Laminated PAINT

Travis R. Austin

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Laminated PAINT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

LAMINATED PAINT

By Travis Austin, M.F.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018

Major Director: Stephen Vitiello, Professor, Graduate Program Director, Department of Kinetic Imaging

Though we may not perceive it, we are surrounded by material-in-flux. Inert materials degrade and the events that comprise our natural and social environments causally thread into a duration that unifies us in our incomprehension. Sounds reveal ever-present vibrations of the landscape: expressions of the flexuous ground on which we stand.
These works, musings, and theoretical inquiries provide the background for *Laminated PAINT*.
Playback is past juxtaposed with the present
**Box with No Sound and Interior Volume (after Robert Morris)**

*If he had never lived, the shape of art history since 1960 would be little different…*
Peter Schjeldahl on Robert Morris, The Village Voice; March 1, 1994

*I think that today art is a form of art history.*
Robert Morris, letter to Henry Flynt; August 13, 1962

Robert Morris’ *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* is a walnut box containing a speaker that plays back the sound of its own construction. In his book, *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art*, Seth Kim-Cohen writes that Morris’ *Box* “is a very early, if not the earliest, example of a work existing simultaneously, equally, as sculpture and as sound work. As such, Morris’ box also provides the earliest example of how such work might constitute its ontology. Box indicates where an expanded sonic practice might locate its values and how it might organize its relationships to and between process and product, the space of production versus the space of reception, and the time of making relative to the time of beholding.”¹

To fully experience *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* is to listen through a three-and-a-half-hour recording of the box’s construction. There are two distinct components: sound and unitary form. The duration of the sound is determined by the artist, while the cube is perceived in space temporally at the viewer’s discretion.

In keeping with event and word scores of the time that interwove process and product, Kim-Cohen proposes that the sound in Morris’ *Box* serves as instructions to build a copy. When I came across Kim-Cohen’s passage on Morris, I had been recording different material activations (sledgehammering a brick, kneading wet clay, twisting bundles of straw…) and presenting the recordings along side the resultant states of the materials. I was thinking about holistic relationships between material and sound, and the idea of “covering” a precursive work appealed to my musical background. *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* struck a chord with me because of the non-hierarchical relationship between its retinal and sound components. I set out to unify the separate components of Morris’ *Box* by bringing them together in the activity of the present.

![My replica of Morris’ Box](image)

I constructed a replica of the box and recorded the sound of shredding it with a miter saw. The remains would be placed in a speaker cone and activated by playing back the recording. I would loop the playback, continuously animating the material. This activity would be seen inside an open plinth through a plexiglass cube with the same dimensions as the original box. The experiential divide between the cube and the sound in Morris’ piece would be dissolved.

Upon constructing the piece and turning on the sound, the speaker cone kicked the finer sawdust particles up and out of the plinth, tracing the volume of the former box along the inner surface of the plexiglass. Through the ghostly form, the viewer’s attention is directed to the amalgamation within the plinth.

I commemorated my replica with a painting. Within the historical context of Morris’ *Box*, representational painting was considered a discipline of the past, an appropriate tense for the late state of my replica. The illusory space within *Box with No Sound* denies the temporal and spatial conditions required for sound. Thus, the painting reconciles the temporal differences within Morris’ *Box* by excluding object and sound from the intention of the work altogether. The visual of the box is admittedly strange, and I’m amused at myself explaining the significance of the painting: “...*but it's a sound art painting*...” Sound, an essential component of the work, can only be imagined within its illusory plane.

*Interior Volume* and *Box with No Sound* present unified aural and perceptual activities within their respective realms. The essential conditions for sound are presented in relation to two distinct representations of the subject: one spatial and one illusory. They differentiate from the stylistically subjective, abstract representationalism of visual music, and the conceptual objectification of sound in *musique concrete*.

