

# Sounding the Object: a Timebase Archive

David Toop\*

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A proposition for a hypothetical environment in which intangible multi-sensory events can be experienced as if in a museum. This museum of the imagination displays various sounding devices and listening events, all of which are footnoted by ancillary theoretical, conceptual and anecdotal material from the author's sound work practice and research between 1971 and the present.

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The timebase archive is a museum of imaginary containers without objects. As a curator I have been invited in the past to assemble exhibitions of sound work in galleries. This always raises contradictions in that much of the work I would like to include has no tangible or visible presence. Its timebase is fleeting and therefore entirely unsuited to environments in which spectators are presumed to linger over exhibits that appear to be static. Time Base theory first came onto my radar through the work and ideas of artist John Latham. His expositions on time base and event structure can be found in many publications.<sup>1</sup> To reduce these ideas down to their bare bones, he proposed a new way of thinking about the world in which reality is perceived not as solids and intangibles co-existing uneasily in a progression of time but as a world in which all phenomena can be understood through the insistence of events. This is particularly apposite to the domain of sound in which we discover that concepts such as a History of Listening or a Museum of Sound are not viable within the current administration of such projects except in fatally compromised form. If there is nothing to see, nothing to touch, then in our current view, there is very little to be done.

My own experience has developed in a variety of setting – live performance, recording studios, in 'the field' (in settings that may appear to be anthropology, phonography, art, journalism or scholarship but are really just differing strategies in a single investigation into sound and listening), in books and other media for the eyes, in exhibition settings and the digital domain. Attempts to bring together such variation in types and intensities of engagement tend to be unwieldy and reductive (what happens to sound in a book, for example, or what happens to presence in a website?). Perhaps it is better to propose hypothetical solutions to intractable problems.

## Vitrine 1

Researching in the sound archives of the BBC in 1971 I came across a recording of a live beetle jews harp from Papua New Guinea (this unique artifact had already been released on a BBC record compiled by John Peel so I knew it existed but to find the 'original' was exciting). No details

of the instrument were appended to the recording but a photograph found elsewhere shows the performer holding a beetle close to his mouth. This creature is balanced on a blade of grass, the overtones of its buzzing modulated by the varying cavity of the player's opening and closing mouth. Although the technique is comparable to a more conventional jews harp, the technology is radically different. In New Guinea, jews harps were made from short lengths of bamboo. The bamboo was shaped to form a point, then split on one side to form a thin tongue. Held against the mouth, this tongue can then be hammered rapidly with the knuckle of the thumb, which is in turn attached to a string. A complex thought process is evident from this shaping of available material and the devising of two separate ways to generate sound through physical action and yet the economy of the live beetle instrument is impressive. There is no instrument, only contingency, a moment of (admittedly unequal) partnership between two living organisms.

## Vitrine 2

In the same year I formulated the concept of Bi(s)onics: the science of (sound) systems based on living things. This encompassed Bionics – the science of systems based on living things; sonics or sound; and bi (two). So, a combining of two areas of study (figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

The Wasp Flute, made in 1973, was an instrument built according to these principles and clearly influenced by the live beetle jews harp along with other unusual instruments that could be viewed in collections such as the Horniman Museum, London, and the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. Although the Wasp Flute was built and, in theory, would have worked as intended there was no real desire to entrap wasps, bees or any other buzzing insects in its attached container. The thinking was less about an actualized music than a question about the boundaries of technology. If a musical instrument becomes a sound source rather than a machine for delivering a particular system of musical theory (as was often the case in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) then where are its boundaries? Can it be described as an object (and therefore archived and exhibited as object) or is it a cluster of events whose material presence is only one point on the time base? Of course there was also the irony that the instrument was silent, a condition shared with the extraordinary instruments displayed in museum collections (figure 2).

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\* Senior Research Fellow,  
London College of Communication,  
London SE1 6SB, United Kingdom.

