of Singapore as an audio archivist. I was really fascinated that, within the domain of digital editing, one has complete control and capability of composing 'sound collages' in a non-linear sort of way. International electronic musicians were also starting to experiment with computers to compose abstract music. I was inspired and after acquiring a laptop and researching digital synthesis tools, the history and methods of musique concrète and more, I started constructing sound collages of my own. I discovered that by using digital synthesis, I can create unfamiliar and interesting new sounds, and these sounds can be composed to create moods or narratives like in music, but in a more liberating way.

Sound can be stimulating, calming or simply noise you filter out depending on a situation or context. I am always listening out for sounds that arouse me in music, other media and the environment. This helps me understand obscure or new sounds, and how they affect people in my work as a sound designer. Sound also has the capacity to affect behavior and evoke different moods within social spaces. Some examples are soothing sounds designed for aquariums, or sounds that contribute to the narratives of an art exhibition. It can also be used as a weapon in warfare. For me, sound has the capacity to accentuate a space or change the way spaces are commonly perceived. Simply imagine playing black metal music in a bookstore.

Speaking of space and how sound affects listeners, I have experienced being in professionally soundproofed studios, or anechoic chambers, and the silence in there can be really uncomfortable. Your ears start to ring consistently and you can hear the sounds that your body is emitting. Silence in this instance is a paradox; you are in a space that is designed to shut exterior sources of sound out completely, but you are disturbed by its overwhelming silence at the same time. This experience of silence – often thought of as peaceful, but also disconcerting and anxious – has been important to my works.

Listening to sound art or experimental music can be very challenging in itself. To the uninitiated, it may sound unfamiliar or comparable to noise. For myself, when I listen to sound artists perform, I try to study and observe their methods and styles, and listen to the narratives in their composition to understand what they are trying to express. A constant challenge of working with sound for me is to remain focused. As sound art has no limits and boundaries, one needs to know what to do to create something that you have in mind. Within a realm of infinite possibilities, you have to change your methods of working with sound to be 'contemporary' or stimulating. When working with sound, you have to understand its aesthetics, frequencies, and allow for audiences to understand what you are trying to do. I am still learning.

# ZAI TANG



[76]

[77]

Like most of us who have the privilege of hearing, my relationship with sound began in utero. The fluctuating tempo of my mother's heartbeat, her bubbling blood stream, the shifting intonations of her voice and occasional tummy rumbles were the first sounds I encountered. Enveloped within this intimate listening environment during the initial stages of life primed my ears, as it did yours, for the exterior acoustic environment beyond the womb.

As a child my young ears, probably like yours, were city dwellers. I spent my early years moving between London and Singapore, exposed to two contrasting urban soundscapes, rich in their own unique variety of sonorous colours, textures and rhythms. When I eventually settled in London at aged seven, I unknowingly carried with me the trace of a particular bird's morning song, which I used to hear every day in Sembawang at first light.

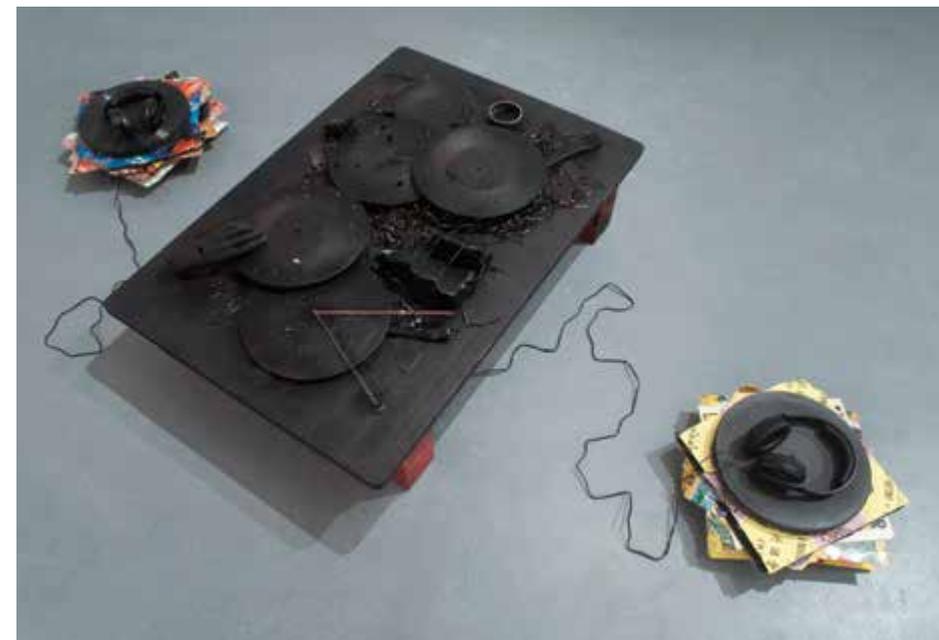
The song appeared to me in my daydreams, its soft, textural glissando transporting me back to a lucid scene of awakening in Sembawang at sunrise, just in time for school. This early experience planted the seeds of curiosity of how sound can capture the very essence of a place in a way that eludes images or words.

Over the years my work has explored the interplay between sound, space and the sense of being that our aural experience mediates. I draw influence from an area of research and practice called acoustic ecology, defined by R Murray Schafer as:

'... the study of the effects of the acoustic environment or SOUNDSCAPE on the physical responses or behavioural characteristics of creatures living within it.'<sup>1</sup>

In an increasingly urbanised world, the soundscapes we inhabit are becoming homogenised and overpopulated. The sounds that imbue places with a distinctive sense of identity and provide us with a feeling of belonging are often drowned out by the perpetual morphosis of our lived environment. Through my work I try to reveal the vital role listening plays in our perception of the world and highlight how more holistic approaches to urban development could benefit our wellbeing.

<sup>1</sup> R Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1977.



Above: Zai Tang, visual score for *Uniform* (solo/duet), pencil on paper, digitally inverted, 2013

Below: Zai Tang, *Through the Mind's Eye of a Needle*, vinyl, record covers, guitar string, styrofoam, rubber bands, masking tape, nails, spray paint, wood and sound, dimensions variable, 1000 seconds, 2011. Photo: Philipp Aldrup

# MARK WONG

Music was my first and lifelong love. An early memory involves me as a five-year-old listening to 'Billie Jean', thoroughly immersed in the groove and suffering the involuntary compulsion to tap my toes. Ostensibly amused by this, a family member made a teasing remark to the rest of the family, filling me with a profound sense of self-awareness and shame. From a young age, I have been aware of the psychological and physiological power of music. Today, I carry echoes of that shame with me.

