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FEATURES

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**John Wynne's**  
unique sound space

BY JULIAN COWLEY

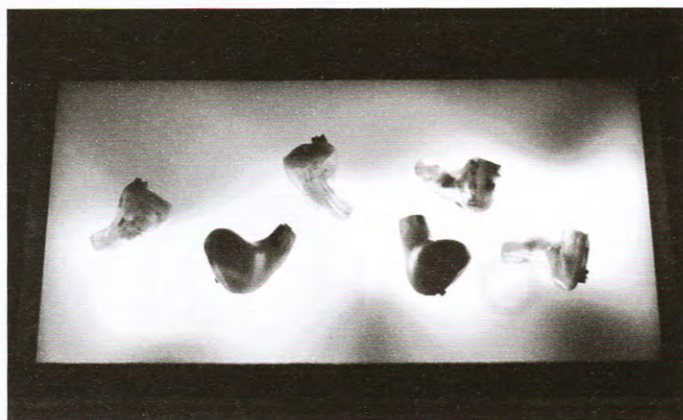
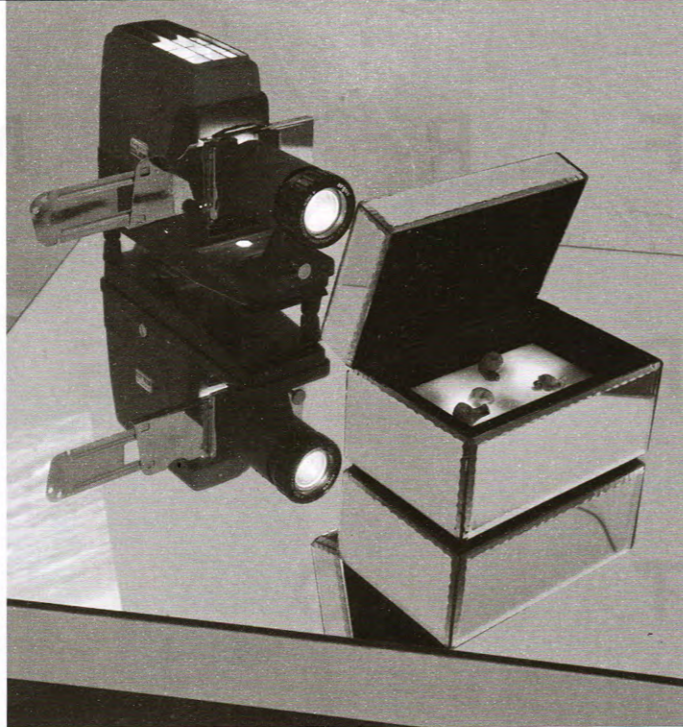
ON THE CD: *Transplant*



F R O M T H E  
P E R S O N A L  
T O T H E  
P H Y S I C A L  
J O H N W Y N N E  
R E C A L I B R A T E S  
O U R P E R C E P T I O N  
O F P H Y S I C A L S P A C E  
B Y J U L I A N C O W L E Y







John Wynne's sound art practice often recontextualizes artifacts in order to redefine physical space. In *Cold Atlantic* (far left) and *Hearing Loss* (left) his late father's hearing aids amplify silence producing a complex field of high-pitched feedback.

**A** CHILL-BLUE IMAGE OF OCEAN WAVES PROJECTS across the join of two white walls. At first, the image appears still, but then you notice the waves undulating gently. On a table in front of the image, and housed in a small casket with its lid raised, twelve hearing aids emit a complex field of high-pitched feedback. These are the ingredients of sound artist John Wynne's *Cold Atlantic*, shown recently at Toronto's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery. Wynne grew up in Canada; his accent reflects that, although he left in 1983. Across the Atlantic, in a studio set up in his south London home, Wynne runs the animated image from *Cold Atlantic* on his laptop and talks with candour and enthusiasm about the development of his sculpturally simple, yet emotionally resonant installation.

