

Exhibiting Sound Art

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Foreword

Peter Kiefer

Sound is not enduring; it is transient: it begins, is sustained, and fades.

Sometimes it resounds only for a few seconds—like striking a triangle or a drop falling on water—sometimes it lasts minutes, hours, and longer. Sound is always ephemeral, just as everything that grows also perishes—like life itself. There is a fundamental condition for the perception of sound: it has to have at least a beginning and an end, otherwise it remains blocked from our senses.

Sound is always associated with movement.

Sound always goes hand in hand with activity as a sign of life; sound stands for life and creation. And while sounds preserved on media appear to be archived permanently, they are limited by the temporality of the experience at the moment they are played back.

Art, at least in the understanding of traditional fine art, has other qualities: it is carved in stone, captured in oil, cast in bronze, and constructed in buildings. In nearly all cases, art is designed to last, conceived for “eternity.” Even when the motif of transience is depicted—like the *vanitas* symbolism in the still life—the product of that depiction is conceived for the long time and above all as unchanging. That is why we are able to view the wonderful works of art created over millennia in museums today and experience them as documents of history. It is no coincidence that there is a scholarly field of art “history.”

We can indeed rediscover and exhibit the Venus of Willendorf, which was lost for nearly 30,000 years; the same applies to the approximately 35,000-year-old statuette of the Lion Man from Hohlenstein-Stadel. In the Swabian Jura, too, flutes thirty or forty thousand years old, made of bird bones and mammoth ivory, were discovered. These finds from the Aurignacian prove that music and sounds were important to the people of the Old Stone Age. Unlike the statuettes, however, the sounds themselves can no longer be experienced.

Can these arts, conditioned by completely antithetical assumptions, be connected to one another at all—as the term “sound art” suggests? And if so, how?

That it can succeed in the process of artistic creation has been demonstrated over several decades by numerous works of sound art, which, compared to fine art, is a comparatively recent art form.

We can therefore state that there is sound art, and we do not want to get caught up here in the discourse over how artists make it. This process should for the moment remain in the almost magical sphere of creative production. It is worth noting that sound artists of differ-

ent backgrounds have dedicated themselves to this art form; one finds musicians, composers, visual artists, architects, computer scientists, sculptors, writers, radio playwrights, editors, and so on, in a field distinguished by the heterogeneity of its subjects and references.

Very few of them have completed a degree in a specific field to be a sound artist, in part because such programs have existed anywhere in the world only for a few years and only in a few places.

For museum directors, gallerists, curators, festival directors, engaging with works of sound art often represents the beginning of a journey into the field of sounds, accompanied by the fundamental question that always has to be asked anew: How do I exhibit sound art?

Related questions that can be asked are: How do I exhibit the immaterial quality of sounds? What are the conditions of the sites and spaces? What is my own competency in hearing? How do I think of a listening experience from the public's perspective? What is the difference between visual and auditory representation? What purely physical settings should be considered?

As in the early days of video art, the media constellation of the new art form sound art goes hand in hand with new challenges to forms of presentation. And as with the artists of the first generations, there are hardly any educational institutions and almost no guidelines for how to address this theme in a fundamental way or to obtain specific knowledge.

In preparation for this foreword, I rummaged around in my archive: As early as 2003, we organized a gathering of experts on the "(im)possible museum of sounds" at the Kunsthochschule für Medien in Cologne. In 2004, a large symposium followed and an exhibition titled *KLANGRAUM—RAUMKLANG* (Sound Space—Space Sound).

Then and now, the aspect of space is common to all sound.

Be it purely physical, as every sound needs space to propagate, be it sculpturally conceived, be it metaphorically, as through the concept that in the fluid, evanescent character of sounds, a concept of place and time is always co-defined.

It is a great pleasure to see that sound art has in recent years experienced a growing and wide-ranging response across society.

This can perhaps be explained by a current need: in today's fast-moving times, it is not at all surprising that the clip-like, gleaming surface of the visual realities of media provoke a kind of counterreaction toward hearing, listening in, and listening to. Because alongside the simulated life in the media, listening closely to sounds still contains its own time and demands an especially personal, almost intimate approach to the work.

Many people are searching for another, deeper engagement that can open up authentic experiences for them.

The Gutenberg Sound Art Academy (GUSAC) and the *Exhibiting Sound Art* symposium in 2019 are also connected to my thesis that our century will become, after the visually dom-

inated twentieth century, the century of the auditory and of a sensitized, intersensory perception in the sense of an interiorization.

Sound art can, precisely because it combines the visual with the auditory in the multisensory, emphasize itself positively in the way it does so. Connecting the rather unconscious auditory perception with the concept-based visual one offers an extraordinary opportunity to approach this art on different levels and in the self-defined plurality of one's own experience. Something that is a great aesthetic challenge for the artist offers the listener several gateways of access and provides an approach to truly all interested visitors.

The present publication is dedicated to precisely this question; it brings together texts and reflections discussing the possibilities and conditions of the exhibition of sound art and how to position it.

Its importance and topicality are demonstrated by the fact that several treatises that explore this theme in a scholarly way for the first time are currently being worked out in close temporal proximity.

Exhibiting Sound Art is intended to offer a contribution to this discourse. The editors hope that it will become an informative and substantial source for theory and practice and lead to a competent approach to an increased dissemination of this art form that is so close to our hearts. Precisely because it brings people together to listen and, in this togetherness, an authentic experience permits reflection on the self and sometimes even opens up a space for questions that we have not yet asked ourselves as individuals or as a society.