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Silence, sound and noise in the work of John Cage and its effects on the pre-Fluxus Avant-Garde in post-war Germany

"*The background noise never ceases: it is limitless, continuous, unending, unchanging. […] it is a matter of being itself […] it is part of the in-itself, part of the for-itself […] yes, noise is metaphysical.*"[1]
– Michel Serres

"*Schönberg wrote atonal music, Cage wrote acomposition, I write amusic*."[2]
– Nam June Paik

Fig. 1 Boulez, Moderna and Stockhausen, Studio for electronic music, Darmstadt, 1954. Source: feastofmusic.com

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[1] Michel Serres, *Genese* (Paris: Grasset, 1982): trans. Genevieve James and James Nielson, Genesis (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p.13

[2] Nam June Paik, 'Letter to Dr. Steinecke', Cologne, 2nd May, 1959 in Edith Decker (ed.), *Nam June Paik, Niederschriften eines Kulturnomaden* (Cologne, 1992), p. 51–53

Changes, Indeterminacy, Communication – those are the titles of three successive lectures given by the American composer John Cage at the international summer courses for new music in Darmstadt in 1958. Cage, who was approached by the course director Dr. Wolfgang Steinecke in order to fill Pierre Boulez' spot (who was unable to complete his work on time), caused a major stir in the small German town. His charismatic appearance – arguably even more so than his musical oeuvre – would have a profound effect on the development of the post-war avant-garde. In the wake of his ground-breaking explorations, artists and musicians searched for new ways to move beyond the Western traditions of both art and music. Composers and artists alike were challenging the rigid formats of the cultural canon, aiming to expand their practices beyond the predeterminate limits of a single genre. Cage's concepts of indeterminacy, chance and the introduction of silence and non-musical sounds into music became the conceptual palette of this post-war avant-garde.

The long-lasting impact that Cage had on his students, many of which would go on to play central roles in the Fluxus movement, cannot be overstressed. But what was so special about Cage? What made his audience in Darmstadt so receptive to his ideas? And where did composers go from there? My aim in this essay is to propose a response to those questions by zooming in on three years from about 1959 to 1962 during which a circle of key figures – among others electronic music pioneer Karl-Heinz Stockhausen, Korean musician and multimedia artist Nam June Paik and visual artist Mary Bauermeister – embarked on a short-lived, yet immensely influential quest for new creative expressions, that would transform the languages of art and music to come.

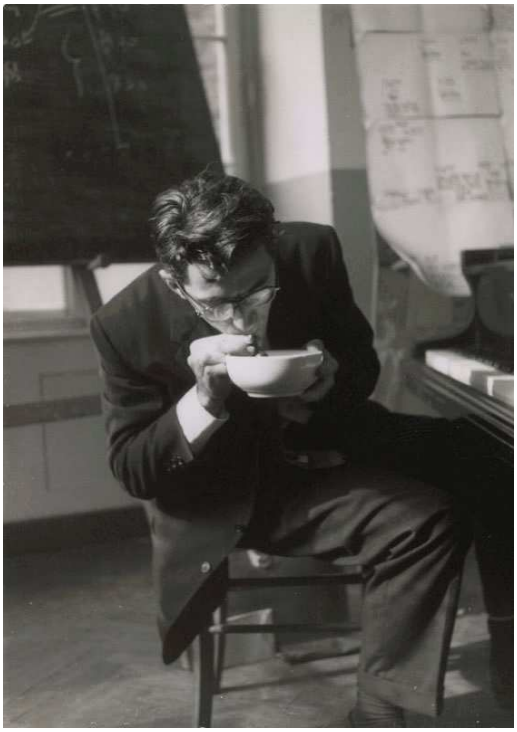

Fig. 2 John Cage preparing a piano, ca. 1954. Source: frieze.com
Fig. 3 David Tudor performing Water Works by John Cage, Darmstadt, 1958. Source: getty.edu

