

of deeper reflections on the social and political struggles of the era, or on the prevalence of class and privilege within the avant-garde scene, although there is some mention here of the frequent misogyny of the counterculture. Indeed, numerous other studies are currently emerging of the London art scene in the 1960s and 1970s that address these sociopolitical contexts and the wider 'field of cultural production', notably from art historians such as Amy Tobin and Catherine Spencer, as well as volumes by Lisa Tickner (Books *AM438*) and Thomas Crow. It is history rooted in such contexts that our own era needs in order for the past to remain a wellspring of hope.

David Curtis, *London's Arts Labs and the 60s Avant-Garde*, John Libbey Publishing, 2020, 212pp, £24.99, 978 0 861967 48 3.

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## Cathy Lane and Angus Carlyle: Sound Arts Now

'I understand that there is a history, a lineage, but to be honest, it's a lineage that, up until this point, I have felt excluded from.' The London-based artist and musician Evan Ifekoya, one of 20 practitioners interviewed by Cathy Lane and Angus Carlyle for this new volume from Uniformbooks, sums up something of the imbalance that the editors seek to counter. A collection of meandering but geographically and socially contextualised discussions - almost like qualitative research materials - takes us from Brighton to Beirut and beyond, in many cases via Skype or Zoom, to establish some of the contemporary geographies, sociologies and economies of sound arts while looking beyond a network of 'white men from the global north'.

Given the difficulty of defining who might be in that network having read this book, it seems to have been refreshingly expendable for Lane and Carlyle's interlocutors (which is not to deny its existence or downplay the difficulty of reacting against and through exclusionary canons). One notable point about this set of artists, however, is the sheer range of occupations in which they are steeped, from computer engineering to investigative journalism. Perhaps the task for many contributors has been to negotiate the (white, male) history of their own discipline by shuffling across to



Elsa M'bala, performance in the field, 2017,  
photo by Simone Gilges

another, whose traditions and institutions feel, to a limited extent, more up for grabs.

One familiar route into the field for this reviewer was that described by Adam Basanta, Caroline Devine, Khaled Kaddal and a few others: via guitar-based pop/rock music and onwards through various forms of experimental and 'noise' performance. But for others, including Ifekoya and Maria Chavez, the passage was via club and DJ culture. Then there are the conservatoire or formally trained musicians, such as Jennifer Walshe and Lina Lapelyté, as well as those steeped in the classical traditions of their own country - Budhaditya Chattopadhyay discusses the looping temporality of Indian music, for example. (Interestingly, it is mainly non-European/US-born artists who feel comfortable referencing John Cage and the western minimalist canon, as if it represented a heavier weight of hegemony for others.) Some practitioners, such as Mikhail Karikis and Lapelyté, have seized on classical formats such as opera after moving into sound arts practice, using them as vessels for multi-modal expression.

And all this is only to cover one broad avenue of access to sound art, through music. There is also a cultural geographer interviewed in the book (*AM* Kanngieser), a trained newsreader (*Yang* Yeung), a curator (*Jau-Lan* Guo), filmmakers and more. So, bearing this occupational diversity in mind, what, if anything, are the binding themes and forms of sound arts now? It's a question probably best ducked, or answered tangentially, by example. For some practitioners, such as Basanta and Chavez, a sense of the visual or sculptural aspects of musical performance seemingly led them to focus on the more-than-auditory dynamics of their work, and from there towards gallery spaces and an identification of their practice, almost on institutional grounds, as 'art'. For others, such as Kanngieser and Lawrence Abu Hamdan, the concern has been with recording or sonic reconstruction as an investigative tool, that concern being directed by a specifically activist purpose; one thinks of Kanngieser's auditory records of the experiences of Pacific communities threatened by rising sea levels and Abu Hamdan's work with Forensic Architecture using foley props to help former inmates of Syria's Sednaya Prison reconstruct the sonic - and therefore architectural - dimensions of a space in which they were kept in darkness (*Interview AM407*).

The utilisation of sound as sociological resource is taken in different, more archivist directions by Chattopadhyay, whose *Decomposing Landscape* captures Santhal tribal drumming patterns familiar from his Bengal childhood, and by Hong-Kai Wang and Karikis's projects with retired workers to reanimate auditory labour-scapes: from Taiwanese sugar factories to a Kentish coalmine. Indeed, the sense of sound art as social document is seemingly now established enough within the field to be *détourned*, as in Walshe's extraordinary *Aisteach* project, which involved creating a sound archive for an imaginary Irish avant-garde, thereby proposing 'a history where colonisation didn't happen.'

The common thread here is about placing sound in context, real or imagined, in a way that can establish connections with other media, and with political, geographical and historical modes of enquiry. Carlyle and Lane offer ballast to this speculation by noting an increasing emphasis, across sound arts over the past 20 years, on listening rather than exploring sound as

a subject-centred practice, often coupled with outputs that are not ‘sound-realised’. In future, it will be interesting to trace the geographical spread of sound arts. While many non-western hubs appear to have been established – in Hong Kong, Taiwan, India – some artists, such as the Cameroonian Elsa M’bala, appear to be working with tenuous infrastructural support. But the future is open: ‘What we can say,’ the editors conclude of sound art today, ‘is that it’s constantly shape-shifting.’

