

LINKAGE OF PERCEPTION

Wherever we may be - most of the time we hear sounds. If we don't pay attention to them, they disturb us. If we listen to them, we think them fascinating. John Cage, *The Future of Music - Credo* (Footnote 1), 1957/58

'Spaces of perception' Tilman Küntzel calls his installation in the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden. He has put a labyrinth of partitions into the two exhibition rooms; it is adapted from rooms and functions of a flat's or house's ground plan. In his 'model house' there is a dining room, as well as bathroom, TV corner and study. The second exhibition room opens to a garden or yard - only a built-in wall, centrally placed in front of the back wall of the room, walls off the scenery. Contrary to the clean-sterile, technically perfect architecture of the exhibition hall, Tilman Küntzel creates a provisional arrangement that makes a quick overview on the shown impossible. Usually it is possible to let the eyes freely wander through the rooms - now the visitor has to 'walk all over the exhibition' to see the exhibits. Besides everyone will find his individual way. Directly lead to the objects by this, he can perceive them for himself - free from other impressions and isolated in stands. In this connection curiosity is evoked - what is waiting for me when I turn round the corner? -, as well as concentration in a silent, direct confrontation with the object, that sometimes has its own demands on the visitor, is made possible.

For a moment everything seems to be normal: the rooms of the 'model house' fulfil particular functions. But then the irritation begins: aren't there faint noises coming from the pipe of the shower. When listening carefully one can hear a melody, taken from Raymond Roussel's novel *Locus Solus* (1914) (Footnote 2) (See picture and sound documentation) .



In the nearby study there is a lamp on the desk. When switching it on, the lighting conditions stay the same. Instead of it one can hear the scratching of a nib. - The lampshade is a loudspeaker! (See picture and sound documentation) In the TV room the news are on, a comfortable armchair is inviting to stay. But instead of the distant-distinguished reporting of Dagmar Berghoff (well-known German newsreader) & Co., this: along with the usual and expected pictures from foreign countries there are no commenting texts, but drum rhythms and flute sounds can be heard. Different recordings of ethnic music are attributed to the reports of the region they are belonging to. The visitor has to decide on his own if he thinks this folkloric underlying funny or exposing. Apart from that we are confronted with the question of the working-together of picture and sound: how do they overlap? Which

medium of conveying dominates the other one? Is there a possibility to reach a balance in the middle? Only if the usual alliance of optical and acoustical perception is broken, the reflection on these habitual mechanisms begins.

Tilman Küntzel is especially occupied with the working-together and linking-up of the different human sensory perceptions: sounds and noises 'in the wrong place, but also the visible consequences of sound waves that are - because of the low frequency - not audible for us, cause us 'not to believe our eyes and ears'.

In his work *Earth Sound* a globe (an inflatable plastic ball) floats in the air, moved as if by magic in certain intervals - who would not be reminded of Charlie Chaplin's *Great Dictator*! After a short time it lands on a column again. The whole thing is caused by the five times slowed down speed of a tape with a fragment of dixieland jazz. Played in multiple amplification, the vibrations of the membrane of a loudspeaker set the ball in motion. So the observer in the end can see sounds he cannot perceive with his ears because of physiological reasons. (See picture and sound documentation) "The eye seakes, the eare finds" was the motto of one of Küntzel's works (the *Interactive Torch* - recording sounds instead of giving light). In many of his works he almost provokes an exchange of the roles of the human sense organs. Sometimes elements of physical contact are also integrated - for instance when, with the help of a simple mechanism, a spoon permanently stirs a soup (that is slowly becoming unappetizing)-(*The Good and the Malicious...*). Some aspects of Küntzel's 'model flat' make us think of indelible memories of childhood - ("I don't eat my soup!"). Values and ideas that are passed on to children and young persons through conventions as well. Who would not remember with some disconcertment his first confrontation with the word "Kulturbeutel" (about: 'culture bag' - German expression for 'washbag') - even if only the small plastic bag for comb and toothbrush is meant. In the bathroom Küntzel has put some different cultural possessions into his *Sounding Washbags* (rotating around their axis). From two endless tapes a fragment of Swiss folk music sounds. Because of the different length of the two tapes, constantly new mixings and overlapping of diverse sounds appear. In a certain way a sound collage without ending manifests itself while playing. (See picture and sound documentation) The red walkmen in bilious green bags (complementary contrasts) are only dummies, the sounds come from other loudspeakers. But the perceiving person is easily lead up the garden path - obviously willing to forge links between cause and effect in the easiest way. Scarcely credible is also the causal chain that often is falsely made with Küntzel's camera-monitor interaction. For the project "Weltbekannt e.V. Hamburg" obvious sheet metal imitations of a video camera and a TV monitor had been placed in public showcases. A photoelectric barrier, independently connected, switched on a small red light at the 'camera' when people were passing; so the persons affected had the conclusive impression to be 'on the air' - even if the wires were rusty. In the Kunsthalle this installation is put up in 'the garden' - as a modern fossil of media history. After the visitor has seen through this confusion the 'real' flashing of the motion indicator installation of the Kunsthalle will seem to him as doubtful in its function - in the face of all these surrogates.

