

Filament Essays

## **On Found Objects**

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*“When two objects are paired a natural symmetry begins to emerge. One object insists on doing it alone, while the other simply wants a way in which to frame the surrounding environment.”* Craig Foltz – Libretto, Opera of Objects, 2018

In 2007, I undertook an experiment to perform for an hour using only found objects in the LaMama Musica series, curated by Adrian Sherriff. I was in a phase of wanting to give up music – feeling I was losing *my* direction as I worked in an overwhelming variety of musical contexts. For this gig I wanted to try something new – to see if I could develop a new musical language for found objects. I built an instrumentarium using ceramic bowls, mixing bowls, bottles, bathroom tiles and planks of wood. I use this word instrumentarium to name the collection of things I use in a particular piece – a selection of objects set up in a particular way. In my mind the placement of these things is already suggestive of the music they can play – determined by the object’s proximity to other objects, the sculptural shape of the final collection, and how the collection holds its shape or transforms during the performance. The choreo-spatial aspects of percussion always seem to be important – even when they are not intentionally scored or considered.

What attracted me to the particular objects mentioned above, was that most of them have a clear pitch, but none of them adhere to anything like equal temperament. Part of my learning about the sound world of objects is learning how to negotiate pitch content, relationships, combinations. It is like being gifted a 23-tone, 23-object instrument, where each tone has a different timbre, each tone uses a different performance practice and each tone requires different effort to produce the same dynamic. In other words, the instrumentarium is not evenly flattened terrain, but instead full of all the glorious nuances and inconsistencies of an un-landscaped backyard.

What I learned from this process, besides the overwhelming joy of being freed from 12 evenly spaced tones, was how to both combine timbres and how to really separate them; the space each sound needs for its complexity to be audible; that each object has a history; and that each combination of sounds can present new sonic meaning. In developing this improvisational freedom, I was in fact learning to deeply understand and sonically manipulate materials.

In reality I had been experimenting with found objects since the late 1980’s. As a percussionist with a particular interest in new music, the repertoire requires one to play tin cans, brake drums, roofing metal mixed in with tomtoms, triangles and bass drums. I remember the tertiary percussion studios being filled with all manner of percussion instruments from timpani to suspension springs from cars, marimba to wooden planks. Even

while my technical attention was consumed with refinement, dexterity and wrist control, it was clear to me that percussion was materially unbounded. Later, playing celery in a Globokar's (1989) *Kvadrat*, coconuts in Kagel's (1998) *Solo for Zwei*, reception bells in Kate Neal's (2012) *What Hath II*, dominos and a kitchen sink in Anthony Pateras' (2001) *Mutant Theatre*, I realised that all of these composer-led requests fit within my concept of what a percussionist can do. The role of percussionist is to conjure sound, to bring things into vibration. Right?

I have often wondered why this extended performative sound world is so closely aligned with the percussionist. Many composers have made open score pieces for non-percussion instruments, but perhaps the answer lies in the fact that many solo percussion works ask the performer to fill-in their sound world. Ferneyhough's (1995) *Bone Alphabet* asks the percussionist to select 7 sounds that can fit into a suitcase (and support the notation of his composition), Feldman (1965) asks for high, medium and low - resonant and non-resonant - sounds in *King of Denmark*, and in Globokar's (1973) *Toucher* the performer is asked to build their instrumentarium of 7 sound sources that can mimic vocal sounds. The idea of sonic discovery and choice is deeply ingrained in percussive training, and elemental to foundational works in the literature.

This kind of approach does find its way in to other performers' practices. Flute player Jodie Rottle's (2018) thesis *Sounding the Everyday: Working with Objects in New Music Practice* examines how everyday objects can expand the music practices of composers, performers, and improvisers. Elizabeth Jigalin has a practice of composing and improvising with objects; composing curious sandpits of sound that combine music, play, theatre and the everyday. Visual artist Rosemary Joy (2015) wrote an amazing thesis on her body of work that explores ideas around site specificity and the interaction of visual and aural perception to create focussed listening experiences; and Leah Scholes' (2007) thesis looked at the history of found objects in percussion repertoire. Together this work ruminates on post-instrumental practice, demonstrating all manner of composers working with materials, objects, constructing and deconstructing sound, manipulating technologies, and challenging the audience to do the sematic sense-making.

In 2018, Cathy Milliken, Erik Griswold and I made the *Opera of Objects* (2018). Using text by Craig Foltz, we based the opera on 5 objects – a red object, a hollow object, a nostalgic

object, a transparent object, an unnecessary object. By independently selecting our objects, we created complex and delightful conversations between our 15 objects. My unnecessary ornamental fake-grass covered bunny rabbit was paired with Cathy's childhood toy car and Erik's singular rusty bed spring. "What does it mean to be unnecessary" says the text by Craig Foltz.

During the process of making this piece, I was reminded to consider where our musical knowledge lies. It is not in the refined technique needed to execute particular musical passages from historic literature – although those techniques certainly help focus attention and precision necessary for object-oriented investigations. The knowledge is not in the object itself – which remains soundless until it is in some way vibrated. For me, knowledge is in understanding how to interrogate an object, to have tools to use to ask it questions, to inspire it, to communicate with it, to find a context in which that object is voiced. The object is vibrated into a new reason for being and belonging. The object begins to have agency, to undertake empathy, connectedness, and to become something extraordinary.

Going back to my 2007 experiment working exclusively with found objects, I think this is what I was learning. Found objects are not just another thing to "hit, shake or scrape" – the traditional definition of percussion. Found objects, like other sound sources, are soundless, music-less, until they are vibrated, investigated, and drawn into musical conversations. Ceramic bowls are one of my favourite instruments. I feel I know how to make them sing, how to produce a dull sound, how to make them glisten when played with other instruments, how to gesture with them. So too, a tam tam is a favourite instrument – a large metal disc which, when activated, has inside it a universe of sound. It is this conjuring of sound that for me is the domain of *my* version of percussion, regardless of whether I am sounding my body, a hairdryer or the branches of a tree.

The slope is slippery – all instruments are derived from found objects – elemental materials. The bamboo flute, the orange-box cajon, the conch shell. Instruments are refinements of these raw materials with slowly evolving musical practices surrounding them. What we see in post-instrumental practice are sound worlds that are freed from preconceived sonic function. We are seeing experimentation, process, investigation, curiosity, and vibration happening before our eyes and ears. We are remapping the world according to these new propositions, making new discoveries in our approaches to playing and to listening. Our

fundamental relationship with these objects will change as new multi-sensorial memories are formed.

Post-instrumental practice does not really have a before and after – it has been co-created over decades of playing and making. We can look back and see how improvisers have shaped new musical practices, composers have proposed seemingly impossible actions, and performers have found previously unimaginable ways to navigate these compositional challenges. Together with the listener, the audience, these approaches continue to posit ways of doing that “can be used to inform a way of thinking about new music” (Stene, 2014).

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