

Chapter 6

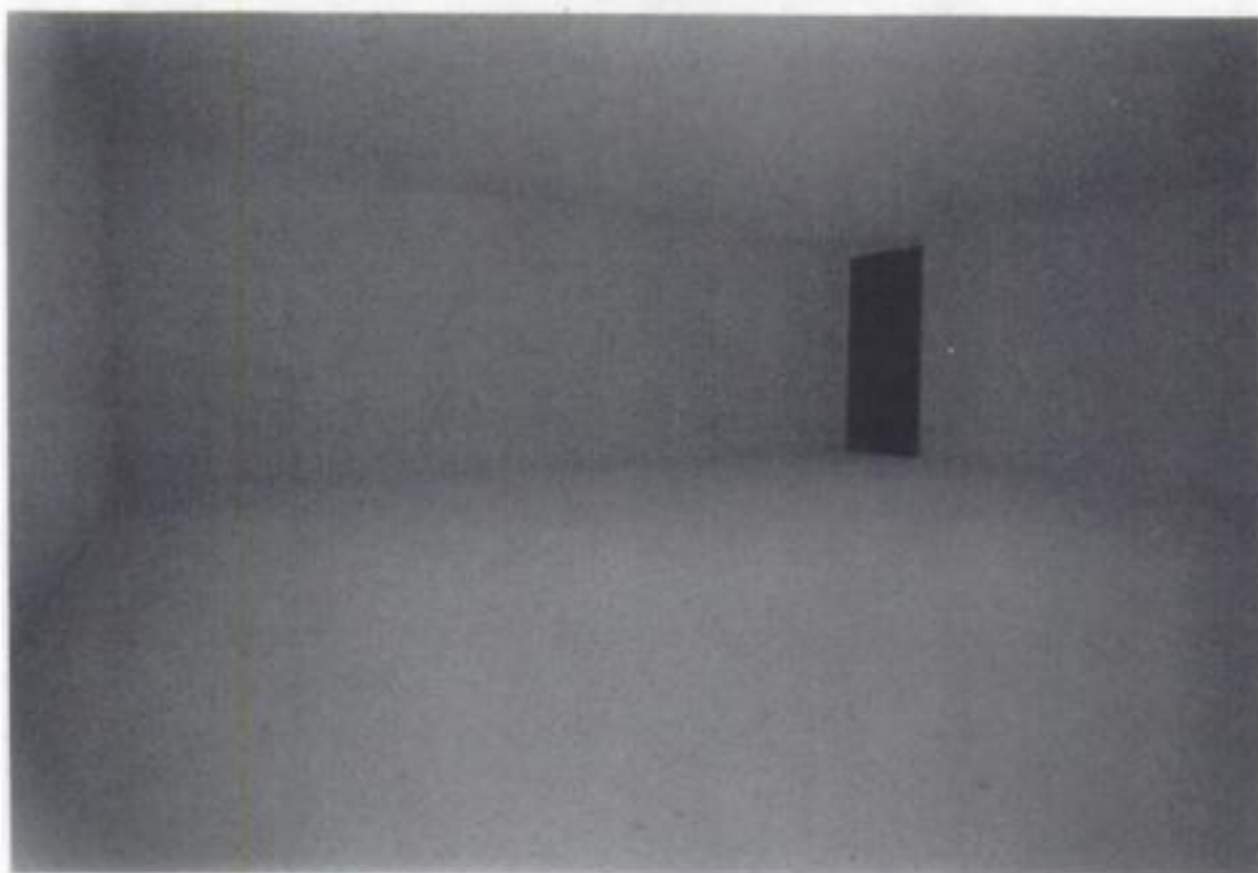
Conceptualizations: Michael Asher and the Subject of Space

