

CONCEPTUAL MUSIC: NEW MEDIA AND FRONTIERS IN MARYANNE AMACHER'S *CITY-LINKS* SERIES

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Abstract: Between 1967 and 1988 Maryanne Amacher's *City-Links* series comprised radio broadcasts, sound installations and interdisciplinary performances featuring her practice of mixing sonic material from multiple remote locations joined via telecommunications infrastructure. These works reflect Amacher's compositional elevation of the process of sonic perception alongside musical material, an approach that would evolve to inform her later work in which she dealt with the musical potential of psychoacoustic phenomena known as auditory distortion products. This article aims to provide an overview of the *City-Links* series as a unique product of the experimentation in post-war avant-garde music and visual and conceptual art. After a synopsis of Amacher's early compositional development, I offer a comparison between Amacher's *City-Links* and John Cage's radio works, exploring different contemporary approaches to transmission and broadcast as a compositional medium. I then situate the site-specificity of the *City-Links* works within the extramusical frame offered by Amacher's contemporary Robert Smithson's site/non-site dialectic. The article finally suggests the necessity for a more holistic examination of Amacher's legacy that accounts for both the musicological and art-historical implications of her work.

Introduction

Maryanne Amacher's legacy consistently refutes a straightforward characterisation. A student of Karlheinz Stockhausen who later became a collaborator and friend to John Cage, her compositional output represents a strikingly diverse engagement with new forms such as installation and electroacoustic performance. She has become well known primarily for her interrogation of psychoacoustic phenomena such as auditory distortion products as musical material.¹ Her work in this area has developed a sort of metonymical relationship to the whole of Amacher's oeuvre, hindering the possibilities

¹ For an initial synopsis of some of the research and ideas with which Amacher engaged in the field of psychoacoustics, see Malcolm W. Browne, 'Ear's Own Sounds May Underlie its Precision', *The New York Times*, 9 June 1992, www.nytimes.com/1992/06/09/science/ear-s-own-sounds-may-underlie-its-precision.html (accessed 10 February 2022).

for a more nuanced discussion of her work's broader musical and artistic implications.

It is my aim to reframe Amacher's creative output and artistic legacy beyond the technical discussions and implications of her work with auditory distortion products. In Amacher's ambition to cultivate a compositional practice beyond 'simply rearranging and modifying existent musical figures', she expanded the boundaries of not only musical material and form but, perhaps more importantly, the definitions and tools available for music composition itself.² This article articulates the hermeneutical systems that can be used to examine, analyse and engage with Amacher's catalogue as the nexus in the US of the post-Cageian musical avant-garde and the burgeoning movements of conceptual and new media art. The focus will be a period of her work encompassed by the *City-Links* series beginning in 1967. I will characterise this series in relation to some of the developments in avant-garde music and conceptual art concerned with audience perception as a means for artistic enquiry. After a brief overview of the *City-Links* series, I will examine key aspects of these works in relation to the value systems negotiated: first, in similar contemporary works of Cage and, second, in the work and writings of the visual and conceptual artist Robert Smithson, in order to demonstrate the necessity of a more holistic contemporary and historical interrogation of Amacher's innovations in musical aesthetics, form, material and time.

Early Work

Coming of age during the institutional support for new art, media and cultural studies of the Great Society era, Amacher capitalised on many of the newly available grants, postgraduate research fellowships and residency programmes.³ After her undergraduate studies in composition and piano at the University of Pennsylvania and her subsequent studies in Lejaren Hiller's experimental music studio at the University of Illinois, Amacher took up her residency as Creative Associate at the University of Buffalo from 1966 to 1967. This period saw the genesis of a compositional practice concerned with perceptual space in musical form and material that defined the rest of her career.

Despite her reputation as an installation artist, Amacher began her mature compositional career working within concert music, and the *Audjoins Suite* represents perhaps some of her earliest music in this genre.⁴ I say perhaps because the entire scope of the *Audjoins Suite* is not entirely clear, although it is generally understood to consist of the choral work *Arcade* and the percussion and tape work *Adjacencies*.⁵ These works reveal that early in her compositional

² Maryanne Amacher, 'Thinking of Karlheinz Stockhausen', in *Maryanne Amacher: Selected Writings and Interviews*, eds Amy Cimini and Bill Dietz (Brooklyn: Blank Forms Editions, 2020), p. 382.