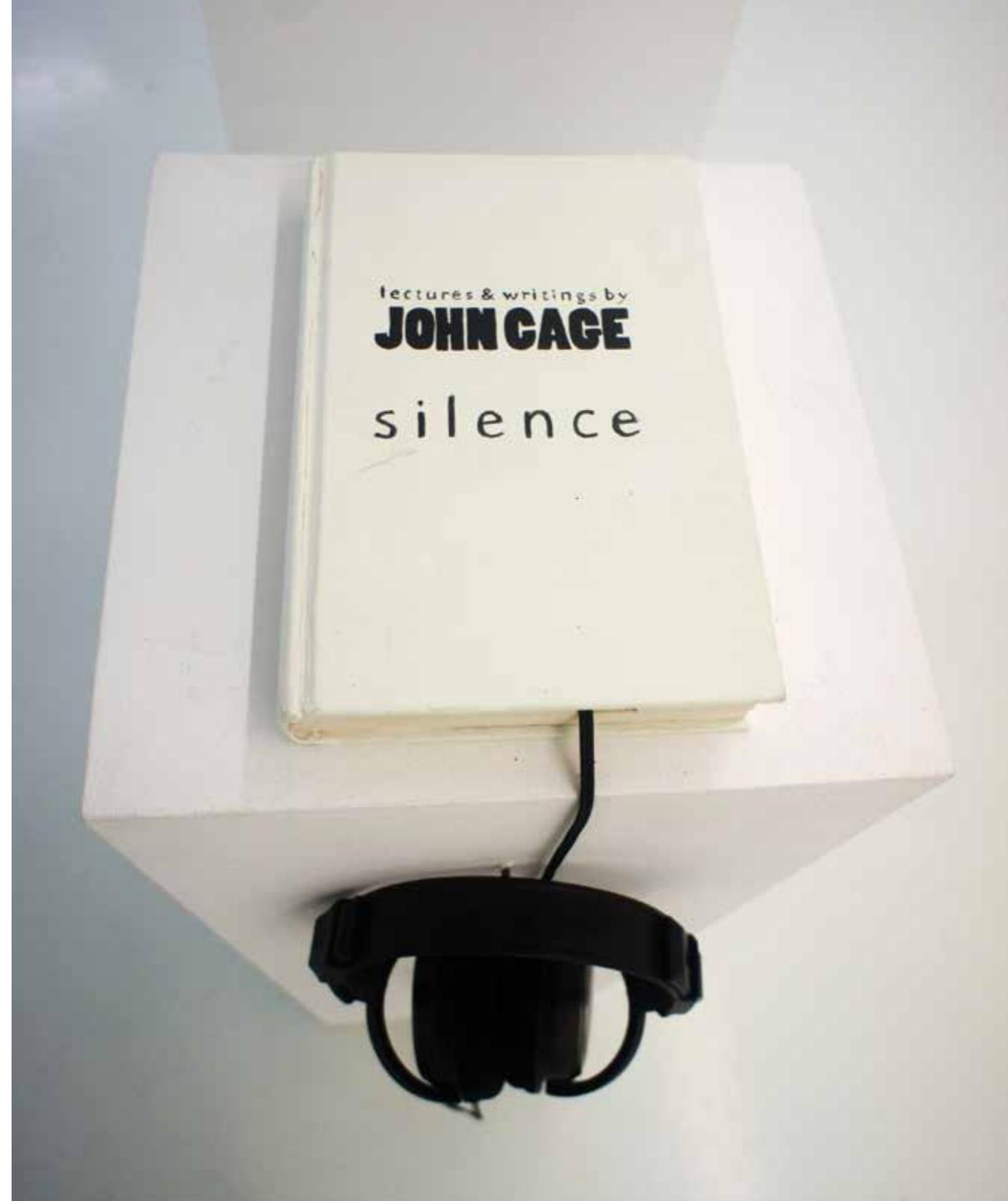
R. Murray Schafer: 'We have no ear lids. We are condemned to listen. But this does not mean our ears are always open.'

My journey in sound has been a journey through listening, of learning to open my ears. In my pre-teen and early teenage years, I ravidly consumed all manner of pop and rock music, absorbing everything on FM radio, until I reached a point where I began to tire of formulaic music, or what my younger self read as a popular culture of vacuity, mundanity and consumerism. I looked for alternatives by reaching out into the margins, and digging deeper into music history. I discovered jazz, tracing its roots in ragtime, big band and folk blues and following its development into free jazz and the avant garde. Once I discovered John Cage in my late teens, it was as if my ears – and mind – were truly, fully open for the first time, ready to listen to the entire sonic field from silence to noise and back, an endless sea of possibilities. I listened to the world anew and, in fact, I was able to return to pop and rock, listening to it as if with new ears and discovering great joy and common grief. Cage taught me to listen with empathy and, more so, for sheer pleasure.

Even when I began to make my own music – electronic, electro-acoustic – and later, sound-based art, it always started and ended with listening. Whether composing, playing, or improvising, I am listening. When I conduct research on a project, I am listening to points of view, and thinking hard on what they mean and what they can mean.

