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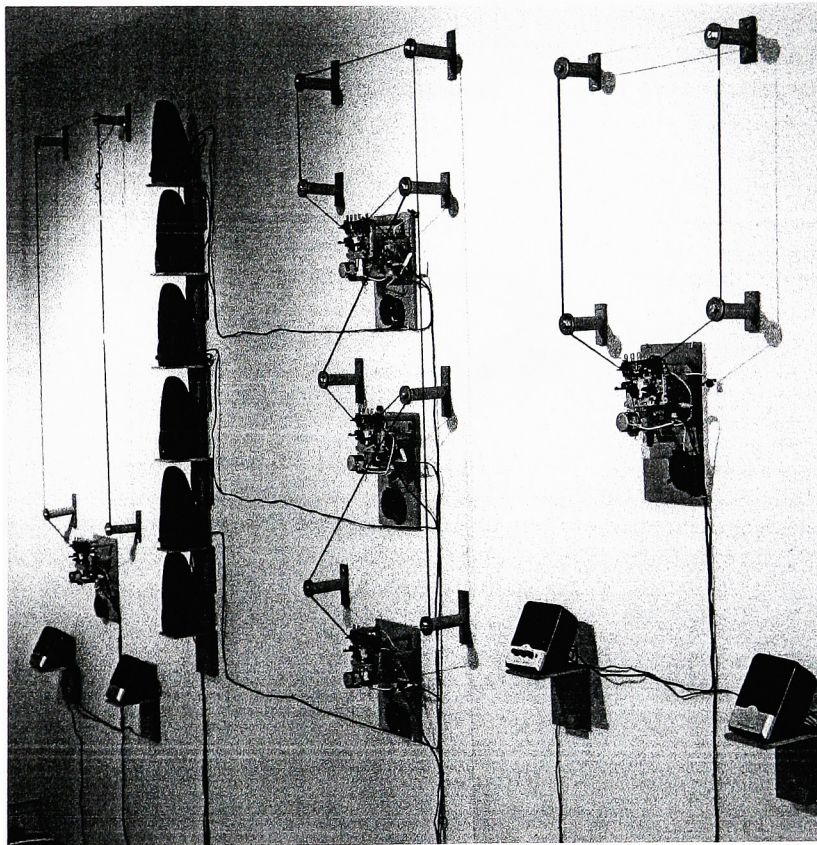
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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS



WALKING THE LOOP

by Cory Card

May 26, 2006

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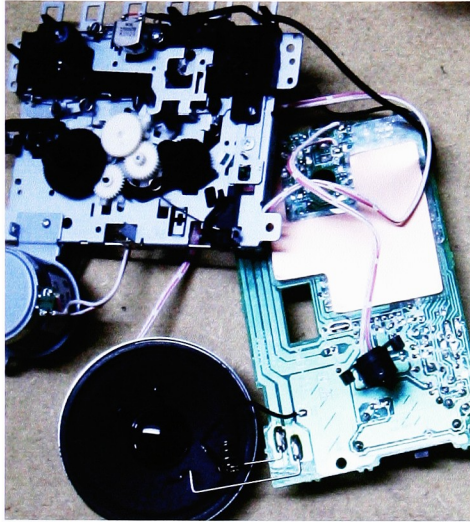
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Contents

Introduction	page 4
<i>Why choose sound?</i>	page 5
 Evolution/Challenges	page 8
<i>On collecting</i>	page 10
<i>Audio Formats</i>	page 16
<i>Cassettes</i>	page 18
<i>Recording and the First Sound Pieces</i>	page 23
<i>Cassette Archive</i>	page 25
<i>Walking in Circles</i>	page 28
 Sound, Art and Technology	page 30
<i>Noise</i>	page 31
<i>Technology</i>	page 35
<i>Space</i>	page 38
 <i>Walking the Loop: the exhibition</i>	page 42
<i>On loops</i>	page 47
<i>Audio</i>	page 50
 Where to go Next?	page 52
 Bibliography	page 54

Introduction



detail of tape recorder removed from case

I began my graduate career with a single goal in mind: to incorporate sound into my visual artwork. While having a lifelong fascination with sound, I had no idea, at that time of exactly how, or through what means I was going to be able to reach this goal, having no prior experience with multimedia work or sound recording for that matter. What came as a result of this desire was a rich, personal and deeply satisfying investigation into the integration of sound and vision. This thesis was not only an inquiry into the incorporation of senses beyond the visual, but also resulted in an exploration into the history of sound art, avant-garde composition and the blurring of lines between art and technology, which not only informed the work but opened my eyes to many more possibilities.

Why choose sound?

It is difficult to explain the importance of sound to me, or why it is that I chose it as a path to investigate. Sound is simply a sense that has fascinated me for a long period of time. I enjoy the experience of listening to the world around me. I love how it enriches my everyday life with its constant changes, randomness and subtleties. Whether it be the sounds of the birds singing, squawking and chirping, coupled with the slight sound of my fingers tapping on the computer keys, cars whirring by the house with the undertone of the refrigerator and the occasional pitter patter of the cat's feet across the carpet that I'm experiencing as I write this document this morning or if its lying on the couch, in the dark listening to the rural space ragas¹ of the MV and EE Medicine Traveling Medicine show on the turntable, while distant sounds of arguing drunks occasionally filter in, barely audible from down the road. The more I've learned about sound the more I enjoy it and the better listener I have become and the more fearful I have become of loosing my hearing.²

Sound is fleeting and is experienced over time, which is quite different than seeing. It is constantly happening and changing at all times: one is able to close one's eyes but it is much harder to block out incoming sounds. Instead new sounds are often noticed as noise levels decrease. When it is made quiet in a room the focus of the ear is simply shifted towards the more subtle auditory layers of the environment such as one's

¹ This term is derived from the catch phrase for the Child of the Microtones; a private press CDR label run by Matt *MV* Valentine, much in the same vein as Sun Ra's Saturn releases. The actual phrase contained within the CDR booklets is usually *Rural Ragas and Blues*.

² The inclusion of the National Technical Institute of the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology has aided in heighten my awareness to the possibilities of hearing loss.

own breathing. John Cage relates an experience he had in an anechoic chamber³; ...*in the anechoic chamber at Harvard University heard that silence was not the absence of sound but was the unintended operation of my nervous system and the circulation of my blood.*⁴

The impetus for beginning this inquiry was musical in nature. Shortly before deciding to venture down this path, I began making many new musical discoveries. Once turned on to Can, Neu!, Tony Conrad and John Cale my head was completely turned around in regards to the possibilities that pure sound contained. After these discoveries I soon ventured on into many more exploratory realms of music from Japanese psychedelia and noise to free jazz, free folk, avant-garde composition and the New Zealand underground.

This personal fascination with sound has roots that stem back to my childhood, especially in regards to music. Thinking in hindsight about this I feel I had a strange and immediate draw to the way music is experienced through the radio or the home stereo system. Memories of myself as a very young child are often connected to hearing music. At the age of five I received my first cassette player, but before that I had a toy record player on which I would read along with my books, or listen to my mother's stack of old 45's. Around the age of eight or nine, I had fleeting aspirations to make music, which did not last. What I recall the most from my more formative years is that no matter what it is I was doing (reading, drawing or playing) I was usually listening to music.

