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Sense, and How to Make It: Affect in Art
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Introduction

On the hunt for a lustrous topic for my thesis, I, as everyone else, started out on a large sheet of white paper, trying to pull tenfolds of terms, sentences, and topics that are in any relation to my practice as an artist out of my sleeve. Although, this seemed like a fool-proof plan to find a theoretical lid, to the pot, that is my brain, I ended up with a much too organized collection of quotes and definitions around two major terms: affect and sound. The latter is a term which I say so many times per day that I began to despise it, especially when added in front of the word “...art” and the first, is a term I had barely ever heard before. After a few weeks of research, two things became clear to me:

- A) this thesis will not make anyone laugh, and
- B) this thesis will, to some extent, represent the backbone of my personal understanding of art.





Affect had a certain mystique around itself that didn't let me go; it seemed as if it were the glue that connects my consciousness to the world it's existing in. Art within this cosmic sandwich seemed to me as if it were inherently connected to this glue between mind and matter. After all, art is nothing more than physical things, with which we engage mentally, more often so than physically. At its core, affect theory challenges traditional understandings of emotions as merely private, internal states, suggesting instead that affects are pre-conscious, bodily responses to stimuli that precede and exceed the formation of emotions and cognitions.

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Affect theory proposes that these visceral responses are not just personal experiences, but are deeply interconnected with the social and material world, influencing and being influenced by the dynamics of power, politics, and social structures, or in the words of Vernon Kelly and Margaret Thorsborne:

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“Affects are our biology, feelings are our psychology and emotions are our biography”.

Broken down into digestible language, this means that affects are inputs to our senses, feelings are how we take notice of these inputs, and emotions are, depending on previous experiences, our reaction to them. Sound is interesting within this chain of cause and effect because it can have an impact on us through both biological and biographical means. Therefore it comes as no surprise that many theorists have engaged in writing about sound, as a practical approach to affect studies. Within this thesis I will elaborate on the intrinsic relation between sound and affect, and more practically analyze their role and potential within the visual arts.

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Affect, sound and music

Sound has the potential to affect us on many levels. It has a seductive power, can modulate brainwaves, and trigger the release of certain hormones within the body. Music is the organization of sounds in time. Its emotive potential is related to the harmonic progression of music and the extent to which each note or chord fulfills our expectations. Moving from a major to a minor chord communicates a somewhat sad turn within a song, just as a minor to major shift seems uplifting and positive.

Although music is so good at communicating emotion, it “cannot be equated with language... [because it] never has a stable reference to a code of the linguistic type” and if you want to compare the two it’s rather to be seen as “language without meaning”, as Attali writes¹. In my personal understanding, language has at its core the goal of enabling dialogue and communication. Two people must speak the same language to be able to understand each other. Even if one does not talk, the foundation of intelligibility is a shared understanding of the language spoken. To be understood, a language must have first been learned. This is the case for

¹ Jaques José Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (p.25), trans. Brian Massumi, Manchester University Press, Manchester (1985)





both verbal and bodily language. For music, this is not the case. We have a psychological response to music regardless of whether we have heard anything like it before. It goes so far that not feeling music is considered a neurological condition, music anhedonia. Not a disorder in itself, but rather a symptom of disorders like depression or as a response to trauma. Hearing something we like engages the brain's reward system, much like winning a game. Rhythm can stimulate. High volume can agonize.

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The affective potential of sound is a bit harder to describe. To understand how sound can have an inherent affect, it is better to leave a cultural understanding behind and view sound simply as a physical phenomenon. Vibrations, transmitted through a medium, usually air. Have you ever wondered why animals run away from natural disasters much earlier than we can even notice these events, as often portrayed in doomsday movies?

This is because infrasonic frequencies lower than 20hz emitted by such catastrophes—imagine the rumble produced by an erupting volcano, an earthquake, or severe weather conditions—trigger a fight or flight response in their brain. They trigger fear on a subconscious level.

back to emotion back to art

Early in my reading of the field of affect studies, I had a small epiphany. As per usual, self-proclaimed epiphanies related to something one has little knowledge of should be treated with some insecurity and uncertainty, perhaps even with a pinch of re-consideration. Nevertheless, this stuck to my mind, so here goes nothing: Sound is an affective monologue. Every sound. Maybe not every sound. But music sure is! And sound in art is too... or, at least, it should be.

It would be easier for me if a good part of affect theory would

²Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677), translated by Edwin Curley in *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Definition of the Affects Book III Definition II*, Princeton University Press, (1985)



not emphasize the inability to give the term *affect* a clear definition. After Spinoza, this would have been easy. “Pleasure is...[a person’s] passage from less to a greater perfection”.²

Perfection refers to the body’s ability to affect and be affected and the mind’s correlative ability to frame active ideas—in other words, the physical and psychological sides of conatus, vitality, or active power. Although Spinoza’s term conatus seems ancient, I feel that it is useful to keep its meaning at heart when thinking about affect. The main proposition of Spinoza’s conatus doctrine states: “each thing, to the extent it is in itself [quantum in se est], strives [conatur] to persevere in its being.”³ Thus, conatus is one’s own natural predisposition to continue to exist and enhance one’s own existence, derived from the Latin translation of to strive. Joy is the emotional expression of an enhancement to our conatus.⁴ Sound is able to affect us in exactly this way; it can lift our mood, increase our vitality, through listening to music or the direct modulation of brain waves. It can just as much drag us down, take frequencies of 7hz, for example. These coincide with theta rhythms, thought to induce moods of fear and anger⁵. Interestingly, the inability to define affect was already an essential part of Spinoza’s definition of the term. An affect is so difficult to grasp because it is only observable in the increase or decrease it causes to the body’s vital force, or in Spinoza’s terms, the enhancement or diminution of our conatus.