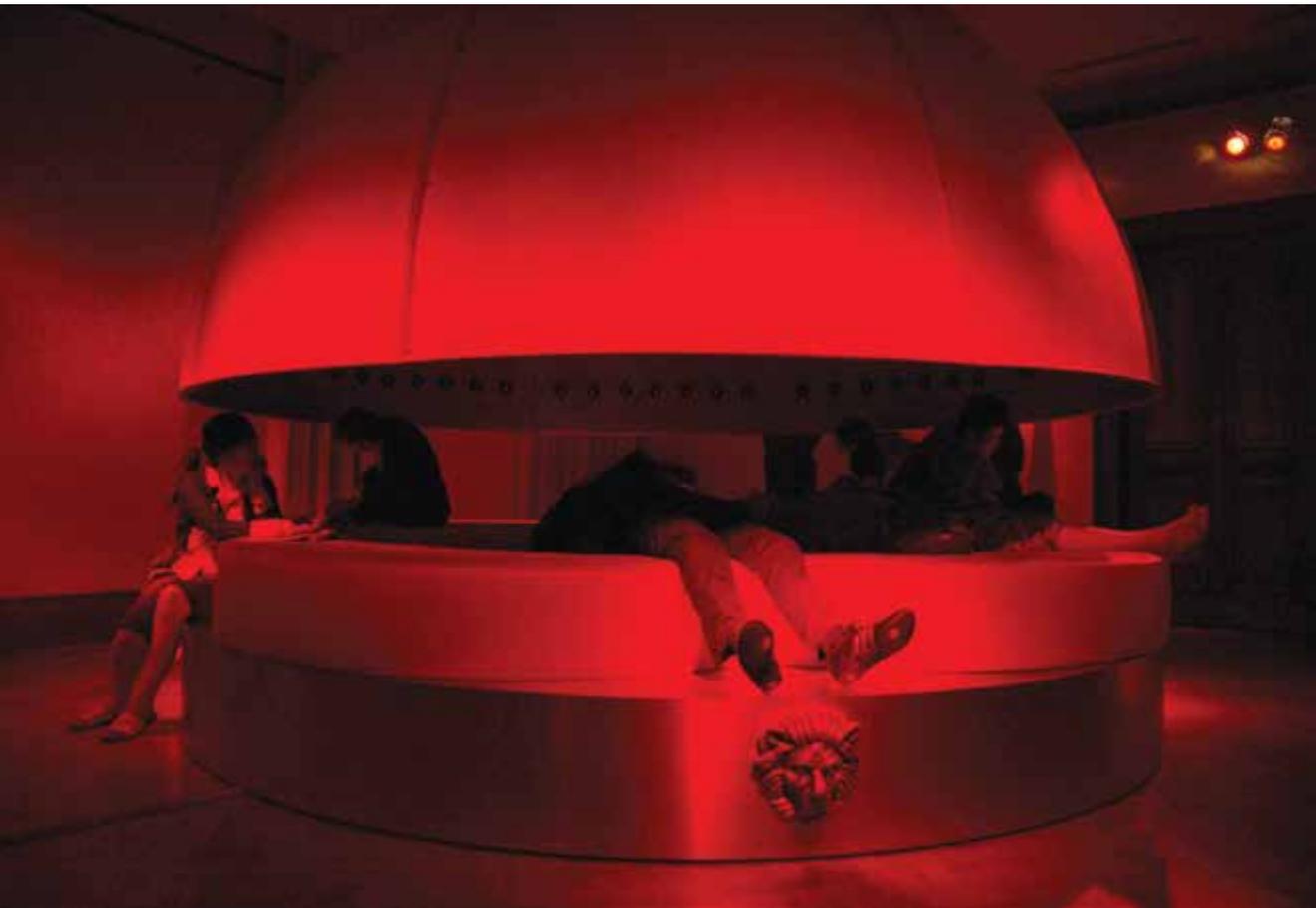
What is it about music and sound that have captured my lifelong devotion?

In a culture dominated by the visual, sound represents a subversive force, unseen but omni-present. It penetrates a world of surfaces. To listen deeply is to sensitise yourself to the vibrations surrounding you, and tapping your toes along if you feel like adding to the conversation.



Mark Wong, *The Right to Free Speech (in 4 Official Languages)*, manipulated book, sound file, digital media player, headphones, dimensions variable, 2013

# ZUL MAHMUD



Left: Zul Mahmud, *Dancing with Frequency*, interactive sound installation light sensors, wood, six monitors, tweeters, laser pointers, computer and microcontroller, 2008

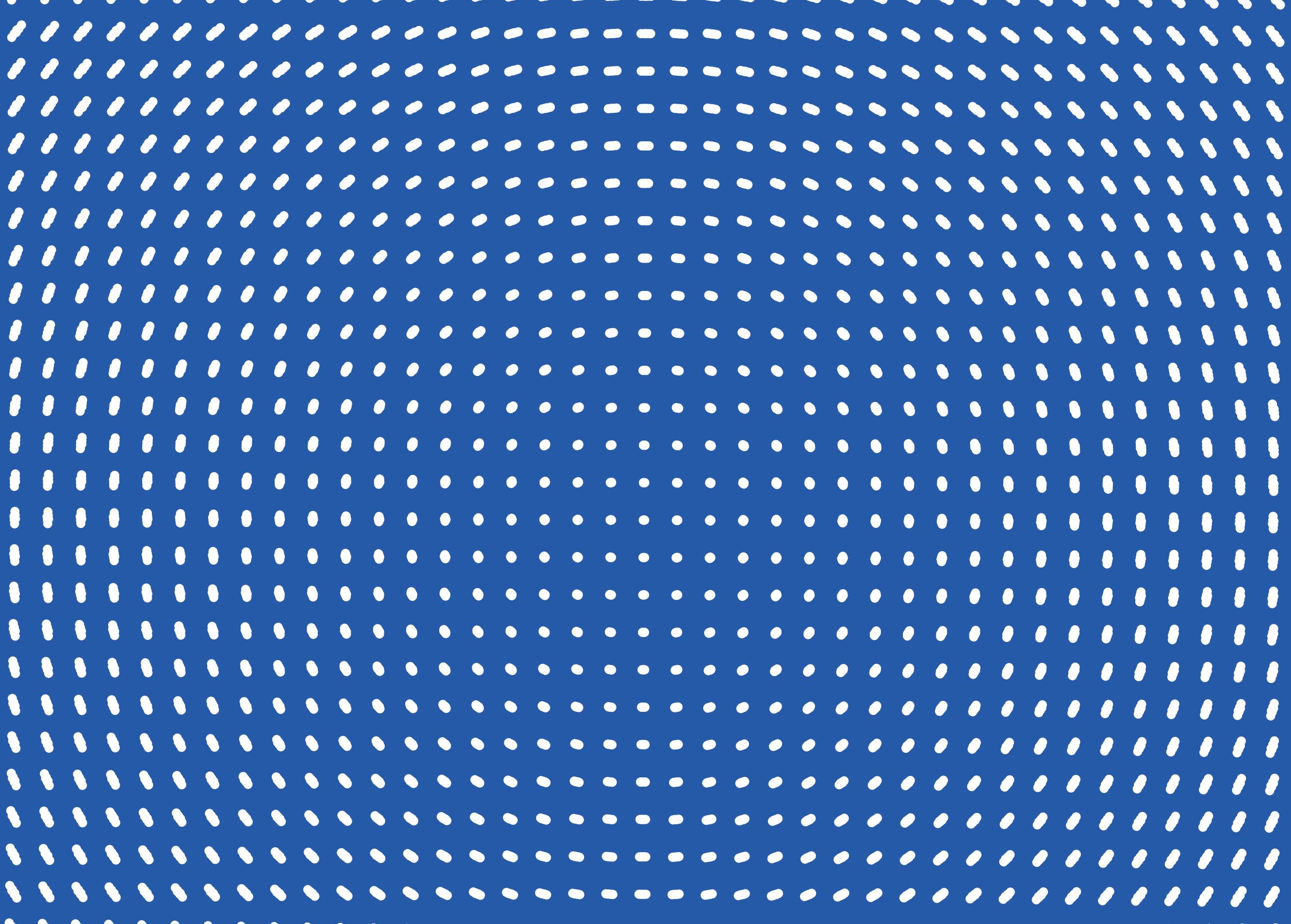


Right: Zul Mahmud, *Sonic Dome. An Empire of Thoughts*, sound installation, fibreglass, sofa bed, wood, tweeters, subwoofers, amplifier, DVD player, 2007. Photo: National Arts Council of Singapore

Sound has been a primary focus in my work for the last twelve years. I am always fascinated with sound and its characteristics. There are a lot of things to discover and explore in sound-making. I was introduced to sound or computer music in 2001 through the work of a Dutch artist when I was in Norway. When I came back to Singapore, I tried to incorporate sound in my visual work, but as my visual installations had a stronger presence, the sonic aspect of my works took on a supporting role. However, since 2004, I have decided to concentrate on sound.