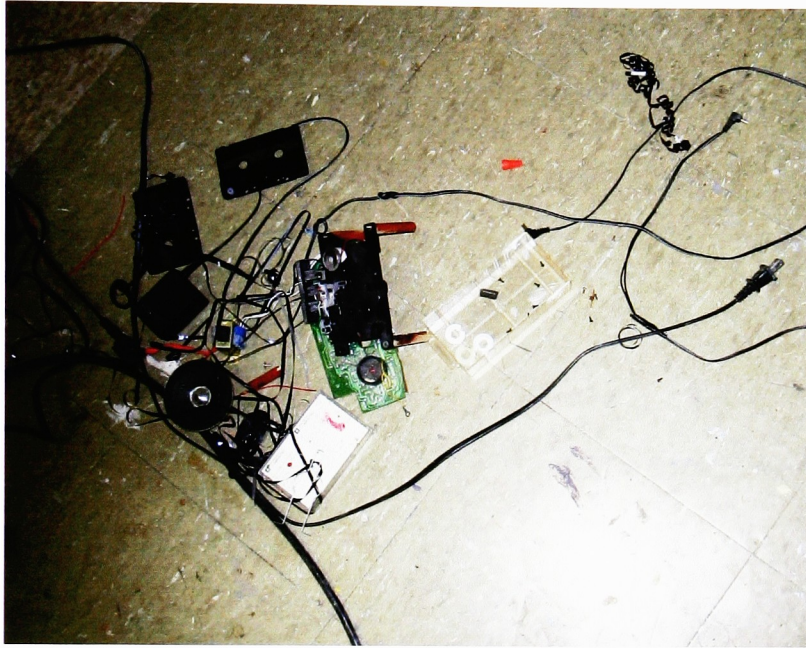
³ A sound proof room

⁴ Cage, John. *An Autobiographical Statement*. 1989. New Albion Records. 12 May, 2006. <http://www.newalbion.com/artists/cagej/autobiog.html>

Coupled with having a constant desire to be listening I soon discovered MTV: the musical cornerstone of the eighties, which fused popular music with imagery, typically in some sort of narrative format. The appeal of music television was an even greater draw to my younger self as I was not allowed to watch it, so any chance I had I would try to sneak a peak at a few videos before my parents returned. As I reflect on myself at that age I see the exposure and draw to music television was an experience that laid some sort of groundwork for my current artistic endeavors. However, I came to these ideas from a completely different route.

Interest in music continued on into my high school years where at sixteen I bought my first guitar and wanted to learn how to play and hopefully be in a band. Soon I was kind of learning to play, and started playing in *bands* with some of my friends. My personal commitment to playing at this time was less than dedicated. Basically those *band* situations led more to trouble than they did to creating exciting music. Yet the desire has remained with me. It was through the discovery of the previously mentioned musical subgenres, many years later, that I began once again to have the urge to really play. This time it felt more like a need than a want. It was through that need that I began to recognize that sound contained the potential to take my artwork places I had been striving to make it go for a long time.

Evolution/Challenges



various cords, cases, speakers etc.

Many critical issues arose within the process of creating this body of work. The struggle was both aesthetic and technological in nature. The initial questions that had to be solved were how do I best combine the aural and the visual? How will they inform one another? And most importantly how do I keep the work true to myself?

I initially set out to create some form of Baroque overload of the senses, approaching the work through a collage of imagery and sound, working with irony, randomness and allegory. The intent was simply to create a space that operated on an excess of imagery and objects to which sound, that was just as claustrophobic as the imagery, would be added. As I began to work through these ideas the realization came about that this approach would lack any real conceptual clarity. I soon felt very uncomfortable with the way in which I was approaching my work and felt that it needed a

more solidified conceptual direction. If the desire was to be working with both the visual and the aural then some conclusion had to be drawn that would connect the two.

There are many ways in which an object can relate to its sound, as objects have specific sounds associated with them. In an art-historical context one can find the perfect answer in Robert Morris's *Box With the Sound of its Own Making* (1961). The piece was a simple wooden construction made of walnut. Which Morris sealed inside a three and one half hour tape recording of himself building the box. This work exists as homage to the aural act of making, a document of the variety of sounds that Morris employed while constructing that specific box. The box itself then functions as the end physical result of the act documented in sound.

This idea of working with the nature of sound in relation to the nature of the object was intriguing to me, but not the route I really wanted to go down. I wanted to address my work with more focus on the aspects of music, the process of listening, as well as lending to the work some emotional or meditative aspects. I was forced to contemplate how it is that one experiences music⁵. I began slowly ruminating about speakers, records, high-fi systems, mp3 players and all the other technological innovations that come along with being able to listen in one's home.

⁵ In its earlier stages, I often stated that I was exploring ways that one experiences sound in relationship to the visual. Instead I should have stated: the way in which we experience music in relationship to the objects that make listening to music possible.

On collecting



Detail of my record and tape collection

As my focus turned toward these items I began to think more specifically about one of my major life preoccupations; collecting music. Whether it is on CD, vinyl, cassette tape, whatever, I'm constantly seeking new sounds for my ears. The concepts revolving around collecting contain close ties with the idea of invoking memory through specific objects.

The collecting of objects is a way of defining the individual both socially and culturally. One is able to assert who one is by the objects with which one surrounds oneself. In essence, the objects become a part of who the person is at the same time that the person becomes an extension of the object. This rings especially true with the rise of consumer society, which confers status on those who acquire material possessions. The world of the true collector goes beyond an attempt to maintain some form of status. The collector is one who finds the object, or more importantly the obsessive gathering and ordering of objects, an essential part of his very being. James Clifford, who has written in depth on the subject of collecting states:

Some sort of "gathering" around the self and around the group-the assemblage of a material " world," the marking-off of a subjective domain that is not "other"- is probably universal. All such collections embody hierarchies of value, exclusions, rule-governed territories of the self.... In the West... collecting has long been a strategy for the deployment of the possessive self, culture and authenticity.⁶

Collecting operates very much on the basis of implementing systems of value and display. In regards to one's collection one must ask which items are the most important within the collection, what are the factors that define the hierarchical importance of the items, and how is it that the collection is organized? Unless one has infinite funding for his or her collection, one must be selective based upon what one adds to the collection, as it is rather difficult to collect everything within ones interest. The choices for the collection must in some way enhance, inform, or further define the identity of the collection.

My personal music collection is based upon a multitude of factors as my interests cover a wide variety of musical subgenres. I don't specifically collect jazz or classic rock, but focus on music that takes a very exploratory or individualistic approach to creating music. My collection is more of an overview of things that personally interest me and that I feel contain a sense of personal conviction within the work that takes it beyond the normal confines of any specific subgenre of music. I'm more invested in finding albums that speak to me in some way, or that appeal to my personal aesthetic sensibilities, as opposed to collecting in accordance with monetary value. Moreover, the

⁶ Clifford, James. *On Collecting Art and Culture. Art and its Significance: an Anthology of Aesthetic Theory.* Ed. Stephen David Ross. Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1994. P.623.

meaning of the sound can also be understood in connection with the devices by which the sound was made, recorded, stored and played. These tools and objects are part of the material culture of sound and of representing the meaning of sound. So, in essence, I find myself readily engaged in this activity of attempting to define myself through my objects, as well as to learn more about and expand who I am in relation to them. When someone browses my record collection inferences can be made in regards to me by what can be found in that collection.

As far as adding to the collection, the choices themselves are based on taste, and mood at the time of purchase. Often times, when discovering a band or subgenre I first want to locate some sort of essential recordings and then, depending upon how much time and interest I spend with that specific genre, individual, or band will determine whether I feel that I need more. By stating that I typically go for the essential recordings first does not mean that I go out and purchase some “greatest hits” or compilation, but instead, I try to find what is considered the best recording in that specific grouping. The decisions are often informed either by word of mouth or through reading and research. Some things I become very obsessive about, upon discovery of which, I tend to try and gather up as much as I am able to at the time.

Another decision-making factor is based upon the visual aesthetics of the object itself. Basing the purchase of music upon the way in which it is visually laid out may seem somewhat ridiculous, as the visuals on the cover don’t necessarily have anything to do with the music that is going to be inside. I would never purchase a record based purely on the way it looks, unless of course it was purchased specifically for that reason, but visual aesthetics do often play a role. This is a big factor when encountering a band in a

live situation that has a large discography of nicely packaged homemade stuff. I typically go in knowing what I'm looking for, but on those occasions when I don't; I simply pick the one that feels right. A decision is often made based upon the visuals of the product. This aesthetic appeal has contributed to my obsessive purchasing of the products put out by Nemo Bidstrup on his Time-lag Records⁷ label. Each record is just beautifully put together, often with heavy stock art paper, words done in letterpress, silk screened covers, 180 gram audiophile vinyl and so on. Care is placed in the products, which are only released in limited edition, giving even more importance to acquiring them as soon as I possibly afford them. I wouldn't make these purchases every time a record is released by Time-lag, if the music was not consistently of the same quality as the packaging.