³ Founded in 1965, the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) became the US federal government standing programme to fund new artistic projects, primarily in the form of grants. See Karen Patricia Heath, 'Artistic Scarcity in an Age of Material Abundance: President Lyndon Johnson, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Great Society Liberalism', *European Journal of American Culture*, 36, no. 1 (2017), pp. 5–22. Amy Cimini discusses how developments in the NEA's funding structures impacted Amacher's *City-Links* series in *Wild Sound: Maryanne Amacher and the Tenses of Audible Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 139–40.

⁴ The surviving production materials and score excerpts indicate a composition period from 1965 to 1967. For the dates of specific materials and initial documented performances, see Amacher, *Maryanne Amacher*, pp. 28–30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 27–47.

development Amacher had already gravitated towards elaborate, bespoke electroacoustic presentations. The production notes for *Arcade*, for example, call for ‘3 chamber choirs, 9 members each, brass, strings, woodwinds, percussion... 3 chamber choirs are separated in space depending on the stage and room area... Percussion is amplified out through 4 channels... Areas of woodwinds, strings and choral sounds are to be pre-recorded on a 4-channel tape to fuse conveniently with the performing sounds’.⁶ There is, however, no public record that *Arcade* was ever performed; the score exists only in fragments and there is no known recording.

Performance materials for the second work in the *Audjoins Suite*, *Adjacencies*, are better preserved, but the initial performances in Buffalo at the Albright-Knox Gallery and in New York City at Carnegie Hall succeeded only in dissuading Amacher from further work on concert music.⁷ Amacher described her initial compositional approach to the *Audjoins Suite*:

I made *Audjoins* so that worlds of sound could be joined. They receive each other, interrupt, interact, and bring the unexpected into each other. What previously could not have happened simultaneously in the same place, either because of distance, as in the case of countries, or within one composition because of sound levels in one room, is now possible through electronic means.⁸

Amacher realised, however, that the constraints of concert music on her interest in open-durational forms and complex spatialisation and sound diffusion were irreconcilable. Nevertheless, this initial compositional philosophy would serve as the departure point for the radical new forms of presentation that typified the rest of her career.

Notes on Source Materials

In a letter to her parents written some time in the 1960s, Amacher differentiates herself from the ‘idiot composers who can’t write about their own ideas’: she instead, is someone whose ‘written word and theories are there and solid’.⁹ One of her significant publications, *Psychoacoustic Phenomena in Music Composition: Some Features of a Perceptual Geography*, illustrates Amacher’s eloquent and revolutionary foray into the musical potential and possibilities of psychoacoustics.¹⁰ These writings serve as a useful starting point in contextualising her work, although many other personal and/or unpublished resources have only recently been collected and made publicly available.¹¹

⁶ Excerpt from *Arcade* production notes, *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷ Amacher’s *Adjacencies*, realised by percussionists Rebecca Lloyd-Jones and Dustin Donahue, and sound engineers David Aguila and Theocharis Papatrechas, has recently been made available on YouTube and is one of the few accessible audio/video recordings of Amacher’s instrumental works. Rebecca Lloyd-Jones, ‘Maryanne Amacher (1938–2009) | *Adjacencies* (1965)’, YouTube, 17 February 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uNkRHNUlqw. Accessed March 1, 2023. The documentation of the Albright-Knox Gallery and Carnegie Hall performances can be found in Amacher, *Maryanne Amacher*, p. 29.

⁸ Amacher, *Maryanne Amacher*, p. 28.

⁹ Amacher, *Maryanne Amacher*, pp. 20–24.

¹⁰ Maryanne Amacher, foreword note and update to ‘Psychoacoustic Phenomena in Musical Composition: Some Features of a Perceptual Geography’, in *Arcana III: Musicians on Music*, ed. John Zorn (New York: Tzadik, 2008).

¹¹ Amacher, *Maryanne Amacher*, compiled and edited by Amy Cimini and Bill Dietz, both sometime collaborators of Amacher, contains a variety of private communications, sketches, funding applications and work-in-progress schema that enable a new scholarly perspective on Amacher’s output. Additional resources have been made available in Cimini’s 2021 book *Wild Sound*. Dietz and Cimini are responsible in part for the

Amacher's published and private writings, sketches, preparatory diagrams, technical riders and grant applications are central to any musicological or art-historical examination of her work. Given her commitment to projects that reject conventional documentation in audio, video or notation, these sources must exist not as a compromise in place of recordings or scores but as evolving contributions to a new musical and artistic historiography. Amacher's work demonstrates the imperative to develop new ways of experiencing contemporary art and music whose existence is ephemeral; her position at the forefront of a new understanding of the materiality of sound means that historically privileged tools for musical analysis are insufficient for any thorough examination of her work.