The growing concern of bodily and spatial experience instigated through Happenings, Fluxus, and Minimalism gained momentum throughout the decade of the 1960s as artists progressively turned toward ephemeral materials, process-oriented situations, and spatial alterations in the making of work. Morris's considerations of sculptural experience, and his ongoing theoretical writings, formed the basis for a heightened intellectual ambition in probing what art could be and in what way it could address a viewer. That the making of objects expanded beyond the traditional studio practice of an artist can be seen in the development of Installation art in the latter part of the decade. The exhibition "Spaces," which opened at the end of 1969 at the Museum of Modern Art, additionally reflected the growing forms of practice in which the artist's studio collapsed onto the space of exhibition: "In 'Spaces,' the artists treated a space large enough for the viewer to enter as a single work, rather than as a gallery to be filled with discrete objects. Emphasis was placed on the experience the viewer would have. The works included in 'Spaces' were installed directly in the galleries, tailored to the configurations of the spaces they occupied, and were dismantled following the exhibition."¹ Whereas Morris's sculptural works from the early 1960s activated a spatial relation by setting up sculpture as a perceptual object shifting according to a viewer's perspective, "Spaces" proposed that a viewer "now enters the interior space of the work of art—an area formerly experienced only visually from without, approached but not encroached upon . . . presented with a set of conditions rather than a finite object."²

Curated by Jennifer Licht, "Spaces" included works by Michael Asher, Larry Bell, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, artist/engineer group Pulsa, and Franz Erhard Walther. Each of the artists responded to the exhibition with various approaches, through the use of process, ephemera, or audience participation. Michael Asher's

installation worked through these aspects by incorporating a relation to auditory experience. The installation consisted of an existing space to which the artist added two further walls, leaving two entry and exit points onto the space. In addition, Asher added a series of acoustic modifications to the space, essentially attempting to dampen sound reflection, as well as interference, from outside spaces. Through such modifications, the installation functioned to absorb sound and reduce acoustical reverberation. In short, the room was silenced. Initially Asher had intended to install a tone generator in the space, with the idea of amplifying specific frequencies into the room; yet after consideration, he decided to pursue an alternative direction by accentuating the space's absorbent capabilities. Such silencing, for Asher, was utilized as a means to "control and articulate sensory space,"³ so as to create "continuity with no single point of perceptual objectification," and in contrast to "phenomenologically determined works that attempted to fabricate a highly controlled area of visual perception."⁴ Emptying the room of visual differentiation, from sightlines to acoustic zones, from visual distance to aural contraction, Asher altered a viewer's expectations, turning the experience of art viewing into an acoustical absence.

The work reflected the artist's overall interest at this time to question the given attributes by which art comes to function, which for Asher were based on issues related to visibility and objectness and were further reflected in a number of



Michael Asher, installation for "Spaces," 1969/1970. View of the installation and the northeast entry/exit. Photograph by Claude Picasso.

works. As with the previous installation, his piece of the La Jolla Museum of Art at the end of 1969 consisted of spatially altering a room so as to heighten or deliver auditory information. To do so, a series of walls were constructed and inserted into the gallery space, creating entry and exit points and allowing sound equipment to be hidden from view. This equipment consisted of an audio oscillator, an amplifier, and a loudspeaker, which amplified a frequency of 85Hz at a level just above audibility. In addition, Asher covered the floor in white carpet to dampen the vertical movement of sound, paralleling the existing acoustic tiling already in place on the ceiling, and he masked the existing lighting through reflective shielding, to diffuse any direct lighting and corresponding shadow. In contrast to the work for "Spaces," here Asher aimed to create a highly reflective acoustic space. As the artist explains: "The vertical surfaces responded to the sound frequency, which caused them to resonate as if they were tuned, while the horizontal surfaces, due to their sound-dampening effect, reduced the frequency. The cancellation of the sound waves occurred when these frequencies coincided . . . at a point exactly in the center of the gallery. . . ."⁵

