

*IN THE FOREGROUND:*  
*CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING*  
A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

“SHIFTING FOCAL POINTS”  
SERGEI TCHEREPNIN  
ON SONIC ATTENTION

Season 5, Episode 3  
Recording date: January 18, 2023  
Release date: April 4, 2023

Transcript

**Caro Fowler**

Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

In this episode, you'll hear from me, **Caitlin Woolsey**, Assistant Director of RAP, as I speak with Sergei Tcherepnin, an artist who works at the intersections of sound, music, sculpture, theater, and photography. We discuss how his work is made to be interacted with and creates new intimacies in listening – and he describes how he seeks to create multiple focal points within each work, activating a kind of queer sound or queer listening. At several intervals during the interview, you'll hear excerpts from Sergei's sound work; full details about these pieces will be shared at the close of the episode. Join us now in imagining how we might listen not only by *hearing*, but also listen by way of touching, by moving, by feeling.

**Sergei Tcherepnin**

*"The intermedial aspects of my work are always changing. And the focal points. Even within one installation, I'm really interested in shifting perspectives, or focal points, and making installations where the sound seems very present and in the forefront but then suddenly [you] turn a corner and you're confronted by this glowing photograph that's pulsing, and suddenly that seems like the most important... There's a kind of dance between perspectives."*

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Thank you so much for joining me today. It's a real pleasure to speak with you about your work, Sergei.

**Sergei Tcherepnin**

Hi, thank you. Yes, it's so nice to be here.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

As a visual artist, can you tell me a little bit about how you came to the arts, if there were formative experiences or influences from childhood? And then in

particular, I'm interested to have you speak a little bit about the centrality of sound, and how that emerged as a core element of your artistic practice?

**Sergei Tcherepnin**

I guess I would start from when I was a teenager. I was already involved in many facets of art: I was studying photography, and within photography, experimenting with liquid emulsion and printing on stones; printing on fabric. And then simultaneously, I was very involved in theater, doing improv, and doing summer theater, and things like that. And then simultaneously, I had a private musical practice. Specifically, improvising on the piano, and also recording a lot. Recording just sounds from nature. I had a little cassette tape. So I think just making different forms of art from a very young age was just somehow embedded in my everyday life. I think that specifically, the improvising practice, and the sort of experimental nature of it—photography—that I was interested in at that time, kind of took hold, especially in college. One of the most important moments for me in realizing that I really wanted to combine different art forms was when I started to be an improviser for theater, among aspiring playwrights—in college—and aspiring directors. And so I did a number of runs with different theater productions, and some of them straightforward, some of them more experimental in nature. It showed me possibilities, possibilities for interrelationships between light, movement, drama, I guess; narrative, music, painting, sculpture. When I was a teenager, I definitely I remember having this sort of elusive, somewhat vague dream of, Someday I'm going to be making these strange experiences for swift, strange lights and obscure, mysterious movements and strange music, but I didn't really know what it meant. I just had this kind of dream of it. And I think I talked about it with friends. And it was always very clear to me.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Did you always see them as in some way intersecting?

**Sergei Tcherepnin**

You know, they were definitely very separate for a long time for me, and especially when I was first starting out in high school. In fact, I kept my music practice completely to myself, and I really even didn't want to study music. I just wanted to have it as a private practice. And I think part of that was growing up in an extremely musical household, where my father was a composer; his father was a composer, his mother was a pianist, he taught me piano, my uncle was an

instrument builder. And so all of that made me feel like I wanted to just keep music as a kind of private personal practice. Whereas photography, when you first as a teenager go into a dark room, it just seem like it's just magic. The whole process is magic. And then add that to printing on stones, and little pieces of fabric, and it even becomes more mysterious and magical. I think improvisation and learning from materials was the main crux of that.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

And you've already touched on this, but I'm interested to ask you to speak a little bit more about the way that your artistic practice today bridges what are often construed as adjacent, but still separate, disciplines of sculpture, sound and composition, music, then also installation, performance, theater... Do you think about your work as a sort of intermedial practice? Or is that kind of terminology the art historian impulse in me to diagnose?

