

Sonic Genealogies

Olivia Block on Harry Bertoia

My name is Olivia Block, I am a media artist and sound and music composer based in Chicago. My work manifests itself in many different forms. I make scores for orchestra, I make electro-recorded music pieces that come out on different labels. I also do a lot of sound installation work, which is usually site-specific, meaning that I take speakers and place them in locations and I think about each location separately and create the work to fit that location. That includes thinking about architecture, material, shape, acoustics, historical context of the location and everything related to that site.

I first became familiar with Harry Bertoia's work when I was much younger living in Austin and a friend of mine had one of his LPs of the recorded sculptures. I remember listening to it in this friend's front porch and thinking that it was so beautiful. I was looking at the cover and just wondering whom this person was. I think that those forms and sounds just stacked in my mind for a long time so when I finally moved to Chicago a few years after that, in the late nineties, another friend have told me that there was a Harry Bertoia's sculpture here in a public place that I could go and check out. And I did.

It was in this kind of office building in downtown Chicago. I visited the sculpture and I loved it so much; it brought me so much happiness, and sometimes in a dark time because I was new to the city. I would go there at night and just listen to the wind hitting the sculpture. And then when I started teaching at the School of the Art Institute I brought my students there because it was very close to the school and all the students really loved it. I remember thinking that they

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License: Creative Commons by-nc-nd 4.0 The intention of the Sonic Genealogies series is to listen to the work of some of the most eminent figures in experimental music and sound art in the 20th century. However, it seeks to do so in a unique way: through the ears and voices of those artists who have retaken certain aspects of its sound legacy and melded them in some way into their own creations. Consequently, the idea is to put into practice this beautiful idea of "sharing listening" which Peter Szendy puts forward in the pages of his book Listen: A History of our Ears.

responded so much to the sculpture, more so than they did to really anything else that I played them or talked about in the class.

Bertoia came from a design background, he was very aware of the way the materials can be manipulated and shaped physically. The sound came out of the material and the form rather than “I want this sound, how do I get it?” I love the story of the way Bertoia discovered the sounds of the metal. When he was in his studio working on a piece he dropped a big rod of metal and reverberated in the room making this beautiful sonorous bell-like tone. Working with these materials, using his hands, brought the ideas of sound to his mind. Bertoia was an instrument maker, which is really great because I think the person who made the violin or the trumpet or the guitar is more in the background of the narrative music history. I think that the wonderful thing about Bertoia is that the craftsmanship is elevated in the process of the music making.

One of the most important things about Bertoia is that he thought a lot about timber. I don't know if you would think of it that way but I definitely think of him as a timbral composer. When I think about timber I always think about something that John Cage said... something along the lines of the fact that percussion instruments are kind of the bridge between music and sound and noise. I think that Bertoia was kind of situated on that bridge. And because he had such a hands-on-knowledge on these metal materials that he used he knew how to manipulate the timber of that material to draw out the most beautiful sounds and certain elements of the tone.

Even if you asked a violinist or a trombone player, they too would have knowledge of how to manipulate the material that they are using to draw out certain kind of timbral qualities. Being in Chicago I have a lot of friends who are improvisers. I can think of brass players who subtly can manipulate their mouth or even place things inside of the bell so that they can change the way that the metal and the air are interacting to make the sound. With these manipulations they don't change the pitch necessarily but they do change the timber. Again, this reinforces this notion of timber and how important that was to Bertoia, and how that element of music is one of the most important ones to sound artists in general.

Bertoia was a composer in the same way that David Tudor was a composer when he created his sound producing objects. In that sense I think that the object itself that creates the sound is more of a composition. There's an awareness that sound will result from that object doing something and the sounds that come out from that are going to be somewhat unpredictable. So if one is thinking about this idea of a sound object... the controversy around that term is about the fact that an object isn't really time-based. Usually when you think about sound pieces or music you think about this events that take place in time. I am not necessarily thinking in terms of sound objects but more in terms of space, and I think Bertoia thought in terms of space as well because he was so involved in the community of architecture. So many of his works were commissioned by

architects and I think that he had a real working knowledge of how architecture and sound work together.

So the way that I see this in his Sonambient sculptures is his focus on reverberation. So all of these sounds that he brought out of this metal had this long long case, and the sounds would just last for long time and fill up the space in these interesting ways. Was Bertoia thinking in terms of time? Was he thinking in terms of a sound object? Maybe it wasn't even that he was consciously thinking about these things... I think it was more that he had this innate knowledge of the way that sounds and materials, time and objects worked together, which is what makes those sculptures so amazing and beautiful.

Rosalind Krauss' idea of the expanded sculptural field is a really good way of describing the sonic aspects of the Sonambient sculptures. So now it's not just about a solid object and these materials, their weight, their shape... It's about phenomena of sound that expands this field literally because sounds travel further. But the really interesting thing to me is that the original LP recordings of the Sonambient sculptures are yet another expansion of that field. And, if you think about it, the field becomes almost limitless because anyone can listen to these recordings with the proper equipment to do so.

Sonambient Pavilion was a large-scale sixteen-channel sound installation that I made in Chicago, in this downtown public park called Millennium Park, in the Pritzker Pavilion. The idea started when I kept visiting the Sonambient sculptures here and noticing they were in disrepair. I felt like I wanted more people to know about these sculptures. Plus, the sounds themselves that these sculptures generate are so beautiful that I thought "wouldn't it be amazing if I could, again, expand the sculptural field of these objects further? To take these beautiful sounds and diffuse them out into this enormous football-field sized location?" The piece opened as part of the architecture biennial and it was installed for a month on weekends. It was a free installation that people could just come and go as they pleased. I was using Bertoia's sounds to articulate a space that wasn't actually real. I was making, kind of like, walls out of sound; making this architecture out of sound. In a sense it was like using his sounds to create an invisible architecture around people walking on this great lawn.

The way I did that was to use Bertoia's sounds in a kind of a pointillistic way at times so that the peripheral area of the speakers was sounding with this kind of shimmering bell-like tones. At other times, I sort of called the attention to the top of the arch that goes over the heads of all the people walking on the lawn, by taking these large drones that moved from front to back. So over time all these Bertoia's Sonambient sculpture's sounds were making this larger shape or room that people were coming to and being a part of because the sound was there. When I was working on Sonambient Pavilion I really gained an understanding of just how rich Bertoia's sound were because the frequency spectrum was so incredibly broad.

I think that he brought out this tension between the ephemeral phenomena of sound, that kind of radiated outward and had no boundaries, and the solidity and the stability of the visual object. I think that that extra layer of meaning just opened up all of these possibilities in thinking about art and sculpture. The fact that there are recordings of these sculptures and that those recordings were available to someone like me, when I was in a rock band, and not just sitting in a gallery... that too was revolutionary. Bertoia's work has been very important to me personally as a sound-artist and I am so happy that more people are taking an interest in his work now.



Harry Bertoia. Harry Bertoia Foundation