In the yard or garden of Küntzel's 'model house' the objects and installations unfold more freely and less 'for a specific purpose'. Two light-sound sculptures use the geometric basic forms of circle and ellipse.(Footnote 3) At first glance they seem to be 'abstract' and free of concrete function, even if one can find familiar everyday objects, such as three ping-pong balls in *Pulsars* and an egg-cutter that is integrated in the central opening of the second object. From the back threads of lametta flutter against the cutting wires and produce a metallic sound; amplified through spatial resonance and loudspeakers 'material sound' is 'transmitted': the tightened metal wires of the kitchen utensil have become strings of a strange musical instrument. One of the sound openings of the cosmic-blue object is formed as an early-Byzantine note symbol (compare the signet printed on the CD3) (See picture and sound documentation). The sounds as such arouse associations of mechanical chimes or tubular bells touched by the stream of air. Every 'body' is

loaded with energy, has its vibration and can be set swinging. The German avant-garde film-maker Oskar Fischinger in a conversation with John Cage once said: "Every object has a soul; and this soul can be released by setting the object swinging."(Footnote 4)

The plainness of his means shows Küntzel's unspent view on the omnipresent, often standardized small utensils that are never looked at consciously by many people, because of their functionality. For example, what is the "Euro-loop"? It is a standardized gap in plastic or cardboard to hang up packed goods on hangers at shelves in supermarkets. Tilman Küntzel extends these trivial-functional forms into the sculptural. He hammers a Haribo-bag (jellybaby-bag) from massive ship's steel, for example, and again 'produces' modern fossils. Cheap striped plastic bags pile on top of each other as a light sculpture - with a flickering chain of light-emitting diodes drawn through the inside. One can see these bags with the streams of travellers from East Europe - on railway stations one has to walk round the 'stocks' that are packed in them. Küntzel transforms them into a fragile, transparent spot that clearly shows the flimsiness of the western consumer society everyone strives for.

The sound objects are often set going with just as simple as effective small parts from handcraft shops. Switches, grinding contacts, motors for model machines, walkmen, microphones. The ways of functioning of his wondrously modified objects, often combined in an unusual way, - Küntzel does not disguise them. In quickly-made construction plans every path of wires and the whole technical 'insides' is explained. The mystery is not the production but the effect of the works that are determined for an interaction with the perceiving visitor.

Tilman Küntzel got important impulses from Prof Claus Böhmler (born 1939), who was also occupied with links between the perceiving organs. He describes these occurrences under the title *Projects*:

From the touchable...into the non-audible
From the invisible...into the audible
From the audible...into the visible
From the too fast...into the too big
From the bended...into the transparent
From the touchable...into what can be smelled and the audible
From the not-to-be-smelled...into the cross-eyed big(Footnote 5)

In Böhmler's sketches and suggestions - for example, for a "Universe Hear-Speak-Set" in the drawing *Hearing and Speaking - at the Same Time*(1985)(Footnote 6) - there is often an ironic-subversive note; (...?)

The collage and the overlapping of partly defamiliarized taped sound or music - sometimes using computer programs - is another correspondance in the interests of teacher and student.(Footnote 7)

The creative potential of the media world and the world of technology and machinery is as productive for Tilman Küntzel as the natural, the human evidences and the evidences of creatures that he 'finds'. In fact they can be 'networked' - to stay in computer language: highly artificial synthetic sounds enter into symbiosis, rhythmic and melodious dialogues or 'multilogues' with the mating calls of capercaillies and the sounds of rhinos running, and so on.

All this wouldn't be possible without the 'godfather' John Cage who uses the connection of artificial and natural sounds in his compositions for a long time.(Footnote 8) For Cage this is followed by an equality of (international) sounds and(casual) noises. In the context of this article it cannot be referred to the very interesting history of 'sound art' in the 20th century; it had been especially sensitized for an instrumentation with everyday-sounds by the sound generators ("Intonarumori") of the futurist Luigi Russolo since 1913.(Footnote 9)

Maybe John Cage and Sigmar Polke are the most important points of reference for Tilman Küntzel. From the American composer it is the aleatorical way of composition - it is made with the help of operations happening by chance that derive from certain possibilities of, for example, the *I Ging*. From Sigmar Polke it is the rich, creative imagination that creatively unfolds by using lost property and quotations and so gets its power to shape.