*Sound Arts Now*, Cathy Lane and Angus Carlyle, Uniformbooks, 2021, 240pp, pb, £14.00, 978 1 910010 26 6.

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## Alexandra Moschovi: A Gust of Photo-Philia – Photography in the Art Museum

Despite the title of Alexandra Moschovi’s book, photography didn’t exactly blow open the doors of museums. Rather, it seeped in slowly, permeating their exhibitions and collections one genre and format at a time: from fine art photography to photojournalism, cyanotypes to Polaroids, colour to digital. This process reveals an inherent conservatism to institutions, a purist ethos that was challenged only by the best efforts of curators to incorporate photography within their remits, and that was achieved in intermittent, incremental stages. Furthermore, as the author points out, any complacency regarding photography’s acceptance in museums should be tempered by looking at more recent points of contention: the display and collection of crowd-sourced images and social-media posts. Long after most forms of vernacular photography found themselves recognised by arts institutions, their online descendants are often left circulating in spaces generally deemed just too disposable, too populist, for inclusion.

In detailing this gradual, long-term journey, Moschovi focuses on large, established institutions, such as Tate and the Guggenheim: the big-name museums around which smaller, more versatile and experimental galleries have tended to orbit. There is a logic to this emphasis, as photography’s wider acceptance as *art*, as the aesthetic equivalent to painting or sculpture, required the imprimatur of such cultural heavyweights. Their acknowledgement – even belatedly, grudgingly – was a form of validation, an invitation to the canon. One sees this development play out in her thorough analysis of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, perhaps the exemplary model of how photography came to be institutionalised within an art historical context, and the curatorial approaches of subsequent directors of its Department of Photography. The back-and-forth attempts to determine precisely what role photography holds in the museum (from the medium-specificity advocated by Beaumont Newhall to Edward Steichen’s focus on its communicative properties, John Szarkowski’s modernist formalism, and the post-medium pluralism of Peter Galassi and Quentin Bajac) are captured in a chronology of the museum’s

exhibitions and acquisitions, and its periods of expansion and retrenchment, as MoMA haltingly, yet irrevocably, built towards its current status as a custodian of photographic history.

In elaborating these experiences of art museums, from MoMA to the Victoria & Albert Museum, Tate, the Guggenheim, and the Musée National d’Art Moderne (MNAM), Moschovi reveals the different contexts of each institution, their respective roundabout journeys in accommodating photography within individual, and often specialised, missions. If the V&A found itself somewhat out of touch, as a museum dedicated to the ‘educational and commercial “usefulness” of art’, during the era of high modernism, its position nevertheless allowed for a certain inclusiveness and flexibility, embracing ‘the art(s) of photography as a whole, using photography’s heterogeneity and polymorphism to expand the Museum’s narratives and widen its publics’. Tate, on the other hand, had to negotiate the distinctions between its various branches, with Liverpool serving as a testing ground as it worked out the collecting policies that would distinguish Tate Modern from Tate Britain. Nevertheless, it took its time, resisting ‘the new epistemological construct that conceptualist and postmodernist practices called for, as the Gallery’s taxonomic paradoxes verified. The old modernist values, namely the aura of authenticity, high creativity, and the presence of the artist, were instead adapted to rarefy photographic works as museum collectibles.’

In turn, latecomers to photographic acquisitions and exhibitions gained a certain edge, as arguments around its artistic value had been somewhat resolved by this time. Photography was also perfectly suited to constrained budgets because of its reproducibility and relative affordability, allowing Tate and the Guggenheim to build significant collections even as the rigid distinctions between different media began to loosen and dissolve. Conceptual and performance art practices which utilised photography as a form of documentation rendered notions of medium-specificity redundant while, conversely, tendencies towards larger-scale, high-definition images imbued other photographs with a sense of aura and awe more readily associated with painting. By the time Moschovi comes to her final example, of MNAM and the Centre Georges Pompidou, the notion that photography might have inherent attributes – of indexicality or instantaneity, of ‘reality’ or verisimilitude – had become irrelevant. The museum, in turn, embraces and encourages this post-disciplinary, of photography as an aspect of film and new media work, sculpture and collage, reinforced by the distributive and manipulable properties of digital technologies (citing Bajac, before his move from MNAM to MoMA, and his argument that ‘the ambiguity and malleability of digital images has turned the photograph’s affirmation of “that has been” into speculation of “that may have been”, thus subverting the nature of the photographic document’). The image has become finally, fully, untethered from any innate ‘photographicness’. The irony here, of course, is that such a fluid, formless conception of photography might just render the photographic museum itself obsolete.

Alexandra Moschovi, *A Gust of Photo-Philia: Photography in the Art Museum*, Lieven University Press, 2020, 332pp, £54, 978 9462702 42 4.

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