

Making Music as Contemporary Art

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Abstract

Music is closely aligned to the other arts as never before in history. Sound art, visual art and performance intertwine in ways that provide new opportunities for cross fertilisation between artists originating from different disciplines. In this paper, the author reflects on her own career and discusses possibilities for music in the arts by musicians and visual artists alike. Is the most interesting music coming from art schools?

A Graduate Pathway

As the century has progressed selves have become increasingly populated with the characters of others (Gergen, 1991, p. 71).

As a graduate of a Bachelor of Music degree with honours in classical music performance, it is considered by many to be rather unusual that my doctoral studies would be in fine art. Despite this, I would never call myself a student of 'fine art', though I often refer to myself as an artist. I still do 'gigs' and my art will always have its roots in sound and music. This personal anecdote is little more than a reflection on how the definition of what music or art can be has changed. I am a student in 'sound' and these days that fits under the school of fine arts.

After graduating from a course with highly defined outcomes – the ability to play an instrument and understand the context in which to use it- my career took a rather different turn than the one I imagined as a student. As one of seemingly thousands of flute players graduating from a University, there were not enough ensemble and orchestral jobs to go around. This led me to create my own opportunities, and eventually my own art, and gradually I moved in enough directions to embrace elements of the other artistic genres by becoming a sound and performance artist.

Whilst a musician could indeed be called a performance or sound artist, they tend to focus on more abstract elements of music rather than the blatant performance or visual presentation of it. In fact, there is a good deal of convention around the presentation of music – from black and white clothing to auditorium venues. My interest in performance and sound art evolved from a frustration with the bland presentation of most contemporary classical music, coupled with an interest in the relationship of music and image. A fine art qualification allows me to pursue this relationship more fully, and offers me a certain freedom to move beyond the purely sonic abstractions a PhD in Music Composition may restrict me to. I do not always

wish to notate my music by any means, let alone conventional ones. I want imagery in my work – performance and otherwise - to be an equal partner in importance to the music. Many musicians are conditioned to link images to music, through a heavy diet of television, movies and music video. Elements of this link can be recognised and embraced in music and art schools. My own career pathway has taught me a few things about places to start and ways to finish, and that the arts can move seamlessly between genre, with the right guidance. Music or Art School?

As lecturer in composition for the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, my employers are happy to have me study toward a PhD qualification. But are my studies relevant to what I teach in the academy environment?

The re-organisation of university departments has seen different art forms become bedfellows in rather unusual arrangements. Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Western Australia, for example, offers a PhD in Creative Arts, effectively covering all creative arts specialisations or combinations in a single doctoral qualification, under the Faculty of Arts and Education. Along with institutions such as Queensland University of Technology (QUT), ECU offers financial incentives for performance and arts practice as research, a strategy now being adopted in the Federal Government's new Research Quality Framework (RQF). This means that creative students have more to offer the universities in which they study and that the preparation every artist does towards a project will be recognised as research alongside an academic paper in other fields. In fact, this paper would not even be contemplated if it had not been for this new outlook. Universities are embracing the so-called 'creative industries' and the challenges they provide to institutional structures, but the emphasis is on employment opportunities rather than the idea of art study for its own sake.

Electronic Arts is one area of the 'fine art' schools that provides flexibility for students who wish to focus on electronic sounds. As a touring musician performing at festivals around Australia, I have observed that some of the most interesting electronic music from emerging artists is coming from art school students, not music school students. Lecturers such as sound artist Joyce Hinterding find positions in fine art schools, working in areas such as electronic arts that offer them more flexibility in the way to approach sound than a curriculum in a music academy may offer. What does this tell us about contemporary music practice? Even though electronic arts departments do not provide background for the broad history of music and its context, or specific training in certain music skills such as aural training or arrangement, they do provide a context for contemporary art- a hybrid, open type of art. Electronic music was developed in the music academy, when in post-war Europe these institutions could provide the enormous and costly studios required for the experimentation of electronic music at that time. As a classically trained musician working with electronics, I find the shift of electronic music study to electronic art department unfortunate as many students

could benefit from the lessons of a music composition department. Music studies today could be grounded on the philosophy of early 20th century composer Edgar Varese, who preferred to call music 'organised sound'. Creators need skills to organise things- be they sound, musical notes or physical objects - as proven in areas such as electronic and improvised music, painting and sculpture.

There was plenty of fuss when the Western Australian Government changed its high school education structure to outcomes based education, allowing 'non musical' instruments and forms such as laptops and contemporary pop music genres into the music curriculum (Taylor & Ferrari, 2006, p. 4). Students will be looking to pursue their study in higher education. As in the past, there is enormous resistance to the idea that music is changing – and whilst there will still be musicians who are happy to perform music created in the distant past, do we need to teach students to write music that resembles it? Surely institutions have a responsibility for the education and development of music-based artists who have broad range of abilities relevant to contemporary arts practice, and respond to recent trends in music and its interaction with other arts. Music academies provide students with a range of skills that allow them to choose their direction of specialisation and carry it forth with a rich skill base, but the need to provide an understanding of context is more important than ever.

My role as lecturer in composition in a classical music department can be rather complicated. Music should indeed be contemporary art, but is there a need to draw a line in the sand in regards to 'music' and 'sound'? The challenge is that the academy environment is struggling to accommodate the resounding effects of postmodernism and what it has meant to the way we think about music today. If any artist using or creating music is to be truly prepared for the workplace, they need to be familiar with the many genres and techniques for creating music, and the many contemporary contexts in which it can be used. Visual arts students seem much better prepared in this area of their discipline. A music academy may offer this knowledge, but it struggles to provide skills for truly contemporary music creation. Yet this should not mean that teaching of certain genres of 'new music' are better off in the art school. A collaborative approach to teaching and learning between the art and music schools would be more valuable for students of contemporary art; music or visually based.