An Overview of the *City-Links* Series

Two works created during Amacher's tenure as a Creative Associate in 1967 in Buffalo, *In-City #1* and *In-City, Buffalo 1967*, are the first clear examples of her revolutionary new direction, following her dissatisfaction with the *Audjoins Suite*. These works are the foundation of what would become *City-Links*, a series of 22 projects, realised between 1967 and 1988.¹² The series is comprised of performances or installations, tailored to specific presentation locations. Amacher defines a "City-Link" as 'the sounding resources of 2 or more remote locations (cities or locations within a city): through electronic links music is composed, at spaces distant from each other, together in time'.¹³ Each work introduced new developments in Amacher's engagement with ideas such as new technology in sound diffusion and telecommunications, urban planning and architecture and information theory, but here I will examine just a few of these..

In-City #1 was Amacher's first major engagement with radio broadcast and live transmission as a musical medium. Realised in May 1967, it consisted of a 28-hour broadcast on Buffalo's WBFO radio programme, during which Amacher mixed eight incoming audio feeds, connected to the studio via telephone lines, in real time from various sites throughout the city. These sites included: 'the live sound from the microphones installed at Bethlehem Steel, a stone tower (at Niagara Mohawk Power Company), the airport, Pillsbury Four Machines, main street, [the] surrounding area of the old Erie canal, exhaust pumps (Central Gas Plant) and in the old grain mills area'.¹⁴ The realisations of these works relied heavily on the support of the Bell telecommunications utility company, which installed 15 kHz telephone lines between the composer's specified sites to allow continuous transmission of the sound to be captured by Amacher's microphone array. The resulting presentations of the composite sounds varied in form and duration. The works often took the shape of long-form radio broadcasts, as in the initial work for WBFO Buffalo, or as more extreme installation works such as *City-Links #4 (Tone and Place, Work I)* and *City-Links #14*, which saw a microphone installed in a window near the New England Fish Exchange at Pier 6, Boston Harbor. This microphone transmitted

development of the Amacher Archives in New York City, and their encouragement and guidance has been paramount in my research.

¹² Amacher, *Maryanne Amacher*, p. 50.

¹³ Tobi Maier, Micah Silver, Robert The and Axel Wieder, 'Maryanne Amacher: *City-Links*', booklet for exhibition *Maryanne Amacher: City-Links* (New York: Ludlow 38 Künstlerhaus Stuttgart Goethe Institut, 2010).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

sounds from the harbour environment to Amacher's studio, again via a 15kHz telephone line, 14 hours a day throughout the nearly three years of her fellowship at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT, from 1973 to 1976.¹⁵ In a 1988 interview with Jeffrey Bartone for the Olympia, Washington-based KAOS 89.3 FM radio programme, Amacher describes her design for the Boston Harbor *City-Links* work:

The microphone was on a window facing the ocean. It was not intended to pick up the ocean sounds. Sounds in the immediate atmosphere were not of interest to me. I chose the quietest space that I could get – one that would be quiet at night when the day activity had stopped in the area, where I could really observe distant sound, as well as close-up sound. In fact, my interest in any such piece as this, working with the environment, has never really been for the *sounds*. I've never been interested in boat horns or water waves or birds. My main interest in doing this has always to do with the ways of hearing, and us and our responses.¹⁶

The work in Boston Harbor was one of Amacher's most successful *City-Links*, and recordings and/or live feeds from the window microphone and additional microphones installed after 1976 would inform or constitute several subsequent *City-Links* throughout the US.¹⁷ The sounds were rerouted and/or mixed specifically for installation spaces, including the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Hayden Gallery in Cambridge, Massachusetts; the sounds were also included in singular performances in a collaboration with Merce Cunningham's dance studio in Manhattan and at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.¹⁸ Given the logistic complexity of many of her projects, collaboration was often critical in Amacher's development of new works, especially the *City-Links* series.

(Post-)Cageian Compositional Paradigms and New Media Implications

The collaboration with the Cunningham Dance Company offers crucial insight into the partnerships and aesthetic and ideological networks in which Amacher's realisations of these works took place, and Amacher's relationship with John Cage offers significant insights into the relationship between her work and the innovations of the avant-garde in the latter half of the twentieth century. Cage commended the beauty of Amacher's work in a recorded conversation with Richard Kostelanetz in 1979, and the two composers performed together, Amacher providing electronic accompaniment to Cage's *Lectures on Weather* and the long-form text composition *Empty Words*.¹⁹ A surviving letter reveals that Amacher turned to Cage for support during a period of personal crisis, and their relationship was one of mutual trust in both their artistic aspirations and personal lives.²⁰

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Amacher, *Maryanne Amacher*, pp. 211–21.

