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Silent Sound Art: Performing the Unheard

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Zusammenfassung.
Dieser Beitrag ist eine Reflexion über die so genannte Silent Sound Art. Beispielhaft hierfür sind die Arbeiten von Peter Ablinger und Akio Suzuki, die im Zusammenhang mit einer teilweise historisch hergeleiteten Annahme eines teilnehmenden Subjekts in der Installationskunst interpretiert werden sollen. Hierbei wird der Schwerpunkt auf Kunstbewegungen und ausgewählte Werke aus den späten 1950ern bis in die frühen 1970er gelegt, namentlich von John Cage, George Brecht und La Monte Young.

Abstract.
This article is a reflection on silent sound art, exemplified here by the works of Peter Ablinger and Akio Suzuki, in the context of a partially historical consideration of the participatory subject in Installation Art, with a primary focus on artistic movements and selected works from the late 1950s to the early 1970s by John Cage, George Brecht, and La Monte Young.

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Silent Sound Art: Performing the Unheard

Among the varied forms of artworks and performances spanning the range of sound art, there is a particular tradition that cuts to the heart of how the audience, the artist, and the artwork interact. In many cases, these are works of sound art that do not sound at all. Such pieces of silent sound art may come in the form of instructions (explicit or implicit) or situations that transform the audience into an intentional participant in particular sonic conditions. They lead to an awareness of one's own auditive perspective and performativity as a listener. That is not to say that this is the only function of pieces of silent sound art or that such pieces are the only forms of sound art that bring awareness of listening performativity, but simply that promoting this awareness is such a strong factor in many of these works that it is a feature worth considering.

In the following pages I reflect particularly on Peter Ablinger and Akio Suzuki as artists who pursue this form of sound art and on the trajectory of sound and installation art in which their works might be considered. This consideration leads from shifts in the conception of silence and agency in music, especially in regard to John Cage's *4'33",* to immersive happenings, the event scores of Fluxus, and the minimalist works of La Monte Young. The soundful and soundless works of these movements contextualize current works of silent sound art.

Whereas the art of the last half of the twentieth century was steeped in questions of self-reflexivity, the function of space, phenomenology, and political critique, today the discourse seems to have shifted to the interface: the space between two interacting systems and the medium through which we, as artists and audiences, communicate with the world. Artworks invite a person's involvement in different ways and to different degrees. This request on the part of the work changes the subjective involvement of the person – changes their identity as a subject – and thereby their experience. What I find fascinating are the ways in which pieces of silent sound art engage a listener and can manifest this involvement – this necessary interrelation.

Peter Ablinger's Empty Chairs

The works of Peter Ablinger acknowledge the potential of white, of vagueness, of silence and empty chairs. His focus is on listening and awareness of the sensory experience, and many of his works are beautiful examples of using objects as interdictions that can "frame" an auditory space. Using arch-like constructions or groups of pre-arranged chairs to indicate a listening location, Ablinger plays with a reconsideration of the perceptual possibilities that are in fact always available to us in our audition of open space.

One of Ablinger's pieces, *Weiss/Weisslich 14* (1995), reads simply *sitzen und hören* – to sit and to listen.[1] In theory, like many of his other small texts or titles, the work can exist by taking the words as a suggestion to perform those activities – to imagine sitting and listening – or even just by reading the title. Building on this idea in a

1 Peter Ablinger, *Stühle, als Hörorte/Chairs as Listening Places*; http://ablinger.mur.at/docu01.html (accessed 14 June 2012).

material way, Ablinger has realized various chair pieces: works using texts or configurations of chairs as listening places (*Hörorte*). An array of six chairs, or thirty-six chairs, or perhaps an arrangement of chairs and bamboo plants will be set up in various patterns in a spatial composition. The chairs might be in a wintry field, by a lake, at a specific time of day, near a city street, or inside a building. They are often structured with reference to an element on the site. For example, a row of chairs may be placed at a right angle to an expected wind that may only arise during sunset as in *Chairs, Bamboo, Sunrise, Sunset* (1996).[2] These chair pieces are at the same time a kind of sculpture, a composition of objects, and also a designation of a (conceptual) audience space. As sure as an occupied chair might disappear under its occupant, an empty chair is a signifier of a presence: the potential presence of a seated auditor.

