

Between Avant-Garde and Pop Culture

Sabine Breitsameter
Winfried Pauleit
Anne Thurmann-Jajes

This book, the third volume in the series on artists' publications, comprises revised versions of the lectures held at the conference **Sound Art – Between Avant-Garde and Pop Culture** which took place at the Neues Museum Weserburg from Sept. 9 to Oct. 2, 2005. This series is being published by the Forschungsverbund Künstlerpublikationen (Research Association Artists' Publications). The Forschungsverbund is a research association of more than twenty scientists from the University of Bremen, the International University Bremen, the University of the Arts, the Forschungsstelle Osteuropa (Research Centre for East European Studies) and the Neues Museum Weserburg Bremen (NMWB) / Studienzentrum für Künstlerpublikationen (Research Centre for Artists' Publications), the association's supporting institutions.

The conference was carried out within the framework of the **Sound Art Exhibition Project** of Aug. 21 to Nov. 27, 2005 (project director: Dr. Anne Thurmann-Jajes), organized and presented by the Studienzentrum für Künstlerpublikationen / NMWB in collaboration with the Forschungsverbund and with substantial support from the German Federal Culture Foundation. In addition to the conference, the exhibition project encompassed the show **Vinyl. Records and Covers by Artists**, the film week **Sound Art Cinema** in cooperation with Kino 46, a concert series and an art market for Sound Art. Excerpts from the concerts are being published as an audio CD. The project based on the largest and most important collection of artists' publications in Europe – the holdings of the museum's Research Centre for Artists' Publications and the loan of the sound art collection from Guy Schraenen. He also took over the curatorial task of the exhibition. Produced jointly with the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), the show comprised the acoustic and visual presentation of more than eight hundred vinyl records and their covers, produced and designed by artists, as well as several audio CDs, cassettes, works of graphic art, magazines, newspapers and catalogues. It was accompanied by a catalogue in the form of a discography on artists' records. Thanks to the combination of these five different programme modules, it was possible to present Sound Art in all its diverse facets from the 1920s to the most recent approaches, and thus to realize one of this art form's chief objectives: to connect art and life.

The Sound Art project was carried out in keeping with the standards set by the legendary radio programme series **pro musica nova**, created and run by Hans Otte of Radio Bremen. Through this programme, Bremen came to enjoy a very special connection to New Music and Sound Art throughout Europe and beyond. In the 1970s and 1980s, Bremen gained world renown for its activities in this field, and nearly all of the major sound artists and musicians performed on stage in the Hanse City. The exhibition project represents the beginning of a renaissance of interest in what happens on the boundaries between art, music and literature. Referring to this Anne Thurmann-Jajes outlined the development and contexts of Sound Art in her introduction to the conference.

As the project's central element, the conference served to bring together all of the events and aspects of Sound Art emerging on the boundaries between literature, art, music, radio and film and provide them with a theoretical foundation. In the process, the discussions revolved around the work of Sound Art as an artwork – not an original artwork, as in sound installations, but as a manifestation of a new artistic way of thinking. So-called sound interventions and sound works which have been reproduced and published are art forms which evade the traditional conception of art. The conference aimed towards the scholarly investigation of an area of research hitherto neglected, and, divided into four sections, addressed themes related to the avant-garde in Russia and Europe, Radio Art from its beginnings in the radio theory of Bertolt Brecht to artistic projects on Internet radio, intermediality since the 1960s and, finally, the significance of sound in the area of film and audio-vision:

The Archaeology of the Avant-Garde

The earliest examples of the interface between the visual and the acoustic are found in the internationally and intermedially oriented historic avant-garde of the period around 1913 in the experimental productions of the Dadaists and the Futurists, and around 1918 in the works by the artists of the Russian avant-garde. Both Raoul Hausmann and Kurt Schwitters liberated the vocal sound from its literal meaning, thus developing the function of the verbal utterance. The Russian Futurists incorporated urban sounds into their art and used the connection between sound and image to fetishize newly emerging technologies. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti made an important contribution to the development of Sound Art with radical language experiments aimed towards the destruction of grammar while at the same time paying tribute to dynamic, explosive movement. The common concern in this section is the exploration and elucidation of the specific origins of Sound Art.

Taking four theorists and writers as examples, **Julia Kursell** examines how spoken language is understood as Sound Art by the Russian avant-garde. Here the words' meaning recedes behind their acoustics, and new sounds become audible as a result.

