

Sound Art

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The concepts *Sound* and *Sound Art* are notoriously vague; they can be understood as terms denoting style or genre, and they encompass a whole spectrum of acoustic and visual phenomena as well as artistic concepts and themes. Due to its intricate, multifaceted nature, it is virtually impossible to address all aspects of Sound Art. Instead, I will attempt below to provide a general overview, structuring the history of Sound Art in the process. And even if this process of systematization leads to no more than a theoretical construction, it offers a means of grasping Sound Art in its complexity. To this end, I will undertake to retrace the dimension of Sound Art in a great curve along its salient points. In the place of *Sound Art*, terms such as *Acoustic Art* or *Audio Art* are also often used, but these terms delineate more or less the same context and can be understood as synonyms of Sound Art.

The concern here is not with sound in the purely musicological sense, but with the constant expansion of the perception of acoustic phenomena and with experiments which evade any and all classification. The liberation of sound from the confined territory of professional musicians, the renunciation of the traditional conception of art and the materialization of language together formed the basis for the emergence and development of Sound Art. In this sense, the term Sound Art designates independent works arising from a great number of movements all concerned with new, unconventional ways of exploring sound and language as objects and – from the conceptual perspective – with the investigation of auditive material. What they have in common is the continual transcendence of the boundaries demarcating the acoustic and visual fields of art, literature and music – this transcendence being the means by which new forms of perception were experimentally developed. The core of Sound Art forms the sound work as the manifestation of a new kind of artistic thought. As authentic productions and original artworks in the area of language, sound and visual-artistic concepts, they were published in small editions and/or made accessible to the public. In the process, the entire spectrum of the media used for reproducing, publishing and publicizing were employed, including radio, television and audio playback devices. These ‘mass media’ sound works as well as the sound interventions they generate evade traditional conceptions of the original and the composition in art and music. And Sound Art developed chiefly within the context of the mass media – being particularly indebted to the technology of the vinyl record – in the form of artworks published by artists.

It is for this reason that sound art forms a major category of artists' publications.

Since the 1960s, Sound Art has represented a fundamental working context for contemporary artists, musicians, composers and writers. The music score becomes a graphic image, the conceptual sketch of an artistic action or the phonetic transcription of a poem becomes a score, the artistic action becomes a concert. Artists become musicians, writers become artists and musicians become writers.

From the present-day perspective, the beginnings of Sound Art are to be found in the early twentieth century in the first sound-poetic works of the Dadaists and Futurists as well as the Russian avant-garde. Raoul Hausmann, Hugo Ball and Kurt Schwitters are particularly worthy of mention in this context, as is the Cabaret Voltaire. Kurt Schwitters' **Ursonate**, completed in 1924 and published as a record in 1932, is one of the most well-known works. Further examples are the Futurist sound poems by Velimir Chlebnikov, Aleksej Krucenych and Vladimir Majakovskij, and the work **Victory over the Sun**, in which Aleksej Krucenych and Kasimir Malevich experimented with the material of language, as well as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti with his radical language experiments. The incorporation of urban, natural and industrial noises into art, music and literature represents another level. Among the pioneers of Noise Art are Ferrucci Busoni and Luigi Russolo, who not only wrote important manifestos but also built the first sound generators. In Baku, Arsenij Avraamov conducted a concerto for factory sirens and steam whistles; Roger and Katy Payne recorded the song of the whales. As early as 1937, John Cage wrote a manifesto on noise, **The Future of Music: Credo**. Again and again, conscious attempts were made to transcend musical traditions and rules, as exemplified by Ballila Pratella's **Manifesto of the Futurist Musician**, to cite a very early instance, followed by the work of Erik Satie, Alexander Scriabin, Edgard Varèse, Arnold Schönberg (who liberated music from its dependence on a single key) and John Cage. For his film **Enthusiasm: Donbass Symphony**, Dziga Vertov collaged noises to form a melody, and Oskar Fischinger devoted himself to the abstract music film. The names Walter Ruttmann, Orson Welles and Hans Flesch stand for the first unconventional radio plays.