detail of Painting Petals on Planet Ghost's self-titled LP on Time-Lag Records

⁷ www.time-lagrecords.com

As far as the organization of my collection goes, each medium—i.e. CDs, records, and cassette tapes—are divided amongst themselves. This decision is basically made due to the fact that each format is a different size, and so would look rather odd lined up in and amongst one another: essentially it is the aesthetics of display that really enforce this deciding factor. Each album⁸ is then placed in alphabetical order by artist, unless it is a compilation featuring various artists, which is instead placed under its title. If I am in possession of more than one album by any given artist, then they are usually placed under the artist's name by release date, the oldest coming first. From there the collection could be broken down more, but I personally prefer not to go beyond alphabetization, as it then becomes rather nitpicky. Employing the alphabet is also an easy way of allowing myself to quickly locate the specific album that I may be looking for

When confronted with issues or ideas regarding the evolution of my thesis work, it was often my music collection that I went to for inspiration or information. The organizational aesthetics of the collection would have been reflected in the way in which the original tape archive would have been organized. In thinking about how my own collection is organized, spatially. I was able to take that format and expand upon it in a more artistic fashion. As is explained later that pursuit did not actually pan out, but the collection, through its growth and evolution, played a key role in informing my work. Though, it is not an actual part of the work, my collection expanded as the work did with the growth of the collection. When made aware of new things such as Alvin Lucier's *I am Sitting in a Room* (1969), I bought it placed it in my collection for both personal

⁸ When stating the word album I am not specifically referring to records but to a collection of compositions sequenced together in order to be perceived as a whole musical statement.

entertainment as well as for further investigation. By listening to albums both new and old I was able to keep myself informed as to exactly what was going on in contemporary music and what had happened in the past. It is not only about being aware of what has happened, but having the ability to examine the art on an intimate level. Surrounding myself with music was the only way in which I could properly inform myself in relationship to it.

It made sense to narrow the focus down to an investigation of technological mediums through which sound is readily available to be experienced, as these types of objects exist both as a physical/visual object and as a potential producer of sound. From there the importance came to focusing on just one of these, which was a relatively easy solution. CDs were much too sterile to use, the act of playing a compact disc is overly shrouded in a mystery of embedded code and the object itself doesn't allow much for visual manipulation. Records, on the other hand, were way too loaded:

*Unlike CDs and other digital playback formats the record is an object that perfectly symbolizes and embodies its morbid role in the preservation and transmission of sonic culture. A spiral scratch, its gleaming dark circle is the back hole, into which memories are poured, only to emerge again as ghost voices, life preserved beyond death. Frozen in time within the grooves, a voice, an instrument, a sound becomes the living dead and is worshipped in a way that a loved one, deceased, may be adored for years by the bereaved.*⁹

As the record has reached a status of the almost sacred within sonic culture the obvious answer would be to profane it. But this route has been explored by sound artist/ DJ Christian Marclay in his work *A Record Without a Cover* (1985). The work functions on the basis of the inevitable breakdown of the record, but speeds the process up by demanding that the owner does not *properly* take care of the item. The record slowly builds up with dust and scratches, so that each time it is played back the listener

⁹ Toop, David. Haunted Weather: Music, Silence and Memory. (London: Serpent's Tail, 2004) p. 168

encounters a different experience, the dust and scratches lending themselves to the deteriorating memory that is the original recording.¹⁰

After weeding through the above options and knowing that items such as wax cylinders, 8-tracks and reel-to-reel tapes were out of the question, as their lives were very short lived in the minds of the audiophile, I decided that the solution had to be the cassette tape.

¹⁰ I only relate the story of *A Record Without a Cover* (1985); because of how well it illustrates the idea creates a link between memory and technology, which is a key issue within the development of this body of work.

Cassettes



mix tape given to me by Jennifer Marquart

The audiocassette is a recording medium that came into and went out of vogue within my lifetime. It is the first sound-producing medium that I had a great amount of interaction with, I grew up listening to, recording on and manipulating cassettes. The first cassette I ever owned was Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the USA* (1984)¹¹ and somehow I've managed to hold onto it throughout the years and surprisingly it still plays well. The pain and disappointment that would occur when a favorite cassette would break or get caught and mangled within the tape player is a feeling that I've experienced on many occasions.

¹¹ Sony Records, 1984

Cassettes were the first medium that could easily and inexpensively be reproduced, at home. The recording capabilities of cassettes offer a great variety of potential for creating personalized mixes of your favorite songs. In the eighties and early nineties a whole subculture sprang up dedicated to the creation of mix tapes.¹² The mix tape is a compilation of selected music and sounds typically intended as a personalized gift. Often times some form of handmade artwork was on the cover, as opposed to simply writing in the selected album cuts. They are mainly exchanged between friends and lovers. Usually, some form of cryptic message is included through the way the album cuts are arranged on the tape. This was a way to express something that he/she was too shy to come straight out and say. The themes were often incredibly simple but at the same time so difficult to come right out and say to the person. Themes often include the initial attraction tape, the break-up tape, or the *I hate you, why'd you have to hurt me so badly, I still love you, you sadistic bitch tape*.

I personally spent hours upon hours making mix tapes for girls I had feelings for in high school, as well as for friends that I wanted to share new music with. The tapes created specifically with romantic interest in mind allowed me to say more without saying it directly. Instead, I could let the Cure, Nirvana or Mark Lanegan say it for me in a much more *deep* and poetic manner. Occasionally, I would make a tape that would say exactly what I wanted to express to the person. But fearing possible rejection, I'd never give the tape to the person. Some of those I'd just keep for private listening,

¹² see Moore, Thurston, ed. Mix Tape: the Art of Cassette Culture. (United States of America: Universe, 2004).

sometimes they even became a cathartic release for the issues that were bothering me with that person and they worked as a means of getting over them.

Sadly, the time of mix tapes has come and gone and been replaced first by the mix CDR, which has now evolved into the MP3 play list. A significant difference arises in regards to the production of the play list, in that the new methods are quicker to make and don't demand the hours of time to create the perfect mix. Also there are often weirdnesses in segueing from one song to the next as space is left between, and there is never any evidence of the hand in the production of a computer-generated play list, no errant clicks of the record head coming in, no hiss, no slow deterioration of sound quality. The differences between the mix tape and the play list finds its visual equivalent in the digital photograph compared to a film photograph. The digital image tends to lack the same sense of aura that the image produced from film has. The digital image or sounds always remains the same. It doesn't deteriorate over time or repeated use. If the digital print is damaged it can easily be reprinted. If the CD is lost or broken another one can be burned for less than a dollar. In order to recreate the analog version a lot more labor must go into the reproduction. But the most tragic aspect of the analogue is that it can never be reproduced exactly as the previous version; it simply becomes a new object with similar qualities with a completely different aura.

In essence, the mix tape can be viewed as an audio *memento mori*, yet it also exists as a visual object that one may handle and dote over. This makes it rival the photograph in some ways as a way of remembering lost or dead moments. One may read through the messages hinted at in the titles of the songs, examine the images, often collaged, that constitute the cover and sometimes the inserts as well, all while

experiencing the sounds that also had a significant impact upon ones life. Revisiting mix tapes is often like trying to revisit a specific moment, it's a glimpse back at something definitive for that specific juncture in ones life. Just like the photograph captures a dead moment, so too does the mix tape.

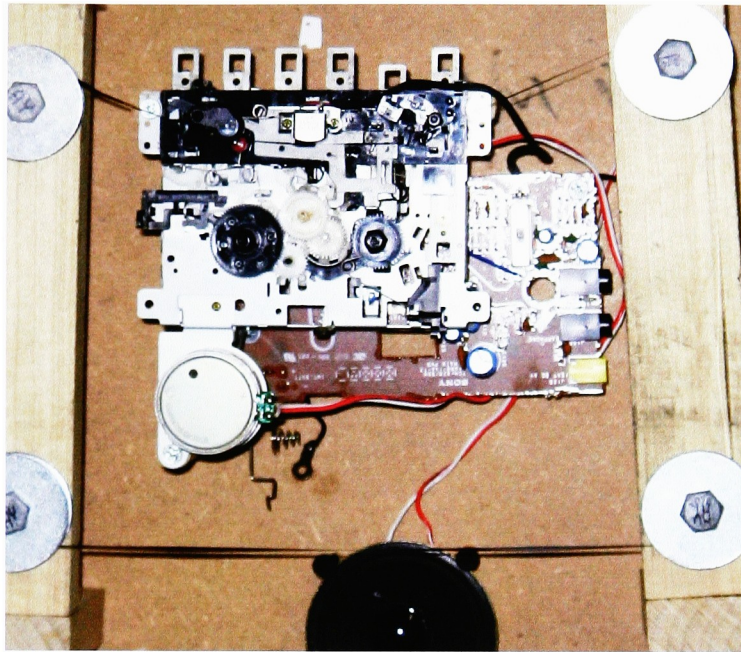


detail of mix tape made by M. Harrington

The cassette began to reveal how one's experience can be intrinsically linked with technology. It is through the technologies themselves that we are now able to date specific points in our lives and identify who we were when that technology was at its peak. Technology is in a constant state of replacing itself, but one has to pose the question: what is being lost in the process? The cassette now sits in a position of being slowly eradicated from consumer consciousness. It has now been twice replaced, first by the CD and now the mp3. What then happens to our memories in relationship to the

object once it is finally gone? CDs and mp3s are different, especially mp3s, as they no longer exist as an actual object but merely a file on the computer. How does one relate to that? What will change as objects disappear?