If we are to anthropomorphize the box, we can relate it to Morris’ *Untitled (Box for Standing)*, an upright wooden box in which Morris performatively stood (as he will one day not be able to), and *Column*, a hollow rectangular column in which Morris stood and toppled over, landing him in the emergency room. When Morris performed in his work, he was demonstrating linkages between his objects and his body. Morris is well known for his essay *Notes on Sculpture*. In *Notes*, Morris discusses the nature of unitary form characteristic of Minimalism in the 1960’s:
“Characteristic of a gestalt\textsuperscript{3} is that once it is established, all the information about it, qua gestalt, is exhausted. (One does not, for example, seek the gestalt of a gestalt.) Furthermore, once it is established, it does not disintegrate.” He elaborates that “simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience. Unitary forms do not reduce relationships.”\textsuperscript{4}

It’s not so well known that \textit{Notes on Sculpture} began as a parody.\textsuperscript{5} Although it was refashioned into a more serious text at the request of his editor, some passages retain a parodical self-satisfied tone. Like the rationale within \textit{Notes on Sculpture}, \textit{Box with the Sound of its Own Making} toys with the rigidity of reductive discourse, and it’s evident that Morris intended the three-and-a-half-hour recording to be more impassive than revelatory. In a letter dated August 8, 1960, Morris writes to John Cage about his work, \textit{Wind Ensemble}: “Yes, I wanted a death of process here... a kind of duration of idea only. I don’t think the work goes very far toward changing the Focus from expressing or watching, which I want to do.”\textsuperscript{6} Soon after this letter to Cage, Morris produced his \textit{Box} (among several other works) and invited Cage to his studio. “When Cage came, I turned [Box] on... and he wouldn’t listen to me. He sat and listened to it for three hours and that was really impressive to me. He just sat there.”\textsuperscript{7} It’s clear that a concept was more important to Morris than the totality of the sound content. Cage’s full attention demonstrated to Morris that this work ceases to be conceptual once entirely listened to.

A few years after Cage’s studio visit, Morris choreographed and produced \textit{Site}, which includes the clamor of a jackhammer. I suspect that \textit{Site} was influenced by Cage’s visit: it interlinked ‘construction’ sounds with live performance. Morris continued producing minimalist forms, albeit without sound. Prior to writing \textit{Notes on Sculpture} he exhibited what he termed ‘unitary forms,’ describing them as both liberated and bound by their simplicity. They recall Constantin Brancusi, upon whom Morris wrote his MA thesis. Brancusi promoted the column from pedestal to object with \textit{Endless Column}, a title that is poetic as it is prescient. \textit{Endless Column} is said to have given birth to modern sculpture.\textsuperscript{8}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{3} I understand the word gestalt here to be synonymous with shape.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Morris, Robert. “Letters to John Cage.” \textit{October} 81, 1997 : p. 70
\item \textsuperscript{7} Ng, Tracee. “Robert Morris Artist Overview and Analysis.” \textit{The Art Story} Retrieved from \url{http://www.theartstory.org/artist-morris-robert-artworks.htm} ; accessed March 2018
\item \textsuperscript{8} Lanchner, Carolyn. “Constantin Brancusi.” New York, NY ; The Museum of Modern Art, 2010. Print. pp. 16-18
\end{itemize}
Given Morris’ personal interest in Brancusi, I don’t think that Morris felt his own box on a pedestal to be sculpture,9 but he strategically framed his practice as such in order to antagonize the criticism that was driving the market from within its own logic. After all, Morris is discussed more as a Postminimalist than a sculptor. “As Annette Michelson and Rosalind Krauss have established, Morris’ investigations operated through the dynamic of the ideally grasped Gestalt of the minimalist shape and the transgressive subversion of that cognitive certainty by the viewers’ temporally and spatially unfolding experience of differences in the objects actual experience.”10 Morris’ Minimalism, the “new limit and freedom for sculpture,”11 feels explicitly Cagean and Brancusian, and both are especially resonant in the work and writings he produced in the mid to late sixties.

Donald Judd wasn’t enamored: “Morris’ work implies that everything exists in the same way through existing in the most minimal way, but by clearly being art, purposefully built, useless and unidentifiable. It sets a lowest common denominator; it is art, which is supposed to exist most clearly and importantly, but it barely exists.”12 Cage’s critics had similar complaints about 4′33″. It appears that Morris, like Cage, effectively nailed the authoritative rigidity of his target audience. As these simple forms accrue complexity through the temporal, spatial act of perception, they read as springboards from which to investigate the phenomenological conditions of subjectivity. It is from here that Morris begins to diverge from Cage.13 I can also differentiate myself from Cage, because I find importance in aesthetic and subjective investigations. As long as there is human civilization, art will be produced, and subjective voices are essential to conversation.

