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## SOUND ART AS PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE AND INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE: REASSESSING THE ORIGINS



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**A**bstract. The paper aims to re-examine the origins of sound art from the perspective of audience participation and the role it has in the formation of the art form. I focus on the three pioneering artists: the Baschet brothers, Max Neuhaus and Hildegard Westerkamp, and their respective practices of sound sculpture, sound installation and soundwalking. I show that reimagining the role of the listener as an active participant and co-creator was an important goal for these foundational practices. However, they differ in their approach towards participation. Sound sculptures engage the listeners in collective music-making. Sound installations invite the participants to re-compose spatially distributed sonic material into a personalized temporal musical sequence. Finally, soundwalks establish a relationship of aesthetic appreciation between the active, agentic listening of the walk's participants and the everyday sound-making practices that compose the acoustic environment. Sound artists' attitudes towards audience engagement can thus be also regarded as a form of institutional critique aimed at established institutions of (musical) listening.

**Key words:** sound art, sound sculpture, sound installation, soundwalk, participation, institutional critique, Baschet brothers, Max Neuhaus, Hildegard Westerkamp.

To this day, and despite the calls for more socially engaged approaches [Kim-Cohen], sound art continues to be theorized primarily in terms of phenomenology of listening and acoustic space. However, for many sound artists, particularly the pioneers of the art form, those were not the only concerns, and possibly not even the most important ones. A close reading of the artists' interviews, essays and statements reveals a prominent interest in participation and listener agency. For example, the Baschet brothers, who coined the term “sound sculpture”, defined it as a combination of “shapes, sounds and audience participation” [Baschet & Baschet: 110]. Max Neuhaus has always emphasized the element of discovery in his works, requiring listeners to actively seek sounds and mentally arrange them into a composition of their own [Neuhaus & Jardins: 82]. Peter Vogel described his cybernetic sound objects as having a behavior and being able to enter a dialog with a viewer/listener [Vogel: 92]. Many similar statements could be cited, creating a paradoxical situation: a rather socially oriented art form is framed in scholarly literature as abstract and uninvolved.

The goal of this article is to re-examine the

origins of sound art from the perspective of various forms of participations and how they informed the formation of the art form. I focus on the works of three pioneering artists and collectives – the Baschet brothers, Max Neuhaus and Hildegard Westerkamp – and three major genres of sound art – sound sculpture, sound installation and soundwalk. Discussing how participation and listener agency were major concerns for the development of these practices, I establish sound art as a form of institutional critique that questions traditional listening practices of both the concert hall and the everyday and challenges the inherent hierarchies of music culture<sup>1</sup>.

### Sound sculpture

Anglophone histories of sound art usually put the emergence of the practice in the early 1980s, when the term was first introduced, or in the late 1960s – early 1970s, with the practice of Max Neuhaus. What is left out then, are the two decades of history of sound sculpture<sup>2</sup>. The reasons for such omission can only be speculated, however, *including* sound sculpture into the sound art's history as one of its earliest examples allows to regard sound art from a completely different

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<sup>1</sup>This trend had a parallel movement in visual arts, where sound was used by artists like e.g. Michael Asher to critique the functioning of exhibition spaces. See e.g. [LaBelle: 87–96].

<sup>2</sup>Sound sculptures are, however, present in German histories of sound art. See [Gertich].

perspective – that of participation and institutional critique.

Of the various “genres” of sound art, sound sculpture is the one where the role of audience participation is the most obvious and tangible. The French sculptor brothers Bernard and François Baschet, who originated this art form in mid-1950s, even named participation a core component of their art [Baschet & Baschet: 110]. In fact, the very term “sound sculpture” owes its existence to a move from concert venues and organized performances to museums and participatory music-making. The Baschets’ early works were essentially experimental musical instruments that the brothers called “sound structures” and used in musical performances. They even invited some prominent composers to write music for them. The term “sound sculptures” was introduced to designate the works that were exhibited in museums and galleries where anyone could play them [Baschet: 40]. The Baschets wrote:

“Philosophically, we think that, in our machine-oriented, automated society, creativity is the only way to avoid mass ossification. Sound sculpture is a tool as much as an art form. The sculptor makes something, and musicians or visitors use it to create their own art. It is a double-trigger operation. This reminds me of the following story. Eckerman asked Goethe, ‘What is a real thing [eine echte Sache]?’ Goethe answered, ‘A thing is ‘real’ when it produces something else [wiederproduktiv].’ In this case, sound sculpture fits with

Goethe’s definition, as it gives the musician or visitor the pleasure of creating as well” [Baschet & Baschet: 110].

