



[CURRENT ISSUE](#) [ARCHIVE](#) [ABOUT](#) [EDITORIAL BOARD](#) [ADVISORY BOARD](#) [CALL FOR PAPERS](#) [BOOK REVIEWS](#) [SUBMISSION GUIDELINES](#) [CONTACT](#)

[Share This Article](#)

[View As PDF](#)

## Contemporary Art & The Noise of TENDING

By *Caleb Kelly & Ross Gibson*

### Abstract

In 2010, inside the walls of the heritage-listed grounds of the old Callan Park Hospital in the suburb of Rozelle, a small group of staff and students from Sydney College of the Arts established a modest garden. The project was dubbed *TENDING*. Taken at face value, *TENDING* is simply a garden developed to produce food and to provide an alternative gathering place for staff and students. There are millions of such gardens in the world and recently there have been numerous art projects established around gardens. However, behind the simplicity of the project resides a complex noise of voices, interest groups, heritage, power, ownership and conversation. This paper will unravel the noise just below the surface of the seemingly idyllic and silent spaces of Callan Park. It will look at how the simple act of creating a garden laid out the complex interactions between culture and nature, and signal and noise.

Keywords: *TENDING*; Noise; Sound; Sound in Art; Gardening in Art

### Introduction

A garden can be a place where relationships, tendencies and 'energies' (in the form of inertia as well as momentum) can be shown emerging and giving shape to places and people over extended periods of time. We can think of this emergence as a contention between the willed guidance of signal and the profuse dynamics of noise. In a garden, design contends with dishevelment: the distinction between 'good' organisms and 'weeds' is constantly policed and every action – no matter if it is by a guardian or by an intruder – can set off some unpredictable reaction that might manifest over different time scales from the immediate to the annual and beyond. In a garden, the art is in the partnership you can graft between the culture of your intentional design (or signals) and the noise that nature brings. Or does the signal come from nature while the noise is brought by the gardeners? This is a matter of perspective, and we will return to this idea before long, looking for the right standpoint on this question of culture conTENDING with nature, signal vying with noise.

The classicist Anne Carson (1986) proclaims that writing is like gardening; an author permanently inscribing language tries to manage time and space much as a gardener does. Words on a page resemble seedlings purposefully planted in a defined plot so that they will yield riches in perpetuity, so long as individuals come and spend concentrated time and self-discipline harvesting in the plot. To write is to stop the amnesiac leaching that can be caused by time in cultures that must never stop sharing memories to maintain a store of wisdom and truth. Also, to write is to bank on benefits blooming in the future. Comparably, to garden is to work a clean edge against time's noisy tendency to wildness, to hedge against entropy while anticipating a coming, meaningful harvest. So, in addition to giving the writer 'a taste of what it would be like to control time,' the page is a place where the delineation of space can make a world of knowledge and influence. A page is a tract. It supports a writer's plots. A page permits the viewer to survey its propositions at the correct, profitable distance. A well-tended page can be valuable and fertile like an expanse of tilled land. Descriptions of writing are thick with such metaphors of spatial husbandry (Carson 1986).

If we accept Carson's horticultural view of the generation of propositions and the maintenance of meaning and knowledge, and if we allow that art is one of the cardinal ways with which human beings examine their significance in and knowledge of the world, then there is real value in considering art practice as an activity that is comparable to gardening. Certainly this is only a short step away from regarding gardening as an art, which has rarely been a controversial view.

This paper will 'look at' the gardening project *TENDING*, 'viewing' it as a work of art that is examinable through the 'lens' of sound, and specifically noise. Clearly, in this paper, we are interested in productive paradoxes, qualities of matter, or of moments, that do not rest tidily inside bounded categories. Might noise be such a quality?