Having lived through both the rise and decline of the cassette, I felt that the cassette would be a great medium to explore in creating a relationship between the aural and the visual as the cassette exists both as a visual signifier of sound as well as a producer of sound. It is the connection that the cassette has with both film and photography and all other things analogue that permits it to stand as a reminder of the recent technological past and all the fond memories that were associated with it. This makes the cassette even harder to let disappear into a world of ones and zeros, and images that stand in for intangible objects.



interior detail of *[anti] music box* (2004)

I first began working with cassettes in my first year of graduate school when I began recording my own sounds onto cassette. Not able to afford a computer, at the time, I decided to purchase a cheap four-track recorder. The notion to purchase and record on four-track was inspired by New Zealand guitarist Roy Montgomery, who recorded a plethora of albums direct to four-track with a cheap guitar and a few effects boxes. The results were astounding, to my ears. The sound was very earthy, and organic, containing a bit of hiss and a whole lot of warmth. The music itself lends to that style of recording in that it wasn't intended to be perfect in any way shape or form, but created with the intent of displaying vulnerability, imperfection and the qualities that make one human. Recording direct to four-track allows one to capture the immediacy of the moment, as well as to experiment with ideas at one's leisure without the cost or polish of the studio.

After starting to do some recording, the first sound oriented work I created was a music box. The music box was originally supposed to operate with a CD, but there was too much involved with getting the CD player to turn on and off when the top opened, so I opted for tape, which was much easier to manipulate. This also aided in solidifying my feelings in regards to CDs and tapes. The premise for the box was that it was originally going to be a beautiful, well crafted box that when opened played an awful racquet of noise. Instead, what happened is that I became rather enthralled with the mechanics of how the exposed guts of the tape player looked, so much so that I opted to allow the viewer to see into the box, in essence creating an *anti*-music box. After that little spark my first year, I set that direction of exploration aside until I began a deeper inquiry into the cassette tape, this past year.

The first thing I attempted to do, working towards my thesis exhibition was to continue on in the Baroque direction that I had been heading, but obviously with the cassette in mind. I planned to create a memorial to the cassette that included a large archive of both found pre-made and homemade tapes. The viewer would be able to listen to any of these tapes through a tape deck and pair of headphones. Also included in the space would be a series of retro style music boxes that held the tape loop machines within them; displaying the workings of the cassettes themselves. They were placed within these boxes in order to attempt to appear sacred in some way, and encased under plexi-glass; continuing with a form of presentation that would speak to memorializing, collecting and preserving the audible past.

In approaching this direction this was the first time I had to deal with the organization of space. How exactly does it look, operate and feel when the viewer enters into it, as well as specifically how does one navigate the space? Or for that matter how does one go about engaging the viewer in the archive; are they allowed to touch, search through and listen, or are they limited to simply observing what is revealed to them? It is often difficult to get someone to interact with a work without simply just looking, but coupled with this is the threat of potential theft, or damage.

Beyond those concerns, the issue that is most central in creating an archive is dealing with the visual organization of the objects, or artifacts that make up the space; mainly, in what manner are the objects catalogued, what determines how they are catalogued and how to establish which objects had more of a significance than the others?

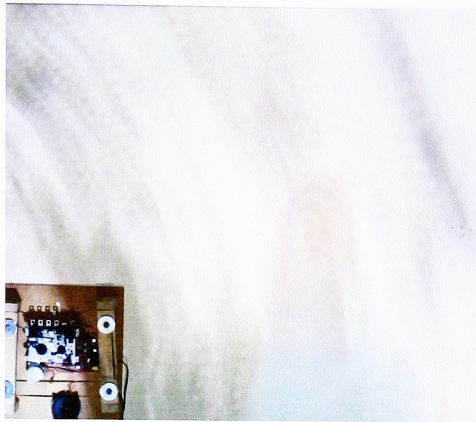
This would most likely be determined by which objects had the most relevance to me, but then again I had to think about the audience being able to relate to the work in a more universal manner. Most likely a general audience would not always deem what I felt as important as being important. I, on one hand, would place my Warmer Milks' *Penetration Initials* (2005) cassette in a position of high importance, but most people wouldn't have the foggiest notion of what Warmer Milks was about. To add to the issue surrounding it is the fact that the tape was created last year, so what cultural relevance does a brand new tape have in light of an archive attempting to discuss the recently antiquated, except as a simple rehash? In this light the work could have gone one of two ways; either being a personal collection that an audience can relate to simply as a personal collection, and create the work more in light of my life, or go the public route and make a distinction based upon what was culturally significant. As was previously mentioned, I was after capturing a lost technological moment, which led toward a more universal theme.

I also had to contend with how the sound was going to inform the space, as well as how the visuals and the space were, in turn, going to inform the sound. At this point of working I believed that the cassettes and music boxes were enough to inform the viewer/listener as to what was going on in the space. They would be able to listen and experience through both headphones and overhead speakers, creating both a public and private space for the listener to choose between, all within the context of a space designed with the intention of revisiting a specific time in the history of audio technology.

This work eventually became overly ironic and kitschy to me in reaction to which my interests began to shift. Conceptually, the idea of the archive was very loaded and I

wasn't specifying what kind of archive it would be. Since I included both pre-made, or store bought cassettes as well as mix tapes, I was essentially just collecting cassettes with no specific regard to what was going to be defined by collecting them into an archive. In hindsight I see that things needed to become more specific regarding what type of cassette I was actually memorializing in this work. Eventually I did realize that I wanted to memorialize the act of playing cassette tape or more specifically how cassettes produce sound, how exactly that sound effects the space its placed in and how exactly the sound changes over time.

I also felt that I was trying, in some way, to prove that I had to demonstrate some sort of crafting skills with this work as well. Another key reason for these ideas not panning out is that they became rather masturbatory exercises in making objects, an attempt to make *nice things* purely for the sake of being able to do so. The problem with this is that the work really didn't add up to being about who I am, or what I am really interested in but simply demonstrating what I could do.



Walking the Loop 1 (2006)

Frustrated by what I was doing I continued to try and formulate a solution that would work for me. But I found myself banging my head against the wall, until I was instructed to make a very simple piece based on some form of ritual. Since I felt that I was continuously walking in circles inside my head, running ideas around and finding ways in which to undermine them, I decided to do just that for the work. I went to my studio and filmed feet walking around the perimeter of my studio space and then went out into the woods to do the same thing.