Darmstadt ‘58

In 1972, the by then internationally celebrated multimedia artist Nam June Paik stated that his “past 14 years is nothing but an extension of one memorable evening at Darmstadt ’58”[3] – an evening at the international summer school for new music. It was Karlheinz Stockhausen who had convinced the director to invite Cage to Darmstadt. After studying the second Viennese school including Schönberg and Berg, Stockhausen worked together with Pierre Boulez at the studio for electronic music at the WDR, where they explored the possibilities for synthetic constructions of sound through noise generators, sinusoidal tone generators, and sound oscillators – radio station equipment re-purposed for musical investigations. The studio was the first of its kind and became known as the birth place of serial electronic music. The fact that composers and artists at the time were searching for abstract, non-figurative and non-representative forms of expression was no coincidence. They had experienced the horrors of the war and the hunger of the post-war years. They had no more trust in the political and cultural values of the father generation. If there was a way to bring art and music forward, it had to be in an act of total total rupture. Avant-garde music became a way of questioning the values of society. Deconstructive gestures, the introduction of strange sounds and to a certain degree violent performances were a means to rebel against a social atmosphere that still hold on to oppressive, encrusted structures. In this climate, a figure like Cage, who was preparing pianos (Fig.2) and making music that sounded unlike anything they had heard before, seemed absolutely radical.

Fig. 4 Bauermeister (second left) and Stockhausen (centre) being shown a letter by Boulez, Darmstadt, 1962. Source: guardian.com

[3] Nam June Paik, ‘Letter to Cage’ (1972), in Judson Rosebush, ed., *Video’n’Videology: Nam June Paik* (1959-1973), exh. cat. (Syracruse, New York: Everson Museum of Art, 1974), unpaginated

Expanding the sphere of music: Sound and Silence

Before focusing on the pre-Fluxus circle emerging in Cologne, I want to spend a moment outlining Cage's most relevant contributions to the sphere of music. In his early career as a composer, Cage was a student of Arnold Schönberg, the father of 12-tonal music. However, Cage was lacking the talent for harmony and musical structure, which led Schöneberg to attest him that he would never be able to write music.[4] It was only in 1951, in an anechoic chamber at Harvard university, that Cage made an observation that would not only determine his own career, but change the history of music to come. Cage realised that there is no such thing as total silence. Even if one were to eliminate all external sounds, one would still hears two tones – a higher pitched one generated in the nervous system, and a lower pitched one generated by one's own blood circulation. From this observation, Cage came to redefine the notion of silence. For him, silence described not the absence of sound, but the absence of *intentional* sound. He went on to ask: Why do we prefer some sounds over others? If the universe is never silent, why do we cherish what we call music and dismiss what we call noise? Could we open our senses to the hidden music of the cosmos?

By introducing silence (i.e. the absence of intentional sound) and non-musical sounds into his compositions, Cage expanded the realm of music ad infinitum. If, as he proposed, there is no sound, wether audible or inaudible, that could not be part of a composition, then the repertoire of the composer became boundless. For there to be music, according to Cage, there is no need for a human organisation of certain sounds according to certain structures, we do not even have to do anything other than to listen. Since the world is already filled with sounds, whether we perceive them or not, there is no *other* left to music. In Douglas Kahn's words "sounds no longer required any authorial or intentional organization, nor anyone to organise them – just someone to listen."[5] This conceptual expansion of the sphere of an artistic practice had an enormous impacts beyond music on dance, painting and performance. Cage redefined our epistemological understanding of what constitutes music, and therefore what constitutes culture.

Music that clears the mind: Zen and Chance

Cage came to find that the history of Western music was based on the experience of beauty and harmony. What was generally defined as beautiful, however, he believed to be a case of learned conventions. Cage sought to eliminate the social and cultural meanings that generally attached to certain sounds. He proposed to think of sound as an entity in and for itself, instead of a vessel of meaning and a medium for emotion, as in the tradition of Beethoven or Wagner. Inspired by his studies of Indian philosophy and Zen Buddhism, Cage embarked on a search for a musical language that would be independent of the tastes and preferences of the socially formed ego. By contemplation all sounds without making judgements, Cage envisioned a meditative form of music that should clear the mind form preconceived sets of values. He was in search of the "truth of matter,"[6] a truth that could not be found in subjective expression. Hence, he stated that "The

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[4] John Cage, *An Autobiographical Statement*, 1990 via http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/john-cage-an-autobiographical-statement/1757 [accessed Dec 10, 2015]

[5] Douglas Kahn, extract from 'The Latest: Fluxus and Music', in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, eds, *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), p.105