FIGURE 1 TENDING 2011 KIRSTEN BRADLEY

In the years since the beginning of the twenty-first century there has been an amplification of theoretical interest in sound in culture. Increased attention to the sonic has occurred across

### ABOUT INTERFERENCE

Interference is a biannual online journal in association with the Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media (Gradcam). It is an open access forum on the role of sound in cultural practices, providing a trans-disciplinary platform for the presentation of research and practice in areas such as acoustic ecology, sensory anthropology, sonic arts, musicology, technology studies and philosophy. The journal seeks to balance its content between scholarly writing, accounts of creative practice, and an active engagement with current research topics in audio culture. [ [More](#) ]

### TRANSMISSION DRIFT

Interference wishes to work collaboratively with the Irish Sound, Science and Technology Association (ISSTA) for their forthcoming conference *Transmission Drift* on August 28-29, 2013. This conference is an opportunity to create a special issue that reflects wider questions around sound, art and performance as well as science and technology. It is Interference's goal to publish papers that explore sound in a variety of academic and artistic contexts. [ [More](#) ]

### CALL FOR PAPERS

General Issue on Methodologies (Issue 4)

Deadline for Abstracts Extended to May 18th 2012

While still a relatively new discursive platform, Interference would like to take the opportunity in our fourth call for papers to invite submissions for a more open call, stepping momentarily outside the strong thematics that have shaped our previous three publications. This call invites papers on any aspect of audio cultures, but places an emphasis on the methodologies and frameworks that inform your research. [ [More](#) ]

### ISSUE 3 PHOTO CREDIT

Rosa Menkman; *Museum*; 2010; Images courtesy of the artist.

[rosa-menkman.blogspot.com](http://rosa-menkman.blogspot.com)

ISSN: 2009-3578

All content © Interference, 2011. All Rights Reserved.

### INTERFERENCE NETWORK

[Facebook](#)  
[Flickr](#)



Soundcloud  
Vimeo

---

#### PARTNERS

CTVR  
Gradcam  
HEA

---

#### CONTACT

editor@interferencejournal.com  
www.interferencejournal.com  
Interference Journal  
CTVR / Room 3.19  
Dunlop Oriel House  
Trinity College  
Dublin 2  
Ireland

numerous disciplines, including anthropology, cultural studies, history and so on. This turn in focus from visuality to aurality was crucial in alerting us to the significance of sound within these disciplines and a large number of projects have since been published. So much so that it is now no longer necessary to lament the dearth of attention to sound within scholarship. Academics who had played the catch up game with the history of sound are now getting down to working on current and future possibilities for research practices that comprehend the importance of the senses in knowledge creation. The art world has been slow to join the party in this regard, perhaps due to being wedded to visuality as its defining feature. Sound, however, has always been in art and as long as we make art, sound will be a part of it. John Cage in the early 1950s argued explicitly for the impossibility of silence, creating a piece of very noisy silence in *4'33"* (1952). If silence is impossible then it stands to reason that art is not, and is never, silent.

This paper takes Cage at his word and the imaginary silence of the garden is assessed through the discourse of noise. We ask, is it possible to create an understanding of the underbelly of a system through the discourse of noise? This is achieved not by trying to find one-to-one instances of noise as an auditory phenomenon in the garden, but by listening to the surrounding systems and by digging around where no one had been able to before. Art has an uncanny way of helping its participants to get away with things, to move beyond the rules that govern the everyday (even if just for a moment).

Within the discourses of audio culture, noise is a recurring theme, yet it is a difficult concept. Noise itself is not easy to tame, it traverses theoretical understanding in chaotic and insensible ways, always and forever remaining all and nothing.

Noise is embedded in information, in the object and subject of language. As the backdrop of communication, it fills the silences and gaps, often corrupting and confusing. It is repeatedly pushed to the background in an attempt to make it invisible and unknown. Noise is not always loud; chaos can exist below the surface, a quiet backdrop to important rules and tidily maintained structures.

Paul Hegarty begins his book *Noise/Music* by bluntly stating, "Noise is not an objective fact" (2007, p. 3). For Hegarty, the perception of noise occurs in relation to a historical, geographical and culturally located subject, one whose listening

is brought back to hearing through processes of rejection (as noise), confusion (through noise as change), excess (including of volume), wrongness or inappropriateness, failure (of noise, to be noise, to not be noise, to be music, not be sound, not be). Noise is where all this listening goes when it has had enough (Ibid. p. 199).

