

An ear alone is not a being (John Cage)

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1)

In 1970, Tom Marioni, the founder and director of the MOCA (Museum of Conceptual Art) in San Francisco, having defined the activities of his museum as "idea-oriented situations not directed at the production of static objects," utilized sound as a basic component for actions, i.e. presentations of creative processes during specific time-spans. In Marioni's perspective, "actions" involved public—or social—intelligence, and were made for particular spaces or places. MOCA's collections consisted of "evidence-giving residue" that was "either the result of an action by a visual artist, or the result of actual and physical change to the architecture," each art work adding to the history of the building "without erasing previous history." When the building was torn down in 1985, the collections, i.e. all the elements that had become part of the space, were destroyed; the building had provided an autobiography, an "invisible work of art," "a frame of a frame of a frame," "a body of work which is primarily about time" (Renny Pritikin), a "monument" (in Gianni Vattimo's sense): or an "etcetera" or "public document" (= a koan, in Juan Hidalgo's perspective).

2)

Tom Marioni's sounding "actions" may recall Robert Irwin's definition of minimalism as "a reduction of imagery to get at physicality" or "a reduction of metaphor to get at presence"—their common goal is "to expurgate all metaphors of presence from the experience of art and to replace them with a conscious awareness of perception." The perceiver "is located at the very moment his own perceptions become manifest to himself at the very brink of his first contact with the world" (Thomas DeLio). But it is difficult to imagine tracing a dividing line between artists from a visual background and those from a musical background. At least in the Cagean or post-Cagean perspective (which Tom Marioni clearly assumes), what Bergson (or Adorno) considered as an alienating feature, the "spatialization of time," can but appear as positive. (Cf. Carl Dahlhaus: "Going beyond Bergson, we might ask: is time a mere medium of processes in it? or is time itself an occurrence? And does music situate itself 'in time, or does music rather have 'time in itself?") In fact, one of the most striking features of Cage's music, and of the mutation it has brought into the avant-gardist musical sphere, is that, since it obeys Christian Wolff's "Zero Time" principle, it eschews the concept of a linear sounding object with a beginning and an end, i.e. the Western tradition of the composer plotting a path of musical successive events. Cage's works have everything in common with visual art, except that they are also for the ears: the scores, according to the composer, do not provide the performer with a picture but with a "camera—the performer has to shoot the picture." The composer invents not only the music but the musical instrument, thus enlarging Harry Partch's artisanal instrument-making; and he composes not only processes, but—as in the case of David Tudor's electronic circuitry and of Max Neuhaus' sound installations—musical environments.

3)

Such a de-linearization of music allowed the composer Alvin Lucier, as soon as in 1965, to focus upon alpha waves and enable the performer to experience them in a variety of visual and sonic guises in his MUSIC FOR SOLO PERFORMER. The idea of making sound "visible" was present also in THE QUEEN OF THE SOUTH (1972), TYNDALL ORCHESTRATIONS (1977), GHOSTS (1978), DIRECTIONS OF SOUNDS FROM THE BRIDGE (1978), and MUSIC FOR PURE WAVES, BASS DRUMS AND ACOUSTIC PENDULUMS (1980'). In the latter, the sound is projected in such a way that the swing of the pendulums represents the sine wave and reveal not only the acoustic vibrations, but the visual translations of the mechanism by which those vibrations are transformed into an audible event (DeLio). The perceiver "is forced to reevaluate his own position vis-à-vis the artwork ... The experience is circular. As the listener becomes conscious of the object of his perceptions, he also becomes aware of the act of perceiving and, finally, of himself as the perceiving being ... In this sense Lucier's art may be seen as the culmination of a post-Cartesian dialectic in which perception is understood not as the product of the thinking mind, but as the source of all thought" (DeLio). Or we may argue, with Thierry de Duve, that Lucier's work opens the way to the overcoming of Kant's definition of space and time as the A PRIORI dimensions of human sensibility, and also to the redefinition of what PRESENCE means in modernism (the loss of confidence in Kant's A PRIORI "formes de la sensibilité)." The suspicion that presence is impossible, as in Derrida's philosophy or Beckett's theatre). The new definition of presence, if traced back to Cage, and to the minimalist sculpture, requires "real space" and "real time," since the beholder is not placed in front of an object, but plunged into a situation of which he is a part—so that far from relying on A PRIORI concepts of time and space, he has to produce their reality as of his own corporeal experience of "being confronted with an INSTALLATION in which he is included" (de Duve).

4)

This new kind of presence involves a "non metaphorical" way of mixing listening and seeing (cf. what Heidegger discovers in Mozart. when he composed, he did not only listen to what he was composing, he was "seeing" the whole piece in a glimpse). Such a presence does not involve only synaesthesia, it includes as well equitemporality" (GLEICHURSPRUNGZEITLICHKEIT), i.e. the quality of the time-spans, either "present" (= the "presence" of the present) or "absent" (= the past and the future). It may thus be opposed to the typically modernist definition of aesthetic experience as suspended, withdrawn or uncanny presence, "a definition that infiltrates Walter Benjamin's conception of the AURA" (de Duve). Now, since according to Benjamin the reproducibility of the artworks strips them bare of their aura, the minimalist/Cagean movement appears as transferring the conditions of aesthetic experience from the "modernist" AURA to the postmodernist ACTUALITY by acknowledging art's reproducibility (de Duve). Heidegger's "yes and no" (or "equanimity") to technology is to be taken seriously: presence involves the technology of today (and especially devices or systems that both "distance and connect the performer from and with the audience"—we need a redefinition of "nearness" as a "technological" ZEITSPIELRAUM).

