

Book Review

Cathy Lane and Angus Carlyle (eds.), *Sound Arts Now*. Axminster: Uniformbooks, 2021. ISBN: 9781910010266. doi:10.1017/S1355771821000522

According to the editors, the preparations for this book trail back to 2014. The bulk of the book consists of interviews with 20 current sound artists, all with short, personal introductions by one of the editors, Cathy Lane or Angus Carlyle. The interviews are followed by an Afterword, which is structured as a conversation between the editors. As a whole, the interviews are intended to show different practices, approaches and ideas in contemporary sound art, to enlarge ‘the perceived dimensions of sound arts practices’ (p. 5) and render an image of sound art in this ‘present historical moment’ (p. 7).

The artists that have been interviewed for this book are (in order of their contributions) Adam Basanta, A. M. Kanngieser, Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, Caroline Devine, Elsa M’bala, Evan Ifekoya, Hanna Tuulikki, Hong-Kai Wang, Jau-Lan Guo, Jennifer Walshe, Khaled Kaddal, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Lina Lapelyte, Maria Chavez, Mark Peter Wright, Mikel R. Nieto, Mikhail Karakis, Samson Young, Yang Yeung and Yashas Shetty.

The premises for selecting this particular group of artists have not been made clear. However, since several of them are previous students of the editors and/or have become part of the editors’ network during their travels, the selection appears to result from the editors’ personal interests and motivations rather than a more principled or theoretical approach. This personal approach is evident also in the interviews, where the artists provide interesting thoughts on their backgrounds, their educations, their artistic collaborations and shows significant elements in what has shaped their artistic practices.

The diversity of the artists’ backgrounds and work makes it difficult to distinguish clear trends from this selection, something that is also noted by the editors in the Afterword. There are nonetheless questions and topics that can be recognised among the practices outlined by most of the artists included in this book. But first – what is *not* discussed: the sounds themselves; the changes in air pressure that constitute the basis for our perception of sound character, function and significance. This perspective that is so important, particularly in many central European strands of sound art, is not discussed at all. It seems that sonic qualities and nuances in timbral expression are

uninteresting when compared with the referential qualities and broader social situations for these new sonic arts. In the book, there is little evidence that installation works that reveal or emphasise essential traits or characteristics of a site or situation are of much interest, and the physical and psychological craft of developing ideas in between sound, space and site is hardly mentioned. The social aspects are emphasised, not the acoustic. Thus one can say that any type of essentialism is losing ground to relational perspectives in this book, and this is clearly a new development in sound art, also discussed in other recent publications on sound art.¹

What *is* discussed in most of the interviews is the social framing of the works, the collaboration with public, audience and other contributors, and ideas of diverse identities, in a perspective of de-colonisation. Many of the artists interviewed in this book are from Asia and Africa, and questions of identity and identity politics are prominent in much of their thinking. This type of perspective on the global south is particularly pronounced in the interviews with Budhaditya Chattopadhyay and Khaled Kaddal, and discussed in more detail by Mikel R. Nieto: ‘How is the other listening? And how does the other listen to us?’ These questions are a bit more difficult to address than earlier queries into acoustic space art and experimental music – the two main development lines in the more historical strand of sound art. A. M. Kanngieser takes these types of questions into field recordings and eco-compositions; how a listener can generate meaning from sound without being familiar with its background and context – who listens, and to what? This is further echoed in the interview with Hanna Tuulikki, where she adds the idea of listening *with* instead of listening *to*, and expands the range of subjects to include the increasingly popular term ‘more than human’.

In the interviews, there is a broad willingness to engage sound art in types of political activism, in understanding and resisting marginalisation (Evan Ifekoya), and exploiting intimacy as a tool to both disarm and engage the public (Maria Chavez).

A phenomenological perspective is absent overall, and is explicitly rejected by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, who finds it too narrow to be useful in grasping the larger political issues. To some extent, this is mirrored in the interview with Elsa M’bala, whose works start with a theme, and not at all with a sound. In many of the interviews, listening has become politicised and

¹See review in *Organised Sound* 25(3): 372–8.

approached differently from the majority of the Western canon.

Many of the artists have played instruments, several have backgrounds from popular music, and all of them work in between genres, expanding the borders of sound art to the degree that the term 'sound art' might no longer be a fitting categorisation. The book is strong in the presentation of the artists' individual practical challenges and descriptions of how they manage the new artist role that follows from use of advanced technology – and to some degree a de-institutionalisation process.

A weakness of the book is in discussions of the artists' ideas and concepts; there is not much information on actual works, or analysis of the actual nuts and

bolts that goes into crafting the art. More detail about how the artists actually work with sound would have made the book a better resource for understanding both current developments in sound art, as well as the referred works. The editors could clearly have steered the interviews into more detailed discussions of actual works and descriptions of the contributions of the selected artists, but as a snapshot of how a number of important contemporary artists look at the situation for sound art today, the book is a valuable resource.

Jøran Rudi
(post@joranrudi.no)