**Sergei Tcherepnin**

To be honest, I prefer not to define my practice along those terms. And I think part of that is because the intermedial aspects of my work are always changing. And the kind of focal points. Even within one installation, sometimes I think, I'm really interested in shifting perspectives, or focal points, and making installations where the sound seems very, you know, present and in the forefront. But then suddenly [you] turn a corner and you're confronted by this glowing photograph that's pulsing, and suddenly that seems like the most important. There's a kind of dance between perspective, or focal points. So that's within one installation, but also between exhibitions and performances. It just depends on what the work is, as to how the kind of relationships, the relationships between mediums within a particular exhibition, are working.

If there is an art historical movement that speaks to me, it would be Fluxus from the '60s, or possibly the movement of artists in the Lower East Side in the '80s, post-punk, no wave musical practices mixed with expanded cinema and a kind of interesting mix of integrated arts. And actually, when I was an undergrad, I studied with, among other people, Barbara Ess, who was a photographer; she passed away in 2021. She used pinhole cameras to make really vivid, dream-like, beautiful color photographs. But she was also actively playing music with the Y Pants, a really strange no wave band, and also collaborating with Marina Rosenfeld, a sound artist, and Peggy Ahwesh, a filmmaker. So she was my advisor in undergrad, and she encouraged me to help to start the Integrated Arts

Program. I helped to sort of coordinate with her bringing integrated arts lecturers to come and talk about the integration of arts and undergrad context, which was new to Bard at the time. But thinking back, that experience of working with Barbara was really, really influential for me.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

So you just touched on this a little bit in speaking about Barbara's influence on your development or your thinking, but are there other figures that felt like they opened a kind of horizon of possibility for this way of working?

**Sergei Tcherepnin**

Yeah, I mean, definitely Maryanne Amacher, who was very close with my father, actually, and also with my uncle. And so I've known her since I was very little. Maryanne passed away in 2009. I went to Bard College; in undergrad, she wasn't teaching there, but lived in the area. And I used to go over to her house, and she would play me her music and expose me to a world of ideas that it took me years to process. But from the very moment that I started to hear what she had to say, and to hear her music, from that moment, it showed me what could be possible, in that this sort of vague dream that I was having as a sixteen-year-old suddenly started to have more definition. In a funny way, I still kind of struggle with how influential she was for me, because I remember when I was in my early 20s, I just sort of wanted to mimic what she was doing. I think that that is often a process for young artists, and I don't think it's a terrible thing. But getting out of that, sort of growing and finding my own unique voice out of that, was a slow process. I worked as Maryanne's assistant on and off for about six years. So her work was hugely influential. Maryanne also is a very difficult artists to define. She was not necessarily a sound artist, not necessarily an intermedia artist. She would probably be considered a pioneer of sound art, but I think she never quite wanted to bear that label.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Shifting a little bit perhaps to talk about some specific work, for those who are not familiar, your work is not just interactive, but often created to be interacted *with*. These are pieces that involve listening, not just by hearing, but by touching or by opening , by pressing, by feeling. I'm curious to have you speak a little bit about this dynamic quality of the work. Then perhaps maybe a separate question is about how you think about participation or collaboration?

**Sergei Tcherepnin**

Participation in my work is important to me, because of how it induces active spectatorship or active listening. There's a kind of shifting of focal points within the installations. So there'll be sound, there might be also music as a separate kind of entity within sound, or within the soundscape. And then there might be sculptures; there might be photographs. And already, I think of the experience of these exhibitions. I'm thinking particularly about my show at Company [Gallery]—even without touching anything, or being told to do anything, that already the importance of walking through the show, and finding a pathway, and finding your own encounters, having multiple encounters within that show that might be different from somebody else's encounters. That for me is a kind of participatory process that activates a kind of agency within the viewer and listener. I'm thinking of that as participatory in a way that is maybe more aligned with the participatory aspects of Dan Graham's two-way mirror pavilions; I would say, it's not necessarily the point of the work, but it does become integral to the work. Because I just remember visiting some of these pavilions where there's a playfulness that happens with the viewer. The viewers really do just completely complete the work. They somehow make the work like a kind of stage, like a kind of performance space. I think of that kind of aspect of it, rather than having a set of instructions. If you think of participatory aspects that are maybe more aligned with how museums might frame a participatory art practice, which I've fought against that kind of institutionalizing of participatory art.