In the 1950s, Pierre Schaeffer developed *Musique Concrète*, Gerhard Rühm and Hans C. Artmann created dialect poems as a means of disassociating themselves from 'post-fascist' ideas, and the Western German Broadcasting Company WDR founded the **Studio für Elektronische Musik**, directed by Herbert Eimert and, from 1962, Karlheinz Stockhausen. Electronic music emerged from the development of serial music, an attempt to base as many of music's attributes as possible on series of numbers or proportions. Finally, John Cage applied the aleatory technique in his compositions, thus introducing not only chance and improvisation to music but also – in *4'33"*, his most famous work – silence. The Lettrists, who formed an artis-

tic and literary movement around Isidore Isou in Paris, expanded 'sound language' and founded Lettrist music, while Karel Appel, a member of the artists' group COBRA, initiated *Musique Barbare*. The members of the Beat Generation around William Burroughs took the auditive presentation of their works into the realm of performance and, during the same period, Henri Chopin made a major contribution to the development and dissemination of *Poésie Sonore*. In the 1960s, in the magazine **OU**, of which he was editor-in-chief, Chopin distributed records of sound poetry by such artists as Bernard Heidsieck, Brion Gysin and, later, William Burroughs.

Sound poetry, which also served as a source of inspiration for the language artworks of Conceptual Art, came into its own in the 1960s and 1970s in conjunction with the development and availability of tape recorders and other technical means. Henri Chopin, François Dufrênes, Eugen Gomringer, Brion Gysin, Sten Hanson, Ernst Jandl, Ferdinand Kriwet, Franz Mon and Gerhard Rühm are chief representatives of phonetic and sound poetry. At the same time, Gerhard Rühm and Franz Mon developed the Neues Hörspiel, or New Radio Play, receiving important support for their efforts from the WDR **HörSpielStudio** founded by Klaus Schöning in 1968, renamed **Studio Akustische Kunst** in 1991. Other artists who worked there included George Brecht, John Cage, Ernst Jandl, Joan La Barbara and Mauricio Kagel. The programme **pro musica nova** had already been initiated by Hans Otte at Radio Bremen in 1961. In the 1960s, Minimal Music emerged in the U.S. through the work of La Monte Young, Terry Riley and others. Experimental music theatre is attributed to Mauricio Kagel, to whose influence the sound experiments of visual artists can also be traced. Visual works incorporating acoustic elements and qualities were produced by such artists as Roman Opalka – who vocally accompanied his work on the screen and recorded the process on tape –, Hanne Darboven, Jean Tinguely, Christian Marclay, Dieter Roth and Lawrence Weiner. Sound works also emerged in the context of happenings and artistic actions by Joseph Beuys, Allan Kaprow and Wolf Vostell. Taking those works as a point of departure, Hermann Nitsch and Otto Mühl developed the *Totaltheater* as a special form of sound work. Fluxus artists like Ben Vautier, George Brecht, Emmett Williams and Nam June Paik created concert scores, sound artworks and sound objects for their Fluxus concerts and happenings. The Fluxus artists worked with music, painting, literature, installation and object art simultaneously. The Spanish Fluxus group Zaj consistently referred to its actions as concerts. Bruce Naumann, with **Violin tuned D.E.A.D.**, and Nam June Paik, with **Beatles Electroniques**, are two examples of artists who created videos in which music and imagery formed a conceptual whole. They thus anticipated the music videos and video clips which were gradually emerging at the time, drawing from the rich fund of Sound Art in the process. Trends were also set by vocal interpretations of works by John Cage, carried out by artists such as Morton Feldmann and Joan La Barbara, and

the development of electro-acoustic music by Iannis Xenakis. Joe Jones built music machines and Laurie Anderson's records made it to the top of the rock music charts while Andy Warhol and Raymond Pettibon drew attention to the significance of the artistic design of record covers.

The more recent development since the 1980s was shaped in good part by sound installations and sound sculptures, which are sometimes also encountered in the public realm. Sound interventions and sound spaces should also be mentioned in this context, works which can be presented in both interior as well as exterior spaces due to their purely acoustic orientation and perception. Particularly Nam June Paik, Terry Fox and Hans Otte, Rolf Julius and Christina Kubisch are to be cited in this connection. New developments in the artistic application of radio led in 1987 to the founding of the **Kunstradio** at the Austrian Broadcasting Company ORF in Vienna under the direction of Heidi Grundmann and, two years earlier, that of the programme **Ars Sonora** with José Iges at Radio Nacional de España in Madrid.

A special phenomenon occurring increasingly since the 1980s are the so-called art music groups, for example A. R. Penck or Rodney Graham with their respective bands, Destroy All Monsters, The Poetics or Pipilotti Rist in Les Reines Prochaines, as well as the numerous bands of which Martin Kippenberger was either a co-founder or a member, such as The Golden Kot Quartett. They made music in the same manner in which they made art, without the slightest musicological ambitions. There was no substantial difference between their music and an artwork, except that the former did not require the framework of art.