Although Spinoza has more or less coined the term, his description of affect is fairly vague, in its distinction between emotions and affects. Since Deleuze, Guattari and ultimately Brian Massumi and Eve Sedgwick affect and emotion are described as two fundamentally different things. Resulting in a more elaborate field of ontological theory-affect theory. This is, for me, an attempt to overcome the mind-body du-

³ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677), translated by Edwin Curley in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Volume I, Princeton University Press, (1985)

⁴ Spinoza, *Definitions of affect in Ethics* (1677)

⁵ Steve Goodman, *Sonic warfare : sound, affect, and the ecology of fear* (p.18), The MIT Press, Cambridge (2012)



alism and to de-mystify our position as sentient beings in a world in which we seem to be alone.

Affects, according to Massumi, are forces influencing us on a pre-conscious level. They are not emotions that can be described or communicated, but rather the intensities that trigger an emotional response within us. A key concept to be understood here is the independency affect has from language. If we see consciousness as something that is proven by one's awareness of the self—as in “I think, therefore I am”—affect comes before this ability to articulate one's own thoughts and therefore overthrows the approach of humanity understanding the world through language. We are not God's descendants, who are superior to all other beings—as we are the only ones that are able to speak—but rather we are beings, which are affected by the same intensities that have influence on a mouse or a deer. Affect theory may be viewed as an attempt to unite scientific and social theories. Our mind is understanding and experiencing the world through our *senses*, not through a divine ability to contemplate and think about what we sense. Consider, for example, the physical and abstract possibilities of our hands. A hand may be limited by its material possibilities. How far we can reach with it, in how many ways we can bend it, and in how many other ways we can have influence on material things by using it. At the same time, a hand can communicate via signs, hold socio-cultural value by wearing a wedding ring, or involve a sort of cultural identity via decorations such as tattoos or nail polish. It has possibilities in material and abstract ways; thus, the hand is both a part of the body and the mind.⁶

Eve Sedgwick's *Performativity and Performance*, like the works of Judith Butler, also shines light on how gender is a performative act. Performing utterances such as women take care

⁶ Lewis Waller on Massumi and Sedgwick, <https://www.thenandnow.co/2023/06/15/introduction-to-affect-theory-brian-massumi-eve-sedgwick/>, accessed on 3rd of January 2024 14:43



of children, or women cook for their husbands, lead to social constructions in opposition to utterances such as women can take care of children and women can cook for their husbands.

The latter involves all other possibilities of mind and body. Here, language and its use affect how we either socially construct a gender as a limitation, or how a gender can be a product coming forth out of all other possibilities. Thus, gender is both a materialistic manifestation, which is the outcome of a set of possibilities, and performative, a mental manifestation which was result to a set of possibilities. Understood like this, as gender in modern society is a social construct linked to certain expectations, it is no more than a performative act.

In one part of the world, a tattooed face is understood as manly and at the other end as a symbol of femininity. Nothing ever just is, but everything always can. Language constructs our identities and has the tendency to limit the subject at hand to what it *is* by describing it in one way. On the other hand, if we apply the logic of the hand as both abstract and material, then language can have a comparable set of possibilities confined within its configuration.

Sedgwick expanded this logic to a philosophical approach towards material in a comparable way as it is practiced within the visual arts. Material being both real and abstract, textures having context, and able to communicate attributes, such as safety or hostility. Objects involve a cultural history, and the way we experience them is often more important than what meets the eye. The dualistic divide between mind and body can therefore be compared to a divide between the real and abstract, the inherent material limitations of an object, and its abstract possibilities. Personally, I feel as if this broadening of one's understanding of material, as in seeing both the physical and abstract, is a fundamental concept of art since modernity. After all, academic education in art, rather lies in the sharpening of one's sensibility with regard to a philo-

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sophical understanding of the material world, then the learning of a certain set of skills. What I am trying to highlight is the similarities and correlations affect theory has to visual art. It is never the point to carve anything in stone, affect theory, and thinking about affect is—in a comparable way as art is—a philosophical engagement with the physical world rather than an attempt to define, depict, or explain it.

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Massumi has joined forces with visual artist and philosopher Erin Manning to describe the relationship between art and philosophy as follows. Philosophy is thinking as an act; a doing. Art is acting as a form of thinking; or thought through action.⁷ Long before affect became a somewhat chic topic, philosopher Susanne K. Langer had been researching how art and music influence the mind. To her, music had a notion of being felt as thought and “[music]... is the logical symbolic expression of inner life”⁸. Compare, for example, dance music to an opera. Although one sparks actions such as dancing or head nodding, the other does not make us less engaged. “Whether pulsed or meandering, danced to or ‘stilled’ to, music presents a fabric of tensions—a ‘tensity’—[...] (comparable to our) vital activity.”⁹ This, I see as comparable to Massumi’s use of the term *intensities* as a sort of force, affecting us, moving us to *do*.

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Here it is interesting to observe how a web of different philosophies is starting to weave into a new understanding of art, music, and affect. Massumi, who gained reputation through his translation of Deleuze and Guattari’s *A thousand plateaus* (1987), is now seeing music through a feeling and experience oriented lens described by Langer.¹⁰ What I am trying to point out is the eclectic nature of affect studies. Essential to an understanding of affect is the fluidity of the term and topics discussed. From Spinoza to Langer to Massumi and Manning, a key factor is that nothing should

⁷ a core principle described of the publication; Brian Massumi’s and Erin Manning’s *Thought in the act* (2014)

⁸ Wayne D. Bowman, *Philosophical Perspectives on Music* (p. 213–215), Oxford University Press, New York (1998)

⁹ Eldritch Priest; *Musical abstraction and the semblance of affect* (p.47), Bloomsbury Academics, New York (2013)

¹⁰ who was a pupil of A.N. Whitehead





ever be defined as one thing or another, just as Whitehead famously said: "It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God..."¹¹.

