Acoustic Art Forms in the Age of Recordability

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Many theoretical accounts of sound art tend to treat it as a subcategory of either music or visual art. I argue that this dualism prevents many works of sound art from being fully appreciated. My subsequent attempt of finding a basis for a more comprehensive aesthetic of acoustic art forms is helped along by Trevor Wishart's concept of 'sonic art'. I follow Wishart's insight that the status of music was changed by the invention of sound recording and go on to argue that an even more important ontological consequence of recording was the new possibility of storing and manipulating any acoustic event. This media-historic condition, which I refer to as 'recordability', spawned three distinct art forms with different degrees of abstraction – electroacoustic music in the tradition of Pierre Schaeffer, gallery-oriented sound art and radiogenic Ars Acustica. Introducing Ars Acustica, or radio art, as a third term provides some perspective on the music/sound art binarism. A brief look at the history of radio art aims at substantiating my claim that all art forms based on recordable sounds can be fruitfully discussed by appreciating their shared technological basis and the multiplicity of their reference systems rather than by subsuming one into another.

1. MUSIC VS SOUND ART: A FORCED CHOICE

In recent years, there has been some controversial, even polemical, debate about what relation sound art has, should, or should not have to music. Seth Kim-Cohen's 2009 book *In the Blink of an Ear* presented an exemplary attempt at constructing the 'language of a sonic practice distinct from music' (Kim-Cohen 2009: xxiii) by relating it to developments in fine art practice and theory from the 'conceptual turn after Marcel Duchamp' (Kim-Cohen 2009: xvii) to Rosalind Krauss. 'Kim-Cohen's theory of an "expanded sonic practice" transposes Krauss' argument from her famous essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" into the register of sound art' (Kane 2013). But in trying to emancipate sound art as a genre in its own right from what he perceives as the overwhelmingly dominant discourse of Western art music and musicology, Kim-Cohen practically rethinks sound art as a form of conceptual art, thus bringing it almost completely under the jurisdiction of a history and theory of the fine arts, or, as Kim-Cohen calls them, the gallery arts. But, as Brian Kane rightly observes, Kim-Cohen presents his readers with 'a *forced* choice; sound art can follow the bad path of Music, or the good path of the gallery arts' (Kane 2013, original emphasis).

Some aspects of this debate uncannily echo earlier discussions 'in Germany, where sound art is an established practice' (Kim-Cohen 2009: 116) – mainly due to the fact that several artists who went on to give shape to sound art on an international level, such as Christina Kubisch and Rolf Julius, started their careers in West Germany in the 1970s. The catalogue of the first Sonambiente sound art festival in Berlin, held in 1995 and presenting a wide range of international sound artists, provides a good example for the dualistic nature of much critical writing on sound in German. The contributors variously refer to sound art as a 'new musical genre' (Sanio 1996: 230, my translation) or as 'sound sculpture' (de la Motte-Haber 1996: 16, my translation), to quote just two examples. Yet fifteen years on, Kim-Cohen's leap of faith from music to gallery art still seems trapped within the same dualism, unable to conceive of sound art as a discipline in its own right. To phrase the problem in Kim-Cohen's own terms, sound art may now be viewed as 'distinct from music' (Kim-Cohen 2009: xxiii), but at the risk of being reduced to a mere genre of the gallery arts – either as conceptual art that incidentally uses sound, or as a mere 'technique', with artists using sound alongside more traditional artistic media such as watercolours, acrylic paint, marble or wood.

This constant concern with the question of whether 'music' is the right frame of reference to discuss acoustic artworks tends to distract attention from the actual acoustic materiality of individual works of sound art, which is not necessarily of a musical nature at all, but might instead be composed of speech or noises. However, suggesting that sound art belongs to the 'gallery arts' rather than to music tends to restrict the discourse on sound art to those acoustic works that have a visual component or are at least conceived for presentation in a gallery context. This, I would argue, neglects the fact that a comprehensive aesthetic of acoustic art forms would have to take into account not only music and (gallery-related) sound art, but also artistic forms that employ non-musical sound in the form of recorded media or broadcasts, both of which are not usually intended for a gallery situation.

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Such a comprehensive aesthetic would likely provide us with a helpful perspective on both music and sound art and help us out of the dualistic discourses outlined above. By making a wider range of artistic works available to comparative analyses, it might also advance a more nuanced appraisal of the actual acoustic shape of individual works. I will thus attempt to sketch some preliminary ideas about a possible common territory shared by these art forms within which such an aesthetic of acoustic art could be founded.