Walking, as an activity, has always been a release for me, a way to think and figure things out, or just simply to get away. *Walking ideally is a state in which the mind, the body and the world are aligned as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord. Walking allows us to be in our bodies and in the world without being made busy by them*¹³. I've made too little time for my walks over the past year in school and upon forcing myself to do it; I soon began

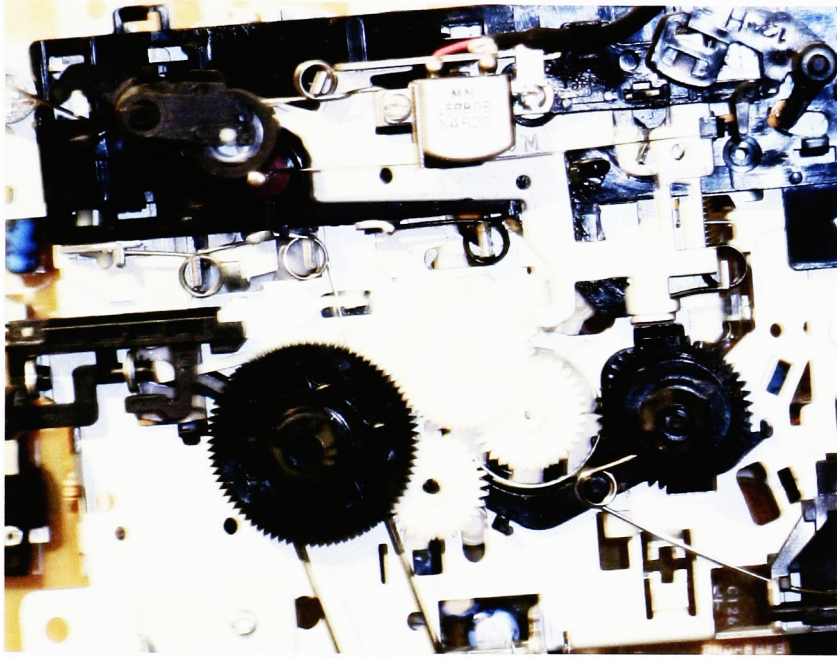
¹³ Solnit, Rebecca. Wanderlust: A History of Walking. New York: Penguin Books, 2000. p.5.

to realize that the most interesting aspects of my work had a lot to do with the rhythmic activity of walking. Finding this connection between my body and the work, I was currently making, was a real revelation and led me down the path to take a more meditative look at my work and to focus on the essence of the work instead of trying to force all these extra accoutrements into it.

Walking has its fair share of art-historical antecedents. When I began this work I automatically thought of Bruce Nauman's piece *Stamping in the Studio* (1968) in which he stomps back and forth across his studio making primitive rhythmic sound with each step. Vito Acconci and Richard Long are two other artists that have devoted a large amount of their work to the act of walking. For myself walking was more the way in which I was able to get where I wanted to be, a means to solving the problem as opposed to being the main focus of the work.

The connection between the rhythmic characteristics of walking and the rhythmic characteristic of the tape loops that I was making for the inside of the box seemed a rather perfect match. I don't believe my work to be necessarily about walking but I chose to incorporate the video of myself walking with the tape loop in order to visually reinforce the idea of looping sound. The resulting piece, *walking the loop #1*; a tape loop and cassette player attached to the wall in the lower left hand corner of a video of my feet walking counter clockwise around the loop. This work was to become the first work to be included in my exhibition. It was simple, meditative in nature, cutting directly to the point and focused on what I already found most interesting: the mechanics that made the production of sound possible through the cassette.

Sound, Art and Technology



detail of Cassette Recorder

Before I delve into the intricacies of the exhibition itself and where I went from that first tape loop on the wall, I feel I need to talk more in depth about my research into avant-garde composition, sound art and contemporary music, as well as their connection to the work, both influentially and conceptually. My work would not have reached the points it did without having constantly informed myself about the history of and the practice of sound art.

The reasons I began researching this direction, in the first place was due to my interest in *noise* music. *Noise* as music doesn't necessarily imply that the compositions are simply made up of random abrasive sound, but that the focus is directed more towards drone, repetition and space. This stands in opposition to Western classical music tradition, which is rooted in the implementation of melodic harmony and an overriding narrative theme. Nor does noise employ the typically popular music structure of the verse, chorus and hook. John Cage, who is often seen as the cornerstone of change within Twentieth century composition, talks about the employment of noise in *The Future of Music: Credo* delivered as a lecture in Seattle in 1937:

I BELIEVE THAT THE USE OF NOISE

Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments. Every film studio has a library of "sound effects" recorded on film. With a film phonograph it is now possible to control the amplitude and frequency of any one of these sounds and to give it rhythms within or beyond the reach of the imagination. Given four film phonographs, we can compose and perform a quartet for explosive motor, wind, heartbeat and landslide.

TO MAKE MUSIC

*If this word "music" is sacred and reserved for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century instruments, we can substitute a more meaningful term: organization of sound.*¹⁴

¹⁴ Cage, John. *Silence*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press 1961) p.3 As a side note I will attempt to keep everything written by Cage as true to the form that it is printed in his books due because the way in which Cage writes often contains some sort of relevance to what he is speaking about.

The key to understanding how twentieth and twenty-first century avant-garde compositional techniques function is through this concept of organizing sounds. Much of this is also a response to changes in the sound environment due to advances in technology; musicians began to feel a need to respond to the new sounds confronting them on a daily basis. A significant distinguishing factor in twentieth century music is that many composers/musicians were discovering non-western musical traditions, which they coupled with new found technologies to create their sounds. The ability to record music ushered in a great change and those who embraced this change soon found that they could more readily respond to social and political changes with their music. Repetition was a key focus, as was the drone: sounds that have their roots in both traditional and primitive music, but are also the sounds of mechanization and electricity.

My first cognizant experience with these sounds was through a series of recordings that John Cale did with Tony Conrad in the mid to late sixties. Cale and Conrad both participated in the *Theatre of Eternal Music* with composer La Monte Young. The music they composed/improvised was essentially a wall of continuous raw sound, based upon sustained tones played on amplified violin and viola. When I first popped *Dream Interpretation* (1969) into my CD player I was instantly bowled over by the extreme visceral power of the twenty plus minute composition that began the album. The sound was raw, ugly, extremely hypnotic and beautiful all at once. The irony in the work was that the sounds were being manipulated through instruments that stand as icons of the Western classical tradition. I later discovered that much of Conrad's musical

explorations were always based upon an attempt to undermine some canonized myth of eighteenth and nineteenth classical music, which they were doing very successfully in *Dream Interpretation* (1969).

From that point I began to realize that one of the main connections in all the music I really enjoy experiencing contains some element of that simple, repetitious sound, an underlying drone, something that is wild, and that pushes it off the beaten path somewhere. There is almost always something cosmic in nature, about the music, that can't be easily explained, something that pushes the listener beyond normal background music and into demanding one's full attention. The music often differs in its conceptual framework but contains some element that runs through all whether the music is labeled Minimalism, Free Jazz, New Zealand Underground, the *New Weird America*¹⁵ or Psychedelic.

The interesting thing about these and a plethora of other musical subgenres is that they all stem from one another; there is a constant cross-pollination of genres as they stem from similar points or make nods toward one another, but the end results are often worlds away from one another. As an example take Tony Conrad: one of the forefathers of modern music whom I have seen play with an improvisational drummer and a laptop musician, as part of a *free jazz* combo, and directing a chamber orchestra. Yet, no matter what situation or whom he plays with, he still sounds like Tony Conrad, as he doesn't modify his own sound or musical curiosities to fit the genre he is playing.

¹⁵ A term coined by Wire contributor David Keenan referring to a plethora of contemporary bands and musicians who all share some sort of genre combining interest. The bands typically have some connection to folk but not always as the avant-garde, krautrock, heavy metal and psychedelia all play an important role.

Much contemporary music stems back to a few particular purveyors of specific genres. Usually the influence of Sun Ra and John Fahey aren't far away. Conrad himself has been a big influence on many of this generation's musician. Another seminal acts is The Dead C, a New Zealand band that pushes rock music to the very edge with their lo-fi hazy guitar sound. Also of note are the Tower Recordings who fused this lo-fi experimental attitude with an interest in late 60's style British Folk music, especially that of the Incredible String Band and Fairport Convention.

Technology

Technology plays a large role in the development of twentieth and twenty-first century music, both as an influence and as a major factor in its implementation. None of this work would exist without the addition of recorded sound, amplification and eventually the computer. 20th Century composers did not often work with an orchestra, as that was rather expensive and made no sense in trying to break from that tradition. Many worked in radio workshops, such as the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, where they had access to all the wonderful new accoutrements of radio technology: magnetic tape, early computers and large-scale synthesizers. A great many of the early experimenters in electronic sound would create sound effects for radio and film during the day and do their own experimentations at night.

Eventually experimental music was taken on the road and performed in a live setting. John Cage and David Tudor were probably the first to take a very *do it yourself* attitude toward the performance of their music. This attitude was in opposition to the inquiries of the technicians creating their sounds in the laboratory. Cage and Tudor brought their music back to the music hall. Instead of employing musicians to play their compositions they created a number of electronic devices that could be brought around to a venue and set up and played by themselves. Once the music went live it also became a visual performance act as well as an aural one.

