

On Stuart Marshall: Composer, Video Artist and Filmmaker, 1949–1993

Alvin Lucier

I first met Stuart Marshall in 1969 in London. At that time, the Sonic Arts Union, of which I was a member along with Robert Ashley, David Behrman and Gordon Mumma, was touring Europe. We were in London for a concert at the American Embassy. Stuart was a student at the Newport College of Art at the time and had come to London to check us out. Two years later he enrolled in the Masters Program at Wesleyan University where I had just begun teaching. He stayed at Wesleyan for 1 year, during which he made several beautiful works collected in his Masters Thesis entitled “Zones 1971–72” [1]. Among them were four room-tone pieces in which square wave oscillators sound at one or more resonant frequencies of the room. Loudspeakers were positioned in carefully chosen locations, and in some cases oscilloscope displays were included. Stuart (Fig. 1) was fond of translating sounds from one medium to another, as well as displacing sound environments to various locations. In *Room Tone 2* (Fig. 2), a closed loop antenna runs around the room at shoulder height, its electromagnetic waves made audible to listeners by means of personal radio receivers. In *Room Tone 4*, vibration pickups detect floor sounds in a corridor and play them through loudspeakers in an adjacent room. These sounds are then broadcast to portable FM receivers with headphones in the original corridor space. The transmitters are adjusted so that the threshold of hearing coincides with the locations where the walls of the rooms meet the walls of the corridor. In *4D Projection through a 3D Structure*, microphones pick up sounds in one room, then play them on the other side of the wall into an adjacent room following certain lines of projection. Stuart suggested a version for tap dancer whose sounds would be projected at acute angles throughout

the building. He once confided in me that he would love to find a way to place caps on the bottom of the performer’s shoes so that every time he took a step a small explosion would occur. For practical reasons he never realized this idea.

From 1969 to 1972 Stuart made a series of outdoor sound works that were mostly concerned with the threshold of hearing. Sumptuously reproduced topological maps of the Welsh countryside were dotted with symbols of sound sending and receiving devices positioned in certain geographical locations [2]. In one work, entitled *Golden Hill*, stationary sound sources are placed in trees. Performers walking throughout the landscape try to avoid them. If they do encounter one, they make one pulsed sound by some means, then retreat. In another work, entitled *Usk* (Fig. 3), several ice cream vans with bells on them converge to a central point. As a van crosses a performer’s threshold of hearing, he or she releases a flare. In many cases, atmospheric conditions such as wind and temperature changes may cause differences in the threshold of hearing.

Stuart loved spoonerisms. I never failed to start him howling with laughter at a collection of anecdotes, particularly those that had hilarious but plausible reversals, for example, “O, weary benches.” These slips of the tongue delighted Stuart and led him to a deep reading of Freud and, later, Lacan. Like conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, whom Stuart particularly admired, words and their multiple meanings played an important part in his thinking.

For example, the title of a performance piece, *A Sagging and Reading Room*, plays on the ambiguity of the participles “sagging” and “reading.” (A room may sag but it cannot read.) In this work, four players listen to recorded statements as to where they will be in relation to the other performers and two microphones. As they follow seemingly contradictory statements, they move in front of and behind each other, creating unexpected groupings. In one performance all four players ended up clumped around one microphone.

After Stuart left Middletown, Connecticut, in 1972 I saw him only a few times. We toured England together in 1973. In

ABSTRACT

Alvin Lucier reminisces about his former student and colleague Stuart Marshall. Marshall’s sound works investigated such phenomena as the threshold of hearing and the displacement of sound environments, through scores that combined participants and equipment in incongruous ways, with instructions based on seemingly contradictory statements, creating unexpected groupings and responses.

Fig. 1. Stuart Marshall, mid-1970s. (Photo courtesy of Royston Edwards)



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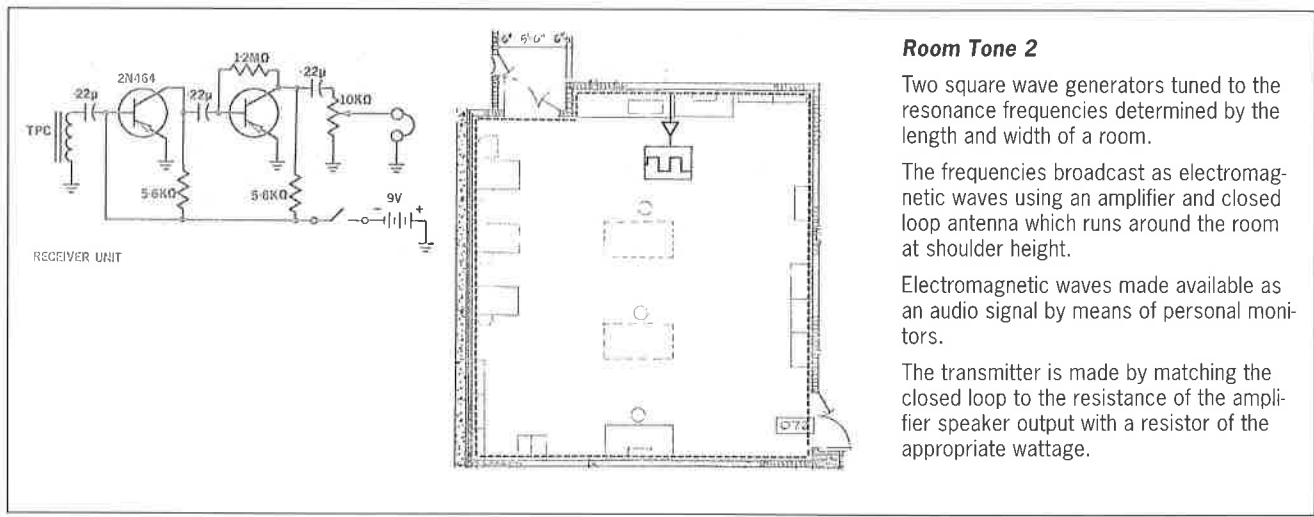


Fig. 2. Stuart Marshall, score for *Room Tone 2*, from *Zones 1971–72* [1].