2. MUSIC IN THE EXPANDED FIELD

Many theoretical writings on sound art, including the examples quoted above, seem to imply that sound art, as a relatively new phenomenon, must be subsumed into either fine art or music as a mere new genre. Those who claim that sound art is music seem to imply that none of the works created under the label of sound art over the last decades have succeeded in creating any sound that marks a specific difference from music, while the visual elements are reduced to mere accidental ornaments to the sound. The concept of music is taken to be comprehensive enough to accommodate any sound ever made by sound artists, an attitude reflected in Kane's provocative question: 'Haven't we had an art of sounds for a very long time, and hasn't it gone by the name of music?' (Kane 2013).

This would work just fine if it was generally agreed 'that there is no such thing as an *unmusical* sound-object' (Wishart 1996: 8, original emphasis). But at least in traditional musicology, this is far from being an undisputed truth – even less so in 1985, when Trevor Wishart coined the term 'sonic art' to refer to those aesthetic uses of sounds that cannot be conceptualised in the framework of what he calls 'lattice sonics': 'Everything from isorhythm through Rameau's theory of tonality to serialism comes under the general heading of lattice sonics and is adequately dealt with in existing musical text-books' (p. 8). This presented a problem for Wishart as a composer of electroacoustic music, because many of the things he was interested in as an artist – ways in which 'pitch-free materials can be structurally organised' (p. 7), the 'anecdotal aspects of sound-material' (p. 7), and more generally the temporal organisation of a 'continuum' of sound as opposed to 'the properties of sounds on a *lattice*' (p. 17, original emphasis) – were in fact deemed unmusical in some quarters even by the mid-1980s. 'This is why I have chosen the title *On Sonic Art* to encompass the arts of organising sound-events in time. This, however, is merely a convenient fiction for those who cannot bear to see the use of the word "music" extended. For me, all these areas fall within the category I call "music"' (p. 4). Yet having said that, it still seemed easier for him to define a whole new art form than to get musical traditionalists to change their minds.

Revisiting Wishart's seminal *On Sonic Art* in our present context is instructive for two related reasons. First, he explains why the concept of music as we have known it 'for a very long time' (Kane 2013) is limited; but second, and more importantly, he shows a way towards a common ground on which both music and other acoustic art forms can be based without the need for subsuming one into the other.

Wishart argues that the emphasis of Western music on the 'pitch/duration paradigm' (Wishart 1996: 11) has been enforced by its notation system. Written music tends to focus more on these aspects of music simply because they are easier to notate in written symbols than timbre, for example. The development of musical notation in Europe, according to Wishart's account, was modelled on alphabetic writing. From the alphabet, which allows spoken language to be committed to writing by using only some two dozen letters, musical notation adopted the idea of breaking a stream of sounds down into a set of permutable graphical elements:

> music is ultimately reducible to a small, finite number of elementary constituents with a finite number of 'parameters', out of which all sounds possibly required in musical praxis can be notated by combination […] For a notation procedure to be of any use it must use only a manageable (small) number of constituents which are then permuted; notation of the continuum is necessarily approximate. (p. 22)

In the course of musical history, 'the discrete logic of the pitch lattice' (p. 23) in notation and the design of 'keyed, holed or fretted instruments' (p. 23) for producing tones of definite pitch formed a feedback loop in which one practice constantly reinforced the other. 'Conceptually, at least, an instrument is a source of stable timbre, but variable pitch' (p. 23). For anyone wanting to commit the transitory experience of music as it is played and heard to a more durable medium, it seemed convenient to design their music in a notation-friendly way. After all, writing notes was the only way of storing musical information outside the human mind, and the medium of notation defined the boundaries within which the musical message could be formulated. In keeping with his historical analysis, Wishart is well aware of the fact that his own expanded idea of 'music' only became possible through the invention of a new medium for storing music: 'From the final quarter of the twentieth century, it now seems clear that the central watershed in changing our view of what constitutes music has more to do with the invention of sound recording and then sound processing and synthesis than with any specific development within the language of music itself' (p. 5).

