Trusting Serendipity
A Conversation with

John Phillips and Carolyn Healy

BY VIRGINIA MAKSYMOWICZ

Carolyn Healy is an installation artist who began her career with an exhibition of small, abstract sculptures made of found objects at the Marian Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, in 1979. Since 1987 she has created numerous large site-specific installation pieces, some for performance events and many in collaboration with sound and video artist John Phillips. Her work has been shown at Carnegie Mellon University; Symphony Space; the Cini Foundation; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; Crosswaves Festival at the Annenberg Center, Philadelphia; Eastern State Penitentiary; the Museum of American Art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; and as part of the International Computer Music Conference in Ann Arbor in 1998 and in Beijing, China, in 1999. John Phillips’s tape works have been performed at New York City dance and theater venues, international electronic art festivals, and on nationally syndicated New American Radio. His live sound and video performances have been featured in numerous venues in Philadelphia and New York.

Virginia Maksymowicz: Much of your work relies on “collecting”—in Carolyn’s case, objects, or in John’s case, sounds. Are you both collecting all the time, or do you start your scavenger hunt when you begin working on a particular installation?

Carolyn Healy: It’s a bit of both. I always have my eyes open while walking the streets. I also have people who offer me things, and then I have a circuit of suppliers whom I tend not to visit until I have something underway.

VM: Are you attracted to certain categories of junk?

CH: Part of it is economic. The recycling places tend heavily toward metal, which they sell by the pound. I like metal, but I’m always looking for other things. They may show up in thrift stores or on the street or in dumpsters. I’m attracted by texture and shape more than color and tend to avoid anything too recognizable.

John Phillips: I used to collect sounds very directly by walking around with my recorder. But then my tools changed. Now I’m able to fabricate any sound. So instead of merely collecting interesting sounds with a microphone as I did 10 years ago, I can modify them so that they become other things. For example, I’m able to record Carolyn’s inhaled breath and make that into many different kinds of sounds. In Limbic Pentometer, 60 percent of the soundtrack
was created by me hitting or knocking her sculpture and recording the results. I wanted the sounds of the piece to be in the piece; the rest was heavily modified.

VM: Your installations combine sound, light, and objects. Have you made pieces in which the sculptures generate their own sound mechanically?

JP: No, we don’t do that. But often people think that the sculptures are making their own sounds.

CH: That kind of ambiguity happened in Growth Factor. There were looping cables that people stepped over or through and a heavy-duty, intense soundtrack. It was supposed to be primordial. People were startled by the sudden shifts in sound; they definitely associated their movements with changes in the sounds around them.

VM: I asked the question because I was thinking of Tim Hawkinson’s sculptures, which generate their own sounds. Or artists like Bill and Mary Buchen, whose work, although not electromechanical, relies on the wind or people touching it to make the sounds.

JP: One of the major events in my art education was David Tudor’s Rainforest, which was here in Philadelphia in 1982 in an empty building on 15th and Walnut. That was a big deal for us. All of the objects and sound came together.

CH: I think we come at sound with a different intention; it sets a mood. So it has to be a little more controlled than auto-generated sound.


VM: I could go in several directions at this point: collaboration, artistic influences, mood. What do you want to address?

JP: It might be interesting to know that as collaborators we work alone in separate studios; we both need a lot of independence. An unusual thing is that Carolyn went to music school. I was a painter. We cross-fertilized and eventually switched disciplines. So there’s an understanding on Carolyn’s part of what sound does, and there’s an understanding on my part of what she’s up to visually.

CH: Our mode of collaborating is to give each other complete, separate space. When we begin, we agree on an idea that we both can chew on. Then we go our own ways for quite a while before we even see what the other is doing. Eventually we give each other feedback—that’s when the respect and the knowledge of each other’s discipline come in. He has to listen to me, and I have to listen to him.

JP: But the fact is that we don’t have to say that much to each other. Occasionally, I’ll say, “Well maybe this or maybe that,” or she’ll say, “I don’t like that particular sound.” Amazingly, we’re almost always in agreement about whatever makes up the intangible core of the project.

