

## Photophonics

Steven Connor

When Alexander Graham Bell developed his photophone in 1880, a device which allowed the transmission of sound by light, using the modulation of crystal selenium cells, he exulted that 'I have heard articulate speech by sunlight! I have heard a ray of the sun laugh and cough and sing!.....I have been able to hear a shadow and I have even perceived by ear the passage of a cloud across the sun's disk'. Such devices imply that sound may be not only reproduced, as in the gramophone, but also produced from the shapes and events of the physical world, which thereby becomes a vast, virtual archive of incipient sound. My talk will consider the ways in which sound artists have attempted to render visual or physical forms and processes as sound. I will take my lead from Aura Satz's *Sound Seam* (2010), which, as she says, 'gives voice to the idea that every surface, in particular parts of our anatomy, is potentially inscribed with an unheard sound or echoes of voices from the past itself', itself prompted by Rilke's fantasy in 'Primal Sound' of being able to play the mesial grooves of a brain, and his extension of the idea: 'what variety of lines then, occurring anywhere, could one not put under the needle and try out?' I will wonder if one might read out from this effort at sonic reading-off in sound art a contemporary form of the Renaissance doctrine of signatures.