

JOEL STERN

S2E10:

EAR TRAINING

BEYOND MUSICAL

PARAMETERS

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It is already the finale for SEASON 2: THE AFTERMATH and as a quick announcement, it is also the last ever episode of the DECLASSIFY podcast, but I will touch more on that later. Today's guest for the finale of the podcast is none other than artist, sound researcher, educator, curator and currently the artistic director of experimental arts company Liquid Architecture, Joel Stern. Joel was appointed the artistic director of Liquid Architecture in 2013 where in this capacity he has curated and produced festivals, exhibitions, concerts and publications in Australia and internationally. He has also led independent organisations including OtherFilm and Instrument Builders project. His interests as an artist, curator and researcher (where he currently teaches at Monash University) include sound, power, control, surveillance, social practice, experimental music and non-human or machine listening. This podcast finale explores intersections of making sound and listening, how to train one's ear to be socially active and the power of artist-led interventions, research and movements.

Victoria Pham

Hello hello! Thank you for coming back to the podcast and I can't believe how quickly this season has blown by. It is already the finale for SEASON 2: THE AFTERMATH and as a quick announcement, it is also the last ever episode of the DECLASSIFY podcast, but I will touch more on that later. Because I am speedily and with great haste going to move into introducing today's guest for the finale of the podcast; none other than artist, sound researcher, educator, curator and currently the artistic director of experimental arts company Liquid Architecture, Joel Stern. Joel was appointed the artistic director of Liquid Architecture in 2013 where in this capacity he has curated and produced festivals, exhibitions, concerts and publications in Australia and internationally. He has also led independent organisations including OtherFilm and Instrument Builders project, as well as having worked in sound production and community radio. His interests as an artist, curator and researcher (where he currently teaches at Monash University) include sound, power, control, surveillance, social practice, experimental music and non-human or machine listening. I am very excited to welcome you on the podcast to speak with you today, Joel. Welcome!

Joel Stern

Hello, hi.

Victoria Pham

Great, well, I'll just jump straight into it. Well, my the first question I've been asking, every episode this season has been, Did you always know that you wanted to work with sound or engage with sound making practices?

Joel Stern

No, but I have done so my adult life. So, I'm just trying to work it out. I'm trying to think about, you know, whether there was sort of a crucial moment, where it became clear to me that this was sort of, you know, I wouldn't say calling, but it's sort of very strong passion. And I think, you know, I was obsessed with music. From a pretty young age from maybe I was gonna say like nine or 10, that is even is even earlier and my obsession with music was not so much that I just like loved music, like singing and dancing and listening to music, but I kind of I would type video hits and rage and sort of catalogue the videos and kind of memorise the charts. And then as soon as I was old enough, my parents you know, would buy me like cassettes, and, you know, had a, had a collection and then even in primary school, I was taping cassettes for other kids and I was sort of had this almost proselytising attitude about the music I loved. If I loved, you know, a band or an artist, I had to tell all my friends about them and convince them about how fantastic that music was. And and so I was sort of just a very passionate fan of music. And that kind of led me into things like read like radio, and benzenes. And, and all that sort of fan culture. And so, you know, in high school, I was involved in community radio, had lots of friends in bands, and although I never played music, in sort of in front of anyone, but I would go along, I would help make posters, I'd take photos, I'd record concerts. And I had a really strong fascination in you know, not just music that the circulation and distribution in the sort of culture of music making and sort of music communities. And that led me into a Media Studies degree and undergraduate degree at at RMIT where I really wanted to get involved in radio and radio production and I started doing shows on triphala and the RMIT radio station, student radio station at the time. They gave me graveyard shifts 2am till 6am slots and you know, and and other feelings for other presenters are going with my friends and you know, I was I was working at a independent record store collector's corner at the time in Swanston Street, which doesn't exist anymore, but you know, they're not The 90s in Melbourne was a sort of golden age for Matt, for me as a teenager. And in my early 20s,

of course, you know, I think that but it, it was a golden age for sort of independent music culture in a way, like, there were lots of record stores. And in every record store, there were these like connoisseurs who could just give you an informal education on the history of every genre of music and community radio was huge, that all ages music scene was huge. There were so many venues. That reputation that Melbourne has as a, as a music culture, I think was really forged in that period in the 90s, when, when I was first getting involved with music. And so yeah, that I kind of, without really knowing it, in a way was developing a sort of identity as a listener, as a close listener. Who, who could sort of hear in music, you know, a huge amount of detail and nuance and things about genre and kind of could recognise a song from the first two seconds of its guitar tone. And you know, that sort of listening, obsessive listening culture that sort of fans bring to music. But then through radio production, I started to realise that there was a kind of aesthetics of radio production that involved collecting, compiling, mixing and layering of sound in a studio environment. That was sort of very creative and imaginative and kind of went beyond the source materials into sort of the production of new work. And that led me quite quickly to learning about music, concrete, and experimental music and sample based music and all of those things and, and field recording, etc. And then before I knew it, you know, without ever having really identified as a musician, I was sort of producing experimental music and Sonic art and all of those things. As, as someone who was sort of directly working with sound in a, you know, kind of production and material way, but bypassing the musical education, you know, that a lot of my friends who are really great instrumentalists, you know, still and still have so many friends that like that, they all had that background. So yeah, and it's always been a passion. For me, that's just growing deeper and deeper from from my immersion in those cultures as a teenager through to, you know, the media studies approach through to moving to London and studying sound design and music technology. With David Toop, and John Wayne and Kathy Lane, and all those peoples in the first year of that, the course that is now Chris AP, or London College of Communication sound art course. So I moved there in when I was 21, and enrolled in that programme. And became very, very involved in the London experimental and improvised music and Sonic art scenes. Head Pro, did radio shows on resonance, FM and things like that. And it's been a big part of my life ever since. So that's, that that's a long answer that takes you up to, you know, into into my kind of early 20s, I guess.

