

## Responses

*Art Journal* invited Keith Townsend Obadike to respond to the “Afrotech and Outer Spaces” forum, published in the Fall 2001 issue.

It has to do with stimulation: from the images I do the music, from the music I do the sound. But sound is not something foreign to adorn the film. It is intrinsic to the film. . . . Oral tradition is a tradition of images.  
—Djibril Diop Mambety, filmmaker

In the past few years, I’ve defined my practice as sound art. Usually when someone unfamiliar with contemporary art asks what I do, I say “I’m an artist,” or “I’m a sound artist”; “I’m a composer,” or “I work with sound in a visual art context.” My response often depends on how much of a conversation I think this person wants to have and how pretentious I think “sound artist” might seem in a given context. Many who have taken on the label “sound artist” have been versed to some degree in conceptual visual practices as well as experimental or electronic music. Since interdisciplinary art did not begin with the term “sound artist,” how does it help to use such a job descriptor?

Not too long ago I had the privilege of working on a project called *To Conserve a Legacy: American Art from Historically Black Colleges and Universities*. The art historian Richard Powell, who served as co-curator, organized a symposium that explored the relationship between contemporary art practice and the collections of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). I had been involved with the project for about six months by the time I began to question my relationship as a sound and new-media artist to this significant collection of paintings and sculpture.

During his lecture, Michael Lomax, a panel member and president of Dillard University in New Orleans, took a moment to recognize composer T. J. Anderson in the audience. For a brief moment, it struck me as strange that the venerable composer Anderson, whose work ranges from experimental composition to reviving the music of Scott Joplin, was watching from the audience rather than participating. But it made sense eventually, because he works with sound, not visual art. As someone who has devoted a great deal of time to working with and thinking about the interplay of sound and image, I had not spent much time thinking about the disciplinary divisions that grounded my predecessors.

My impetus to use the term “sound artist” is to align my work equally with visual and performance artists, composers, and sound designers. While this might seem like a simple notion, I’ve found that many people only know of a European or European-American sound-art tradition. Many popular histories of sound art trace it back to early Italian Futurist performances by Filippo Marinetti and Luigi Russolo or the American John Cage. This European-centered narrative of sound art is no help in explaining my practice or that of many American sound artists. I place my work in the tradition of artists such as Sun Ra, Adrian Piper, Uche Okeke, Romare Bearden, T. J. Anderson, Acha Debela, and Olly Wilson.

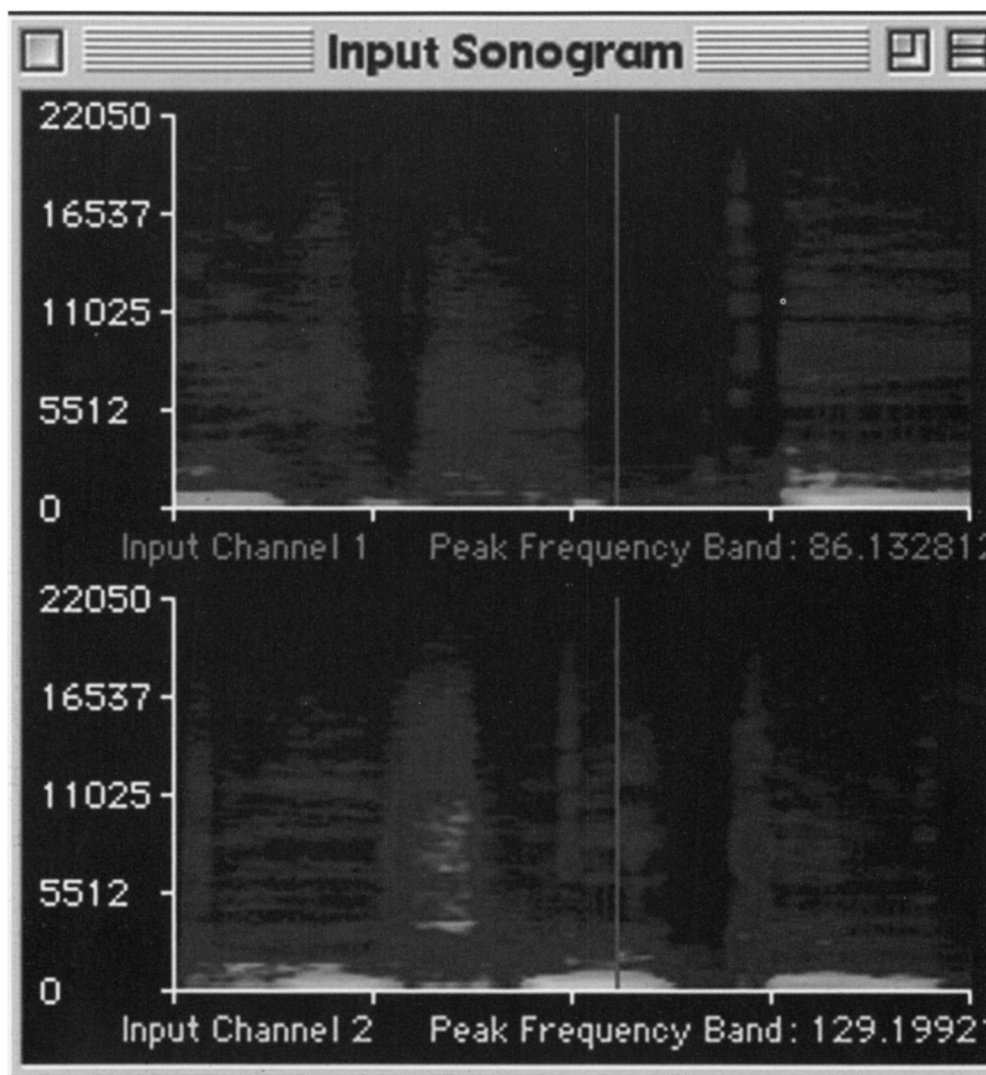
While the influence of musicians on sound art might seem obvious, one may question the role of painters and sculptors. There is always sonic informa-

**Keith Townsend Obadike**

### **What’s in a Name? Seeing Sound Art in Black Visual Traditions**

tion to be gleaned from the performance and object-based work of artists such as Faith Ringgold, Obiora Udechukwu, David Hammons, James VanDerZee, Raymond Saunders, Norman Lewis, and Terry Adkins. Many of these artists are musicians as well. In a recent conversation with the art historian Judith Wilson, I learned that Adrian Piper made some early conceptual sound works like the “Sensation” series (1965) and other audio installations. Carrie Mae Weems also

works with spoken word and audio recordings. I would argue that for many black visual artists the black soundscape is a constant source. As a sound artist, I want to communicate something about this tradition. The primary question in my work is: How can the sound of our music and speech comment on or create an internal mental image? I’ve become increasingly concerned with constructing a metalanguage that can function as a personal art history and sonic praxis. This device should be useful for expressing momentary concerns, but will also create a conceptual lineage for my work. From Anderson to VanDerZee, I trace a lineage through visual art and experimental music. The terms “composer” or “artist” do



**Sonogram from *Automatic*, 2000. Audio CD. 3 hours, 27 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.**

not describe what I do. “Sound artist” enables those of us who work with sound in interdisciplinary contexts to address those influences.

Keith Townsend Obadike is a sound artist whose latest projects include *Blackness for Sale* (2001) and *The Sour Thunder* (1998–2002). He is an M.F.A. student in sound design at Yale University. His work was included in the exhibition *Race and Digital Space* at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Mass. in 2001 and will be on view at the International Center of Photography, New York, and the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2002.