The question as to the liberties and limits of access to various forms of artistic expression – such as the video image, sound, architecture or the Internet – is associated in the 1990s with the convergencies and divergencies of a digital aesthetic as well as with the interfaces of media art. In the latter, the visual element loses its predominant position. The technical and artistic prerequisites for the presentation of sound and image as entities of equal value had now been created, whether in film, in Internet artworks or in room installations. Within the context of film, Sound Design evolved as a genre in its own right and, in a concurrent development, so-called sound artists emerged – artists whose working material is sound. The **ars electronica** Festival in Linz served as a framework for the development of digital music. It is in this context that autonomous artists' radio stations are to be cited. The latter sprouted up all over the world, e.g. in Canada and Australia, and used the possibilities provided by Internet for broadcasting and world-wide reception. In 1995, for example, Heidi Grundmann created **Horizontal Radio** as a global radio and Internet project.

Dave Allen, Douglas Gordon, Jutta Koether, Jonathan Meese, Jonathan Monk, Carsten Nicolai and Pipilotti Rist are artists who avail themselves of a

wide variety of genres in their work, whether painting, installation, music bands, electronic music, artists' books or records. The *revival* of the artist's record goes hand in hand with the creation of new labels. The artists stand for the approach which has been referred to since the 1990s as *crossover*. Whereas the period of the 1960s to 1970s is shaped by the term *inter-media* – coined by Dick Higgins – crossover refers to the application of various genres and media according to artistic inspiration. The concern is no longer with the combination or fusion of artistic, musical and literary disciplines and the new art forms that emerge in the process, but with freedom of choice among these – meanwhile firmly established – forms of expression. The transcendence of boundaries is no longer the primary focus; the artists work interdisciplinarily per se, moving around in the most diverse disciplines simultaneously as a matter of course. Their strategy is now based on singling out media for their artistic concepts in order to draw attention to the heterogeneity of artistic work. In this way they counter any overly hasty attempt to appropriate or classify them artistically. And they thus mirror the experience of social realities, which in their complexity can no longer be perceived as a unified whole.¹ Book reviews, stage design, DJing and everyday situations are all integrated into artistic processes. That which had emerged in the 1960s in the overlapping and combining of genres under the caption 'intermedia' took hold and survived into the 1980s and beyond, became established, enabling artists since the 1990s to avail themselves of a crossover of artistic, musical and literary means.²

The examples cited above already indicate the significance of technology. For a long time, the lack of suitable technical means represented an insurmountable obstacle for the development as well as the distribution of sound artworks. It was not until the end of the 1950s that Sound Art received new impulses due to the advent of the tape recorder. As the medium used for the dissemination of acoustic artworks, the record itself becomes the most important fundamental material, not only with regard to its function as a sound carrier, but also in its presence and effectiveness as an object. From the aesthetic-formative point of view, the artistic conception of the record cover takes on major significance. In the 1980s, the record is replaced by the audio CD but retains its artistic and fetishist associations. In recent years the audio CD cover has undergone conceptual design virtually as an object – in a period in which the CD itself has become an endangered species due to new technologies such as the downloading of music from the Internet, as well as new storage media. In the 1970s, the music cassette bore comparable significance because it represented a simple means of making recordings independently of labels and publishing houses. Since the 1990s, newly developing technologies have provided Sound Art with new means and possibilities again and again. Thanks to new software and the still expanding Internet, the computer plays a major role in the generation of sound. In the coming years and decades,

Sound Art can be expected to develop further in keeping with its relationship to media art and the media themselves as they slowly dissolve into 'virtuality.'

Sound Art is distinguished by its interdisciplinary approach and its cross-media presentation. In view of its transcendence of genre, movement and discipline boundaries, it can be described as a 'meta-stylistic' phenomenon. Its complexity can be grasped neither thematically nor with the aid of classification by genre, and its association with musical, literary and artistic trends serves more as an expression of Sound Art's conceptual unrestrictedness than as a means of gaining an overview. Depending on the genre, Sound Art manifests itself in auditive works on records, cassettes and audio CDs, sometimes in association with artist's books, boxes and catalogues, newspapers and magazines. Primarily autonomous sound works are published on these sound carriers, but the latter also feature recordings of sound installations and interventions, performances, artistic actions and happenings, radio and montage works as well as works adhering to traditional compositional conceptions.