BIONIC research-detection-  
"unsolved mysteries of nature"  
VIEW to their practical  
application  
Pipstrelle-ultra-sonic signals  
at 45k/c's of hunting bats  
"British Mammals and Amphibians"  
BBC Wildlife Series No 2 RED42M  
Side 1 band 2  
see "Mysterious Senses"-  
Vitus B. Dröscher- p.16  
compare and contrast-  
WATKINS "WEM RUSH PEP BOX"  
"BIONIC ROCK"-coined:  
Wed. 3rd January 1971  
David Toop

*Toop.*

Fig. 1: Bi(s)onics

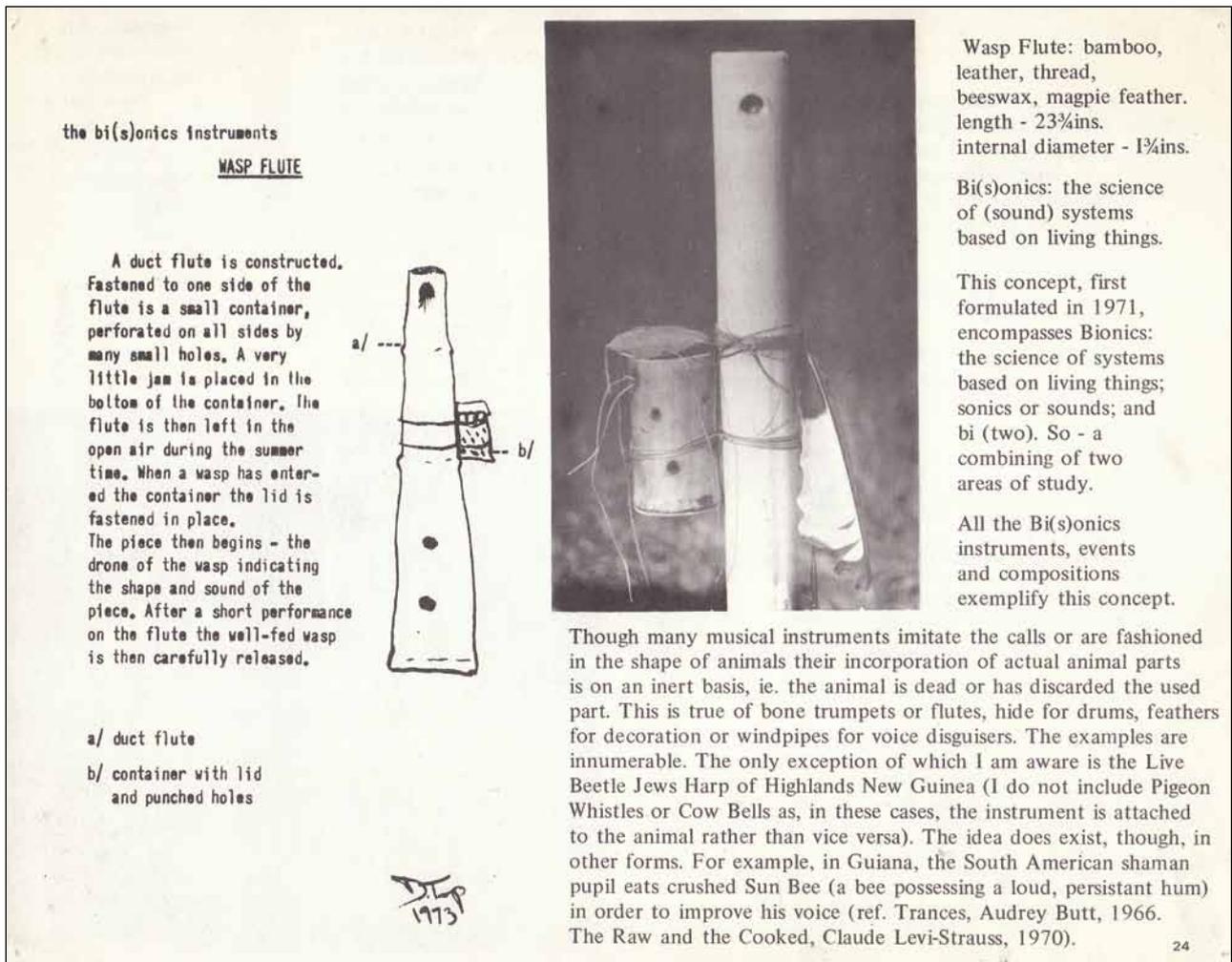


Fig. 2: Wasp Flute

### Vitrine 3

This opportunity to conduct research within the BBC sound archives at Broadcasting House arose as a consequence of a letter written to the BBC in October 1971. My impassioned if naïve plea demanded greater consciousness from the Corporation of its responsibility to our changing auditory environment and those parts of musical culture fast disappearing as the way of life into which they were embedded also disappeared. "This music is dying," I wrote, "and it is no longer enough to lump it under the heading 'primitive music' - the diversity and strangeness of the sounds is amazing. There is so much to learn and the slate is being wiped clean before the pupils have had a chance to read the words . . . It is a world that is only very recently being discovered in 20<sup>th</sup> century terms, a field of incredibly rapid expansion. It is just too ironic to witness its simultaneous disappearance."