So does sound art require a study of music at all? Knowledge provides opportunities and if taught correctly, music composition offers a variety of skills that can be draw on a range of arts media. Theory is essentially part of our attempt to understand, and therefore, to better control musical ideas that engage us (Grenbaum & Hindson, 2005, p. 3).

The sound art/music case is often compared to the debate over the need to study popular music as a stream in music degrees, as universities strive to find courses that attract students. These new graduates are not producing hit songs or innovative music: in fact, their

career paths are quite similar to those of classical music graduates – playing music written by others in conventional environments. Do we need more graduates like this, or do we need graduates creating new ideas and practices that are grounded in skills relevant to our contemporary lifestyle?

Sound Art vs Music

Musical arts are closer than ever before to the other arts. Opera allowed a merging with sculptural objects as seen in sets and screens, culminating in the *gesamtkunstwerk* or ‘total art’ of composers such as Richard Wagner. The invention of the sound film offered a new path for music, movement, and image to co-exist; leading to a whole new way of creating and organising music. But it has been the development of sound art that has aligned music most closely with the visual and plastic arts, despite its origins in music academy.

Improvisation, since its incorporation into the musical canon in the 1950’s, has added a dimension to music that is only really beginning to become understood. The Australian Music Centre - the leading organization for Australian new music - now recognises improvised music (often music recorded straight to disc without any notation) as composition – and the terms composition and improvisation are often interchangeable. In many ways, improvisation has allowed music to exist outside formal training. It has given confidence to so-called ‘non musicians’ to create their own soundscapes for their art.

Scholar Douglas Kahn has comprehensively documented the progression of music into sound art in his book *Noise Water Meat - A History of Music in the Arts* by aligning the industrial revolution, technological developments and various art movements in the relationship of music to other arts. A work’s integrity as musical is maintained in a historic line that has not yet reached an end point. He points out that twentieth century art has plenty of examples of inspiring artists who manage to engage music and other arts equally, and these should provide an inspiration to contemporary artists. Many of these were aligned with the Fluxus movement, and John Cage is a good case in point. He studied with great music composers and theorists Karlheinz Stockhausen and Arnold Schoneberg, and went on to become the true ‘artist’ – creating works that would redefine what music was by also allowing it to be something else other than music, as Cage himself states;

I believe that the use of noise to make music will continue and increase until we reach a music produced through the aid of electrical instruments which will make available for musical purposes any and all sounds that can be heard (Cage, 1970, p. 55).

And, by definition, allow anyone to make them;

I imagine that as contemporary music goes on changing in the way that I'm changing it what will be done is to more and more completely liberate sounds from abstract ideas about them and more and more exactly to let them be physically uniquely themselves (Kostelanetz & Darby, 1996).

Nam Jun Paik is another example of a music graduate whose career took him to different places. His art remained grounded in music throughout his career, in collaborative works such as TV Bra for a Living Sculpture (1969),¹ created with cellist Charlotte Moorman. Works such as these have influenced the way sound can be integrated into video installation, and can be seen as a direct influence on later installation practice. The incredible cinematic collaborations of installation artist Mathew Barney and composer Jonathan Bepler in the majority of the Cremaster Cycle embrace the potency of sound and music integration (Gladstone & Barney, 1995-2002).

The Artist in the World

Perhaps if institutions that create graduates of music, fine art and even film broaden their horizons to allow the integration of the conventions of other arts, we will be creating an exciting and new future of arts practice for Australia. Perhaps the music and arts academy need to reflect upon the contemporary arts environment by embracing interdisciplinary practice more readily, offering components of study to other academic departments whilst maintaining an integrity of quality within its specialisation.

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Biography

¹ New York: Howard Wise Gallery, 1969 (performance with video)

Cat Hope is an accomplished composer, sound artist, performer, songwriter and noise artist whose practice is sometimes an interdisciplinary one that crosses over into video and installation. Her work has taken her on numerous tours around Australia, the USA, Japan and Europe, and her music recordings are distributed and published worldwide. She has written soundscapes for dance and theatre companies as well as completed commissions to write music for film (winning the *Pandora's Box Film Festival* Best Score award in 2000) and pure music works. Cat is a classically trained flautist, with a BMus Hons, but also a vocalist and experimental bassist who plays as a soloist and as part of small ensembles, such as *Gata Negra* and *Lux Mammoth*. She has directed and edited numerous short music videos and created audiovisual installations. Her work has been shown in *ISEA* (Japan 2002, Finland 2004), the *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art* (2002), the *New Directions New Media* Festival in Singapore (2004) and festivals Australia wide.

Cat is an active researcher and has conducted extensive funded research into communication technologies, audio recording in forensics, noise notation and surveillance techniques for use in performance, and maintains an active interest in challenging the relationship of image and sound. In 2006 she formed the *Music Research Group* at ECU. She is also part of the sound art research collective *Metaphonica*, a previous Board member of the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, the chairman of the ArtsWA Contemporary Music panel and curates a new music events *Club Zho* and *Sound Spectrum*. Cat runs a music label and production company, Bloodstar and is the lecturer in Composition and Music Technology at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts at Edith Cowan University and a PhD candidate in SOUND at RMIT University.

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