The invention of sound recording broke the monopoly that written notation had on the 'representation' of musical sound. It could possibly be argued that

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many developments in Western art music since that time – from the reinforced 'lattice-dominated aesthetic' (p. 32) of dodecaphony and serialism to graphic scores and indeterminacy – were attempts at justifying the need for a score and for the composer as a writer of scores despite the fact that, from a technological viewpoint, these intermediaries are no longer necessary for listeners to access music. Outside this rather specialised context, however, recording had a double effect on the musical sensibility 'of the phonograph-literate. For the first time, there was access to a musical "text" which was more full, across cultures, across classes, and across history, than had ever been the case before' (Conrad 1997: 40). Recordings of music from oral cultures put the written canon of Western art music in perspective. Furthermore, audio recording and the possibility of comparing several performances of one and the same piece also changed the way in which listeners approached this very canon of written music, an effect described in Glenn Gould's classic essay, *The Prospects of Recording*:

> If we were to take an inventory of those musical predilections most characteristic of our generation, we would discover that almost every item on such a list could be attributed directly to the influence of the recording. First of all, today's listeners have come to associate musical performance with sounds possessed of characteristics which two generations ago were neither available to the profession nor wanted by the public – characteristics such as analytic clarity, immediacy, and indeed almost tactile proximity. (Gould 1966: 115–16)

The point is that listeners not only expect these qualities from recordings of music, but increasingly also from live performances – because listening to recordings has taught them that these qualities are achievable. Thus, the ontological status of all music after the invention of audio recording was changed by the fact that all music *could* be recorded – what I will call the essential *recordability* of music – rather than by empirical recordings of individual pieces.

But this view 'underestimates what recording technology has done and misses a fundamental techno-historical event' (López 2014: 96) because it only considers the consequences of sound recording for music, an art form already defined as such. Much more important is the fact that 'another layer of musical "reality" sneaked in the sound recordings: the sonic, the phenomenological, the Schaefferian *concrète*. That, and not "music", is what became materialized for the first time in history' (López 2014: 96).

In other words, through recording technology, *all* acoustic phenomena became recordable. Up to that point, language and music – written down or notated on a pitch-based lattice, respectively – had been the only acoustic phenomena to share this ontological status. All of a sudden, music as an art form was nothing more than one recordable phenomenon among myriad others. Or, to borrow Krauss's term via Kim-Cohen: with the invention of sound recording, music found itself in an expanded situation. As a consequence, both musical and non-musical sound objects became potential material for artistic activities.

3. AN ART OF RECORDINGS

Starting with Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* from 1961, in which a tape recorder plays back the sounds mentioned in the title through a loudspeaker housed in the box, to the work of contemporary sound artists such as Susan Philipsz, most sound art destined for exhibition rather than performance, be it in galleries or public spaces, has been relying on the availability of a recording medium. Kim-Cohen convincingly argues that Morris's *Box* 'is a very early, if not *the* earliest, example of a work existing simultaneously, equally, as sculpture and as sound work' (Kim-Cohen 2009: 47, original emphasis) and thus marks the beginning of sound art in the gallery context. However, he is more interested in relating it to the 'conceptual turn' in the arts at the time and thus neglects the fact that the existence of the recording medium is a necessary condition for the creation of this work.

Electrical recording technology not only made it possible to preserve sounds other than music, as noted by Francisco López, but also 'to mold the sounds in a very physical and intuitive way' (Minard 2002: 47). This also enabled artists trained in disciplines other than music to artistically work with sounds, and to do this in ways that had not been possible before. Robin Minard has pointed out that the initial appeal of the magnetic tape recorder to visual artists, which is at least retained if not heightened with today's digital recording technology, lies in the fact that:

> in the studio the composer reacts to sounds much in the same way as painters or sculptors normally react to their own physical interaction with materials […] the results can then be reworked again and again in an intuitive manner until the desired result is obtained […] There was no more musical interpretation of a work (neither real nor virtual) but rather a work where all phases were finalized by the artist alone. The analogy to the artist's atelier is most appropriate. (Minard 2002: 47)

This repetition and processing of sounds after they originally occurred was made possible by the ontological change that recording technology brought to the relationship between sounds and both time and space. Not only could non-musical sounds now be stored, but 'for the first time, acoustic events were being isolated from their inherent space and time. Suddenly, sounds became "sound objects" capable of being transported from one space to another. They could be recalled at any time and any place' (Minard 2002: 44).

