THE SONIC REAL

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CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS



HEARING THE OTHER

edited by Sabine Sanio

The Sonic Real

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Hearing the Other

Conference Proceedings

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Funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
(DFG, German Research Foundation) – 652302

"The Sonic Real" was part of the
DFG research project "Hearing the Other"
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Wolke Verlag, Berlin
Printed in Lithuania
Copy editing by Eric Maltz
Typesetting in Simoncini Garamond
Cover design: Kathrin Scheidt

ISBN 978-3-95593-593-1

www.wolke-verlag.de

Universität der Künste Berlin
Berlin Career College

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Introduction

Sabine Sanio

As part of the DFG[1] research project "Hearing the Other. On the Aesthetics of the Real in Experimental Music and Sound Art," the conference "The Sonic Real" took place on September 24 and 25, 2021, and was held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We (Bernhard Rietbrock, Jan Thoben, and I – the team behind the research project "Hearing the Other") wanted to use this conference to discuss the questions, insights, and argumentative strategies developed in the course of our research on the project's themes with other theorists and artists. The goal of the event was to spark interest in the ideas and concepts of an aesthetics of the real, particularly within the fields of media aesthetics, philosophy, cultural studies, besides of course music, sonic arts and musicology.

The Research Project: Hearing the Other. On the Aesthetics of the Real in Experimental Music and Sound Art

This research project focused on innovations in experimental music and sound arts from the second half of the 20th century until today. We were particularly interested in the radical approach with which concepts of material and media research were pursued in these fields, while all traditional strategies of art music were called into question. In this context, we examined the accompanying shifts in conceptions of compositional material, the performance situation, and the category of space, as well as the growing significance of technical media in musical practice and reception. By reflecting on these developments and the resulting innovations from a theoretical perspective, we sought to contribute to the establishment of an "aesthetics of the real." In doing so, we have examined, not least, contemporary musical

1 DFG: Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

approaches that engage with the inaudible and problematize the role of the listener.

From the perspective of listening, sound is the Other; one could also say that sound is a "real" in music. It is by no means merely an acoustic phenomenon, but must rather be regarded as a complex intermodal phenomenon with visual and haptic qualities. Moreover, as music becomes increasingly experience-oriented, its spatial qualities are receiving greater attention. In our research project, we viewed this as an indication of fundamental changes in the form and reception of contemporary music and sound art. Ultimately, media-reflexive strategies play a decisive role in the compositional and sonic engagement with the Real.

Building on philosophical and aesthetic theories of the Real and the event by Jacques Lacan, Alain Badiou, and Dieter Mersch, the project began by examining the validity of Lacan's interpretation of the Real. In our effort to contribute to an aesthetics of the Real for experimental music and sound art from the perspectives of musicology, media studies, performance studies, and philosophy, we distinguished thematically between the "Musical Construction of the Real," "Musical Media Reflexivity (Media Music)," and "The Real in Aesthetics." This documentation provides insight into the debates we held both within the project and with external participants.

The online conference: The Sonic Real

Two years after the research project began, in the fall of 2021, we organized the conference "The Sonic Real," which, due to the pandemic, took place online. Therefore, we decided against traditional presentations and structured the conference as a series of conversations, inviting the audience at the end of each session to participate by asking questions, offering comments, or contributing via chat.

We invited Charles Curtis and Luc Döbereiner – a musician and a composer, respectively – as well as three philosophers: Rahma Khazam, Christoph Cox, and Markus Rautzenberg, all of whom were familiar with the questions addressed by our research project and with an aesthetics of the real. The detailed program is printed following this introduction. During

the conference there were some changes to the original program because Volker Straebel and Judith Siegmund had to cancel their participation at the last minute. As a result, we designated the members of our research team – who had originally been scheduled to serve as moderators – as discussion partners. Separately, there were also some unfortunate technical issues during the recording of Jan Thoben's conversation with Luc Döbereiner. This resulted in Luc presenting his ideas on an aesthetics of the real in a separate text, titled "Sublime Synthesis: Sound at the Threshold of the Real." In addition, the recording of the conversation between Charles Curtis and Bernhard Rietbrock was completely lost. We decided to host their conversation again in May 2024 to re-record it, with myself serving as moderator.

The themes "Philosophical Concepts of the Real," "Reconsidering the Philosophies of the Real," "Performing the Real. Impossibilities and Minimal Difference," and "Sublime Synthesis: Sound at the Threshold of the Real," provide a good introduction to the current debate on the aesthetics of the real in experimental music and sound art.

The talks of the conference were complemented by a performance by cellist and composer Charles Curtis, which took place at the conclusion of the conference. The performance featured works by Alvin Lucier and Eliane Radigue, which served as recurring points of reference in the discussions throughout the conference.

