

Listening

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1. Sound Art as a School of Listening

Sound art or sound installations share with new music the expansion of sound material beyond tonality to include natural and artificial sounds. Where they differ, however, is in their explicit reference to space. Indeed, sound installations even go so far as to reference, or shape, a specific locality.¹ This kind of artistic approach to sounds calls for a new form of listening, or trains us to listen in a new way. Listening becomes a way of being in a place. That is to say, on the one hand a place is perceived in terms of its particular properties as an acoustic space, and on the other hand, visitors, by their listening, perceive themselves in terms of their corporeal presence. In this way, sound art takes part in a tendency characteristic of all modern art, namely its becoming reflexive. This implies that listening in sound art is not only a means of apprehending a given work of art, but rather that the work revolves around listening itself. Of course we are always listening, but we are always *not* listening too. Above all, however, listening, and indeed hearing, is a channel of linguistic communication and is always already instrumentalised as an organ of orientation. Here sound art calls for a change in attitude, thereby promising us the opportunity to experience what listening as such really is.²

2. The Dominance of Sight

Hearing and sight are classed as higher senses – which in a way discredits the lower senses, namely smell, taste and touch. This is not our present concern. All the same, there is a distinct hierarchy among the higher senses, these being distinguished by distance and thus potentially by objectivity: what actually counts is what we see. This dominance, which we are inclined to take for granted, could in fact be culturally determined. To name just one example, Thorleif Bomann has endeavoured to demonstrate the dominance of hearing in Hebrew.³ The dominance of sight over hearing is further reinforced in contemporary civilisation by the imperative of objectivity. In seeing, much more so than in hearing, we perceive objects or signals rather than sensory qualities. If one were to give an example of sight, the most obvious one

would be: “I see a house”, but not “I see red”, and least of all “I perceive that it is bright”.⁴ With hearing it is not as common to simply skip over sensory qualities. While one could similarly cite as a primary example “I hear a car”, it is almost equally as obvious to say “I hear a sound” or “I hear music”.

Would one need to be blind to truly experience what it means to hear? Presumably not. To the contrary, one could in fact surmise that the essence of hearing becomes even clearer if it has to be conquered over the dominance of sight. In this sense it could be worthwhile closing one’s eyes to be able to fully perceive an acoustic landscape (a soundscape⁵) or a work of sound art in its peculiarity. Yet hearing not only has to be conquered over sight but first and foremost over *not* hearing, *not* listening. As participants in technical civilisation and city dwellers by and large, we tend *not* to hear most of the things that we could in principle hear. Our attitude towards hearing is a habitual non-hearing. On the one hand, that has to do with what one might call acoustic pollution: our aural space is beleaguered by traffic noise and music. In our everyday lives the activity of hearing requires a high level of filtering to primarily allow the sounds of speech and signals of orientation to register in our minds. What also gets marginalised in the filtering process, however, is the very thing that is at stake in sound installations, namely the acoustic character of a locality. For hearing, precisely because it can be a means of corporeal presence, has a tendency to make our consciousness dissipate in space – hence, a tendency that runs counter to the necessary concentration on objects, symbols and people in everyday life.

Ultimately, the everyday object-relatedness of hearing and listening has to be overcome if we are to arrive at listening itself. Of course from listening to music, we are all quite practised at listening to sounds. Yet when we hear everyday sounds we tend to skip over the sounds themselves in a bid to determine their source: I hear a car, I hear somebody coming, I hear a mosquito whining. By no means should the cognitive achievement of this kind of hearing be underestimated. For it actually goes as far as the cognition of the individual. To be sure, just as we have the capacity to recognise a certain car from the hum of its engine or the rattle of its tyres, so are we able to recognise a person on the phone by the voice. Sound art trains us to hear and to listen in such a way that we perceive a sound in itself and not the object it is coming from.