López and Minard both emphasise the importance of Pierre Schaeffer's *concrète,* hands-on bricolage with

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recorded sounds rather than the lattice-notated production of pitched sounds. They both see Schaeffer's work as the major step towards realising the potential of recordings for art – not necessarily for music. After all, Schaeffer only coined the term 'musique concrète' after the fact, in an attempt to systematise his findings. What he set out to do when starting his research was to create 'a series of studies, without preconceived subject, without literary concern, with the sole aim of giving me […] opportunities for demonstrating radiophonic mechanisms' (Schaeffer 1970: 93, quoted in Dack 1994: 4). In other words, his aim was to experiment with the technological equipment of radio in order to find aesthetic possibilities specific to this medium – as opposed to using radio as a mere transmission channel for music or speech.

The development of Schaeffer's own early work clearly illustrates how technological innovation influences, and to a certain degree determines, artistic practice. His first experiments in the Studio d'Essai de la Radiodiffusion Nationale from about 1943 to the seminal *Cinq études de bruits* from 1948 were carried out using sounds (mechanically) recorded on discs. 'The unforeseen event was that produced by the sillon fermé the closed groove on the disc that Schaeffer had to use to record sounds. A closed groove functioned in the same way as a tape loop and a recorded sound could be repeated constantly' (Dack 1994: 4). Thus, the repetition of sounds was crucial to Schaeffer's discovery of their aesthetic qualities, beyond their previous use as mere sound effects for the illustration of radio drama (cf. Minard 2002: 46). But the repetitive closed groove could not be cut up and spliced. Thus the expansion and refinement of sound processing techniques achieved by Schaeffer and his collaborators throughout the 1950s and 1960s would not have been possible to the same degree with the original disc equipment. This required tape machines which Schaeffer, like the rest of the civilian world, did not have access to until well after the end of World War II.

Magnetic tape machines of sufficient recording quality had been developed by German engineers in the 1930s and 1940s, but due to fascism and war they only became available for civilian use, both in and outside Germany, after 1944–45 (cf. Kittler 1986: 161–2). In other words, Schaeffer's original discoveries with the 'closed groove' happened just at the time when a new tool for further developing them was about to become available to him. Without the advent of these new editing possibilities, his research might have reached a dead end quite quickly.

López notes the passing of 'a non-negligible seventy years since the invention of the first recording machine' (López 2014: 97) before Schaeffer inaugurated a proper art of recorded sounds. This emphasises the importance of media technology for the development of such an art form. Electrical sound recording had changed the status of music to that of one acoustic art form among (theoretically possible) others, but only with magnetic tape did these other acoustic art forms become a practical possibility. (The fate of Luigi Russolo's 'art of noises' seems to confirm this. Though apparently a spectacular phenomenon in their day, his noise instruments were too cumbersome to warrant a long-term practice, while his theoretical ideas only came to be fully appreciated after it became possible to manipulate recorded sounds.)

The use of 'sound turned into a sculptural material' (Minard 2002: 46) in gallery-oriented sound art is only one example of the new acoustic art forms that Schaeffer's research pioneered. Although he himself chose to inscribe his post-1948 work in the context of music, Schaeffer did also clear a path towards the form of genuinely radiophonic art he had originally set out to find.

4. RECORDING AND RADIO

In retrospect, the fact that Schaeffer's work is rooted in the radiophonic medium tends to be overshadowed by his later efforts at systematising sounds in a comprehensive music theory or *solfège* set to supplement that of traditional, lattice-based music, and by the incorporation of electroacoustic music studios into institutions of musical education. Although after the discoveries of 1948 Schaeffer would choose to inscribe his work into the history of music rather than radio, '[d]uring the mid nineteen-forties one of Schaeffer's concerns was radiophonic art which included all manner of sounds: words, music as well as noises. Due to the predominance of drama and the spoken word in radio productions, literary considerations were a decisive factor' (Dack 1994: 1), with other sounds being reduced to a subservient role. It was in an attempt to liberate the technological possibilities of the (radio) studio from this limited task of illustrating spoken-word programmes that Schaeffer started developing his idea of a radiophonic work 'without literary concern' (Schaeffer 1970: 93, quoted in Dack 1994: 4), which eventually led to musique concrète.

In a recent historical overview of radiophonic experimentation, Colin Black (2014) has shown that attempts at creating radiophonic works not based on spoken (literary) texts, but using all sorts of sounds, already started in the early years of broadcasting in the 1920s. With magnetic tape not yet available, many of the sounds had to be produced live and very few recordings of the actual works have been preserved. One of the rare exceptions is Walter Ruttmann's piece *Weekend* from 1930, a collage of everyday sounds 'on the soundtrack of an optical sound film using the so-called tri ergon technique' (Anonymous 2000). This technology, originally developed for and used in sound film, provided possibilities of editing and splicing

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similar to those of later magnetic tapes, but at the time remained an exception in the radiophonic context.