With regard to the visual media, Sound Art encompasses magazines, newspapers, graphic works – including scores –, postcards and covers conceived by artists. The most important types of three-dimensional works comprised by Sound Art are sound installations, video installations based on sound, sound sculptures, sound objects, multiples, object records and object CDs. The audio-visual works of Sound Art take recourse to such forms of expression as videos conceived by artists, films, concerts, artistic actions and multimedia editions as well as Net Art. Since the 1990s, multimedia editions have been produced on CD-ROM and DVD, for example **Small Fish. Chamber Music with Images for Computers and Players** by Kiyoshi Furukawa, Masaki Fujihata and Wolfgang Münch, who forged links with media art.

Works of Sound Art can be found in the context of nearly every artistic tendency since the avant-garde movements of the 1920s – in Dadaism and Futurism, in movements such as the Beat Generation, Fluxus, Phonetic and Sound Poetry, Nouveau Réalisme, Pop Art, Electronic Music, New Music, Minimal Music and Conceptual Art and all the way up to the most recent computer-generated sound experiments, which are influenced by individual concepts and further heighten the complexity of Sound Art.

In view of the above-formulated definition of Sound Art, the retracing of its development and the systematization of its genres, it becomes evident that Sound Art is shaped both by materiality and immateriality, since the sound work is ultimately realized in a realm above and beyond the material, for example the vinyl, through the act of listening or of immersion in the imaginary sound space. Irregardless of the various genres, tendencies and disciplines, there can be said to be two fundamental levels of Sound Art's existence, depending on the manner in which the works

are meant to be heard. If we take the aspect of Sound Art's perception / reception as an orientation here, it is as a means of better structuring and comprehending its complexity, for no other reference systems are of any help in that undertaking.

In the case of records, Radio Art, sound spaces and sound interventions, it is acoustic perception which is the chief focus: The record as a sound carrying medium or the computer as a playback medium are of secondary importance. Even if the cover is conceived by the artist in keeping with the ideas underlying the sound work and in conceptual association with that work, that artistic conception is generally dependent on – subordinate to – the sound work. In the case of works in which the acoustic, visual and three-dimensional/object aspects are of equal importance, materiality plays a decisive role. Despite its dependence on materiality, visibility or audio-visibility, in this category the individual work does not exist without acoustic, tonal or auditive elements.

Sound Art, then, is inconceivable without the acoustic, sound-related, tonal, onomatopoeic, auditive or radiophonic aspect. Yet Sound Art is not constituted by this aspect alone, but emerges only in association with musical, artistic and literary concepts. Sound Art encompasses works characterized by acoustic interdisciplinarity, regardless of the context. Attempts to draw the boundaries of Sound Art from the perspective of art or music theory are thus doomed to failure. It is its uncompromising, subversive openness of discourse which accounts for the fascination of Sound Art.

Translated by Judith Rosenthal

1 I am grateful to Claudia Funke for kindly pointing this out to me.

2 The following publications offer more in-depth overviews of Sound Art:

René Block (ed.): **Für Augen und Ohren. Berliner Musiktage 1980.** Akademie der Künste Berlin. – Berlin, 1980.

Karin von Maur (ed.): **Vom Klang der Bilder. Die Musik in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts.** Staatsgalerie Stuttgart 1985. – Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1985.

Ursula Block / Michael Glasmeier: **Broken Music. Artists' Recordworks.** DAAD Galerie Berlin, Gemeentemuseum The Hague, Magasin Grenoble. – Berlin, 1989.

Helga de la Motte-Haber: **Klangkunst.** Akademie der Künste Berlin. – Munich/New York: Prestel Verlag, 1996.

Testcard – Beiträge zur Popgeschichte, Vol. 3: **Sound.** Mainz: Ventil Verlag, 1996, 2002².

Kunstforum International: **Art & Pop & Crossover.** Vol. 134, May-September 1996.

Kunstforum International: **Cool Club Cultures.** Vol. 135, October 1996–January 1997.

Ulrike Groos/Markus Müller: **Make it funky. Crossover zwischen Musik, Pop, Avantgarde und Kunst.** Jahresring 45.– Cologne: Oktagon Verlag, 1998.

Guy Schraenen: **Vinyl. Records and Covers by Artists.** Neues Museum Weserburg Bremen, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona. – Bremen, 2006.