3. The Hearing of Sound

As a rule we only hear a sound as such when we don't know where it is coming from and what is making it. It is this »Je ne sais quoi – I don't know what« that was upheld in the eighteenth century as the perception of beauty and that in the present context at least enables the appreciation of a sound in its purely sensuous and hence also spatial quality. The hearing of a sound as such has a purely somatic or even physical background. Sounds and noises can often still be heard even when their source has become silent or is no longer there. This is called reverberation, a phenomenon taken into consideration early on in classical church music. Sounds can endure in a space for a period of time. In terms of physics, this phenomenon is determined by echo reflection and resonance and it means that one can play architectonic spaces like a musical instrument. What is important for us at this stage is the fact that the resonance can be perceived as a presence of sound in space, or as the sound made by the space itself. These days what was traditionally known as reverberation can be enhanced by means of electronic equipment in such a way as to prolong sounds in space, to allow them to move within the space and to modulate the space itself.

4. The Temporality and Spatiality of Sounds

Ever since Henri Bergson, philosophy has taken a melody as its prototype when it comes to demonstrating the possibility of a temporally protracted form of awareness. For a human being, the time of presence is protracted when, by listening, he or she apprehends a musical sequence, such as the song of a bird or a melody in its entirety. Conversely, time has been designated as the decisive dimension for the phenomenon of music. Music is said to be a time-based art because it arranges a sequence of tones into a single entity. In contrast, certain strands of new music and, in particular, sound art have brought to bear the spatiality of auditory experiences. Hearing and listening are fundamentally spatial. Indeed, just by listening through headphones one can recognise the fact that music or even mere sounds give rise to a special aural space. Of course this aural space usually overlaps with visual space, yet it is basically independent of it and structurally different too. In any case it is not a metric space but at best a topological one. Within it there are directions and forms. If we do in fact allow ourselves to focus on sounds as such, we realise that sounds and above all the ensemble of sounds in space form shapes, that they move around the space, especially rising and falling, and that they can be pointy or broad,

disjointed or even diffuse. Yet the main experience conveyed by sound art or sound installations is the experience of sonorous space in itself. They create an acoustic environment. The viewer is situated in a sound space or conversely, the sound space is the corporeal space modified by sounds.

That this is the case can be especially experienced through sound art. In actual fact, however, it plays a role in other ways as well, namely in everyday life. Hence research undertaken in the context of the Soundscape Project has shown that for many people a sense of home is determined by the character of the acoustic environment in which they live. In general it would seem that the emotional relationship people entertain with their respective surroundings is activated more than anything else by the sound these surroundings produce. Naturally, good use has been made of this realisation in strategies of acoustic furnishing applied in fields ranging from marketing to urban planning.

5. Emotionality

In distinguishing what is said from the way it is said, Immanuel Kant, in his *Aesthetics*, adverted early on to the emotionality of sound. He was of the mind that the tone in which a person speaks could directly communicate his or her emotional state to the listener. Building on this insight, he went on to declare music a language of emotions.⁶ Up until now efforts to come to grips with the emotional effect of sounds by means of association theory have proved both cumbersome and inadequate: sounds, it is argued, constitute a kind of key that offers the listener access to affective memories drawn from his or her emotional repertory. This sort of explanation by no means takes into account the situations in which we come up against unfamiliar or even disconcerting sounds. A far better explanation can be arrived at on the basis of the theory of atmospheres.⁷ According to this school of thought, sounds are among the most important generators of atmospheres. Atmospheres are tuned spaces: in other words, sounds create a mood; they give a space an emotional tone. On the other hand, atmospheres are perceived by *attuning* the visitor in a particular way.⁸ That is to say, they are perceived in the visitor's affectivity or state of mind within the space in question. Accordingly, the emotional effect of sounds, and of music in particular, is no longer surprising. On the basis of their spatiality they modify the space in corporeal presence. That always happens, even though we as people are forced to constantly conduct a kind of emotional management in order to maintain the requisite

degree of coolness for our life context. In contrast, the listening inspired by sound art reopens the possibility of feeling one's way into the space. It is on this basis that the subject becomes emotionally affectable in the first place.