[6] John Cage, *Conversing with Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), p.65

purpose of music is to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences. […] the responsibility of the artist is to imitate nature in her manner of operation."[7] One way for him to remove the layer of subjectivity and the ego in the Western musical tradition was to turn to chance operations. He started to experiment with tossing coins and the Chinese oracle I Ching, which he would use for many of his most influential works. As a result of chance operations, each element of the composition would be attributed the same value and no outcome would be preferred over another. The result of chance operations, however, was not chaos. Indeterminacy on the part of the composer was rather a possibility to reveal the ontological order of sound itself. Suzanne Delehanty states that the inclusion of sound, silence, noise and the spoken word into the work of art allowed artists to enter a third realm:

> "In this realm, compounded in the artist's mind of physical and metaphysical reality, the once discrete, static relations among artists, art object and viewer began to quiver and resound. […] The work of art, once silent, permanent and timeless, became a hybrid object that began to resonate beyond the worlds of illusion and reality. Sound announced that human experience, ever changing in time and space – the substance of life itself – had become both the subject and object of art."[8]

Fig. 5 Nam June Paik before his performance of Homage à John Cage at atelier Bauermeister, 1959. Photo: Manfred Leve

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[7] John Cage, *An Autobiographical Statement*, 1990 via http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/john-cage-an-autobiographical-statement/1757 [accessed Dec 10, 2015]

[8] Suzanne Delehanty, *Soundings: An International Survey of Sound in the Plastic Arts* (Purchase, New York: Neuberger Museum/State University of New York, 1981), unpaginated

Post-Cage?

It is no surprise that when Cage gave his lectures in Darmstadt, the audience soaked up his ideas, among them 24-year old Nam June Paik. The impact Cage had on his students was unparalleled. It is American Fluxus artist George Maciunas who best sums up how the various concepts relevant to the Fluxus movement already converge in Cage:

> "We have the idea of indeterminacy and simultaneity and concretism and noise coming from Futurism, theatre, like Futurist music of Russolo. then we have the idea of the Reasy-made and concept art coming from Marcel Duchamp. Okay, we have the idea of collage and concretism from Dadaists…They all end up with John Cage with his prepared piano, which is really a collage of sounds."[9]

Yet, the adoption of Cagean ideas did not go without struggles. If Cage had stretched the space of music ad infinitum, if any could be music or no sound at all, where else can a composer go after him? What barriers were left to be torn down? Was there a way to step out of Cage's shadow, to somehow get "post-Cage"?