In information theory, noise is defined as an intrusion into the process of communication. Claude Shannon (1948), a mathematician at Bell Labs, developed a theory aiming to rid telephone communication of excessive noise. His theory uses mathematics to calculate how much information a given channel can carry and the ratio of signal-to-noise within that channel. The signal in the line is understood to be the message or what is being communicated and noise is anything extra to the intended message. Noise, then, is in excess of the object of communication and is anything extraneous to the message: this includes everything from pauses in dialogue (for example, umms and errs); to a smudged newspaper text; and even the interesting people on table nine who make your current conversation hard to follow.

*TENDING* is full of noise. It was not that the project was loud in volume, in fact for the most part it was hushed, the conversations private or convivial in nature. This was not a project about excess – it had more to do with 'making-do' than with extremes. When we read Hegarty's list above we see *TENDING* as navigating a complex mesh of wrongness, inappropriateness and failure. This noise, as noise often is, was pushed into the background, it happened behind closed doors and went unrecorded through private phone-calls. We will attend to this quiet murmuring soon, after we give a

few more paragraphs here, establishing our disciplinary and institutional contexts.

### Noise in the gallery

Contemporary art is already abundant with sound, and therefore with noise. Despite the fact that most art that has been designed and/or acquired for art museums is inherently visual, any array of art works engage sound both as content and as incidental sonic outcomes whenever an audience turns up. Sound can be heard in the audio tracks of video pieces and emerging from installations with sound-making elements such as machinery. Sound in art is not easily controlled. Inside the art gallery we are confronted with noise as sound leaks messily out of its exhibition bounds. The desired audio of an installation all too swiftly becomes noise as it interferes with the quiet and pious contemplation of nearby works. Hard flat walls do not help this situation, yet the art institution continues to ignore issues of noise while desiring contemporary art brimming with sound. Noise is also present in the gallery in the form of incidental sounds. These are the sounds made by the audience (conversational noise or the incidental noise of footsteps) and the noise created of the general goings-on of the museum (the gallery bookshop and café, outside urban traffic noise).

These issues collide when artists deliberately make works that sonically intervene in the gallery. Australian artist Marco Fusinato engages noise in his work in both the sense of volume and interference. *Aetheric Plexus* (2009) is an installation comprising of a stage-lighting rig that quietly waits for a visitor to enter the gallery. The moving audience member triggers an explosion of light and noise that is extreme in volume, heat (from the lights) and shock. When this work was recently exhibited in Artspace, in Sydney, the neighbouring offices of the Sydney Biennale demanded noise abatement, and the work was silenced during working hours. Fusinato causes a dilemma for the art gallery in that his works are highly sought after in the Biennale circuit, yet they cause numerous audio issues in a culture that expects silence in its spaces.

In the last twenty years an expanding area of contemporary art has become an often rowdy, production-oriented practice. Inside the gallery, artists can be encountered noisily building art work (e.g. Paul Donald's bridge built in Artspace, Sydney, during opening hours); audiences eat lunch and stay for hours in vast open museum spaces (e.g. Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall); conversational practices fill once reverent galleries with discussion (e.g. Lucas Ilhein's environmental audit of the exhibition *In the Balance* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney); and educational art approaches create public learning spaces within the confines of galleries themselves (e.g. *Wide Open School* at the Haywood Gallery, London).<sup>1</sup> These noisy contemporary practices cannot be 'displayed' in the same manner as quiet visual works. The sounds created are not bounded by the walls that surround them, nor are these sounds always appreciated by the institution set firmly in the belief of the autonomous artwork. Try as they might the art institution and the modernist architectural design of the gallery cannot contain the noise created by these productive practices. While these works are often housed in the gallery, they come into their own when they are produced outside of the institutional housing and allowed to mix with the everyday.