'While it is unclear if Schaeffer was influenced by, or indeed had knowledge of, preceding radio experimentation, he furthered the practice by using more complex editing and sonic manipulation techniques, initially achieved using phonographic recordings and, later, using tape recorders' (Black 2014: 185). For German radio theorists and practitioners in particular, Schaeffer's creative use of recorded sounds provided an important stimulus for 'the expanded notion of play in the *Hörspiel* of the 1960's and '70's' (Hagelüken 2006: 16). The 'German name, *Hörspiel,* means radio play (or, more literally, play in order to be heard)' (Landy 2007: 11). In post-war German radio, this mostly meant radio drama geared either towards popular entertainment or more artistic literary ambitions. However, all of these works were drama productions firmly rooted in written language until the

> entire concept of radio as an educational and entertainment institution underwent a profound transformation in the 1960's effected by, among other factors, the rise of television […] A reorientation on the part of the radio was necessary – if only in order to retain a share of the market […] Pushed on by an external impetus, radio was moved to innovate, and Radiokunst [radio art] and Ars Acustica were art forms which played with just the 'specific qualities' [of radio as opposed to other media]. (Hagelüken 2006: 13)

These specific qualities of radio had already interested both Schaeffer and the pre-war radio experimentalists, but had arguably been neglected by the text-centred, narrative radio plays of the 1950s and early 1960s. 'The terrain of radiophonic art stood to be redefined' (Hagelüken 2006: 13). However, the attempts of innovative German radio-makers at liberating radiophonic art from the constraints of spoken manuscripts and their mere sonic illustration were different from Schaeffer's aesthetic. 'Schaeffer ultimately decided that sound objects, generally speaking, should not be too anecdotal' (Dack 1994: 5), and '[s]timulation of realistic imagery was adamantly avoided' (Hagelüken 2006: 16) in his acousmatic approach by electronically processing natural sounds. In a way, Schaeffer chose to take sides with music rather than literature. This decision was a necessary condition for the development of electroacoustic music in all its various forms and formats – concerts, records and radio programmes – up to the present day. But if one's aim were to constitute a specifically radiophonic art, Schaeffer's move could be seen as a narrowing down of possibilities, similar to Seth Kim-Cohen's tactical decision to locate sound art in the realm of fine art instead of music.

However, the radio works that went on to shape 'the independent form of Ars Acustica' (Hagelüken 2006: 14) were characterised by an approach to material and form that was neither predominantly literary nor predominantly musical. 'The term Ars Acustica, which refers to a specific treatment of sound material in the medium of radio, originated in the WDR [West German Radio based in Cologne] Studio für Akustische Kunst (Studio for Acoustic Art), and was coined by the former producer Klaus Schöning in the 1970's' (Hagelüken 2006: 1).

What Andreas Hagelüken means by 'specific treatment' is precisely the opposite of an aesthetic dogma about how something should sound. Instead, the concept of Ars Acustica was aimed at achieving an art form specific to radio in that it sounded different from what one could just as well hear in concerts (traditional or electroacoustic), theatre performances, or poetry readings. In order to achieve this specific difference, Schöning and like-minded radio practitioners, from an increasing number of countries, consciously avoided taking sides with either literature or music and equally commissioned poets, composers, performers, sound artists and conceptual artists with a visual arts background to work in and with radio. They followed an open approach that was able to encompass language-based as well as purely sonic, anecdotal as well as abstract works: 'For Acoustic Art, all of the audible events are components of equal value. Acoustic Art is a melting pot of heterogeneous acoustic elements' (Schöning 1999: 26).

Avoiding any attempts at a prescriptive aesthetic, this is a pragmatic, materialist description aimed at embracing the technological structure of the recording medium for which 'all audible events' are synonymous with 'all recordable events'. But while Ars Acustica or Acoustic Art (two terms Schöning uses synonymously) began as a radiophonic practice, what ultimately defines it is the fact that 'Acoustic Art, media art, is notated, is "written" on tape, and it quickly became digital' (Schöning 1999: 31). Much like Schaeffer's experiments started within the institution of radio and went on to develop into a musical form for loudspeaker concerts and records, '[i]t can thus be concluded today that the idea of radio-specific art has bypassed the very medium which once brought it to life: *Radiokunst* and Ars Acustica have ripened into a self-contained art form which claims its place beside visual art, literature, and music in the business of culture, in festivals, in series and clubs, on-site and online' (Hagelüken 2006: 21–2).

