

SOUND OUT

H o n g y o u n K i m

MFA-Thesis

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In the modern era, our understanding of the world is mostly based on visual experiences. It is true that understanding has been identified with seeing, thus experiences through other senses such as hearing, touch, smell and taste have been thrown aside in comparison to vision. In other words, the hierarchical position of senses limits our understanding and imagination. Therefore, “a visually based epistemology is both insufficient and often erroneous in its description, analysis and thus understanding of the social world” (Bull, Back, 3). In relation to this subject, I am interested in exploring the auditory experience and the sound of objects on the assumption that “no sense is privileged in relation to its counterparts,” (Bull, Back, 2) so sound is equally important in our experience and understanding of the world. Regarding this, the author of “The Auditory Culture Reader” points out that:

The reduction of knowledge to the visual has placed serious limitations on our ability to grasp the meanings attached to much social behavior, be it contemporary, historical or comparative(Bull, Back, 2).

While considering this idea that the overwhelming power of the eye over the other senses limits comprehending, it is interesting to rethink my questions. Is there a possibility of using sound to understand the meaning and significance of experience involved with an object? How can sound connect us in ways that vision cannot? How might sound transform the body ornament, not physically but perceptually in the relationship between wearer and viewer?

The book, "*The auditory culture reader*" edited by Michael Bull and Les Back brings up the idea of interactive sounds in relation to my questions by unfolding the sound from various angles. Two editors and contributors' investigations of human culture, history and music through the sound have inspired my own exploration of new possibilities for using the object's sound in the form of jewelry and to question the idea of auditory experience.

In particular, Leigh Eric Schmidt draws a bigger picture about how we started living in the world full of visual pleasure. He describes that the shift from oral culture to literacy whereby people gradually transformed from engaged speakers and listener to silent scanners of written words. The print revolution of the early modern period accelerated this rapid change toward "visuality". He posits, "Words became printed objects more than breathed speech, things to be seen rather than voices to be heard" (Schmidt, 42).

Schmidt's argument breaks my questions wide open, especially about how could sound can occupy a place in the form of jewelry with few interruption of visual (decorative) elements. In addition to this, the author Adolf Loos's idea in the book "*Ornament and crime*" encourages me to reconsider my work at the intersection between visual and sound culture. He argues, "the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornamentation from objects of everyday use" (20). My challenge is to draw the wearer into touchable, playable and audible body adornment as opposed to the conventional jewelries, which impose themselves upon their occupants and viewers as well. In other words, I explore the mediating role of intimate jewelry through the interaction between wearer

and viewer. Based on these ideas, my approach on the elimination of an unnecessary decoration from daily object to create my “sound ornament” is not to neglect visual pleasure, rather it is to erase the hierarchy of the visible and auditory.

To do so, I suppose that the aesthetically minimized form of jewelry is adjacent to the idea of creating democratic relationship between the visibly discernible and acoustic senses to create both visual and aural experiences. However, as I mentioned earlier, it is clear that there is no way in which sound can precede the visual effect of jewelry, even though it has a very simple form because of the dominance of the visual culture in this modern era. There are an exceptions where the auditory systems illicit equal or stronger reactions to our vision. For instance, a wide range of physical and immaterial objects in our everyday experience are involved with this multisensory interaction, such as between computer keyboard and monitor, smart phone, many indication parts of electronic devices, video, ATM...etc. Regarding this, the industrial designer Elif Özcan Vieira, in the article ‘Sound Is An Integral Part of Products’ states that:

Product sounds influence our reasoning, emotional state, purchase decisions, preference, and expectations regarding the product and the product’s performance. Thus, auditory experience elicited by product sounds may not be just about the act of hearing or a sensory response to an acoustical stimulus. A complimentary and meaningful relationship exists between a product and its sounds.

In this respect, the relationship between visual component, and the sound is not a hierarchical relationship, rather they are complementary counterpart to understand the multiple meanings behind object and its sound. In a similar manner, but not in the relationship between product and user, the visual element and its equivalent sound in my work are linked in the form of both jewelry and musical instrument. For instance, one of my necklaces titled “Hook a ring” which is made out of fishing reel and rubber ring are connected through interaction between visual composition and sound. When you pull out the rubber ring, which is knotted to fish wire, the fish wire is unwound with a twirl and it generates the characteristic sound of a fishing reel. When you wind the reel, you can hear the same sound too. Thereby wearer experiences the mutual relation between vision, tactile and auditory sense by perceiving them as a whole. My expectation through this equivocal visual composition, function and sound is to induce people to experience the body adornment with equally important different senses.