The one thing I've encountered is that when we talk about sound art, many tend to associate it with live sound performance but there is more to sound than just performance.

To me, sound is very important in social spaces; it shapes the characteristics of any given space and environment. It also shapes how people behave in social spaces. I believe certain sounds will just pass us by, but I think experiencing sound has a lot to do with being selective over what you want to listen to. Personally, I consider sound pollution to be materials I can work with. They are like my sketches. I can record and collect them as materials for my current or future sound works. Another aspect that I believe is important is noise; it is something I can't run away from. It is part and parcel of our fast-paced urban society such as in Singapore – so I embrace it.



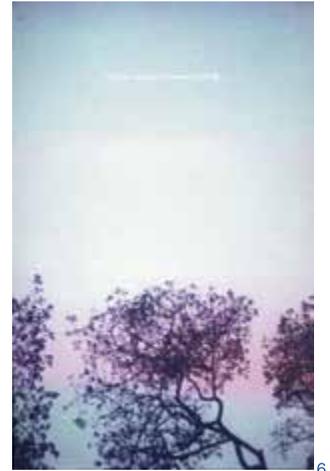
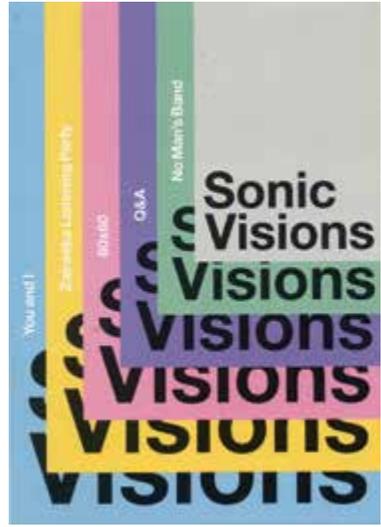
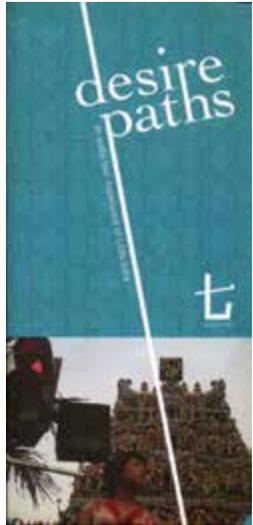
STATIONS — THE ARCHIVE — PERFORMANCES — INSTALLATIONS — SOUND SCORES — LISTENING

*Finding Sound* is an archive developed by Mark Wong as part of the exhibition. It is conceived as a temporary space for uncovering and analysing the complex yet often overlooked history of sonic arts in Singapore. The archive comprises a series of new video interviews, photographs, event collaterals, video recordings of past events and CD releases, with annotations by Wong. It revisits local events and developments altered through individual experiences, and abounds in personal stories, names, forgotten stances, suppositions, and memories.

Through a series of new video interviews with artists, archivists, musicians, academics and observers of the sonic field in Singapore, *Finding Sound* ventures to explore oral tradition as a gateway to preserving memory and 'passing down' local knowledge of Singapore's sonic culture. Taking the uneasy categorisation of 'sound art' as a point of departure, the interviews attempt to piece together various positions and personal investments in sonic arts that overlap and contradict, offering audiences a glimpse into a complex history from different viewpoints.

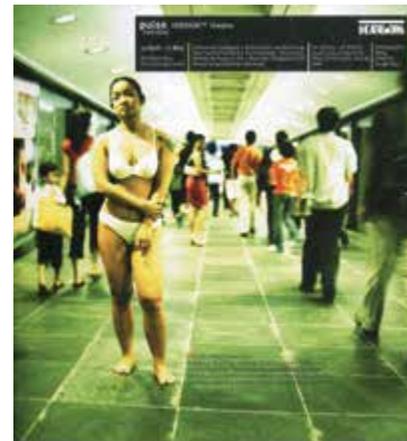
EXTRACTS FROM THE ARCHIVE (FOLLOWING PAGES):

- 1 *Desire Paths, An Audio Tour Experience of Little India, Spell #7* in collaboration with Evan Tan, various locations, 2004
- 2 *Conference of the Birds*, organised by onistudio, The Substation, 2006
- 3 *Sonic Visions*, organised by Song-Ming Ang, The Substation, 2011
- 4 George Chua and Yuen Chee Wai, 'live' at *strategies v02*, 2003
- 5 *Una Voce*, 24-hour Sound Art Festival, organised by Pink Ark, The Substation, 2005
- 6 *I have Escaped Even Myself*, organised by Singapore Sound Art Collective (sporesac)/Flux Us, 72-13, 2006
- 7 *Body Fields*, organised by 5th Passage, Parkway Parade Shopping Centre, 1992-93
- 8 Joseph Tham, 'Let us rock!: *History//Music and Freedom*', in *Think Magazine*, vol. 111, no. 28, 2007, pp. 30-36
- 9 *Corporate Toil* (Joe Ng and Wong Fook Yew), *Certain Earth Screams*, in conjunction with the solo exhibition of Koh Nguang How, *Monuments for Trees*, The Garden of The Substation, 1990. Photo: Koh Nguang How
- 10 Teh Su Ching, 'In a State of Flux', *The Straits Times*, 30 July 2005, p. 20
- 11 'Local Sound Art', *Juice*, c. 2008, p. 20
- 12 *pulse.VERSION™*, organised by TheatreWorks, 2003
- 13 *The Time Show*, The Artists Village, 1989-90



[86]

[87]



10

11

12

13



STATIONS – THE ARCHIVE – PERFORMANCES – INSTALLATIONS – SOUND SCORES – LISTENING

Schedule of Performances and Installation change-overs

Opening Night: Thu, 6<sup>th</sup> February, from 6:30pm  
Installation by Mohamad Riduan (7 - 16 February)  
Performances from 7pm: Mohamad Riduan, Zai Tang

