

Music “Vs” Sound Art

In this fascinating talk, Yiorgis Sakellariou explores a question that has been troubling him for years: where and how can we draw a line between sound art and music? As the rest of his talk shows, this question is far from a nominal one, as different answers may affect ‘educational strategies, theoretical discourses and artistic practice’. A lecturer and a sound artist himself, Yiorgis refrains from proposing neat categorizations or definitions: sounds have a ‘ghostly’ quality that fundamentally escapes these verbal constructs, accounting for the proliferation of competitive or alternative terms (e.g. sonic art, soundscape composition, computer music, noise music...) that for the sake of convenience may be grouped under the umbrella term ‘sound art’. Still, Yiorgis does pinpoint some breakthroughs in the history of music which would later pave the way for practices better described as sound art rather than music. One such breakthrough was Debussy’s attempt to ‘push music beyond tonality’ (as scholar Christopher Small put it). The sound as such, with its physical properties, was eventually gaining ground, whilst before Debussy it was subordinate to the abstract score and the resolution-anticipation pattern that had characterized music. The futurist manifesto provocatively legitimised the use of noise in music, and composer Erwin Schulhoff created *In futurum*, a soundless piece of music that predated John Cage’s famous 4’33’’ by over three decades. These experiments blurred the boundaries between music as a temporal, performance-based art, and environmental sounds that interact with the acoustic, resonating qualities of spaces. Indeed, one general characteristic of sound art lies in its being site-specific, inviting the listener to a more active, individualistic type of fruition – as is typically the case with paintings and installations, which are not bound by time. Towards the end of the talk, Yiorgis moved beyond the history of music to touch upon the differences between sound and vision, between listening and seeing, in a more philosophical fashion: whilst the eyes explores surfaces and analytically parses reality, the ear penetrates things and calls for a holistic, unifying apprehension of reality. The debate that followed particularly focused on this purported contrast, as the audience was formed also of visual artists who did not always agreed with this sound-vision dichotomy. All in all, this has been a very enriching talk, creating – like music itself – an engaged audience, a ‘temporary community’ of attentive listeners.

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