In this aspect, the argument cited by Richard Sennett inspires me to ask questions: how does our body interacting with both physical objects (body ornament) and sound? And what does it mean? Sennett describes, “for musicians, the sense of touch defines our physical experience of art: lips applied to reed, fingers pushing down keys or strings...A pianist or a violinist must constantly explore resistance, either in the instrument or in the musician’s own body” (481). I don’t think that anyone would argue that his idea is confined only to musicians. Regardless, he suggests that the sound is not only confined to listening. As he implied, touching is also closely linked with the understanding of

both object and its sound, and it is difficult to separate our senses. In relation to this, Christine Sun Kim, who is an American sound artist and has been deaf since birth explores the similar idea of interaction between sound and body, but in a different way than what Sennett described. In the lecture organized by TED Talks, she says, “I was taught to believe that sound was not a part of my life, that it was a hearing person’s thing”. Despite her physical disability, her curiosity of sound leads herself to investigate the similarity between ASL (American Sign Language) and music. Through her own exploration of sound and sign language, she realized that sound doesn’t have to be known solely through ears. She says, “It can be felt, seen and experienced as an idea”. Regarding this, she referred to how subtle changes of hand gestures in both sign language and playing piano inflect its meaning and sound in a similar way. For instance, one hand gestures in ASL that denotes the phrase, “all night” is to use one hand to draw a half circle from chest, moving palm side downward. But, when this sign is expressed just slower, it means “all night long” and it creates different rhythm and sound. In short, her idea is to create signs and repeat them over again as a pianist does to create a piece of visual music. The ideas of both Sennett and Kim suggest new possibilities about how sound could be explored in terms of tactile and body gesture.

When I apply Sennett’s idea toward my own work, I realized that body adornment could interact with the wearer’s body in a similar way as that of a musical instrument. By applying Sennett’s concept of touch, I alter found objects into more touchable, playable and wearable instruments. To be specific, the

found objects are the raw materials that already contain possibilities to be played and to be worn at the intersection of jewelry and musical instruments. To apply Kim's idea of gestural sound, I also studied American musician John Cage since his art works are a combination of sound, music and choreography. One of his compositions "4'33", which is performed in the absence of deliberate sound, is significant to consider. The intention of this composition does not mean "four minute and 33 seconds of silence", as is often assumed, but rather the sound of the environment heard by the audience during the performance. He states, "There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot". His abstract and metaphorical performance and music composition bring up an interesting question, how sound, even a small snippet of sound, could be evocative and interactive for both audience (listener) and wearer (player)? The ideas of both Kim and Cage shed light on this question to investigate the interaction of sound not only through physical objects, but also through performance. In relation to this, a pianist Alex Peh, who is an assistant professor in music department at State University of New York at New Paltz will organize a performance in collaboration with my body of work that is composed of three stages. The second stage is inspired by one of John Cage's works "Living Room Music". The three stages are designed as below:

1. First stage: performers wear jewelry and extemporaneously generate noise by playing the jewelry while walking in a crowd.

2. Second stage: performers are gathered together in the same spot and noises are smoothly changed into more organized and rhythmic sound.
3. Third stage: the sounds played by performers slowly transition back to the first stage, rhythmical sounds slowly turn into noise and it blends into the natural sound of crowd.

I expect, through this performance, that audience (listener) and performers (wearer) will experience a moment in which various sensations and emotions come and go, and they will simultaneously use different senses to hear, see, and feel. I hope that they can, at least for a moment, step away from habitual response; “we tend to see what we want to see” (5).

I regard the installation as an extension of my work through which the audiences are simultaneously involved with visual composition and sound. To be specific, on the back side of the panel, the “capacitive sensor”, which is based on capacitive coupling, will be installed. This sensor detects anything that is conductive and will be triggered by close contact with human body to play recorded sounds of the individual jewelry pieces. All of the electric parts, sensors and circuit boards are hidden, and thus it is invisible from the audience’s view. From the front view, individual jewelry is hanged on the exact spot where the capacitive sensor is attached so that each jewel has its own trigger to be “played”. To summarize, the audience will hear an unexpected sound without touching, but they are required to use parts of their body to almost touch to trigger the sensor. Through this setting, I expect that the audience will experience the subtle

changes of senses of their body, and the moment of mirage in which vision, tactile and auditory sense are circulating in the same vein. I hope that the audience will pause to experience the different sensation from different senses, but not as a separate one from another.