The reason I insist this to be the true beginning of sound art is twofold. First, the sound-making activity was taken outside of musical institutions and into the institutions of art, and in some later works – into the public space. This simple change of spaces brought with it a considerable change in the modes of audience behavior. Musical institutions, particularly those of classical music, imply a highly regulated form of listening. The concertgoer’s behavior is dictated by social norms, while their listening experience is defined by the concert scheduling. Both these concerns are deconstructed by a sound sculpture exhibition. Interactivity and non-linearity of the art form reinforces the listener’s agency, instead of subjecting it to the rules of musical institution. At the same time, introducing sound into exhibition space disturbs the traditional quietness of the white cube, subverting the traditional museum behavior as well.

Second, and more importantly, the Baschets also took sound-making activity outside of musical paradigms, effectively performing an institutional critique of the traditional musical hierarchies. These are most evident, once again, in classical music with its pyramid of composer-performer-listener remaining unshakable even in the most daring aleatoric practices of the time [Taruskin: 54–56]. In other kinds of music, like

improvisation and jazz, or broadly speaking popular music, there still is the stage, the distinction between those who make sounds and those who listen.

Sound sculptures dismantle this hierarchy, as their listeners are at the same time composers and performers. They remove both the stage and the professionalization barrier, allowing the audience to become musicians. Even though the Baschet sculptures are built to traditional Western scales, this does not limit the possibilities for the audience engagement with them. The participants could find new, creative ways of producing sounds with a sound sculpture, not dictated by musical theory and foreseen by the artists.

Moreover, the music that a listener makes with sound sculpture does not exist only in her personal experience, but is shared with the fellow audience members, facilitating a creative dialog between them and shaping them as a collective entity. However, even in that regard sound sculptures afford the audience a great amount of freedom, as whether the other listeners choose to engage or not is left entirely at their discretion.

The Baschets were also very conscious about the political, liberating potential of these practices, particularly in the later stages of their career. For example, in late 1960s they created an ensemble of instruments for the New York theatre of the deaf. From 1975 to 1978 they participated

in the Guggenheim Museum program “Learning to Read through Arts”, which at that time was aimed at ghetto children who did not have access to regular schooling. After the Baschets left New York, they continued their educational program in France and other countries. There they worked primarily with children with physical and mental disabilities, collaborating with the MESH foundation (Music in education and care for the disabled).

While sound sculptures can be approached from the traditional spatial or phenomenological angles, such an analysis would leave behind the features that are central to the art form: corporeality of sound-making<sup>1</sup> and audience participation. They emphasize the material and social conditions for sound production, both in abstract (deconstructing the hierarchies inherent to art music), and in specific, tangible ways (catering to specific disadvantaged groups). This turns them into a powerful instrument of institutional critique, despite their modernist, abstract outlook and the lack of clear political statements from the artists.

### **Sound installation**

If historical narratives of sound art often omit sound sculpture, sound installation remains a fixture in any of them. Arguably, this practice also serves as origin for the spatiality-focused

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<sup>1</sup>I discussed this aspect of sound sculptures in an earlier article, see [Keylin].

approach to theorizing sound art, as the art form itself seems to emphasize spatial organization above all else. However, revisiting it from the perspective of participation, as a continuation of the trends set by sound sculptures, brings to the foreground other aspects of sound installation.

Max Neuhaus is widely acknowledged as the originator of the term “sound installation”, even though whether he was the author of the first works in this new genre can be debated [LaBelle: 153]. He defined sound installations as “sound works without a beginning or an end, where the sounds were placed in space rather than time” [Neuhaus & Jardins: 42]. A poster work for Neuhaus’ idea of sound installation is his first, “Drive-In Music” (1967). In this work a series of transmitters were arranged along a portion of a highway, each transmitting a constant unchanging sine tone. Turning their car radios to the transmitters’ frequency, people driving by could hear a combination of these tones. As the transmitters were not particularly powerful, the combination heard was defined by car’s position relative to them and changed as it moved. Thus, in the temporal domain the sounds remained static, but each was tied to a certain place.

