

How I became a Sound Artist

While teaching Sound Art at the University of Cincinnati I was continually asked the same question “What is Sound Art?” To answer I had to examine how I had come to calling myself a Sound Artist.

How I ended up teaching Sound Art at The University of Cincinnati.

I had always wanted to make music but more than just play an instrument I wanted to compose music. But I didn't know how to play any instruments. I studied filmmaking but was so focused on sound that I had completed the soundtrack before I began shooting my first film. I dropped out of film school and worked to save up money to buy a tape recorder and a synthesizer. I blindly turned knobs and banged on any instrument that I could get my hands on and mixed sounds I recorded on the street to compose film-like soundtracks, only without the film. One class in music theory convinced me that I would never be able to learn music so I sought the advice of New York composer Rhys Chatham who, when he understood that I didn't know a single note or chord, looked at me in amazement and said “Incredible! Don't learn music, just keep doing what you're doing.” Encouraged by the avant-garde composer John Cage who said ‘music is everywhere and we all have the best seats’ I forged ahead composing “music” off the cuff of my ears.

I continued composing noisy soundscapes and produced cassettes which I sold in local record shops. I traded cassettes with other like-minded artists around the world by post and became a part of a Cassette Culture network which thrived outside of mainstream culture, even before the rise of the Internet. I traveled to Europe and had several albums released on artist-run labels. In Berlin I met Conrad Schnitzler, an artist who had studied sculpture with Joseph Beuys and had abandoned constructing huge metal sculptures to become a composer of pure sonic dimensions. Conrad exposed me to the outer edges of music and art and introduced me to other artists who used sound as a painter would use paint. I returned to New York City, rented a storefront in the East Village, installed an octophonic sound system into the walls and called it Generator Sound Art Gallery. I collected artist-made recordings of experimental music, sound and noise while curating concerts and exhibitions by artists whose primary medium was sound. Generator attracted an international following of adventurous sound explorers. I drifted further away from traditional music and called my music Sound Art to distinguish it from “noise music” which had since developed into its own extremely noisy genre. News of Generator spread and years after it closed I received an invitation to teach Sound Art at the College of Design, Art, Architecture and Planning at the University of Cincinnati, a class that had never been offered before.

On a bright and sunny afternoon recently I was enjoying the sound of running water while taking a shower when I dropped a nearly empty bottle of shampoo. The sudden sound of falling water hitting the plastic bottle cascaded against the bathroom tiles in a symphony of poly rhythmic overtones. The irregularity of the water flow kept the rhythms in constant flux. The rising and falling volume was like some intense tribal ritual music gone wild! I immediately record this sound. This was good music! Or was it Sound Art? I flashed on discussions I had with students about Sound Art. If I released a CD of my “shower” it could be labeled music, noise, or Sound Art.