Somebody else whose participatory aspects are interesting to me are the Tropicália movement in Brazil, Hélio Oiticica, and especially also Lygia Clark's playthings, which, again, there's no instructions, there's no rules, there's no clear sense of, 'you must do this, and then this happens'; there's no sort of causality to it, I guess. But there's more a series of potentialities. And I think that form of participation, those potentialities, demand a kind of activity in order to interact, in order to get something out of the work, or in order to understand the work, or to internalize the work.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

That makes sense to me, too, in terms of you evoking the Graham pavilions and Lygia Clark's playthings, because they function as a kind of formal sculptural or

architectural element, a discrete element. There are these sort of, nascent embedded possibilities that are not scripted, that are totally open-ended, but that are always there, regardless of if someone is actively engaging with or in the space.

### **Sergei Tcherepnin**

I recently, or maybe five years ago, saw Carolee Schneemann's kinetic paintings, and I found those be really inspiring. I didn't know about them when I was also making these sort of kinetic sculptures. But I thought, Ah, yeah, this makes so much sense, these kinds of strange paintings as set pieces. And they also reminded me a bit of some of the set design of some [John] Cage, [Merce] Cunningham ballets that I saw by [Robert] Rauschenberg. I think there was an exhibition at MoMA that had this aspect of, you want to move around, and there's a set of relations that you sort of want to explore, you want to go through, you want to kind of move through the work to sort of enter into the work. So I feel like that kind of language is something that I'm really connected to.

### **Caitlin Woolsey**

To take the conversation a little bit more theoretical for a moment, if I may: I'm interested in the way that your work both acknowledges the physical qualities of sound as their own thing, while also not fetishizing some pure 'sound in itself,' but always acknowledging that listening and hearing and sound—and this relationality that you were just speaking to—is always understood from the subjective position of both the artist and the spectator, but also in relation to other listeners or other people in this space, or in relation to the particular space of a theater, perhaps where performance is happening, or the white cube of a gallery. And you've spoken before, or alluded to the ways in which—what orientations does sound have?

### **Sergei Tcherepnin**

I think it's helpful to just acknowledge that the materiality of sound is a preoccupation and investigation of early electronic music pioneers in Europe, specifically, the Musique Concrète movement and Pierre Schaefer. And that movement to this day is still taken to the extreme by artists like Francisco López. In studying and listening to that music, I loved the concepts and I loved, for instance, Edgar Varèse's text "The Liberation of Sound"—this was hugely influential to me. But I always felt a little bit like there was something missing

from the insistence on cutting off the source from the experience, in an attempt to fully abstract recorded sound into musical language. It's well known that concert-goers would have to wear a blindfold, and that there is a kind of insistence that maybe a train sound is not a train. It's a new vocabulary for music. And Francisco Lopèz is kind of a sound artist now who writes about this and will record a rainforest but insists that this is a musical experience, this is sound matter. I think there are clear problematics within this, especially in terms of not acknowledging the place or the context of the recording. Especially in Francisco Lopèz's work, there's an insistence also on a kind of transcendental possibility of getting lost within this representational space, this composed space, which actually, he's calling non-representational—he's insisting that it's not non-representational. But there's a kind of disconnect for me, that this can be a transformative transcendental experience. Just to connect some of these, I would say that that's very related, in many ways, to that [John] Cagean concept of expanding one's own ideas, of finding music within one's environment, or expanding one's perceptual sense of what's happening around oneself sonically, as part of a sonic field. But I realized what's really missing in *Musique Concrète* and in Francisco Lopèz, and a lot of electronic music that's insisting on these expanded languages of sound and transcendental listening experiences, is the ways that the sound is presented. So the transmission of sound is cutting off possibilities, actually. It's about immersion. It becomes about a kind of environment—it's like a virtual environment. So the actual environment is eliminated and is not important. I think that that is in very sharp contrast to Maryanne Amasher, her way of working, which is all about research into the space that the work is being presented in, or and it's all about research into acoustics and architecture, and acoustic anomalies within constructing architectures.

But I think the materiality of sound was hugely important for me because of the potential for physicality of sound, the potential for—I mentioned encounters earlier—I think encountering a physical, material body that is sound is something that I was very preoccupied with, and still am. But I think that the thing that has been missing in a lot of historical approaches, and you touched on it, is that there's a kind of pure, ideal utopic vision of a transcendental experience of this sound. That is the materiality of sound. And that culminates, I would say, in something like the Francisco Lopèz experience of transcendental listening, experience of a non-representational rainforest. I actually have experienced



some of these pieces live, and I can't say that I don't love the experience sonically. It's very rich.

But I just find that with my own practice, the way that I would like to approach the materiality of sound is maybe just more, well, I would say more queer. Because I think that having multiple possibilities for encounters with materialities sort of dancing around a spectator, dancing around a room—and in unexpected ways—is sort of what I'm hoping to achieve when I'm making work. I'm also fully aware that I started off talking a lot about the problematics, of cutting off the context of a sound, and I would say, in my own work, it's something that I think a lot about. But in the end, the sonic language that I use, I usually make myself. It's something that I've been challenged on by friends and colleagues as well, 'you're always using a modular synthesizer, is that really important to you?' And I would say, it's important to me, because it's a very personal language for myself. I know how to make physical material; it's not necessarily that the source is important. But I'm also not going out and recording places, although I have done that, but, for instance the bird recordings become extremely important for a very particular reason and become really part of the work.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

So do you think about your use of modular synthesizers as the kind of sonic vernacular that makes sense because of your particular musical aptitude, or skill set?

**Sergei Tcherepnin**

Yes, I think it's a very personal vernacular. Also, I think that my own relationship to the synthesizer is highly personal. I would just say that I have specific sort of themes, sound-wise, that I come back to a lot. I know exactly what I'm going to try to do. When I'm making a kind of voice appear within a sculpture, or a set of voices, I have a specific way of getting to that. I'm actually interested in that transformation of this voice, because I do think that maybe that voice has had ten years, or those voices have been appearing, more or less, in different sculptures—very similar voices—for 10 years. And I think I'm actually in a process of shifting a bit.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

I have a number of questions that emerged from what you just said. Because you just mentioned the kind of voices of the sculptures that you make, I wonder if we might return to this question of the orientations of sound, and the way that your work still draws on traditions of narrative or character theater. And these scenarios that you've created at times invoke these kind of hybridized characters, like the figure of the Pied Piper, or a Listening Cactus, that invite audiences to cultivate or develop new ways of handling or interacting with these sonically animated sculptural objects. How do you think about that question of narrative, or the space of theater, within your work?

### **Sergei Tcherepnin**

I mean, I think that it definitely depends on the work. So in 2015, I had a commission from The Kitchen in New York, and for that, there were actually performers on stage, and that came out of that came out of a collaboration with Lucy Dodd, who came up with this character of the Maize Mantis. Lucy is a painter, an extremely imaginative artist, who I was really close with at that time. And she had written or put together this book called *The Genesis of a Painting*. But the Maize Mantis somehow figured into this personal lineage for herself. So Lucy had made this costume for me and we had performed many times with it. And it had come out of a very personal experience of photography, a very intense collaboration with Lucy. And at the same time, the Maize Mantis became a way that I found that in performance of my electronic music I could somehow direct the attention of the listener towards moving their bodies. So in a way, that Maize Mantis was a dancer. But another way, the Maize Mantis was a kind of instigator. So, in the earlier performances of the Maize Mantis character, I was literally just at times trying to scatter the audience; I was a disrupter to the performances. And the costume itself, it's kind of like these loosely-falling rags, this earth color, but very psychedelic, that Lucy had patched together. And it kind of just fell over my body and allowed a lot of my body to show as well, a lot of limbs; I'm very tall, and my limbs showed. In that sense, maybe it could have been something that I might perform with at Spectrum, which is a queer club in the city [New York]. So it felt like very aligned with the kind of clubs that I was going to also, which was a very real, important experience for me. So in that sense, that it is a very queer character for me because of how I am on stage, but then also queer in the sense of how it is a kind of disrupter to the listening experience. And I felt like the disrupter in the sense of insisting on non-normative, non-strict, non-directed—an active listening experiences. At The Kitchen, the Maize Mantis, this last performance was in a black box theater. So it

was a challenge to disrupt the audience in that same sense, but I still thought of the Maize Mantis as a kind of sensual physicality that can direct the audience's attention through the space.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

It sounds like it's disrupting the control relations in terms of who is dictating what happens and who is observing and who is actively being forced or choosing to change their relation to the space.

**Sergei Tcherepnin**

I mean, ironically, I hit a wall. There was a review of that performance about 'how Sergei Tcherepnin breaks down the fourth wall, again,' which I thought it was a very positive review actually, and I really liked it. But somehow I thought, you know, if this is all that's coming across from this gesture, then I need to find other approaches. Because if you reduce what the Maize Mantis' role was [to] it is breaking down the fourth wall, in a way kind of like, 'okay, let's get everybody together and move around the room'.... Just to go back to Maryanne [Amacher]'s work, I think the fourth wall wasn't even ever mentioned, because Maryanne set up, made sure to put herself in, situations where there was no distinction. The audience wanted to go up, to go to this corner of the room, and to then move around, and kind of dance to hear the tones come into their body. And so I think that that kind of possibility that I saw in Maryanne's work, where the participation is just embedded in the work itself, that it's like a desire, it creates desire in the listener, it creates desire in the viewer. I think that's something that the Maize Mantis, maybe the kind of sexuality and the sensuality of the body of that character, was a way to kind of create a desire.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

And I guess that's what I was trying to evoke in terms of control, or who's directing the situation, that it's not just that there's an invitation to participate or to move, but that it feels like it's a more embedded desire. If I can go back to another question I had, from what you mentioned before, when you were alluding to thinking about a different kind of sonic vernacular. And I would be curious to hear you speak a little bit about those specific instances that you mentioned already, of using bird sounds? I'm curious about the instances in your work where you have made a decision to work with recordings that are not things that you've electronically constructed?

### Sergei Tcherepnin

So for Baby Company [Gallery], for landline Institute, I was commissioned to do an installation in New Zealand. And I had already been pretty interested in the bird population, many endemic birds going extinct, and within the context of biodiversity, being threatened worldwide. Just being somebody who has always been interested in birds and bird songs and the language of birds, and also interested in the musical history of human attempts, composers' attempts, to categorize bird calls. Olivier Messiaen, for instance, [his] *Catalogue d'oiseaux* [*Catalogue of Birds*], which was an attempt to make a catalog that's playable on the piano of birds across France. And it's an amazing piece, but also completely shows the inability of the piano to capture, to reproduce, a bird call. And it also shows the insane limitations of the piano itself. And also it shows the human hitting their head against the wall trying to understand this complex world. But as complex as those piano pieces are—you listen to them and they're virtuosic twentieth-century masterpieces—but they just completely fall short to the birds themselves.

Anyway, being interested in those slippage between human's attempts to understand and then the thing itself. All that to say, when I was invited to do the work in New Zealand, I thought, Okay, I have to do a work about birds there. So I started researching the birds and came across an extinct bird, the moa, that was fascinating to me, and then also became interested in the kōkako in particular, which is very endangered both the South Island and the North Island. And just reading about these birds, I became very interested that their calls are always sung in pairs. Their partners are lifelong partnerships. And their calls define territories. Sometimes they have songs that are five minutes long, and their ability to sing songs with each other, to sing these duets, are so precise, that when they're two kilometers apart—first of all, their voice, they can project up to five kilometers away, they're also sometimes very low, they sound like an oboe or something. And they can account for the speed of sound in their timing when they're like three kilometers apart they somehow just do it, like part of their genetics.

Then on top of all of this, my interest in queer sound, or queer listening, queer encounters of sound, in my installations—I became also very interested that most of the pairs now, most of the couples, are male pairs. And so I found a researcher, Jeff McLeod, who passed away years ago, but who had done an entire PhD research on recording male-male pairs and recording male-female

pairs, and seeing if there were differences. There was a reason for this, that was for preservation; they wanted to see if they could actually repopulate, and if they could hear in one territory that there were male-male pairs, they might bring females.

I found all these record recordings, so beautiful. So I wrote to somebody who knew Jeff McLeod and they sent me all of these recordings. And so for instance, I have a recording of Jimmy and Beau; Jeff MacLeod named all of the pairs. I built a synthesizer patch with my analog synth. And I made a kind of keyboard. I tuned a keyboard that was exactly the scale and intonation of these birds. I found every single intonation, every single gesture, and I recreated it on the synthesizer. And then I did two things. One is I made my own musical landscape around this, with the sound world, with this vernacular. And then I also shadowed, with the synthesizer, the bird call. So with the genetic rescue project, it is possible to clone these birds now, but they haven't actually started cloning them. But I thought, what would happen if suddenly, there was a population of half-cloned kōkako and kōkako, so I just made this kind of synthetic kōkako landscape. And then that became part of an installation. That in itself formally did all of the things that I had talked about earlier: you had to walk around, you had encounters essentially little shrines to the kōkako that had different versions of either the synthetic or a combination of the synthetic and the actual [field recordings].

**Caitlin Woolsey**

In closing, I would love to have you speak about what you're working on right now?

**Sergei Tcherepnin**

COVID definitely made me slow down a lot. And that said, I don't have a lot going on in the art world, necessarily. Teaching became hugely important to me, and I am just thinking, and reading, and making music—a lot of music. But I will say that this bird extinction project is something that I am rekindling. I'd like to kind of create an inventory of extinct birds actually, imagining their voices within a kind of in conversation in an installation. I feel very disconnected from museums in general. I don't think I fully agree with the kind of the legitimization process, that museums create legitimacy for artists or art movements or galleries in order to sell their work. I mentioned Fluxus before; I feel more aligned with movements that are about communities of artists. Also in teaching, so many of

my courses have been about collectivity, and about collective devising of exhibitions, devising of performances. And in that I've been researching movements of both theater and art where this kind of collective process is important. I have made exhibitions in this way with groups of students. AFor example, last year at the Angewandte [University of Applied Arts] in Vienna, it really was a very real exhibition or mini sound series that was based on Maryanne Amacher, but [we] really expanded it into new directions. The students were all artists making incredible work.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

It's like you spoke before about the importance of working with Barbara and Maryanne, it's sort of like that relationship dynamic is now at play in this collaborative process with the students that you're working alongside. It makes me think of the way that you described the Maize Mantis, in the way that the audience feels like they're part of something and are involved in it in a substantive way, not just a kind of superficially performative way. But thank you so much for your time, Sergei. It is a real pleasure to speak with you.

**Sergei Tcherepnin**

Thank you so much.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

The sound excerpts you heard in this episode are all by Sergei Tcherepnin. The first is from *Giving Rein*, originally a 38-channel performance at Murray Guy Gallery in New York in 2011; the second and third sonic interludes are both excerpts from *Aviary Clones*, an installation at Len Lye Foundation in New Zealand in 2018. All recordings are copyrighted by the artist. I'm very grateful to him for so generously allowing us to share his work with you in this way.

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information about this episode and links to resources referenced in the conversation, please visit [clarkart.edu/rap/podcast](http://clarkart.edu/rap/podcast). This program was produced by me, Caitlin Woolsey, with Caroline Fowler, music by lightchaser, sound editing by CJ DeGennaro, and additional support provided by Annie Jun and Maggie O'Connor.

The Clark Art Institute sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these

homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee community. As we learn, speak, and gather here at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations by committing to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.