"When my father was in hospital, dying, his hearing aids would constantly fall out and get lost in the bedclothes, and we would spend time looking for them. Just after he died I made a piece called *Hearing Loss*, simply using feedback from six hearing aids he had left behind," explains Wynne. The title *Hearing Loss* is neatly ambivalent, poignantly so, suggesting not only the fading of a sense but also absence made audible, loss being heard. *Cold Atlantic* may seem more remote, yet that title bears a further intimate connotation for Wynne.

"Around the time my dad died, I was going through some of his slides. He was meticulous in organizing them. One showed just waves and the horizon. He had labelled it 'Cold Atlantic,' which was uncharacteristically poetic for him. The emptiness of this image worked well with the idea of loss and absence, especially as there was no sound source in *Hearing Loss* other than feedback, which is the amplification of nothing, in a sense.

"The first time I showed *Cold Atlantic*, in Vancouver, I used my Dad's slide projector. When Christof Migone asked to present the piece in Toronto I opted to use a tiny data projector, because I wanted the waves to be digitally animated. There are now twelve rather than six hearing aids; the others donated by a manufacturer. Each has a noise gate in it so there isn't just a flat tone, and if you crouch in front of them the feedback field changes." Wynne has also cropped the horizon from the image, leaving just waves and a sense of their endless propagation. Comparably, individual lives dissolve into the vibrational universe; yet life goes on. Such is the emotional resonance of *Cold Atlantic*.

Initially, Wynne felt this was a very personal installation. Now, as his father's memory fades by degrees, he feels he has licence to rework it. Such reworking and development of basic ideas has been

a recurrent aspect of Wynne's sound art practice. So too has his use of discarded materials. For years Wynne collected old loudspeakers; some he found abandoned on city streets. This hoarding culminated in a critically acclaimed installation realized in 2009 at London's Beaconsfield Gallery. It featured 300 loudspeakers, a player piano, and a vacuum cleaner, and it became the first sound work to be acquired by the Saatchi collection of contemporary art.

In the heart of *Installation for 300 speakers, player piano and vacuum cleaner* Wynne placed a player piano, painstakingly restored and adapted, with help from London-based pianola aficionado Rex Lawson, a friend and associate of Conlon Nancarrow. "Rex told me that I could use a vacuum cleaner to power it," Wynne explains. "I added a large wheel to slow the mechanism down, so it took a whole day to play a music roll, and I chose the longest from a selection of old rolls that Rex pulled from a drawer." On a recording of this installation, issued on CD, you can hear music from Franz Lehár's *Gypsy Love* seeping oh so slowly from that roll, while discreet wisps and haloes of synthesized sound sweep around the speaker stack.

"People expect a work involving 300 speakers to be really loud, but I like to confound expectations," Wynne observes. "I was interested in loudness when I was younger; now I guess I'm more interested in the other end of the scale, and in subtle movement of sound through space. Making this piece, I was thinking visually as well as sonically, trying to find a form that was self-supporting, yet safe enough for people to wander through it. I decided to stack the loudspeakers in a corner, with no need for scaffolding or wires from the ceiling." Speakers habitually deflect our attention away from their physical presence to their function of relaying sound, but *Installation for 300 speakers, player piano and vacuum cleaner* vividly foregrounds their material existence as

objects in a room. Through such recontextualization, Wynne's work opens up possibilities for fresh meanings and unforeseen associations.

A few years earlier, Wynne had travelled to take up a residency in Berlin, with numerous speakers crammed into his car and another large speaker strapped to the roof rack. Once there, he got sponsorship from a recycling company and made an installation with 207 loudspeakers, including East German designs he hadn't encountered before. "I started looking at all these speakers," Wynne recalls, "and it was like they were looking back at me—almost as if they had personalities. So I wanted to do something vaguely anthropomorphic with their arrangement." On the floor at Kunstfabrik gallery he distributed the speakers into eight groups, each with its own circulating synthesized sound. Above them, a wall speaker issued a descending Shepard tone, creating through auditory illusion, the impression of a continuously falling pitch. From within the gallery, planes could be heard passing overhead in the middle distance. Wynne welcomes such intrusion from the environment, and actively responds to it when synthesizing sounds for inclusion in a piece, creating a kind of dialogue with what is already there, or with what occurs unexpectedly during the preparation process. That Berlin installation was entitled *Fallender ton für 207 lautsprecher*. Wynne favours such matter-of-fact, neutrally descriptive titles for his site-specific work. They allow latitude for interpretation. Entries in the Kunstfabrik visitors' book testify that some found in the sound and layout of this loudspeaker sculpture an intense evocation of the September 11 attacks.