Some of Robert Morris’ Untitled pieces, 1964, at Dia:Beacon, Beacon, NY


11. The closing line of Notes on Sculpture frames the situation of Minimalism: “The magnification of this single most important sculptural value, shape, together with greater unification and integration of every other essential sculptural value makes on the one hand, the multipart, inflected formats of past sculpture extraneous, and on the other, establishes both a new limit and a new freedom for sculpture. Morris, Robert. “Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris.” Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1993. Print. p. 8


Morris had rendered his walnut box a speaker cabinet: a gestalt that phenomenologically activates its audience. Where Morris’ was displayed upon a plinth, Interior Volume’s speaker cabinet is the plinth, further integrating the components of the work and the display.

I carried out Interior Volume not in the flippant spirit of Duchamp, but with Hollis Frampton’s (nostalgia) in mind. (Nostaglia) shows a series of photographs that burn on a hotplate. Each photograph is accompanied by commentary for the next photograph in the series, and so the audience is presented with simultaneous past and present elements. What may seem to be destructive acts are transformative moments from documents into animated events.

Still from Hollis Frampton’s (nostalgia), 1971

14. In the context of this discussion, the “Marshall” logo shifts the cabinet into pop art.
I was invited to present my work at the SOUND-IMAGE Colloquium at the University of Greenwich in November of 2017. There I met Mark Harris, a professor at Goldsmiths, University of London, and a former VCUarts faculty member. He said that I was too kind to Morris and his contemporaries. His advice was to exploit a shortcoming in the historical analysis of Morris’ work in order to open things up moving forward. Perhaps I had referenced him in a way that mostly leads my audience to back to Morris. Morris himself is criticized for riding upon the ideas of others. In The Village Voice Peter Schjeldahl writes that “Morris was an extrapolator, a sort of action critic whose game consisted in beating other artists at what could be seen, cynically, as their games.” And in Artforum Dena Shottenkirk writes in a slightly warmer review that over three decades his work typically fell “in sync with the tempo of the moment.” But you can’t say Morris doesn’t keep moving. In a letter he wrote to Henry Flynt, I get a good feel for his sensibilities: “Once one is committed to attempt [to effect changes in the structures of art forms] and tries it for a while- one becomes aware that if one wants "experience" one must repeat himself until other new things occur: a position difficult if not impossible to accept with large "idea" ambitions. So one remains idle, repeats things, or finds some form of concentration and duration outside the art- jazz, chess, whatever. I think that today art is a form of art history.”


At once

Continuously

Unchanging and ever-changing
PAINT

PAINT is a work in which I paint directly onto the surface of a video projection. The video depicts me painting myself into the corner of a room. The layered activity presents illusory space in temporal accordance with reality. Wet paint doubles as a projection surface, and dries at the same rate as the paint depicted within the projection. A description of the documented activities within PAINT could also serve as instructions:

- The corner of a room is masked with painter's tape
- A layer of black paint is applied to the corner and the paint begins to dry
- The painter’s tape is removed
- The layer of black paint dries
- A layer of white paint is applied to the corner with the exception of where the painter stands
- The painter stands in the corner until the white layer of paint becomes dry to the touch
- The painter walks away

These activities are metaphorical:

- Reduction may lead to a distinctive mark
- Reduction may limit one’s options
- Reduction is akin to painting oneself into a corner
- Beholding experience is akin to watching paint dry

By performing the activities I would actualize the metaphors. The gallery in which I was to perform wouldn’t allow paint on the floor, so I settled for video documentation. This afforded me more clarity of thought in carrying out the activities alone. I didn’t place any sort of entertainment device out of frame while videotaping so that I could give the situation my full attention. Feet planted amidst drying paint, my thoughts came to the forefront of my experience. I meditated on the appearance of the paint, noticing it change from glossy wet to matte dry. The textural transition indicated activity over a long duration, and in time I came to perceive the liveness of my immediate environment. With a trance-induced awareness of material activity, I looked to my jacket draped on a chair. The paint around me will be in a changed state once I’m able to walk on the dry surface, but I’ll interact with my jacket same as before. Despite its relative stability, I knew the material makeup of my jacket was degrading and transforming, albeit at a rate comprehensible only in my imagination. Drying paint had expanded my awareness of unseen material transformation by way of direct experience.

Every day of the gallery exhibition of PAINT, I painted along with my likeness in the video projection directly onto the projection surface. ‘Live’ paint was the site of perception for both material and representational aspects of the piece, and I could be seen simultaneously in both realms.