VM: You’ve known each other for 40 years, since high school. I didn’t realize the extent of your “switch” in disciplines. In some cases, like with Newton and Helen Harrison, Helen grew into it, first assisting, then becoming involved in the ideas, and finally collaborating.

JP: The big thing that happened to us is that we got involved with a pair of actors. That’s when we got on stage and that’s when I started doing sound work. It was a whole different situation. Carolyn went from making small sculptures to making an entire stage set for Symphony Space. We both went from zero to 60 in a lot of ways: size-wise, scale-wise, and audience-wise.

VM: When was that?

CH: 1987. These were experimental theater artists with La Mama and Andrei Serban. We adopted their method—giving each other complete autonomy and trusting in serendipity.

VM: How did this come about?

JP: We had mutual friends. They had a project: a four-hour performance of Molly Bloom’s soliloquy from James Joyce. They said, “This is what we do. We’re open to other people doing things. What do you want to do?” I very clearly remember walking around the block and then deciding to do sound pieces between each of the pauses—there was no punctuation in the piece, but she took seven breaks—plus opening music. Carolyn said, “I’ll do the stage set.” So it evolved.
CH: And the lighting. I'd never done theater lighting. I had to learn in a hurry.
JP: It was incredible. Carolyn and I realized how much we enjoyed the dark, the lights, the synergy created by sculpture and sound together. The actors had their own thing, but we realized that we could do our work without them.
CH: To be in a time-based medium really suited us.
VM: Your work is also theatrical in how you control your audience: your installations are in darkened rooms that people have to enter, with limited paths to walk through or around. In a sense, you are presenting something closer to theater than sculpture.
CH: But I'd like to think that the audience is free to choose points of perspective through where they stand or sit or how long they stay there before moving. We don't control any of that. It's self-directed. We did one installation where you could lie down. It really brought the experience into focus.
VM: When I walked around Limbic Pentameter for the first time, one of the projections came on, and I saw my shadow in the projection. It was an interesting experience, as if I had become part of the piece.
CH: That was definitely intentional. That's a way that theater inhabits the installation.
VM: There's a parallel to people not knowing if they are setting off the sounds themselves. With the shadows, there were moments when I wasn't sure: Is that me? Is that not me? Am I making this movement? Are they controlling it?
CH: That surprised us the first time it happened. Subsequently we learned that we like having people imagine that they're doing things rather than actually having to create an interactive system that inevitably becomes predictable.

JP: We've learned that if you pace things in the tempo of human breathing or movement, then when the sounds or the lights change people tend to think they're having some effect on it. They'll ask us: Did we make this up? Is that really happening? We shrug and don't say anything. What could be more wonderful? It's really rhythmic, not in a musical sense but in a physical sense. If things change as you move around, then you respond.
CH: From the very beginning, we learned how effective computer controls are: we can choreograph the light and sound with long loop cycles, 25 or 30 minutes, long enough that people lose track and sense an endless evolution. Then you begin to wonder what is causing what.
VM: In Limbic Pentameter and Growth Factor, as other people were walking around, I could never tell if the person next to me was doing something. It forced me to interact with other viewers.
CH: That makes me think of Nmesh, where I worked with fleeting reflections from mirrors mounted on poles and light sweeping around the room. Viewers had to turn their heads to catch something that appeared briefly in their peripheral vision. The piece was metaphorical: it was about the impending death of my mother.
VM: Do you think that the relationship between sound and sculpture comes more easily than between sound and, for example, painting?
JP: I think that sculpture and sound go together because sculpture is three-dimensional and sound is three-dimensional. We live in a world where there are sounds and objects around us all the time.
CH: Installation, especially, is like a landscape in which you're accustomed to hearing natural sounds coming from all different points. There's something about time being built into wandering around our installations that makes them work.

For more information: <http://terragizmo.net/Healy&Phillips/>.

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