Collaborating with Cage during the 50s, Tudor turned to electronics as a way of realizing pieces, such as Cage's Variations series, that were scored "for any sound-producing means". He took to the medium with the same obsessive attitude he had earlier brought to his

*piano interpretations. Attempting to bridge the ever-widening gap between the engineer and the musician, he taught himself electronics from the inside out, soldering his own circuits and housing them in makeshift containers. Compared with Babbitt's RCA Synthesizer, Tudor's 'lunch boxes' were rudimentary indeed. But they were modular, portable and could easily be altered as the occasion demanded- necessary requirements for Tudor's peculiar art.*¹⁶

Along with bringing the work to a live audience, Cage and Tudor raised the cross-platform aspects even further when they began creating music for Merce Cunningham's dance troop.

As I examined the history of avant-garde music, what I found most fascinating was its relationship to technology, as well as the ways in which the visual was incorporated. The real importance of Cage and Tudor and others is that they approached their work with technology as amateurs much in the same manner that I've approached my music/sound making. I've come to music via the path of the amateur, having had no formal training, simply an interest in picking things up and seeing what I can do with them. I learn what works and grow through continued experimentation.

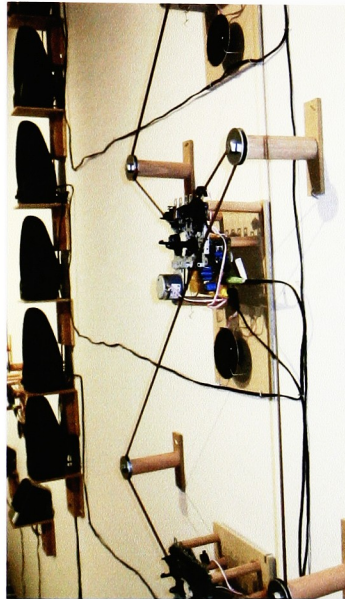
Many contemporary musicians and sound artists work in this way, incorporating a wide variety of means; with store bought f/x pedals or homemade instruments. Much of their success has to do with a combining of high and lo-fi implementation of sound. Seeing bands like Wolf Eyes and Davenport perform with such a wide variety of tools at hand, inspired me to explore the concept myself; taking things apart, figuring out how they work, and most importantly figuring out how these objects can operate within the context of my work.

¹⁶ Cox, Christoph. *The Jerrybuilt Future: the Sonic Arts Union, Once Group and MEV's Live Electronics. Undercurrents: the hidden Wiring of Modern Music.* Rob Young, ed. (London: Continuum, 2002) p.38

Having a rather inquisitive nature as to how things work, I began gravitating more and more towards playing with simple electronics in order to create my artwork. I am especially interested in using *junk* or outdated electronics, as conceptually they are intriguing since they still maintain their utilitarian function, yet they are no longer useful to society as a whole. As I realized in working with my archive concept, recently antiquated objects often invoke nostalgia, or are always available for a reinterpretation within a new context. The use of outdated technological items display how quickly technology replaces itself and can operate within the art world as a readily available *readymade* item.

Jean Tinguely's experiments with motors and machines utilized ideas incorporating old technologies. What I enjoy most about Tinguely's work is that most often they self-destruct, something that I find a rather poetic commentary on the inherent nature of man-made things. One of his most notorious works was *Homage to New York* (1960), a work that he was commissioned to create for the Museum of Modern Art. The work was constructed out of junk parts, which self-destructed within twenty-seven minutes after being set into motion.

Space



detail from *Walking the Loop* (2006)

Probably some of my most important research over the past two years was the discovery of Alvin Lucier's piece for voice and two cassette players; *I am Sitting in a Room* (1969). The work functions as both a definition of the space that it is performed in as well as an elimination or deduction of the original sound into a rhythmic pattern. *I am Sitting in a Room* consists of Lucier speaking the following phrase into one of two tape recorders:

I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and am going to play back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech. I regard

*this activity not so much as a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have.*¹⁷

After stating this, he continues to do as he stated, play the tape back and record it on the second recorder again and again until his voice is completely eliminated.

The reason for the work having such an effect on me was that it paired sound down to its very essence, rhythm, and also defined the space of the room it was made in. If the work were created in a different environment it would take on different characteristics, hence the importance of the first line emphasizing a different room than I, the listener, is in now, as the sounds created in the room I inhabit would take on a different quality. This forced me to think about the importance of architecture and space in relationship to sound, which may in fact be a simple realization, but it is of the utmost importance when working with sound: what are the sound characteristics of a room and how exactly will the space react to a given sound. Another aspect of the work that I find of extreme importance is the rhythm created through looping and how that rhythm brings about a sort of meditative state. If you continuously repeat something in many ways it changes, as the meaning, of what is stated, slowly begins to dissipate. It is the loss of the original through repetition that allows one to go elsewhere, and in this work it is not only some form of meditation but proof of an actual physical phenomenon that is enacted through repeated patterns.

Space has always been a very important element in experiencing music. Architecture and acoustics often find themselves working together. Concert halls are

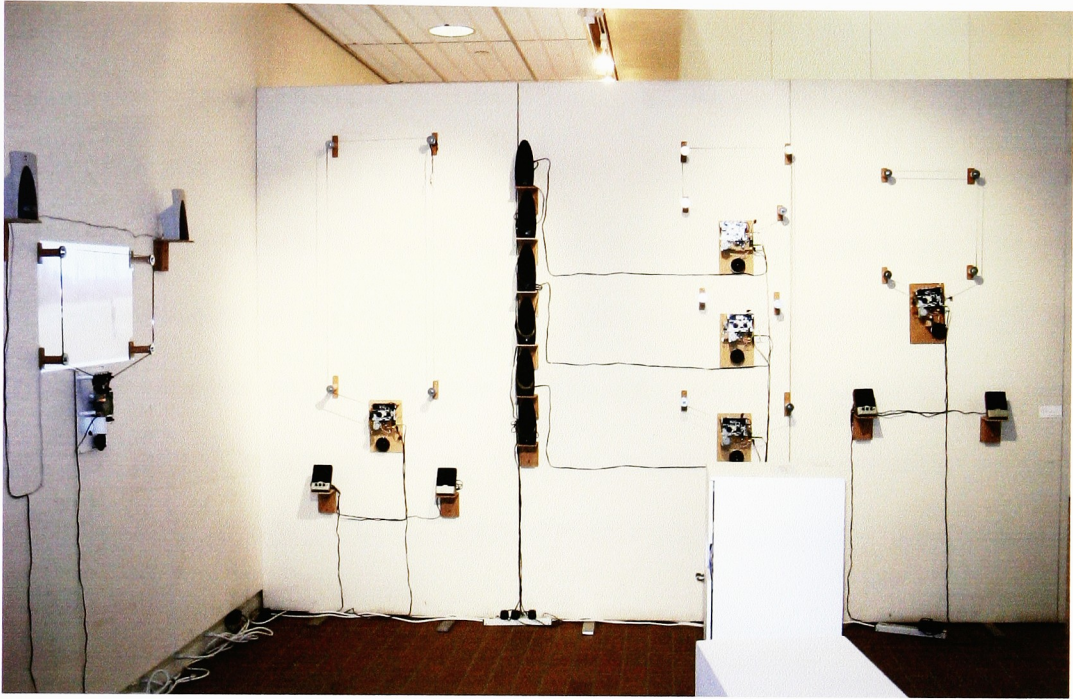
¹⁷ Lucier, Alvin. *I am Sitting in a Room* (for voice on tape) (CD). (New York: Lovely Music, Ltd. 1990).

created specifically for certain kinds of listening and social experience (space shapes both how sounds and bodies circulate). In many cases, the acoustic quality of a building is taken into consideration when it is being constructed. If the architect forgets to consider how sound will operate within his design, the results can be quite disastrous. On the other hand, when the acoustics of a space are given careful consideration, some of the most beautiful sound experiences result. What the architect must take into consideration when designing a space is what the space will be used for. Will there be sermons, musical performances, or gatherings of any sort where people will be listening? On top of that, how will the space prevent or include sound from the outside? And going into finer detail; are there points from which sound needs to project from and others where the sound needs to be dampened?