¹⁷ For a complete list of the *City-Links* works and their surviving programme notes, see Maier et al., 'Maryanne Amacher'.

¹⁸ These performances and works consist respectively of 'City-Links #10 (Everything-In-Air)' (Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1974), 'City-Links #7 (Everything-In-Air)' (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1974), 'Labyrinth Gives Way to Skin' (Merce Cunningham and Dance Company, Roundabout Theatre, New York, 1975), 'Remainder', commissioned by the Cunningham Dance Foundation as repertoire music for 'Torse', a new work by Merce Cunningham (Amacher gave the first performances with the Cunningham Company at the MacCarter Theatre, Princeton, 1976 and the Teatro Nacional, Caracas, 1976). Maier et al., 'Maryanne Amacher'.

¹⁹ Amacher, *Maryanne Amacher*, p. 186.

²⁰ Amacher and Cage's close personal relationship is evident in a letter from Amacher to Cage dated September 1983. Accompanying it was an 'Itemized Living Expenses for October and November', and the letter explains Amacher's dire financial situation,

Cage's 'radio works' offer a particularly useful point of comparison with Amacher's *City-Links*. Cage produced 14 works utilising radios to generate sound and performance materials as part of his increasing incorporation of found sounds and indeterminacy into his compositions. Because Cage believed that visual stimuli were an obligation of the contemporary composer, their soundworlds were often generated in highly performative concert presentations. *Imaginary Landscape No. 4 (March No.2)*, composed in 1951 for 12 radios, 24 performers and a conductor, is perhaps the most frequently discussed of the radio works and employs a conventionally notated score requiring the performers to manipulate both the tuning of each radio and their dynamics or timbre.²¹ The result is an entanglement of collaged radio sounds, ranging from static and white noise to momentary glimpses of music or speech stations.²²

Any discussion of the way that media and technology became primary tools for artists and composers, particularly those inclined towards radical experimentation, would be incomplete without reference to the writings of Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan's ideas influenced Cage and, given Cage and Amacher's shared commitment to technological innovation, are invaluable in discussing their works.²³ Cage and Amacher's broadcast- or transmission-oriented works are similar in their innovations in 'instrumentation', but any comparison must focus on their means of receiving and perceiving sound and information. Alana Pagnutti, writing on Cage's radio works, makes a critical note of the inadequacy of the word 'listener' when describing a 'receiver' of these works.²⁴ For Cage, the sight of the performers grappling with their radios represents as significant a contribution to the work as the resultant sounds. In Amacher's *City-Links* the performance may not provide a visual stimulus, but the situation of the sounds in space, such as the architectural features of an atrium or gallery, provides an immediate environmental context that is part of the experience of the work. The unique structural qualities and acoustics of the various transmission nodes – the sonic image of the harbour, the acoustic profile of Amacher's studio and the spatialisation of speakers within an installation space – affect the listener through their interaction with elements beyond their initial situation in physical reality.²⁵ Recorded documentation of these installation works or radio broadcasts is scarce because it fails to capture the receiver's particular experience of the particular presentation format.

At the 1989 Ars Electronica festival in Linz, Amacher characterised her work as an extension of Cage's engagement with the sounds of

owing to, among other things, her mother's illness and hospitalisation and the death of Dutch collaborators who were attempting to secure funding for a new large-scale Amacher work. Amacher humbly requests support in the form of 'concerts, lectures, introductions to people who would have interest in my work, and artist's emergency funds', the latter amounting to the US\$3,500 that she needed to survive the coming months. It is unclear to what extent Cage was able to intervene on her behalf. Amacher, *Maryanne Amacher*, pp. 269–74.

²¹ Andrea Valle and Amedeo Casella, *Imaginary Landscape No. 4: Study and Annotation of the Score*, presented at the Proceedings of the XXI CIM-Colloquio di Informatica Musicale, Cagliari, 2016. http://cim.lim.di.unimi.it/2016_CIM_XXI_Atti.pdf; accessed 18 November 2023.

²² The account of the performance as told by the American composer Alvin Lucier in *Music 109: Notes on Experimental Music* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), p. 5.