ON THE CD: *Transplant*

PHOTOS BY JOHN WYNNE (PREVIOUS PAGE), (CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) TONI HAFKENSCHIED, GAZELLI ART HOUSE, AND JOHN WYNNE  
PHOTO BY TIMOTHY WAINWRIGHT





AS IT IS, YOU CAN REALLY HEAR  
THE MALFUNCTIONING BODY:  
COUGHING OR WHEEZING, OR THE  
WEAKNESS IN PEOPLE'S VOICES.

"Sound art is still not well understood, I think," Wynne suggests. "There are a few curators now who specialize and have knowledge, but a lot of galleries don't know how to work with it and find sound art slightly problematic, imagining it to be very technical. The last thing on earth I could have imagined while I was making that piece was that Charles Saatchi would come along and snap it up. It was hard to part with it, because it involved materials I thought I hadn't finished working with." Wynne chuckles and adds, "But it did take a huge storage problem off my hands."

Perhaps Saatchi's interest in *Installation for 300 speakers, player piano and vacuum cleaner* is not so surprising. Correspondences to Wynne's practice of recontextualizing artifacts, in order to generate unexpected meanings and even to recalibrate our perception, might readily be found in the visual and plastic arts. His hearing aids, detached from their intended use, whistling in a mirrored jewel box, have the delicate suggestiveness of Joseph Cornell's surrealistic boxed assemblages. His speaker stack with Pianola has the aesthetic serendipity of a Robert Rauschenberg combine, and the monumental presence of a Louise Nevelson construction. But as the sound of planes in Berlin vividly demonstrated, the sonic dimension of Wynne's work can introduce dynamic and unexpected relationships, both within the enclosed gallery space and with the world beyond it.

"Existing ambient sound often becomes part of my site-specific installations," Wynne says. "There are times when the work may push that sound away, but it almost always comes back in." His *Installation no. 1 for high and low frequencies* was realized in 2011, in a London gallery space where artist Kate Terry was working at the same time, making a minimalist piece using threads. "It wasn't a collaboration," Wynne notes. "I was particularly interested in doing things with low-frequency waves coming from a massive subwoofer at either end of this long thin space. Kate was interested in working across the space."

"In a sense we were both making architectural interventions. The building participated. Beat frequencies really made the tin roof rattle. The sound I synthesized started off very low. Initially, people didn't notice it. Then, they thought it was coming from outside, along with the sound of planes or pigeons on the roof. Eventually, they recognized that it was actually being produced inside the space." A second installation of this kind was realized the following year in another London gallery,

situated near a busy three-way intersection. London buses regularly paused outside, and as their engines idled, low-frequency vibrations rumbled through the floor and entered into the piece.

These abstract, site-specific pieces coexist in Wynne's documentary-like projects. "There's a boundary between documentary and abstraction," he observes. "I'm trying to make that boundary permeable." For a year he was artist-in-residence at Harefield Hospital, a leading centre for heart and lung transplantation in Uxbridge, U.K. While in residence, he recorded sounds of the hospital, its machinery and devices, its beeps and routine bustle, and he talked with recipients of recycled organs. Photographer Tim Wainwright, his collaborator on this project, took still images of the place and the people: faces lined with anxiety, their eyes mixing gratitude with persistent fear; a mundane door-handle, contemplated through long, precarious days of immobility; surgical clogs splashed with workaday gore. "Tim had done other medical projects, and he sought me out for *Transplant*," Wynne explains. "I come from a medical family, so I wasn't put off by that aspect. In fact I had recently been working with the sound of alarms, so my initial response was, 'Great! Hospital alarms!' But then I became deeply interested in the personal side of it."