Questioning the operations of art production as predicated on the fabrication and presentation of objects, Asher attempted to navigate between the prevailing aesthetics of Minimalism and the then emerging field of Conceptual art, seeking to both question the former while moving away from some of the philosophical riddles found in the latter. In doing so, Asher continually sought to incorporate the space itself into the making of work, leading a visitor to question the presence of given conditions. That Asher does so through a continual application and incorporation of sound, whether in methods of amplification and reverberation or reduction and absorption, may reveal aspects of the artist's practice and the general artistic atmosphere at this time, as well as articulating a potential of the auditory to figure alternative views on perception and materiality. The ability to fashion concrete presence through audible structures allows Asher to raise questions as to what constitutes an object, and, in doing so, to problematize the vocabulary of sculpture and object-making at this time. Thus, sound creates opportunities for rethinking materiality in general by introducing the perceptual question of whether acoustical additions and subtractions may in the end come to constitute, quite literally, an artistic object or not. Sound seems to supply Asher with a critical vantage point in his pursuit to adopt the spatial characteristics of the gallery for art making, to turn them on themselves: the subtle but invasive refashioning of gallery spaces indicative of his installation practice goes hand in hand with the introduction or erasure of acoustical features. Thus, we might consider them as partners in Asher's probing of the conditions of art in general and the very spaces in which objects come to take on power.

His earlier piece for the Whitney Museum exhibition "Anti-Illusion: Procedures/ Materials"⁶ six months prior to "Spaces," in the summer of 1969, further reveals the artist's ambitions. In contrast to the other projects, for "Anti-Illusion," Asher presented a "plane of air" positioned between two of the gallery spaces

within the Museum. Produced by blowers forcing air through a plenum chamber, the work was made manifest through activating a molecular condition: "The piece is a cubic volume of space, circumscribed by an activated air mass within the confines of that space. The space is acknowledged by the pressure felt when moving into or out of its confines. The disembodied literalism of the piece neatly alludes to a slab form without carpentry."⁷ As in his other projects, Asher's plane of air functioned as a spatial situation defined not by visual reference but by the pressure of air: whether with audible sound or not, both installations create form through a molecular alteration, bypassing visual materiality. Whereas Morris's sculptural works question the perception of forms through a display of their inherent positionality, Asher's plane of air alters the perception of form by changing its inherent materiality—can it be said that form may exist strictly through the molecular characteristic of air? "Asher intervenes in given situations by subtly altering or shifting aspects of their structures. As a result, he draws attention to previously unapparent or unarticulated aspects of them."⁸ By shifting perception toward the seeming immaterial and away from visual perspective and the apprehension of imagery, Asher, in turn, shifts the understanding of what may constitute an art object or experience—not only is space brought into play as an embodiment of an art object, as material relation, but the question of what constitutes space itself is brought under scrutiny. In this way, we can see (or feel) Asher's work from this time as questioning the new-found realm of Installation art as predicated on the appropriation and use of space: is space as readily available as it may seem? That is to say, is space neutral? And further, what defines space? By stimulating understanding of space from one of graphic dimensions, as governed by the architectural drawing that hovers over and above space, as an abstracted item one can point to, or even with Morris, as an area separating the viewer from the object, Asher's volumetric structures redefine spatiality through the tactility of the aural: felt sound and constructions with air pressure.

