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Review by Jordan Lacey

The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound Art - Sanne Krogh Groth & Holger Schulze (eds.). New York: Bloomsbury, 2020

The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound Art is a welcome addition to the growing volumes of texts dedicated to sound art theory and practice. It plays a particularly important role in broadening the discipline's awareness of twentieth-century thinkers and practitioners who have influenced the development of sound art. Many texts on sound art provide a history of the field, often holding up John Cage and Pierre Schaeffer as exemplary, typically with a nod towards Luigi Russolo and perhaps Murray Schafer. With the exception of Cage, none of these figures in the history of sound art are given much airtime in this volume. Instead, a multitude of other figures are foregrounded, with Kodwo Eshun and Pauline Oliveros most prevalent. For me, this is illustrative of the book's overall agenda: to challenge the hegemonic hold of white, typically European, men on the domain of sound art, thereby opening the domain to a richer and more diverse field of thinkers.

Krogh Groth and Schulze begin the volume with an introduction that presents a history of academic positionings of sound art, culminating with references to Cobussen, Meelberg and Truax's book *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sounding Art* – which asks the question “What is *sounding* art?”, the answer being that sounding art always exceeds the aesthetic in its diversity and that music and other art forms using sound should not be excluded from its definition – and a reference to theorist-curator-satirist (if I can call him that) John Kannenberg's (Museum of Portable Sound), “Is it Sound Art?” flowchart, where all arrows lead us to same conclusion – that sound art and music are, in fact, indistinguishable. They then step in with their own contribution to the domain: six “battlegrounds” they have identified within the field of sound art. The term battleground seems apt, as a number of the chapters are quite provocative in so far as they challenge dominant paradigms by proposing new narratives and histories. I find this a welcome intervention, as sound art can so easily center around conversations regarding space and aesthetics and the technical aspects of sound-making, without properly considering the social and political contexts of sound and sound-making and/or the capacity of sound art/artists to challenge these contexts.

It would be too much to try and succinctly summarize each of the battlegrounds here, especially given that each battleground contains as much diversity across its chapters as do the battlegrounds when compared with each other. That being said, here is a

fleeting attempt: **Battleground I** is environmentally and socially charged, exploring practices that challenge listeners to engage with the Anthropocene and the social as contemporary dystopias. **Battleground II** attempts to pull sound art out of its colonial tendencies by focusing on the practices of non-European artists (mainly coming from Indonesia, Nigeria, and Egypt). **Battleground III** is an exploration of theorists and artists exploring the sounds and gestures of the human body through orality, intimacy, VR (ambisonics), and the erotic (audioporn). **Battleground IV** explores the tension of sound art as practice with institutions that – academic and otherwise – collide with the radical intentions of individual and/or groups of sound artists operating in sociopolitical contexts. **Battleground V** is more philosophical, exploring the practice of sonic fiction as a form of sound art that produces new imaginative worlds. Foci include Afrofuturism, black noise, women sonic thinkers, and the unsound; it is here that Kodwo Eshun is predominantly mentioned. **Battleground VI** is an exploration of instruments created for and by sound artists. Across all six battlegrounds the editors have done an excellent job in offering a mix of theory and practice, with authors ranging from highly experienced musicological academics to seasoned practicing artists (and everything in-between).

All the chapters in this collection are worth reading as generative pieces that provoke thought and reveal themes. However, there are two chapters that stood out for me. The first is Sharon Stewart's *Inquiring into the Hack. New Sonic and Institutional Practices by Pauline Oliveros, Pussy Riot, and Goodiepal* (Battleground IV). Stewart's meticulous research digs deep into three very different types of individual/group practices to explore the ways in which they challenged academic and political institutions. I appreciated this chapter because it was a convincing argument, using real world examples, of how sound art can uniquely challenge institutional power in a way that has ramifications for people who may typically have never heard of, or have nothing to do with, sound art. Secondly, I very much enjoyed Yuri Landman's *Pickups and Strings. On Experimental Preparation and Magnetic Amplification* (Battleground VI). What I appreciate in Landman's chapter is the effortless blending of music and sound art, creating the sense that these are similar and not separate practices. This actually runs against the grain of most of the other chapters in the fascinating sixth battleground, which suggest (mostly indirectly) that the production and playing of musical instruments often reproduces expected forms, whereas sound art instruments challenge the idea and reception of what sound-making can be. However, as Landman points out, many musicians are also sound artists – it only takes a minor modification to make a musical instrument into a sound art instrument. His chapter reminded me that any young sound explorer who gets pleasure from screaming into their guitar pick-up is already a sound artist in the making...

There is one more battleground that I would like to have seen included: urban sound study/research/art. But of course I would be of this opinion, as this is my area of study. Elen Flügge does an excellent job introducing this topic into the book in **Battleground IV** with the chapter *Sounding in Paths, Hearing through Cracks. Sonic Arts Practices and Urban Institutions* by providing a rich discussion of theories

and practices related to the constellation of activities surrounding SARC (Sonic Arts Research Centre, Belfast). However, there is so much more that could be said in relation to this extremely fertile area of research (no criticism of Flügge here – one can only do so much with one chapter) which is most certainly a battleground given the challenges and pressures sound artists (and urban planners/designers) face when intervening in the public realm. Interestingly though, I found many of the names I might have expected to see in relation to this battleground appear in Holger Schulze's new edited book *The Bloomsbury Handbook of The Anthropology of Sound* (Sam Auinger, Marie Thompson, Jean-Paul Thibaud, Marcel Cobussen, amongst others). The timely arrival of this book (it turned up as I was writing this review) reminded me that urban sound art is inextricably bound to the dynamism of society and the lives that make it so. It made me wonder if perhaps urban sound studies will always exceed the question of sound art, which seems to be commensurate with what Groth and Schulze have shown with this new book: that sound art is so much more than the act of generating interesting sounds in space. In closing, this is a welcome and important book that greatly enriches the scope of the sound art domain and should be of considerable interest to both theorists and practitioners.