

Sound Art?

Fundació Joan Miró

26 October 2019 - 23 February 2020

A project curated by Arnau Horta in collaboration with Martina Millà

Sponsored in full by the BBVA Foundation

The Fundació Joan Miró presents *Sound Art?*, a question in the form of an exhibition which reassesses the notion of sound in art and considers the possibility of this aesthetic category.

The show, sponsored by the BBVA Foundation, is set up as a journey tracing the imprint of the sound element in twentieth-century visual arts and led by curator Arnau Horta, a recognised expert in contemporary art involving sound.

The project unfolds along five sections which address everything from the sound element as a source of inspiration for visual artists to sound art as a possible aesthetic category, the music score as a space for experimentation, the body as a listening device, and silence as a discursive and conceptual element.

***Sound Art?* gathers seventy pieces, including paintings, prints, drawings, sculptures and installations that illustrate the ongoing, rich conversation that the visual arts have historically held with sound.**

The selection covers a broad time span, ranging from the late nineteenth century until today, with works by thirty-six artists from around the world including James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Marcel Duchamp, Sonia Delaunay, Frantisek Kupka, Joseph Beuys, John Cage, Laurie Anderson, John Baldessari, Tres, and Joan Miró, among others.

The visual-sonic world of Rolf Julius (1939-2011), never before displayed in an exhibition in Spain, has a prominent presence in *Sound Art?*, coinciding with the eightieth anniversary of the German artist's birth.

***Sound Art?* draws its title from the seminal article by Max Neuhaus (1939-2009), which is included in the publication for this exhibition along with other key essays on the subject, new contributions from renowned scholars and first-hand accounts from artists and gallerists.**

Barcelona, 24 October 2019. The *Sound Art?* exhibition delves into the questions posed almost twenty years ago by the percussionist and sound installation pioneer Max Neuhaus (1939-2009) in his eponymous article: Do all artistic practices involving the sound element constitute a single aesthetic category? Or is sound actually the matter and the medium used in a variety of artistic expressions in dialogue with one another?

Curator Arnau Horta, who specializes in the analysis of sound and listening in contemporary artistic practices, investigates the presence of the sound element in twentieth-century visual arts to contribute to this debate on the subject of sound in art.

Throughout its five sections, the exhibition, sponsored in full by the BBVA Foundation, identifies the different ways in which sound is expressed in visual arts and offers a chronology of the sonorisation of the art object from the late nineteenth century until today. The show illustrates the progressive development of this sonorisation process: first implicitly, as an allegorical allusion to sound, and then explicitly, as an effective propagation of sound into the art object.

From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, sound phenomena became a constant source of inspiration and a tool that was broadly used by a large group of artists committed to renewing the practice of art. *Eyes Listen*, the first section of the exhibition, focuses primarily on the role of music as a determining factor in the transition from figuration to abstraction. Most of the titles of the works in this section refer to music, its codes and its terminology. Such is the case of *Nocturne: Blue and Silver – Chelsea* (1871) by James Abbott McNeill Whistler, the diptych *Prelude and Fugue* (1908) by Mikalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis, *Rythmes colorés* (1913) by Léopold Survage, *Bock syncopé (Rythme heurté) (staccato)* (1928-30) by František Kupka and *Musique du crépuscule I and V* (1965/1966) by Joan Miró, from the Fundació's collection. Sonia Delaunay's vibrant painting *Chanteurs de flamenco (Grand flamenco)* (1915-16), also shown in this section, exemplifies how sounds can be seen and, conversely, colours can be heard.

In turn, from the mid-twentieth century on, the ongoing dialogue between sound and image drove many composers to seek inspiration in the visual arts in an attempt to break away from the constraints of musical notation and traditional composition methods. The second section of the exhibition, titled *Music on Paper*, examines how the music score became a space that opened up to experimentation and performativity for artists either directly or indirectly related to the Fluxus group, such as Earle Brown, Cathy Berberian, Dick Higgins, Channa Horwitz, Pablo Palazuelo, Katalin Ladik, Alvin Lucier and Rolf Julius. The latter's work is featured throughout the show, with a selection of his pieces on display in its various sections and in different spaces within the museum. Coinciding with the eightieth anniversary of this German artist's birth, *Sound Art?* highlights his output, which pioneered the use of sound in art by exploring the cusp between the realms of music, painting and sculpture.