Victoria Pham

Sounds amazing, because it seems very fluid and organic, your movement between all the genres, which is very different from how I grew up, because I felt like when I grew up, music was a very categorical in a way. So I was introduced to classical music really early on, because my parents wanted me to learn piano when I was young, which I think is the story a lot of people go through. And then I just kind of everything kind of spanned from that central point that I only understood other genres in relation to classical music, because that was the first thing I encountered. So I like hearing your story, how everything was fluid all the way from a lot of the contemporary music you were listening to in the home and all through to the kind of weird spaces of music concurrently, Sonic art that were emerging, I suppose in the 90s

Joel Stern

Yeah, I mean, I did have a sense of genre for sure. And especially genres of popular music, whether it was like you know, hip hop or electronic music or you know, indie rock or later, different sub genres of avant garde music, but I think the thing for me was because I came up through sort of grassroots music scenes, rather than, say, a classical education, or an institutional education. I sort of the main difference I perceived was between, like, grassroots underground music production on the one hand, and then sort of institutional top down cultures of music pedagogy and sort of knowledge production, let's say on the other hand. So it was, it took me a long time to come to terms with the Conservatorium and the kind of idea of formal music

education, and to, to not sort of see it as something wholly alien to me. But yet, in some ways, for me, I was less concerned with the differences between genres of music and more concerned with the political differences in sort of how music is kind of organised and produced and circulated and consumed.

Victoria Pham

I know what you mean about the Conservatorium, I mean, having gone to one I still feel like it's a bit of an alien form to me. I suppose that leads me to I wrote this question about genre, because I was having a conversation with a musician and someone who wasn't a musician. And the person who wasn't a musician, but was a very deep listener, and attended a lot of different types of concerts from different genres, was asking us what exactly was the difference between what's known as classical art, music, new music, and experimental, experimental music in that in that world, because he just didn't know how to get into that, that sphere of listening, because they all kind of sounded the same to him. And he didn't understand the distinguishing what distinguished each of these genres. And to be honest, as I was talking to him, I realised, I didn't either. So I was wondering, if you had any insight in, in that realm,

Joel Stern

you have thought about a lot, you know, as someone who, you know, in all of my involvement with music, whether it's being a radio presenter, or you know, directing an organisation like liquid architecture, one of the most important responsibilities is to communicate, you know, what is sort of valuable and exciting and interesting and dynamic about music to others. And those people that you communicating with ranged from, like absolute specialists who kind of have a completely sort of nuanced knowledge of musical traditions, through to people for whom this is really new territory, and who sort of really need an accessible kind of explanation or commentary or kind of way of engaging with the work. And so I think, you know, terminology matters, insofar as, it's a way of making people feel confident in their listening, and that they are kind of, you know, and that this music is potentially for them, and that as a listener, they can bring value, you know, to that experience, because, obviously, you know, avant garde forms of music can be very alienating for those who, you know, are made to feel that they don't understand or that this music has been produced by specialists for specialists and has nothing to do with them, or who are patronised by the sort of, let's say, presumption of like cultural sort of values, that certain institutional forms of music, you know, assert for themselves. So, that's a roundabout way of saying that. Like, I think of all those terms, experimental music, avant garde music, new music, sort of classical postclassical as sort of strategic tactical, fluid contest to contested they, they do not have a fixed meaning that they describe certain institutional ecologies, certain communities of practice, certain political economies. You know, certain genre signifiers, let's say, or, you know, all of those things when I think of experimental music, I think of, you know, American postwar avant gardes from cage and Feldman and ELB and Lucia and Robert Ashley, and Pauline Oliveros. You know, when I think of classical new music, you know, I think of you know, German and Central European, you know, composers attached to prestigious conservatory comes in and universities, riding complicated scores for, you know, ensembles and bowing at the end to sort of, you know, polite applause or even rapturous applause or whatever. You know, and then when I think of avant gardes, avant garde music, I sort of think of the various 20th century assaults on culture, you know, through sort of data, surrealism Fluxus minimalism, conceptualism, etc, that were kind of attempting to dismantle conventions of form, content, beauty, etc. So they all have different nuances. And sort of, you know, emphases but it would be, I think, a waste of time to be come fixated on sort of policing the boundaries, between genre descriptions, when, you know, the descriptions, essentially just an overlay on a kind of Sonic production and a kind of listening culture that accompanies it. Yeah, I'm drawn to experimental music as a terminology. Because I've always sort of seen experimentation as a kind of ethic, you know, as

a kind of commitment to, you know, staging experiments, and learn and learning from the results. And, you know, in the end, that those experiments are sort of worthwhile, insofar as the results can be useful, you know, socially and culturally and politically, etc. And I really, sort of like the idea of, of experimental music, sort of operating in a way that is sort of ambivalent, in relation to, you know, let's say, the music marketplace, or the kind of capitalist economy or the grant industrial complex, or, you know, all of those sorts of things, that, that what's being experimented with, is both the form of the music, but also the mode of production and the means of, you know, its reception and consumption and things and things like that. So, yeah, I'm not sure if that answers your question, but that maybe my sort of sub summary answer at the end of a long rant would be that because, you know, the sort of formal qualities of a piece of music, you know, it's it, it's sort of repertoire of sounds and gestures, and its aesthetic quality, is sort of inseparable from the sort of mode of its production and the conventions of the listening and the sort of all of the contextual dimensions to sort of think of genre as simply sort of something that can be distinguished through aesthetic signifiers, you know, that would be really sort of reductive. So, you know, therefore, if you kind of, if you accept that, then I think you sort of have to accept that. Genres are political, you know, that they are kind of they are kind of propositional, you know, and they're sort of there to be possibly subverted and you know, intervened in route rather than, you know, consolidated.