### Gardening in contemporary art

Outside of the gallery, relational and community-based art practices have taken on an often noisy form, allowing the chaos of the world to seep into work that is exposed to its environment. Politically engaged and at times radical community organisations enter urban space, intervening in the everyday and regularly causing political friction in the process. Projects such as *Park Fiction* (1994) develop alternative models of activism, employing radical tactics to circumvent local government bureaucracy and real estate development. *Park Fiction* is a project borne out of local need for public community space. It revolved around an artistic intervention in which a parallel planning process was facilitated that "undermined the bureaucratic hierarchies of conventional planning while retaining a sufficient level of organizational and political coherence to operate within existing circuits of public policy and decision making" (Kester 2011, p. 202). By producing a series of games, tactics and projects, the community re-imagined the site set for development as a public park. The noise created out of *Park Fiction* in a very real sense materialised an actual public park. The park itself does not conform to urban planning and development design and is a messy publically generated space, one that sits vociferously next to a highly developed and planned urban environment.

Like the park, the garden has become a common trope within conversational and relational practices, forming a space that provides both context and content for artworks. Artists such as Marjetica Potrč and Nils Norman create community-based projects that aim to enable sustainable and viable futures in the form of gardens, kitchens and community spaces. What makes these projects different from other community spaces is the use of art-based tactics and approaches. Potrč's project *The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbour* (2009) was developed in an unused plot of land to bring the local community together by growing produce and cooking together in a community kitchen. Norman's *Edible Park* (2010) acts as an artwork and thereby bypasses the local planning restrictions that do not allow for agriculture in the zone (Demos 2012). *TENDING* can be understood to develop in-line with contemporary dialogical practices, as well as relational community gardening. What started as a simple experiment was soon to get noisy.

FIGURE 2 TENDING 2011 BONETTO IHLEIN

### TENDING

At Sydney College of the Arts, the Art School of The University of Sydney, in the grounds of the re-used nineteenth century mental hospital that forms the campus, a few staff members decided to



establish a small garden (the authors were part of this initiative). The garden was construed as a research project that we hoped would also be useful in our teaching.

The buildings and the grounds of Sydney College of the Arts comprise some of the most contentious real estate in this city whose main industry and everyday obsession has always been land transactions and 'developments'. Located inside a suburb-sized tract of harbourside parkland that has been sculpted according to nineteenth century landscape-design principles, the college occupies a swathe of 'greenfield space' that is all ripe for development in the minds of entrepreneurs. The entire estate is known as Callan Park. The precinct of sandstone heritage buildings that house the college is called Kirkbride.

The commercial value of Kirkbride and Callan Park is practically immeasurable. The property is still held in 'public trust' by the State Government of New South Wales, but its upkeep is extremely expensive and these costs have been somewhat cynically delegated out on long-lease agreements to a Local Council (which is habitually at odds with the State Government), the University of Sydney and a State Government Authority that oversees the management and exploitation of all public foreshore properties around Sydney Harbour.<sup>2</sup> The State Government, no matter which political persuasion it pretends to represent, is always one budget-calculation away from trying to sell the land, but the furore that such a scheme would elicit from several sectors of the public would be so unseemly and electorally damaging, the sell-off has never been achieved.

The maintenance of Callan Park is not an easy, cooperative or convivial arrangement. Rather, it is an odd circumstance where all the noise in the system of the place has made silence weird sentence. It looks as if the site is serenely controlled by some clear and functional signal, when in fact it is paralysed by the overlapping noises of administrative dysfunction, inter-factional ambitions and enmity. Because cacophonous turmoil would arise if anyone tried to do anything more active or creative than maintaining the status quo of inaction, nothing happens. Silence rules Callan Park by dint of all its latent noise, not by peace. In this context we thought it would be instructive to try to disturb the silent paralysis with a creative action. How viable and universally acceptable *to disturb it with a garden*. Who doesn't love a garden?

Knowing that there would be much writing as well as physical toil to be done, we staked out a small courtyard inside Kirkbride, inside the domain over which the College has overwhelming sovereignty deeded by our 99-year lease. And we waited to see what would happen. This waiting was really our first period of research-reflection. Turning the first sod would make something happen. If you wanted to summarise the intention with one distilled portion of art theory, you could not go past David Rokey's appreciation of how the best interactive and emergent artworks establish, not finished products but dynamic relationships (and, we would say, relationship dynamics) that help us understand the repercussions of our actions (Rockey 1995).