²³ Alana Pagnutti, *Reception: The Radio-Works of Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage*, ed. Victoria Miguel (Smith and Brown, 2016), 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁵ Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, 'Auditory Spatial Awareness', in *Spaces Speak* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), pp. 11–66.

everyday life.²⁶ Her presentation of these sounds, however, has less to do with what the listener is hearing than with how they hear it, an approach encapsulated in McLuhan's axiom 'the medium is the message'.²⁷ Amacher understood that her role as composer of *City-Links* was to foster listening that was concerned with shared social experiences, achieved by unifying disparate sonic environments. When sounding locations are linked with and within a receiving space, such as Amacher's studio or an installation space, an aural bridge in time and space is created. The invisibility of the transmission tele-links directs the listener's focus away from the physical means of the sound production and towards a conceptual awareness of the listener's own limits, limits revealed and expanded by Amacher's transmission and presentation. According to McLuhan, 'the message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs'.²⁸ The radio as a medium is not simply an innovative sound producing mechanism and its use by Cage does not place it within the lineage of instrumental development as, for example, a proto-sampler. As Pagnutti says, 'the radio in the radio-works functions not to communicate information, but instead to create a unique effect on the viewer of the works'.²⁹ Similarly, in Amacher's *City-Links* the role of telecommunications and the 15 kHz tele-links in transmitting or broadcasting sounds illustrates a clear continuity with Cage's work.

Despite the similarities in medium, however, there are conceptual distinctions between the composers' handling of material and form. Unlike Cage's radio-work performances, Amacher seeks to underpin the socialised phenomena of 'hearing' by revealing the inherent qualities of her transmitted sounds to be collectively experienced. Her works might focus on phenomena such as drones or beating that provide a singular reference point for change within a specific parameter; by contrast, Cage's interest in chance in performance is a driving force in the audience's holistic reception of the work as an amalgamation of individual perceptions of an ever-changing array of fleeting material.

A crucial distinction between Cage and Amacher's approaches to these works lies in their respective interpretation of McLuhan's conception of time as experienced through new technological innovations. McLuhan believed the advent of new electronic technologies, particularly in communication and media, and their introduction into art and culture had paved the way for a uniquely modern perception of time. In this new temporal order 'sequence yields to the simultaneous'³⁰ and, as Pagnutti argues, the radio is the epitome of this new simultaneity,³¹ with the accelerated experience of events broadcast from many locations instilling a new empirical awareness of time and space. Pagnutti argues that Cage's radio works use the new medium to transmit an understanding of the fleeting qualities of time and the volatility of the present moment. Within this conceptual framework, she argues, Cage attempts to cultivate the perceptual

²⁶ 'Maryanne Amacher speaking at Ars Electronica. Linz, Austria 1989', YouTube, 5 June 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwYaL-QiCKQ&t=1675s. Accessed February 25, 2023. Amacher discusses Cage around 5'10" into the recording.

²⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), p. 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁹ Pagnutti, *Reception*, p. 3.

³⁰ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 13.

³¹ Pagnutti, *Reception*, p. 27.

awareness of the work's 'audience': 'as opposed to a concrete object which allows for longer contemplation, sound is more closely linked to time in that one must be conscious of the constantly shifting ephemerality of both'.³²

This is the clearest distinction in the aesthetic implications of Amacher and Cage's approaches. I would argue that the aspiration towards a concrete objectivity in a sounding environment is fundamental to Amacher's project. In a 1974 interview with Norman Pelligrini, she said of her Boston Harbor transmission to her Cambridge studio that 'It's almost as if you had such a thing – which of course we don't, that I know of at this moment – as, like a sound hologram'.³³ The incoming sonic material varied according to the environmental conditions in which Amacher placed her microphone(s), but at the core of her practice in these works were the hours spent studying the consistent, underlying qualities of sound inherent to a given location and how these qualities would shift, transform, appear and diminish in her processing, mixing and dissemination of the material. In the initial Boston Harbor works, for example, the composite mix of incoming sound into Amacher's studio produced a drone frequency at a consistent 92 Hz (F#2 minus 9 cents).³⁴ Amacher's intention was to dissect the environments that she studied and transmitted, making listeners aware of the simultaneity of these objective phenomena occurring across and within one or more spaces. She refers to this idea, categorised by McLuhan as 'synchronicity', and offers her own interpretation of time:

Time corresponds here to life of the space, to sense of being there. Approach and disappearance of what is sounding in the environment. Vibration in air heard 3 minutes before the actual sound of a plane is heard. Changes in air vibration as different boats approach. Seagulls sensing these changes in air – their anticipation, announcement of arrivals and disappearances, before the sound of the change is heard at the site. Patterns within air. Hearing synchronicity 'live' as it is: at same moment, birds suddenly begin to sing at one location, music begins at another. Hearing simultaneously spaces distant from each other, experiencing over time, more than one space at same time, coincidental rhythms, patterns of synchronicity, emerge. Awareness suddenly altered by over-view – perception recognizing beyond the boundary of my walls, room, immediate sound I hear from the street outside my window.³⁵

The new paradigm of medium as message underpinned an explosion of conceptual art practices and a fiercely critical response from many art historians to what they perceived as a rejection of inherently pictorial values.³⁶ Amacher's evolving musical and inter-media practice during the late 1960s and throughout the *City-Links* series illustrates, on the other hand, a compositional philosophy galvanised by the pre-supposition that 'ideas alone can be works of art'.³⁷ Interviewed by Frank J. Oteri for NewMusicUSA in 2004, Amacher explicitly detailed this motivation: 'I would like to dream that I could make music that triggered another music in the listener's mind. I think to me it's

³² Ibid.

³³ Cimini, *Wild Sound*, p. 104.

³⁴ Alan Licht, *Sound Art: Beyond Music, between Categories*, (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), p. 271.

³⁵ Maier, et al., 'Maryanne Amacher'.

³⁶ See, for example, Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, eds Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 8.

³⁷ Sol LeWitt, 'Sentences on Conceptual Art', in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 106.

almost more interesting than the music itself really.³⁸ The *City-Links* series is a robust framework for how a composer might conceive both sonic material and also the conditions in which it might be perceived by a listener. To work in this way, Amacher and Cage demonstrate that composers must cultivate a new array of extramusical tools and theoretical implications. These composers' works reveal the extent to which music-making, even within similar conceptual frameworks, can offer distinctly different interpretations of content, form and extra-material implications.

Interventions in Landscape and Robert Smithson

The tools and methodologies for artistic enquiry change over time, as do the boundaries of media that differentiate artistic disciplines. One particular iteration of Amacher's Boston Harbor work is especially revealing of the expansion of the composer's public reception. This work, shown as an installation entitled *Hearing the Space, Day by Day, 'Live'*, was Amacher's contribution to the group 'new media' exhibition *Interventions in Landscape* at the Hayward Gallery in London from 7 November 1973 to 7 June 1974, during Amacher's residence at the Hayward's affiliate institution at MIT. Amacher's press release and her interview with Jeffrey Bartone provide critical insights into the network of non-musicians and artists that constituted Amacher's peers and colleagues. In the interview Amacher recounts her role in the exhibition:

It was a show of various environmental artists, like Dennis Oppenheim and Robert Smithson. (It was shortly after Smithson had died.) I was invited to make a work there, and I was able to transmit my Pier 6 sound every day. I could also make any interactions or interventions in this kind of landscape in my own studio! In the course of every day I could go in and mix other music. So, for one month not only was I redirecting or making another link, adding yet another link of this live sound atmosphere, but I was also making a live performance intervention every day, which was quite a wonderful experience.³⁹

The so-called Land or Environmental Artists were part of the post-war American avant-garde. Casual connections might be made between Amacher's methodologies and several of these artists, but this is one of the few documented instances in which Amacher directly engaged with them. I will argue, however, that Amacher's work at this point in her career represents a direct engagement with Smithson's most influential theoretical writings and that this may provide an integral tool for analysing and understanding Amacher's development and ambitions as a composer of an entirely 'new' music.

The main link between Amacher and Smithson is their engagement with displacement as a primary tool for art-making. For Smithson, this is best illustrated in his theoretical dichotomy of 'sites' and 'non-sites', terms that would serve as the dialectical taxonomy of and methodological approach to his creation of various works during his most recognisable mature period. A 'site' refers to an artwork situated outside the gallery, usually consisting of a subtle staging of, or intervention into, the landscape; Smithson's aim is to draw attention to the raw innate qualities of a physical reality

³⁸ 'Extremities: Maryanne Amacher', interview by Frank J. Oteri, NewMusicUSA, 1 May, 2004, <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/extremities-maryanne-amacher-in-conversation-with-frank-j-oteri/>. Accessed February 25, 2023.