Victoria Pham

Yes, you're right. They don't have very clear borders, which is probably why I struggled to even explain any of this to someone who, not even to myself, even sometimes I listen to bits of music, where I don't know what the historical social background isn't, I think, where's this from? So I just kind of plot it into the new music, experimental music umbrella, as it is,

Joel Stern

totally, but then I suppose it's baby. My answer then was also kind of very sort of Western or Eurocentric in in the sense that if we're thinking about discrete musical traditions from around the world, and the absolutely irreducible diversity, hopefully like musical practices around the world, then there are real really important differences that need to be named. You about the sort of, you know, role of music, in producing, you know, community meaning sort of self identification, etc. But I think if we think about the sort of yet, let's say, the cultural production of music in the West, from the 20th century onwards, then you can sort of say that a lot of those genre distinctions are sort of institutional and, and political,

Victoria Pham

is exactly what you mentioned before, when you are talking about all the different dimensions to music, you mentioned, active listening, which is something when I'm making music that isn't Western, or basically isn't for a concert hall, or isn't designed to be in a concert hall, there's a greater emphasis on participation from the listener, either in, in music alongside the music makers, not really on stage, but the key music makers in a community, or, or somehow actively participating in the music in a way that isn't as passive, I don't know, I always associate when you go to a concert, there's a big separation with the people on stage, and the people who kind of sit back and, and take all that all that sound in without necessarily engaging with the music making in a communal way.

Joel Stern

So I totally get it. And I also like, I've had arguments with people all my, all my life, about the sort of, like, the kind of responsibility of the listener in relation to music, you know, because I, even before I could articulate it, I remember, you know, in high school sort of playing sort of records to people and and people

saying, I don't like it, that's not to my taste, or whatever and may thinking, I don't care about your taste like, like, this sort this sort of like, it's somehow it's like, listening is sort of, you have to bring a certain knowledge to the listening. It's like dismissing something on the basis of it not being to your taste kind of presumes that it's like that your taste is not informed by your knowledge, or expectations, or do you know what I mean? So one thing, I've just never been able to forgive people who didn't, who weren't willing to learn about things they didn't, they kind of didn't, like, respond, you know, what I mean, like that, if you heard something, and you kind of found it alienating, rather than reject it, you would sort of like, try to find out more about what what it is, and like, why it sounds like that, and kind of like, what the context of its production is, and all of that. So I've always had this that sort of curiosity and wanted to sort of bring that, to me active listening means you sort of bringing to that listening, a kind of curiosity to and sort of a desire to kind of understand what you're hearing.

INTERMISSION I:

This first intermission is a work selected by Joel. This experimental, sound-art work 'My Body Blushed to the Whistle of the Birch' is performed and composed by Seth Kim-Cohen, here presented by Liquid Architecture at west Space gallery in 2016. The work's text reflects on the conceptual underpinning of the work which combines pre-corded material with live performance: "It is written that the dawning of the Age of Aquarius is anticipated by the herald of the singing-stinging urges and the weltanshauung-of-pure-data." More information about this work and Seth Kim-Cohen is available in the podcast description.

Victoria Pham

Now, I understand what you mean, it's like a curiosity with sounds around you. Which do you think there's a way we could train ears to open up to that kind of curiosity?

Joel Stern

100% I mean, ear training for musicians, is sort of like pitch and frequency recognition and tempo recognition, and all of that. And surely, there are analogous forms of ear training that are more more focused on social, cultural, political, ethical, you know, and other kinds of questions. It's something I've been thinking about heaps in relation to the machine listening project. Because if we want to say that machines, listen, which is sort of already, you know, a kind of anthropomorphizing of the machine, you know, because they'd process sort of auditory data that that, you know, listening is the, is a way of describing sort of what humans do to sound but, you know, the, I've been sort of working with people to, let's say, to listen to or to audio, in ways that are kind of more similar to the way that a machine might index that audio in order to extract data from it. So, for instance, to break words into their phonemes and sort of or to sort of alphabetize words, you know, or to listen indexical ways, etc. And, you know, to me, that's the kind of edge raining, it's a way of sort of training oneself to listen in more machinic ways in order to sort of understand some of the technical infrastructures, that kind of we we exist in. So I think, you know, in the same way, like, I've been inspired by Lawrence, Abu Hamed and work, the Lebanese British artist whose work is very focused on different forms of political listening, that that sort of can be used as sort of forensic investigative tools. And he's made a new work, I haven't seen it yet, but he, but I've sort of read about it, where he is working with people in Lebanon, to who can identify the type of aeroplane, you know, that is in the sky from the sound of its engine. And therefore know whether it's a military plane, a civilian plane belonging to which country, likely to sort of impact the, you know, one's

life in one way or at so that's a form of ear training, you know, in the field, being able to hear the difference between the engine of one plan or another with potentially life or death consequences. Yeah, so I'm interested in that question of year of how to train one's listening beyond the can conventions of musical parameters that we're used to.

Victoria Pham

So kind of understanding how machines processing so we can get a better so we can understand how to communicate with them better or mimic the techniques that machines listen with.

