Kevin Concannon

Over the course of the last twenty years, public art has evolved from the "furd of the plaza"—usually selected by an architect—to a truly public art that engages its public from the artist selection process to the functional relationship of the work itself to its audience and its surroundings. While only twenty years ago successful public art meant large-scale sculpture that complemented its architectural surroundings, today an architect is frequently hired as part of a design team that also includes artist and landscape architect. The same is true: to create a building that is at once functional, "user-friendly," and sympathetic to its surroundings. In part a reaction to the severe formalism of International Style architecture, this recent trend has coincidently created a new forum for sound sculptures. And the future sounds even brighter with the confluence of Public Art in America '87 and New Music America this October in Philadelphia. The two organizations, attracting public art professionals and sound sculptors respectively, have concocted piggybacked sessions and events that promise to inspire even more sound sculpture in public places. As this possibility may strike some in both fields, there are natural alliances between them, and even a bit of history.

In 1966, three years before the installation of the first NEA Art in Public Places project (Caldier's La Grande Vitesse in Grand Rapids), Harry Bertoia installed his singing fountain in the River Oaks Shopping Center, Houston, Texas. A pioneer in the field of sound sculpture, Bertoia stumbled upon the sonic possibilities of metal sculpture by chance several years into a successful career. While working for Knoll Associates, he designed the classic Bertoia chair. His frequent architectural commissions brought his large-scale sculptures into a variety of public spaces, most prominently the Saarinen Chapel at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where his metal screen sculpture provides a foil for the dancing reflections of light that animate the central altar. Eleven years later he created his first major commissioned sound sculpture—a shopping center.

This piece was a culmination of his studies into the sonic character of different types of metal. For this piece he selected T0bin bronze rods that bell-like sound. The sculpture was activated by the wind blowing through the many foot traffic and seating areas into its public commissions, creating "sound gardens.”

As Holits creates meditative gardens for his wind organs, Peter Richards and George Gonzales built for their Wave Organ a small and unusual park at the tip of a jetty near San Francisco's Exploratorium. The Organ itself is a series of pipe organs built into the cliffs off terminating above ground level through a variety of openings in and around an area that looks like a large barbeque/altar. The seating area's platform is constructed of old curbstones and discarded tombs. The headstones and other monuments were salvaged from a rededicated cemetery in San Francisco which was, in its day, a busy place. The'statue'sof a rededicated cemetery is thus site-specific on two counts. While its relationship to the changing tides becomes obvious to the visitor, the use of discarded tombstones and curbstones connects the piece to the history of San Francisco.

Much public sound sculpture exploits natural phenomena such as wind and water through acoustical means. The idea of using a hone and masticated stones dates back much further, in fact, than Bertoia's sonic fountain. Bill and Mary Buchen have studied the multi-cultural traditions of sound sculpture incorporating their research into their contemporary installations. For this year's Ars Electronica festival in Linz, Austria, they built a series of whirligigs—mechanical devices that use the wind's power to rotate tuned bells against strikers and strikers against tuned pipes. When installed in series, the various instruments sound together in an aleatoric symbol. In their original context, the whirligigs served a functional as well as aesthetic purpose; they were used as sound scaracres to protect crops.

A more thoroughly modern method of artists, however, use electronics to alter spaces instead of wind. Bill Holits' works respond to the sounds of given environments and transposes them into unlikely situations. His evolution from composer to sound sculptor began with an interest in field recordings of ambient sounds. For Sonota, "what was especially interesting about ambient sound was the way it inhabited and belonged to the environments and acoustical contexts in which I found them." This observation propounds the transposability of sounds from one environment to another first with tape-recorders and then with live telephone cable and satellite links.

Satellite Soundbridge San Francisco—Colin Johanson's project that is linking those two cities for a one-hour broadcast. In San Francisco, Fontana to the sounds of the Gate Bridge and the animal life on the Farallon Islands, twenty-six miles off the shore between the city and the Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Opera House. Microphones placed on the island picked up the sounds of the wave, birds, and sea lions as well as the soup of the sea. Splitting via a hydron on the east side of the island. From the bridge came the sounds of cars passing, the wave, and birds breaking. In Cologne, microphones linked the Zo, the Rhine, and to a building over the area surrounding the Museum Ludwig.

Parks, yards and passers-by, well-endowed geographically from the sounds, were alternately amused, perplexed, or relaxed. Loudspeakers were placed to the noise and the the great sound sculptor played for the sonic landscape's ability to produce a communication link. To travel from place to place in music and life. They are, for the most part, just so hard to understand. They are an experience that is an experience of the sounds with the natural environment.

Christoper Janney's Soundbath (1972) has traveled around the world as a concept and as a possible form of an establishment for a major new genre. On top of any grand stair in less than one hour a mechanical and electronic device, the soundbath, played on the ground, is a small, aural sculpture. Its means are of a cornucopia of the voice and the voice's environment. The voice is triggered as a musical note as a person's skull or descends each step. The voice's environment can be heard, and the voice’s environment can be heard, and the voice's environment can be heard.

The stone sculptures by Peter Richards and George Gonzales are becoming part of the landscape, part of the public's environment, and part of the public's experience. These environments are being transformed, and the public is being transformed by them. They are an experience of the sounds with the natural environment, and they are an experience of the sounds with the natural environment. They are an experience of the sounds with the natural environment, and they are an experience of the sounds with the natural environment. They are an experience of the sounds with the natural environment, and they are an experience of the sounds with the natural environment. They are an experience of the sounds with the natural environment, and they are an experience of the sounds with the natural environment.