In closing, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone involved. First and foremost, I would like to extend my special thanks to the participants in the conference discussions – Rahma Khazam, Luc Döbereiner, Markus Rautzenberg, Charles Curtis, Christoph Cox, Jan Thoben, and Bernhard Rietbrock – for the thoughts, ideas, and arguments they developed, as well as for their great dedication during the discussions. I would also like to extend special thanks to Eric Maltz, whose exceptionally meticulous and knowledgeable editing was always constructive and enlightening. Finally, I would like to thank the German Research Foundation (DFG), which made this entire research project possible in the first place, and the master program in Sound Studies and Sonic Arts, through which we were able to host the event. Here, I would like to thank Lukas Grundmann in particular for his

technical support and Kathrin Scheidt for her work on design and public relations. Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues on the research team, Jan Thoben and Bernhard Rietbrock, for their extremely constructive and productive collaboration.

Berlin, Summer 2026
Sabine Sanio

CONFERENCE

The Sonic Real
24/25 Sep 2021





Source: Kathrin Scheidt

The Sonic Real Online Conference focuses on recent debates on the real in philosophy and the sonic arts. Over the past decades, artistic positions in experimental music and sound art have been questioning the emphasis on subjectivity while exploring the unnoticed and the inaudible. Ongoing investigation of the thresholds of audibility, sonic media reflexivity and the relationships between sound and space show the increased interest in an aesthetics of the real.

Select theorists from philosophy, media theory and musicology as well as musicians will discuss the relationship between the different theoretical notions of the real and the sonic arts.

This D-A-CH project conference is co-hosted by the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste and the IMR Institute for Music Research and funded by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Full Schedule

24.SEP	4PM	The Sonic Real: **Philosophical Concepts of the Real** with **Prof. Dr. Christoph Cox** & **Prof. Dr. Markus Rautzenberg**
	6PM	The Sonic Real: **Media Specificity & Sonic Materialism** with **Volker Straebel** & **Luc Döbereiner**

25.SEP	4PM	The Sonic Real: **Reconsidering the Philosophies of the Real** with **Dr. Rahma Khazam** & **Prof. Dr. Judith Siegmund**
	6PM	The Sonic Real: **Performing the Real** with **Charles Curtis** & **Dr. des. Bernhard Rietbrock**
	7PM	The Sonic Real: **Charles Curtis** cello concert

DFG RESEARCH PROJECT

Hearing the Other



Source: Kathrin Scheidt

DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft funded research project

Prof. Dr. habil Sabine Sanio UdK Berlin
Bernhard Rietbrock ZHdK Zürich
Jan Thoben UdK Berlin
Prof. Volker Straebel UdK Berlin
Prof. Dr. Dieter Mersch ZHdK Zürich
Prof. Dr. Jörn Peter Hiekel ZHdK Zürich

Hearing the Other. On the Aesthetics of the Real in Experimental Music and Sound Art

This research project focuses on the conceptual innovations in experimental music and sound art since the second half of the 20th century. Its radical claim to material and media exploration fundamentally puts the traditional strategies of art music up for discussion. On the one hand, there are changes in ideas regarding the compositional material, the performance situation and the category of space, and on the other hand, the question of the role of technical media in music practice and reception grows increasingly more important. This research project reacts to these developments by making

the innovations described above comprehensively fruitful for the first time in a theoretical perspective. An "aesthetics of the real" is to be established. Current musical positions that approach the inaudible and problematize the role of the listener will be examined.

From the perspective of listening, sound is the Other: In this respect sound is a real in music. It is by no means merely acoustic, but represents a complex intermodal phenomenon with visual and haptic qualities. Furthermore, the increasing experiential orientation of music causes a general revaluation of the dimension of space, a further indication of fundamental changes in the appearance and reception of contemporary music and sound art. Finally, media-reflexive strategies play a decisive role in the artistic questioning of the real, as they identify the audible and the inaudible in media-technical dispositives as discursive disciplining.

With reference to philosophical and aesthetic theories on the real and the event (Lacan, Badiou, Mersch), the fundamental interpretation of the real by Lacan is to be examined for its viability. The research project is interdisciplinary. It aims to develop an aesthetic of the real in experimental music and sound art from the perspective of music and media studies, performance studies and philosophy. The study is subdivided into the following topics: "Musical Construction of the Real", "Musical Media Reflexivity (Media Music)" and "The Real in Aesthetics".

PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS OF THE REAL

A Talk with Christoph Cox & Markus Rautzenberg
Moderation: Bernhard Rietbrock

Christoph Cox [CC]: As a way to begin this conversation about philosophical conceptions of the real, I thought I'd offer a short autobiographical account of the shift in my thinking from anti-realism toward realism, and I'll say something, too, about the important role that sound played in this shift.