A field in art that lies at this intersection of music, art, and possibly affect is *sound art*. Since the early 1980s sound has been increasingly represented within the exhibition landscape, ultimately becoming somewhat of an art fad, if you ask me. However, not every work of "sound art" has to involve anything under the sun, which makes sound or is anyhow connected to music. To understand what makes an artwork a piece of "sound art", it is essential to examine the role that music can play within visual arts.

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¹¹ Alfred North Whitehead; Chapter II of Part V, "Final Interpretation" (p.348) of *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, New York, Macmillan (1929)





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Suzan Philipsz, *Lowlands* (2010)
(Documentation image at River Clyde)



Is ‘sound art’ worth a dime?

This question may seem like a joke but is very sincere to me. To elaborate, I will discuss a work from the first ever “sound artist” to win the Turner prize, Suzan Philipsz. Central to Philipsz’s practice is her peculiar approach to “sound art”. By using her own untrained and unaccompanied singing voice, she is dissecting musical elements and rearranging them into new renditions, playfully organized in space rather than, as done in music, within time.

For her Turner prize winning piece *Lowlands*, Philipsz made a large-scale public sound installation placed under three bridges crossing Glasgow’s River Clyde. During her initial site visit, she came across flowers on a bridge’s rails, a tribute to someone who had committed suicide. This led Philipsz to explore the 16th-century Scottish ballad “Lowlands Away,” of which she found three variations, each telling the story of a drowned woman’s ghost mourning the separation from her lover. Philipsz recorded herself singing all three versions and installed one recording under each bridge.

In this particular work, Philipsz is tiptoeing between art and music in a very delicate way. One of the most powerful qualities of music is to affect on a memory-based level. From a young age, we learn to associate certain harmonic progressions and styles of music with certain feelings or emotions.



This is a unique learning process for every individual, but can often be traced back to a cultural background. Most people who grew up in Europe for example, will describe a song written in a major key as happy and a song written in a minor key as sad.¹² The song Philipsz chose for *Lowlands* is therefore already affecting the viewer by being a ballad and is getting its strength within the artwork from all memorized associations the viewer has, due to previously heard ballads.

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Sara Ahmed writes about how happiness connects us to the objects we find pleasing and how we form profound bonds with these things. The pleasurable affect sustains itself through the comings and goings of these things; the affect is what sticks.¹³ I would argue that we accumulate affective responses to sounds we hear, which remind us of comparable sounds we heard earlier in the same way as someone can project the love of their old car onto their new car, as it is a *thing* that gives them pleasure. This, I see as the emotional bond we form with the material world, and could be seen as how we as individuals build our unique sensibility, generally referred to as personal taste. Here, sensibility is rather an accumulation of memorized affects than an opinion. Everybody might like different things due to different reasons, but in the end, sensibility is merely a subconscious construct built by previous experiences that guides us to make seemingly reliable decisions toward a favorable outcome. One could argue that this would lead to everyone only ever engaging in familiar things, thus never broadening their sensibility.

However, following this logic, engagement with unfamiliar things can also be associated with favorable outcomes, as previous engagements with an unpredictable outcome might have resulted in a positive affect.

¹²<https://www.hmpglobelearningnetwork.com/site/altc/articles/sound-stimulation-patients-alzheimers-disease> - accessed on 23.01.2024 14:49

¹³Sarah Ahmed; "Happy Objects" from *The affect theory reader* (p.29) , Duke University Press, Durham and London (2010)



The dissection of this ballad, organized into space, almost as a choir is organized into tenor, alto, and soprano, adds a layer of incompleteness to this rendition of the song. At no spot under the bridges can all voices be heard equally.

However close you are to one of the speakers there will always be a longing to hear the other voices. The longing for a loved one is translated into sound in space. In combination with the memories triggered by the familiar musical format of a ballad, Philipsz successfully created an affective atmosphere in public space and turned music to art.

The quality of the work, as I understand, comes through a choice towards unintelligibility. If listened to individually, three pieces of music communicating through harmonic progressions and language could be understood as three different affective monologues. Each of these monologues would lead to a direct response in the listener, building upon familiar impressions that the listener had memorized. In contrast, the spatial distribution of sound in *Lowlands* results in a blurred combination of affective atmospheres, where all of these pieces of music somewhat affect the viewer, but cannot be clearly understood. The direct singular affects these songs have, is replaced with an engagement in space. In doing so, Philipsz puts sound, space, and viewer in a dialogue that music alone would not intend.

Keeping all this in mind, I conclude *Lowlands* to be a good example of what “sound art” should be.

Philipsz worked off a musical starting point and assembled several pieces of music, as if they were materials, into one artwork. The work could not exist without the viewers’ sensibility for musical elements and that is something all “sound art” has in common; the viewer has to approach the work as if it were both art and music at the same time. Although



this worked out wonderfully in *Lowlands*, I think that this half and half approach of “sound art” is the exact problem that keeps the medium stuck in an extra category, never being fully considered art—hence the prefix *sound*—but also not considered music, although it might be musical.

After all, not all sounds are musical, so why tie sound in art to music at all?

