



Sonic Anchor #8 Review— Edwin Lo (Hong Kong) + Wang Changcun (Shanghai)

Text: Samson Young

Composer, sound artist, and media artist. Received training in computer music and composition at Princeton University under the supervision of Paul Lansky. Currently an assistant professor at the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong. Principle investigator at the Laboratory for Ubiquitous Musical Expression (L.U.M.E), and artistic director of experimental sound advocacy organisation Contemporary Musiking.

Sound art has yet to capture the imagination of university music departments. Academic writings in sound art and/or auditory culture are read mostly by art historians, media theorists, philosophers, and cultural theorists. Meanwhile, musicologists by-and-large continue with their meta-narratives, conveniently ignoring the many great strides that sound art as a cluster of practice had made in the last decade. With the crazy amount of press and international attention that sound art had been generating, you'd think that the majority of music departments would have sound studies seminars by now—but at least in Hong Kong, the schools and centres of contemporary and media art were the only places that are interested in institutionalising this rich field of knowledge.

Ultimately it doesn't matter where a discourse resides institutionally as long as there is an active community of practitioners supporting it. But a curious side effect of the institutionalisation of sound art by contemporary and media art is that aspiring sound artists end up receiving a kind of training in which the visual is the default mode of operation. To add to the problem, "composition" is curiously thought of by some as the anti-thesis to sound art (a misguided conviction that is popularised by Alan Licht's horrific and irresponsibly under-researched text), and so "compositional" ideals such as structure, crafts and robust temporal organisation have acquired negative connotations. I am not saying at all that sound art performances must be structurally robust and carefully crafted: structural beauty is only one among many aesthetic criteria; that said, bad performance that (a) makes no structural senses (b) sounds ill-crafted and (c) tries to rationalise itself with some lame conceptual idea just make me cringe.

Wang Changcun from Shanghai, who performed at Sonic Anchor #8, was trained in computer science. But you wouldn't

have guessed from the sounds that he makes: Changcun has some serious sonic (and dare I say musical) chops. Changcun performed with an array of sound-generating scripts that he'd embedded in advance onto a webpage. Conceptually it was nothing to write home about, but he showed what I call fine executional details: everything was just perfectly crafted. Sounds that he used had an almost shiny purity to them; the volume level was just right; the sound picture was front and centre, but never imposing; the stereo panning tricks were nuanced. Perhaps most importantly: it made good structural sense. It had a very gratifying collapse, and an almost romantic temporal arch. This sort of performance is the most difficult to write about because I could only talk about auditory specifics, and auditory specifics cannot be put gracefully into words.

After the performance, some asked to see the webpage that Changcun was performing from. Changcun reluctantly complied, but his sound world was convincing and self-contained in a Kantian-idealist sort of way—it really needed no footnotes.

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

Co-presenter