Before the invention of PA systems, speakers and all the wondrous items that came along with electricity, the architect had to consciously design the acoustic qualities of the room, but now sound can be projected into just about any space. Further adding to and complicating this relationship between sound and space is the invention of filters and effects that manipulate the sounds of bigger or smaller spaces, and are dependent upon the musician's objectives. In essence, you can now, through spring reverb, delay and various other effects, mimic the way in which sound operates in specific spaces such as concert halls, cathedrals etc. The results are obviously sub par to the actual experience, but with the ways in which digital technology continues to advance, I am sure that at some point, one will be able to dial up the sound qualities of the best concert halls in the world right in their own living room.

In my work I was forced to think about how exactly I was going to approach or navigate the space I wanted to create and what exactly was going to be the ideal response from the viewer. I was not only dealing with the architecture of the space, or how the sound was going to exist in the space, but the way in which the visual elements would ultimately control the space.

Walking the Loop: the exhibition

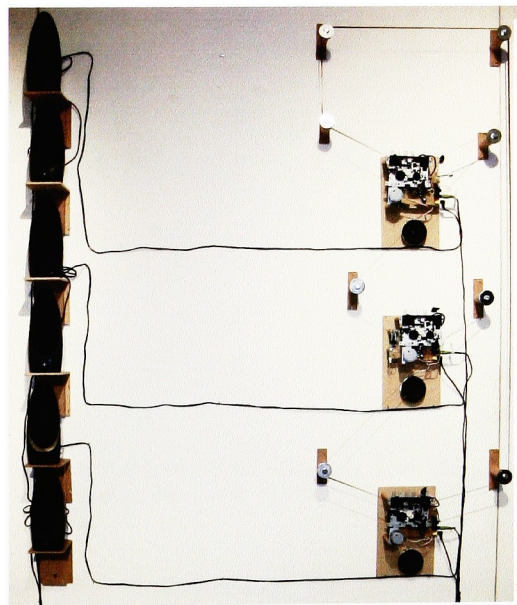


Walking the Loop, installation view (2006)

When I originally began creating work for the thesis exhibition, I was constantly trying to extend my ideas to the point where the overload on the viewer's senses quickly became apparent. I wanted to place emphasis both on the aural and the visual without one outweighing the other. At the very least, I wanted to establish some sort of intrinsic connection between the two. I essentially walked down a slowly evolving path that finally led me to the beginning of the kinds of work I wanted to create. One of the most important lessons learned in this whole process was to simplify the work. It seems rather ironic in hindsight, that the sound-works that originally spoke to me were minimalist in nature, yet it took me quite some time to reach that point of simplifying my visual work.

While creating the first walking piece I realized I had captured the essence of what I was trying to do in a very immediate way, through simple modifications of *found* objects.

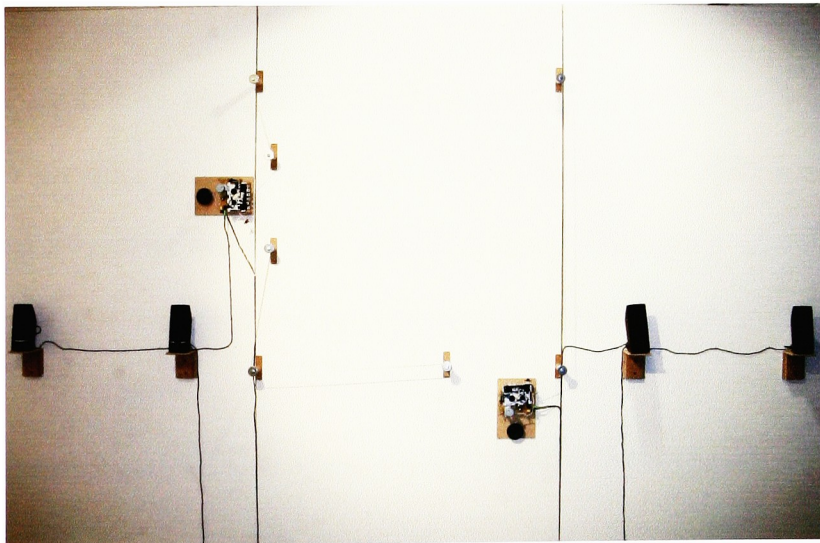
The organization of the visual space was dictated by simply removing tape players from their plastic cases, mounting them onto boards and extending tape loops around simple posts, in a rectangular format. The players were then attached to external speakers that played back the sounds previously recorded on the tape loops. The whole installation consisted of six different loops. One played consecutively through three players while another played through two. The rest consisted of single players, two of which had looped videos of myself walking in circles. One projected within the rectangular frame created by the loop while the other projected directly onto the tape loop and the player.



Walking the Loop, 3 Player (2006)

It must be stated that the visual elements of this environment contribute most to the functioning of the space as a whole. The visuals direct the viewer's attention towards

the production of sound. One has to visually understand the workings of the cassette player in order to comprehend how the sound is being produced. A motor driving a series of gears is slowly feeding a looped length of magnetic tape continuously through a magnetic head. The interaction of the two magnetic objects is what then makes the sound being heard over the connected speakers. Through the observation of this activity one ideally will slowly begin to understand the visual and aural rhythmic qualities of the space. Ideally one would then slip into a more meditative or contemplative state of mind, transcending the space itself and attempting to understand the emotional or melancholic qualities of the interacting sound fragments being projected through the speakers, in relationship to all the slow visual movement that is happening.



Walking the Loop, double player (2006)

Navigation of the space is dictated by this connection between sight and sound. When the installation is running one is drawn into the space, from the outside, by the sound. Once inside it is the visual arrangement of the machines, tape loops, speakers, wire and projections that immediately take over. At the same time they are directing the

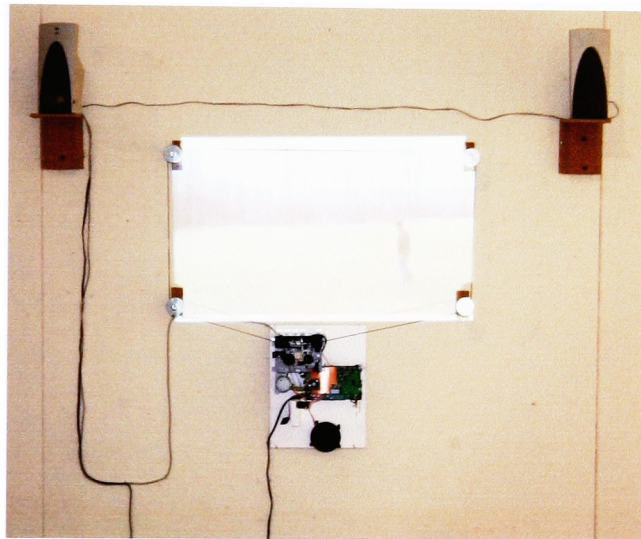
participant back toward the sound. From that point, it is a back and forth play between the visual and the aural that the viewer must contend with to determine where the sounds are coming from. Since different sounds are projected from several points within the space, the sound experience changes depending upon where the viewer is standing in relationship to each set of speakers. This becomes an experience based upon three-dimensional space.

Once the viewer is able to comprehend the play between the visual and the aural they are then able to comprehend the contemplative activities that the space was designed for. I included a bench in which one could sit in the center of all the activity and meditate on the interaction of all the elements. The simple rectangular format of the loops aided in this process as the emptiness within frames allowed a space in which one is able to project their own imagery. The idea of projecting some sort of imagery into these frames is implied by the video loops of myself walking in circles. The videos themselves were placed within the space as visual reinforcements of the act of creating sound. But they also facilitated the enhancement of the meditative space. The activity of walking invoked a journey or in this case walking in continuous circles becomes a contemplative or ritualistic act often done in order to clear ones head.