At the moment Küntzel is realizing his newest work "*There's a Song Slumbering in All the Things...*". A small collection of poems (Sources of Cheerfulness)(Footnote 10), found on the street, as a motto has the poetic lines by Joseph von Eichendorff:

There's a song slumbering in all the things,
that now dream on and on,
and the world commences to sing,
if only you find the magic word.

Tilman Küntzel again puts this image of the romantic poet - of the magic word that can 'unlock' the life in things - into an interactive context, including playful accidental moments. A melody chip and a sound switch from a handcraft shop - ready-made pseudo-imagination that allows the handyman to have eight different melodies for his door bell in store, sounding by principle of chance - are added to a repro of the poem's lines on the tabletop. Tilman Küntzel indiscriminately 'assimilates' these building blocks to his work. The electronic elements allow the visitor an acoustic search for the 'magic word' - may it be by clapping, speaking, singing, and so on, so that the technology inside reacts. So Küntzel's work is brought to life by the acting of the perceiving person - by intervening he actually completes it.

Tilman Küntzel's objects need 'public space' - the curious attentive person as well as the unconcerned passer-by who only accidentally gets involved in an 'incident of perception'.

In 1991 the artist Guillaume Bijl originally furnished a gallery room as a supermarket(Footnote 11) and so attracted unsuspecting passers-by to shop. If functions and furnishing are faked in nearly perfect mimicry, only few manage an exposure: for moments art and life are welded together in irritation. At the end of this article I want to refer to Raymond Roussel (1877-1933), the french literate whose importance wasn't noticed until the surrealists (among them Salvador Dali). His main works *Impressions d'Afrique* (1910) and *Locus Solus* (1914) with their exuberant, droll, partly obscure and frightening fantasies - the materializations through incredible technical 'inventions' are often described in details over pages - have prompted Küntzel to make compositions and objects. Inventions have to be understood in the sense of inventiveness and creativity. In the end, what else are inventions than to understand the 'impossible' or something only thought of as 'possible' and to translate it into action?

The perceiving person may be encouraged to track down the 'possible' - that is mostly thought of as unreal - in Tilman Küntzel's objects and compositions, too.

Angelika Beckmann,
Kunsthalle Baden-Baden (D) March 1992

Translation: Roy Eichenauer, Hamburg

See also the essay titled A CD AT THE MUSEUM by Tilman Küntzel, which was published in the same catalogue. It describes the audio piece WIR FANGEN DAS MÖGLICHE, which he composed for the catalogue of this exhibition

1 Quotation from: Richard Kostelanetz, *John Cage*, Cologne 1973, p. 83. back

2 Raymond Roussel, *Locus Solus*, Frankfurt/M. 1977, p. 259. back

3 Due to a change in the concept of the exhibition at short notice, Tilman Küntzel shows the works *Do My Mother a Favour*, 1991 and *There's a Song Slumbering in All the Things...*, 1992 instead of the light-sound sculptures. [back](#)

4 Richard Kostelanetz, *John Cage im Gespräch* (In Conversation with J.C.), Cologne, 2nd edition 1991, p. 36. [back](#)

5 Michael Erlöff, *Claus Böhmler. Das Verhältnismäßige in der Kunst - ein nichtlineares Programm* (TheProportional in Art - a Non-Linear Program), in *Künstler, Kritisches Lexikon der Gegenwartskunst*, issue 10/1990, p.2. [back](#)

6 *Ibid.*, fig. 11, p.8. [back](#)

7 Ursula Block/Michael Glasmeier, *Broken Music. Artist's Recordwork*, Berlin 1989, p. 106. Please notice the article by Tilman Küntzel in this booklet. [back](#)

8 Wulf Herzogenrath, *John Cage: Insel der Konzentration* (Island of Concentration), in *Künstler, Kritisches Lexikon der Gegenwartskunst*, issue 15/1991 [back](#)

9 Exhibition catalogue Luigi Russolo: *Die Geräuschkunst* (Sound Art) 1913-1931, Bochum 1985/85 [back](#)

10 *Quellen des Frohsinns* (Sources of Cheerfulness). Gedanken und Gedichte (Thoughts and Poems) von (from) Wilhelm Busch bis (to) K.H. Waggerl, St. Gallen, 23rd edition, 1958. [back](#)

11 Rainer Metzger, *Die liquidierten Dinge. Über das Tautologische an einigen Arbeiten der achtziger Jahre* (The Liquidated Things. On the Tautological in Some of the Works of the 80's), in *Artis*, 43rd volume 1991, No. 3, p. 16-20 and 17s. [back](#)