# Extended Guitar and Sound Art Practice

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<u>Introduction</u>

My practice centres around extended guitar techniques. This means an approach to the guitar that is otherwise unconventional. I attempt to combine a number of approaches to extend the sonic possibilities of the guitar, such as computer processing of the audio, and virtuosic 'imperfect improvisational' techniques. I wonder about the definition – whether it is sound art, music, or experimental music - and in some senses this flip between what is art and/or art-music is at the root of my research questions.

This essay will explore a range of definitions that purvey the 'aural arts' as well as exploring my project focus on extended guitar's techniques, possibilities, and potential. In this essay I am interested in exploring the histories and philosophical discussion surrounding an extended, improvisational approach, as well as situating my practice in the broader context of sound art. Thus, it will be important for me to distinguish between music, sound art and experimentalism. This is a preliminary investigation into the field and the first paper I have written on the topic of sound arts. As such, the approach is one of exploratory research.

1. **Extended Definitions:** What is the discourse surrounding definitions of music, experimental music and sound art?

2. **Lineage:** What are the effects 20th century movements have had on our conception of music, and how does my practice contribute to the lineage of extended guitar practice?

   i. Extended Listening

   ii. Extended Guitar

3. **Conclusion**

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## 1. Extended Definitions

In contextualising my practice I have become concerned with where to situate it on the continuum of sound practice. As we will see, composers and improvisers have arrived at a new music in the modern era, which, due in part to the pioneers I will mention, was enabled via extended *modes of listening*.

I am interested in music and theory that challenges our way of *hearing* what constitutes music. What initially appears as noise, or 'sound art', can eventually become digestible as music. Our ability to widen our auditory palette for new sounds is what enables new,

exploratory music to eventually become commonplace. For, as Lucia Dlugoszewski states "The first concern of all music in one way or another is to shatter the indifference of hearing" (quoted in Oliveros : 2005 : p.xv).

Composers and improvisers are now in a position to use all manner of electronic and/or noise-sounds in their compositions (Hamilton, 2007 : p. 60). 'Experimental' and 'sound art' arise as terms used to describe this music, which appears to be at ends with 'music' in the traditional sense. In fact, there is much confusion around the term 'sound art'! What is this conflict that exists between music and sound-art/experimentalism? And how can we differentiate between them? We will explore some of these definitions here through the writings of Michael Nyman, Alan Licht and Andy Hamilton.

Let's start with Hamilton's definition of music: "Music is a practice involving skill or craft whose ends are essentially aesthetic, that especially rewards aesthetic attention – whose material is sounds exhibiting tonal organisation," and further, that "music is a human activity grounded in the body and bodily movement". (2007 : p.6). Hamilton's conclusion is that music is abstract in form but humane in utterance, and that music is "the *rhythmicization* (sic) of sound" (2007: p.121). Interestingly, this puts natural sonic phenomena like bird-song outside of the boundary of music for Hamilton; a field recording of birds is sound-art (2007 : p.62).

Experimental music is said to denote an attempt to step outside the boundaries of conventional musical practice. It is, in essence, a non-conformist approach. John Cage's (1912-1992) definition of experimental meant engaging in actions where, either in composition, or performance, the outcome is not known (Cage : 1968 : p.13). One may argue, however, that as these practices become more commonplace, they are no longer experimental (Gibbs : 2008 : p. 33).

For Nyman, experimental referred to a new music that was in opposition from the then termed 'avant-garde' composers such as Varese, Xenakis, Stockhausen, and Boulez (Nyman, 1974 : p.2). Conversely, Leonard B. Meyer (1918 – 2007) includes composers rejected by Nyman in his definition, holding that "there is no single, or even pre-eminent, experimental music, but rather a plethora of different methods and kinds" (Meyer : 1994 : 237). What, then, are we to make of experimentalism's continual defiance of definition?