Thus, 'radio art is not inherently a subset of sonic art' (Black 2014: 190), regardless of whether we prefer to equate 'sonic art' with music or with 'sound art'. It becomes clear that all of these terms refer to different forms of acoustic art based on sound recording.

5. MATERIALITY AND MEANING

Against any dogmatic claims as to music being 'better' than sound art or, conversely, sound art being more 'progressive' than music, our discussion has highlighted the fact that (whether they like it our not) they

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do share a common technological characteristic: their dependence on recording, or rather, recordability. In addition to this, music and sound art are not the only art forms that employ acoustic elements, as evidenced by our excursion into radiogenic Acoustic Art. As a consequence, comparative discussion of works of (what is traditionally called) music and (what has more recently come to be called) sound art, as well as of all other acoustic art forms, should focus on the experience of the listener. This is because, due to the very structure of the medium, sound recordings directly address the listening subject – unlike notated music, which requires interpreters such as conductors and performers in order to reach a listener. 'At the center of the technological debate, then, is a new kind of listener – a listener more participant in the musical experience' (Gould 1966: 121). Under the conditions of recordability, the listener can experience acoustic objects without the need for a mediator who turns symbols into sounds. 'Rather, the auditory is generated in the listening practice: in listening I am in sound, there can be no gap between the heard and hearing, I either hear it or I don't, and what I perceive is what I hear' (Voegelin 2010: 5).

Very similar ideas have been developed in the context of radio art, for example by radio artist Robert Adrian: 'Radio happens in the place it is heard and not in the production studio' (Gilfillan 2008: 212). In fact, our brief look at the history of radiogenic Acoustic Art has also supplied evidence that this is yet another resource for a critical vocabulary of recorded, or recordable, artworks to draw upon. As its very technological structure involves transmission over a distance between the producer of a sound and its listener, radiophonic art is an example of an art form in which '[t]he aesthetic subject in sound is defined by this fact of interaction with the auditory world' (Voegelin 2010: 5), regardless of any affiliations to music or art history. In this form of Acoustic Art, the ontological locus of the work is neither in the score nor the gallery, but in the sound as it is being listened to: 'Sound does not describe but produces the object/phenomenon under consideration' (Voegelin 2010: 10).

But radio art also points to a way out of the dualistic music/sound art deadlock in another respect. Wishart challenged traditional concepts of music to 'embrace and systematically investigate areas that have traditionally been regarded as the legitimate property of psycho-acousticians, phoneticians, poets and sound-poets, of nature recordists and audio-zoologists, of naturalistic and "effects"-based film-sound engineering and much more' (Wishart 1996: 331). Kim-Cohen challenged sound art to 'engage the rich cultural, technical, social, ontological implications' (Kim-Cohen 2009: 115) of the sounds it presents. What both writers point to is the fact that sounds cannot, and should not, be reduced to either 'formal structures' or 'signifiers', but that they usually partake of several such reference systems at once. Characteristic radiophonic compositions, which draw on the combined resources of spoken language, noises, and musical elements without necessarily being dramatic or narrative, prove the point composer and theorist Mathias Fuchs has made with regard to all acoustic artworks:

> In fact, I assume that some sections of works of music and sound art function like language while others do not. I think that there are highly interesting works of sonic art [Fuchs uses the English term, in Wishart's definition, in the original German text] which temporarily represent extra-musical elements while at other times during the same compositions one encounters abstract material without a determinable reference. (Fuchs 2010: 248–9, my translation)

In other words, the perspective provided by Ars Acustica on both 'music' and 'sound art' clearly indicates that we do not have to choose between two (or more) frames of reference. Instead, acoustic artworks in the age of recordability derive much of their aesthetic value from intersections of these frames. Thus, critical analysis of acoustic artworks should endorse a 'transversality of reference systems' (Fuchs 2010: 255, my translation) rather than attempt, for example, to separate the allegedly more musical from the not-so-musical aspects. In this way, the sonic qualities of individual works as well as their relation to aesthetic, theoretical, social, and political contexts might be more fully appreciated. This will in turn help formulate a comprehensive aesthetic of acoustic artworks – an aesthetic which, as I hope to have shown in this article, will have to take into account the fact that listening to acoustic artworks in our age always takes place within a horizon of recordability.

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