

Composition #1  
To Robert Pasnau

**Scrunch this page  
and listen.**

Lucas Norer  
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# FADING EVENTS OF OBJECTS

by Lucas Norer

In his essay "What is sound"<sup>1</sup> the American philosopher Robert Pasnau formulates a remarkably new theory about the character of sound. By rejecting almost all existing philosophical theories about the nature and the perception of sound (herein named "the standard view"), he defined "a new order" of how to perceive and where to locate sound. This twist might not just have an impact in the field of philosophy but probably even more in the field of art, in particular the sonic arts<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, Pasnau's text has not received much attention in recent times. I am proposing that, if we follow Pasnau's theory on sound, numerous fields like the production, distribution, presentation and the reception of sound in the arts are effected fundamentally.

Basically, Pasnau proposes that we should describe "sound as a quality belonging not to the medium, but to the object that makes the sound."<sup>3</sup> Retracing the Aristotelian remark that "sound is a certain motion of air"<sup>4</sup> and Descartes' conclusion that "most philosophers maintain that sound is nothing but a certain vibration of air which strikes our ears"<sup>5</sup>, sound got located in a medium and not within the object that produces the sound. Effecting generations of artists, art critics and theorist dealing with sound in the arts, the standard view generates a particular kind of sonic art and a determinate reception. Especially sonic art works dealing with spatial and transcendent qualities of sounds like open-ended sonic forms and site-specific locations are trapped in the notions of the standard view favouring the medium rather than the object of sound production. As a result of this idealistic approach, sonic art is for the most part resistant to profound theoretical descriptions and analysis (compared to the visual arts), yet it is also resistant to the commercial and institutionalised art world.

If we reformulate sonic art as an object-based art, in contrast to a medium-based art, how will this effect its production, presentation and reception? Will sonic art be involved in the commercial art market or receive a convenient theoretical reception?

By declaring sound as an immaterial force ("sound is a certain motion of air") it might be obvious to argue that as a consequence of the standard view, the notion of sound as the object of a medium liberated sound from a number of restraints. Forces such as "the repressive control of galleries, museums and the media – the imprisoning iron triangle of the art world"<sup>6</sup> emerge, which favour commodities rather than immaterial manifestations. Approaching sonic art via Pasnau's theory transfers it from vague, transcendent manifestations into what I define herein as fading events of objects.

One might think that, as a consequence, the location of sound in objects results in the embedding of the sonic arts into the commercial art world. I will argue that the loss of the immateriality of sound won't effect its resistant power, on the contrary, it will be strengthened by conversion. In this context Robert Morris' theoretical writings are compelling where he legitimates objects as art, since with the emergence of minimal art a similar discourse about objectification has appeared. He argues that "Objects were an obvious first step away from illusionism, allusion and metaphor. They [the objects] are the clearest type of artificial independent entity, obviously removed and separated from the anthropomorphic."<sup>7</sup> An independent entity that instantly generates, just by its mere presence, a certain relation of power. A power as a resistant force that challenges the mechanisms of the "iron triangle" via confrontation and occupation and not via escape and exodus<sup>8</sup>. Instead of acting as illusion, instantly emitting such as ephemeral gas, sounds located in objects gain a presence that have the ability to confront and occupy any power relation, just like Morris' sculptures did. Therefore to exhibit sonic art projects still implements an institutional critique by undermining the basic (economic) conditions of (commercial) art, according to production, costs of production, reception, storage and archiving of art works.

By favouring the visual, philosophy and art history failed to create a critical and theoretical reception of the sonic sphere. Christopher Cox argues that this absence arose because "the prevailing theoretical models are inadequate [...] to capture the nature of the sonic"<sup>9</sup>. He therefore proposes a materialist based theory of sound which helps us to understand artistic productions not within the framework of representation and signification, but as "complexes of forces materially inflected by other forces and force-complexes."<sup>10</sup> Instead of asking what an artwork means or represents, we should be inclined to find out "what it does and how it operates, what changes it effectuates."<sup>11</sup>

By defining sound as fading events of objects we gain the ability to investigate sound in a tangible way. Instead of struggling both theoretically and artistically with its vague presence, we can actually locate sound and its duration in reference, in addition, in association, in separation or in division to a point of view.

(1) Robert Pasnau, What Is Sound?, The Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 49, no.196 (July 1999), p. 309 – 324.

(2) Douglas Kahn strongly suggests not to use the term sound art as it categorizes a too narrow field within what he suggests should be entitled sound in the arts. In reference to Douglas Kahn's definition I shall stick to his term but as well to the term sonic arts. See: Douglas Kahn, The Arts of Sound Art and Music: [http://www.douglaskahn.com/writings/douglas\\_kahn-sound\\_art.pdf](http://www.douglaskahn.com/writings/douglas_kahn-sound_art.pdf) [14.04.2013].

(3) Robert Pasnau, What Is Sound?, The Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 49, no.196 (July 1999), p. 309.

(4) Ibid., p. 310.

(5) Ibid., p. 310.

(6) Maurice Berger, Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism & the 1960's, Harper & Row, New York, 1989, p. 123.

(7) Robert Morris, Notes on Sculpture, Part 4 (1969), Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 1994, p. 64.

(8) See: Branden Wayne Joseph, Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the arts after Cage, Zone Books, New York, 2008, p. 133.

(9) Christopher Cox, Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism, journal of visual culture, Vol 10(2), 2011, p.146.

(10) Ibid., p. 157.

(11) Ibid., p. 157.