I documented a day’s gallery activity and made it available as a DVD edition. This lands as a punch line because the 5-and-a-half hour film lacks the essential live qualities of the work. I never wanted to watch PAINT in its entirety, but I came to find several points of interest in recording my subjective durational experience. These points of interest (and more!) are given dutiful consideration within my five-plus hours of directors commentary.
I did little to prepare for the recording session. I hoped to capture thought in the making, and improvisation would complement the temporal dynamics of the piece. The generative process would double as the product. My simple plan was to respond to the action on the screen, beginning with the application of painter’s tape and black paint. I expected that I would run out of insight somewhere within the first hour, and that I would respond to the mundanity on screen for the majority of the time. My expectations were mostly met, but mundanity led to the more fruitful moments. These were the departures from conceptual or anecdotal material toward observations of the materiality of the moving image and the screen.

Over time, my commentary became as reduced and static as the image I was attending to, but all the while I trusted that I was looking at a progression of images. This sensitized me to the passage of time to the point that I was able to process little else. With nothing perceivably changing on screen for four consecutive hours, my experience intensified. I eased the tension through an objective lens. *I know this problem will work itself out because that is the way I designed it.* I found assurance in knowing that I was subject to self-prescribed conditions.

Five hours in, my eyes and stomach began to ache. This was largely due to the layer of white paint introduced towards the end, turning on the majority of the pixel-lights at which I was staring. I displaced the physiological discomfort with tangential thought, tussling with myself through the home stretch until my likenesses relieved me by walking out of frame.
Vito Acconci’s prompt below cued me to record director’s commentary for PAINT. It came from his Fall 2015 class, Aesthetics of Information. The prompt encourages me to pit my work against itself, but I view the commentary track as a complementary layer, or a ripple, in temporal harmony with both the video and the initial activities of PAINT. The layered activity/video/commentary inspired the text for Laminated PAINT.

Do something that exists in time, that takes time (a piece of writing, a piece of music/sound, a video/animation, etc). Whatever is is you’re doing, put it down somewhere, in space (on paper, e.g. or on video, etc) - actually, instead of putting it down, you might just as well be putting it up, or across, or over, or through, or inside, or inside-out...

Use J.G. Ballard as a model: the way Ballard annotates The Atrocity Exhibition, more than 20 years later… Yes, he’s commenting, explaining, informing, correcting, changing, adding or subtracting, etc; but, just as much, he’s re-writing his novel, or writing a sequel, or writing a whole new novel altogether, next to the 1st one.

Do what Ballard did, at least for the time being: whatever piece/project you’ve done, or whatever piece/project you might be doing (after all, you might still be doing it) - whatever it is, now put something else next to it (or, if you want, on top of it, or under it, or inside it, etc. Now stand back & consider:

Can what you did 1st stand up to what you did later? Or does the 2nd take over? Could it be a draw? Are you prejudiced: if you want your 1st version to win, does that imply you’re a traditionalist (are you living in the past?) - or, if you want your 2nd version to win, does that mean you always want a 2nd chance (do you believe you always deserve a 2nd chance? do you always do better if you have a model to play off of? or do you always need something to overturn, do you always want to start revolutions…)
READING 5:

Marshall McLuhan/Quentin Fiore, from *The Medium Is The Massage (An Inventory Of Effects)* – eye versus ear, & vice versa/hearing versus seeing, & vice versa/public versus mass, & vice versa/public versus private, & vice versa/public versus individual, & vice versa/single versus many, & vice versa……

EXERCISE 5:

A. Do a project on paper – it could be on paper the size of a newspaper, like the NY Times, it could be on paper the size of a book-page, it could the traditional/normal/standard 8¼x11 piece of paper… Put text next to image next to different-looking-text next to drawing next to still-different-looking-text next to advertisement next to again-different-looking-text next to public-notice, etc… Put right-side-up text next to upside-down text next to on-its-side text next to image whether right-side-up or upside-down or on-its-side… Whatever you do, how do you continue from page to page, how do you go from page to page, how do you flow or do you even think of flow, do you think instead of ‘flee,’ or ‘fly,’ or ‘fli’, etc…