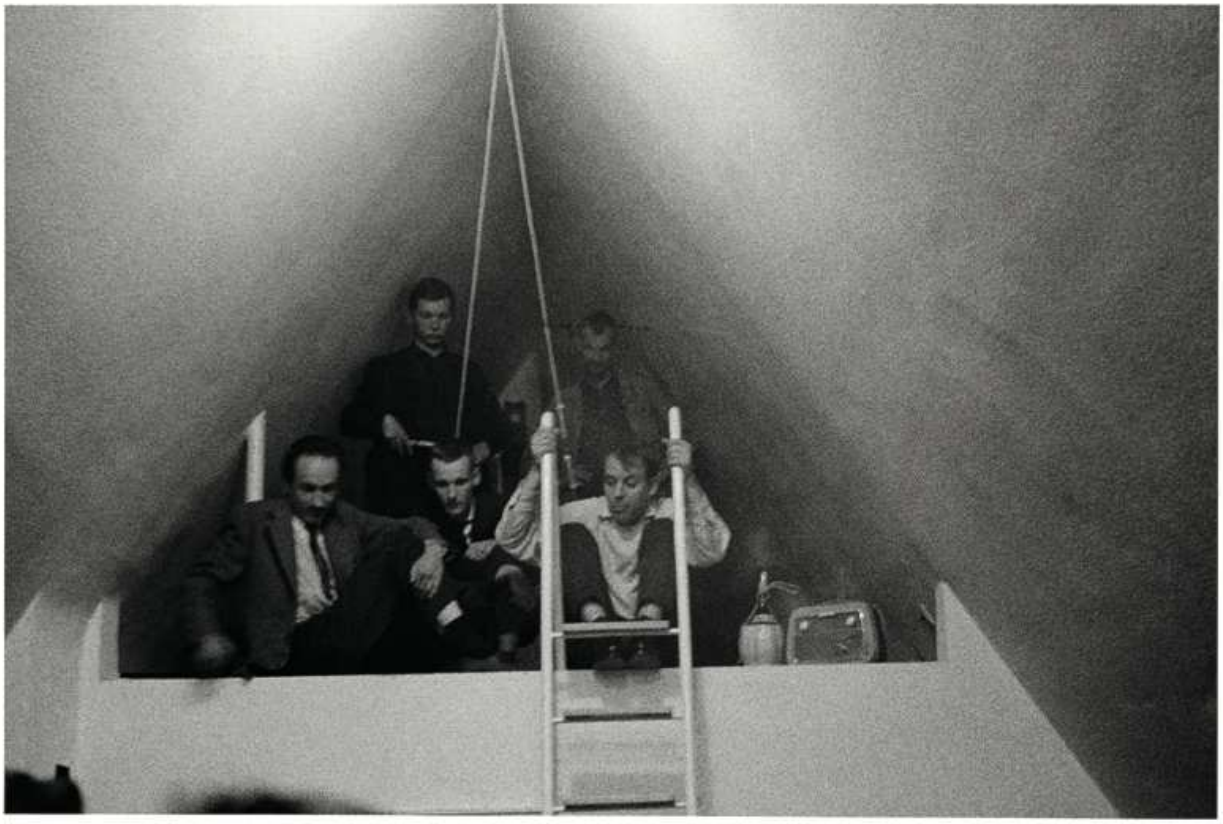

Fig. 6 Stockhausen (at the ladder), "Contre-Festival" at Atelier Bauermeister, 1960. Photo: Manfred Leve

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[9] George Maciunas in 'Transcripts of the Videotaped Interview with George Macunias by Larry Miller, March 24, 1978', in Jon Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus etc/Addenada 1: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, exh. cat. (New York: Ink &, 1983), p.12

Lintgasse 28

One space where this question was thoroughly tested was the atelier of Mary Bauermeister, a talented young woman who, against the will of her parents, had moved to Cologne to study painting. Primarily interested in paint and tactile materials, Bauermeister was also passionate about new music and took a class in composition held by Stockhausen, who she would soon madly fall in love with. Although better known for their adventurous ménage-à-trois, the first exchanges between the two were intellectual: Bauermeister introduced the value of experimentation to Stockhausen, who, in turn, taught her about structure and mathematical form. It was at his class in Darmstadt where she developed *Malerische Konzeption* (Painterly Conception), a 'gesamtsinnliches' (total-sensory) work that would explicitly merge the languages of music and painting.[10] During her childhood, Bauermeister was able to see colours in objects and it might be due to this ability that she developed a special interest in the synthesis of different senses. Stockhausen had a lot of respect for Bauermeister's work. In a letter to her, he admits that "You are further advanced in art, than I am in music. I need to catch up."[11] What both of them shared was a believe in the spiritual power of art and music. Stockhausen described *Stimmung* as a highly meditative piece of music:

> "Time is eliminated. One listens to the inner of sound, the inner of the harmonic spectrum, the inner of a vocal, to the inner. Gradual frequencies – barely bursts – all senses awake and calm. In the beauty of the sensual shines the beauty of the eternal."[12]

The mutual attraction between musical and artistic ideas did not only happen between Bauermeister and Stockhausen. After the official concerts of new music at the WDR, where Stockhauen, Boulez and others performed regularly, one would often gather in Bauermeister's atelier in Lintgasse 28. Over only two years from 1960 to 1962, the atelier turned into an important space for the exchange of new ideas in art and became a meeting point for some of the most forward-thinking artists and composers of the time, including George Maciunas, Joseph Beuys, David Tudor, George Bracht, Wolf Vostell, Nam June Paik and John Cage. Lintgasse 28 became the venue for a series of concerts conceived as antidotes to the WDR, often featuring composers who were not accepted into the official programme (Fig.6). Although called concerts, these events went far beyond the traditional concert situation. The first event in 1960 was entitled "Music–Texts–Painting–Architecture" – it is for this multidisciplinary approach that the Lintgasse concerts have been as neo-Dada and proto-Fluxus. Hannah Higgins, for example, refers to their explorations as "comparatively non-hierarchical exchanges of information across national, disciplinary and age boundaries."[13] One of the regular performers at was Nam June Paik, who, after graduating at the university of Tokio where he wrote a thesis on Schönberg's atonal music, had arrived in Germany in 1956 to continue his studies in Munich and Freiburg. The WDR found his work to be too experimental, but Bauermeister was immediately intrigued by his unconventional style of 'action' music. For example, he would start to seduce the audience by playing the Chopin Sonata Nocturne in B-Dur and then, suddenly,