Martin Maurach retraces the emergence of sound poetry from letter poems, showing how Kurt Schwitters imitates patterns of cultural codes, for example (in his **Ursonate**) those of music, while Raoul Hausmann reads the names of speech sounds as sounds. It becomes apparent in the process that not letters but emotional and social gestures are perceived as the primary messages.

Up-stream – The Development of Radio Art

The beginnings of public access to the new medium of radio in the early 1920s was accompanied by the emergence of an art made especially for this new technology. From the start, the aesthetic approaches to this art form came from every branch of art. Two further waves of artistic innovation followed in Radio Art: In 1961 Friedrich Knillis broke paths with his idea of the *Total Sound Play* – inspired by *Musique Concrète*, the innovations of John Cage and (not least importantly) the electro-acoustic innovations of the 1950s – thus ushering in the so-called New Radio Play, based chiefly on the aesthetics of sound. In the late 1980s major impulses came from the U.S., Australia and Canada: In independent broadcasting stations, the broadcasting and production studios of university and community radio stations, artists devoted themselves to the aesthetic exploration of the ether, soon followed by the acoustic ‘cultivation’ of the digital and interactive networks. In 1986, Heidi Grundmann founded the **Kunstradio** at the Vienna station of the Austrian broadcasting company ORF. This studio provided support to artists experimenting on merging radio with new media and technologies. In her contribution “Expanded Radio. Radio Art in the Field of Tension between Broadcasting Medium and Communications Technology,” **Heidi Grundmann** describes artistic concepts that are based on radio and its technological/communicative potential but do not necessarily result in the broadcasting of finished productions. The essay by radio programme director and scholar **Wolfgang Hagen**, “Artaud and the Serialization of Radio”, focuses on the fundamentally different approaches from which the new medium of radio emerged around 1920 in Europe and the U.S., retraces their diverging aesthetic positions and uses Artaud’s radio play of 1947 as the vanishing point for a glimpse into the future. The fact that all radio art is based on ideas already articulated in 1924 by the pioneers Richard Hughes, Kurt Weill and Hans Flesch is elucidated by **Sabine Breitsameter**. Particularly Hans Flesch’s concepts point the way directly into the age of present-day networks. Already back then – and we thus come full circle back to Heidi Grundmann’s essay – artists wanted to be more than mere programme slots for *new sound*. Not unlike the protagonists of today’s *Expanded Radio*, creative radio visionaries of 1924 demanded access to frequencies, equipment and technical know-how. And they did so not merely in the interest of advancing Radio Art as an aesthetic category but to develop the shapeability of radio’s political and social dimension.

Intermediality as a Guiding Principle

The transcendence of the boundaries between art, music and literature forms the core of Sound Art. As regards music, repeated attempts have been undertaken to break through musical traditions and rules, for example by liberating music from its relationship to a single basic key, the achievement of Arnold Schönberg. The development of serial music led in the 1950s to electronic music by such artists as Karlheinz Stockhausen. Finally, John Cage employed the aleatory technique, thus introducing chance and improvisation as well as the element of silence to music. In the mid 1960s, La Monte Young, Terry Riley and others created the art form known as Minimal Music, Mauricio Kagel experimental music theatre. The Fluxus artists worked with music, painting, literature, installation and object art simultaneously. Due to the development and availability of recording machines and other technical means, sound poetry – which also influenced the speech-related products of Conceptual Art – underwent its actual realization in the 1960s. In this context, the question arises again and again as to how music, literature and art mutually involved and/or influenced one another.

Basing her remarks on three hypotheses, **Barbara Barthelmes** describes the discussion of Sound Art within the field of musicology. This discussion did not commence until the end of the twentieth century in a brief phase of intensive and extensive reception and research. It had been the historical-philosophical conception of material – an aspect closely associated with the history of compositional procedure – which had presented the greatest obstacle, due to the fact that Sound Art is associated with the dissolution of genre boundaries. Based on a new definition of time and space, a conception of Sound Art as a genre has meanwhile been developed. From the visual arts perspective, **Peter Frank** provides an overview of that which – with the emergence of the Fluxus movement – came to be known as *intermedia*. This term was coined by Dick Higgins for works uniting the characteristics of two or more disciplines. The *happening*, for example, was based on a fusion of various artistic practices from theatre, painting, rhetoric, music and, often, film: Despite the fact that intermedia led to the dissolution of traditional artistic disciplines, music remained as a connecting element or, as John Cage expressed it: Everything we do is music. Against the background of his own works and his activities in the Fylkingen Society in Stockholm, **Sten Hanson** describes the origins and development of text-sound compositions generated by the 1960s zeitgeist, a type of sound work which had only been possible since the 1950s due to the advent of tape recording devices.