³⁹ Amacher, *Maryanne Amacher*, p. 213.

and location as an inherent challenge to the natural order of perception. In a conversation between Smithson and the artists Dennis Oppenheim and Michael Heizer, Smithson characterises the site as the ‘unfocused fringe where your mind loses its boundaries and a sense of the oceanic pervades’.⁴⁰ Unlike a painting or sculptural work in a museum, gallery or even an outdoor sculpture garden, the visual gestalt that is responsible for the clear boundaries between the ‘space’ or ‘reality’ of the artwork and the world in which it exists are not explicitly discernible.

Like Amacher, Smithson problematises conventional documentation. Smithson’s objection to photography of his works mirrors Amacher’s opposition to recordings of her installation works. Photography, like audio recordings, would continue to amass a cultural significance that would aid in the long-term preservation of artworks of this nature, but Smithson insisted that this ‘steal[s] the nature of the work’.⁴¹ The shortcomings of these documentary media lie in their inability to capture scale and form and to capture time on what Smithson would refer to as a ‘geological scale’. By definition a work that is permanently in flux negates the temporality of a ‘record’. A return to the location of Amacher’s Pier 6 microphone would not yield the composite sound experienced in the Hayward Gallery or that on any surviving tape of the *City-Links* works. The composite of Amacher’s strategic sound-capturing, mixing, processing, synthesising and transmitting have accumulated ‘geologically’ in the form of a new aural gestalt that cannot be divided and subsumed back into its original environment.⁴²

Most relevant, however, to this comparison of Smithson and Amacher are the ideas articulated in Smithson’s writing about non-sites and Amacher’s writing about a so-called ‘Long Distance Music’.⁴³ Much of Smithson’s work is primarily associated with its engagement with natural materials, creating works that can only exist outside traditional gallery settings, but his simultaneous preoccupation with non-sites reveals his problematisation of the Land-Art label. In his ‘A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites’ (1968) Smithson introduces what would become a central conceptual component in his gallery-oriented work:

The Nonsite (an indoor earthwork) is a three dimensional logical picture that is abstract, yet it represents an actual site in N.J. (The Pine Barrens Plains). It is by this three dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site which does not resemble it – thus *The Nonsite*. To understand this language of sites is to appreciate the metaphor between the syntactical construct and the complex of ideas, letting the former function as a three dimensional picture which doesn’t look like a picture.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Robert Smithson, ‘Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson (1970)’, eds Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 248.

⁴¹ Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, p. 251.

⁴² Amy Cimini, ‘Telematic Tape: Notes on Maryanne Amacher’s *City-Links* (1967–1980)’, in *Twentieth-Century Music*, 14, no. 1 (2017), p. 93.

⁴³ Amacher, *Maryanne Amacher*, pp. 78–91. ‘Long Distance Music’ was a quasi-manifesto and collection of text pieces that followed Amacher’s initial works in Buffalo. These pieces warrant their own examination, although they are situated with Amacher’s interest in listening as a form of social participation in collective performance or ‘happening-like’ contexts before she returned to intensive realisations of tele-link works and the remainder of the *City-Links* series.

⁴⁴ Robert Smithson, ‘A Provisional Theory of Nonsites (1968)’, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 364.

Smithson refers here to his work *Nonsite 'Line of Wreckage', Bayonne, New Jersey*, also completed in 1968. The work consists of a painted seven-tier aluminium container, housing broken concrete slabs of varying sizes.⁴⁵ Its presentation is explicitly constructed for a gallery presentation and is accompanied by a framed map and photographic panels of the source materials and site origin; the non-site constitutes a transmission of this physical reality to a display elsewhere. Similarly, Amacher's transmission of unified sound sources of various environments involves making installations or broadcasts to provide convenient access to her source materials' origin sites. Amacher situates her mixes in a space or format designed for a specific form of listening in order to reveal a perceptual space that is uniquely possible when the distinctions between environmental material and art or musical presentation are dissolved. The synthesis of sounding sources provides, in Smithson's terms, a sort of aural picture of one or more sites, but without an essential, readily identifiable representation of the source. Amacher aims to capture and mix the sounds so that the material is highlighted at the edges of perception; hearing this material in the appropriate format will offer a conceptual awareness of sound beyond the 'statistical'.⁴⁶