Since the late 1990's, a new term for these experiments has emerged, equally as rejected (and confused) – under the heading 'sound-art' – coined by Dan Lander in the mid 1980's (Licht, pp. 9 - 11). For Scottish critic and author David Keenan (Glass & Cormack, 2008, p. 347), "sound art is music liberated from servitude and the strictures of function, whether as song, composition, background, theme, advertisement, relaxant, dialogue, or narcotic. It is

vibration denuded of any point; an approach to sound-as-sound, that would offend any criteria for placing value on it…"

It's interesting to note here Keenan's initial definition - 'sound art is music'. Music, detached nonetheless, but music still. However, sound artist Marina Rosenfeld comments that 20th century composers didn't *free sound from music*, they desperately tried to *reintegrate* sound into music. Conversely, musicologist Walter Wiora (1906 – 1997) claims there is a genuine non-musical sound art that attempts to free sound from music (Hamilton : 2007 : p.60), while Licht purports that sound art and experimental music are two very different arenas (2007 : pp. 12 - 13). He proposes the distinctions between music and sound art lie in its context – and the term has had the unfortunate consequence of being applied incorrectly to any experimental music of the second half of the 20th century (Licht : p.12).

For Licht, Sound art is not about performance, and notes the term 'sound artist' holds a certain legitimacy over the term 'experimental musician' – whose definition tends to describe an incompetent musician. Sound art is about work that exists in the gallery/art-space context. However, Hegarty's view is that sound art may be both installation and performance. (Hegarty : 2007 : p. 171).

If indeed a sound artist is one who presents work within an exhibition space, as Licht and Hegarty point out, its primary content and subject matter is *sound*, or positioning visual materials in direct conversation with aurality (LaBelle : 2007 : p.151). It is a revelation of how sound might expand *listening*, and a comment on site and space through the materiality of sound itself.  Thus, Hamilton (2007 : p.40) calls for a new bracket of 'aural arts'. As the visual arts has its sub-sets, cannot the audible arena have its own umbrella term? Since, as we have seen there are numerous sonic practices that now exist outside of the all-encompassing term 'music'.

Interestingly, for Australian sound artists Philip Samartzis and Oren Ambarchi, the differences and definitions are irrelevant (Hamilton : p.62, Cormack & Glass : 2009 : p.339). What is closer to hand is (and always has been) the same pursuit - the totally thorough and passionate investigation of sound. Janek Shaeffer (Gibbs : p.55) refers to his practice as a 'sound artist', even though he constantly pulls from other media in the presentation of his works. What may be more factually at hand, than any other actual separation, is a kind of 'genre confusion' - music's inability to deal with its own advancements (Hamilton : p.62). Perhaps this is the zone of experimentalism - the gap where new sounds and compositional approaches are created, where culture and its ears have not yet had the chance to catch up.

Yet Hamilton (2007 : p.45) draws definite boundaries: there exists a tonal music, a well as a non-musical sound art. As we will see in the next section of the essay, sound art as a

practice had its beginnings in Futurists and music concrète, and John Cage – in that they intended for the display of *sounds as sounds*.

I attempt to situate my practice in these gaps between what is music, what is not music, and what is experimentalism and sound-art, in a spirit somewhat in alliance with Ambarchi and Samartzis - the attempt to extend and explore the language of sound. For me, it's tenable to define my work as all these – it is experimental in one context, commonplace in another; in some instances it appears as sound art – that is, arrangements and performances of sounds, noises and environmental material in conversation with visual and gallery culture; in other instances it traverses more musical modes that consider elements such as rhythm, melody and harmony, and is essentially instrumental. In many ways this serves as a bringing together of many aural arts to bear under the bracket of both musician and sound artist.

My work is a combination of sounds that create drone-like, textural, ambient, immersive soundscapes. The pieces are created using audio effects that effectively abstract guitar sounds, which are then pitted against (and placed in conversation with) field recordings of environmental sounds, and again overlayed with improvised guitar playing.