Neuhaus’ definition of sound installation builds on an implicit understanding of musical works as having a beginning and an end, as well as being organized temporally – an understanding rather characteristic of the artist’s circles. A percussionist by trade, before turning to sound installations he was a prominent performer of the

postwar musical avant-garde, receiving acclaim for his performances of John Cage’s works. Cage, on the other hand, was one of the key proponents of the idea that music is pure time structured through sonic events. This approach allowed the composer to escape the ubiquitous concept of harmony that defined Western art music before him and to introduce everyday sounds into his pieces [Griffiths: 22–23]. The influence of this concept of music is evident in Neuhaus’ definition of sound installations. In a sense, he simply projects musical structure from time onto space, accommodating for the non-linearity of the latter. However, this emphasis on spatiality and structure eclipses another goal that Neuhaus aimed to achieve through sound installation. The renouncement of temporal organization was a means to facilitate listener agency [Neuhaus & Jardins: 34].

Equally necessary to Neuhaus’ idea of sound installation is its placement in the public spaces. As he later claimed, “Drive-In Music” was driven by his “interest in working with a public at large. Inserting works into their daily domain in such a way that people could find them in their own time and on their own terms” [Neuhaus & Jardins: 82]. Public space here serves as an antithesis for institutional one: open to everyone and not marked as something special or elite. The barriers of institution, be it a musical or art space, are implicitly class barriers. Their audiences are defined by who can afford entrance, who is let in and who even considers this kind of activity.

By placing his works in public space, Neuhaus aimed to make them “part of people’s daily activities” [Neuhaus & Jardins: 43] instead of a special event, thus removing the aura of elitism from an art experience. At the same time, sound art in public space has a reparatory function towards public space itself, facilitating the engagement of the passers-by with the space and one another [Föllmer].

Many of the work’s aspects are designed in such a way as to give the listener maximum freedom in how to approach it. Even though “Drive-In Music” intervenes into public space, it does so without imposing its sounds on those who pass through that space [Andueza: 89]. The work could only be heard from a car radio tuned to a specified frequency. Moreover, what each listener heard was a product of where and at what speed she was moving, as well as weather conditions and radio interference [LaBelle: 154–155]. “Drive-In Music” was the first in a series of works that Neuhaus dubbed “Passage”, which “[implied] an active role on the part of listeners, who set a static sound structure into motion for themselves by passing through it” [Neuhaus].

If creating a sound installation could be interpreted as projecting musical structure onto space, the perception of such works is essentially the opposite operation. “Traditionally, composers have located the elements of a composition

in time”, writes Neuhaus. “One idea which I am interested in is locating them, instead, in space, and letting the listener place them in his own time” [Neuhaus & Jardins]. A listener moving through the space of a sound installation does indeed experience its sounds in sequence, mentally arranging them into a virtual music piece, of which she is a co-author.

This trust in the listener marks the main difference in the approaches of Cage and Neuhaus. Cage used the institutional power of music to legitimize everyday sounds as art – and that meant not just the concert hall (a later rendition of 4’33” was performed on a street), but also the whole ritual of performing a written score. Neuhaus, on the other hand, let the listeners figure their experience out for themselves, with minimal input from the artist. Where Cage’s goal was to liberate sounds, Neuhaus’ was to liberate and empower listeners<sup>1</sup>.

Listening thus can be regarded as a participatory creative activity. Rather than passive perception (to the extent that perception can even be passive), sound installation facilitates listening as a compositional process on a pre-defined material. Whereas it lacks the apparent collective sound-making aspect of sound sculptures, what is produced by the participants is a personal temporal recomposition of spatially organized sounds and a state of togetherness in listening to

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<sup>1</sup> Another Neuhaus’ work from 1966 was “Public Supply I”, a radio program where listeners could phone the station and join the collective improvisation.

them. While sound sculptures remove the professionalization barrier, sound installation does away with the concept of skill and ability altogether, only requiring the ability to listen.

### Soundwalking

Prior to sound installations, Neuhaus has organized several “guided tours”, where participants were led through the streets of New York, but rather than seeing the sights of the city, the goal was to listen to its sounds. For Neuhaus, that was another way to escape the institutions and paradigms of concert music: instead of inviting the streets into the concert hall, like Cage did, he invited the listeners outside [Neuhaus 2006]. However, it was the Canadian artist Hildegard Westerkamp, who took this idea to its logical conclusion and framed it in the theories of the acoustic ecology movement, resulting in the practice of soundwalking (see [LaBelle: 200–14]).

“A soundwalk is any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment. It is exposing our ears to every sound around us no matter where we are.

<...>

A soundwalk can be designed in many different ways. It can be done alone or with a friend <...> It can also be done in small groups, in which case it is always interesting to explore the interplay between group listening and individual listening by alternating between walking at a distance from or right in the middle of the group.

A soundwalk can furthermore cover a wide area or it can just centre around one particular place. No matter what form a soundwalk takes, its focus is to rediscover and re-activate our sense of hearing” [Westerkamp: 49–50].