Eventually a response came back from a remarkable woman - Madeau Stewart - at that time a BBC Sound Archive producer. It was her series, *Music of Necessity*, that prompted me to write my letter and her commissioning that allowed me to explore the archives en route to making three programmes for BBC Radio 3. The first of these - *Crossthreads*, broadcast in May 1972 - pro-

posed an ambiguous equivalence between human music and bioacoustics, drawing upon the many voices, instrumental and oral, buried within the museum. The technique of mixing lengthy sequences of sound without explanation or formal logic was closely associated in my mind with two related experiences: the perception of environmental sound, whereby many voices co-exist as a 'composition' according to the way they are processed by listeners, and the practice of improvisation, through which highly individual voices (again, the term 'voices' intended to be read in the broadest sense) work towards an unfolding, always contingent state of communality.

### Vitrine 4

The reptile house: a large lizard stands immobile within its glass-fronted enclosure at London Zoo. There is movement between this moment of stasis and the next but the human eye is too slow to register the movement itself. One position in space appears to have been succeeded by another position in space without any intervening transition.

From this observation I came to write the first of four text compositions for improvising musicians entitled *The Bi(s)onics Pieces*. *Lizard Music* was written in May 1972:

lizard music: a figure, phrase, cycle, sound, etc. is played specifically to create a feeling of stasis. at various points throughout the piece all players change simultaneously to another statement as if the previous one had not happened. no statements are pre-arranged between the players. satisfactory systems of simultaneous change are investigated. lizards are studied.

### Vitrine 5

1976: the negotiation of a placement within London Zoo by Barbara Steveni of Artist Placement Group.<sup>3</sup> At the time I wrote about my interest in inter-species or 'alien' communication. In particular I was interested in thresholds and zoomorphism in musical instruments (or should I say instruments of sound). Zoomorphism, for example, might include instruments made from or decorated with animal parts, instruments such as hunting calls or ritual noisemakers used to imitate animal sounds, and instruments which act as a vehicle of transition to 'animal' and other extra-human states. All of these definitions might also apply to threshold instruments – auditory devices which bring together the intentions of humans with the actions of non-human species (like the amphibious lizard, capable of surviving in more than one medium). Incidentally, such instruments might also make sound on the threshold of music. During my placement in the zoo I presented a small exhibition of my research into such instruments, including the Ko-tze pigeon whistles of China (figure 3).



**Fig. 3:** Ko-tze pigeon whistle



**Audio clip 1:** Pigeon whistles

### Vitrine 6

A pigeon whistle collected in Beijing, 2005. Invited to Beijing in 2005 to create work for The British Council Sound and the City project, I heard Ko-tze for the first time in situ, an eerie chord from the sky that moved in space, drifting and formless like the heavenly chords of Chinese, Japanese and Korean ceremonial music from ancient times. Walking through the old hutongs of the city in search of a pigeon loft we found the man who owned this flock of avian musicians, all of them flying with globular eight-note whistles attached to their tails, ostensibly to frighten off birds of prey. The practice of flying pigeons, or making such whistles, will die out of course; the sound itself, already so evanescent as to be impossible to record properly or even hear for any length of time (because the pigeons are never static) seems to encapsulate the idea of an instrument that is of time, a conglomerate without fixed boundaries and possessed of only partial human agency (figure 4).

### Vitrine 7

A museum of listening, existing only in time.

### Notes

- 1 See, for example, John A. Walker's monograph, *John Latham: The Incidental Person – His Art and Ideas*, London, 1995, or *The Portable John Latham*, edited by Antony Hudek and Athanasios Velios, London, 2010.
- 2 The word bionics was coined by Major Jack E. Steele of the Aerospace Division of the US Air Force in 1960 and launched at a congress in Dayton, Ohio, September 13-15, 1960 (see Gérardin, Lucien, *Bionics*, London, 1968).
- 3 My association with Artist Placement Group, the organization founded in 1966 with the aim of placing artists in non-art situations such as industry, government departments and other institutions, began at the beginning of the 1970s. Like many artists of that time, I wanted to get away from the existing platforms for art and music, to engage with the materials of my practice in settings that might catch people in a state of unreadiness. My desire to work in a zoo was consistent with many of my interests but it also turned on the idea that a zoo was an involuntary performance space: the paying 'audience' was not at all clear about its own desires and the 'performers' were entrapped unwittingly within the scope of a relentless gaze without meaning. Even to read an animal's behaviour as 'reluctant' or 'shy' did violence to the true dynamic of the event. From a music performer's point of view, this seemed an environment of great potentiality in which to work.