B. Now do the same project, or something like the same project, on a computer-screen: you can’t go from page to page on a computer, there aren’t any pages – you can go from 1 image to another, 1 image after another, but that might be cheating, that’s not using the medium for what it can or might be able to do… Instead, go *inside* 1 thing into another, go *through* 1 thing into another... Or go *outside* 1 thing into another thing outside it, onto yet *still another* thing outside that, into *still another*, etc…

READING 6:

J.G Ballard, from *The Atrocity Exhibition*, 1967-69, annotated by Ballard 1990

EXERCISE 6:

Do something that exists in time, that takes time (a piece of writing, a piece of music/sound, a video/animation, etc). Whatever it is you’re doing, put it down somewhere, in space (on paper, e.g., or on video, etc) – actually, instead of putting it down, you might just as well be putting it up, or across, or over, or through, or inside, or inside-out...

Use J.G Ballad as a model: the way Ballard annotates *The Atrocity Exhibition*, more than 20 years later… Yes, he’s commenting, explaining, informing, correcting, changing, adding or
subtracting, etc; but, just as much, he’s re-writing his novel, or writing a sequel, or writing a whole new novel altogether, next to the 1st one.

Do what Ballard did, at least for the time being: whatever piece/project you’ve done, or whatever piece/project you might be doing (after all, you might still be doing it) – whatever it is, now put something else next to it (or, if you want, on top of it, or under it, or inside it, etc). Now stand back & consider:

Can what you did 1st stand up to what you did later? Or does the 2nd take over? Could it be a draw? Are you prejudiced: if you want your 1st version to win, does that imply you’re a traditionalist (are you living in the past?) – or, if you want your 2nd version to win, does that mean you always want a 2nd chance (do you believe you always deserve a 2nd chance? do you always do better if you have a model to play off of? or do you always need something to overturn, do you always want to start revolutions...?)
Stills

Oil on canvas

(each) 13 x 18 in
Laminated PAINT (transcript)

The corner of a room is masked with painter's tape
00:01:19:11 Watching paint dry
00:01:41:17 Composing and listening
00:01:53:13 The essential fabric
00:02:25:06 An instruction

A layer of black paint is applied to the corner and the paint begins to dry
00:03:48:10 To paint on the floor
00:04:02:06 To watch a screen
00:05:00:16 To stand alive
00:05:41:12 Lost on the audience
00:06:16:04 On a wall
00:07:06:09 On wet paint
00:07:17:09 On whatever you see
00:07:55:13 To layer attention
00:08:19:01 In accordance with time
00:11:38:20 To trap myself

The painter's tape is removed
00:12:09:15 Until the paint dries
00:12:49:14 So it won't follow
00:13:04:09 My steps
00:14:24:16 My position
00:17:25:18 Knowing activity
00:17:50:25 Knowing half-life
00:18:07:08 Knowing duration
00:18:17:00 Beyond knowing
00:18:55:17 Beyond grasp
00:20:23:16 Pinning a particle
00:20:50:04 Affected by attention
00:22:03:20 To speak of music
00:22:54:12 Of human origin
00:23:16:22 Of speech
00:23:29:23 Of music
The fateful measure
The constant idea
The only reduction
The limit of notation
The limit of perfection
The omnipresent flux
The material essence
The inability to represent
The inability of paint
The spectrum foregrounded
The still figure
On flexuous ground
Unchanged
A video of paint drying
An illusory document
Within a projection
Dust and reflection
The vibrating white
On black ground
Folded in a void
Displayed on the screen
Each pixel a spotlight
Each pixel the same
In a co-opted form
In a bed of noise
With eyes closed
Perceiving motion
And accruing flux
Through meandering vessels
Straddling pixels
Straddling motion
Straddling a gradient
Straddling material
Black wedge, white space
Video noise, color spectrum
Video noise, black wedge
The figure wall
The dust on the surface
Straddling illusion
Time rewound
Time passed
Tape removed
Over and over
In sync with the image
Returning and departing

Achieving the product
Achieving passage
The only progress
The only sight
In representative form
In due time
Seeing my reflection
In the black
Intensely static
For the sake of myself
Turning to the sound
To the static motion
To be engaged
To no further interest
To no further change
An artificial place
Sealed from the light
As the bird knows light
Promised by technology
In regard to the present
An advantage
A skewed image
A dusty surface
A broken window
Against the instruction
Of the frontal plane
That divides our instincts
On behalf of our predators
Engaging boredom
To keep us moving
And summit the chain
For the privilege of staring