Joel Stern

Yeah, to listen in machinic ways in order to understand how we are being heard by that those technical infrastructures. And then in order to intervene and subvert and kind of, let's say, and sort of, at times, evade some of those forms of listening. And then in other ways to kind of de naturalise the forms of listening that we have, and open up other formal possibilities. I mean, if you think of a lot of the sort of structural material experiments, you know, in various avant garde like, say, William Burroughs cutting up, you know, the page of book and sort of re re combining pages in different ways or other musical experiments in sampling and editing or, you know, alienating sounds from their sources and stuff, a lot of it comes from sort of D naturalising, the forms of, you know, listening or reading or looking that we're used to, through a sort of a more mechanistic type of intervention. So, yeah, I've always been interested in that.

Victoria Pham

Super cool. I suppose, like off your story about hands jam, research, I was reading some accounts not too long ago, and I have to find them, maybe I'll send it to you or pop them in to the podcast link about soldiers and their experiences with sound in in a similar way, where they are able to distinguish in complete, seemingly complete silence as soon as there's no noise happening, everyone starts to get anxious because it's like it's building up to some sort of climax. So there's a different relationship that when you're in the field, or in a military situation, your relationship with no no noise, as opposed to a lot of noise completely is submitted.

Joel Stern

Absolutely. And yeah, my colleague and sort of close collaborator, James Parker, from Melbourne law school, has written extensively on you know, silence as a kind of, as a sort of, signifier of the as the as the as evidence rather than the absence of evidence if that makes sense as a sort of active signifier of something that has been a violence or erasure rather than as the kind of you know, let's say sublime kind of Zen like state that someone like cage sort of would posit for for a silence so and he's he's written really beautifully in fact on Laurens have been hundreds work sort of through the prism of cages notion No silence.

Victoria Pham

So beautiful. We have to look that up. Wonderful. I suppose this is a good kind of segue into me asking about liquid architecture. And when you first joined eight years ago, did you did you have a really clear idea of where you were going to take the organisation or how you were going to shape it up until now?

Joel Stern

Yeah, I think so. I mean, I joined in 2013. I've been I've been involved with liquid architecture as an artist a number of times, since the organisation was founded in 1989. In fact, in in 1999, when a group of RMIT

media arts students established liquid architecture, I was also at RMIT, in the Media Studies Department next door, you know, doing my undergraduate degree, I wasn't part of the gang that started the organisation. They were much sort of cooler than me, they were kind of electronic artists, you know, doing like sound design and video. Whereas I was doing something more like sort of, you know, journalism and radio production and etc. But they were always these people like Philip Brophy and Philip SomArts. Us and they're sort of students, and amazing people coming through RMIT in the late 90s, like the cultural theorists, Cogito ation, who who'd written the book more brilliant than the Sun at that point, which is a kind of Afro futurist kind of theorization that has become, you know, really influential over the years. And I suppose I'm just giving a bit of a potted history of liquid architecture, because I think it helps set the scene for maybe the kind of intervention that I wanted to make when I joined. And, you know, in that early 2000s, period, LA was an annual festival of Sonic art and experimental music, initially staged in Melbourne in small galleries, like where space and clubs like the lounge, and other places and it did have a kind of strong relationship to Melbourne's kind of techno culture. You know, probably more so than say like, you know, new music or avant garde music, it was more coming out of electronic music and, you know, early warp records, and that, that sort of like an underground club culture kind of influence. And throughout that sort of 2000s period, liquid architecture sort of evolved into an annual touring festival. There were strategic alliances, we go to institute, Allianz francais, Japan Foundation, and sort of various international cultural agencies, which meant that some fairly high profile, sort of avant garde figures came to Australia through liquid architecture, people like Bernard Parmigiani. You know, Thomas Kerner pulling all the various Tony Conrad, you know, like, it became the place where the modernist musical avant garde was sort of showcased in an Australian context. And this was before major city festival like Melbourne festival, or vivid or mono foam, or Adelaide Festival sort of had a strong stake in kind of experimental and new music, as far as I'm concerned, like they had their ensembles and stuff, but in some ways, liquid architecture did the work of bringing that kind of music to more mainstream attention in an Australian context a few years before the big festivals started to reproduce similar kinds of programmes. So where am I going with this? In 2013. I joined initially as curator, and then quickly became artistic co director with my colleague, Danny's Avella. I just moved from Brisbane, Danny moved down from Brisbane to Shane and I had already worked together for eight. He's running kind of an artists Moving Image collective called other film. And we've been very obsessed with experimental film culture and sort of audio visual art. We came into liquid architecture with a quite a strong proposal, which was in a way to shift the emphasis from this kind of prestigious annual showcase of fame. touring artists with some local support acts into an organisation that had more of a grassroots commitment to fostering experimental culture and production all year round, through supporting local artists in regular ongoing forums, and had had a sort of commitment to art form development of experimental music, you know, rather than just say showcasing, you know, the most prominent and important figures, you know, asking critical questions about the about Sonic art, and experimental music and sort of not not being afraid to kind of stage you know, critical conversations and debates about the value of the work, you know, so stepping back from sort of just promoting work and presenting it to audiences into a kind of much more collaborative participatory mode of producing discourse, publishing, commissioning, and experimenting with sort of formats. And so, yeah, from 2014 onwards, we dissolved the annual festival programme. We in had a staff of three, Danny and I, as CO directors, and a general manager, Annabelle Lukla, who was amazing, just taking our ideas and making them sort of prep, work in practice with budgets and, and production. And we started staging events, sort of all everywhere, in anywhere at every scale, you know, with international and local artists, in sort of myriad partnerships with a non art collaborators. And I think we tried to shift the emphasis of the organisation from being primarily concerned with the production of sound into an organisation more sort of focused on the, on the politics of listening, and culture and cultures of listening.

