

I want to talk on perception in sound art, especially in public space. In sound art installations the listener faces a total different situation than in concert pieces: time and space are used contrary and the visual and social context is totally different.

Time: sound installations have usually no beginning and no end like concert pieces – and usually no dramatic climax. Christoph Cox ascertains in his article „From Music to Sound“ a fundamental difference between music and sound because time is not a measured time but continuity. In sound art, he says, the concept of time „shifts from time to duration“, from „being in time“ to „being as time“ or in terms of Henri Bergson: not „temps“ but „dureé“.

For the listener this has consequences because he is not guided through a piece. He is facing a sound status (or sequences of that) or how I call it: a sound situation. And as a producer of such a sound situation I have to be aware that in every moment the listener has to be affected by the sound directly - otherwise the listener will disappear quickly.

Space: in sound installations 'space' plays a basic role for sound concepts and their perception. There is no stage and no musicians you observe like in concerts and usually you are free to move while the sound is playing. But not only this is a difference: for sound artists the choice of the space, of it's architectural and visual conditions and also the social context is quiet important. For me it's fundamental for my work: very often I'm developing my art work after discovering a certain space, working with the visual and acoustic materials and the social aspects. For this way of site-specific art I developed the concept of „Ortsklang“ / „Site-Sound“¹.

Thus, perception in sound art is always not only perception of sound but also perception of space and the site-specific context. The listener can move and should move in a sound installation, listening in different distances to the sound objects or the spatial configuration of sound. The listener has to discover different perspectives in listening as well as he has to discover the space itself in several layers. As in my first example „*transition*“ these site-specific layers can disclose historical aspects too.

This installation was built in Richard Serras sculpture „*berlin junction*“, two curved metal plates standing in front of the Philharmonie Concert Hall in Berlin. The basic sound was derived by the curves taken as waves with a certain frequency produced as sinus tones. By 4 sensors in the space between this basic sound was transformed if a visitor came through the plates. Thus, the sound status was changed – and this was the basic concept of „*transition*“: change by movement. Serras sculpture from 1987 was expressing the status of Berlin during the Wall - two parts paralyzed seem to fall into each other. „*transition*“ was emphasizing a new flow, a changing society in an uncertain, ambivalent moment.

But of cause, it was installed 2001 and this change was over and I brought in a sceptical view by using Bertold Brechts poem „Change of Wheel“ from 1953 describing a situation of transition: „(...) I don't like where I come from. I don't like where I'm going. Why do I watch the changing of the wheel with impatience?“²

Let's jump into my video documentation, starting with a very high, metallic sound status:

[VIDEO: transition <https://vimeo.com/51620853>]

As you could see I was just filming when this man came and was interested what I was doing here. He didn't know that I was the artist. Such situations are ideal to get to know what my public is perceiving, how my public reacts and may be what they think about. It was very interesting for me

1 *Site-Sounds. On Strategies of Sound Art in Public Space.* In: Organised Sound 14/1, 2009 (Cambridge University Press)

2 For more details on the installation, see: *From the sound installation to the sound situation. On my work „transition - berlin junction eine klangsituation“.* Organised Sound 8/2. Cambridge, 2003.

just to come around again and again during the two years „transition“ was running there, and to observe (of course without video camera) and to talk to the people in the sculpture. That's also a difference to the concert situation: you can talk while the installation is running and discuss single sound developments or the atmosphere of a special moment.



„transition“ (2001/2002): Visitors in the sound installation, running two years.

Some people were singing, some were playing didgeridoo, some were just going through again and again. One day a woman showed her friend this place with the works: „It's amazing what sounds the wind is producing here“. Children coming through discovered the interactive possibilities much faster than adults - and with more patience and joy.

There was no sign at the sculpture, no explanation (only inside of the Philharmonie with a text book). The visitors had to discover all by themselves: First that there was a sound installation at all, then how it was sounding and which words were coming out of the loudspeakers in the ground, then how they could influence the sounds and words interactively, and then what was the total concept and the context of the installation.

Because every visitor going through the installation was changing the sounds more or less it was not a fixed composition. So, this art work was not absolute, it was relative. The visitors couldn't experience the whole piece like in concerts and they only could experience just that status of sound which they were facing in this moment. As a producer of such a sound situation I couldn't know exactly which status of sound had been developed by the passers-by. I only made a framework in which the sounds could vary. This kind of musical process I call „Interactive Variation“³. It's an open process – and after starting the installation I was quiet nervous not to know if the sound would go out of control sometimes.



Sideboard with computer and monitor in the foyer of Philharmonie. On the top transition textbook and comment book

In general a sound situation is an open situation: there are no limits in time, there is an open space (especially in public space), there is an open process (especially in interactive works). The visitor is not guided through a piece like in the concert situation or well informed like in the gallery situation. In sound art the visitors are offered to discover the piece in a **self-dependent way**. I think this is one of the most important characteristics to describe the way of perception in sound art. It's a question of perception on a fundamental level. And how deep the visitors can go depends on both, on their 'perceptive ability' and their 'joy in discovery' – and of course it's a question on the 'depth of perception' and the 'depth of discovery' which is included in the work by the artist.

³ *Interactive Variation – On the Relativity of Sound and Movement*. In: *New Music and Aesthetics in the 21st Century* Vol.4, Hofheim 2006, Wolke-Verlag.

Of course a lot of visitors are not used to behave like this and get lost or leave very quickly. And maybe this is a measurement of the success of a sound art installation: it's not the applause like in concerts but the duration of staying in the installation. Especially in public space it's quite difficult to get attention just by sound. We are all moving through a city almost visually orientated, controlled by visual signs, flooded by visual pictures or phrases on advertisement billboards, surrounded by traffic noise. Public space in an urban environment is multilayered and depending on the quarter more or less mixed by different people and cultures. For me that's a challenge and I like to work with a very heterogeneous public and how to reach them in public space.

In creating a sound situation the sound artist is always **creating a situation of perception**, he is working on strategies of perception. For example Akio Suzuki is an extreme point of self-dependent discovery. He just signed points on the ground in this way (ears as footprints): a silent invitation to stand here and in this direction to listen what is happening.



„otodate“ by Akio Suzuki (sonambiente catalog 1996, Berlin). „Electric Walk“ by Christina Kubisch (Montreal 2008).

In Christina Kubisch's „Electric Walks“ - with headphones transforming electromagnetic waves emitted from everyday items into sounds - the listener can walk through the city in a free way, exploring the urban environment.

Very often my strategy of creating perception is working with an irritation, like in the next example, my project „Ramallah Tours“ in Israel from 2009, with a vibrating car in public space. The sounding car was attracting the people in the street, making them curious to know what this car with the label and internet address *ramallahatours.info* was standing for. It was a fake travel agency for booking tours to Ramallah for Israeli citizens – at the time not possible in real life.



„Ramallah Tours“ (2009): Taxi car making sounds by 4 transducers at the body of the car. Travel agency label.

The car in the street was colored in the style of a Palestinian taxi - a strange object in the public space of Israel because of the political circumstances it should not be there. And it made strange sounds: In the 30 minutes sound collage there appeared sounds from the checkpoint at the border, from machines for concrete from the Jewish settlements in Palestine, Israeli peace songs combined with a Palestinian song, and Israeli reactions on the speech of Obama in Cairo I recorded from an Israeli radio program. The Ramallah Tours website is still existing and I still get booking requests, mostly from the US.

[VIDEO: RamallahTours <https://vimeo.com/25556967>]

Self-dependent discovery is based on irritation or a fascinating moment which holds the public, let them explore the installation space physically and mentally choosing their own time to stay. The listener in the installation gets more or less in the role of the performer or the musician in the concert situation because with his behaviour, his movements and his interest he is interpreting the piece. The process of perception is a part of the creating process.

In my installation „TRASA“ from 2004 the people could discover a spoken text by walking on a line, depending on their position and speed.



„TRASA warszawa-berlin“ (2004): text line on the floor. Wall with video projection (Warsaw part)

The two text were poems, one in polish, one in german, which could be heard in subway-stations in Berlin and Warsaw dependent to the movements of the visitors. The installation also had a visual part by connecting these two spaces live by internet, so that the people could communicate with gestures.

[VIDEO: TRASA <https://vimeo.com/51620849>]

In „TRASA“ I created a communication space with two connected public sites. The people were coming through this situation by accident, got involved automatically and could stay a while, playing with their self-produced pictures or self-produced voice sounds. So, my public created a common space of two cities and two languages. And they were stopping for a moment, stopping in the daily routine of shopping and working to get a view, an audiovisual view to another side of life. The installation was connecting two neighbours, two nations which often had a violent contact because of the german aggression and still have a difficult contact with a lot of prejudice. „TRASA“ was installed in a 'space of tension' (in german „Spannungsraum“) which had two dimensions: an aesthetical space of tension where people could explore themselves and a political space of tension in which the installation got an importance for the two nations. The perception of this installation running two months in fall 2004 had different levels: in press, TV and radio a lot of reports were made so that the people came to see, somehow informed; but the main public was just coming through facing a strange situation on their way to the subway. And there were people who watched other people if and how they react on this doubled audiovisual mirror. The two sites become stages in public space where the people themselves were playing.

In my installation „Der gelbe Klang² (The yellow sound²)“ at the exhibition 'Sound Art' at ZKM, I worked only with sounds and yellow light to get attention by the people coming around by foot or bikes. Entering the sound situation by going down the stairs they could discover a six-channel-surround sound playing 'yellow noise', a sentence out of Kandinski's text „On stage composition“ for his piece „The yellow sound“ in russian and german. I also used other site-specific sounds like steps on the park ground and the bell sounds of the castle in electronical transformations to make a mixture of the existing sound environment and the artificial sounds.

In this case it's a fixed, composed piece of 16 minutes but for a site-specific location and the visitors can discover the connections to the environment acoustically and visually. By the way: for me this text by Kandinsky is a historic manifest on sound art, expressing a lot of ideas how a new kind of art can be created on the basics of abstract color, sound, words and movement⁴.

4 Wassili Kandinsky: „Über Bühnenkomposition“, in: Almanach Der blaue Reiter, München, 1912.



„Der gelbe Klang² (The yellow sound²)“ at night and during the day. Walls painted in a special 'Kandinsky-yellow' (ZKM Karlsruhe 2012)

[VIDEO: gelberKlang <https://vimeo.com/49863098>]

This work was hardly perceived. May be it wasn't noticed very well because on the top around the stairs the sounds were not loud and the kind of sounds could not be identified as music in a common sense. That's why many passers-by couldn't imagine that if they go just a few steps down, they could make a very strong sound experience. As I could observe it, most of the people in the park didn't discovered the piece, and I had to realise that in this case my strategy of creating perception wasn't strong enough. It's also an example how difficult it can be to work with sounds in public space⁵.

In my next example I chose to produce the initial irritation by a visual sign. I created 4 writings of the word „GNADE“ (MERCY), standing in front of banks, a insurance company and a job center. I don't want to explain the whole work, just this, that it makes a link to our current financial dept crisis and how our democratic society gets more and more in very undemocratic dependencies of banks and other institutions of capitalistic power - like in former times the dependance on aristocratic rulers: the times of mercy and disgrace.

The words in public space made this dependencies evident and they also link to a central installation in the castle Schwetzingen with an „altar of mercy“ („Gnadenaltar“) where the whole context of the installation could be experienced. Visually the golden letters were noticed fleetingly, but a little sound interaction let the people stop and make them think about, as you can see in the video examples:

[VIDEO: GNADE <https://vimeo.com/51620850>]

By a motion sensor the passers-by evoked a small piece out of Mozarts opera „La Clemenza di Tito“ („The Clemency of Titus“, 1791) and it is interesting to see that this sound interaction made the sculptural object alive and how the people wanted to touch it.

But of cause you never know how the visitors really were touched by such an art intervention, what



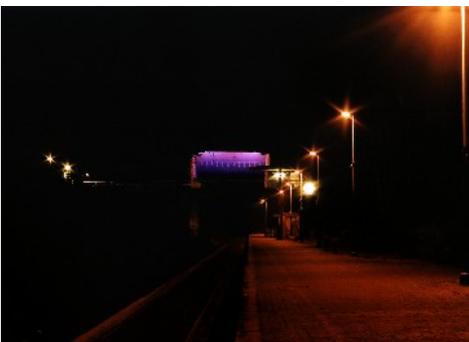
they are understanding, how they feel in such a sound art situation, what they think. The last years I often tried to be visible and present, i.e. ready to communicate with my public, even if it's just to stand there with a video camera, like in this project in Mannheim:

Standing there with my video camera I was told some interesting stories on this place, some people had uncomfortable feelings, some were asking me about the sense and telling their thoughts, some were smiling and agreeing (especially in front of the job center).

⁵ The installation was destroyed three times in 4 months. Thus, some people very well noticed the installation, unfortunately in a bad way.

All my installations in public space are temporary. So after some days, some months or even some years the work disappears and I don't know if it has left any marks. It's like after a concert: it exists further only in the memory of the people or in documentations of the project, you can get on DVD or in the internet. Some of my projects like the *WatchTower* project, working with a fake strategy like in the *RamallahTours* project, they are still going on in the internet and I get every month some reactions from all over the world. But that's only in our second public space: the world wide web.

Asked how sound art works influence the space also after the installation is gone, I can tell you only one project that has remarkable consequences in the physical public space, on the space itself. It was my sound-light-installation „Ortsklang Marl Mitte. blaues blach. Viel Kunst. Wenig Arbeit“. I used for this installation the graffiti phrases I found at a railway station made of concrete in Marl, that's a rough industrial area in the Ruhrgebiet. I made recordings with young pupils in this town speaking these sometimes extremely provocative phrases, from left-wing to neonazism, and I arranged a chorus of voices with loudspeakers just at that place, in this hall of concrete at the railway station. Audible in this way the passers-by could'nt close their eyes because now they had to hear these phrases, had to think on this location and the whole situation in town.



„Ortsklang Marl Mitte“ (2002, German Sound Art Award). The hall of concrete I worked with was removed after a hard discussion process.

In the night I illuminated the space by blue light, the color of utopia. I really loved this place, and although it was arranged quiet smooth and with a lot of musically transformations fo these graffiti phrases, there was a controversial discussion in the city on this work and on this site, this rough and nasty place to stay. And two or three years after they teared down this hall of concrete.

georg klein (2012)

Lecture at
MUSA conference Karlsruhe, July 2012
LAK Sound Art Festival, Copenhagen, Sept. 2012

Responds to: mail@georgklein.de

www.georgklein.de