5)

Now we may understand Nam June Paik's analysis of the relationship between technology and the poetics of simultaneity. Many mystics, he says, "are interested to spring out from ONE-ROW TIME, ONE-WAY TIME, in order to GRASP the Eternity. To stop at the consummated or sterile zero-point is a classical method to grasp the Eternity. To perceive SIMULTANEOUSLY the parallel flows of many independent movements is another classical way for it. But poor Joyce was compelled to write the parallel, advancing stories in one book with one-way direction ...

The simultaneous perception of the parallel flows of 13 independent TV movements CAN perhaps realize this old dream of mystics, although the problem is left unresolved, whether this is possible with our normal physiognomy (we have only ONE heart, ONE breath, ONE focus of eye), without some mystical training. And IF WELL TRAINED ... he needs neither 13 TVs, nor TV, nor electronics, nor music, nor art." Thus Nam June Paik, despite his profound involvement in technical matters and devices—he is commonly considered the inventor of video art—stands not so far from Heidegger's "taoist" advice about technology: we have simultaneously to let technical devices enter our daily life and leave them outside, "that is, let them alone, as things which are nothing absolute but remain dependent upon something higher" so that they do not affect "our inner and real core" (DISCOURSE ON THINKING).

6)

Therefore even in a society dominated by the electronic of communication one may not consider that reality or "presence" (i.e. real space-time) tends to disappear. True, in such a society the very definition of the real may become "that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction," or "that which is always already reproduced"; true, with production reproducing itself, artifice or SIMULACRUM, and so art as "hyperreality," is everywhere and therefore nowhere—and since "metaphor and metonymy are abolished in digitality" (Baudrillard), it may seem that, according to Hegel's prophecy, art is dead. But the idea that reality is replaced by a SINGLE "hyperreality" I is too simple—we are rather confronted with a pluralistic universe of various hyperrealities, or a MULTIVERSE. In Michael Philipson's terms, we might say that through the relation of the fragment to dispersal or to Fragmentation itself, the artwork of today marks the lack of a whole and stands as a metaphor for the whole; and that this whole is the bursting and flashing of manifestness, the appearance of wondrous being (MYO U) from true emptiness (SHIN KU) (Shunryu Suzuki).

7)

In an essay of 1963 about the "New Ontology of Music," Paik wrote: "In the normal concert, the sounds move, the audience sits down. In my so-called 'action music' the sounds, etc., move, the audience is attacked by me. In the 'Symphony for 20 Rooms,' the sounds, etc., move, the audience moves also. In my 'Omnibus Music No. 1' (1961), the sounds sit down, the audience visits them. In the Music Exposition, the sounds sit, the audience plays or attacks them. In the 'Moving Theatre' in the street' the sounds move in the street, the audience meets or encounters them in the street 'unexpectedly.' The beauty of moving theatre lies in this 'surprise a priori,' because almost all of the audience is uninvited, not knowing what it is, why it is, who is the composer, the player, organizer or, better speaking, organizer, composer' player." Then we may understand how, in a world marked by the inflation of simulation and re-presentation, the artwork "in the street" has to be put outside the positivities of information and of the semiotic sign—since it stands not as the simple negative of the sign or meaning, but beyond its region, it may avoid the "negative" level of the modernist presence QUA-absence. In Nam June Paik's perspective, it eludes the RELATIVE nothingness or absence of the Western thought, but aims at ABSOLUTE nothingness or emptiness—the "formless form" or "spaceless space" of Eastern aesthetics. Thereupon we leave the Kantian A PRIORI forms of sensibility—as the Chinese philosopher Chang Chung-yuan has shown. "Kant's space, in Eastern terms, is relative emptiness, or SUNYA. For Heidegger and the East, space is not limited to relative emptiness' ... but is the higher affirmation of the reality of things, or absolute emptiness, or SUNYATA." In a similar way, Kant has maintained that time is the mere form of inner sense: it does not exist in itself, nor is it an objective determination inherent in things, it is only the formal A PRIORI condition of all appearances whatsoever, and it is only in time that two contradictory predicates can meet in a single object, one after the other. "This is quite different, Chang tells us, from the Eastern view of time. As the Ch'an philosopher Dogen says, time is not limited to the mere condition of appearance, or to the form of inner sense. Rather, 'time itself is existence' and existence is time. Further, time 'in the primordial sense' is not conceived in terms of the sequence of opposition, but is the absolute moment in which all contradictions are simultaneously identified."

8) Therefore works inspired by the path-breaking innovations of John Cage and Nam June Paik, like those of the Korean artist Soun-Gui Kim, hold here a crucial position. A painter and sculptor, Soun-Gui Kim has found in video art the means of eschewing the reduction of seeing to any optical activity and the reduction of hearing to any acoustical one. To see, she argues, requires an activity of the heart (SIN); and the heart simultaneously perceives, sees, things (SI) and originates ideas (YI). The first step of creation is YI MING — a seeing of the idea by the heart. But the heart cannot be taken as anything subjective, nor is it anything objective. Beyond the subject-object split, "time times" and "space spaces." Here Soun-Gui Kim retrieves Heidegger's intuition of a co-dependency between time and space. In Takeuchi Yoshinori's words, "time as time enjoys a unique and elemental opening (the opening of the past, the future, and the present), and space a unique and elemental opening as space—but in addition, time is ex-static of itself in space, and space ex-static of itself in time, which together result in a locus of epochal time (WEILE) that is the time-space of the historical world. This leads to the realization that the provenance of DA-SEIN, whose fate it is to bear the burden of the historical world at that locus, represents the 'event-aspect' (EREIGNIS) of the principle of SUNYATA" (THE HEART OF BUDDHISM, pp. 76–77).

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