In the resulting twenty-four-channel photographic and sound installation (with a book plus DVD issued as documentary adjunct), Wainwright's images avoid sensationalism, while conveying continuation of life in proximity to the threat of death. Wynne handles sound with comparable sensitivity, recording individual insights and recollections of intense, often traumatic experience. Voices of patients, varied in character, are subtly counterpointed against the functional noise of a sophisticated and well-regulated environment.

"Tim and I didn't have an agenda," Wynne remarks. "We recorded fifty patients altogether. The only question I consistently asked was if they had any observations about sound in the hospital. A lot did. Practically tied to a bed, they couldn't see around the corner; but they could hear what was going on. Some listeners think the interviews were staged because the responses are so articulate. But being that sick is a long process, and I think those patients had rehearsed their story to themselves many times.

"The psychiatrist in the hospital was surprised when she heard how much more open people often were with us than with her. Talking to a

*Transplant*, a twenty-four-channel photographic and sound installation was produced when Wynne and photographer Tim Wainwright spent a year as artists-in-residence at Harefield Hospital, a leading centre for heart and lung transplantation in Uxbridge, U.K.

PHOTO BY TIMOTHY WAINWRIGHT





*Anspayaxw*, with photographs by Denise Hawrysis is a twelve-channel sound installation combining evocative environmental textures with voices speaking Gitxsanimaax, a language that makes striking use of breathy voiceless fricatives. Gitxsanimaax now barely survives in the Skeena River area of British Columbia.

psychiatrist they have to play a kind of game, appearing sick enough to need a transplant, but not too sick to survive or too mentally disturbed by the notion of a transplant. We developed ways of making people comfortable, and there's a surprising sense of intimacy in this piece. My approach to recording is quite obtrusive, positioning a big microphone close to someone's face, but a hospital is already highly technologized, so people weren't intimidated by a microphone or still camera. I'd sit off to one side and try to maintain eye contact. I decided not to manipulate the voices at all. As it is, you can really hear the malfunctioning body: coughing or wheezing, or the weakness in people's voices."

Medicine is just one of the discursive contexts within which Wynne's sound art has achieved definition. His practice has also taken shape in relation to ethnography, anthropology, linguistics, semiotics, and architecture. Nonetheless, he readily identifies specific musical inspiration that served as his springboard into sound art. "My partner, Denise Hawrysis, was studying at San Francisco Art Institute in 1983, when David Rosenboom was teaching there," he recalls. "I sat in on some of Rosenboom's classes and was intrigued. Then I heard his *Music from Brains in Fours*, a work triggered by brainwaves, and it just blew me away. Around the same time, in a friend's flat in New York, I heard Steve Reich's *Come Out*. Those two pieces made me realize that there is a whole way of working with sound that hadn't occurred to me. Denise signed out a Nagra tape recorder from the Art Institute, and I started to make field recordings and learned basic tape-manipulation techniques. Then, after moving to London, I spent all my time at the National Sound Archives, learning about *musique concrète* and electronic music."

Listening to Wynne's early piece *James Kamotho Kimani*, a sonic portrait derived from the vigorous speech rhythms of a resident of

Nairobi, it's easy to hear the direct impact of *Come Out*. In its use of the human voice as a pliable sound source, Reich's piece reverberates extensively, if in a less obvious manner, through a prominent strand of Wynne's work. The *Hearing Voices* project, which provided the focus for his doctoral research into language endangerment as an aspect of acoustic ecology, at London's Goldsmith's College, originated during a trip to Botswana. Watching television, Wynne was startled to hear a meaning-laden click emerge from the mouth of a Zulu newsreader. He had found sound he could work with. He contacted Andy Chebanne, a linguist at the University of Botswana, and they made high-quality recordings of the so-called "click languages," rapidly disappearing yet still spoken in regions of the Kalahari.

