

Arturas Bumšteinas & Gitis Bertulis

COCHLEA LOUNGE

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Sling

There is something persistently parasitic about a sling, the very idea of it or even a sheer image of a sling – an object hanging down close to a horizontal plane, suspended. Like a sleeping mountaineer hanging down from a cliff, or a swallow’s nest sucking itself up to the ceiling. It is surely parasitic on its holder – a ceiling or a rock, sheltering some tiny creatures holding onto it from obstinate gravity. It is also in a strange way parasitic on the ground, or rather on gravity itself, which fills the whole air between the sling and the floor. It is, after all, particularly this force that makes suspension possible. The force that pulls bodies down and by the same token makes hammocks work against it. It is gravity that creates this intimate closure – a counter-gravity bubble, suspended by the ceiling.

But what does this all have to do with a sound installation? And what does it have to do with sound in general – this weightless, allegedly immaterial phenomenon that seems to get away from all powers of verticality, spreading around spherically? There are things about hearing that we cannot hear, and most probably will never be able to hear. There are things about it we are more likely to see than hear, features we can imagine and understand better when they are completely mute and only visually prompted. Perhaps one of those things is the verticality of hearing, the semantics of up and down, a realm not very common to the everyday imagery of sound.

In every sling, there is an element of damping. To damp means to embrace, to suck up, to absorb, to invite in, to paste onto; to let a parasite go under one’s skin or stay on it, but not be bounced away or reflected, as one’s skin is never a mirror. To damp is to detain what comes over, to never let it go back into the chaos of free-falling molecules of air. To damp is to give shelter, to create a nearness up there by the ceiling, a nearness generated against all odds: a visual depiction of a shelter, constantly at work, hanging down but also hanging up, or perhaps, if said more accurately, *holding* down. In every sling’s verticality, to damp is to create an invisible line, a gravity-counter-gravity axis, where a some sort of dropping is always implied.

Georg von Békésy knew about this acoustic verticality very well, having studied it while doing extensive research in the field of cochlear mechanics. He proved that when an external stimulus – an acoustic wave – hits the cochlea, the pressure applied on the organ is not homogeneous. Quite the contrary: it spills over in an orderly manner, depending on the frequency ranges of the stimulus. The low ones press the upper part of the cochlea, while the high ones move towards its lower bits. This is the exact opposite of how our bodies receive the harmonics of sound, feeling the low frequencies in the floppy guts and the high ones, in the firm skulls. What Békésy discovered was that each external stimulus produces a certain phantom wave; real, but existing without a direct acoustic cause. It is produced within the ear by the pressure’s imbalance and is purely vertical.

Considering this verticality, Békésy's constructions used in Vilnius Recording Studio seem to resemble the inner ear's mechanics; the structures are made of damping materials to attract the sounds and contain them there. And once a sound is swallowed by the solid material, it is turned into something that might drop, something that has weight and therefore is subject to gravity. These structures are no stalactites, as some might see them. We are not entering a cave, and these structures are not refined by ages of fixed, barely-changing conditions. If anything, they are like minor siblings of stalactites – calthemites, parasitizing the reinforced concrete, made with plywood add-ons and acrylic covers. Perhaps they can even be called acousthemites – quick in sucking up sound, effective in preserving it and under certain conditions – likely to return it, drop by drop.

Surely a pyramid, no matter if placed upright or upside down, is the shape of death. Or maybe rather a shape meant to cover the dead, in which case sounds that get shelter inside this architectural ear freeze there. But in the case of calthemites, it only takes a bit of wind, a couple of wet gusts of rain and a reverse process may start. Concrete and acrylic paint are unreliable death keepers. Ammonium and calcium chlorides, phenol, sugar, all acids, inorganic sulphates, sulphated coal and coke, water of course, both sea and the ground – not to mention sewage, – aviation fuel, even beer and glucose, urine, wine – all of those materials reverse the process of sound solidification in the ear. And by reversing that process, they defrost the sounds in the architectural ear, and liquefy them.

Everything that is solid, they say, melts into air – and it does so under the influence of that very same air, air that also transmits sounds into the architectural ear. Air can also make the ear melt. Just like François Rabelais suggested, the frozen sounds of a battle – sounds that freeze with the drop of temperature – all melt when it gets warmer, producing a barbaric noise. Yet they are not the same battle words any more (never trust high fidelity). They are hibernated and stimulated, frozen and melted. Naturally, in the case described by von Békésy, the melting process of the sounds is different than in Rabelais's case. They do not spill over. They drop, one by one.

Michal Libera

Arturas Bumšteinas (b. 1982) is a sound artist working in the fields of experimental music, radio art, installations and performance. He is the founding member of Quartet Twentytwentyone, Works & Days, Zarasai and Wolumen ensembles. Since the year 2000 he has collaborated with many international musicians and artists. His interdisciplinary projects were presented in dozens of events around Europe. Festivals where his music and art projects were showcased include The Holland Festival, Sensoralia / Romaeuropa, Angelica, Vilnius Jazz, Unsound, Skanumezs, Cut & Splice, amongst others. Bumšteinas has also been included in more than 30 group shows and presented 5 solo shows. In the year 2013 he was awarded the “Palma Ars Acustica” prize for radiophonic arts. Bumšteinas is selected as an artist-in-residence at DAAD Berliner Kuenstlerprogramm for the year 2017.

Gitis Bertulis (b. 1970) is an artist, who in the past has been involved in fashion and interior design projects. Since 2005 the artist started experimenting with the sound and later on creating unique sounds systems that have been presented in non-institutional events in Lithuania as well as abroad. Last year G. Bertulis collaborated with A. Bumšteinas on the show Echeia in

Contemporary Art Center (Vilnius), where he created one of the sound systems presented in the show.

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