

Hand/cup/stone

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Hand / Cup / Stone

By Evelyn Ficarra

In the second showing of my piece *Piano Bench Variations*, I placed stones and cups inside an open piano bench, on which a video projection of these same cups and stones were 'played' with, by a pair of video hands, to make sounds. Without any prompting, one participant knelt by the work, reached into the bench and began moving the cups and stones against each other, mimicking the hands in the video, and enjoying, as I had done when I made the video, the agency of creating sounds and small choreographies through handling objects. The next day, a student of mine asked – 'How did you do that?' 'What?' I asked. "How did you make the video follow what the man was doing?' 'Ah!' I said. 'Other way round!'

These questions around where agency lies run as an undercurrent in my work, at every stage. First of all, I am expressing my own agency – or so I imagine – through my compositional process. My core impulse as a composer is an attraction to sound, in particular to a process of recording sound and reanimating it in different contexts - musique concrète, mixed electroacoustic / instrumental music, collaborations in film, dance and theatre, and gallery-based installations. Key to this practice is playing with objects to make sounds. I choose the sounds / objects I love, which resonate with my ideas, and pull them together into audiovisual pieces, exerting what I imagine to be my *direct agency*¹. By *direct agency* I mean that I am in direct physical contact with materials, exerting power over them, using them to express and explore a creative idea. More specifically, I improvise with physical objects as instruments, exploring their sonic capabilities, alone and in combination, and record the sounds they make for further electronic manipulation. I may then turn those objects into audio speakers and re-use them to re-animate their own recorded sound, setting objects and sounds in a scene together (e.g. as part of a sound installation).

¹ In the process of considering these issues I have found it useful to define different types of agency, which I have italicized for emphasis. These italicized phrases are not meant to refer to any external body of theoretical work, but are simply a reflection of how I have been thinking through my compositional process.



Piano Bench Variations, 1078 Gallery, Chico, California January 2019

Objects I've been interested in lately include teacups and other crockery, broken pianos, stones, pieces of wood and metal. On closer consideration, how much am I in control of, or exerting power over, these objects, and how much am I interacting *with* them in a dialogue? Through physical interaction, I am asking questions of the objects. What sounds can these objects make, how do they behave when subjected to different pressures? I might have *direct agency*, but I can't have *sole agency*, because I'm not fully in control. I don't know, in advance, what sounds will emerge. I can't predict how, or even whether, a teacup will break, when I hurl it against the strings of a clapped-out upright piano, or which

strings I'll hit, or how many fragments there will be or how they will fall. It is my energy that sets the process in motion, but it is the stored energy in both the teacup and the piano that erupts at the point of impact. In that sense there is a *shared agency* between the objects and me, and the objects guide me in the process of making.

This *shared agency* continues into the electronic realm, through technology-dependent acts of audio recording, then to further, digital interactions with the material in the computer. What is the agency of a recorded sound? R. Murray Schafer² speaks of the 'schizophonic' nature of recorded sound, its alienated separation from the original source. Is this kind of disembodiment a loss of agency? Or is it a further distribution of agency – now the sound originates in the computers, and comes to me through headphones or speakers. Now the relationship is between me and the computer, and again I'm not fully in control - surprises come at me via the software, when I subject the sounds to digital processes whose sonic result I can't always confidently predict. The computer becomes another partner in agency, as do the loudspeakers through which the sound is reanimated – another variable in a long chain.

After so many years working with recorded sound, I've become somewhat skeptical of professional audio speakers – not of their brilliancy of sonic reproduction, I am still seduced by that – but of their theatrical inertness, their quality of 'there-to-be-heard-not-seen'. Moving away from the concert hall into the arena of sound installations, in gallery shows or as site-specific work, I'm now bringing the original physical objects back into the artistic equation, creating an uncanny – perhaps ungainly – fusion or collision – between the object and the sound recording of that object. Thus the sound of a teacup being stirred emanates from the teacup itself, or the audio-image of a hand playing the piano is projected onto that piano, using a transducer to make the piano resonate with its re-imported sound. Could one see this re-animation as giving agency, in the form of physical presence, back to the object? Or is it an *artificial* or *prosthetic agency*, achieved through technological ghosting, creating a zombie object, undead, a kind of puppet? If a computer is running the sounds from behind the scenes, is it too sharing agency, perhaps through randomized sound selection, becoming a kind of stand-in for me as sonic puppeteer?

² Schafer, R. Murray. *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Knopf, 1977.



Piano Bench Variations, Sussex Humanities Lab, Brighton March 2019

The final layer of agency lies of course with the listener / participant. My recent collaborative show *Broken Open*³ offers four separate pieces (*TEA POeT*, *Ghost Cup*, *Falling*, and *Piano Bench Variations*) grouped loosely together on a small stage. The audience can experience them in any order, for as long or as briefly as desired, with a wide latitude of proximity. They could even, if they wanted, touch or handle pieces, as did the participant mentioned earlier. They decide how much attention to give, how long to stay with each piece, what angle from which to view it. Ideally, they make these decisions in response to objects and the sounds they make. A teacup draws them in by whispering, but then the tray on which it sits shocks them by beginning to shake... then their attention is drawn from behind by the sound of china smashing onto piano strings, or a bowl of broken crockery which emanates with the sound of clinking shards. With these pieces, I offer sound / object choreographies and micro-landscapes to the audience, and each participant sculpts their own journey and constructs – or not – the meanings. My hope is to evoke a space for the exploration of narrative, musical and poetic resonance, which reveals itself, and is co-created, in line with how much time, attention, and quality of thought an audience member gives to the work. It's a *relational agency*, an *agency of imagination*, shared between objects, participants and artist, in a given space and time.

³ 1078 Gallery in Chico California, January 17th – Feb 10th, 2019. Collaborators: poet Elise Ficarra and ceramicist Cameron Crawford.