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Marcel Duchamp, *With hidden Noise* (1916)



‘Sound art’ ≠ (Music|Art)

As mentioned previously, I define music as the organization of sound in time. I would define visual arts as the organization of material in space. So, in which of these rigid boxes should I place the term “sound art”? Sound, as a medium in art, is certainly no new frontier, but seems somehow forever stuck in its infancy. Since art has reached modernity, artists have been toying around with sound—take, for example, Luigi Russolo’s futurist manifesto *The Art of Noises* from 1913—but few have approached the medium with the same standards as more traditional media. The involvement of sound in a visual artwork was pioneered by Duchamp with his readymade *With Hidden Noise*, which has given the presence of sound in art a, not always just, connotation of conceptual art. Nevertheless, I would consider *With Hidden Noise* a sound work, maybe even the first notable one.

The work, consisting of a ball of twine between two brass plates, joined by four long screws, containing an unknown object added by a friend of Duchamp without telling him what was added, replaces a material element of a sculpture with a sound. The sound adds, almost with mathematical precision, the possibility of anti-retinal engagement with an object, which would otherwise be a fairly straightforward sculpture with clear material qualities. The hidden noise,



which would almost deserve to be included in the list of materials, were it not the title already, anti-retinalizes the object as a whole. The qualities of all materials used in the work are somehow framed by all possible qualities of the hidden object, while the sound it makes becomes an illustration of the interaction between the known and the unknown. The question “what is inside”, might seem mundane but is just an entry for the questions, “who put it inside” and “does it matter that the person who put it in there was the heir to a steel-imperium who could have well afforded to throw a coin sized diamond in that ball of twine”.

The point I am trying to make, or rather the questions I am asking, are: What should sound in art be and why is it that a hundred-year-old work by Duchamp can be seen as a sound work but nobody would ever even consider it to be “sound art”? The latter question, I think, is simple to answer. *With Hidden Noise* is an artwork that uses sound as if it were a material, conforming to how we approach materials in art. “Sound art” on the other hand, tends to be a label for artworks that linger between art and music. The term, in my view, has a strong tendency towards being a sloppy label, used by artists who make somewhat avant-garde pieces of music. An object, machine, or any assemblage of the two that makes sound, for the sole reason to create sound, is essentially just a musical instrument, not a piece of art. And it is exactly these, which are usually called “sound art”.

The first person to build a practice in the medium of sound, who has not made the mistake of approaching it under the umbrella term of “sound art” was Max Neuhaus. He has made countless sound works and, as I see it, almost all of them have one thing in common: they engage in the affective potential of sound and often his works do not include the object that makes the sound as a visual component of the work, giving full focus to how an aural experience sparks an en-

¹⁴First published as an introduction to the exhibition "Volume: Bed of Sound", P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York (2000)



gagement with space. Many of these works are single sounds, as in one never changing tone, placed in an existing space, which has also led him to describe his works as “sound sculptures”. In regard to the term “sound art” he wrote: “These same people who would all ridicule a new art form called, say, ‘Steel Art’ which was composed of steel sculpture combined with steel guitar music along with anything else with steel in it, somehow have no trouble at all swallowing ‘Sound Art’.”¹⁴ So at least I’m not alone in my hostility towards it.

He is right of course. ‘Sound art’ is not a form of art in itself, the definition should be rather simple. Sound, as a medium in art, is the vibration of matter, usually perceived through air, sculpted, and organized to gain cultural meaning. Just as marble stone can be sculpted and organized into the shape of David, thereby gaining meaning through our cultural comprehension of the figure of David as ‘the small guy who killed the big guy’. Plastic arts are mostly perceived through the organization of lightwaves within the visible spectrum, as in light hits painting, painting reflects light, viewer registers light through their eyes. Sound in art is mostly perceived through the organization of sound waves within the audible spectrum, as in sound source emits sound wave, sound wave travels to viewer, viewer registers sound through their ears.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a general confusion regarding sound in art, and often I see how sound installations get a somewhat separated placement within an exhibition, or are simply banned to non-spaces like the entry, the garden, or a hallway. This tendency might be due to the spatial distribution of sound, as in, it being not so easily containable, and may seem like a simple solution for curators to ensure that the sound does not disturb the rest of the show. This approach reminds me of how children get a separate table in the back of a restaurant to let the adults dine in peace, which feels somehow cowardly. A thorough exploration of



how sound could correlate with other media or how curatorial engagement could make sonic and plastic works benefit from one another is rather rare within the general exhibition landscape. This might also explain why many viewers seem to have an attitude towards sound works as if they were cabinets of curiosity. The works spark interest, but somehow stay a bit strange, and how one should engage or contemplate them seems unclear. I see how this often leads to an unintentional choreography. Well-dressed art lovers of all age groups close their eyes and behave just as one is expected to when presented with some exquisite Mozart. Bohemian listening with complete disregard for the surrounding space, other artworks, or anything visual.

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This shows how giving the medium a label such as ‘sound art’ does not arise from the complexity or intangibility of the medium. It is our profound cultural conditioning to understand the visual arts as the art of matter and music as the art of sound, and the difference in how we as listeners or viewers engage in either music or art is fundamental. Music generally demands a certain observer role from the listener; there is an immaterial border between the stage and the public. This is, of course, not carved in stone; see, for example, how John Cage has turned around this dynamic in *4'33"*, a piece of music that deliberately involves no sound produced by any participating musician, to instead highlight the sounds made by the public. Making a stage for coughing, breathing, and how loud one can experience silence. However, as exceptions confirm a rule, *4'33"* plays with exactly this dynamic between the observer and producer of sounds. Simply flipping sides, wittily laying the performer role upon unsuspecting concert attendees.

Why is it then that ‘sound art’ is not music but also not recognized as an equal to other media in art?