Room Tone 2

Two square wave generators tuned to the resonance frequencies determined by the length and width of a room.

The frequencies broadcast as electromagnetic waves using an amplifier and closed loop antenna which runs around the room at shoulder height.

Electromagnetic waves made available as an audio signal by means of personal monitors.

The transmitter is made by matching the closed loop to the resistance of the amplifier speaker output with a resistor of the appropriate wattage.

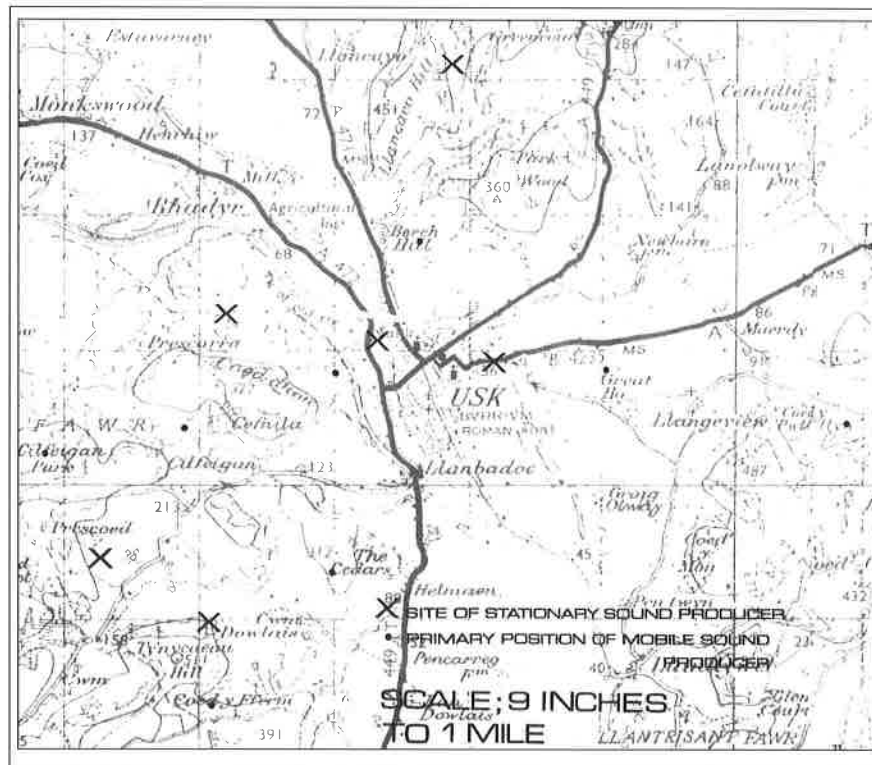


Fig. 3. Stuart Marshall, *Usk*, from *Zones 1969–1970* [2].

Usk

(Usk, Monmouthshire, South Wales)

Proposed nighttime performance.

Six ice cream vans with jingles constantly playing make a synchronised start from the specified points to converge on the town centre.

Size separate stationary groups of performers on the surrounding hills release flash-and-bang flares on encountering the threshold of hearing of their respective ice cream vans.

Cardiff Stuart suggested we perform four works in four separate spaces, starting on the ground floor with a sound installation and ending in the attic with *Vespers*, a piece of mind inspired by the sonic skills of bats. (See *4D Projection through a 3D Structure* [3].) In 1979 we traveled to four cities in Europe. By that time Stuart had become politically active and had started making films and video works that challenged prevailing attitudes toward gay persons. He realized that the equation “silence is death” was just not true for gay persons in Nazi Germany. For them, silence was survival. He

also protested the use of the drug AZT, arguing for a more holistic approach toward health and the quality of life. I like to think these reversals of conventional wisdom came from a deep connection to spoonerisms, in which transpositions of the initial sounds of two or more words generate new meanings. I also like to think that the clarity of his early artworks were harbingers of his later political solutions.

References

1. Stuart Marshall, “*Zones 1971–72*,” Master’s Thesis, Wesleyan University, 1972.

2. Scores for *Golden Hill* and *Usk* are included in Stuart Marshall, “*Zones 1969–1970*,” Source: *Music of the Avant Garde*, No. 10 (1972) (edited by Alvin Lucier).

3. See Marshall [1].

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Born in Nashua, New Hampshire, Alvin Lucier studied at Yale and Brandeis Universities. In 1966, Lucier founded the Sonic Arts Union with Robert Ashley, David Behrman and Gordon Mumma. From 1972 to 1979, he was musical director of the Viola Farber Dance Company. Since 1969 he has taught at Wesleyan University.