

Abstract

Sound images of emptiness. Space and perception in multisensory works. Theoretical considerations based on audio installation: „The words I stopped hearing”.

Academy of Art in Szczecin

Rafał Kołacki

This doctoral dissertation is a subjective, in-depth attempt to describe the emotional state of mourning and the associated experiences (emptiness, silence, noise, etc.), in the broader context of the functioning of the aforementioned concepts in contemporary culture and art (*inter alia*, as elements of inspiration for other artists). The choice of this subject was motivated by many years of experience with sound art. I have been a musician for over ten years, working within the genre known as industrial art, and am involved in field recordings. I create sound installations and conduct workshops in which I teach active listening, *inter alia*, sensitising participants to the aesthetics of environmental sounds. Apart from my decade-long experience, I have also drawn on the work of other artists from Poland and worldwide who create similar works. All this, consequently, enabled me to formulate the thesis that sound art can be seen as an autonomously existing art form, which, despite its short history, is still trying to overcome the hegemony of the oculocentric worldview. In support of such a view, in my reflections, I have explained in the paper crucial concepts in the history of sound art, its characteristic features and the tools needed to correctly 'decipher' works of this genre.

The axiological value of the most important concepts explored in this work (silence, noise, emptiness, solitude) is not its essence, as it was an attempt to transfer subjective emotions and feelings into the language of art, thus making for a creative experience of a time of bereavement. Therefore, in my opinion, the culmination of the work created would be a simplified train of thought; loss—silence, mourning—creative silence, a pretext for action, silence as an artistic medium, silence as a gained experience and a life lesson. Writing this paper was certainly a form of experiencing mourning for me; it was also an attempt to consider the phenomenon from a distance, gaining experience and information on how other artists deal with it.

The dissertation contains six main chapters: in the first, titled *Sound Art – the history of the genre*, I try to settle the question of the definition of this new art, and present the greatest works and artists who have created in this field. I try to highlight this phenomenon in a broader artistic and cultural context so that the reader is able to acquire a basic knowledge of sound art. After all, the extent of our seeing and hearing is determined not by some 'inherent', 'normal' seeing/hearing, but by the process at work in the interplay between biological seeing/hearing and our thought, and cultural endowment. Just as in an image we distinguish between seeing (in the biological sense) and the awareness of seeing, so too in sound, we can speak of the difference between passive hearing and active listening. The difference, however, is the location of the listener: the listener is, as mentioned, so to speak, 'inside' the phenomena being recorded. Noise, like silence, can also be a phenomenon of artistic inspiration. In the second chapter, I revert to trying to 'capture' the notion of noise, and its influence on twentieth-century art, to analyse the types and artistic trends that drew direct inspiration from the value of noise. I am primarily concerned with industrial culture, with which, incidentally, I myself am quite closely associated. In the next chapter, I analyse the phenomenon of noise in turn, mainly concerning the notion of the soundscape of cities, the definition and meaning of which are particularly important in the context of this work. Noise is the antonym of silence and can induce states of tension and exhaustion; despite the surrounding silence, we can feel an internal noise. In chapter four, I write about field recordings, explaining definitions, basic assumptions and examples. I analyse this phenomenon mainly from the perspective of my own experience, as an artist

who has been involved in this art for more than a dozen years, exploring the sonic fabric of major cities worldwide. In Chapter five, '*Mourning and the Absence of Sound*', which addresses the important issue of personal memories, I focus on the particular emotional states that accompany mourning. In order, they are emptiness, silence and noise. In my work, I analyse the definitions, similarities and differences among these concepts. I trace their importance in history, culture, art and private life. I look at emptiness, which I consider both in terms of an emotional experience and a conscious artistic procedure. I then concentrate on silence. Although I explore this phenomenon on several levels (including as an anthropological category), the most important for me is the one that becomes a direct inspiration for creation (silence as a metaphor), both for me and other artists.

I ultimately put into practice the concepts and ideas referred to in the earlier chapters. At the beginning of chapter six, '*I have stopped hearing these words*', I discuss a video presentation—an annex to the theoretical part of the thesis. I describe an artistic work, a multi-element spatial sound sculpture, presented in the form of a video recording. The work consists of two tulle circles suspended from a metal structure, a specially arranged light installation and a set of four speakers, with recordings that came from my late mother's flat. I transferred these sounds into the gallery space and, through a specially arranged sound and visual situation, emitted them, creating simultaneously a kind of sound sculpture, concerning which the listeners find themselves in, so to speak, an *in-and-out situation*, i.e., in a situation of temporal imposition of a specific perception. Thus, a specific sound environment was created in the gallery space, in which counter-empirical listening conditions were created, for example by the presence of acoustic sounds, i.e., sounds whose source is not obvious to the listener. Later in the chapter, I provide examples of the use of the curtain motif (the element particularly close to Mum, through which I recall her in my own memories). I leave the reception of the work to the personal reflections of the listener/viewer.

The creation of a sound installation inspired by one's own experiences, whose main components are silence, emptiness and field recordings, is intended to confirm the validity and need for similar works, and as a kind of therapy. The elements of the work are a conscious choice of my experiences that I present to the viewer. They are meant to reach the viewer's senses—move him/her, to evoke in him/her a new context, a reflective view of himself/herself. In difficult moments, one becomes aware of the banality of existence and important, existential issues arise in one's mind. We conclude that we live to experience it, and we experience it to fill our lives with elements that distract us from the essential problem.