Neither art nor music are defined by the medium they are realized in, as music can exist without sound,¹⁵ and art can exist without matter¹⁶. It is their meaning. Or rather, the lack of it. At its core, art has the intention of giving cultural meaning to a physical object. Even Yves Klein's *Zone of immaterial pictorial sensibility* couldn't exist without its documentation in form of the receipt. Music on the other hand can exist without this cultural meaning, as meaning arises from language and "music cannot be equated with a language" and if to be compared to language it is one "without meaning".¹⁷

Music's ability to affect can come before a socioculturally added layer of meaning. Art on the other hand exists within a dialogue between object and the socio-culturally conscious viewer, as the object can only be art for being understood as such by the viewer.¹⁸ Music and sound can exist as an affective monologue without the necessity of being 'understood' by the listener. In music, the sound produced directly affects the listener at a guttural preconscious level. 'Sound art' on the other hand, makes use a use of sound to address the socio-culturally conscious viewer. As described by Langer music is a *symbolic expression of inner life* and if I were to rephrase this in the terminology of affect-theory I'd call music an *expression of one's vitality*, or vital force.¹⁹ In contrast, art does not always intend to express something. I would even argue that art gets great power from not having to be expressive, raising a question rather than answering it.

Even more remarkable within this monologic nature of music and sound is the fact that the 'person speaking' in this monologue is not the source of sound but the sound itself.

¹⁵John Cage, 4'33", 1953

¹⁶Yves Klein, Zone de Sensibilité Picturale Immatérielle, 1959

¹⁷Jaques José Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, (p.25)

¹⁸As in the performative act of the readymade by Duchamp

¹⁹Wayne D. Bowman, *Philosophical Perspectives on Music* (p. 213-215), Oxford University Press, New York (1998)



To make this clearer, imagine the following: You are at an exhibition and you are watching a performative artwork. The dialectic nature of art is observable in the fact that:

A) you as a viewer have to understand what you are seeing to be art for it to be art, and

B) the performer is not influenced by this artwork in the same way as the viewer because, unlike the viewer, they cannot contemplate what they see.

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We clearly differentiate between artist and viewer. There is the maker and the consumer of art, and the maker will never be able to see their own work through the eyes of a viewer as they are the maker. The artist needs the viewer and vice versa. In opposition to this, sound is more of a one-way street. The pianist playing a sad melody has to *feel* the sound while playing the music in the same way as the listener is intended to *feel* the sound being heard. The intention is to create an affect, which is part of the physical sound itself, and not the sociocultural dialogue between musician and listener.





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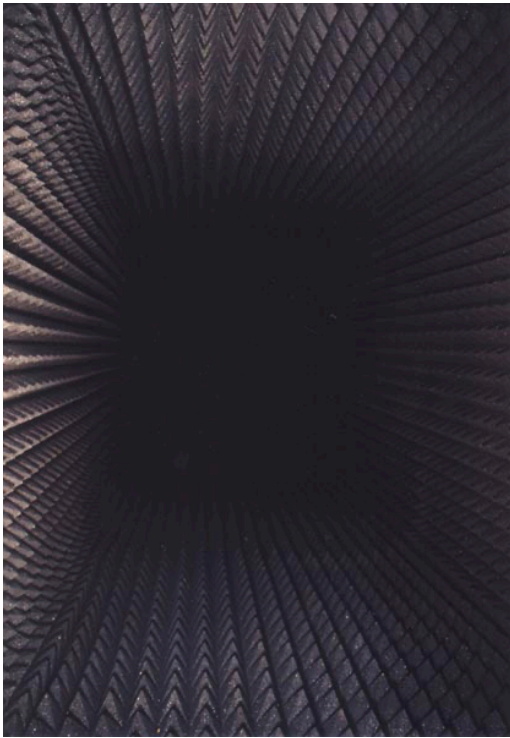




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Gregor Schneider, *U R 8, Total isolierter toter Raum* (1989)

(Left: Inside of the room; Right: Entrance to the room)



Affect as a medium - Gregor Schneider

Schneider has realized a few rooms that were “total isoliert...”, starting with the initial totally isolated room *U R 8, Total isolierter toter Raum* in 1989, the 8th room of his world famous spook-house on Unterheydener-Str. 12 in Mönchengladbach.

To my understanding, the construction of this work had a clear goal at its core. Creating an anechoic chamber by acoustically isolating a room until you reach the elimination of any “minimal background noise.”²⁰ Sounds below 0^{dB} are not loud enough for the ear to register. Here, the number zero is deceiving, as 0^{dB} does not equal silence. In the measurement of air pressure, zero decibel equals the fluctuation of air pressure in relation to the normal atmospheric pressure by 20^µPascal, which is just too little aerial vibration to be perceived by the human ear. The lack of registrable sound leads to an inability to acoustically navigate or localize oneself within a space. We usually rely on our ears for balance and other basic navigation. We can *sense* a space acoustically.

Reverberations give the brain clues about the location of objects (walls, ceilings, floors...big objects). Before I come to the point of this I must point out one more thing in relation to our sense of hearing. The position of the ears on our heads. Our eyes are, as with all sight hunters, in front, evolutionarily specialized to focus on what we chase or otherwise

²⁰ quoted out of a lecture held by Schneider for the AA School of Architecture in 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yKC9EaguDo&ab_channel=AASchoolofArchitecture, accessed on 20.11.2023 at 12:50



concentrate on visually. Our ears are, just as the eyes of a goat, pointing sideways. Goats have eyes on the side to see threats coming from all angles, prioritizing a larger field of vision over seeing three-dimensionally. A goats eyes are, just like our ears, a warning system. Our sense of vision is so focused on what is in front of us that our sense of hearing is essentially the safety sense. In terms of affect, our hearing is our sense of fear.