Although chairs offer a real, material opportunity to sit and be an auditor, the pieces work on another level that is not physically tied to the chairs. The places designated by the chairs as listening places remain so after the chairs have been removed, as with *Listening Piece in Four Parts* (2001) in which twenty chairs were placed at four designated sites on four different days. Although in each case the seats stayed only about two hours, Ablinger points out that "the four places remain – now as a piece of music – for anyone aware of this fact." [3] Significantly, it is not precisely the sounds of the particular place that Ablinger wants to highlight, but rather the experience and process of listening. It is in this touching of world and ear that the art takes place. "Not the sound, but the listening is the piece."[4] Reflecting the same sentiment, another set of works, *3 Easy Pieces* (2004), is an installation in a public space realized around a harbor in Wismar, Germany. Its three parts are, first, acoustic interruptions or framings by several sound-absorbent passageways. Second, chairs set up as though for a concert offer an opportunity to sit and listen. Third, a construction of four pedestals at the four cardinal points is placed in a field. The pedestals bear various instructions for holding the hands behind the ears and then removing them, with variations for each direction.[5]

To pay attention to a harbor soundscape for an hour as though it were a movement of a symphony or to use the hands and body to change the way we hear the white noise of an open field: these are acts that go to the heart of what it is to experience being in the world – and this through a redirection of the human listening faculty. The listener becomes a performer, sitting, standing, passing through, and all the while listening attentively within these self-imposed conditions. Through such installations and instructions, Ablinger only highlights what or in what ways we could perceive for ourselves if only we would think in a certain way.

2 Ablinger, *Stühle, als Hörorte* (see nt. 1).

3 Ablinger, *Stühle, als Hörorte* (see nt. 1).

4 Ablinger, *Stühle, als Hörorte* (see nt. 1).

5 Peter Ablinger, *3 Easy Pieces*, http://ablinger.mur.at/docu12.html (accessed 14 June 2012).

Focused Listening

Ablinger's chairs focus on listeners by directly alluding to their capacity to be observers. His work nudges them to become aware that they could be in a state of observation and focused attention. By seeing a chair, they are invited to project themselves into the situation and experience it by association. Or they may actually sit and pay attention to the site. This makes the work both public and, at the same time, absolutely private. Perception is a personal, individual process because it is an activity filtered through and determined by the character of the person who is hearing or seeing or feeling.

The distinction is often made between levels on which we attentively perceive and sensations on which we do not consciously focus. As Stephen Handel writes:

> Listening is not the same as hearing. The physical pressure wave enables perception but does not force it. Listening is active; it allows age, experience, expectation, and expertise to influence perception. [...] We hear and see things that are important to us as individuals, not sound waves or light rays.[6]

We listen to things that are important to us or that are noteworthy or that have been noted by others. Some silent sound art functions in the form of signage, an indicator of a place or listening conditions deemed by the artist to be in some way worthy of attention. In this way the artist can change the default unreflective hearing of a passerby moving through a particular space into a conscious, concentrated act by inciting a mode of reflective perception.

One might still wonder what inanimate chairs in a field have to say for sound art, but sound art is fundamentally about this interaction of a listener in space. Sound art, in its wide range of forms, plays with the conditions of our auditory experience. Even when that experience is not at that moment being directly thematized, such a work emphasizes the mode and the method of audition and their implications. Music has this potential to bring our listening attitude to attention, but it usually does this only secondarily: the focus of listening to music often lies beyond the meaning of experience itself and instead lies in the structure, technique, melody, narrative, and other mediated factors. It is the object and sound material we are meant to pay attention to in music, not our own engagement with the music, whereas sound art is characterized by its emphasis on space, the presence of the visitor, and the multi-modality of embodied perception.

In introducing *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art*, Brandon LaBelle states that sound art as a practice exposes the dynamics of space beyond its pure presence, showing that knowledge in this context is a social discovery (in contrast to the potentially alienating privacy of visual perception). To be involved in the exchange (the production and reception of sound) is "to be involved in connections

6 Stephen Handel, *Listening: An Introduction to the Perception of Auditory Events*, Cambridge, Mass. 1989, p. 3.

that make privacy intensely public, and public experience distinctly personal."[7] At its core, continues LaBelle, is an activation of the already present relation between sound and space. A sonic event within a room or at a specific site is for anyone in the vicinity to share. It is further "produced and inflected not only by the materiality of space but also by the presence of others, by a body there, another there, and another over there."[8] In this way the event is also perceptually and physically a social event of inherently enveloping and being enveloped by the implied social dynamics. Works like Ablinger's *Chairs* do just this. They make the public positioning of a chair the possibility for you – personally and individually – to experience something that, while designated by the artist and conditioned by fellow participants, cannot be determined by them.