Much like before
Reassured by repetition
Retracing experience
Knowing it moves
Through the image
Knowing it moves
For nothing changing
For the sake of myself
To find a new thread
In sync with the image
Returning and departing
03;25;34;22 Beyond all interest
03;29;10;22 To nowhere
03;29;49;11 With nothing to say
03;32;27;27 Based on my interest
03;33;00;21 In a finite form
03;33;15;07 Made impossible
03;35;00;17 By other eyes
03;36;44;25 By other diversions
03;36;52;12 From a self-solving problem
03;40;27;20 Kept in order
03;41;07;22 However bright
03;43;34;00 And liquid light
03;44;02;21 A solution
03;44;52;21 In a lava lamp
03;45;58;19 Layered
03;47;00;21 For two weeks straight
03;47;23;17 Forty layers of paint
03;47;32;27 For quite a relief
03;51;29;11 A thing of less interest
03;52;53;20 A timeless lie
03;53;47;20 To be melted down
03;54;19;13 Repurposed
03;58;26;20 Remembered
03;58;39;01 And forgotten
04;06;40;17 In the lines of the form
04;06;53;03 And the motion
04;07;17;13 Fading into black
04;07;39;20 Around the lines
04;07;58;28 Between white and black
04;08;30;08 A band of shades
04;08;34;17 In an after image

The layer of black paint dries

04;11;56;28 Ever the same
04;11;58;10 And gone too soon
04;12;53;13 In pixels and dust
04;13;44;06 The figure ground

A layer of white paint is applied to the corner with the exception of where the painter stands

04;16;16;10 Fading in
04;16;55;04 Painting
04;18;04;07 Still from the action
04;18;38;28 My shirt a screen
04;20;55;10 Laminated tape
04;21;13;10 In temporal accordance
04;21;44;29 With unseen motion
04;21;57;05 With the standard of boredom
04;22;44;20 Painting along
04;23;14;01 Started over
04;23;26;04 In succession
04;23;28;20 What I am seeing
04;23;30;08 In the projection
04;23;34;20 Performing an action
04;23;36;22 I’d just performed
04;23;38;09 Mimicking
04;24;00;21 In succession
04;24;06;27 When I was painting
04;24;13;14 When I was done
04;24;22;10 When I was content
04;25;06;19 With fewer options
04;25;14;25 Means to an end
04;25;43;26 Means of reduction
04;25;49;25 Means to a mark
04;27;14;19 Of the composer
04;27;16;22 Of the audience

The painter stands in the corner until the white layer of paint becomes dry to the touch

04;29;19;04 To see
04;29;23;19 An image
04;29;36;12 To see oneself
04;30;09;21 To see a figure
04;30;48;07 Seeing being seen
04;31;19;05 Subjectively looking
04;31;28;22 Objectively acting
04;32;18;04 A pyramid scheme
04;32;41;10 For a new foundation
04;32;44;12 Absent the black wedge
04;33;03;01 With tired arms
Laminating time
Out of accordance
Without instruction
Like a description
Of an image in braille
Molten down
And cast in new form
In director's comments
Conflated with film

Tasked with words
And taking time
From the enduring image

The painter walks away
Impermanence is flux

Fingerprints and dust cover Donald Judd’s *Meter Boxes* at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art
Sound is a projection surface for subjectivity

Experience as figure
Flux as ground
Subjectivity is a projection surface for sound
Experience as ground
Flux as figure
View of *Laminated PAINT*, The Anderson, Richmond, Virginia, 2018
Photo by Patrick Harkin
**Laminated PAINT**

*Laminated PAINT* is a mixed-media installation consisting of glossy white walls, wall text and a speaker cabinet that projects a turbulent field of sound. The sound and installation designs foreground direct experience while alluding to my own precursive work and theoretical courses of inquiry.

*Acousmatic sound* describes sound apart from its origins. It consists of the material and textural qualities that emanate from what Pierre Schaeffer called *sonorous objects*. Schaeffer derived the term from *akousmatikoi*: followers of the teachings of Pythagoras. Pythagoras would deliver his lectures from behind a curtain so that his disciples would focus on the lecture and not the lecturer. We experience *acousmatic sound* though the veil of a speaker, disassociated from its source. The design of my speaker cabinet alludes to Pythagoras the lecturer. It stands at my height of 6’2”, and my boots are displayed in the open space of the base, visualizing my dual presence and absence. I had put forward a similar composer/cabinet relationship with *Suspended Umbrella*, in which I substituted myself with an amplifier in the reception of rain-sound under an umbrella. Presenting the material cause-and-effect chain comprised of its components, it is a program for live sound that exhibits the absence of the programmer.