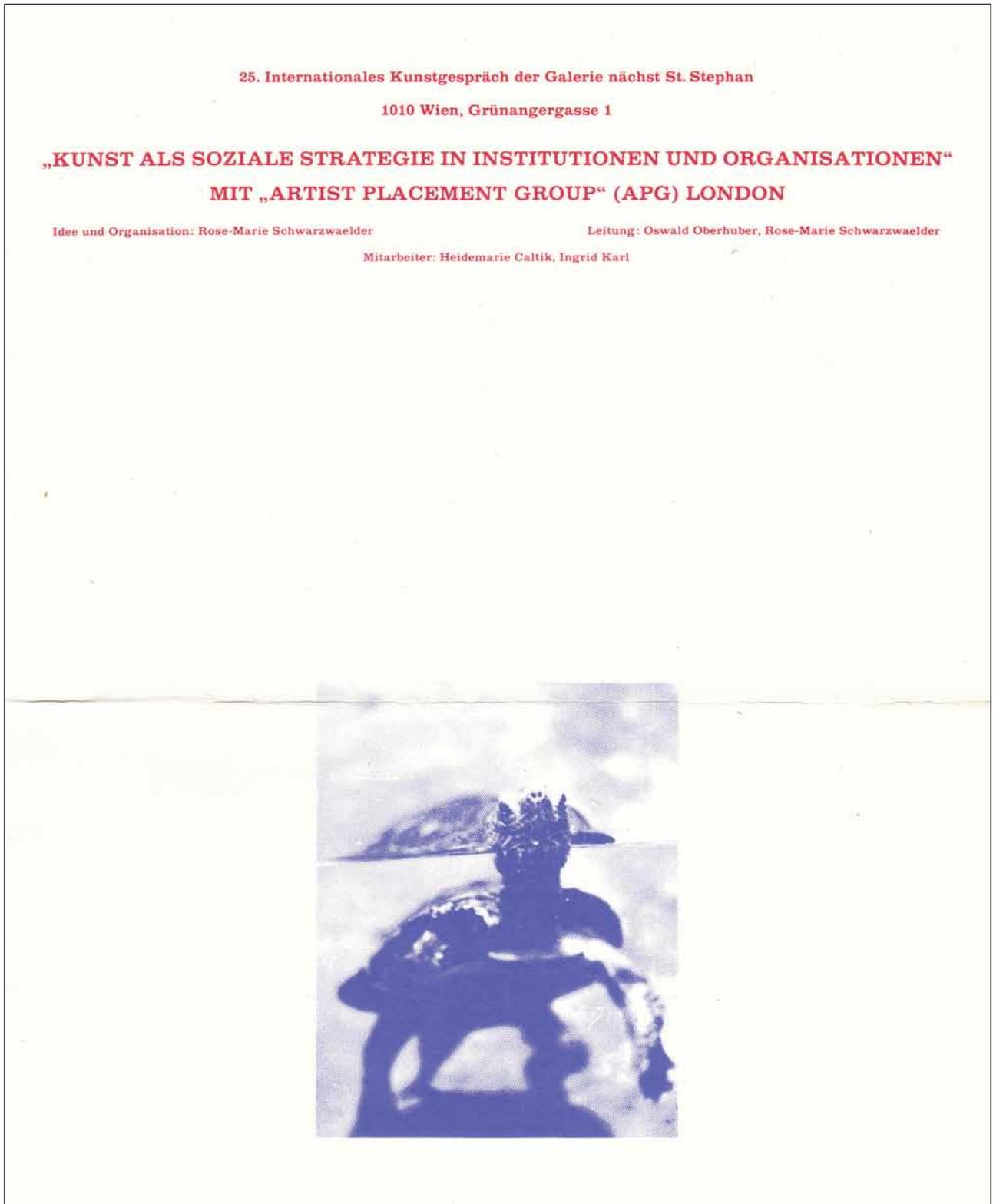


Fig. 4: Lizard