



## REMARKS ON SOUND INSTALLATION ART

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CONSIDERAÇÕES SOBRE A ARTE DA INSTALAÇÃO SONORA  
CONSIDERACIONES SOBRE EL ARTE DE LA INSTALACIÓN SONORA

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## RESUMO

This text explores the evolution of sound art from its origins to contemporary practice. Focusing on sound installations and sculptures, the author distinguishes the sound installation art from broader sound art practices. The importance of space in defining sound art is emphasized, contrasting it with music and other audio-based art forms. The text traces the historical development of sound installations, highlighting key figures and movements, while also critiquing recent trends that prioritize technology over spatial experience. A clear distinction is drawn between sound art and sound installation art, with the latter being defined as the creative use of sound as a material within a specific space.

**Keywords:** sound art, sound installation art, sound installation, sound sculpture, space, site-specific

## ABSTRACT

Este texto explora a evolução da arte sonora desde suas origens até a prática contemporânea. Com foco em instalações e esculturas sonoras, o autor distingue a arte de instalação sonora de práticas mais amplas de arte sonora. A importância do espaço na definição da arte sonora é enfatizada, contrastando-a com a música e outras formas de arte *audio-based*. O texto percorre o desenvolvimento histórico das instalações sonoras, destacando as principais figuras e movimentos, além de criticar as tendências recentes que priorizam a tecnologia em detrimento da experiência espacial. É feita uma distinção clara entre arte sonora e arte de instalação sonora, sendo esta última definida como o uso criativo do som como um material dentro de um espaço específico.

**Palavras-chave:** arte sonora, instalação sonora, escultura sonora, espaço, site-specific

## RÉSUMÉ

Este texto explora la evolución del arte sonoro desde sus orígenes hasta la práctica contemporánea. Concentrándose en las instalaciones sonoras y las esculturas, el autor distingue el arte de la instalación sonora de las prácticas artísticas sonoras más amplias. Se subraya la importancia del espacio en la definición del arte sonoro, contrastándolo con la música y otras formas de arte *audio-based*. El texto traza el desarrollo histórico de las instalaciones sonoras, destacando figuras y movimientos clave, al tiempo que critica las tendencias recientes que dan prioridad a la tecnología sobre la experiencia espacial. Se establece una clara distinción entre arte sonoro e instalación sonora, definiendo esta última como el uso creativo del sonido como material dentro de un espacio específico.

**Palabras clave:** arte sonoro, instalación sonora, escultura sonora, espacio, site-specific

In the almost 30 years I have been active as a curator and producer in the vast field of sound art, my focus on this young art form has increasingly shifted from music to the fine arts. The term “sound art” is mostly used as an overarching generic term for practices as diverse as sound installations, sound sculptures, radio art, sound poetry, sound performances and, at its most extreme, even computer music or auditive net art. By contrast, the sound art I focus on in my curatorial work is primarily what Bernhard Leitner once labelled “sound-space-art”. In other words, sound art, as I understand it, consists exclusively of installations and sculptures in which artists work with sound as a material in physical space. And, as is well known, spatial perception is fundamentally based on our sense of hearing. “Sound is a medium of representation and a medium of perception at the same time”, writes Claudia Tittel in the *sonambiente* catalogue of 2006, and as such changes “all given spatial settings and creates new spaces of perception” (Tittel *apud* de la Motte-Haber et al., 2006, p. 225). Space itself becomes a medium of creation, and due to an artistic engagement with it and in it, turns into a place. This corresponds with how Max Neuhaus put it in an interview with Ulrich Loock in his 1994 book *Sound Works*: “In what I do the sound is the means of creating the work, the means of transforming the space into place” (Neuhaus, 1994, p. 130).

Of course, space as a fundamental category of an artistic work is not new in art history, and, ever since the Middle Ages, has played a central role in music as well. In the installation genre, however, it is the relation between the artwork and the space that is essential. As early as 1958 Allan Kaprow introduced the term “environment” for his spatial works – a term he used to designate both the material surroundings of his “happenings” and any combination of objects in one or more spaces. A precondition for this development was the expanded notion of sculpture resulting from the dissolution of the boundary between sculptural works and the space surrounding them. Later, in 1967, Dan Flavin came

up with the term installation, applying it to his neon works, in which he staged the room itself as an artwork.

Sound installations can be defined as a special category of installation art because of their distinct reference to sound and space. According to Volker Straebel (in *Musik-Konzepte: Klangkunst*, 2008), “sound installations are determined or influenced by the acoustic properties of the spaces in which they are presented. They are place- or site-specific in picking out these or other architectonic dependencies as their major themes or (...) in referring to the historic or other cultural implications of the space.” (Straebel, 2008, p. 43)

So in my understanding, the term sound art primarily covers sound installations and sound sculptures that can be experienced in a unique physical space that cannot simply be replaced. Space-independent classic loudspeaker installations or radio art produced for standard audial settings are characterised by an open spatial reference. Though at times also installational, I consider such pieces as audio art rather than sound art.