And that was a sort of nuanced shift at times, but at other times, you know, possibly a more radical kind of shift. Yeah, so, I've over over the years, you know, we've had, you know, Danny was sort of with the organisation for a number of years, and sort of left in around 2018 19. And I've continued up until now, which is almost nine years like, of being curator and artistic director, with many ups and downs in the organisation, like, you know, with in terms of funding and government support, sort of being one and then lost, and then you know, one again, and then lost again, and staff coming and going and amazing programmes, international programmes in Taiwan and Singapore and Japan. And projects in, you know, places all over Australia that I never expected, we would sort of work. And yeah, oh, yeah. Well, I guess what I wanted to say was that the vision for the organisation was always kind of articulated in the pro through the programme, rather than through sort of like you know, rather than being over determined by sort of, you know, grand statements, if that makes sense, like, my kind of way of working is to programme prolifically and constantly and iteratively and sort of to, like, have themes and ideas that sort of constantly, kind of evolve and have a conversation that is sort of always ongoing articulated through the programme, and to sort of leave space for the programme to articulate the vision, rather than the other way around. But in 2016, or 17, we did establish four key investigations, that liquid architecture sort of that, that would structure our research and elements of our artistic programme. And they were, at the time, wildly Sun, which was a kind of ecological investigation that begins with the Christian wireless and then often had sort of alternating second parts of that. So it would be wireless into plants, wireless and to animals. And it was sort of thinking about human non human listening relations. Another investigation, polyphonic social, was concerned with the political possibilities of polyphony. And the idea of musical structures that could hold multiple voices in kind of relationships of let's say, dissonant solidarity with one another. And that was often took the plate took the form of commissions for participatory Sonic artworks, and ritual Community Music was our concert series and remains the concert series. And there's really concerned with the way in which experimental forms of music produce community, you know, through bringing people together, to listen collectively to often difficult and confounding and challenging material and how that, you know, produces a collect collective listener, and a community that kind of emerges out of that. And then the fourth investigation was eavesdropping, which was really about the politics and ethics of listening in a kind of increasingly networked and sort of technologized world. And the idea that it we shouldn't presume that listening is inherently a sort of positive of all sort of, you know, that, you know, reparative practice, that there are also forms of listening that are extractive colonial, you know, violent and unwanted. So, those four investigations, were, for a long time, the kind of themes that informed the the organization's work, and the artistic programme, were expressions that sort of came out of those investigations. And that that was a really big shift from what liquid architecture had been before, which was more like an annual showcase of the sort of Best International avant garde music.

INTERMISSION II:

This second intermission is another selection by Joel and features Christof Migone's work, Hit Parad, and I'll pass over to him to give us a little background and information about the work:

Joel Stern: one of the first pieces that we sort of organised Danny and I, when we first started at liquid architecture in 2014, was a work by the Canadian artists, Christoph amigaone called hit parade. And Christoph had just written this absolutely amazing book called am Sonic cymatic, which is sort of full of just incredible descriptions of sort of embodied, you know, forms of sound and listening at satellite quite abject and yeah, a full of made up words and neologisms and sort of very academic, but you know, very playful and weird way. And so, he has this work Hit Parade, which involves 50 participants, each with a

microphone, and a guitar amp, lying on the ground and hitting the microphone into the ground 1000 times. And the only rule is that you have to keep a steady tempo, but you can set your own tempo. And the pace ends when the 50th person does the 1000 hit, if that makes sense. So, it totals 50,000 hits, and that's and it's called Heat parade. And the and it produces this sort of polyphonic percussion work of microphones being repeatedly hit into the ground, and it's a little bit like Ligeti's, you know, 100 metronomes, because there's this tendency for the sort of the hits to sort of see synchronise with one another, that then go in and out of phase. And then at the end, you know, and, and it produces this image of the performer lying face-down on the ground, you know, hitting a microphone into the ground. And then at the end, as an artefact it produces all of these broken microphones with the sort of, you know, grilles flattened. And so that, I always understood that work as being both about, you know, the kind of collective forms of labour and ways of being together sonically, and hearing difference and similarity kind of at once. But I also always thought of it as sort of symbolic violence against the kind of microphone and against the kind of, you know, the old production of sound, you know, so it's a very, it's a very avant garde work in the sense that the avant garde has always sort of about destroying the past. And so it was a really cleansing wait as kickstart our tenure as directors of liquid architecture, like a sort of, sort of purging of the past in these 50 Broken microphones. So yeah, we could have a little listen to an excerpt of that the ABC Radio National team came along to the show and made a really beautiful recording of it, which we can, which we can listen to.

Victoria Pham

Yeah, I was about to ask about the investigations, because in fact, that's how I found out about liquid architecture to begin with, in 2014. I think it was the eavesdropping project that I came across, because it was the first time I'd ever seen an institution, I suppose if I'm allowed to call liquid architecture, an institution, or a company, I suppose, combined, such nuanced research with performance and experiments that actually engage the listener in a sort of participatory and learning model. Because before then, I had attended experimental music things, but they were very, I suppose, European in their presentation, they were either touring experimental groups from Europe itself, coming to Israel, and just doing a concert, where there wasn't really the same format that liquid architecture was presenting until I found you in 2014. So that actually changed my own practice about thinking about listening and making music together and working with people who are who are not musicians and collaborating in a much more interdisciplinary way.