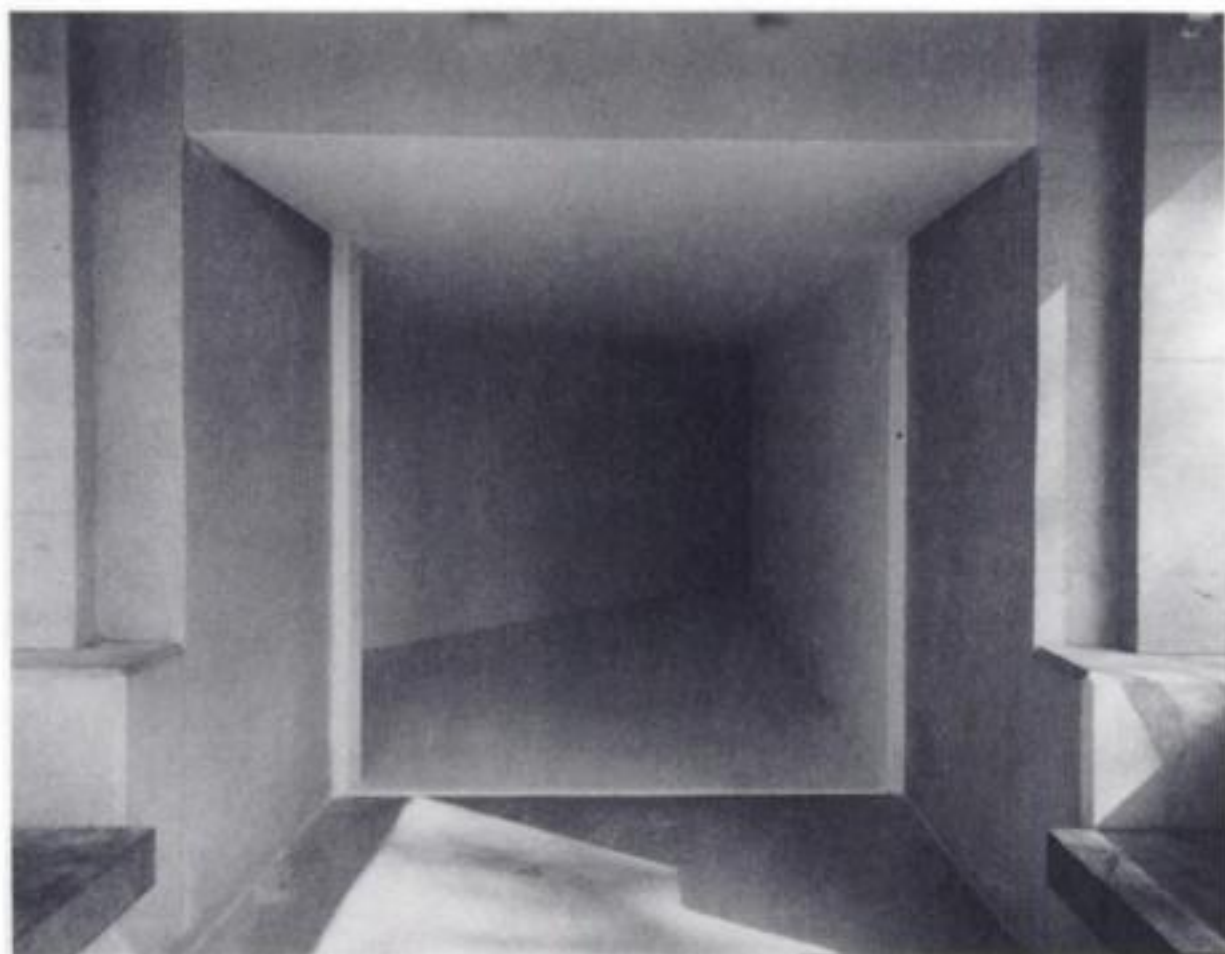
Following these installations, Asher presented an installation work in 1970 at Pomona College in Southern California.

Installed just months after the "Spaces" exhibition, the work was produced through architecturally transforming the gallery space by inserting a kind of hourglass shape: the front room was sectioned off from the second by a narrowed passageway, funneling visitors from the front and toward the back. In addition, the door of the gallery was completely removed for the duration of the exhibition, thereby allowing outside noise and debris to float freely indoors. As Lucy Lippard recalls:

One large irregular-shaped area appears to be two adjoining rooms; the rooms, one much larger than the other, are in the form of right triangles; the triangular rooms converge and flow into one another at their narrowest point, beginning a short passageway connecting the two rooms. One wall of each room has a corresponding parallel wall and corresponding angle in the other room, and both

rooms are positioned so they are the reverse of each other. . . . Sound of traffic, of people walking past the gallery—sounds of vibrations of the day that vary from minute to minute, hour to hour—all enter the project. Being exposed to outdoor conditions, the first small room transmits sounds through the pathway into the back room. They are amplified as they pass into the first room, but are further intensified as they enter the second larger room.⁹

Lippard's impressionistic description highlights Asher's interest and involvement with questions of space as a phenomenological composite beyond strictly visual terms. As Lippard points out, sound figures significantly in the work and, as with his previous works, features as a primary material through which space gets defined. Space and sound interlock in an expanded notion of the object. As in Young's musical work and the use of volume, reverberation, and frequencies to extend musicality into the realm of the overtone spectrum, Asher's early installation works draw upon the aural to reposition space—one might say, to amplify architecture's own perceptual spectrum, beyond its visual presence, as reverberation and molecular movement, as sensory modulation. Whereas previous works used noise generators and oscillators, or acoustical dampening, the Pomona project harnessed



Michael Asher, Installation at Pomona College, 1970. Detail of entry/exit and view into constructed triangular area. Photograph by Frank Thomas.