An excellent definition of sound installation and sound sculpture is given by Helga de la Motte-Haber, one of the few German musicologists intensely exploring the phenomenon of sound art, in *Klangkunst*, volume 12 of *Handbuch der Musik im 20. Jahrhundert*:

Single sounding objects that offer the viewer a visible material opponent can be referred to as sound sculptures. (...) Sound sculptures can be hung in different spaces, meaning they are not necessarily dependent on a site. In contrast, the sound installation is site-specific. Sound installations normally form an arrangement or environment that surrounds the recipient, covers him or her with sound, or becomes accessible through the recipient’s moving in space. Material objects do not necessarily need to be present. This implies the frequent use of technical sound equipment that emits either live-synthesised sound or sound recordings via loudspeakers. Hybrids of sound installations

and sound sculptures are installations in which a number of sound sculptures or objects are combined and installed in one place. (de la Motte-Haber, 1999, p. 95)

The term “sound installation” was coined by the renowned American artist Max Neuhaus in 1971. Neuhaus described his working style in 1974 as follows: “Traditionally, composers have located the elements of a composition in time. One idea which I am interested in is locating them, instead, in space, and letting the listener place them in his own time.” (Neuhaus, 1974, p. 34) This description can be seen as applying to sound art as a whole. Neuhaus first developed and realized his idea of a sound installation in 1967 with his “Drive-In Music” in Buffalo. In terms of sound, this was a complex work that did not impose itself on the passerby or recipient. He installed a large number of radio transmitters with very limited ranges, all sending on the same frequency, in the trees along a wide, tree-lined street. The transmitters’ different sounds and antenna configurations allowed car-driving passersby with tuned-in car radios to experience an individualized sound development depending on their speed and travel direction.

An important aspect of this work – as of most sound installation works – was the principle of observing the visitor’s own time. Sound installations and sound sculptures allow for the visitor to leave and come back at will – the classic form of response in the fine arts as opposed to a concert, where such behaviour would be considered as offensive.

But of course Max Neuhaus was not the first to make installations using sound. Earlier examples include: Mauricio Kagel’s “Música para la torre”, which was realized in 1954 in Buenos Aires, Nicolas Schöffer’s spatio-dynamic construction in 1954, the “Poème électronique” by Edgar Varèse for the Philips Pavilion at the 1958 World Exposition in Brussels, John Cage’s “Variation VII” at the “9 evenings” in New York in 1966 or Maryanne Amacher’s “city links”, started in 1967, a series of in-



stallations with sounds transmitted in real-time from outdoor places to indoor spaces.

Essentially, the origins of sound art can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century. In art history, this is when we first see the emergence of artists and groups that operated between the traditional art forms: names that come to mind here include the Futurists, the Dadaists, the Weimar Bauhaus, Kurt Schwitters or Marcel Duchamp. After the Second World War it was primarily artists connected with Fluxus and Conceptual art as well as representatives of Kinetic art who continued to expand the field of art with new forms such as happenings and environments. In the field of music, too, a number of ideas and concepts appeared (in addition to synaesthetic attempts by Skrjabin or Schönberg, for instance) that were diametrically opposed to a traditional understanding of music, such as Erik Satie's idea of a "musique d'ameublement", Luigi Russolo's Noisy Intonarumori or John Cage's chance operations. Concerts, performances and concepts with extremely long durations such as the Fluxus artists' happenings, works by La Monte Young or Nam June Paik also belong in this line of tradition.

Generally, the removal and shifting of boundaries in the arts can be seen as a precondition for the development of sound art and the concomitant explosive expansion of the concepts of work and material as well as synaesthetic efforts in the arts. Another important factor for the evolution of sound installations and sound sculptures was the development of technologies for recording and replaying sound. Granting independence from performing musicians and allowing for constant mechanical repetition via auto reverse technology, they first made it possible to permanently install tones, sounds and music in a set space. Thus, the use of diverse sound technologies (from cassette recorders at the beginning to MP3 players) and the exploitation of sound differences in different loudspeaker types have become a constant theme in the field. But there are also sound art pieces that manage without any sound technology.

Their sound sources are natural resources, such as wind, water or fire. Works of this kind point to another historical origin of sound art: wind harps, fire organs and even juke and music boxes.

Since some years, the use of the term sound art has become increasingly inflationary. Especially in the field of contemporary and experimental music, we often see the term sound art applied to almost any performative and nonperformative presentation of music that is not based on a traditional score (especially within electronic music). Yet if we subsume even radiophonic pieces or multi-channel electro-acoustic loudspeaker pieces under this rubric, it becomes meaningless. That is why I have been using the term “Sound installation art” for a number of years, which is limited to sound installations or sound sculptures as a site-specific and, above all, situation-specific setting. Sound installation art as a form of installation art is about the creative use of sound as a material in a specific space.

A lot has changed since the 1990s, as technology developed so quickly and access to it was no longer limited to exclusive academic circles. There are now a vast number of artists who work with digital sound and image materials. Among a younger generation of artists we can observe either a fixation on technology or a tendency to enhance or pimp up visual works through the use of sound. When the artist’s emphasis is restricted to two-dimensional screen work or becomes entirely technology-oriented, the next step remains open, namely positioning the work in real space. And people with electronic music backgrounds are mainly focused on algorithmic constructions and technologies. They write detailed software for the distribution of sound and the creation of certain constellations. The question of space and architecture tends to be secondary or merely constructed.

This is why I believe that the more interesting positions continue to come from the visual arts, probably due to a different conceptual, spatial and sculptural understanding.

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