Joel Stern

Well, thanks, Vicki. It's it's really good to hear that and very encouraging and a lot of people sort of found us and, and we found a lot of other people through working in that way, and it certainly didn't happen in a vacuum. There were other organisations around the world that we were really inspired by, like in 2012 Danny and I were had an oz co grant for Curatorial research into Sonic art. And we travelled, we visited Sonic acts in Amsterdam, we went to the Whitney Biennial and met with a group there called Erica, who was staging a project called a survey is a process of listening. And we met George Lewis and ultra red and all sorts of like amazing people who were thinking, really politically and conceptually about sound, Brandon Labelle was there too. And also, sound studies was starting to emerge as a discipline kind of doing, you know, more history, Historia graphics sort of work around listening cultures, and we thought that if there's going to be such a thing as Sonic art or sound art, that it has to include all of this interdisciplinary work has to be informed by these interdisciplinary working, and simply can't be modernist avant garde sort of music production in a gallery or a museum. It's, it sort of has to be grounded

in these sort of interdisciplinary contexts, and, and the political and social demands of our, you know, time. So, and once we started to shift liquid architecture in that direction, yes, there were some people who were annoyed because they made electronic music, and it's, and it was no longer sort of their organisation exclusively. But there was so many other people who came from non musical backgrounds, but who were extremely nuanced Sonic thinkers and listeners, who came into the organisation, from every artistic background, from activism, from animal studies from, you know, environmental science, it, you know, etc, etc, technology. Because we opened the door for people to have a broader conversation about, about sound and, and listening in the kind of expanded field.

Victoria Pham

I think that, in a way, created a very rich environment and the sort of community that drew these strands of research and thinking together in a way that's really impressive. If I'm allowed to say that. Well, I was actually going to ask you because I know you also teach at Monash University, when I understand the curatorial practice programme, how does your your experience from liquid architecture inform now how you teach these these curatorial practices to up and coming curators, and thinkers and artists?

Joel Stern

Well, I've been teaching on and off for quite a long time now. So probably, maybe about 15 years. So I started the first teaching I ever did was in in Brisbane at Queensland University of Technology when I was doing my Masters there, and they gave me a tutoring position in a class called Sound image text. And so as sort of had never had any training as a teacher had no idea sort of how to do it, but I'm not sure if you've had much experience like tutoring and stuff, but they just sort of expect you to know how to teach, like, and you have to then kind of work it out. So I was very bad at it for quite some time, I would say but in that sound image text class, I would sort of we would watch experimental films and video art and we would talk about the audio visual relationships and I was very informed by Michelle she on and kind of other figures in sort of film sound. And then that seemed to go pretty well. So then, Queensland University of Technology said, Well, you can run a studio and teach experimental music and sound if you like. So then suddenly, I had six students who had put their hand up, because they had all the ensembles that you could join and one of them was just called sound. And I had a budget to buy some equipment. So we bought some synthesisers and we made some things and we and our studio was just a weekly jam session, you know, just making noise and kind of collaborating and essentially forming a band. And I suppose those experiences were just for me different forms of pedagogy like one form of pedagogy is sort of giving, is introducing people to really important text like a film or video artwork, and then critically analysing it together. Another form of pedagogy is just to play music together and just jam and improvise and kind of in a totally horizontal and more democratic way. Just try to connect as sort of peers, you know, as musicians. And then, yeah, more recently, at Monash University, I've taught curatorial project studies, which in which is, you know, a pretty interesting subject in a way, because there's a lot of young students who want to study curating. But there are a lot of jobs for curators who graduate. And in some ways, I think, one of the problems is that cute, curating the sort of image of the curator is, you know, that is sort of produced and reproduced on social media and kind of, you know, etc, etc, it's quite glamorous kind of one, that it's a person with exceedingly good taste to has sort of exciting relationships with artists and is, you know, let's say, at and the term curating can get applied to all sorts of things like having a great record collection, or, you know, a beautiful wardrobe full of designer clothes, or whatever. And so it's really quite hard to bring curatorial students onto the sort of same page as one another, and kind of, and develop a common ground about what are the kinds of critical practices that we collectively want to value and learn and participate in and do together? And then what is the sort of utility of that knowledge, you know,

