

**Turn down the staircase:
Dennis McNulty's sound installations.**

Brian Hand

At the base of the stairs he is seated at a desk. Looking down from above is an audience dispersed over three landings. On the table there is a laptop computer with a control board and a long lead to a microphone perched on a first floor window ledge over a busy street. Beneath the table is a mass of cables to amplifiers, mixing desks and a knotted bundle around a small sports radio. The software playing on the computer is MAX/MSP, a graphical programming language that can be used to create networks of information and commands. The graphic interface on the small screen has the appearance of a cybernetic flow chart. It is a constructed patch with discreet operating tasks which do a number of different things to a sound source/signal. The pitch can be altered, the interval of processing can be altered, and the envelope of a segment of sound can be adjusted. MAX/MSP is indiscriminate in what it will work with, sound is just information to a computer processor and information can just as easily become sound. This particular patch is symmetrically arranged not unlike a set of turntable decks: an instrument for two hands. The view from above creates an aesthetic distance to the performer on top of the equipment.

For this piece, entitled *Another Blurred Boundary*¹, Dennis McNulty was performing with live recordings of street noises, and sampling small snippets of this social traffic. At the base of the stairs, the sounds start to ascend. Sound dissolves into sound, speed gathers and disperses. It flows from the laptop archive; the passing pedestrians and the manipulating live hands of the performer on the control board. The MAX/MSP programme does so much. Dennis McNulty does so much. The gathering pace of the Friday evening crowd in Dublin's Temple Bar does so much. Not to shrink from fully exploiting the potential of this performance the small fm radio pitches in to manipulate the information/sound flow with the aleatory variety of its broadcasts. The sound is processed over and over, folding in sweeps over moving sequences. There is variation, manual dexterity and computability.

On paper this scenario might sound dramatic but that adjective would be a misrepresentation of McNulty's work. The concentration or will of the piece is to steer a course away from drama into setting simple diagrammatic tasks that try to organize sounds in a particular space. For the audience in Temple Bar Studios the active pleasures of the performance or sound installation are in the areas of listening, acoustics, and space perception. There are difficulties however with this in that it takes considerable concentration to appreciate the inherent qualities of sound effects-in-themselves and to change from our typical conditioned way of listening. The piece starts with recognizable sounds of the street, but starts to degenerate into complex textures after a few minutes. The audience on the night also starts to make considerable noise despite an initial request for silence.

¹ This performance was titled years later. It was simply referred to as 'the Temple Bar Gallery performance' in the original version of this essay published in the catalogue accompanying the Irish representation at São Paulo in 2004.

McNulty is an artist who constructs unique performances in spaces that produce sound events or passages through improvisation. His live work is less a time-based reproduction of sound as in a concert performance, and more of a spatial physical experience. From a small laptop he can make a seemingly never-ending amount of sound or noise, or noise becoming sound becoming noise. The multidimensional volumes of the spaces he creates installations for, frame the listening experience. The swirling sounds in the atrium stairwell document the acoustic signature of the space like a brass rubbing. The separation between the place of audition of the audience and McNulty, coupled with the dispersal of several sets of speakers in the corners over 3 floors, suggests that a totality of the live composition is incomplete or partial to both composer and audience. Members of the audience had the choice to actively traipse up and down the grey levels of the atrium to sample the multi-sonic effects. The specific boundaries of the gallery and studios with the busy world outside were chipped away at with dry broken rhythmic segments of processed sound.

Sound is a material temporal spatial phenomenon. It is only made sense of upon hearing or being detected by other mechanisms, yet we know it is ever present. There is no universal or transcendent point of audition. We imagine silence where it is not and we tend to repress the fact that we only hear certain frequencies; certain animals, for example, hear so much more. The sense of control that guides and structures our visual perception is not as keen with our aural senses. There are no eyelids for the ears and it is not typical for our culture to emphasise the power of hearing. An awareness of how sound exists and how it can be manipulated is a central skill of Dennis McNulty's practice. This practice is not an art world specific practice but more and art world related practice. It is significant that McNulty is something of an outsider to the art world, and that for *Another Blurred Boundary* he chose to work on the stairs and landings as opposed to a studio or gallery space. It is also important to emphasise that his sound installations and sound projects are configured through site, medium and time specificity. McNulty's creative work is not restricted to galleries or indeed art world contexts; it also inhabits the fields of experimental music and technological research. While this is undoubtedly a political and aesthetic orientation, explicit political issues do appear in pieces like *Another Blurred Boundary*, where direct contact was made between the small art audience inside the gallery and the volume of passing street crowds outside, a link not often dwelled upon by a contemporary art gallery.

