

Sound Object analysis

Mandy-Suzanne Wong

Department of Musicology, University of California, Los Angeles, USA
mandywong@ucla.edu

Abstract

Pierre Schaeffer coined the term "sound object" (*objet sonore*) to describe a sound from which a listener brackets out all referential meaning, taking instead an aesthetic attitude toward the sound's intrinsic parameters. Years later, microsound composer Curtis Roads redefined the sound object as a "basic unit of musical structure, generalizing the traditional concept of note to include complex and mutating sound events on a time scale ranging from a fraction of a second to several seconds." Contrastingly, Chris Cutler identifies the sound object with the "found (or stolen)" sampled sound. My paper evaluates the term "sound object," with these three definitions, as a tool for analysis of avant-garde music and sound art. Sound object analysis is hence the analysis of music and sound art in terms of sound objects. I attempt to apply sound object analysis to sonic experiences that defy description in traditional musical terms: Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* and improvised electroacoustic music by the American duo Mem1.

The term "sound object" suggests that a sound is a discrete entity, set apart from context to various extents. To conceptualize sound as reified and objectified is to adopt an attitude towards it of the kind described above. Thus one might say that "sound object" is a metaphor for that peculiar listening stance. This, I believe, is the greatest strength of sound object analysis: the importance it places on the listening subjectivity. However, the sound object is also problematic. In its determination to separate sound from context, the concept "sound object" may obscure the human factors that give rise to aesthetic sounds. Lucier and Mem1 strain the sound object metaphor even as they showcase its analytical advantages.

This paper is part of my forthcoming dissertation on the creative potential and philosophical implications of the term "sound object."

CV

Originally from Bermuda, Mandy-Suzanne Wong is a PhD candidate in Musicology at the University of California, Los Angeles. She has presented at the Hawaii International Conference on the Arts and Humanities and the Graduate Student Conference in Musicology at Harvard University. In 2008, her paper on Feldman's *Turfan Fragments* won an honorarium from the College Music Society. Mandy-Suzanne's current research interests are the philosophy and aesthetics of contemporary experimental music. Her dissertation is on the term "sound object," coined by Pierre Schaeffer, and materialistic notions of sound that have subsequently shaped recent conceptions of music.