In regard to all this, what is *UR 8*, *Total isolierter toter Raum* made of? Is it, as the list of material says, made of “soil, lead, glass wool, sound-absorbing material in the room, 2 wooden constructions, [and] 1 door.”²¹ Or are all of these things just a necessity in the construction of an affect intended to be mobilized by the room’s ability to strip the viewer of all basic acoustic information? Schneider himself sees these rooms inside of rooms as an act of anti-objectification.²² The space might not be visually distinguishable from any other space, but the viewer’s awareness of its physicality, of *it* being not just a room but a concentration of itself, within itself, leads to a different perception of the space. The focus shifts from object to experience. To me, this has a certain resemblance to Duchamp’s approach of the anti-retinal.

Making art to serve the mind, in contrast to art, which serves the eyes. In a way, Duchamp’s readymades share this quality of anti-objectification with Schneider’s rooms. The usual approach to art, as in looking at and contemplating what you see, seems senseless, if what you are looking at is as mundane of an object as a toilet. The same counts for a room that deliberately has no features whatsoever which give it any visual character. If I were asked to imagine a room with a bed, a heater, a table and a ceiling lamp, the room I’d imagine would look exactly like the second room by Schneider to be “total isoliert”, *UR 12*, *Total isoliertes Gästezimmer*, consisting of an acoustically isolated reconstructed guest-room, within a room.

²¹https://www.gregor-schneider.de/places/1989gkirchen/pages/1989-91_total_isolierter_toter_raum_giesenkirchen_08.htm

²²from the lecture held by Schneider for the AA School of Architecture in 2015



This blanc room is similar to Duchamp's objects of mechanic reproduction; may it be a porcelain toilet or a bottle rack, free of retinal purpose. There is no point in contemplating the material or composition when looking at these artworks. In fact, the complete lack of these traditional aspects of art expands the experience of it. Schneider's rooms are to be *sensed* rather than just seen. The materials used in *UR 12* are a performative gesture rather than a sculptural component, as much as Duchamp's readymades have the performative act of the readymade, to create art by claiming something to be art at their core, much more so than the actual physical object, which is retinal. The room is reconstructed within the room as a performative act, to free the room of its ties to being an object, to be *retinally* contemplated by a viewer. Instead, after the act of reconstruction, the act of concentrating the room within itself,²³ the viewer can turn from retinal contemplation to an anti-retinal engagement with space. It is almost as if the room has become a figurative depiction of itself as a whole, rather than just a sum of all objects it is physically made of.

Therefore, what is the difference between *UR 8* and *UR 12*? One could argue that the guest room is simply a continuation of *UR 8*, spiced up with some Freudian uncanniness achieved through the doubling of a familiar guest room with the unfamiliar attribute of acoustic isolation. Nevertheless, I would argue that the two works are not even within the same category of art, if that exists. To me, *UR 8* is a sound installation. A rather straightforward one actually. I would even say that within the bigger picture of art history, the creation of an anechoic chamber, intended to be an artwork, had to occur. The core of this work is the affect created by its acoustics. *UR 12* is much more complex than this, the attribute of acoustic isolation is nearly unnoticeable, as the room still has normal walls, leading to normal reverberations within it.

²³from lecture held by G. Schneider for the AA School of Architecture in 2015



The acoustic character of the room is fairly familiar, so the use of sound within the artwork is not as gutturally impactful as in *UR 8*. Instead, returning to the notion of the room becoming a figurative depiction of itself, the attribute of acoustic isolation seems like a very delicate way of making the work, even more so, a self-contained entity. The acoustic isolation of the room within the house functions like a frame around a classical painting, creating a border between the physical space surrounding the work and the metaphysical space created within the work.

In this sense, the core of *UR 12* is the *anti-retinalization* or *anti-objectification* of a space. Turning a physical room into a metaphysical space by superfluous material additions. Superfluidity, the practice of adding more and more, is the work rather than what is added.

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Gregor Schneider, *UR 12*, Total isoliertes Gästezimmer (1995)

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Applied affect theory: Atmospheres as artworks

Since the late 1950s, and Allan Karpov's introduction of environments as works of art, installations have become an established medium. While not all installations may be perceived as atmospheric, their eclectic approach—through the assembly of diverse materials and the integration of various media, such as objects, sound, video, and architecture, into one unified artwork—emphasizes an inherent affect as a central aspect of the work. After all, the term *atmosphere*, in relation to art, is vaguely defined. Nobody would consider the distribution of gas around our planet, which would be the only clear definition of the term anyhow relevant to the discussion of art. What makes installations atmospheric, is a focus on the *sensing* of the work, over the seeing. This sensory engagement, along with the pivotal role of the viewer, who transitions from a mere observer to an active participant within the work, endows installations with the potential to evoke and explore affect. The relationship between viewer and artwork becomes dialectical, with each influencing and transforming the other, making way for an *exchange of intensities*. Immersed in the work, the viewer is profoundly impacted; experiencing it from within. Simultaneously, the artwork is influenced by the presence of the viewer, who transitions from being a passive observer to being an integral physical component of the



work. This mutual influence charges both viewer and artwork with a performative quality, as they oscillate between roles of object and subject.

To discuss what makes a work atmospherical, especially in relation to sound and affect, I found it best to dissect the works of someone who would not generally be considered to have much to do with any of these topics. The works of America's favorite megalomaniac, Richard Serra, generally known for their industrial character and brute use of material, changed my view on both atmospheric and sound-related art. To be more specific and not lash out too far, I want to talk briefly about his room filling sheet metal sculptures, as the example pictured to the right, *Snake*.