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[10] Mary Bauermeister, *Ich hänge im Triolengitter* (München: C. Bertelsmann, 2011), p.57

[11] Karlheinz Stockhausen quoted by Mary Baumeister in an interview with Die Welt via http://www.welt.de/print/wams/nrw/article13611330/Der-Komponist-und-die-Frauen.html [accessed Dec 10, 2015]

[12] Karlheinz Stockhausen via www.mathildenhöhe.de [accessed Dec 10, 2015]

[13] Higgins, Hannah. 2002. *Fluxus Experience*. (Berkeley: University of California Press), p.11

crash his head onto the piano, destroy objects and 'attack' the audience. The influence of Cage was perceptible in all of his works. In 1959, Paik worked on the 'anti-music' piece *Hommage à John Cage*, a tumultuous collage including screams, toys, a hen and a motorcycle (Fig.5). Auditorial and visual components merged into a single, yet fragmented, work. Music became one more element alongside everyday objects, furniture, spoken word, written word, paint et cetera. The simultaneity of non-causally related elements prefigured the evolution of multimedia and intermedia art. At a performance of this work in Bauermeister's atelier, Paik famously shampooed David Tudor's and Cage's hair and cut off his tie – a Cologne carnival tradition that symbolises the act of male castration (he could not have known that the ties was a present by Zen master Suzuki). Paik then left the venue and, a while later, phoned to announce to that the performance had ended. It is easy to consider this work merely a chaotic spectacle. Nonetheless, it would be reductive to consider *Hommage à John Cage* only in terms of its humour or shock value. If something happened that made the audience laugh, that was accepted as part of the work, as any reaction on the side of the audience was. But humour was never the goal of the piece itself, the intention was sincere. In a 1959 letter to Dr. Steinecke, Paik explained in detail the musical and intellectual ambitions of the work. What is most striking is the abundance of philosophical, literary and musical references, as well as the clarity with which Paik assesses his own conflictual position in relation to his predecessors. The first part of the composition is described as "evidence that the sublime is essentially inseparable from the ugly and the comic."[14] Paik's aim is here to make a Cagean composition that evades ideals of harmony and beauty and that contests high-cultural preconceptions of what may or may not be suitable material for a composition. His work can therefore be understood as a college of disparate elements, which are nonetheless considered equal in relevance. The Second movement is described to comprise the following: "As bo-o-oring as possible: like Prous, Palestrina, Zen. Gregorian chant, Missa, Parisian cafe, life, sex and dog staring into the distance."[15] What is often overlooked is that the piece also contained a tape collage of sources including "Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, a German song, Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, a lottery announcement given over the phone, a news announcement of a foreign ministers' conference held in Geneva about the reunification of Germany, and a recording of concrete sounds – such as a Japanese toy car, a prepared piano, sine waves, noise and so on."[16] As a music scholar, Paik was highly knowledgable of the canon he sought to expand. In the attempt to "supplement Dada with music,"[17] he searched for a unique new style as a "serious (and non-restorative) antithesis to «twelve-tone mannerism». (Much as I still love Schoenberg and Stockhausen.)"[18] The references to classical composers in his pieces were less instances of him ridiculing the history of his own genre, but rather attempts to productively move forward from a legacy that he very much respected – even if this moving forward sometimes asked for drastic means, as in his piece *One for Violin Solo*, in which a violin is raised into the air by the performer for about five minutes, before he crushes it on the table, unleashing one last, horrible sound out of the instrument (Fig. 7).