Similarly in his video piece *Decompression 2* exhibited at The Captain's Road a group show that took place in a domestic house in Dublin housing estate in 2002, McNulty created a disorientating work that sampled and manipulated the live auditory stream of familiar daytime TV (again through a MAX/MSP patch). *Decompression 2* altered our perception of time as mapped by TV time, compressed time, structured time. The new frontier of digital TV may offer interactivity with search engines compiling individual viewing schedules but *Decompression 2* offered an immediate solution to unscrambling the scrambled time flow that governs most of our lives.

In the work *Falken's Maze* exhibited at the Straylight show in 2003, sampled sounds from the kid's fantasy film *War Games* (1983) were played into a very large disused wholesale supermarket. The samples were of the sonification of technology in this drama about war and hacking: telephones, dial tones, and computers. The sound appears in the space only upon certain acoustic conditions as 'understood' by a computer. The principle condition controlling the appearance of the selected sound effects in the cavernous space was the reverberation as monitored by the computer, when the volume of reverb and noise in the space fell to a certain threshold the unfolding sequence of sound effects from the film would appear. An audience making too much noise would be deprived of the listening experience, even the physical presence of warm bodies in the space affected the acoustics. Passive interaction was the response required for the delivery of the work. This is of course very different to the sound pacification of Muzak that typically controls the acoustics of supermarkets.

An important understanding of certain works, like the Temple Bar Gallery performance, is their live dimension. In the music world McNulty is respected for his improvised performances with David Lacey as well as with a number of other musicians including Keith Rowe. A guiding philosophy about this experimental work is that it must be heard live and that CD recordings are a poor substitute for appreciating the work. In essence the improvised happening is a unique event not to be repeated. This does however make a considerable demand on an audience with lazy habits. Sound work that is fixed in a (commodity) recording is composed of unique sound events that can be repeated and repeated by the listener until their depth and significance is fully known in what Pierre Schaefer describes as reduced listening. As Michel Chion writes about Schaefer's theories: "reduced listening requires the fixing of sounds, which thereby acquire the status of objects".² In a live audience, reduced listening or listening to this specific objectification of sound (and its implicit commodification) is significantly challenged. Instead the listener is encouraged to be open to receiving the raw materials of sound in an exchange where the performer understands the difficulties for the audience of attention to abstract noise.

McNulty's appearance in São Paulo gives important recognition to this contemporary work/movement in Ireland. It also comes at a time when sound art is gaining greater audiences in the art world through a number of important sound art exhibitions. The reasons for the development of the emergence of practitioners working with sound in Ireland such as Dennis McNulty are multiple but two principle factors might be the increased availability of digital technology: the laptop, the internet and programmes such as MAX/MSP and an important graduate course in Music and Media Technologies at Trinity College Dublin (which McNulty attended some years ago). Graduates from this course (and others like it) have contributed to this new wave of art related practitioners engaged with sound.

² Michel Chion, Audio-Vision: sound on screen, trans Claudia Gorbman, Columbia University Press, NY, 1994, p.

The work of these individuals is not only creating new approaches to sound, composition and improvisation, they are also reinterpreting the tradition of experimentation in sound in the last fifty to a hundred years. In discussions and emails over this text Dennis McNulty has introduced me to many fragmentary sources on sound art and improvisation for which I am very grateful, as there is a poverty of published writing on sound installations, generally, as well as in Ireland. In one particular exchange he sent me a quote with an attached comment from an interview with David Tudor, in which Tudor describes his approach to sound installation and the composition to which he first signed his name.

David Tudor:

The first time was...in 1964 which was done at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and at that point I had not titled the piece. I titled it after that [Fluorescent Sound]. It was done at the Festival for Modern Dance and Robert Rauschenberg who was doing a dance collaboration with Steve Paxton asked if I would do the music. I said yes and I walked around the museum and thought, 'what am I going to do?' I noticed that there were -it must have been- a thousand fluorescent light bulbs. One day I was in the room when someone was turning on the fluorescent lights and they didn't know which to turn on and all of a sudden there was the most beautiful music. I thought, 'OK, I'll put some contact microphones up there from the bulbs to see if the sound can be made really audible.' In these days the museum had only two large rooms. The room where the sound was beautiful was actually the foyer but the room I had to work in was the larger gallery and when I tried it there, it worked OK but less beautifully than in the other room. I think there were more light bulbs on the same switch in the large room which seemed to make a difference.³

To which Dennis McNulty observed: “Seems like the room beside “the Gallery” has always been more interesting [for sound installations]”

www.dennismcnulty.com

³ An Interview with David Tudor by Teddy Hultberg in Dusseldorf May 17,18 1988
<http://davidtudor.org/Articles/hultberg.html>