It is important to note that Serra is exploring more than the mere sculpting of led in these works. His use of metal has become a practice of shaping space, or rather, the shaping of negative space, as elaborately described by Peter Weibel in the catalogue of an exhibition with the same name.²⁴ To my eyes, the act of sculpting space is exactly what makes these works atmospherical. The acoustic conditions created within these works make it possible to *sense* the space.

One of the hottest topics of 20th century art—the void—is made apparent through the medium of sound. The openings and closings of these plates and the way they are tilting and slithering through space make it possible, for the viewer, to experience shapes and forms of emptiness that are unfathomable to the eye, through the sensing of acoustics created within these works. To clarify the unclear, imagine the following: you are walking through a park with birds chirping and the sun shining. To cross under a street, you must walk through a tunnel. What was before unapparent, the open acoustic of the park, becomes very obvious as soon as you are in the closed off tunnel and as you are walking out of the tunnel, you hear the space opening up again.

²⁴Peter Weibel; from *Shapes of the void in Negative Space* (p.617), The MIT Press, Cambridge and London (2021)



Serra's work plays with exactly this acoustic phenomenon; thereby enabling the viewer to engage with and experience space, through the medium of sound.

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Richard Serra, Snake (1997)



The affective power is a little too unclear to me to claim as one or another, but personally, I would argue that closed and tight spaces generally have a rather negative influence on one's vitality, not only triggering a negative emotive response to people with claustrophobia. *Snake* is, therefore, atmospheric without being an atmosphere. It is also a sound work without being anything close to what anyone would consider 'sound art'; yet, its sonic aspects are exactly what make it atmospheric. To come to a point, I would say that the term atmosphere in art is good to be looked at through an affect-theory related lens. It is not about being either one or the other - to be classified and categorized - but rather about the possibilities and potential intensities an object withholds in its interaction with a viewer.

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To expand on atmospheric art and conclude on the reach of affect-theory within the art world, I would like to discuss an artist on the very other end of the spectrum of contemporary art, Olafur Eliasson. His practice has a focus on re-creating natural phenomena and constructing atmospheres with the intention to *touch* the viewer through experience and visual percept. To be faced with a monstrously big fake sun in the turbine hall of London's Tate—a hall of huge proportions in itself, then doubled in size by Eliasson, through the installation of mirrors in its ceiling—must be visually fascinating. I assume. It is Eliasson's intentions that make me frown a little. He stated, in relation to his artworks, that he intends to create an affective experience with a focus on the ephemeral. The viewer is to be influenced by the work and vice versa. Or as he puts it he wants us, as viewers, to "learn to see ourselves in a new light."²⁵

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In a published conversation with H el ene Frichot, a faculty member at the architecture department of the University of

²⁵direct quote from the conversation between Frichot and Eliasson



Melbourne and κΤΗ Stockholm, Eliasson is quoted as follows: “Eliasson explained that each one of us is crucial to the completion of the story of light that unfolds. If each participant experiences a slightly different affect, it is through the negotiation of his or her perceptual disagreement that he or she manages to form a community of sorts. [...] If it can be said that we suffer a contemporary waning of affect in our contemporary world of empty consumerism, then it is only through art such as Eliasson’s, with its atmospheric augmentations, that we return to a realm of affect and percept.”²⁶

Although these are not Eliasson’s own words, I must assume that he had signed off on this documented conversation before it was published and, therefore, at least agreed to what is being said. In relation to this, I would like to talk about one of his more recent works, *Ice Watch*.

“Twelve large blocks of ice cast off from the Greenland ice sheet are harvested from a fjord outside Nuuk and presented in a clock formation in a prominent public place. The work by Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing raises awareness of climate change by providing a direct and tangible experience of the reality of melting arctic ice.”²⁷ The carbon footprint of this endeavor was monitored by a hired NGO and is apparently just about the same as that of a “London school class taking a trip to Greenland”²⁸, thus Eliasson had pre-cautiously sought out to not having to feel any guilt for his actions, as ends—of course—justify the means. Here the ends, to be exact, are partly still guilt. Not of his, as he is mere helping the viewer to “see themselves in a new light”. It’s the guilt within the viewer that is intended to be triggered upon view of melting arctic ice, which they are responsible for, as they are the consumer. And it’s the consumer who is causing climate change, not companies like BMW... which sponsor Eliasson’s work. In fact it was BMW that sponsored the symposium at Studio

²⁶ as far as I understand this conversation took place at a symposium held at Studio Olafur Eliasson in 2007 called Life in space, https://www.academia.edu/3593331/Olafur_Eliasson_and_the_circulation_of_affects_and_percepts_In_conversation, accessed on 23.10.2023 at 15:39

²⁷ Olafur Eliasson's Website, documentation of Ice Watch, <https://olafureliasson.net/artwork> accessed on 24.10.2023 at 13:32

²⁸ Article about Eliasson, <https://www.frieze.com/article/was-olafur-eliasson-bringing-30-ice-bergs-london-sustainability-own-goal>, accessed on 24.10.2023 at 16:33



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Olafur Eliasson, *Ice Watch* (2014)

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Olafur Eliasson where he had talked to H el ene Frichot about how his work is “circulating affects”²⁹.

Before coming to my point I must point out one last statement within this Interview:

“A tentative theory of affect will be explored here in order to discover how Eliasson undertakes the mutual transformation of space, time and habitation”.

It seems quite evident that both Eliasson and Frichot are well aware of the existence of affect theory. The article and other interviews of Eliasson reek of affect studies’ terminology, as in mobilizing[affect]³⁰, exchange of intensities³¹, movement between emotional registers,^{32&33} and if he is aware of the qualities of affect as a type of ur-feeling predeceasing emotion, isn’t it questionable to treat the viewers emotions as his to sculpt, influence, and somewhat capitalize on.