Sound Events between Art and Cinema

Since its invention, music and sound have played a major role for film, as they do for other audio-visual art forms as well. Yet whereas the paradigms of image and text long dominated the study of film and the media, music and sound were paid only minor attention as two elements among

many. Yet in the general context as well, music and sound gradually extricated themselves from their subordinate role and came to be understood increasingly as central elements in the making of a work, elements which – as sound objects or sound events – constitute complex synaesthetic or polyphonic compositions. In this context reference is made explicitly to *sound events* as opposed to sound works, a circumstance related to the specific conception of film and cinema. Already in the 1970s, in his text **The Two Avantgardes**, Peter Wollen developed a concept assigning cinema the role of the first hypermedium. Not only could all other art forms be reproduced in this medium, as outlined by Walter Benjamin; what is more, with all their contradictory productions and discourses, the arts encounter one another in film.¹ Viewed in conjunction with current concepts of cinema, this point of view leads far beyond the 1970s avant-garde understanding of cinema, which still took its orientation from author's cinema and directors like Jean-Luc Godard, pointing instead to a *viewers' cinema*, no longer bound to specific locations within the field of art, a cinema whose aesthetic can *happen* – in the perception of the viewer – in everyday life, essentially anywhere and anytime as a nexus of image, text and sound.

In conversation with Winfried Pauleit, **Barbara Flückiger** develops the increasing significance of film-sound design. With origins in the early avant-garde experiments with film sound in the 1920s and 1930s, and likewise drawing from the New Hollywood style of the 1970s, film-sound design established itself as an independent area of production in the film industry, its significance further increasing in conjunction with the digitalization of sound production during the 1990s. In contrast, at the conference **Thomas Y. Levin**, whose essay unfortunately could not be included in this book, showed an example of 1970s mainstream cinema – Sydney Lumet's **The Anderson Tapes**, a thriller on the subject of acoustic surveillance – to demonstrate how sound takes on the role of an independent compositional element in the viewer's perception and shapes the film's narration. Finally, **Daniel Gethmann** focuses on the aesthetic of the signal, discussing the structural and historical boundaries of medial audio-vision in which it is no longer possible to determine whether a graphically recorded sequence of signals contains an image or a sound or neither of the two.

As a means of orientation and to ensure optimal comprehension, we have placed the texts of this publication in temporal order. In view of the fact that the various areas and sections do not distinguish themselves clearly from one another – nor is this the intention – but rather Sound Art proves to be characterized specifically by the interdisciplinary approach, the chronological sequence serves to provide the most comprehensive overview.

Acknowledgements

We are most highly indebted to the German Federal Cultural Foundation, represented by its artistic director Hortensia Völkers, without whose support the conference and publication, and thus essentially the entire exhibition project on Sound Art, would not have been possible. Our thanks are extended as well to Bremen Marketing GmbH, Mr. Klaus Sondergeld, for assistance with special marketing measures. We are most sincerely grateful to the lecturers, the art-market-oriented second-hand book dealerships, art dealers and publishers and to the artists for the enjoyable concerts they gave. On behalf of all involved, we would like to express our heartfelt appreciation to Gerhard Rühm and Monika Lichtenfeld, Franz Mon, Sten Hanson and Dmitri Prigov for the pleasure of their concerts during the conference. For the conception and curatorial realization we are indebted to Guy Schraenen, for their collaboration on the coproduction to Manuel Borja-Villel and Bartomeu Mari of the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). For the cooperation with the Cinema 46 within the framework of the Sound Art Cinema film series, we most kindly thank Christine Ruffert and Karl-Heinz Schmid. We are also grateful to Maike Aden, Bettina Brach, Patrycja de Bieberstein Ilgner, Hartmut Danklef, Renate Gieretz, Nicole Giese, Katrin Homburg, Cordelia Marten, Sebastian Molitor, Tania Müller, Jan Sauerwald and Nadine Vahldiek for their superb organizational work especially during the conference. In the same way we thank Michael Lund and Thomas Thiele from the Zentrum für Multimedia in der Lehre (ZMML) [Centre for Multimedia in Higher Education] at the University Bremen for the assistance in the configuration, design and digitalization of the audio CD. And last but not least we would like to express our very sincere thanks to Claudia Funke for taking on the task of editing this publication as well as the CD.

1 Peter Wollen: "The Two Avant-Gardes" (1975). In: Idem: **Readings and Writings. Semiotic Counter-Strategies.** – London, 1982.