## 2. Lineage

### i. Extended Listening

I want to mention several movements and art groups whose developments since the turn of the 20th Century have enabled the music of today. Firstly, the Futurists laid the foundations for changing our modern way of composing with Russolo (1885 – 1947) arguing that musicians should embrace the machine sounds of the industrial revolution. Futurist manifestos called for a music inclusive of both *noise* and tone (Gibbs : 2007 : p.23). Edgard Varèse (1883 – 1965) famously declared "music is organized sound" (prefiguring Hamilton's *rhythmicization*) holding that music was not a collection of notes (or tones), but was, instead, a structuring of sounds themselves (Cox : 2004 : p. 17). Both the Futurists and Varèse were key pioneers in promoting the inclusion of noise-sounds into music. (Hamilton : 2007 : p.41).

With the introduction of the first tape-machine in 1935, recorded music was now possible. For the first time, this technology liberated music from the moment of performance and from the concert hall (Eno : quoted in Prendergast : 2000). French artists such as Pierre Schaeffer (1910 – 1995) were among the first to exploit this technology, and this led them to declare a new compositional form – *musique concrète*. 'Concrète' referred to working *directly* with sound, physically cutting and manipulating tape, and adding various effects. Finished musique concrète works were played back as 'tape pieces', presented, or 'defused'[1] via loudspeakers. This presentation of musique concrète, according to Schaeffer, had the effect

of destroying clues about the origins of the sounds. He coined this 'acousmatic listening', a term inherited from Pythagoras. Pythagoras students were referred to as the *akousmatikoi* - their lectures were delivered while Pythagoras was concealed behind a curtain, so as to draw more focus toward his voice. Schaeffer felt he was divorcing sounds from their sources by delivering them through 'the veil of loudspeakers' (Hamilton: 2007: p.99).

Whilst this concept isn't philosophically important to me – the divorcing of sounds – it is key to note this as a radical new way of producing music, and listening to it (although Hamilton does present some convincing arguments against the acousmatic thesis[2]). Through the thinking of John Cage, sounds were finally liberated as *sounds themselves*. That is to say, they did not have to represent things, concepts, feelings, or ideas (Cage: 1961: p.19).

The idea of music as an abstract and formal art can be traced to Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), who felt that instrumental music could not express aesthetic ideas, and that it lacked the meaning and intellectual appeal of the other arts (Hamilton : 71). Kant considered instrumental music to be *free beauty* (aesthetic forms autonomous from concept or function), the concept of which has been taken at face value as "art for arts sake", which has carried over into the idea of musical formalism (the idea that form, as opposed to content, is the primary element of aesthetic value). While I don't profess to having read enough Kant nor Cage to agree with these points of view, it is apparent to me that my work has this formal tendency – the form of which is *ambient*, a type of music pioneered by British artist Brian Eno.

Declared at the release of *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (1978), Eno's essay that accompanied the album notes laid the foundations for music as a kind of *tint*. This was music as an atmosphere to a particular situation or mood, a continuous surrounding, and as Eno put it "should be just as interesting as it is disinteresting" (quoted in Cox: 2000: p.97). Citing *Discreet Music* (1975) as his first true ambient release, Eno considered ambient music to also be something of an antidote for Musak, which was the first instance of music as a background feature in environments. Developed by 1950's corporation Musak Inc., the now defunct company was responsible for creating many shopping mall, elevator and public-space-based music's.  The music itself was based around familiar tunes more or less re-orchestrated in a derivative mode (Eno, 1995, p.296). I would argue, however, that Musak still prevails as the dominant public sonic architectural accompaniment, under the guise of pop music. In some senses the idea of ambient music failed to integrate socially in this regard, and instead has become known as a genre – more common to bedrooms, apartments and portable headphones. What's important to take away from ambient music, however, is the idea of the studio as a compositional tool to create quiet, abstract music's, suitable for various spatial environments.