Another problem arising from all this is a tendency for affective rhetoric to be traditionally abused by the politically populist, feeding off the fear of their voters and therefore gaining power by intentionally mobilizing affect. Both Frichot’s writing and Eliasson’s humble intentions of “wanting to make us see ourselves in a new light” share rhetorics with populism. In the quote above, Frichot states how our contemporary world of consumerism is suffering a waning of affect and how only somewhat enlightened artists like Eliasson can help us return to a realm of affect and percept.

In other words, the world has turned to shits and only this one guy can save us all. Sounds familiar?

²⁹in the title of Frichot’s publication

³⁰term coined by Brian Massumi

³¹term coined by Deleuze and Guattari

³²direct quote from the conversation between Frichot and Eliasson

³³as the movement between states of perfection after Spinoza



Don't get me wrong. The planet is suffering, and society should take action. Eco-populism may as well be beneficial. The problem lies elsewhere. It is the fact that Eliasson's application of affect theory abuses art as a pathway to plant his ideas into the viewer's brain without labelling itself as such. Instead of blaming industry, he advocates their latest inventions. Instead of creating loud art he re-designs silent cars.

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Piano Piece for David Tudor #2

Open the keyboard cover without making, from the operation, any sound that is audible to you. Try as many times as you like. The piece is over either when you succeed or when you decide to stop trying. It is not necessary to explain to the audience. **Simply do what you do and, when the piece is over, indicate it in a customary way.**

La Monte Young
October 1960

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La Monte Young, Piano Piece for David Tudor #2 (1960)

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Conclusion

To be very honest, it would feel contradictory to me to conclude in a summarizing way. Writing and thinking about affect is a practice without the goal of a palpable surplus. Affects themselves, are perpetually reforming and best understood, if seen as more bodily than cognitive. There is no clear answer to what affect is, but rather, affect theory should be seen as collective learning on the topic. To harness affect theory effectively, one has to find the idea or blend of ideas that resonate most within the acoustics of their head. On that note: imagine the following song and try to sense it's thought within.

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Peter Weibel, *Negative Space*, The MIT Press, Cambridge and London (2021)



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Footnotes:

¹ Jaques José Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (p.25), trans. Brian Massumi, Manchester University Press, Manchester (1985)



² Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677), translated by Edwin Curley in *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Definition of the Affects Book III Definition II*, Princeton University Press, (1985)



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⁴ Spinoza, Definitions of affect in *Ethics* (1677)



⁵ Steve Goodman, *Sonic warfare : sound, affect, and the ecology of fear* (p.18), The MIT Press, Cambridge (2012)



⁶ Lewis Waller on Massumi and Sedgwick, <https://www.thenandnow.co/2023/06/15/introduction-to-affect-theory-brian-massumi-eve-sedgwick/>, accessed on 3rd of January 2024 14:43
Lewis Waller on Massumi and Sedgwick, <https://www.thenandnow.co/2023/06/15/introduction-to-affect-theory-brian-massumi-eve-sedgwick/>, accessed on 3rd of January 2024 14:43



⁷ a core principle described of the publication; Brian Massumi's and Erin Manning's *Thought in the act* (2014)



⁸ Wayne D. Bowman, *Philosophical Perspectives on Music* (p. 213-215), Oxford University Press, New York (1998)



⁹ Eldricht Priest; *Musical abstraction and the semblance of affect* (p.47), Bloomsbury Academics, New York (2013)



¹⁰ who was a pupil of A.N. Whitehead



¹¹ Alfred North Whitehead; Chapter II of Part V, "Final Interpretation" (p.348) of *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, New York, Macmillan (1929)



¹² https://www.hmpgloballearningnetwork.com/site/altc/articles/sound-stimulation-patients-alzheimers-disease_- accessed on 23.01.2024 14:49



¹³ Sarah Ahmed; "Happy Objects" from *The affect theory reader* (p.29) , Duke University Press, Durham and London (2010)



¹⁴ First published as an introduction to the exhibition "Volume: Bed of Sound", P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York (2000)



¹⁵ John Cage, 4'33", 1953



¹⁶ Yves Klein, Zone de Sensibilité Picturale Immatérielle, 1959



¹⁷ Jaques José Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, (p.25)



¹⁸ As in the performative act of the readymade by Duchamp



¹⁹ Wayne D. Bowman, *Philosophical Perspectives on Music* (p. 213-215), Oxford University Press, New York (1998)



²⁰ quoted out of a lecture held by Schneider for the AA School of Architecture in 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yKC9EaguDo&ab_channel=AASchoolofArchitecture, accessed on 20.11.2023 at 12:50



²¹ https://www.gregor-schneider.de/places/1989gkirchen/pages/1989-91_total_isolierter_toter_raum_giesenkirchen_08.htm



²² from the lecture held by Schneider for the AA School of Architecture in 2015



²³ from lecture held by G. Schneider for the AA School of Architecture in 2015



²⁴ Peter Weibel; from *Shapes of the void in Negative Space* (p.617), The MIT Press, Cambridge and London (2021)



²⁵ direct quote from the conversation between Frichot and Eliasson



²⁶ as far as I understand this conversation took place at a symposium held at Studio Olafur Eliasson in 2007 called Life in space, https://www.academia.edu/3593331/Olafur_Eliasson_and_the_circulation_of_affects_and_percepts_In_conversation , accessed on 23.10.2023 at 15:39



²⁷ Olafur Eliasson's Website, documentation of *Ice Watch*, <https://olafureliasson.net/artwork> accessed on 24.10.2023 at 13:32



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²⁹ in the title of Frichot's publication



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³² direct quote from the conversation between Frichot and Eliasson



³³ as the movement between states of perfection after Spinoza



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