Wed, 19<sup>th</sup> February  
Installation by Zul Mahmud (18 February - 2 March)  
Silent Walk by Song-Ming Ang, 6pm  
Performances from 7pm: Shaun Sankaran, Kei Lam

Wed, 5<sup>th</sup> March  
Installation by Ong Kian-Peng (4 - 9 March)  
Performances from 7pm: Brian O'Reilly, George Chua

Wed, 12<sup>th</sup> March  
Installation by Darren Ng (11 - 16 March)  
Silent Walk by Song-Ming Ang, 6pm  
Performances from 7pm: Gulayu Arkestra, Dennis Tan  
in collaboration with Delphine Mei

STATIONS – THE ARCHIVE – PERFORMANCES – INSTALLATIONS – SOUND SCORES – LISTENING

Image courtesy Brian O'Reilly

Music scores have been used as guides to performing a piece of music as well as for analysing and archiving musical compositions. Where modern musical notation may prove rigid, composers and artists have turned to alternative means of expressing sonic ideas, further exploring the relationship between sight and sound. This includes the use of graphs, drawings, paintings, and other graphic notations that expand upon musical vocabulary, often allowing for various entry points for interpretation. The works brought together in this section feature various innovations for transcribing sonic ideas, providing insight into the artists' process of visualising and working with sound.

gamba spielt zu tonband  
gamba play to tape

barock

tröten wie ein elefant/like an elephant

vereinbarung zwischen musikern  
(flöte, gamba, posauhe, geiger)

agreement between musicians  
(flute, gamba, trombone, violin)

tonband musik/tape music

geföhlvoll/sentimental

präpariert geiger  
prepared violin

ausdehnen/stretch

marsch/march

stottern/stutter

bohnen reiben auf fell/  
beans rubbed on skin

stief/rigid

leidenschaft/passionate

macht/power

Detailed description: The image shows a hand-drawn musical score on a grid background. The score is organized into several horizontal sections. At the top, there are wavy lines and a series of vertical lines that create a trapezoidal shape. Below these are various musical notations, including rhythmic patterns, melodic lines, and clusters of notes. Text annotations in German and English are placed throughout the score, often describing the sound or the instrument being used. For example, 'gamba spielt zu tonband' is written on the left, and 'vereinbarung zwischen musikern' is written above a set of vertical lines. The score is divided into two main sections by a vertical line, with the right section containing more complex and dense musical notation. The overall style is abstract and experimental, focusing on texture and rhythm rather than traditional melody.

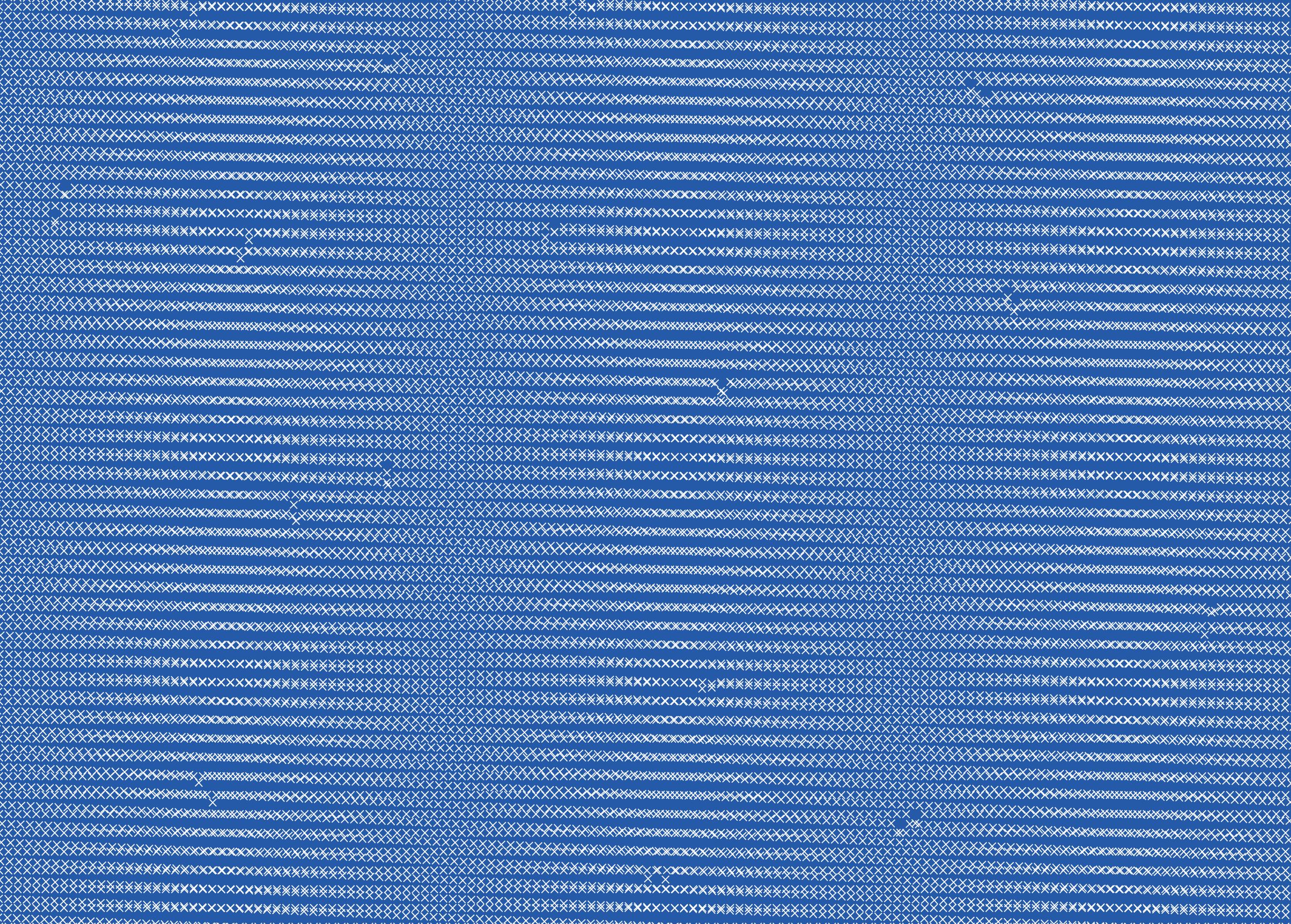
[94]

[95]

STATIONS — THE ARCHIVE — PERFORMANCES — INSTALLATIONS —  
LISTENING STATIONS — SOUND SCORES —



The possibilities for organising, remixing, and capturing sounds today have expanded in correlation to the advent of technology. With the emergence of magnetic tapes and tape recorders, sounds could be cut, rearranged, spliced, and looped to create new sounds. Over seventy years after the commercial production of tape recorders, sonic experimentation continues to expand in relation to digital and electronic possibilities. The works featured as part of the listening stations are representative of the broad spectrum of sonic sensibilities in the exhibition. They encourage active listening on a more intimate level, offering various entry points into experiencing a range of sonic activities from stillness to noise, random to structured forms, and personal to collective interactions with sound.