Michael Asher, Installation at Pomona College, 1970. Viewing out of gallery toward street from small triangular area. Photograph by Frank Thomas.

the found environment as sound-producing source. Here, the installation functioned as an expanded amplifier, an acoustical funnel for the modulation and attenuation of found sound, literally channeled through architectural space.

What can be understood in Asher's installations is not so much the sole use of space, as space itself *as* subject matter. This can be further witnessed in later works, such as his installation for Documenta 5 (1972), in which he divided a room in two by painting one half white and the other black, creating a dramatic architectural and perceptual analysis as to the conditions of experiencing space. Such work would progressively aim to take on the given conditions of gallery spaces and museums, as in his 1974 exhibition at Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles where the artist removed a partitioning wall between the exhibition space and the office area, thereby exposing or making indistinct the space of display and the space of business.

That space as subject matter gains significance is reflected throughout the 1960s, beginning with Happenings's "total art" and Morris's concern for subject-object relations, "for the space of the room itself is a structuring factor both in its cubic shape and in terms of the kinds of compression different sized and propor-

tioned rooms can effect upon the object-subject terms."¹⁰ In outlining some of the terms of the "new sculpture" in his article from 1966 *Notes on Sculpture Part 2*, Morris retains notions of the object as separate from space and the viewer: art, while conversing with spatial considerations, is maintained as an object presented to the viewer's gaze. For Asher and other artists, space itself *is* the object. Asher's work suggests that space is never simply a given, already manifest in the thing presented to the perceiving viewer, as something neutral through which phenomenology and the experiential may pass unimpeded. Rather, space is determined by a set of conditions or systems, molecular and other, through which perception is directed and thus affected. Here, Asher expands Morris by following upon the phenomenological relation—that is to say, in beholding a work like *Slab*, perception oscillates from object to space to object again; Asher's installations begin here, underscoring perception as inherently spatial, as already moving within a larger set of material presences often hidden from view. Asher's early work, in turn, can be positioned between Morris and Young on the field of sound, for his works occupy that space between total immersion in a perceptual plenitude, as in Young, and the auditory discursivity of Morris, to introduce the acoustical as a problematic onto the spatial conditions of artistic presentation.

Spatial Twists

The question of space as subject matter ran throughout a number of artists' works at this time, notably Bruce Nauman, whose *Performance Corridor*, also exhibited in the "Anti-Illusion" exhibition at the Whitney, consisted of two parallel walls separated by a twenty-inch gap and running twenty feet long. Reminiscent of Morris's *Passageway*, the corridor made a viewer radically aware of the intrusiveness of space to shape experience. Such work is furthered in Nauman's "video corridors," in which a labyrinthine structure is fitted with live video cameras and monitors and shows a person's movements in one section of the corridor at precisely the moment they enter another, thereby creating a kind of shadow play in which one is always followed by one's own image. Or his corridor, *Acoustic Wall* (1968), defined by an acoustically treated panel cutting diagonally through a gallery space, creating a funnel-shaped space leading, as in Morris's *Passageway*, to a narrowed dead end. Walking deeper in, information is removed further and further, as light and sound are erased, deadened from the perceptual field: one is left only with space itself, as total absence of other information, only the sterile materiality of the acoustical wall mirrored by the white wall of the gallery. Such spatial alterations find harder edge in the work of Barry Le Va, particularly in his *Velocity-Impact Run*, where the artist set himself the task of running as fast as possible directly into a wall, repeatedly for one hour and forty-three minutes. Performed at the Ohio State University art gallery in 1969, the action was recorded onto audiotape and presented by playing back the recording in the gallery space through a sound system. Amplifying the trace of the body within such extreme