Akio Suzuki's Empty Circles

Another artist working with this approach to sound art is Akio Suzuki. Although he is known as a composer and performer of unique self-invented instruments, his focus is also on listening in space. Many of his works make an even subtler hint to perceptual attention than Ablinger's *Chairs*, such as the installations *Otodate* (1996, 1997) and *Hana* (1997).

Akio Suzuki's *Otodate* piece(s) come from the Japanese ideograms for *oto* (variously translated as sound or echo) and *date* (translated as place or point) and are therefore essentially listening points.[9] They consist of a circle drawn on a street or a sidewalk enclosing two figures that simultaneously appear to be footprints and ears. The image immediately conveys the message: stand still and listen.

Suzuki has placed his listening points in cities such as Berlin, Paris, and Torino, each time seeking out locations in which a standing listener might hear something interesting or unexpected. The listening points offer a chance for people who may already be familiar with a certain corner or area to experience it anew, more deeply than before. Balancing between visual art, composition, the performative, and sculpture, these listening points are similar to Ablinger's chairs in that they ask for a change of attitude. While the chairs propose a literal (or mentally projected) change of bodily position, the *Otodate* change would be physically almost imperceptible. It asks for a phenomenological opening of the ears.

This attentiveness to listening is made even more abstract in *Hana* (meaning flower), a work which is deceptive in its simplicity. It consists of a vase of fresh flowers placed in the center of a gallery.[10] The flowers are replaced every day. This is all there, yet Suzuki defines this as a sound work. If so, then it moves a step beyond a mere alteration in auditive sensibility to an alteration that might be thought of as auditive ideology. The presence of the installation acts in a way that changes, even

7 Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art*, New York 2006, p. ix.

8 LaBelle, *Background Noise*, p. x (see nt. 7).

9 Akio Suzuki, *Hana / Otodate in Torino*; http://www.estatic.it/en/content/akio-suzuki-hana-otodate-torino (accessed 14 Juni 2012) and id., *Borgovico33*; http://www.bv33.org/schede/14_suzuki/e-suzuki.html (accessed 14 June 2012).

10 Suzuki, *Hana / Otodate in Torino* (see nt. 9).

reconfigures, the space itself. It does this through the way it provokes perceptual and conceptual re-consideration in the observer (just as the *Otodate* pieces do in a more overt way) about what a sound work really is.

John Cage's Empty Music

These pieces are placed in the context of sound art, yet all are pieces that as objects make no particular sounds themselves. This makes them on first encounter seem problematic, since they claim to be part of a category whose defining characteristic – sound – they apparently lack. But if we can accept that sound itself is not a pre-requisite for inclusion in music, then the same may hold true for sound art.
Using the not-heard is certainly not unheard of. These pieces exist in a lineage of "silent" works, particularly John Cage's seminal *4'33"*, the minimal sound sculptures and event scores of Fluxus, and the movements and artists whose works redefined not only sound and soundfulness, but also who has the agency in a piece. In the same way as silent music shifts the artistic materiality and places the performance of a work with the audience, silent sound art sharpens the focus on the role of space and the performativity of the listener within that space.
The works of Cage helped instigate a re-conceptualization of the musical object in a way that granted new meaning to the listener's presence, namely, by turning attention to the listener's presence in itself. As Douglas Kahn puts it in *Noise, Water, Meat*, an important aspect of Cage's approach was that it extended the field of artistic materiality by "shifting the production of music from the site of utterance to that of audition."[11] LaBelle places Cage within an experimental art legacy that was moving from an overt musical framework to a contextual "extra-musical" framework, from music to sound and noise, and from symbolic, representational art to paradigms with an emphasis on the phenomenal and non-representational. In this way experimental music was moving in tandem with a general trend of modernism in seeking to intensify the perceptual experience. The intention was to bring the audience in on the level of this experience as a whole and not confront the listeners with a musical object.[12] In the process, in such works as Cage's silent piece, the seminal *4'33*", the listeners were transformed into art objects themselves. *4'33*" highlights the presence and involvement of the audience and also the tensions of its expectations within a specific context. If any content in the piece is to be singled out, it is that which is generated by the environment and the listeners, whose role as audience, expectant listener, and participant is suddenly jerked to the forefront.[13]