"I think part of my crossover with ethnography, anthropology, and linguistics is that some researchers in those fields are interested in what artists are doing," Wynne remarks. Social scientists, seeking to dislodge the Enlightenment gaze from its dominance within their disciplines, have embraced other sensory models, taking an acoustic turn; and elements of Wynne's work have consequently resonated strongly with some academic researchers. "A more basic reason," he suggests, "is that linguists are funded to go around the world making recordings, and often the sound quality is terrible."

When Wynne teamed up with Canadian linguist Tyler Peterson to realize *Anspayaxw*, his second endangered-language project, London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) stepped up to provide a grant.

*Anspayaxw*, with photographs by Denise Hawrysis, is a twelve-channel sound installation combining evocative environmental textures with voices speaking Gitxsanimaax, a language that makes striking use of breathy voiceless fricatives. Gitxsanimaax now barely survives in the Skeena River area of British Columbia. "When I was at school

in Canada we didn't learn anything about issues in the lives of the country's indigenous people," Wynne recalls. "I felt this huge gap in my knowledge, so I wanted to do a project that would help me understand some of those issues. Someone at SOAS directed me to Canada's West Coast. There are only about 400 speakers of Gitxsanimaax left, and most we worked with are middle-aged or older. We let people say what they wanted to say." *Anspayaxw* makes that language audible, not as a neutral medium but as a living environment, or an atmosphere hosting human consciousness. Language, which we inhabit daily and habitually take for granted, is witnessed here on a knife-edge, a fragile linguistic ecosystem, the spoken repository of a unique culture, edging towards extinction.

Although Wynne insists that theatre isn't one of his interests, in 2011 he provided sound design for Toronto's Necessary Angel Theatre Company's intense production *Andromache*. "Director Graham McLaren wanted sound that would be continuous throughout the whole play. I thought, 'How am I going to have any sort of presence while people are speaking?'" Wynne's solution to this problem was suggested by those installations combining high and low frequencies, which he was developing at the time. "It struck me that the human voice—the voice of the actors—communicates within a certain range, while I was interested in these other ranges right now. So I supplied continuous sound. It was almost like creating a site-specific installation within which the play happened."

Arsinée Khanjian played the role of Andromache. Her husband, movie director Atom Egoyan, attended rehearsals and had the opportunity to hear Wynne's contribution to the production. When Jonathan Reekie, director of Aldeburgh Festival in Suffolk, invited Egoyan to contribute to the Benjamin Britten centenary celebrations in November 2013, Egoyan suggested a collaboration with Wynne. At present

they are developing a site-specific piece for a studio on the music campus at Snape Maltings. Wynne explains that Egoyan, a classical-guitar enthusiast, is fascinated by footage of guitarist Julian Bream performing *Nocturnal Op. 70*, which Britten wrote for him. That film, which includes close-ups of the guitarist's fingers, and Bream's earlier sound recording of the piece are starting points for this collaboration.

"All sounds for the piece will be derived from those recordings," Wynne enthuses. "Some elements will probably be left unmanipulated, but there will also be abstracted sound. There's something about the scale of the studio and its wooden interior that reminds me of the inside of a guitar. It has a nice intimate feel. We've talked of exploding the sound spatially and temporally to fit the inside of that studio. In common with my other work, it will make use of the physical space, moving sound through it.

"In *Transplant* and the language works, in all of my installations, I try to create a feeling of time being suspended while you are in the space. Sometimes that involves literally stretching out sounds; in other works it's more nebulous, a very slow pace, a feeling of elongation. I guess I've been really lucky working in places where I'm given a lot of time in the actual space, composing the piece while picking up the rhythm of the place, the rhythms of the existing soundscape."

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**FYI:** For more about sound art in the context of physical space, please read Laura Paolini's article, "Charles Stankieveh, Resonating the Intangible" in *Musicworks* issue 106.