Next, the exhibition continues in a third space titled *Sound Bodies*. Set out like a living room, this area gathers a series of works related to the body like the furniture in a home, proposing a sound experience which is not solely aimed at hearing (or seeing) but rather at the entire body as a listening space. When visitors lean their elbows on Laurie Anderson's *Handphone Table* (1978), they will have a haptic perception of sounds that are only accessible through the vibration travelling up the arms to the hands. Next to this piece we find Michaela Melián's *Mannheim Chair* (2015-16), a seat-shaped structure for immersive listening in which visitors can listen to a voice composition by

the artist herself titled ESR, the acronym for the estrogen receptor gene. This composition is accompanied by a selection of drawings in which Melián turns this DNA sequence into a variety of visual music scores. To round off the third section, Nam June Paik's *TV Experiment (Mixed Microphones)* (1969-95) invites visitors to use their voices – a sonorous extension of their bodies – to generate abstract shapes on a TV screen. Voice is also central in Louise Lawler's *Birdcalls* (1972-81), installed outside the exhibition's itinerary, in the Fundació's Olive Tree Patio. In a scheme that combines wit, humour and a critique of gender dynamics in the art world, Lawler lists the names of twenty-nine prominent male artists using different bird songs.

"Silence," stated Joan Miró (1893-1983), "is the denial of noise — but the smallest noise in the middle of silence becomes enormous. That same process makes me look for the noise hidden in silence, the movement in immobility, life in inanimate things, the infinite in the finite, forms in a void, and myself in anonymity." *The Secret Sounds of Silence*, the fourth section in the exhibition, explores the conceptual aspects of silence as the never-entirely-opposite reverse of sound and investigates the role of both as tools in the process for dematerialising a work of art. This area includes pieces such as Marcel Duchamp's readymade *À bruit secret* (1916-64), the composition *4'33"* (1952) by John Cage along with his collages *Cadaqués 1* and *2* (1982), the installation *The Sound of Ice Melting* (1970) by Paul Kos, and pieces that refer directly to silence in their titles such as *The Silence (Ingmar Bergman)* (1973) by Joseph Beuys or *Silence* (1968) by Joan Miró.

The last section of the exhibition, which lends its title to the whole, raises a closing question for this journey through the gradual sonorisation of the art object. The pieces in this area are sculptures, installations and drawings produced over the past twelve years by artists from several generations and disciplines. Even though some of them do not produce anything audible, sound is at the core of their discourse. Among the works included in this section we find John Baldessari's first sculpture, *Beethoven's Trumpet (With Ear) Opus#* (2007), musical drawings by composer and visual artist Chiyoko Szlavnic, and Carsten Nicolai's sculpture *Yes/No* (2008) in which he casts, in aluminium, the wave shapes for these two words. Whether sound is a category, a medium or a message in the visual arts, for Arnau Horta "the presence of sound (or simply the allusion to it through this title) allows the art object to state its presence, to stand out and be capable of saying in a radically different and augmented way. Whether we choose to qualify this object using one label or a different one is not as important as acknowledging and understanding the consequences of this by no means recent ability that a work of art has to sound, to resonate and to make itself heard – also when it does so in an entirely silent way, filtering its sonority into our eyes, our thoughts or our skin."

A programme of specific activities aimed at all school levels, families and the general public is also being organized around *Sound Art?*, with events held inside and outside the Fundació in collaboration with other academic and cultural institutions. The publication for the exhibition includes a curatorial essay by Arnau Horta, the seminal text by Max Neuhaus titled *Sound Art?* and another key article on the subject by Suzanne Delehanty, the curator of the *Soundings* exhibition held in New York in 1981.

The catalogue also gathers new contributions about the relationship between sound and art, including an essay on the influence of sound on the early avant-garde movements and the pioneers of abstraction, written by Jean Yves Bosseur; an article about the conceptual aspects of sound and silence by musician and writer David Toop; an interview with Maija Julius, daughter of the artist Rolf Julius, and Miki Yui, composer and an assistant to Julius; and a conversation with sound art curators and gallerists Ursula and René Block.

Images and a digitized **press kit** are available at our virtual press room www.fmirobcn.org/press and at <http://bit.ly/Sound-Art>

Follow the *Sound Art?* activities on social media with the hashtag **#SoundArtFJM** and online at www.fmirobcn.org/soundart and at www.fbbva.es/en/eventos/sound-art

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