Indeed we saw things happen very quickly when all the different political forces were roused around the inception of our aesthetic experiment in gardening construed as low-level trouble-making. We have called the project *TENDING*, because this title names the care that must be given to a garden, whilst it names, as well, the tendencies inherent to design principles that contend with wildness while human factions also contend with each other.<sup>3</sup> Two artists, Diego Bonetto and Lucas Ilhein, were hired to tend the garden in its first stages, and they led and developed the project from within the garden.

As expected the political forces were quick to notice the movement in the courtyard.<sup>4</sup> As many as eight interest groups spoke with us in the first weeks of the project. The professors had deliberately 'made noise' by deciding, strategically, not to undertake any prior consultation or to seek any permission other than a generous and jovial assent offered by the Dean of the College.

All of the interest groups wanted precise details concerning both our actions up until then and our plans for the future; most were keen to let us know that *they* were the main parties with whom we should have been negotiating. All this puffing and strutting occurred despite the fact that we had no legal or customary obligations to seek the approvals or permissions of most of these parties. Most

parties suggested – wrongly – that they could shut down our activities whenever they determined. Of course, a good garden should appear to be organised by harmonies and synergies. But we could not even get started unless we agitated the paralysis. We had to make noise in the hope of eventually arriving at and espousing a signal. You can't make a cake without breaking some eggs, and you can't start a garden without disturbing something or someone with a blunt, shunted spade.

In the midst of this hubbub, there was also the loosely affiliated but highly committed, energetic and effective community organisation known as "The Friends of Callan Park". The Friends have an uncanny ability to see and make a public comment on every new action or feature that turns up within the Park, including within the walled bounds of Kirkbride. We value them for their vigilance, because they have stymied many a dubious development in the estate, and we accept that we cannot expect to act in a sovereign manner within our own leasehold without consulting with and winning the blessing of The Friends.<sup>5</sup>

Holding that support is a continuing work-in-progress. Partly this is so because there is tension around an aesthetic issue. For *TENDING* is a permaculture garden at present. Permaculture is a practical ideology. To quote a permaculture team that we have worked with in the past:

The term 'permaculture' was coined by two Australians – David Holmgren and Bill Mollison – in the 1970s... Permaculture is a holistic system of design for human needs. It is most often applied to basic human needs such as water, food and shelter, but it is also used to design more abstract systems such as community and economic structures. Permaculture is sometimes described as the use of ecology as the basis for designing integrated systems of food production, housing, appropriate technology and community development.<sup>6</sup>

Permaculture is a popular and very effective gardening practice in Australia, but it is not universally loved. For one thing some permaculturists tend to be rather zealous and evangelical about their methods and philosophy and for another, it is difficult to describe permaculture gardens as aesthetically satisfying with reference to any conventional definition of beauty or refinement. True, this may indicate that the standard definitions need revision, but to put it bluntly, permaculture gardens can look unruly, scrappy, weedy and unplanned (despite the fact that there is always a strong background-design to every healthy permaculture garden). And, truth to tell, *TENDING* has looked scrappy for most of its two-year existence thus far.

This means that when the Friends and other people rambling through Callan Park stop at the one elevated vantage-point outside Kirkbride from which they can gaze down on the garden in the middle-distance, they see a plot that looks to them untended, unkempt and in need of some tidy discipline and some prettification. In negotiation over this issue – over the noise that The Friends see in the garden and over the noise that The Friends can bring to the first iteration of the garden – we the TENDERS have benefitted from the turbulence. The discussions have helped us realise that one thing we want from the next phase of *TENDING* is for the garden to be a laboratory and a debating chamber in which we can bring new ideas and demands about aesthetics to the slightly tired older norms of permaculture. Thus in response to the noise made by The Friends and by the representatives of several different power-bases and interest-groups insinuated in Callan Park, we have signalled our intention to develop a Centre for Permaculture Aesthetics, a place that will generate new signals within the practice of permaculture in Australia and farther afield. With this new signal, noise will come not only to many old, established permaculture plots but also to the tasteful precepts of aesthetics. We propose that everyone might call this noise 'change' and that there is an art to living with it, profiting from it, being roused by it.

