

REVIEW TOPOGRAPHY OF SOUND ART

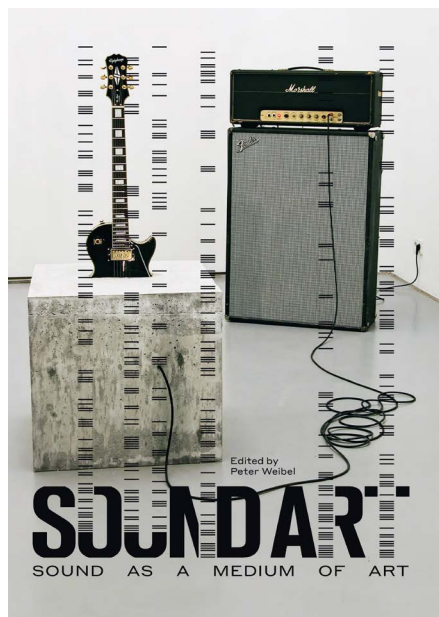
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1 Texts by: Achille Bonito Oliva, Dmitry Bulatov, Germano Celant, Seth Cluett, Christoph Cox, Julia Gerlach, Ryo Ikeshiro and Atau Tanaka, Caleb Kelly, Brandon LaBelle, Christof Migone, László Moholy-Nagy, Daniel Muzyczuk, Tony Myatt, Irene Noy, Giuliano Obici, Carsten Seiffarth and Bernd Schulz, Başak Şenova, Linnea Semmerling, Morten Søndergaard, Alexandra Supper, David Toop and Adam Parkinson, Peter Weibel, Dajuin Yao, Siegfried Zielinski.



Weibel, P. (Ed.) (2019). *Sound Art: Sound as a Medium of Art*. MIT Press¹.

ABSTRACT

Austrian artist and director of ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, Peter Weibel (Odessa, 1944), curates a book/catalogue of the mythical exhibition Sound Art, Sound as Medium of Art, that took place between March 2012 and February 2013 in Karlsruhe, with nearly one thousand images of sound art pieces. Along with a very detailed historical trace of sound as a form of art, the book contains different texts and essays about sound and its history written by renowned and iconic figures in art all articulated in five main sections. A very important work for any artist or amateur interested in sound and music.

Keywords: Sound art; Peter Weibel; ZKM; Exhibition; Catalogue.

Faithful to a post-conceptual art practice, Austrian artist Peter Weibel curates an “Exhibition catalog” (sic) with nearly a thousand images and descriptions in the form of a book about Sound Art. Peter Weibel was born in 1944 in Odessa, grew up in Austria and began his artistic journey as a visual poet, studied cinematography and literature in Paris, went to Vienna to study medicine but then changed to mathematics focusing on logic, obtaining afterwards a PhD.

Between several positions around the world as a lecturer, professor (Vienna, Halifax, Kassel, Buffalo, Linz, Frankfurt) and active artist, producing a variety of works in expanded cinema, video, photography, sound sculpture, digital and purely plastic, his wide career as a “poly-artist” was awarded by the “Siemens Medienkunstpreis” in 1997. Since then, Weibel has accumulated an *hors-pair* quantity of awards and recognitions (“Officier dans l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres”, member of the Russian Academy of Arts Moscow, “Österreichischer Kunstpreis - Medienkunst”...); in 1999 is named director of ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, same institution that has produced this publication.

Weibel’s immense culture and experience is displayed in an introductory text that carefully depicts the concept of sound as an artistic output of its own; the beauty and interest of this text is based on its structure: the reader will find a wise selection of sound phenomena and manifestations from artists of different periods and groups. The main body of this important section is constructed in a series of artistic and iconic outputs and ideas around the different recipients/emitters of sound that the author takes into consideration and classifies in sound sculptures, sound installations, sonic art, new sound instruments, synaesthesia, graphic notation, algebra, sonification, electronic music or radio art.

The text becomes an archipelago in the topography of sound history and its architects, a parallel universe that urges to be present and studied carefully by the new generations of art and music; one can only dream of the effect that a text like this can provoke in young artists at an early age. Futurists, Dadaists, the *Fluxus* movement, conceptual artists and/or plastic artists, shape the body of this first text preparing the reader into a deeper excavation of this history of sound.

Some of the problems very well outlined and evoked in this initial text facing music and “solved” in the “liberty” of John Cage, Earle Brown or David Tudor, might come from a farther way and endemic problem: the imperative and submissive aspect of formal interpretation inherited from the XVIII Century. Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924), composer and piano virtuoso, often mentioned here, understood the subtleties of interpretation and its “new dimensions of freedom” as a liberating act. His arrangements of the music by Johann Sebastian Bach for piano are already a very good example of *know-how* to deal with concepts like “ground control” and the “re-viewing of notational performance practice” (p. 120) as Weibel states.