While the overarching principle of soundwalks and sound installations is roughly the same – listeners, moving through a given space, collecting the sounds heard into a temporal sequence, a personal musical experience – the balance of agencies is not. A sound installation artist is left with significant authorial control, as she defines the continuum of sounds to be heard. In soundwalking, on the other hand, participation plays an even greater role, as listening is the activity that creates the artwork. Whether the artist personally guides a soundwalking tour or just provides the participants with a route, the only directions given to the listeners is essentially that in such and such places they may hear something interesting – or they may not. The whole point of a soundwalk may be to challenge the notion of the ‘interesting’ listening experience, as its material consists primary of mundane. The sonic vocabulary of a soundwalk is the whole of the soundscape that it is performed in – the mass of the sounds that exist in any given environment. A soundwalk artist does not impose here aesthetic vision on the audience, but rather lends them her ears, invites them to a more attentive and creative ways of listening<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> To an extent, this could even be said about recorded soundwalks – see: [Polli].



However, an analysis of a sonic environment – not in the least from a position of acoustic ecology – reveals another participatory aspect to soundwalking. Unless one walks through some deep wilderness, the majority of sounds heard would be human-made: traffic noises, various machinery working, people talking, laughing, arguing, public announcements, possibly some music played loudly somewhere etc. Even the natural sounds in an urban environment are moderated by human activity: one can only hear bird songs in the trees because someone planted those trees. Moreover, the way these sounds are heard – or not heard at all – is also affected by the acoustics of the streets and squares. The French philosopher Henry Lefebvre noted that the urban space is not just a space but a product and a reflection of the social relationships between the inhabitants [Lefebvre]. The sonic environment is created by all those who inhabit it, and therefore they also become the unwitting co-creators of a soundwalk.

The soundwalking project – as well as the whole acoustic ecology project – emerged from a critical stance towards the modern industrial city, whose soundscape is dominated by commercial agenda, whether it presents itself as traffic or other noises, or the infamous Muzak machines. The practice of soundwalking, attentively listening to every possible feature of the soundscape, can be regarded as a protest against this commercial framing of it, and a deconstruction of commercial narratives, uncovering the hidden

‘soundmarks’, obscured by aggressive city noises. As sound artist Andrea Polli puts it, “[t]he practice of soundwalking <...> could also be seen as closely tied to political actions. As if engaged in a political demonstration, soundwalkers can move through space in a silent protest of both the visual dominance in contemporary culture and the constant industrial and electroacoustic noise assaulting our sonic environment” [Polli].

At the same time, focusing on the urban and the everyday, soundwalking does away with the institutions and paradigms of music completely. Soundwalks are not composed in the traditional sense, nor are they intentionally performed to be listened to. Soundwalks instead establish a relationship of aesthetic appreciation between two open-ended groups of people – the ones who create the sonic environment and those who listen to it. Andrea Polli, comparing soundwalks to Western art music tradition, notes that the two practices imply opposite modes of listening: where the art music celebrates control and shaping of the acoustic reality, listening to a soundwalk is necessarily empathetic, inspiring communion with the environment and its inhabitants [Polli].

### Conclusion

The three sound art practices discussed in the above sections demonstrate different levels of engagement with listener/audience agency. Sound sculptures focus on participatory soundmaking, collective or individual, making their listeners at

the same time composers and performers. Sound installations place the listener at the center of a non-linear acoustic space, empowering her to recompose it into personal temporal experience. Soundwalks expand that approach, creating a situation where two sets of social relationships meet through the aesthetic framing of everyday soundmaking and listening.

While these practices are not necessarily openly political, they can be regarded as a form of institutional critique, liberating listening and soundmaking from the domination of the norms and conditions of Western music culture. Escaping the musical institutions, they challenge the authority of concert spaces over listening experiences, while at the same time highlighting the problematic listening cultures of other, public and private, spaces. Escaping the musical paradigms, they highlight the composer-performer-listener hierarchies inherent to music performance. While these might be abstract, it is worth noting that these abstract hierarchies betray other kinds of social barriers, be it class, ability or gender<sup>1</sup>. Thus, regarding sound art from a participatory perspective reveals a social dimension to the art form that goes beyond the fascination with sound and listening in an abstract philosophical sense. Sound art has an inherent political impetus to it, challenging the established cultures of listening and hierarchical systems that they support.

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Claudia Goldin and Cecilia Rouse’s study on gender bias in orchestral auditions [Goldin & Rouse].

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