Smithson was acutely aware of the notion of a postmodern or conceptual art as, in the words of Susan Kandel, 'a space in which distinct categories, genres and media are frustrated'.⁴⁷ Citing 'Language to be Looked at and/or Things to be Read', Smithson's press releases from 1972, Kandel elaborates that, for Smithson, 'in this space, language does not so much trespass on art's sacrosanct province as become wholly imbricated within it, blurring old borders forever'.⁴⁸ This perspective is indicative of what the art critic and historian Craig Owens characterises as 'the eruption of language into the visual field', a hallmark of postmodern art.⁴⁹ Owens was expressly concerned with Smithson's engagement with text, but I would extend his critique to encompass Smithson's art-making as one concerned with the physical embodiment of a new artistic discourse. This aspect of the post-war American avant-garde traverses distinctions in medium between artists and composers. Amacher's work concerns the translation between musical language and environmental sound sources, deliberately challenging the semiotic boundaries to hearing; regardless of interpretation, the space for the listener to confront these principles is dependent on the rhetorical implications of the work, just as it is dependent on the content and material.

Amacher was not the only composer working with microphones and environmental sound as primary compositional tools, and Smithson's ideas often circulate in discussions about field recording or acoustic ecology. The sound-art scholar Brandon LaBelle defines the discipline of acoustic ecology as one that 'raises issues pertaining to sound and audition and their locational specifics, which can be understood to operate along some of the fault lines of [a] site-specific practice'.⁵⁰ At face value, this seems to characterise Amacher's work at this time, and scholars such as LaBelle also cite Smithson's site/non-

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Amacher, *Maryanne Amacher*, p. 129.

⁴⁷ Susan Kandel, 'The Non-Site of Theory', *Frieze*, no. 22 (1995), www.frieze.com/article/non-site-theory. Accessed March 8, 2023.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Craig Owens, 'Earthwords', *October*, 10 (1979), p. 122.

⁵⁰ Brandon LaBelle, 'Soundmarks: Environments and Aural Geography', in *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York and London, Bloomsbury Press, 2015), p. 197.

site paradigm as a reference point for this work.⁵¹ Acoustic ecology stems from the belief that recorded experiential investigations, coupled with observations into the acoustic networks of flora and fauna, have broader implications for human experience.⁵² If we compare Amacher's Pier 6 transmissions, however, with the work of Hildegard Westerkamp or Steve Peters, the differences are readily apparent. They use the sounds of bird calls, rushing winds, dynamic water sources or busy city streets to surround the listener in a cacophony of distinct environmental sounds. By contrast, in one of the few existing recorded accounts of one of Amacher's Pier 6 transmissions from Boston Harbor, Amacher scholar and biographer Amy Cimini describes a tape of the work:

At once both transfixing and boring, drips, drops, exhalations and whirs gently punctuate its thirty-five minutes, though nearly half its duration offers little more than hiss-filled stasis – near silence – perhaps, 'almost nothing'.⁵³

The sounds and their respective sources in an acoustic ecological context are presented specifically because they are expressive of their associated location. Displacement characterises the process of recording environmental sounds and relaying them elsewhere, but to divorce them from their source would be inappropriate. The expression of place is fundamental and thus clearly different from Smithson's site/non-site paradigm as articulated by LaBelle. Smithson himself decries this expressiveness, claiming that 'expressive art avoids the problem of logic; therefore it is not truly abstract. A logical intuition can develop in an entirely "new sense of metaphor" free of natural or realistic expressive content.'⁵⁴ Amacher uses tele-links to displace her site-specific material because her concern is not the documentation of elements from location to location but rather the displacement that may prompt listeners to consider the limitations of their perception of environmental sounds. In other words, the non-site implications of Amacher's work facilitate a kind of listening that is as concerned with how we hear (and think about) sonic information as with what the information is.

Conclusion

Art-historical analysis is inherently paradoxical, examining works whose ideas, concepts and materials are presently and perpetually renegotiated, and the analysis of musical, visual and conceptual works such as the *City-Links* series is particularly difficult. These works, nonetheless, represent a vital subject for contemplation and critical inquiry. Amacher's completion of the *City-Links* in the late 1980s coincided with the Reagan government's volte-face on the federal support for artistic experimentation and expression that had previously bolstered Amacher's career. She would spend the rest of her life navigating institutional and financial hurdles, with varying degrees of success, yet her work and the discourse around it have continued to evolve.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1994), p. 33.

⁵³ Amy Cimini is a pre-eminent Amacher scholar and is in part responsible for the consolidation of the Maryanne Amacher Archive at the New York Public Library. It is my hope that soon these records will be made readily available to scholars and the public for further examination; until then we must rely on collaborators and associates of Amacher, such as Cimini, to characterise the sound of these works. Cimini, 'Telematic Tape', p. 93.

⁵⁴ Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, p. 364.