Finally, I want to mention the Acoustic Ecology movement, pioneered by Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer. In 'The Tuning of the World' (1977), Schafer laid the foundations for a new sonic practice that focused on listening to the world. Though, where Cage may have laid the foundations for this idea with *4'33"*, a 'silent' piece which drew attention to environmental sound (and, in fact, pointed out that 'silence' does not exist) - Acoustic Ecology is said to be environmental sound that is 'judged' – wherein man-made sounds are 'noise' and natural world sounds are to be preserved.  Acoustic Ecology, then, is ultimately of ecological concern – drawing attention to the collision of man-made sonic environments with that of the natural world (Hegarty, 2007). This area for me carries over into my practice of field recordings - but more so in the spirit of Cage - my approach is one of inclusion, a conversation between man-made and environmental ambiences. These recordings become another layer in the music – abstract layers of processed guitar, unprocessed guitar sounds, and worldly recordings of industrialised and natural environments.

However, the resultant outcome is more in line with the Acoustic Ecologists. My work attempts to provide a space for quiet, meditative contemplation in the presence of art. It aligns with the Acoustic Ecology movement in this respect and attempts to heal the sonic environment by providing quiet, immersive spaces within which to escape the noise of the external world. And herein lies a subtle contradiction – on the one hand the Futurists and Cage inform my practice, with the ability to include noise sounds in my work, and yet, on the other hand, I seem to want to escape it. For me, ambient music is the antidote for the *noise* of the world - but we must be careful in our definition. I offer my music in the spirit of an antibody – one that inoculates against the aural infections created by Musak, televisions, pop music, advertising and commercial radio.

"Viruses originate outside a host organism and are interested in that organism's surviving only long enough to enable it to infect other hosts. Art, on the other hand, originates in and is symbiotic with the larger social body. It's long-term survival - and, many would say, it's meaning - depends on the survival of the cultures it celebrates or critiques. The goal of an artist, ... is not to expand or destroy the social body but to challenge it to evolve in new ways. And for its part, the social body needs art."

"As an immune system for the social body, art at its best inoculates the collective unconscious against future threats by providing safe arenas in which it can face unfamiliar or disorientating situations. Art wont tell us what to do, because it's job is to expose problems, not dictate solutions."  (Ippolito : 2006 : 231)

Extended Guitar

In many ways these developments – from pioneers such as Russolo, Schaeffer, Cage & Eno - were the beginning of a true music of abstraction – of *sound as sound*. In my case, this means using the guitar as a tool to create sonic material, which is then manipulated heavily by the computer to achieve certain aesthetic ends. While some parts of the source material become completely unrecognisable, the guitar itself weaves in and out of the recognisable material as an alternate layer in the music. It is this shift between representation and abstraction, which begins to shape a view of the work that I create.

A wide range of audio effects exist in order to process and manipulate the tonal, harmonic and textural quality of sounds. Online music blog *furthernoise.org*[3] describes it's artists as *ambient texturalists*. Tim Catlin, for instance, employs a wide range of *physical* effects processes to the analogue signal of his guitar (Catlin : 2000). What this means is he processes the strings of a guitar physically, with physical means (Catlin does not employ a computer). My process is similar, but somewhat different - more in line with contemporary 'powerbook guitarists'.

As technology has advanced, what were originally physical analogue processes have become emulated and virtualized within computer software. I feel I am thus working primarily as a 'computer guitarist', or 'digital guitarist'. However I also experiment and work with the physical processes such as the ones employed by Catlin (fans, alternate tunings, eBow[4], hardware etc). One of the pioneers of the use of *virtual* effects techniques to extend the language of the guitar is Austrian guitarist Christian Fennesz. Fennesz "uses guitar and computer to create shimmering, swirling electronic sound. (…) His lush and luminant compositions… resemble sensitive, telescopic recordings of rainforest insect life or natural atmospheric occurrences…" (Cormack & Glass, 2009). I attempt to follow in this lineage of digital extended guitar, in a similar spirit to contemporary practitioners such as Christopher Willits[5].