# BIOGRAPHIES

## Artists

### SONG-MING ANG

Song-Ming Ang uses music as his starting point to produce artworks and performances from the overlapping positions of artist, fan, and amateur. These rule-based compositions consist of pushing an idea to its logical conclusion, or constructing situations in which events unfold. Ang has exhibited and performed at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin), Singapore Biennale 2011, Gertrude Contemporary (Melbourne), SCHUNCK (Netherlands), ARCUS Project (Japan), and held solo exhibitions at Stanley Picker Gallery (London), Sound-Fjord (London), Spring Workshop (Hong Kong), Künstlerhaus Bethanien (Berlin), and Future Perfect (Singapore).

### GEORGE CHUA

George Chua is writing as a third person and does not see any importance in mentioning his past works since a career in the arts is not something he cares for anymore. Apart from family and spiritual commitments, he finds great satisfaction making cycles and sequences of sound that take him into a trance. He believes that the relationship one has with sound leads to ecstasy and that the secret to ecstasy and entering a trance-like state is available to those who seek it.

### GULAYU ARKESTRA

Gulayu Arkestra consists of a group of like-minded individuals with varying perspectives on sound and music who had gathered on the island of Pulau Ubin to form an unusual orchestra of sounds, produced by intentional or sometimes unintentional actions. The Arkestra centres its musical direction using methods of free improvisation, often exploring various formats and

strategies that defy the conventional structures and hierarchies of music. More interestingly, most of the Arkestra members involved at the time when the orchestra was formed were not trained musicians. Gulayu Arkestra produces sound through an extensive use of ethnic musical instruments, self-made instruments, as well as random objects and household items not designed for music-making purposes.

### JOYCE KOH

Award-winning composer Dr Joyce Beetuan Koh has an international career. Her works have been performed widely in Europe and Asia, and two piano works have been published by the Associated Board Royal Schools of Music, UK. A versatile composer, her works included commissions for concert music, dance collaborations, and text-sound to sound installations. Originating from her interests in architecture and inter-disciplinarity, Koh explores notions of sonic canvas and space. Dr Koh holds a Ph.D in Composition (York, UK) and Postgraduate Diploma in Music Computing (IRCAM, Paris). She spent 20 years working and living as an independent composer in London and Paris. In 2007, she was Head of Music Faculty at the School of The Arts. Since 2011, she has been programme director of T.I.L.T Arts (Thinking In and Learning Through the Arts), an organisation which offers enrichment programmes for children, amateurs, professionals and educators. She lectures at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Singapore) and the Singapore National Institute of Education.

### KAI LAM

Kai Lam (A.K.A. Singlish Punk) is a multi-disciplinary artist with a background in sculpture. Kai Lam's foray into aural works and sonic arts is a result of his extended practice in video, installation art and performance art. He began his formal training in visual arts

in 1995 at LASALLE College of the Arts and, in 2001, he was awarded a study grant from Lee Foundation and an education bursary from the National Arts Council. He graduated from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology with a Bachelor of Arts. As an artist-organiser, he has initiated critical artist-run projects including *Artists Investigating Monuments* (1999), *Future of Imagination* (2003) and *Rooted In The Ephemeral Speak* (2009). Since 1999, he has traveled to different countries around Asia and Europe to present his performances and art projects.

### MOHAMAD RIDUAN

Mohamad Riduan has exhibited and performed numerous times at The Esplanade, Furor Space, The Substation, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, and World Event Young Artists' festival in Nottingham, England. Most recently, he exhibited at Jendela, Esplanade as part of a two-man exhibition entitled *Bridge: Dari Utara ke Selatan*. Riduan is best known for his sound sculptures, performance art and experimental music. He is also a member of Singapore-based collective OFFCUFF, a multi-disciplinary performance collective focusing on structured improvisation incorporating dual visual projections and dual sound components.

### DARREN NG

Darren Ng is a Singapore-based sound artist and music composer who has 15 years of international experience in theatre, contemporary dance, and film. He has been involved in over 150 arts productions. As a music composer, he is signed to record label Kitchen. Label and goes by the pseudonym sonicbrat. He has also been invited to perform solo and present his sound installations in numerous prestigious international music and arts festivals including Wiener Festwochen (Vienna) and SONAR (Barcelona), to name a few.

To date, he has been nominated 14 times in the *Straits Times Life!* Theatre Awards, won Best Sound Design multiple times as well as received an Honourable Mention for Special Achievement for Best Sound. He was also conferred the National Arts Council's Young Artist Award (music; multi-disciplinary practice) in 2012. A Philosophy and Theatre Studies graduate from the National University of Singapore, he is currently the Associate Sound Artist and Music Composer for The Finger Players and a founding member of the design collective INDEX.

### THE OBSERVATORY

The Observatory is an independent avant rock band and an experimental music group based in Singapore. More than that, they represent a creative force powering musical exploration in all forms unexpected. This year, The Observatory became the first independent and contemporary music group to receive a major grant by the Singapore National Arts Council. For the next three years, The Observatory will continue its programme of international touring, collaborative work with theatre and other arts disciplines whilst challenging the perception of music and invigorating audience appreciation for work that is experimental, thought-provoking and unpredictable. The goal isn't just about creating music that contains universal themes or writing about life from a distinctly Singaporean perspective. It's about breaking down inhibition, convention and the mechanical ways of commercial music-making.

### JOEL ONG

Joel Ong is a sound artist from Singapore. He has been active as a sound designer and installation artist since 2007, and has presented and performed at galleries and art spaces in Asia, Australia and the USA. He is also part of the Loft Collective, an audio

production and sound design group based in Singapore. Joel has completed interdisciplinary residencies at the Curtin Nanochemistry Institute, the Ear Sciences Institute of Australia and PICA (Perth Institute of Contemporary Art). His current research involves the shared and often complementary histories of art and science in order to contextualise new paradigms in digital art and 'new' media especially within the fields of computational, telematic, nano- and bio-art.

Ong was most recently the recipient of the Substation Open Call award (Sound Art) in Singapore, and is an alumni of SymbioticA, the Centre of Excellence in Biological Arts at the University of Western Australia. He is currently residing in Seattle where he is pursuing a Ph.d in Digital Arts and Experimental Media (DXARTS) at the University of Washington. In between making prototypes and tinkling with electronics, Joel also lectures on digital art and leads the occasional soundwalk through the busy streets of Seattle.