6. Silence

European music tends to be dense. It knows only the occasional interruption brought about by rests. Of course even in this case, the appearance of music could be embedded within a period of silence both before and after the piece, but concert culture doesn't allow for that. The time leading up to the start of the music is filled with the kaleidoscope of instruments being tuned and the chattering of people in the audience, whereas the time following the performance is filled with the thunder of applause. In this regard John Cage's *4'33"* was a significant event, because it challenged the audience to listen to a piece of music with no sounds. That was only the beginning. Since then there have been many pieces in which silence plays a key role. Particularly coming from Japan there are numerous works in which silence constitutes not only an interruption of the music but rather the very background out of which that music emerges. The way to this kind of notion was paved in Asia by Chinese and Japanese painting insofar as the surface is never fully painted over but rather treated as an emptiness, a void, in which individual things such as trees, birds and mountains appear.

Silence, as a primary phenomenon of hearing, of listening, also plays a decisive role in sound art. It does not have to be absolute silence, but can just as well be noise or the basic tonality that soundscape researchers deem characteristic of landscape. Here, in any case, a manner of hearing, of listening is called for and practised that is not always bound by tonal content but rather by a kind of expectation, by an opening up of oneself and attentive listening. Of course, this opening up of oneself implies opening oneself up to the space, to the space of corporeal presence. Against the background of listening to silence, other sound events, tones and musical sequences are perceived quite differently, namely as phenomena and events. Whereas in classical music, tone, and especially tone in melodies, played a decisive role – and that meant it had to be there, or not be there, as precisely as possible –, in new music, the very initiation of a tone, the moment, say, when air brushes across the mouthpiece of a flute or a bow touches the string of a violin, came to be appreciated, as did its fading away. This precipitated a change in listening habits which in turn allowed for a tone to be heard and appreciated in terms of its inner

dynamics. Thus not only the sequence but even the tone itself could become a musical event. This tendency was carried on in the realm of sound art. Silence, or basic tonality, is the space the members of the audience enter and to which, by listening, they open themselves. It is against this background that tonal forms and acoustic events appear and disappear – or modulate the acoustic space in its entirety.⁹

Translated from the German by Catherine Nichols

Notes

¹ On the definition and history of sound art see Carsten Seiffarth, “Some Remarks on Sound Art”, in Per Platou (ed.), *Surrounded by Something*, Oslo 2011, pp. 41–49.

² See my essay “Auf dem Weg zum ‘Konzert der Welt’: Neue Musik als Schule des Hörens”, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 4 (July/August 2011), 48–51. Reprinted under the title of “Neue Musik als Schule des Hörens” in J. P. Hiekel (ed.), *Berührungen: Über das (Nicht)Verstehen von Neuer Musik* (Mainz: Schott, 2012), pp. 29–33.

³ Tholeif Bomann, *Das hebräische Denken im Vergleich mit dem griechischen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1952).

⁴ See Gernot Böhme, “Licht als Helle – Zur Phänomenologie des Lichts”, in Johannes Grebe-Ellis and Florian Theilmann (eds.), *open eyes: Ansätze und Perspektiven der phänomenologischen Optik* (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2006), pp. 33–45.

⁵ This expression was coined by Murray Schafer. See R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, original edition (Berlin and Libau: Legarde und Friedrich, 1790), 219. Engl.: *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1951), p. 173.

⁷ See Gernot Böhme, *Architektur und Atmosphäre*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2013).

⁸ This connotation of the term was already used by Kant in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (as note 6), p. 172. In the English edition see page 144. The English translation gives “determine” for the German “stimmen”, though “tuning” would have been more accurate.

⁹ With regard to this section see John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (London: Marion Boyars [1961], Reprint 1999).