In my fabrication process, a various range of techniques from hand-sawing to micro welding are involved to actualize the playable jewelry, since I deal with a variety of found objects such as paper, a zipper, a saw blade, rice, etc. One of the main techniques I utilize is called “micro welding”, which is very advantageous to redesign the found objects without damaging them. The reason is that the welding is done for a split second and the welding-temperature is very temporal so that object is safe from prolonged heat. For instance, one of my jewelry pieces titled ‘Rice in the Christmas ball ornament’, which is made out of plastic hollow ball and steel chain is fabricated by using micro welding. To contain and seal the rice in the plastic ball, I welded a steel cap directly on the mouth of the plastic ball without damaging it.

Through my research and experiment in both areas of sound and jewelry, the most challenging part is to reconsider, reinterpret and recreate the daily object to transform it into the “sound-ornament”, at the possible area where the notion of visual and auditory sense are equally positioned. However, there is no doubt that my jewelry will never be free from the dominance of vision, as long as it remains as an ornament on the body. With this challenge, I wish that the audience understand and enjoy my jewelry not from a single perspective, but from a colorful viewpoint.

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"Bells" steel



"Seed shells" seed shell, steel, brass, nylon string



"Skewer sticks" steel, skewer sticks, nylon string, brass



"Bamboo stick" steel, bamboo stick, copper, nylon string, wood



"Pebbles" pebbles, brass, nylon mesh, nylon string



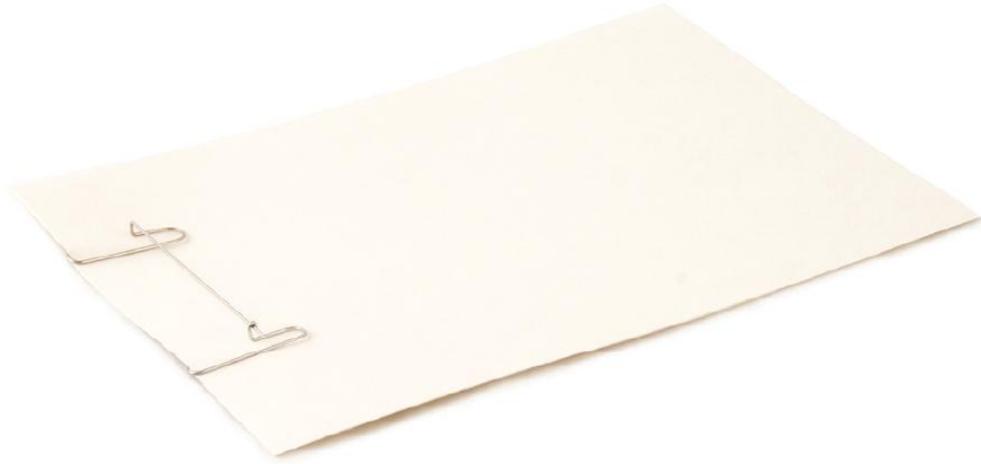
"Lamp cover & magnets" steel, lamp cover, magnets



"Door bell" steel, walnut wood, nylon string



"Cymbalz" walnut wood, steel, brass, nylon string



"Paper & clip" paper, clip



"Jewelry box" copper, jewelry box, stainless steel



"Reed" brass, nylon string, plastic reed



"Pacifier" brass, pacifier



"Sleeve" tarpaulin, button, leather thread



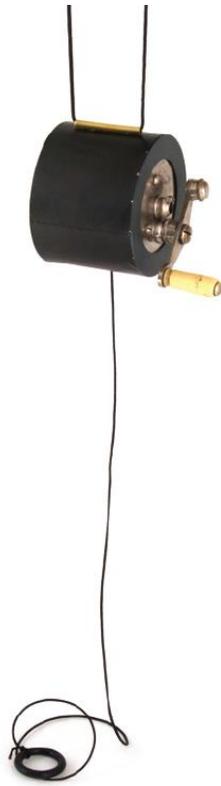
"Wind-up parts" steel, wind-up parts



"Saw blade" steel, saw blade, nylon string, brass



"Rice" plastic ball, wood, steel, rice



"Fishing reel & Rubber ring" steel, brass, fishing reel, rubber ring, nylon string



"Bulb switch" steel, bulb switch



"Measure tape" nylon string, measure tape



"Snap-off knife" steel, snap-off knife



"Velcro" brass, velcro, copper



"Back pocket" jean pocket, brass, stainless steel



"Zip tie" brass, zip tie



"Zipper" brass, zipper



"Earphone" earphone, brass



"Show card" nylon string, show cards