

From the Max Feed Catalog

Sound and Site Unfolding – A conversation between Barbara London and Seth Cluett
Max Feed/Mix Feed, Daniele Balit editor. (bilingual French/English text forthcoming 2018)

At Harvestworks in New York City, former Museum of Modern Art Curator Barbara London and the American sound artist Seth Cluett sat down to talk about sound practices. In a sprawling hour of conversation, their mutual appreciation for the work of Max Neuhaus, a discussion of mass-media audio, and their personal histories with sound unfolded in unexpected directions.

Barbara London: Some of the writing I've been doing recently has led me to consider how each of us grows up in a certain environment, at a particular moment. This means we have cultural codes that are distinctive to us. I think we've talked about this before. For example, I grew up with 45-records, and I listened to rock music stations with disk jockeys like Murray the K and his frenetic nightly radio program, the *Swingin' Soiree*. I felt so cool when I was given a little purse-sized transistor radio that I proudly carried and listened to music as I walked to grammar school. What role did "cultural codes" play in shaping you and your work?

Seth Cluett: My two pieces in *Max Feed* represent aspects of my sonic character that are informed by what you're calling cultural codes, centered around the tension between urban progress and rural history from where I grew up. I was raised in a very rural part of Upstate New York, miles away from a highway; I would go out into the forest with my father and as we would prepare to tap maple trees for maple syrup, sometimes he would stop me and say "listen," and I'd hear a plane fly over and he'd ask me "what do you think the engine is on that plane." From a very early age, I was taught to listen to motors to diagnose whether the car was broken, to listen to the landscape... to trees crackling when the wind blows, but also how sound makes the landscape unfold. One of my earliest sound memories is sitting on the deck behind our home, and when the wind would blow, you could hear the wind coming towards you long before you could feel it. I was fascinated by the way that wind played the landscape... sound would come first and only after you would feel wind make a tangible trace of the sound. This made the wind into a sound object at a time when I didn't know what sound objects were in the Schaefferian sense. The listener plays the landscape by moving, which I think is very close to my thinking about this kind of thing, a beautiful shift happens when sounds at a distance collapse into the space of the gallery, the ephemeral becomes tangible which perhaps is a result of my background from traditional music training to formal studies in the visual arts.

B. L.: I'm impressed that as an artist you work deftly between music, site-specific installation, and sound. Sound has always been a passion of mine. As a child, I played the piano, then moved on to the organ and then the cello. Meanwhile, the adults in my family were all scientists who loved electronic gizmos. My father would record our songs with his *Soundscriber* dictation machine and my ham radio nerd of an uncle was always tuning in to chat with people far away. So as a curator, I naturally gravitated towards video and sound and new music. Back then in the 1970s, I entered a wide-open field with very little written about these hot potatoes. I would love to know more about how you began to work with sound. Were you involved with analog on the way to digital, or have you always been digital?

S. C.: I'm from the original cassette generation, I didn't have an email account or touch a computer until halfway through college. My entire upbringing was around cassettes and records because my parents were

avid music listeners. I would call-in to college radio stations and ask them to play songs with my finger on the record button to make mixtapes from siphoning sound off of the radio. I didn't touch a computer for sound making until after I was out of college. For me, sound has always been a material that you touch with your hands and that elapses in time in a way that you can see – even though my work these days is mostly digital. On tape, at 15 or 30 inches per second, sound actually occupies a measurable amount of physical space. The first experience that I had where I was able to translate this experience out of the electrical domain was hearing a piece by Mark Bain that was in the building that used to be the Center for Advanced Visual Studies where Maryanne Amacher worked at MIT. At this time, maybe 1998, the building was used as an earthquake testing facility and Bain had embedded giant offset discs like giant vibrating pager motors in the walls that turned the room into a loudspeaker. For me, this early experience with non-concert based installation sound work was one where there was nothing in the room to see. There was only sound to feel and that made a very strong impression on me, I thought, “I don't need instruments anymore, I can do this with air.”

B. L.: I remember attending the MIT Media Lab's tenth anniversary celebration in 1995. Nicholas Negroponte, the Media Lab's first director, maintained that technology not only fomented the digital revolution but also boosted human expression. When I toured the Media Lab studios, I was intrigued to meet John Maeda, who was making the most refined form of interactive software art. I also caught up with Antoni Muntadas and Dennis Adams—the interventionist artists known for their media work that reveals historical and political undercurrents—who were at MIT's Center for Advance Visual Studies then. Boston and Cambridge were dynamic places to be at that time, what did you do next?

S.C.: From there I made my very first exhibited sound work at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston. I made a piece using recordings of the lobby that documented how people engaged with the space. I discovered what frequencies people activated in the hallways and galleries and used a microphone to pick up those sounds which were in turn used to vibrate a large speaker filled with illuminated microscope slide glass and mirrors. It was a light sculpture showing people's sonic path through the museum: the talking in the lobby would create frequencies that would vibrate one piece of slide glass and the sound of the air conditioning cycling on and off would move the mirrors... the piece was a typical young artist, medium-translation exercise that had been well worn by artists who would had observed these phenomena and the work would let you see them or hear them. I thought at the time, that I was providing a lens through which to see the social character of the museum lobby. At the end of the day, I was just becoming comfortable dealing with sound as a material.

B.L.: On the palette of a multimedia artist like yourself, sound really is a material to be sculpted, in the form of word repetition, strings of ordinary or electronically generated sounds, evocative melodies, and lots else. Now I forget, did you go on to graduate school directly after receiving your undergraduate degree in music composition?

S.C.: I actually took a year off after undergrad, which is when I started making these sound pieces. I ultimately pursued an MFA in electronic art at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute studying sculpture with the light artist Larry Kagan and sound with Pauline Oliveros. RPI at that time was a real trial by fire for me, I'd come to Pauline with a new piece idea and she would open up Alvin Lucier's Chambers and say “Ahh look, in 1977 Alvin Lucier did this.” Then the next week I'd show her a new piece and she'd show me one of Neuhaus works. I was naively making one cognitive psychology-infused sound exploration after the other and Pauline taught me the immensely powerful history of Lucier, Amacher, Nauman, and Neuhaus experiments with these ideas in the '70s and 80s.

B.L.: A great mentor like Pauline Oliveros guides a talented student like you, and encourages protégées to find their own voice. It takes courage to dig deep to find what you have to say, and through trial and error figure out how to do it. How did your work develop from there?

S.C.: I really had to stop thinking about making work in a notebook and started to make work in a studio. I realized I shouldn't try to merely imagine what is possible with psychoacoustic effects, most everyone had thought of and made work out of the obvious effects in the early development of the medium. I asked myself, what do I observe about sound, and how does it shift when paired against an image or site that I choose. Even now, in the infrequent times I am able to try completely new things, I try to set up something completely unexpected in my studio and respond to it in dialogue rather than generate it from my head fully-formed. When I work site-specifically, I move this studio-thinking to the location as I did in Besançon: I go to the space and I spend time observing. Now the pieces approach the social setting openly; I learn about the community and the landscape and engage the way that real people act in real spaces. I truly think that's something that is lost in the history of conceptual or place-based art... ... we lose the opportunity to understand the process... to understand that the finished work hides the many iterations that the artist throws out before the beautiful simplicity of those early pieces happened. For me, site suggests a process much the same way that materials revealed processes for other artists. Iteration for some, paring away or building up for others. In my work, I try to find a dialogue with the work and then let the work open up potential relationships to the space so that sound and site unfold mysteriously to the audience.