My intellectual formation in the 1980s and 1990s was deeply impacted by poststructuralism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis. Of course there are significant differences among these discourses, but all of them, in some way or another, rejected realism, that is, the claim that we have access to some extra-discursive reality. Instead, all these discourses maintain that experience and perception are always mediated by the symbolic field. They share a deep suspicion of the extra-symbolic, the extra-textual, the extra-discursive, and so on. Or they insist on the absence, the infinite deferral, or the fiction of what Jacques Derrida called the 'transcendental signified', that is, any fundamental reality that could arrest or ground the play of signification.

This rejection of realism is evident throughout the texts that form this theoretical canon: Ferdinand de Saussure, for example, banishes from semiotics the physical stuff of sound; Jacques Lacan casts aside the material substrate of culture that resists symbolization, and so on. Derrida's notorious claim "there is nothing outside the text" offers another expression of this idea. And you find similar ideas in the work of Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, Slavoj Zizek, and many others.

For many post-structuralists, Nietzsche was a key thinker and predecessor. As Bernhard Rietbrock mentioned in his introduction, I wrote my dissertation and first book on Nietzsche, whom I read initially as a sort of anti-realist or perspectivist. While I was writing my book on Nietzsche I was also working as a music critic, writing about experimental music and sound art. Looking for a critical lan-

guage for sonic art, I was struck by the fact that poststructuralism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis were almost entirely concerned with the visual and the textual and had almost nothing to say about the sonic.

In Lacanian terminology these theories were concerned with the imaginary and the symbolic, leaving the real as perceptually and cognitively unavailable, except as a kind of symptom. So in a sense poststructuralism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis remained philosophically Kantian. That is, like Kant, they described and theorized a phenomenal domain, while maintaining that the noumenal domain, the real, is incapable of being known, described, or theorized. In good deconstructive fashion, it was Nietzsche who helped me find a way out of this impasse. Nietzsche is a perspectivist, of course, but he's no ordinary anti-realist. Indeed, in many prominent texts, Nietzsche offers a fairly straightforward description of the way the world really is.

So, for example, in a famous passage from Nietzsche's notebooks, he writes "*This world is the will to power – and nothing besides!* And you yourselves too are this will to power – and nothing besides!"[1] (A closely related passage appears in *Beyond Good and Evil*, §36.) And as anyone who's read Nietzsche knows, music and sound are intimately connected to this conception of the way the world really is. This is what attracted me to Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer's philosophy is important for me, as it was for Nietzsche, insofar as it breaks through the phenomenal wall erected by Kant and plunges us into the noumenal, the Real. To summarize this quickly: In many respects Schopenhauer remained a Kantian in that he insisted the world we know is purely phenomenal, a world of appearance. This world of our everyday, common, sensuous experience – as well as scientific experience – is what he called the world as representation: 'die Welt als Vorstellung'. However, for Schopenhauer, each of us also has another, deeper experience, an experience available to us not through sensory perception or knowledge of the world external to us, but rather

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner, trans. Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, [38]12, p. 38.

from the inside, from our experience as willing agents who act and are acted upon.

It's evident in the fact that I'm not just an object among other objects but am also a subject, a motive force in the world. I can move my hand, can animate myself from the inside, as it were, where I can't do that to other entities in the world. Schopenhauer called this the world as will, 'die Welt als Wille', which he argued was the world as it existed in itself. The will as it manifests itself to me as will and action manifests in everything else in the world, albeit in different forms. For Schopenhauer, gravity, electricity, magnetism, organic growth, desire, human willing – all of these are forms of the will; and for Schopenhauer there's only one will. My experience of myself as a subject is the experience of this singular force that constitutes the real. And for both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, sound and music play a really important role in this experience of the real. In Schopenhauer's aesthetics, the visual and literary arts constitute second order representations, a kind of copy or representation of a representation (namely, the phenomenal, perceptual world). They allow us to contemplate the world at some remove, as disengaged spectators. And this is really important for Schopenhauer, whose philosophy is deeply pessimistic. Schopenhauer thought that, insofar as we are driven by this blind irrational force, the will, our lives are fundamentally meaningless and fraught with suffering.

The visual and literary arts allow us a temporary respite from the force of the will that animates our everyday lives. But for Schopenhauer music is a fundamentally different form of art. It has nothing to do with the world of representation, in his view. In an astonishing passage he writes that music is "quite independent of the apparent world, positively ignores it, and to a certain extent could still exist even if there were no world at all, which can't be said of the other arts." He goes on: "music is a direct expression of the will"; "music differs from all the other arts by the fact that it is not a copy of appearance but is directly a copy of the will itself and therefore express the metaphysical to everything physical in the world, the thing in itself to