outside of class. So that's been kind of really challenging, especially in the last few years of the kind of the COVID crisis and the impact it's had on creative industries in Australia. But the other class that I've taught in the last few years, at Monash, which has been, you know, really sort of rewarding for me is a class called sound in the space of art. And it was passed on to me and David Chesworth, who's a contemporary Australian composer, and artists, to co teach from a senior artist and John Nixon, who unfortunately passed away a couple of years ago, and he was sort of a leading Australian sort of figure in, I suppose, consider conceptual art. And he was quite well known, you know, most well known as a visual artist, but had an, an extensive sort of musical and Sonic practice, too. And David, and I sort of inherited this classroom and then later, I taught it with James Rushford, who's another great composer we taught together. And that was a really, you know, the last few years of teaching that in an art school where we didn't have a music studio, we didn't have good speakers, we didn't have musical equipment. There was no technical knowledge that was being passed on. It was really just a class about how to develop a critical listening sensibility, you know, in in the world, and then kind of apply that to one's own work, whatever that work might be, whether you're an architect or a designer, or painter, or sculptor or whatever. And I was probably the first time as a teacher, I've really been able to think about sound in a fundamentally interdisciplinary way with students whose own interdisciplinarity made that a completely natural thing to do rather than an intervention in the lives of music students. So, yeah, that that that's been really amazing. I've made a lot of friends. Through teaching that class a lot of the students have gone on to intern at liquid architecture and work in the outdoor present in the organisation. And so yeah, and I suppose the other thing to say is that I've always thought of liquid architectures programme and the and the public programmes and exhibition programmes of many of the small artists run or curator run or not for profit, independent art spaces and organisations. In Australia, I've always thought of the programmes as kind of para academic as kind of alternative pedagogies. Like, we work at Collingwood yards, which is a kind of new cultural precinct, you know, in the inner north of Melbourne. And my sense is that if you're 1819 year old art student, and you spend a semester at Collingwood yards, like hanging out at bass, West Bay Centre for prediction at liquid architecture, social studio at Texas, you probably get a better education than you would at the art school in your lectures and toots. Because, you know, rather than having that fixed form of pedagogy, where a teacher is sort of telling you knowledge that you have to sort of, you know, absorb and kind of reproduce in a certain sense, even if, sort of critically at times, to be immersed in a community of practitioners, sort of constantly engaged in questioning each other and themselves, about the value of their work in whose works informed by independent research, and who are kind of taking part in and producing a discourse that is public, and at arm's length from the neoliberal University. I really feel like that's the form of pedagogy that we that we need, you know. So, yeah, it's always been very important for me to understand teaching and learning is something that happens as much in the community as it does in the university, if not more.

Victoria Pham

Now, I completely agree, because I never had any formal art training. And all my experience in the art has been from being lucky enough to have friends. I'm sorry, that was very loud. I'll leave a little gap. Anyways. So all my experience in the art world has been from having friends who are artists and getting to collaborate with them, and learning through a mainly all these independent artists run organisations, who are so open to having different people work in their space. And I've learned so much from just conversing really with other artists and other thinkers.

Joel Stern

Exactly. Yeah. And, you know, so many, like, artists, artists, run spaces, and galleries and organisations like liquid architecture, I think, really foreground discourse at this point, you know, whether it's lecture programmes, or artist talks, or different forms of publishing, reading groups, all those sorts of things. And I think that is sort of, there's a growing self awareness that artistic production is not is knowledge production. And that that's something that we should sort of claim, you know, more in a more assertive way. And so, and you can sort of see it in the interests of curators and artists in those organisations.

Victoria Pham

Yeah, exactly. There's a lot of social engagement and, and we publish a lot of Arts, which is I think it's something a lot of people don't realise. And I like that that's getting much, much more, I don't know what word to use awareness, I suppose, from other communities from from different disciplines that work is happening through the arts.

Joel Stern

Well, we established a journal for liquid architecture in 2019. Disclaimer, and we, you know, we'd wanted to do it for a long time. And that always been, like a prolific Writing Practice connected with the artistic programme where there was artists producing texts that they performed or, you know, things that were printed and circulated at events and etc. But I suppose we realised at a certain point that a digital platform for publishing, new writing and for sort of establishing modes of reading that were kind of relevant to the work we do as well, or to bring reading and listening strategically sort of closer together in certain kind of context, that that was something that would be as important to sort of the community around our organisation as sort of, as, you know, live events. And then in, you know, march 2020, of course, all of the Live Events stopped. And we had some programming budget for that year, that was no longer sort of attached to, you know, concerts and things that we plan to do. And some, some of the stimulus funding that came came from, from the state for sort of COVID relief. And so we really invested a lot of time and energy during that period into developing the journal can and commissioning writers and, and often commissioning the same artists who were going to perform, instead to produce something for the journal, even a piece of music that could be published, you know, in that format, rather than at, performed as a concert. And that's been one of the, I guess, unexpectedly positive byproducts of having to stop our pro, you know, live programme for for almost, you know, two years or whatever has been that we could accelerate the development of the publishing part of the organisation.

Victoria Pham

And it's an amazing resource, because I've touched on it many times. So to anyone who's listening, there'll be a link to the to the journal, because I

Joel Stern

think and hopefully you'll be featured on it this year.

Victoria Pham

I just have this question. I asked everyone actually towards the end. And it's kind of a big, big question, which is, what advice do you have for any up and coming sound makers or sound researchers who wish to be more socially or politically engaged in their practices?

Joel Stern

Yeah, that's a really hard one. Hard to give advice, that's sort of not that's not generic, unless you kind of like a talkie. Talking to a particular person, I kind of if I if I'm giving advice, I need to sort of imagine the person I'm speaking to, and kind of know more about their interests and aspirations. If that makes sense, in the same way, that's like, a friend of mine, who's a really great writer who I really admire, Seth, Kim Cohen, who's a sort of sound theorist, he came and gave a writing workshop at at liquid architecture a few years ago, like a workshop on sort of writing about sound. And he said that the reason why you all find it really bloody hard to write critical essays, that you don't find it hard to write emails or text messages, is that the emails and the text messages addressed to a specific reader who you can imagine, and, and who, and, and the kind of coherence of that rate as identity is what allows you to write sort of, with confidence. And when you're writing, and you can imagine the reader, you know, like, and you can, or the reader is sort of too generalised or not coherent enough in your mind, it becomes really difficult to address them. So I sort of feel the same way about giving advice to be honest. I don't, I don't have general advice. Like, I think some of the things I've touched on, about making sure that you that your work moves across different institutional contexts, don't let you know, if you if you work at a university or study at a university, don't be wholly in the university, like find ways to, you know, work to produce and sort of participate in the kind of culture outside of the university. And by the same token, if you are kind of operating in a fully underground DIY, kind of capacity, you know, don't be reactionary, about the institution to kind of understand what, you know, it is if if you if you're able to, to sort of operate across the institutional lines to and I think, sort of breaking down some of those sort of binaries is quite It's quite an important thing. And then I suppose another it's not a piece of advice, but it's, it's more, again, a political imperative, I think, is, you know, if you're a musician or a sound artist, you, you know, who is wholly concerned with just the sort of formal properties of the sound, you know, the the, the, the work that you're making, you sort of, it's really important to kind of zoom out if you can, and think and think about the way that that work thing kind of operates in the world, the way that it produces a relationship between sort of performer and audience the way that it kind of would be understood by an by experts and non experts alike. And you know, that I don't know, like, the, yeah, the the way in which the kind of practice of making, you know, and the art that you make, is, is a kind of contribution to the community that you're part of. I mean, I think that's sort of quite important that maybe it's a very general thing. But yeah, if anyone listening gets something from that, then I'm happy.