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[14] Nam June Paik, 'Letter to Dr. Steinecke', Cologne, 2nd May, 1959 in Edith Decker (ed.), Nam June Paik, *Niederschriften eines Kulturnomaden*, (Cologne, 1992), p. 51–53

[15] ibid

[16] Michael Nyman, *Nam June Paik, Composer*, 1982 in Caleb Kelly, ed. *Sound*. (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), p. 174

[17] ibid

[18] ibid

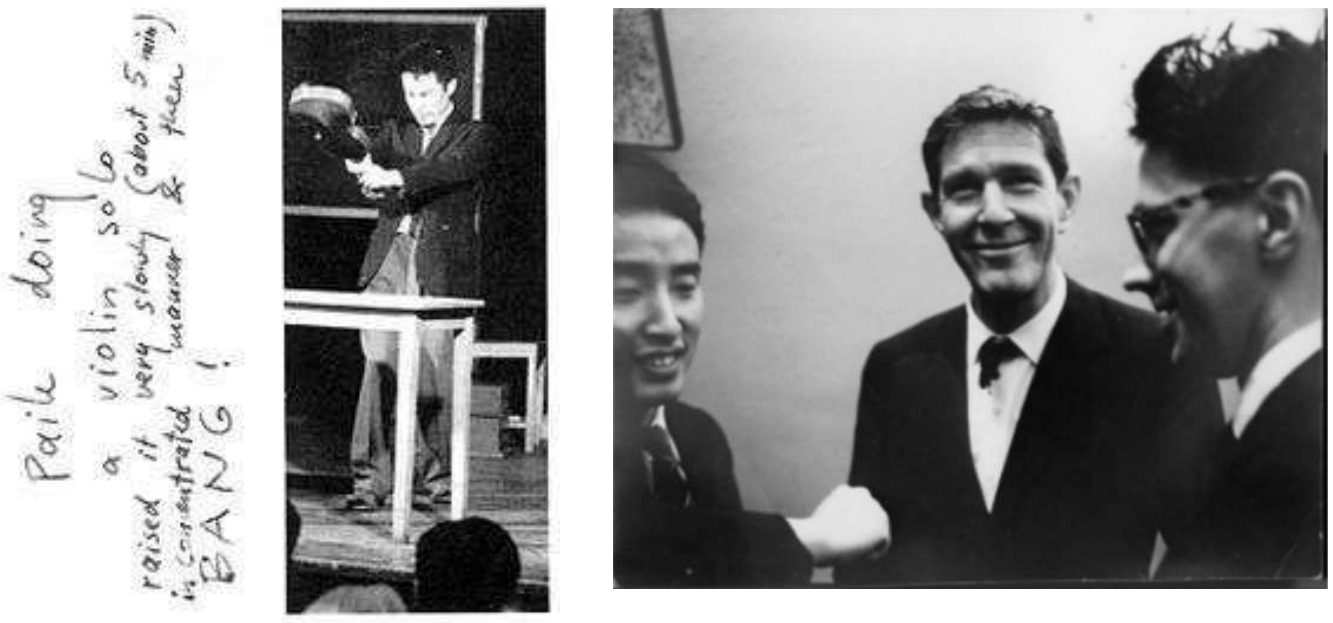
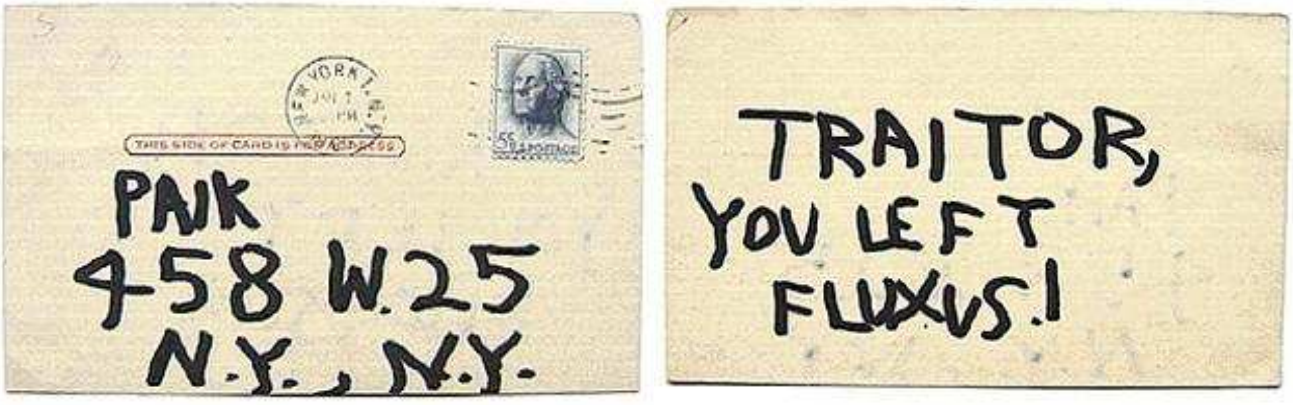