The cabinet in *Laminated PAINT* veils three *Soundlazer* speakers. I first came across the *Soundlazer* while searching for directional speakers with which to translate some of my virtual reality sound pieces into physical space.\(^{19}\) A *Soundlazer* speaker pointed at a wall behaves like a laser pointer on a mirror. It gives the impression of sound emanating from whatever point is ‘illuminated’ by its sound beam.\(^{20}\) I’ve mounted mine to electronic oscillating bases.

![Oscillating Soundlazer speakers unveiled](image1.png) ![A Laminated PAINT audience member looks for hidden sound sources in the walls](image2.png)

Like the filmmaker Michael Snow, I’m bringing out latent possibilities of my hardware through mechanized movement. While Snow’s camera serves as a surrogate eye for the viewer, *Laminated PAINT* directs the audience’s subjective eye to investigate the immediate environment. The shifting sounds seem to come from the walls themselves. This direct experience of motion recalls another project of mine, *Monad*, which involves a vibrating projector that agitates a still image, visually amplifying the minute vibrations of a tactile transducer.

![Monad: A contact mic is affixed to a spring-mounted projector. An agitative transducer, mounted to the body of the projector, receives its signal from the contact mic. Upon activation, the still projection of a single white pixel becomes a moving image.](image3.png)

\(^{19}\) As an audio composer, the x-y-z spatial plane of virtual reality sound design was naturally appealing. I’m interested in relationships between virtual and material environments, and I’ve felt an artist/audience divide in many live electronic music performances. A laptop-anchored performer is visually uninteresting and often disconnected from the audience, but the stage dynamic is illuminating. With live music, this divide is typically addressed by way of spectacle.

Paul Chan writes that Paul Sharits and his contemporaries (including Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton) were “among a generation of film artists in the 1960’s who developed a practice and a mode of thinking that rejected the representational conventions of cinema in favor of building moving images that reimagined and recombined the fundamental units of film into dazzling and sometimes disorienting effect… It was the birth of spectral materialism. And the property of time was no exception.” The property of sound was no exception either. Artists of this era were reckoning with a post-Cagean landscape through subjective, multi-disciplinary investigations of time-based media. I’ve followed suit. Leading up to Laminated PAINT, I’ve given particular attention to the spectral materialists and the Postminimalist investigations of Robert Morris. For now, and perhaps the long run, I’ll happily frame my practice as post-minimal, harmonious with Christoph Cox’s materialist sound theory.

“… For the most part, contemporary sound artists and their curators have been interested in negotiating the visual, rather than rejecting it wholesale. In fact, the very tension of such negotiation is what animates this uncertain art form operating between music and visual art, medium specificity and a postmedium condition.” Cox also writes that “For Nietzsche, matter itself is creative and transformative without external agency, a ceaseless becoming and overcoming that temporarily congeals into forms and beings only to dissolve them back into the natural flux, an ‘eternal self-creating’ and ‘eternal self-destroying… monster of force, without beginning, without end.’ Nietzsche’s name for this flux is ‘will to power’…”


Cox discusses the nature of sound in accordance with Nietzsche’s flux of becoming that “forms empirical individuals – dramatic poems, the figure of the hero on stage, the stage itself, we spectators – and equally dissolves them back into its cauldron of forces and intensities… Music makes audible the dynamic, differential, discordant flux of becoming that precedes and exceeds empirical individuals… Representing and symbolizing nothing, it presents a play of sonic forces and intensities.” The medium of sound evades disciplinary constrictions. This is why I find the term sound art problematic: It feels like a disciplinary constriction.

