



Sonic Anchor #5 Review Mediation, Simulation and Perception

Text: Samson Young

Hong Kong composer and sound artist, Young was Hong Kong Sinfonietta artists associate and a Ph.D fellow at Princeton University. He is now an assistant professor at the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong.

Making distinctions between the real and the simulated is a relatively uncomplicated task in the realm of seeing, at least on the surface. We often rely on crude binaries to make such distinctions—realistic detail vs geometric abstraction, high resolution rendering vs pixelated appearance, tangible vs intangible. Some of these labels carry with them value judgements, while others are more neutral.

Such is the state of affairs in the visual realm—but what of the sonic? What are “virtual” sounds? Is there such a thing as a sound that isn’t “real”? PADA, the Taiwanese audio-visual duo and long term residents at the Taipei Digital Art Center (DAC), attempted to probe these questions in their performance at the 5th edition of Sonic Anchor. The evening was split into two halves. In the first 25 minutes or so the duo improvised with laptop and an electric guitar, and the sound performance was accompanied by projected visuals that mixed found video footages with simulations of cityscape. The duo’s intention, as it was revealed in the post-performance discussion, was to transcend the boundaries that separate the real and the virtual.

We rarely doubt our sense of hearing. Animals depend on their sense of hearing to sense danger and avoid predators that may come their way. When we hear the sound of a fast approaching truck, we instinctively turn. Try this at home: listen to a CD recording of tropical rainforest through headphones. Close your eyes, imagine that you are there, and you are already transported to another place and time. One is, of course, perfectly aware of the fact that one is listening to an archival record simulated by ones and zeros and mediated through modern audio technology, but in sound we trust: we gladly buy into plausible sonic fictions, and such is the power of the medium. Simulated sonic immersion takes place literally “in our heads”, and earbuds are perfect tools in this regard because they permit another reality to penetrate deep into our auditory meatus.

During PADA’s performance, as I drifted between the animated and filmic, I found myself becoming aware of the separation between the world inside of the technology of mediation, and the one outside. I became acutely perceptive of the journey through which sound travelled. Sound originated in the guitarist’s gestures and the resonating body of the musical instrument. Physical vibrations were turned into electrical signals, which were transformed back into vibrations through speaker cones. In the case of sound, I doubt if one is ever able to make a meaningful distinction between the real and the virtual, but by focusing my attention on this binary opposition I was taken “out of my head” and deprived of a total sonic immersion. I was “observing” sound from a distance, as it were.

Immanuel Kant believed that aesthetic experiences originated in what he called “disinterested pleasures”—aesthetic pleasures that depended only upon the perceptible formal qualities of an object: the lines and colours, the timbres and volumes. The relationship between the surface qualities of a sonic object and its source remains a central theme in sound art to-date. PADA’s performance at Sonic Anchor offered an intriguing novel perspective on the issue, despite minor technological problems.

About Sonic Anchor

Sonic Anchor is an experimental music and sound art concert series jointly presented by Contemporary Musiking (CM) and the Hong Kong Arts Centre. Sonic Anchor advocates, encourages, and cultivates experiments in sound and music. Taking full advantage of the intimate setting of the McAulay Studio, Sonic Anchor brings curious audience and adventurous artists together, to enter into a conversation of mutual discovery and respect. Please visit www.hkac.org.hk and contemporarymusiking.com for details

Sonic Anchor #7 will be held on 6 Nov. Please refer to p. 36 for details.

Co-presenter:

