

SONAMBIENTE - Sound Art Festival, Berlin, Summer '96

by Kersten Glandien

Published in: *Resonance* Vol. 5 Nr.1, London 1996. Reprint in *Noise Gate*, 1997

Where better to set up an international Sound Art festival today than in Berlin. The location is perfect and the time seems to be just right. Berlin is on the verge of new departures. It holds the tension between a powerful, controversial past - surfacing not least in the occasion which hosts the event, the 300 anniversary of the Academy of Art - and a distinct aspiration for the future - embodied in the biggest building sites in Europe. Recent changes in German history contribute to the unique spirit and energy of this place, to an atmosphere that attracts many national and international artists to live and work here permanently, or temporarily - some as part of the DAAD¹, the German academic exchange programme.

Against this background the Academy of Art asked over 100 artists to take part in the "internationally biggest presentation of Sound Art"(programme notes) to date, between the 9. August and the 8. September, 1996. About 77 projects scan the gray zones between sound, music, noise, various visual media such as installation, object, sculpture, projection and painting, video, film, architecture, theatre and dance, for new mixtures and mergers. In order to give a good insight into the current state of this complex discourse the organizers Christian Kneisel, Matthias Osterwold and Georg Weckwerth invited Sound Art pioneers, reigning protagonists and newcomers with works already shown elsewhere or newly built for this occasion. The sheer magnitude of this undertaking is indeed impressive and defeats brief description. Yet, a glimpse can still be attempted.

Sound installations and -objects constitute the core of the Sonambiente. In six mostly derelict or currently unused buildings, as well as some distinct outside locations, some 50 artists provide an exhaustive insight into the vast range of projects presently lingering under the umbrella of Sound Art. Apart from the usual suspects in this field, like Nam June Paik, Laurie Anderson and Brian Eno - whose creativity seems to suffer considerably under the strain of constant demand - we find quite a number of artists willing to risk more adventurous and contemporary approaches. The works on show are manifold and defy - virtually by definition - an easy taxonomy. They explore various intersections between sound, visual presentations of all kinds and space. Berlin's appealing locations are loaded with memories - especially in the Eastern part of

¹ Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst Berlin

the city, where most of the buildings used for the installations are situated. Here the links between sound and ambiance are there for the taking.

Hans Peter Kuhn - known to British readers through his collaboration with Robert Wilson at the London Clink last summer - situates his "Ballet of Tones" in a derelict ballroom in the *Sophienstraße*: a skeletal cast-iron balcony runs around its upper part, dim sunlight fades through blind windows onto tar-blackened parquet and green-brownish walls - a line of speakers mounted on a low white wall occasionally releases running lines of tones. The atmosphere of nostalgia and tranquillity created in this sleeping place makes you never want to leave.

Christina Kubisch's room is located in the only old house left on Berlin's busiest building site at the Potsdamer Platz - the *Weinhaus Huth*. Speakers transmit, in real time, the earsplitting noise from the work outside into a dark, empty room where fluorescent writing on small lit plates reflect on the "Colours of Silence". Now and then the transmission is interrupted, leaving us in the stillness of a noise gap.

While both these works rely on the perceptiveness of the audience and its ability to associate sounds with their environment, other works focus less on the space and more on the sound effect attained and its generation. Some of them seek a more hands on interaction with the visitors leaving the sound release or its manipulation to them.

"Liquid percussion" by Trimpin, for instance, gives its audience the option to hear a pre-set composition or alternatively to create their own sound pieces. This visually appealing sound sculpture, with its colourful glass vessels and strange upright tubes set on a bed of shingle, releases computer controlled water drops, from over 100 valves, onto different sounding-surfaces, such as glass, metal, stretched rubber and water, creating a variety of pitches and sound colours. The rhythmic precision of the falling drops results in an intriguing water music.

Sam Auinger and Bruce Odland placed their "Balance 1.0" in the cellar of the derelict *Academy building* at the *Pariser Platz*. Its subtitle "It works, but it doesn't seem to. or: it doesn't seem to work, but it does" hints at the bricolage of objects, materials and sound to hand. From two play stations one or several visitors can trigger a variety of sound loops and light effects. Depending on the number of people joining in, this aleatoric mix of miscellaneous sounds, rhythmic beats, short voice scraps and urban noises can escalate into an exciting sound performance.

A much more subtle way of sound exploration is pursued by Paul DeMarinis in "Gray Matter". Here the sculptural quality of the objects and the sound discovery by the public come to the fore. Long wires, strung between

various objects - a toaster and a door, a double bass mounted to the ceiling and a zinc bath tub, wooden wall mounts and a violin - exhibit an electromagnetic activity that through friction, using hand or objects, can be turned into mechanical vibration, releasing melodies, scales of tones, subtle noises or glissandi. The generation of these sounds requires fine feeling and careful listening, while the actual mechanism remains obscure and is part of the enchantment.

Where as DeMarinis bases his works on a discovery made in the last century, many installations rely on sonic effects achieved by new technology. Yet, the actual technical processes employed often remain hidden too, inducing intriguing trompe-l'oreille-effects.

Ulrich Eller set up 41 snare drums in the light and spacious banqueting hall of the former *GDR Council of State*. Speakers resting inside each drum emit a short basic tone against the differently tuned snare heads, producing a variety of drum sounds. Standing "In the circle of drums" listeners find themselves surrounded by surprising sound movements. The sound producing mechanism is not revealed - we enjoy the effects.

A few installations can be found in outside locations such as the audience magnet "Holle" - an accessible sound gate installed by Lutz Glandien and Malte Lüders into the picturesque arcades of the *States Library Under den Linden*. 60 speakers mounted into 216 free hanging acrylic glass tubes of different length shower the public standing underneath with a sound piece inspired by an old German fairy tale.

One project is dedicated especially to the city of Berlin. Following a detailed conceptual plan, six composers and six video artists collaborated in the creation of 24 video clips of 2,5 minutes each. These document an urban "Vortex", seeking to draw the audience into the depths of metropolitan life. Unfortunately, the "Vortex" loses some of its tractive power through the shortcomings of its actual presentation. In this it shares the fate of a fair number of installations presented at the Sonambiente festival which exhibit little communicative strength. Although Sound Art casts a long shadow throughout the 20th century, many installations and objects still struggle with the very basic problems and traps of this discourse - e.g. the 30-second-effect. Costly installations which can't hold the interest of the public for more than half a minute bear a great potential for boredom and insignificance and invite questions about the artist's intention. These questions can not be dismissed simply by referring to the creative responsibility of the recipient, since interaction as communication is a two way process. The problem is exacerbated by the use of new technology, which increases the difficulty of making conceptual ideas or impressive project descriptions sensually communicable, sensuously experientable.

The installation part of the Sonambiente festival is complemented by many other events such as concerts, the film series 'Sound Staccato and Image Flood' (presenting remarkable collaborations between sound and film), happenings, dance- and theatre performances, and theoretical discussions. To realize this ambitious undertaking the organizers teamed up with a number of other institutions and venues. The entire event might keep a visitor busy for the whole month.

The musical part of the festival is also enticing, focusing on the topic of 'Sound in Space'. It ranges from music performances, pieces for carillon and bells and tape concerts to all kinds of multimedia events. I attended the premier of Jon Rose's new project "Perks"² - an interactive badminton game with two wired up badminton players, live musicians, video- and computer images and a ghost pianist - all processed through the author's inventive mind and bizarre sense of humor. A bold multimedia piece - and more of them to come in this festival.

All in all, the Sonambiente provides a mind blowing tour-de-force through the international Sound Art landscape. For documentational purposes this event was coordinated with a forthcoming book-project of the Prestel publishing house. Just in time for the festival a catalogue-book compiled by Helga de la Motte-Haber was published, including not only summaries on each of the participating artists, but also extensive theoretical reflections on the broad subject of Sound Art and a chronology of its development in the 20th century.³ Furthermore, the Academy of Art took this opportunity to set up a new CD-series, "The Listening Room", dedicated to radiophonic and other sound works, the first three titles of which are already out.

Considering the progressive draining of public resources from art and culture here in Britain, this Berlin festival, with its conceptual and organizational complexity and displayed emotional and financial investment, leaves us with nothing but envy - and speechless.

² available on CD from ReR Megacorp, ReR JR3, www.rermegacorp.com

³ Klangkunst. München/ New York: Prestel, 1996.