The guitar has a rich history of experimentalism and extension; from Glen Branca, to Remco Scha, Keith Rowe, and Jim O'Rourke. As previously mentioned, much of this has been achieved by audio effects, software processes, and alternative physical manipulations of the guitar. But it also occurs in alternate approaches to finger-style playing – in percussive approaches, free-improvisational performance, and scordatura (alternate tunings). In this regard I take something from contemporary guitarists Preston Reed and Kaki King. These guitarists employ a more percussive approach to the guitar – hitting the body, using fret-tap harmonics and alternative tunings to achieve a particular sound, which appears more in sonic likeness to a prepared-piano or Hang drum[6].

One of the first sonic extensions of the guitar, made possible via the electric guitar, was feedback. My practice makes extensive use of feedback, created both physically and virtually. Lou Reed has released an album entirely composed of feedback entitled *Metal Machine Music* (1975). As Eno points out in his diary… :

> "His Metal Machine Music was released the same week… as *Discreet Music. Discreet Music* soft, calm, melodic and reassuringly repetitive…whereas MMM is as abrasive and unmelodic as possible… they occupy two ends of what was at the time a pretty new axis - music as immersion, as a sonic experience in which you float. The roots of Ambient."

This is important for me, this statement from Eno regarding *immersion*. And this really is the current outcome of my practice – I am, predominantly, employing virtual techniques, that is, *computer* audio effects to create immersive sound (and in future – audio-visual) experiences.

In creating these immersive sonic worlds – 'music to swim in' as Eno puts it (Eno: 1995: 294), I have to ask myself why? What does it mean to want to create an immersive experience for someone? In many ways this is the history of art – immersing the viewer or audience in an engagement with an artwork, surrendering to a mode of contemplation.

Another approach to my guitar playing is that of improvisation. Improvisation is perhaps the oldest form of music-making, existing long before the standard of musical notation (Bailey: 1992 : p.83) – the particular form which is of interest to me is *free improvisation*.  Though it is a rarely written about phenomenon, and as for non-rhythmic sound art, totally free improvisation endures a similar array of misunderstanding as do the terms 'experimental' and 'sound art'. I operate between both free & 'fixed' improvisation modes. That is to say, improvisations those focus on the tonal, and others that are more percussive or textural. Pioneers here are Derek Bailey and the group AMM (featuring guitarist Keith Rowe).


Conclusion

We have defined my practice within the lineage of ambient music, exploring a range of techniques as an extended guitarist. From percussive playing, to feedback, audio effects processing, and alternate tunings. These are contrasted against the recordings of the natural and urban world creating a conversation between the improvisations on guitar and of the naturally occurring sounds of my environment. I extend upon the languages created by artists such as Fennesz, Keith Rowe, Derek Bailey, Preston Reed, Kaki King, and Christopher Willits - and aim to contribute work sympathetic with artists who engage in this type of sonic practice.

My future goals involve the integration of this guitar practice within a broader practice of sampling, digital signal processing, synthesis, and moving-image accompaniments. In this regard my approach to music-making is with a view toward live audio-visual performance as a cinematic practice – seductive, immersive, and contemplative.

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[1] Diffusion denotes a particular configuration of loudspeaker systems arrangement and spatialisation. It tends to be academically located and within an electro-acoustic context. See Gibbs, 2008, 132 – 135

[2] see Hamilton pp. 101 - 116

*[3]* http://futhernoise.org

[4] The EBow (brand name for "Electronic Bow" or Energy Bow) is a hand-held, battery-powered electronic device for playing the electric guitar. Instead of having the strings hit by the fingers or a pick, they are moved by the electromagnetic field created by the device, producing a sound reminiscent of using a bow on the strings. (from ebow wiki)
 see http://www.ebow.com/ebow/faq.htm

[5] Bio of Christopher Willits can be found at http://www.christopherwillits.com/about.html

[6] see wikipedia article for 'fingerstyle' guitar http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fingerpicking

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