Happenings and Events: The Organic and the Visceral

In the late 1950s and 1960s questions of contextual artistic practice were being addressed in many ways. Methodological operations such as Cage's use of chance

11 Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*, Cambridge, Mass. 2001, p. 158.

12 LaBelle, *Background Noise*, p. 7–9 (see nt. 7).

13 LaBelle, *Background Noise*, p. 14 (see nt. 7).

were explored in various mediums, and the object of art was repositioned. A reflexivity of art developed, which sought to consider and reconsider itself and its materiality and function. During this period, "environments" and "happenings" emerged. Through random structures or plots – often nearly indistinguishable from the everyday – the line between art and life became increasingly blurred.
Allen Kaprow, best known for staging such art occurrences, described happenings as "an assemblage of events performed or perceived in more than one time and place" and as something "performed according to the plan but without rehearsal, audience, or repetition. It is art but seems closer to life."[14] These events brought up issues of location, space, time, and object (what could be said to be presented or represented here?), but perhaps more pertinently, they brought up the question of agency. Who is the performer, the composer, the director, the artist, or the audience? Where is the intention (if any) and who has it? If the line between art and life is blurred, then so too is the division between active participant and passive observer (and happenstance visitor). If anything concrete can be said to be happening, perhaps it is what lives in the moment, the direct contact.
The emphasis on this immediacy of material was vital in the culture of happenings and environments. Through the use of all manner of substances and materials and their mixing, the idea was not to represent objects, as a painting might in a museum, but to present them for a visitor's direct experience. The visitor is then activated as a participant through an engagement with a work that encompasses every modality. Works like Kaprow's happenings or his action paintings (immersive sculptural and multi-modal works) were something to be played, not just with, but in. The organic inclusion of the participant was essential to the work's being. According to Claire Bishop in her discussion of the history of installation art, Kaprow saw his happenings as a moral imperative: they were there in part to jostle the participant (the would-be-observer) out of mundane, every-day consciousness. He hoped to achieve this by submerging the viewers in a dirty, tense, visceral, and possibly risky situation – a work that acts directly on experience – and thereby enlarge their capacity for experience.[15]
Suzuki and Ablinger's works also enlarge a participant's capacity for experience by a gentle jostle, not with dirty or dangerous or risky action paintings like Kaprow, but by near non-existence. You are forced to pay attention and play along; otherwise you might miss the work entirely. Their works bring an immediacy of the material by providing nearly no medium at all, but instead pointing to the capacity for direct experience. In this way – in their instructional nature, their re-situation of the everyday, and their penchant for the distilled experience – they echo the event scores and compositions that came out of Fluxus.

14 Allan Kaprow, *Some Recent Happenings*, New York 1966, p. 5.

15 Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, New York 2005, p. 24.

Fluxus: Focusing on Attention

The inertia of Fluxus shifted from visceral happenings to more conceptual and language-based actions or pieces, often in the form of event scores. While happenings verged on comedic gestures, Fluxus' compositions hinged on a conceptual resituation of symbolic schemas. The antics of Fluxus, which generally took the form of scores for events, such as the compositions by George Brecht and La Monte Young, are for the most part insinuated in words and left to be performed and heard in the reader's or listener's mind. Event scores were not only abstract where the happenings were direct, but also they tended to create a kind of lens, magnifying simple particles of the everyday.