The postmedium condition of sound is readily apparent in Boomerang, a video directed by Richard Serra in which Nancy Holt is disoriented by delayed playback of her speech: “I have a double take on myself. I am once removed from myself… we are hearing and seeing a world of double reflections and double refractions.” This is disembodied self-perception, and sound as disorientation in space. Boomerang captures sound’s defiance of singularity. As discussed in the relational sound theory of Lawerence English, listening is inherently subjective, thus an idealist or materialist reduction of sound is impossible. To speak objectively of sound is to assume a degree of insularity. Schaeffer, after all, abandoned his own concept of the sonorous object. Perhaps he found that his descriptors for non-significant sound were inadequate to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. The label musique concrete is problematic as any musical genre, but Schaeffer helped give language to a phenomenological condition. Acousmatic sound is ripe for dialog with twentieth century sculptural theory concerning the behavioral space of the viewer.

The form of the cabinet is decidedly minimal in Laminated PAINT, but it’s not idealistic or singular. The cabinet-figure against the room-ground phenomenologically activates the beholder’s experience retinally and aurally. The anthropomorphized gestalt faces away from a back corner. It may come to be seen as a fellow observer as the audience investigates the room at their own discretion.

Engagement with art is a matter of attention which can be limited by disinterest. Michael Baxandall’s study of Renaissance Art, Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy, argues that early Renaissance masters assumed and advanced the quotidian talents of their viewers. Baxandall has a great definition of taste: “Much of what we call ‘taste’ lies in the conformity between discriminations demanded by a painting and skills of discrimination possessed by the


25. “Schaeffer was attracted to the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, founder of ‘phenomenology.’ Phenomenology disregards the traditional philosophical distinctions between ‘subject’ and ‘object,’ ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’ and instead attempts simply to describe the contents of experience without reference to its source or subjective mode… In the case of sound…phenomenology attempts to ‘reduce’ (separate or distill) signal from source, and to restrict itself to describing the differences among sounds themselves.” Cox, Christoph and Warner, Daniel, ed. “Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music.” New York, NY ; Bloomsbury, 2004. Print. p. 76
beholder. We enjoy our own exercise of skill, and we particularly enjoy the playful exercise of skills which we use in normal life very earnestly."

I encourage my audience to exercise relational, multi-disciplinary skills. Soundlazer speakers are marketed as music listening devices, which I find to be a disservice to their target market. I have instead used their shrill sound quality and radical spatialization to associate the experience of movement with the ‘wet paint’ walls. The presentation delivers direct experience of material flux in an instant, inspired by the transformative activities of PAINT.

I’ve painted the walls of the gallery space glossy white, creating the illusion of wet paint. The viewer also encounters a large body of text composed of graphite directly on the wall. It is a poetic transcription of my commentary for the DVD set of PAINT. The poem orients the reader within the multi-layered experience of the author. It includes contemplations of site, material, multitrack recording, performance, composition, and perception: fruits of the precursive activities of PAINT. With a production time of eighteen hours, the graphite text on the wall continues a thread from PAINT by including the gallery as a site of the work.

The speaker cabinet design in Laminated PAINT also continues a thread from Interior Volume and Box with No Sound by representing a figure while foregrounding its absence. This kind of juxtaposition has been a running theme in much of my work. Like Interior Volume, Laminated PAINT presents its subject within a transformative moment. Where Interior Volume directs the viewer’s attention into an underworld within the plinth, Laminated PAINT directs attention around, rather than in or on, the plinth.

While the rigidity of the speaker cabinet noticeably contrasts the field of sound, *Laminated PAINT’s* components share the stage democratically. The pairing of minimal form and sound was influenced by Robert Morris’ *Box with the Sound of its Own Making*. I’ve found such a form/sound juxtaposition to have two essential reductions: idea and movement.

By alluding to past works of mine, *Laminated PAINT* collapses the timeline of my recent personal trajectory. In effect and concept it recalls the sculptural reduction of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the monolith: a mysterious, sound-emitting beacon of universal consciousness. It came to mind as soon as I decided to vertically orient the cabinet. *2001* depicts a technology that could leave us for dead en route to its programmed destination. The film concludes with collapsed time and space, which resonates with the reductive investigations of Minimalism.

Because of the cold disinterest in its human characters, the first thing I did upon finishing Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* was to look up its release date. I wanted to see if it preceded *2001*. It did by a year. Where we view *2001* as fellow humans, *Wavelength* asks us to inhabit the singular eye of a machine, its forward advancement undeterred by the murder of a character played by none other than Hollis Frampton. In a reverse-(nostalgia) move, Snow halts *Wavelength* conclusively, inconclusively, upon a still image: as good as any way to wrap a thing up.