### ONG KIAN-PENG

Ong Kian-Peng recently graduated with a MFA in Design Media Arts and is currently based in Singapore. As a media artist, his works range from sound to media installations. He has exhibited his works locally and internationally including at the International Computer Music Conference, Siggraph 2012, in Los Angeles, *SOUNDWORKS* at ICA London, Asian Students and Young Artists Festival in South Korea and the M1 Fringe Festival.

His current interest in sound revolves around exploring the properties of sound conceptually and experientially, as well as examining different ways of experiencing sound that takes it away from an exclusively cochlear modality. He is inspired by natural systems and processes, and has created installa-

tions that engage with these phenomena in a sculptural and visual way to represent or create sound.

### BRIAN O'REILLY

Brian O'Reilly works within the fields of electro-acoustic composition, sound installations, moving images and noise music. He is also a contrabassist focusing on uncovering the inaudible textures and hidden acoustic micro-sounds of his instrument through the integration of electronic treatments and extended playing techniques.

O'Reilly attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where he focused on sound, analog video synthesis, and kinetic sculpture. He completed his graduate studies in electronic music composition and sound design at the University of California Santa Barbara's Media Arts and Technology program. Currently, he performs audio and moving images focusing on solo projects, contrabass with electronic treatments as part of the group Game of Patience, and modular synthesizer/live visuals with Black Zenith. O'Reilly is also a lecturer at the School of Contemporary Music, LASALLE College of the Arts, focusing on electronic music composition, and creative music-making techniques through the use of improvisation and visual music.

### SHAUN SANKARAN

Shaun Sankaran is a Singaporean musician who has presented his experimental sound works across the globe under various incarnations such as Mindfuckingboy, Dream State Vision, and Chöd. He has performed in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Indonesia, Italy, Malaysia, Netherlands, Philippines, Poland, Singapore, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. His work is both a harmony and disharmony of sounds, a stepping

out of boundaries, and an exercise in total aural anarchy. To him, creating noise and music is not unlike creating a soundscape of freedom, a moment in time where media, social and self-control freeze altogether like performers caught on camera, unmoving and suspended, completely open to interpretation. He engages with the essence of sound and, like the actors caught on film, suspends his disbelief and superstitions, swimming into uncharted electromagnetic realms of pure and total denial of objectivity, names, shapes and forms. Sankaran indulges in creating sounds in which a fascination with the clarity of content and an uncompromising attitude towards conceptual and minimal art can be found. His music is a catharsis of emotions, a purge of self and an expression of those intimacies that are denied words.

#### DENNIS TAN

Dennis Tan is a sound artist who deals with universal themes and the communication between individuals and society. His conceptual work is influenced by his personal experiences. The impulse to develop objects and installations – what he terms ‘sound bodies’ – resulted from his interest in sound and materiality. These sound bodies deeply engage with the environment, perception, and communication patterns of sound. His works convey ‘stories’ about ideas of music and musical instruments; these analyses are also often marked by hidden humor. All of this happens out of the quest to develop new worlds of sound, to expand the multimedia perspectives, and to promote their reception. Tan has performed and exhibited in Finland, Germany, London, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

#### EVAN TAN

Evan Tan is a sound designer for TV and film, and has been involved in the Singapore music scene since 1988 with Opposition Party and The Padres. He

was also a member of The Observatory from 2003–11. Since 2002, he has been active in laptop music and the sound art scene, exploring field recordings, digital noise, electro-acoustic and electronic music. He has also designed various sound walks with local theatre group Spell 7. He is currently in the experimental band Minister. He has participated in various festivals including NUS Arts Festival, Singapore, with Spell 7 Performance Club and Affixen (2013), Georgetown Festival, Penang, with Spell 7 Performance Club and Spare Room Productions (2011), Theatre Der Welt, Germany with The Observatory and Ho Tzu Nyen (2010), Singapore Biennale together with Spell 7 Performance Club (2008), and *Una Voce* Sound Festival, Singapore (2005).

#### ZAI TANG

The central elements of Zai Tang’s work are sound, space and the body. Over the years, these three co-ordinates have emerged from the key areas of research that inform his practise: acoustic ecology and psychogeography – exploring how listening relates to our experience of place and psyche; synaesthesia – understanding how perceptual languages can form between our senses within the brain; experimental music – developing more nuanced strategies towards composition and listening; and electronic dance music – discovering more about the body’s innate ability to feel sound through movement. Using these points of reference as a foundation, he strives to reveal through his work how a greater awareness of sound can enrich our experience of the world, contribute to more dynamic states of being and become a catalyst for liberation.

Tang was awarded a BA in Creative Music Technology at Bath Spa University, and completed his post-graduate in Digital Arts at Camberwell College of Arts. Since 2006, Tang has been exhibiting work and performing in

Singapore, the UK and most notably in the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007) alongside his father Tang Da Wu. Zai Tang’s sound design and composition work for the short films *Jalan Jati (Teak Road)* and *All Lines Flow Out* featured in the Rotterdam and Tribeca film festivals (2012) respectively, with the former film winning Best Sound at the 4th Singapore Short Film Awards (2013), alongside his collaborator Zai Kuning.

#### MARK WONG

Mark Wong’s entry into the world of visual art circa 2011 resulted from a practice that had hitherto revolved around experimental music practice, including electronic, electro-acoustic and experimental music performance, compositions for film and dance, free-form radio shows and live DJ-spinning. Since 2011, his practice has veered towards conceptual and site-specific sound, video and object installations devised to encourage a more careful attention to the sonic environment as well as to communicate the narratives and histories of spaces.

#### ZUL MAHMUD

Zul Mahmud is one of Singapore’s leading sound artists. He has been at the forefront of a generation of sound-media artists in Singapore’s contemporary art development. He represented Singapore with a sound art performance at the Ogaki Biennale in 2006, and was Singapore’s first sound artist at the Singapore Pavilion of the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007. An Associate Artist at the alternative art space The Substation in Singapore, Mahmud has cut a reputation for integrating 3D forms with ‘sound constructions’ and ‘sound-scapes’, often crossing genres and collaborating with artists. Mahmud is also the designer for the first Singtel F1 Grand Prix Night Race trophy in Singapore. Mahmud has frequently worked in the context of the artist collective. He was the co-founder of

Studio 19 and Pink Ark. Pink Ark, which was formed with artist Kai Lam in 2004 to pursue ‘experimental sound art’, marked a milestone as the first sound collective in Singapore. It subsequently organised Singapore’s first 24-hour Sound Art Festival *Una Voce* in 2005.