By dedicating themselves to a single event, a solitary object, or reduced action, Fluxus pieces objectified the process of focusing attention – itself a process of objectifying, by an audience, a listener, reader, participant, or performer – onto attention and perception itself. Many Fluxus works emerge out of experimental music, frequently relying on the language of music and the familiarity with its conventions to be effective.[16] They can be taken as musical works through reference to music compositional traditions, as well as through their claim to the category. In *Composition 1960 #5* by La Monte Young, the score is a set of instructions to turn butterflies loose in a performance area. The music is implied by the actions of releasing them and may endure for as long as the butterflies are allowed to flutter about the room. Butterflies do produce sound, of course – even music one might say – but whether we can hear it is another matter. Being asked to perceive what is not perceptible, to attend to the nearly indiscernible, amplifies instead the dynamics of perception and the listening attitude. Consider as well George Brecht's *Symphony No. 5*:

> Symphony No. 5
> I before hearing
> II hearing
> III after hearing
> 1966[17]

Although there is no direct acoustic product aside from sounds evoked in the mind of the reader or noted at the moment of performance, one can still consider the musical aspects of such a piece and study them in the context of experimental music. If nowhere else, its relation to the category is in the claim of the title itself.

This self-categorization on the part of an artist should not be overlooked, especially in regard to silent sound art. What makes the auditory element of works such as Suzuki's *Hana* most concrete is the curatorial context, which includes the literal

16 LaBelle, *Background Noise*, p. 60 (see nt. 7).

17 Reprinted in: *FluxusPerformanceWorkbook*, ed. Ken Friedman, Owen Smith, and Lauren Sawchyn (A Performance Research e-publication, 2002); http://www.thing.net/~grist/ld/fluxusworkbook.pdf, p. 28 (accessed 14 June 2012).

claim, the self-designation, that it is a sound work. It makes the statement that it is sound art (as opposed to interior decorating, for example), and therefore, this is the context in which it is considered.
Read as musical compositions (once accepted as such), Fluxus event scores extend the world of sound into the imaginary. Their "sonic material" exists through elicitation, emerging in the imagination of the reader/participant. Their sense requires cooperative participation: it requires the resounding body of a listener-in-potentia. Person, perception, and the sound (of a piece) are immediate and inextricable.

Installation Art and the Activation of a Participant

The claim to being sound art, as opposed, for example, to a musical concert, is important, because one is approached differently than the other. Though you can participate by being "all ears" at a traditional concert, the music continues whether you are there or not; your presence is marginal to the event, and the reception is often divisively structured as active performer versus receptive audience. At a sound installation, however, you can be a determining presence in the work. As a participant, you structure the auditory experience because of the way you are asked (or allowed) to move around in space, engage mentally, physically, or psychologically, and because of the temporal leeway, you can choose (within certain confines) how much of and when you hear a work.
Bishop designates this immersive element the most essential to characterizing the category of installation and puts great emphasis on its demand for the embodied presence of a participant.[18] The salient criterion that distinguishes installation art from an installation of art, in which attention is also given to the placement of objects in space for a potential visitor, is that installation art allows for and even requires the physical invasion of a body. Installations create a situation in which the visitor corporeally participates. Works speak to the participant as a material presence, not a disembodied sense organ. Pieces are directed at an integral and dynamic individual and the individual's multi-modal perceptual capacities.[19]
Since installations hinge on the participation of the subject, one way to describe them is by the method in which they condition the nature of the visitor's engagement.[20]
Two aspects of this relation of installation art to its subject in Bishop's account are first, that installation art activates the participant – it requires a visitor to become part of the artwork and engage with it on a conscious level – and second, that installations are part of a cultural art practice, which decentralizes the "viewing" perspective. This is the case in Suzuki's *Otodate* circles, which sensitize the visitor to their own position in a perceptual sphere, while the multiplicity of the listening points

18 Bishop, *Installation Art*, p. 7 (see nt. 15). Here, and in most cases, Bishop uses "viewer" to describe the visitor/subject. However, because her perspective is generally more visually weighted, I have often replaced it with participant, my term of choice.