Victoria Pham

I think I think a lot well, a lot of the listeners are younger musicians who are just starting out in a conservatory, where it is basically a lot of formal training in your first or second year before you get the chance towards the end of the degree to expand your practice in a more social sense. So I think that's very helpful.

Joel Stern

Well, that's good. And it's good that you said that, because I I've never studied in a Conservatorium. And so um, you know, if anything I've said, has come across as sort of critical of, you know, for formal music, education, or conservatory and training, it comes from a place of sort of quite some ignorance about what actually goes on, you know, in those contexts, and I definitely don't want to sort of devalue, you know, the, the experiences that people who are listening might be having, of being inspired learning from amazing teachers, you know, becoming really skilled musicians. And I think all those things are immensely valuable to a practice, you know, especially if they bring you that, you know, so if that if, if they connect you with people that you care about, and sort of allow you to participate in a scene that is

really rewarding. So, yeah, I definitely don't want to come across as sort of as pessimistic or onic or negative about those things at all.

Victoria Pham

Not at all. They kind of all working in this weird mishmash ecosystem of sounds making and my final bit for you is, I don't know if you want to touch on it right now. But sadly, you're, you're leaving liquid architecture.

Joel Stern

Yeah. Yeah, no, I think it's important to mention, because listeners, I'm not sure when this podcast will be available. But obviously, it will be available in the future as well. And so most people listening to, we'll be listening. While after I have already left this role of being artistic director at liquid architecture, which, you know, as we talked about, it's a position I've been in since 2014. So, you know, eight or nine years, I say eight or nine because I just can't quite remember exactly when it started. But yeah, at the end of March, but you know, so three weeks from now, actually be stepping down as Artistic Director and go going over to RMIT and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology to start a three year research fellowship focused on machine listening, which is the, the project you know, we were touching on earlier. And so that will be the end of rather intense, you know, period in my life of being entangled kind of glory gloriously. And and sort of, you know, in a kind of incredibly stimulating and rewarding sort of way with this organisation, liquid architecture, and sort of being able to, to some degree, shape it in the image of my interests, but also be shaped by the opportunities that the platform afforded me. And I will be going over into an academic context in which I can focus really wholly and deeply on a very specific kind of field of research, which is something I've wanted for a while, and it's not really possible when running a company and with all the responsibilities and fragmentation of like, attention that that entails. But for liquid architecture, it there will be an opportunity for new artistic direction, either by, you know, one person or maybe a collective or group of people who can bring to the organisation their own sensibility and agenda and concerns. And it's a great organisation with a great platform and reach and community around it. And some, you know, pretty secure funding for a few years into the future. So, yeah, expect it will be a fantastic opportunity for someone and, you know, I'll remain a supporter of the organisation, you know, along with a number of really great people who are on the team and on the board, including some people who I know you've spoken to recently, like cat hope, and others who are on the board of liquid architecture. So yeah, by the time you listen to this year, and if you're thinking that sort of sounds like might be an opportunity for you, if you're listening sometime in the next few weeks, then you could probably go over to the organization's website and see that that opportunity is

Victoria Pham

there. Well, it's sad to see you go, although I'm so excited, and congratulations again for for your fellowship position. That's so exciting.

Joel Stern

Thank you. And we'll be working together, I think we'll still be continuing our conversations about your collaboration with the artist Charles spring, for later in the year. So that's something I'm really looking forward to as well. Me too.

Victoria Pham

I'm waiting for everything to kind of wind I suppose it is already growing, but growing further into different shapes and spheres. I really have to thank you so much for your time for for speaking with me as part of the season finale for the podcast. Thank you.

Joel Stern

My pleasure.

Victoria Pham

So thank you again,

Joel Stern

no worries.

Victoria Pham

Cheers again to Joel! All the information about Joel's work and all about Liquid Architecture as well as all the references, music excerpts and articles we touched on throughout the episode is all in the podcast information and description. And just before I end I wanted to quickly say what an absolute whirlwind of a project this podcast has been since I started thinking about doing this in June 2020 and the first season launching less than two months after that. I'm not going to say too much right now and am going to release a little thankyou post Season 2 episode following this final episode where I can probably take a moment to thank you all for your continued support, encouragement and engagement for the project. Most of all – thanks to you all for listening. Catch you all next time, for the final time!

Resources

<https://liquidarchitecture.org.au/artists/joel-stern>

<https://liquidarchitecture.org.au/investigations/why-listen>

Seth Kim-Cohen 'My Body Blushed to the Whistle of the Birch'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8n9CjgUnVII>

Christof Migone 'Hit Parade'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdakgA9VXSo>