physical moments, the recording makes audible the act not solely as physical exhaustion but as a confrontation with space through a double act of absence and presence. Whereas the body is literally exhausted by architecture, as a corporeal negotiation through live action, it systematically unhinges the space through an unsettling sonority. The presence of the body as pure physicality passing into its own audible double seems to map out an inherent tension between the body and the built environment, suggesting that physical presence is always already housed within architecture. Being in architecture is to a degree being itself, as architecture comes to partially determine the possibilities of experience through an intrinsic performative relation. Such concerns seem to resonate to a degree within the general frame of Minimalism, where absence is also partly its presence, an existing frame, or corridor, haunted by the coming or going body. Le Va stages his own disappearing act by leaving behind a sonic trace: the audio recording *recalls* the artist's body in its breaking apart, its exhaustion, its extreme physicality, as a kind of sound object hurtling through acoustic space.

That space is made subject matter at this time within an artistic environment that sought to question perception, the field of objects, and what constitutes experience points toward a larger cultural moment in which things like music and architecture also turn. Self-reflective, political, minimalist, articulate, and self-proclaimed, architectural groups like SUPERSTUDIO and Archigram sought to address the total field of society through the design of universal, transportable, self-empowering objects and spaces. SUPERSTUDIO's *The Continuous Monument* echoes Morris's *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, in so far as artistic momentum transforms material conditions, opening onto processes of rethinking, recirculating, and reappropriating the field of objects. While Morris probed questions of sculpture through phenomenological forms, SUPERSTUDIO aimed for a zero-degree of design, a minimalist object wrapped around the world, so as to eliminate bourgeois ideals of consumable objects, spatial injustices articulated through high and low, center and margin. "This process of repeatedly and critically reexamining the normal drifts and currents moving across the domestic landscapes has led them to design, or perhaps more appropriately to un-design, their surroundings. . . ." ¹¹ Whereas SUPERSTUDIO finds answers in the universal grid, Morris sees "random piling, loose stacking, hanging, giving passing form to the material" as operations of "disengaging" with "preconceived enduring forms and orders." ¹² Asher's own conceptual interventions within architecture parallels such spatial concerns by engaging the material circulation of process in the form of sound and molecular movement, and through acts of architectural removal. Such seemingly negative gestures, or what Marshall McLuhan termed "anti-environments," ¹³ while removing, erasing, or collapsing form and function seem to do so with the intent of inciting perception to buried structures, apparatuses of influence, and conventions that position knowledge. SUPERSTUDIO's "Endless City," from the late 1960s, in which "possessionless wanderers" were left to "explore a city without spectacle and without architecture as well" ¹⁴ highlighted

an architectural move toward not so much creating space as than reflecting on the nature of it.

The artistic development of early installation art operates on the level of exploring and exposing the nature of space by appropriating given architectures and inserting a critical appraisal of found conditions. While definitively outside the realm of the architectural profession, such works, as in Asher's microalterations, create spaces that incite self-reflection while cultivating perceptual experience. For Le Va, such interventions continued to take form through acts of scattering physical matter throughout the gallery: breaking sheets of glass piled one on top of one another in controlled action, or, for his work exhibited in "Anti-Illusion," covering the gallery floor in a fine layer of flour. While visitors did not necessarily step onto the flour, their movements in and around the space did slowly push the flour around the space, disrupting its original pattern through air currents. Thus, the work registers not only the single instant of a given appearance but all the absent physicality that has at some point traveled in and around the work.

Sound's Presence

Cage, Happenings, Fluxus, and Minimalism form a constellation in which artistic practice gains significance as a critical undertaking with a view toward an expanded perceptual terrain. Such a practice increasingly views itself as both formalistic and philosophical—that is, the production of objects features more as an event for *positioning* artist and audience, form and content, in a loop of self-reference so as to short-circuit the stability of meaning and representation and open out onto new forms of experience and information.