19 Bishop, *Installation Art*, p. 8 (see nt. 15).

20 Bishop, *Installation Art*, p. 10 (see nt. 15).

contradicts any ultimate center of the piece as a whole.
Installation moves away from the singular gaze, the Western establishment perspective since the art of the Renaissance. In theory, such a gaze of a centered viewer is often associated with privilege, the masculine, and implicit structures of hierarchy. This was a frequent subject of critical writing in the late 1960s, especially in artistic and feminist circles, in which the discussion turned on how to subvert or otherwise re-focus this gaze.
Installation manages this subversion by demanding a visitor's full presence, while simultaneously retracting the possibility of a single ideal perspective from which to take in the work. Pieces are either too large, too long, or too complex to take in at a single glance/visit/listen or too ambiguous and subjective to allow only a single interpretation.[21] What Bishop does not discuss, but what may also factor into the decentralizing character of installation art is its potentially heavy use of sound and other modalities. In other words, the centered gaze could be seen as partly subverted because the monopoly of the visual is itself tempered.
It can be argued that installation art is – or was at one time – anti-institutional by default. With site-specificity and reliance on full corporeal experience, installations create stark contrasts to mass media and stand as an alternative to the passive, one-sidedness that such media represent.[22] Even the seemingly passive artworks of minimalism were about engaging and activating the visitor to be aware of the surroundings and of themselves as perceptual subjects.

The Embodied Subject and Dream House

Minimalism was an aesthetic movement whose works lay somewhere between traditions of sculpture and the installations of the time. Nearly static, their structures are reduced, comprised of the simplest elements, like Robert Morris's idle steel sculptures or the nearly monotonous repetition of La Monte Young's *Well-Tuned Piano*. They could be characterized as uneventful, even boring. However, with everything stripped down to the most essential, the interplay of the body and the installation is accentuated.
The critical reception of minimalism was to a great extent contextualized through reference to the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. A primary concern of his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) was the nature of the human subject, specifically, an embodied subject. A first crucial claim of the theory was the interdependence of the subject and object, which, unlike traditional views, are by no means insular or detached entities. On the contrary, as Merleau-Ponty states, "the thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it [...] and can never actually be in itself."[23] Subject and object are intertwined, the existence of one dependent on the other. Installations exemplify this interrelation of subject to object. They create an

21 Bishop, *Installation Art*, p. 13 (see nt. 15).

22 Bishop, *Installation Art*, p. 32 (see nt. 15).

23 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception (*1945), trans. by Colin Smith, London 1962, p. 320; also in Bishop, *Installation Art*, p. 50 (see nt. 15).

aesthetic experience for the participant, enveloping him or her, and some simultaneously bring the relation itself above the threshold of awareness. A work which makes this dynamic explicit is La Monte Young's *Dream House*.[24]

La Monte Young, working as part of Fluxus, was a key figure in setting the tone for the minimalist movement. In order to explore the world of sound, Young developed increasingly "minimal" projects, such as a theater of a single event – lighting a fire, releasing butterflies, and other unconventional acts. In such cases his perceptual world of sound – music – was in sonic images and meant to be completed in the listener's mind.

While Young was working with music as a concept – with attention to the inaudible and more importantly, to a realignment of the boundaries of subject, object, listener, composition, space, sound – he was also fascinated with the dynamics of construction and auditory fabrication within the ear of the participant. This interest in psychoacoustic processes and the mechanics of hearing led to works that made these things manifest and exploited the ear as a physiological organ. One way to achieve this was to make sound that is beyond anything the listener can hope to grasp completely: tones sustained beyond perceivable time spans – for days or years, amplitude levels that overwhelm the perceiver, and tuning systems specifically determined by Young to the mathematical cent.[25]

This is the case with *Dream House*, a sound and light environment housed in an apartment in Manhattan. The sound is a semi-permanent site-specific drone piece comprised of a number of sine waves whose frequencies Young determined by means of mathematical proportions. Through the use of sine tones and the confines of the walls, ceiling, and floor, a set of standing waves is created, which result in static nodes all through the apartment. This renders it in some sense a sonic sculpture, akin to an auditory Robert Morris. It is also a set of unique circumstances just waiting for a participant to enter – conditions for a physical and psychological interaction between space, sound, and the movement of a listener's body.

Walking in, uninitiated visitors hear just the loud droning and may not be aware at first of the way their own bodies will determine what they ultimately perceive. As they hear alterations in the sound, they may think this is a musical element and that the sine waves generated are changing in a subtly composed piece. It is only by moving through rooms, and by ceasing to move and staying still, that visitors realize it is not the drone that is changing melodically, but we who are navigating a room filled with steady sound. Each tiny movement changes our relationship to the

24 There are several places in which this sound and light environment has been created (exhibited). I am referring to the one currently in its 19th year at the MELA Foundation in New York, with Young's music and visual artist Marian Zazeela. While *Dream House* is what the work is commonly called, the actual title is a description of the sine tones: *The Base 9:7:4 Symmetry in Prime Time When Centered above and below The Lowest Term Primes in The Range 288 to 224 with The Addition of 279 and 261 in Which The Half of The Symmetric Division Mapped above and Including 288 Consists of The Powers of 2 Multiplied by The Primes within The Ranges of 144 to 128, 72 to 64 and 36 to 32 Which Are Symmetrical to Those Primes in Lowest Terms in The Half of The Symmetric Division Mapped below and Including 224 within The Ranges 126 to 112, 63 to 56 and 31.5 to 28 with The Addition of 119*.