The introductory text finishes with a conclusion in the form of a small manifesto prompting us to consider any sound/noise as a possibility for becoming art: sound art. Proposing new words and refreshing Edgar

Varèse's brilliant description of music: an organisation of noises. After this introduction, we have two historical texts: Lazlo Moholy-Nagy's *New Form in Music: Potentialities of the Phonograph* and Germano Celant's *Record as Artwork 1959-1973* followed by a very short but beautiful text about the dematerialisation of the art-work through sound forms by Italian critic Achille Bonito Oliva.

The second part, the most ambitious on this book, is the catalogue itself of ZKM's mythical exhibition Sound Art. *Sound as a Medium of Art*, title of this book/catalogue. The exhibition took place between March 2012 and February 2013 at the museum of ZKM but also in five public areas in the city of Karlsruhe. Reading through the descriptions and functionalities of the artworks displayed becomes an interesting exercise of poetics and imagination, trying to recreate the mechanism of each piece. Although the images and descriptions of the works are correctly done, one can only wish for a less traditional and far more innovative format from an artist like Peter Weibel that has explored and performed thoroughly contemporary practices such as digital art, virtual reality, had an important influence in the European art media scene and is director of the recently created *Peter Weibel Research Institute for digital Cultures* at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna.

This intense exercise of ekphrasis, each piece being mainly described by each of the artists is very impressive, the mechanical and technological wonders that most of the pieces possess are simply outstanding. Ironically, one can just ask where the aforementioned place of artistic liberty and liberation of music or sound art is, inside the engineered processes in most of the installations, pieces, or sound sculptures presented here.

The lack of mystery in some of these technological wonders or digitalised processes can be a bit unfortunate and uninteresting, becoming gadgets, being more dependent on a power source to exist than to the mystery of interpretation or its "publicity". Some descriptions could be more interesting than the pieces themselves, proof that artistic ideas do have a real difficulty of existing inserted on mechanical objects or processes.

Nevertheless, denying the great interest and curiosity that this part has would be completely irresponsible and out of place. Artists like Peter Ablinger, Cory Arcangel, Harry Belafonte, Joseph Beuys, Paul DeMarinis, Max Eastley, Stephan von Huene, Anna Jermolaewa, Timo Kahlen, Bernhard Leitner or Bruce Nauman, to mention a few, proposed sound art pieces in the exhibition that, from a personal point of view, are really worth being carefully studied.

Following the exhibition catalogue, we have three short essays about "Media Technology in Theory and Practice" where Siegfried Zielinski exhibits a wonderful text about mechanics and sound, Seth Cluett a text about the loudspeaker in art and Alexandra Supper a text about sonification. All three texts are very revealing and situate the reader in a more specific practice of sound art.

The next section is about "Sound Art in Context". Linnea Semmerling writes a beautiful text about sound art in White Cubes and art galleries,

Irene Noy about the curatorial practices in West Germany, Brandon LaBelle has a very interesting text about sonic-sites, Tony Myatt contributes to this section with a great essay about Sound Pavilions. To conclude this part, Morten Søndergaard narrates us a very interesting text, directed to any curator, about the creation of an Archive of Sound Art in Scandinavia and dealing with the tremendous difficulty of the creation of such an apparatus nowadays.

The book ends with a final section titled “Historical cartography of Sound Art” where we learn about sound art in specific parts of the world. An interesting conversation between David Topp and Adam Parkinson about sound art in the UK, Carsten Seiffarth and Bernd Schulz write a very attractive text about Germany’s situation, Daniel Muzyczuk about the Polish Radio Experimental Studio, Başak Şenova about experimental music in Turkey, Dajuin Yao a text about China and the new-born “Sonic Hotspots”, Caleb Kelly writing the Australian Sound Art scene, Christoph Cox about a Post-Cage era in the USA, Christof Migone about Canada and the wide panorama of sound artists and Julia Gerlach writes a beautiful text about visionary Brazilian artist Walter Smetak. Three texts were for me quite remarkable and give a very serious weight to this section and to the book itself: *The Other Side of Sound: Sources and Trends of Sound Art in Russia* by Dimitri Bulatov, where we learn about the history of sound artists in Russia and their influence, a *B-side* to be considered with Russian classical music. Ryo Ikeshiro and Atsu Tanaka write a marvellous text: *Sound in Japan: Silence, Noise, Material, and Media*, tracing Japanese history from the gardens, Gagaku and Noh theatre up to a *Post-Fukushima* scene and finally the text *Brazilian Sound Art from a Gambiarra Perspective* by Giuliano Obici, which is simply marvellous and inspiring.

This book relies on a very clever and solid structure magnificently done by Peter Weibel. Such publication should be seriously considered for anyone interested in music or sound art nowadays. Although we do hope to see it in a different format, with probably new digital interactions, the book is a real pleasure to get lost between the history, images and texts of sound art.

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