As we have seen, the move toward self-reference and language games operates to reflect upon the very conditions at play in the production of a work of art and its ultimate reception—Cage on the terrain of music, Happenings on the terrain of the spectacle, Fluxus on the terrain of language and the postcognitive, and Minimalism in terms of sound, space, and perception. Such a constellation poses art increasingly as a "contextual" practice. In contrast to Abstract Expressionism's obsession with the artists' physical actions that result in painterly marks, this new sense of practice figures such action in relation to audience, space, and experience in such a way as to make them implicit in the actual production of work itself. For whether *4'33"*, *Yard*, *The Well-Tuned Piano*, or *Box for Standing*, the very context (and their intrinsic elements) in which music is heard, spectacles are created, and actions are seen function as contributing factors.

What Conceptual art finalizes, beginning with Cage's philosophical questioning of the musical object and subsequent move toward everyday life, through Fluxus's minute deconstructions wielded in vaudevillian antics, and Minimalism's perceptual and geometric spatialities of sound and space, is the necessity on the part of art to reflect upon its own conventions. Conceptual art in a sense

politicizes Fluxus by shifting from an overtly performative mode to a covertly analytical one, from a desire for immediacy to a distrust of such immediacy. Such a move oscillates around questions of perception—as in Young’s Dream House, or even Morris’s spatial constructs—and questions of meaning. For if we follow Cage’s attempt to outlive representation by freeing sound from its musical harness through to Happenings’ “total art” and Fluxus’s further dissolving of the line between art and life—toward a postcognitive immediacy—we witness a general appraisal and suspicion of the function of art to produce “meaning” through representational forms only.

That sound features as a thread throughout the art scene of the 1960s is a testament to not only Cage’s example or influence, though this in itself initiates a great deal, but to a pervasive concern for the present. Against this narrative of artistic work, we might recall the political and social reality at this time, so as to recognize the intensity with which focus was placed on what was not only apparent to the eye but also what lurked behind. Presence and the present were brought into question by demanding that it come forward, in all truthfulness, and in all its otherness: representation could thus only be trusted if it demonstrated some element of contingency, and art-making a degree of performative criticality.

Sound is brought into play as media leading straight into perception and heightened immediacy, relocating the art object to that of spatiality and relational engagement: sound comes from a body and reaches another to leave behind static objects, thereby problematizing *and* freeing up representation; it, in turn, lends to the immediacy of perception, as spatial intensity enfolding the body in on itself, as tactile event, while it also displaces perception, causing it to stutter through technological mediation, continually shifting perspective across the here and now, original and copy, bringing the faint ephemera of a past back into the present to question how immediacy itself is constructed or always slightly beyond one’s grasp.

What such work adds to the legacy of experimental music and the emerging forms of auditory art is a *performative* potential by which sound is harnessed to engage spatial experience, spatial economy, and spatial politics: Young’s Dream House absorbs bodily presence into an architectonics of dynamic frequency by constructing what David Toop refers to as an “aerial architecture”;¹⁵ the phenomenological probing of Morris questions the exchanges and negotiations between subjects and objects within an elaborated field of production, while Asher’s installation works bring to the fore the very properties and conditions that make space available by inserting acoustical infiltrations. Thus, sound is not only an expanded musical vocabulary or medium for social anarchy, as in the case of Cage and early experimental music, but a radical form of materiality for creating, describing, and questioning the experiential event and its fabrication.

Notes

1. Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 88.
2. Jennifer Licht, introduction to the exhibition catalogue, *Spaces* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1969).
3. *Ibid.*
4. Michael Asher, *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979* (Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), p. 30.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
6. It is worth noting that besides the participating artists, the exhibition also featured concerts by Philip Glass and Steve Reich.
7. James Monte, from the introduction to the exhibition catalog *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969).
8. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965–1975* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), p. 58.
9. Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), p. 198.
10. Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), p. 16.
11. Peter Lang and William Menking, "Only Architecture Will Be Our Lives," in *SUPERSTUDIO: Life Without Objects* (Milano: Skira, 2003), p. 28.
12. Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, p. 46.
13. Marshall McLuhan, "The Relation of Environment to Anti-Environment," in *Innovations: Essays on Art and Ideas*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (London: Macmillan & Co., 1968), pp. 122–123.
14. Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. 145.
15. David Toop, *Haunted Weather: Music, Silence and Memory* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2004), p. 256.