25 LaBelle, *Background Noise*, p. 71 (see nt. 7).

"static" sound. We are a disturbing element that is literally changing the sonic sculpture and thus changing what we hear as well as what there is to hear. Even on a small scale, shifting tones are created by the very structure of our ears. By determining how we partake of the work, we determine what the work itself is at a given moment.

In works like *Dream House*, materials are presented as they are. The relationship is physical and perceptual – the emphasis is on literalism. Furthermore, *Dream House* is a work that responds to its space – it would not exist as it does without the rooms that hold and structure its sound waves. The room is another body interrelating with the body of sound filling it and the physical body of the observer weaving through. By participating in a work such as *Dream House*, a person can be made more acutely aware of the dynamics of hearing, which makes *Dream House* exemplary of installations that are about heightened consciousness and perhaps developing a new state of the real.

What one realizes on exiting the installation is that these subtle mechanics of hearing, which are brought to attention through the droning sine tones inside, are active all the time: we are moving through a sea of sound with which we are constantly in flux.

If Young's approach to this engagement of the audience (and his way of realizing this) is through sound that overwhelms perception by being larger than comprehension, then Ablinger and Suzuki's works can be seen as following another method: letting sound fall away entirely and creating a work founded on what can be filled in by the listeners' perceptions, sensibilities, and imagination.

Soundful Silence

The statement that sound has "fallen away" or been left out should, of course, not be taken too seriously nor should the categorization "silent sound art." I have been speaking of silence and soundlessness mostly in a conventional sense. But both of these can be misconstrued. Especially in the discourse around sound art, sound and silence have gained some peculiar usage and are subject to opinion. Between the reconsideration of the musical object in Cage, the experimentation with materiality and event, the questioning of listener (or reader) agency, and Fluxus' music, silence and sound were at times construed as conventional opposites. First, silence became redefined, particularly through Cage, so fully as to include loud sounds; on the other hand, sound was extended far beyond the acoustic. Taken this way, silent is a perhaps a misnomer in the case of Ablinger or Suzuki's works.

The notion of silence which Cage developed through his compositions and lectures was a particular understanding of the term, which stemmed in part from his experience that there is never true silence for anyone. In *4'33"* the realization of a silent piece included all the unintentional sounds that occur during a performance. As Kahn points out, while often cited as the prototypical silent piece, in performance

the piece is rarely silent at all.[26] Eventually, as Kahn writes:

> At midcentury, once within the context of indeterminacy, silence then turned into its opposite: sound. […] Eventually codified in the publication of *4'33",* an ultimate *silent piece* could occur anywhere and anytime, all sounds could be music, and no one need to make music for music to exist. As one indication of how much this new Cagean silence departed from common usage, loud sounds too could be silence.[27]

Meanwhile, in the other direction, Fluxus event scores presented sound and music that was to be completed in the readers' minds or that (as in Young's butterfly piece) would not be audible even when produced. If we accept Douglas Kahn's inclusive definition of sound in *Noise, Water, Meat,* then there are many ways in which things we thought were silent are not, and so-called silent sound art is in fact quite soundful.

> By sound, I mean sounds, voices, aurality – all that might fall within or touch on auditive phenomena, whether this involves actual sonic or auditive events or ideas about sound or listening; sounds actually heard or heard in myth, idea, or by implication; sounds heard by everyone or imagined by one person alone; or sounds as they fuse with the sensorium as a whole.[28]

Considering these descriptions, works such as Ablinger's *3 Easy Pieces* or Suzuki's *Otodate* sound in a silent way (through idea or by implication) or are silent, but in a Cagean, sound-filled way. That said, the aim of this reflection is not to be finicky about terms. Most such works I would still refer to as silent sound artworks, with the understanding that they involve plenty of sound (and with the further understanding that sound can take inaudible forms). Some works may produce sound that is inaudible to us in order to create an effect observable by other means (usually visual). A piece may use other means (again, perhaps visual or textual) to symbolize or refer to sound that is present, or was present, or even could be present (e.g., if produced by the reader/viewer/listener). It could be that a work incorporates sound below the threshold of our perception, sound which occurred in the past and is evident by artifact, sound which is conceptual, a description, or simply pointed to or framed by the piece.