The reason for wanting to create a space intended for reflection is that it is often music or sound, which invokes a similar condition for myself. In this case, the viewer/listener's transcendence is not completely based upon the sound but is mediated through the technological means by which the sound is made possible. Being that contemplative states are closely associated with the act of remembering, the whole issue

of memory comes back into play. The operation of the cassette tape in the work finds itself becoming a *material manifestation*¹⁸ of memory:

*... a strip of tape passing through the playback head of a cassette recorder, threatening to unspool as it comes to the end of its reel, is analogous to the memory of a life threading through the space and time of the world, then unspooling into nothingness.*¹⁹



Walking the Loop 2 (2006)

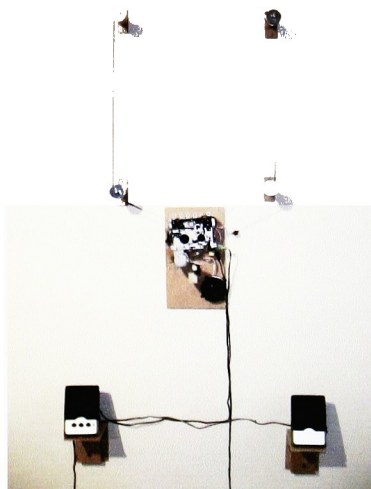
The way in which the cassette tape is exposed in the work displays its fragile nature, and once one is able to associate one's memory and life with this moving object, the space begins to make much more sense in relationship to commenting on the human condition. The piece as a whole becomes a sort of elegy for the cassette player: the last of the analogue audio formats. No longer will the experience of listening be facilitated through tangible means as the technology has evolved to the point of complete physical

¹⁸ See David Toop quoting Adam Egoyan in Haunted Weather, p.99

¹⁹ Toop, David. Haunted Weather: Music, Silence and Memory. London: Serpent's Tail, 2004, p.99

and visual mystery. The air of melancholy that accompanies these notions aid one in further attaining the desired experience of contemplation and memory.

On Loops



Walking the Loop, single player small (2006)

The idea of contemplative states being associated with technology seems quite odd at first glance, especially in achieving this state through the technology. What must be acknowledged is that the two major foci of twentieth and twenty-first century music, are the incorporation of non-western musical traditions into the music of the west and the use of mechanical or electronic means in order to produce sound. Both of these foci, the *primitive* and the machine, rely heavily upon repetition and rhythm as opposed to melody and narrative. With this in mind, the work attempts to address both of these issues at once.

The idea for creating a space that focused on achieving a contemplative state through technology was initially sparked this past December upon receiving a *Buddha Machine* (2005) as a Christmas gift. The *Buddha Machine* is a hand held sound playing device that contains nine small loops, created by the Chinese electronic music collective known as FM3. This allows a person to toggle back and forth between the various loops. The sound quality of the loops is rather low-fi and contains a fair amount of hiss, but that

adds to the whole aura of the object itself and is where I found some connecting similarities in my work and that of FM3's. The real significance of this little novelty item is that it offers a different way in which to experience sound, as well as dealing with sound in a similar way that I was dealing with it through a looped format. Up until this point I did not quite realize why I was interested in employing loops as a major part of my work, it was when I received the item that I realized the full meditative power of repetition.



Buddha Machine by FM3 (2005)

The *Buddha Machine* was originally designed as a technological object created to facilitate transcendence in Buddhist temples, in lieu of chanting monks; it contained a series of programmed looped mantras instead of the sounds of FM3. Upon acknowledging and contemplating the very nature of the loop I began heading toward a very significant change within my work as a whole. In response to this, I created a space that was both personal in regards to this realization and one that addressed the essence of what I had been working with for quite some time.

Audio

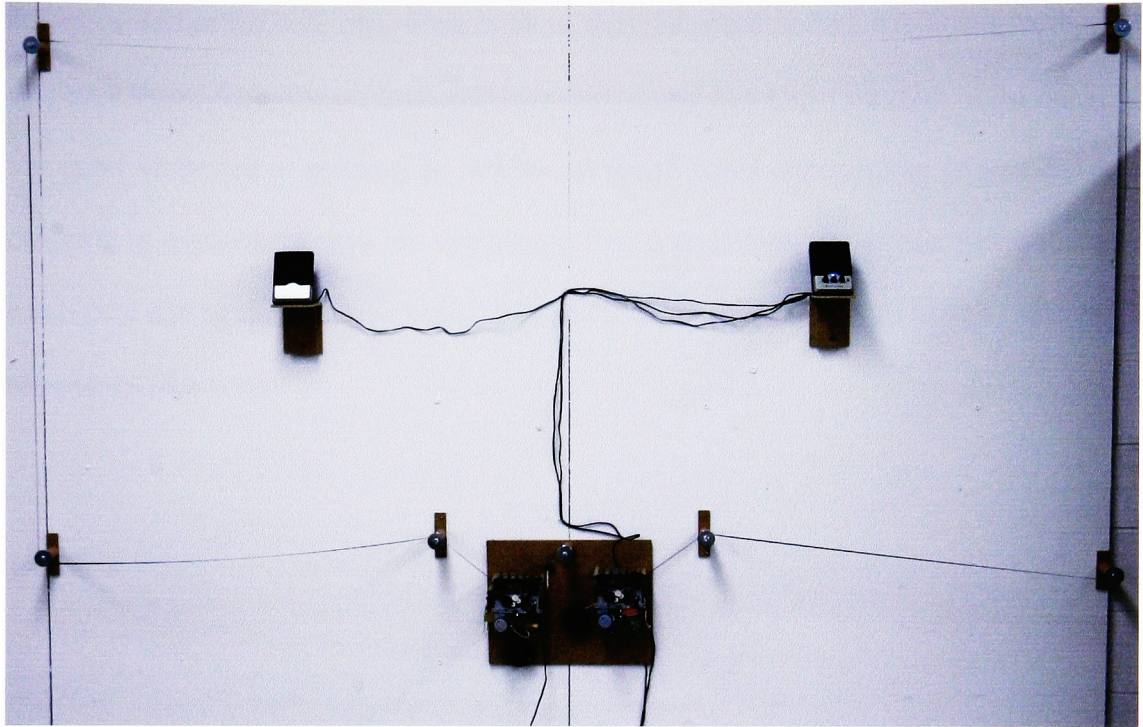
The sounds that comprise this work were created by sitting down with a variety of instruments, pedals and other odd objects, which resulted in five plus hours of recordings. The original recordings were then edited down to roughly an hours worth of material. From which individual snippets were extracted to compromise what one experiences upon entering the exhibition space. The idea of creating an endless looped composition came from listening to a lot of mid-late 1960's tape music and realizing that they were often made from a series of sounds that were very different from one another. Somehow these sounds were able to come together, mix and create an overall experience that was very different from the original singular sounds. Some key composers who realized the powerful effect and level of variations that could be achieved through the layering of loops were Holger Czukay and Rolf Dammers' *Canaxis* (1969) and Ramon Sender's *Worldflood* (1965).

When selecting the six fragments that made up the composition for the space I tried to focus upon creating a specific mood within the space. The mood created by the sound was essential to the success of the piece in that it was the controlling factor in how the work was received by the audience. First and foremost the sound had to have a direct appeal to me. I also needed sound that was rather melancholy in nature, something that would invoke contemplation rather than dance. This was rather easy to establish because emotionally my artwork has always fallen into the realm of melancholy and contemplation.

Each of the six loops were of differing length and contained different sounds. This was done in order to give the composition a constant feel of change, and movement as

opposed to something more stagnant. In order to create a dynamic range of sound I incorporated silence into many of the loops. The loops themselves weren't lined up with any real intent but simply placed on the posts and left to their own devices. This itself was an homage to Cage and his ideas of *chance operation*, I wanted the viewer/listener to have a slightly different experience each time the space was revisited.

Where to go next?



Record, Delay, Play (2006)

I view this body of work as merely a beginning for further exploration between the relationship of sight and sound. Though I feel my thesis exhibition was quite successful, I feel that the work can develop further. I plan to make more of a conscious effort to acknowledge the space I employ. I want the sounds to interact more with the space and the viewer. I also intend to think more about what sounds I do employ and how they relate to the medium and the imagery. In the exhibition I missed including the sounds of myself walking that would have better incorporated the videos with the installation overall. I'm also interested in taking apart and learning how more objects associated with sound operate. I plan to spend a great deal of time in the future, investigating speakers, record players and other sound producing objects.

I'm also very interested in beginning to use musical performances as a starting point for exhibition of my artwork. In this way, I would record directly onto the loops in the space and at the end; play them back so that the space is then interacting with what was once there. I plan to continue incorporating music as a major element of the work, as I'm most interested in creating an emotion or mood based organization of sound. I will continue to experiment with the knowledge I've gained from the artistic research that I conducted during the past two years. I intend to continue building upon that exploration to produce new work.

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