Mahmod’s practice traverses various media and platforms. Adopting a multi-disciplinary/multi-genre approach, his works include drawings, prints, sculptures and ready-mades. Mahmud has exhibited in Singapore, Thailand, Germany, Japan, Vietnam, Italy, Moscow, China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Norway and Finland.

## Writers

#### CHARLES MEREWETHER

Charles Merewether is an art historian, writer and curator. He was the director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore from 2010 to 2013. Born in Edinburgh, he was educated in Australia where he received his BA in Literature and doctorate in Art History at the University of Sydney. Merewether has taught at the University of Sydney and Universidad Autonoma in Barcelona. Between 2007 and 2008, he was deputy director of the cultural district, Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi and artistic director and curator of the Biennale of Sydney (2004-06). From 1994 to 2004, he was collections curator at the Getty Center in Los Angeles. His recent publications include *After Memory: The Art of Milenko Prvacki, 40 Years* (2013), *ISSUE: Land* (2012), a co-edited volume of essays *After the Event* by Manchester University Press (2010), *Under Construction: Ai Weiwei* (2008), *Art, Anti-Art, Non-Art: Experimentations in the Public Sphere in Postwar Japan 1950-1970* (2007), and *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art* by Whitechapel Gallery (2006).

#### CHONG LI-CHUAN

Chong Li-Chuan, also known as Chuan, is a musician by training, composer by choice, an academic at large, and a consultant in user experience and strategic design. He received his formal education at Goldsmiths College, University of London. When Chuan was a post-graduate researcher in electro-acoustic composition at the Stanley Glasser Electronic Music Studios (EMS) at Goldsmiths College, his research interests included, but were not limited to, acoustic ecology, aurally, listening, sound and semblance, the aesthetics of noise and silence, musicking, identity formation, gender, performativity, embodiment, and post-structuralism. Some of his music may be found here: <https://soundcloud.com/li-chuan-chong>

#### IAN WOO

Born in Singapore, Ian Woo began his studies at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (SG) in 1991. Between 1995 and 2006, he received a Masters in European Fine Art at the Winchester School of Art (UK) and a research practice DFA with RMIT University (AUS). Woo is primarily a painter working in the language of abstraction with an interest in painting’s inherent ability to suggest modes of representation. His artistic influences range from Hieronymus Bosch and Philip Guston to John Cage. As a musician, he currently performs with the band Cuba, a minimal and rhythmic sound machine filled with notions of wanderlust, inebriation and stupidity.

## Curators

#### BANI HAYKAL

Bani Haykal experiments with text and music. As a performer and writer, he has collaborated with collectives and individuals, both locally and internationally,

participating in several festivals including World Event Young Artist (UK), da:ns Festival, 55mm2 Festival (Germany) and The M1 Fringe Festival amongst others.

His work with music includes being the vocalist and songwriter for b-quartet, the music collective Mux, audio-visual performance group OFFCUFF and The Observatory. As a solo musician, he has released 3 studies (‘Ergophobia’, ‘how I got lost and died trying’, and ‘sketches of syllables’) exploring structured improvisation and the spoken word. He has also toured, both as a soloist and with The Observatory, in France, Italy and Norway.

As an artist, he has exhibited at The Substation, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore and Platform 3 (Bandung), producing three works: *Rethinking Music, inside the subject* and *Dormant Music*. He is an Associate Artist with The Substation and a curator for their quarterly music programme *Tribal Gathering of Tongue Tasters*.

#### JOLEEN LOH

Joleen Loh is a curator and writer. She currently works at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore. In 2013, she was the visual arts curator of Lit Up Festival, an interdisciplinary arts festival in Singapore. Previously, she was the curatorial assistant at the Singapore Art Museum for *Lucid Dreams in the Reverie of the Real*, a solo exhibition in 2012 by Cultural Medallion recipient Lee Wen. Her curatorial work includes *Flux – City of Change* at Starta, Saatchi Gallery (UK), *INTERPLAY* at Art Stage Singapore 2013, *From Wonder to Ruins* at Fehily Contemporary (AUS), and *Looking at the Overlooked* at George Paton Gallery (AUS). Her texts have been published in *TODAY*, *Glossary*, *Media Lab Projects 2008 – 2013*, *Asian Arts Space Network*, *Art Stage Singapore 2013*, *Praxis Press*, *UN Magazine*, and *Daily Serving*.

## Acknowledgements

The curators would like to thank, first and foremost, the seventeen participating artists, Song-Ming Ang, George Chua, Gulayu Arkestra, Joyce Koh, Kai Lam, Mohamad Riduan, Darren Ng, The Observatory, Joel Ong, Ong Kian-Peng, Brian O'Reilly, Shaun Sankaran, Dennis Tan, Evan Tan, Zai Tang, Mark Wong and Zul Mahmod, for their enthusiasm, effort and faith in the first edition of this project. All of them have contributed past work or developed new work for this exhibition, as well as texts for the publication even though writing may not necessarily be their first choice. We are grateful for their time and for sharing with us their rich encounters and experiences with sound.

Sincere thanks also to ICAS Director Bala Starr for her support of this exhibition. The presentation of the works in the exhibition as well as the series of performances would not have been possible without the assistance of ICAS staff, and we would like to thank Ramesh Narayanan, Redzuan Zemmy and Hafiz Osman for their time, effort and care.

*SOUND: Latitudes and Attitudes* was generously supported by the National Arts Council, Arts Fund, and B Cube Entertainment. We are very grateful to our exhibition supporters who have ensured this project's success, and would especially like to thank Philip Francis, Ning Chong, Cheryl Lim and Christopher Ang.

Heartfelt thanks also to those who have contributed in various ways toward the catalogue: Charles Merewether, Ian Woo, Chong Li-Chuan, Zul Mahmod, Joyce Koh and Vanessa Ban. The exhibition was also made possible with the help of Koh Nguang How, the teams behind The Substation as well as the Independent Archive & Resource Center, who have kindly shared their resources with us.

Finally, for sharing their valuable insights and engaging in discussions with us during the course of the exhibition's development, we would also like to thank Koh Nguang How, Zai Kuning, Mark Wong, Wu Jun Han, Chong Li-Chuan, George Chua, PerMagnus Lindborg, Shaun Sankaran, Harold Seah, Evan Tan, Joseph Tham and Vivian Wang.

## SOUND: Latitudes and Attitudes Curated by Bani Haykal and Joleen Loh

Published by the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore on the occasion of the exhibition *SOUND: Latitudes and Attitudes*, 7 February to 16 March 2014. A Parallel Event of the Singapore Biennale 2013 *If The World Changed*.

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