If validation as sound art were still in order for works such as *Otodate* and *3 Three Easy Pieces*, then there are various aspects that might serve to validate them. One is the creation of conditions in which the sound emerges through the participation of the listener. Another is a reference to the observation that sound does not produce itself, but is already present. In light of Kahn's comments, there is nothing that such works do not do that other sound art does. Far from being soundless pieces, mute

26 Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, p. 158 (see nt. 11).

27 Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, p. 163 (see nt. 11).

28 Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, p. 3 (see nt. 11).

markers in the urban realm such as Suzuki's listening points can become overwhelmed by the clamor of human and automotive traffic. Ablinger's listening pieces, meanwhile, akin to a sound walk, could even be thought of as sound sites. When considered in this way, the soundfulness becomes evident.

The Performer Emerges

In *Understanding the Art of Sound Organization*, Leigh Landy proposes formulating the interactive reception of sound art in terms of emergence. Landy is quoting Simon Waters who states, "The listener is an interpreter, not a receiver," and the term "emergence" can be used to describe the awareness and use of "changing boundaries between the subject (listener, interpreter) and the maker (artist, composer) in which the former interacts with what the latter has made, such that the work can be said to emerge in its 'use,' rather than having been designed in its entirety by the artist and then 'presented'."[29]

Meaning (or "use") is generated through the interaction of the listener-interpreter-participant and thus is constantly determined and re-determined by the level of engagement and the dynamic of this subject-to-object relationship. The works of Ablinger and Suzuki simply make this propensity of sound art more potent by having even the sounding part of their work itself emergent.

In a recent conversation with a colleague on installation and sound art and the engagement of the visitor/viewer/listener/audience/participant therein, both of us quickly became frustrated in trying to name each player in this complex interaction. What is the appropriate title for each such that all do not end in a simple dichotomy and yet we can still express the complexity of the relationship? Subject-object, artist-audience, composer-listener: all of these sound divisive, insinuating two sides positioned in conflict. I proposed "participant," and my colleague exclaimed, "Why stop there? I have begun just calling everyone 'performer'!", an opinion which I submit now as a way of conceptualizing our engagement in installations of silent sound art.

These mute installations expand our understanding of how and in what ways we can perform in the world. What is listening for us, and what do we hear? Do we sit, stand, walk, run, stay very still, close our eyes, or hum along? Do we hear objects, voices, architecture, or our own narrative? Do we hear structure or melody, pulses, pitches, or memories? Do we hear in nouns, verbs, adjectives? The possibilities are expanded in space. What emerges in the works of sound art considered here is an awareness of our place as listeners.

In discussing art as a complement, or a photographic negative, to what is seen or heard, Peter Ablinger considers the idea that art is what lies beyond the boundary of the perceivable:

29 Leigh Landy, *Understanding the Art of Sound Organization*, Cambridge, Mass. 2007, p. 39.

> Das was man sieht oder hört ist das Komplement zu dem was man NICHT sieht oder hört. Die Kunst ist aber nicht das was man sieht oder hört – das ist nur das Handwerk/Kunsthandwerk – die Kunst ist genau das Komplement zu dem was man sieht oder hört. Ist das dessen Außengrenze das Sicht- oder Hörbare beschreibt. Die Kunst ist exakt dort wo das Sicht- oder Hörbare aufhört.[30]

As with Ablinger's chairs or Suzuki's *Otodate* circles, the works direct attention both outward and inward and to the observer, i.e., to that which is "missing" or that which it "is not." In its way, the work asks us as observers to become performers and to realize the artwork through an implementation of and by our senses and intellect. It relies on an awakening of our performative capacity.

30 Peter Ablinger, "Komplementäre Kunst" (7/02), in: id., *3 Easy Pieces* (see nt. 5).