Since the first mention of the idea for a College garden, different aesthetic demands have always been foisted upon *TENDING*. Different demands of art have been applied to the garden too. For example, art should be first-and-foremost beautiful; or it should be principally concerned with the relationships that are activated around and through it; or it should be discomfiting, not decorative; or it should be stamped with a strong individual statement; or it should be an object, not a utilitarian service, and so on. Just as any garden is maintained against weediness and the uglification of unruly growth, so *TENDING* has always been a contentious place of counterpointing signals making noise. Of course, this noise was exactly what we wanted to hear. It proves the fertility of the garden.

#### Footnotes

1. Paul Donald (2011), "Would Work" *In Nothing Like Performance*, Artspace, Sydney; Olafur Eliasson (2003), "The Weather Project"; Tate Modern, London; Lucas Ilhein (2010), "Environmental Audit", *In In The Balance*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; *Wide Open School* (2012), Haywood Gallery, London. [^]
2. Part of Callan Park's commercial allure stems from the fact that it holds several kilometres of dazzling harbour vistas. [^]
3. For an account of the slow unfolding of the project and for evidence of how we have tried to make the online world a forceful and definitive part of the community-building and proposition-blooming of the project, see the blog that we started even before we turned the first sod: <http://www.TENDING.net.au> [^]
4. Here is a list of the various organisations and work-teams that spoke with us during the first weeks of the project: the landscape-management company that is employed by the State Government's harbour-foreshore authority to tend the entire parklands; the harbour-foreshore authority itself; postgraduate students from the Soil Sciences Department of the Sydney University Faculty of Agriculture; the Local Council that oversees the master-plan and the week-

by-week management of large portions of the estate; the property-management sector of the University of Sydney; the property-management team from Sydney College of the Arts; the Student Union from the University of Sydney; a small group of SCA students who were annoyed that professors were permitted to start a garden when previous attempts by students had been stymied by bureaucratic obfuscation and the reluctance of anyone in middle-management to make an unprecedented decision. [ ]

5. In the case of the garden project, our consultation with The Friends was, as usual, an educational experience. As it turned out, one of the most senior and well respected of The Friends is an historian of all the gardens that have ever existed in Callan Park and Kirkbride. This particular Friend has been generous and inspiring with her information about all the different designs and purposes of dozens of different garden plots scattered across the estate. So we were able to win Friendly support without too much trouble. [ ]
6. See: <http://milkwoodpermaculture.com.au/permaculture/faqs> (accessed: May 2012). [ ]

#### References

- Carson, A., 1986. *Eros the Bittersweet: an essay*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Demos, T.J., 2012. Art After Nature. *Artforum*, April: 191-197.
- Hegarty, P., 2007. *Noise/Music: A History*. New York: Continuum.
- Kester, G., 2011. *Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Rokeby, D., 1995. Transforming Mirrors: subjectivity and control in interactive media. In: Penny, P., ed. *Critical Issues in Electronic Media*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Shannon, C., 1948. A Mathematical Theory of Communication. *Bell System Technical Journal*, Vol. 27, July & October: 379-423, 623-656.

#### Bio

Ross Gibson is Professor of Contemporary Arts at the Sydney College of the Arts. His research includes making books, films and art installations investigating the use of narrative and private ritual in the comprehension of everyday experience. Gibson is the co-editor of *Voice: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media* (MIT Press, 2010)

Caleb Kelly is a researcher in the field of the sound arts at the College of Fine Arts, the University of New South Wales. He is the author of *Cracked Media: The Sound of Malfunction* (MIT Press, 2009) and editor of *Sound* (MIT Press/Whitechapel Gallery, 2011).

[Return to Current Issue](#)

CTVR



Funded under the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions