

Cellular Chimes

A Proposal for Office Soundscapes

By Joshua Hudelson

I have spent the better part of the last three years working in offices, and that has been more than enough time to see the truth in the cliché: I walk down the same hall each day, press the same elevator button, open and close the same doors, operate the same coffee machine, and have the same conversations with my coworkers, day in and day out. The theme is repetition: of images, movements, sounds, and words. Repetition *ad absurdum*. And this what makes for the humor of so many office-based movies, sitcoms, and comic strips. But beneath the humor, one might sense—as Franz Kafka did—something more ominous. The strange repetition of the working day consumes more hours than we would like to admit. It encroaches ever farther into social spaces: sidewalks, subways, taxis, stores, parks, and restaurants. All of these suffer, inevitably, a similar kind of ossification.

It is hard to say specifically what that ossification is. I can best describe it by way of its opposite: open-ended possibility. By this I mean nothing very unfamiliar. It's the same open-endedness that one feels upon picking up a musical instrument.

Imagine for a moment what it would be like if we engaged musical instruments in the same way that we engaged the objects of our workplace: staplers, fax machines, or microwaves. We would certainly never make much of the stuff that we call "music." Instead, we would probably learn just one or two melodies and play them dispassionately over and over again. Or, if we managed more than that, we would still consider the art of musicianship a dead-end road. Learning to play would be like learning to use the Xerox machine. There would be no sense that one could continue playing the instrument for the rest of one's life with the same level of interest and zeal. There would be no opportunity for surprise. Like a swivel chair or a photocopier, the use of a musical instrument would be finite, determined, and dead.

The reason this is not the case, however, is because instruments are different than other objects. Not materially; they are, of course, made out of the same matter and subject to the same physical laws as everything else. But ontologically they are worlds apart.

We regard instruments, in their very being, as special things. It is no coincidence that anthropologists have recorded case after case of magical rites being accompanied—or, more often, orchestrated—by musical performance. Music instruments are magical and have the potential to transcend the everyday.

They can do this because of their generative ability. This is an oversimplification, but useful here. Why, we may ask, does a musician have no difficulty sitting for hours with her instrument, experimenting, testing, messing up and starting over again—in a word, playing? At times, the playing may sound very repetitive, but in this case each repetition holds open the possibility that something new will emerge, and so there is always anticipation and never boredom. This is in stark contrast to the work of an office assistant, which is always delimited by the spectrum of greater or less efficiency. Generating something new is simply not an issue, and therefore not an option.

The newness that comes from playing a musical instrument may take shape on any number of levels: new melodies, new harmonies, new rhythms, new timbres, new performance techniques, and so on. But perhaps most important is the newness of the environment that is created by the sound. Music reshapes the way we live in our space, whether we are musicians ourselves, audience members, or accidental listeners.

This space itself is also threatened by ossification. Think of how music is used most commonly—not to create a space, but to mask it. Elevator music and Moozak, the pop songs played in department stores, car radios, and ipods. It is neither the devices nor the music that are problematic, but the uses toward which they are put. They attempt to negate the real, living space around them.

But, to quote Heidegger quoting Holderlin, "where there is danger, grows the saving power also." To the degree that musical space is in danger, it also contains the necessary power to save itself.

One goal of my work has been to harness this power of music to counteract the force of ossification that I discussed above. But let me take a moment to be clear about what I am *not* trying to do. I am not attempting to ameliorate the problem by creating a more dynamic and interesting work environment. Nor am I trying to coyly draw attention to the evils of repetitive activity in the workplace. Nor am I trying to increase musicianship or revert back to a golden era of engaged listening. Those solutions are too counter-productive, cynical, and utopian, respectively.

My goal is very modest: to create environmental structures and situations that resist their everyday status and instead open up "instrumental" possibilities. In other words, I am interested in finding ways to let the objects and spaces of the working world slip into the realm of instruments and musicality. At the very least, I wish to show how the putatively hard limits between these two spheres can be blurred.

To this end, I propose the *Cellular Chimes*, a sound sculpture for the average office. Constructed out of various resonant materials (including carved wood, hammered copper and tin, drum skins, and glass), it can be suspended from the ceiling of the average corporate lobby or conference room. The shape of the sculpture will follow in the spirit minimalist sculptors such as Robert Morris, Jules Olitski, and Tony Smith. Their works explored the sculptural possibility of objects resisting their everyday objecthood, and likewise, the music of *Cellular Chimes* will resist the ossification that Moozak and Ipods have given to the word "music."

The sculpture will be lined with two dozen vibrating devices, similar to those found in modern-day cellular phones. These devices will be wired to a circuit board that can receive phone calls on several lines. A phone call to a particular line will activate one of the vibrating devices, causing the sculpture surface to which it is attached to resonate. The phone numbers to the sculpture will be made public, and a microphone in the room will feed back the sound of the sculpture to the caller for a few seconds.

Cellular Chimes might be compared to a similar sound device called the telemegaphone, which broadcasts the voice of the caller through megaphones in a distant location. The differences between these two works are important. First, *Cellular Chimes* will not broadcast sounds created by the caller. The caller's agency in the playing of the sculpture is limited to the timing of the call. While this may appear to limit the "instrument" quality of the sculpture, I believe it enhances it: the goal is not to create an environment people can control, but rather, one to which they may contribute. People will call the sculpture without knowing how frequent the prior calls have been, whether theirs will occur in unison with another, or whether more calls, or silence, will follow soon after. Each call is like one note on a score that no one can see, and in this way the sculpture relies on the leap of faith that is required in any act of musicianship.

Another difference is that the sculpture is focused on cellular phones, using the vibrating function in the body of the sculpture itself. In some ways, telemegaphones and *Cellular Chimes* are opposites. Telemegaphones *amplify* telephone calls, while *Cellular Chimes* attempts to *absorb, transform, and redirect* them. At the heart of this goal is the acknowledgement that cellular phones, and in particular MP3-playing phones, are having an adverse effect on the modern soundscape—not only in their intrusive rings, but in their complicity in using sound to detach from, rather than engage, the local environment.

A final aspect of *Cellular Chimes* worth mentioning: while most calls will be coming from people outside of the building, and perhaps even outside of the state or country, this does not preclude people in the room with the sculpture to call as well. This permits further openness for the sculpture and prevents it from being limited to a single kind of playing.