Fig. 7 Nam June Paik performing *One for Violin Solo*, Düsseldorf, 1962. Photo: George Maciunas. Source: medienkunstnetz.de
Fig. 8 Nam June Paik, John Cage and David Tudor after the concert «Kompositionen» at Atelier Bauermeister, Oct 6, 1960. Photo: Klaus Barisch. Source Galerie Schüppenhauer

In 1962, Stockhausen's *Originale*, in which Paik played a big part, was premiered in New York. Maciunas considered this move a betrayal of the European avant-garde and called Stockhausen a 'Cultural Imperialist'.[19] Shortly after, Bauermeitser moved to New York where she would spent productive years in exchange with artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. The Fluxus Festival which Maciunas had planned for Cologne, then took place in Wiesbaden.



Lintgasse was passé.
Fig. 9 Nam June Paik, »Traitor, you left Fluxes« (Postcard from George Maciunas to Nam June Paik), 1964 – 1965

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[19] via www.medienkunstnetz.de/werke/traitor/bilder/2/ [accessed Dec 10, 2015]

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would say that the Lintgasse atelier was unique in putting Cage's ideas to test, not only concerning the kind of works they performed, but also in terms of the mind set with which these artists from different genres, different nationalities and different levels of training (whereas a figure like Paik was highly skilled and trained in classical music, others came from entirely non-academic backgrounds) worked and lived together. Douglas Kahn states that "Much of the Fluxus corpus defied categorisation along the lines of established artistic disciplines – music, performance and the written word often coalescing into hybrid forms, exchanging places, or fitting themselves into the cracks of existing media."[20] It was precisely this indeterminate set-up of various formal elements that allowed for musical ideas to play a major role in the conceptual framing of the Fluxus project, especially concerning "the relationship of art to nature, society, mass media and the everyday."[21]

Consequences

Whether it is Bruce Numen who, in 1969, makes a piece that instructs the performer to drop a microphone in a hole one mile into the earth,[22] or Laurie Anderson, who writes a *Duet for Door Jamb and Violin* in 1977[23] – the influence that Cage and the pre-Fluxus avant-garde had on music and sound art of the following decades was immense. And the way Fluxus incorporated sound as a an artistic medium, which was so directly prefigured by the Lintgasse concerts, still has far reaching effects on contemporary practice, whether in the works of performance artists like Marina Abramovic or minimalist electronic composers like Carsten Nicolai.

Considering the accelerating levels of noise in contemporary urban environments, it will be exciting to see in what ways artist, composers and musicians will proceed to deal with sound as an artistic medium. Can we conceive new ways of engaging with the omnipresent sonic make-up of cities in the 21st century? What new possibilities do digital technologies hold for the ways we produce and perceive sounds? What new links will composers and artists find to make audio-visual art? It might be that the answer to those questions in the 21st century does not so much lie in a nostalgia for the radical avant-garde, but in a more subtle, less destructive engagement with sound. But if one thing is to be learned from Cage, then it is that the closer one listens, the more one hears – and that life is never silent.

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[20] Douglas Kahn, *The Latest: Fluxus and Music*, 1993 in Caleb Kelly, ed. *Sound*. (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), p.29

[21] ibid

[22] Bruce Nauman, Untitled (1969), for the proposal-based exhibition 'Art in the Mind', Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College (1970) in Caleb Kelly, ed. *Sound*. (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), p.186

[23] Laurie Anderson, 'Duet for Door Jamb and Violin', in Anderson, Notebook, Artist Book Series #1 (New York: the Collation Center, 1977); extract from Words in Reverse, Top Stories #2 (New York, 1979), unpaginated

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