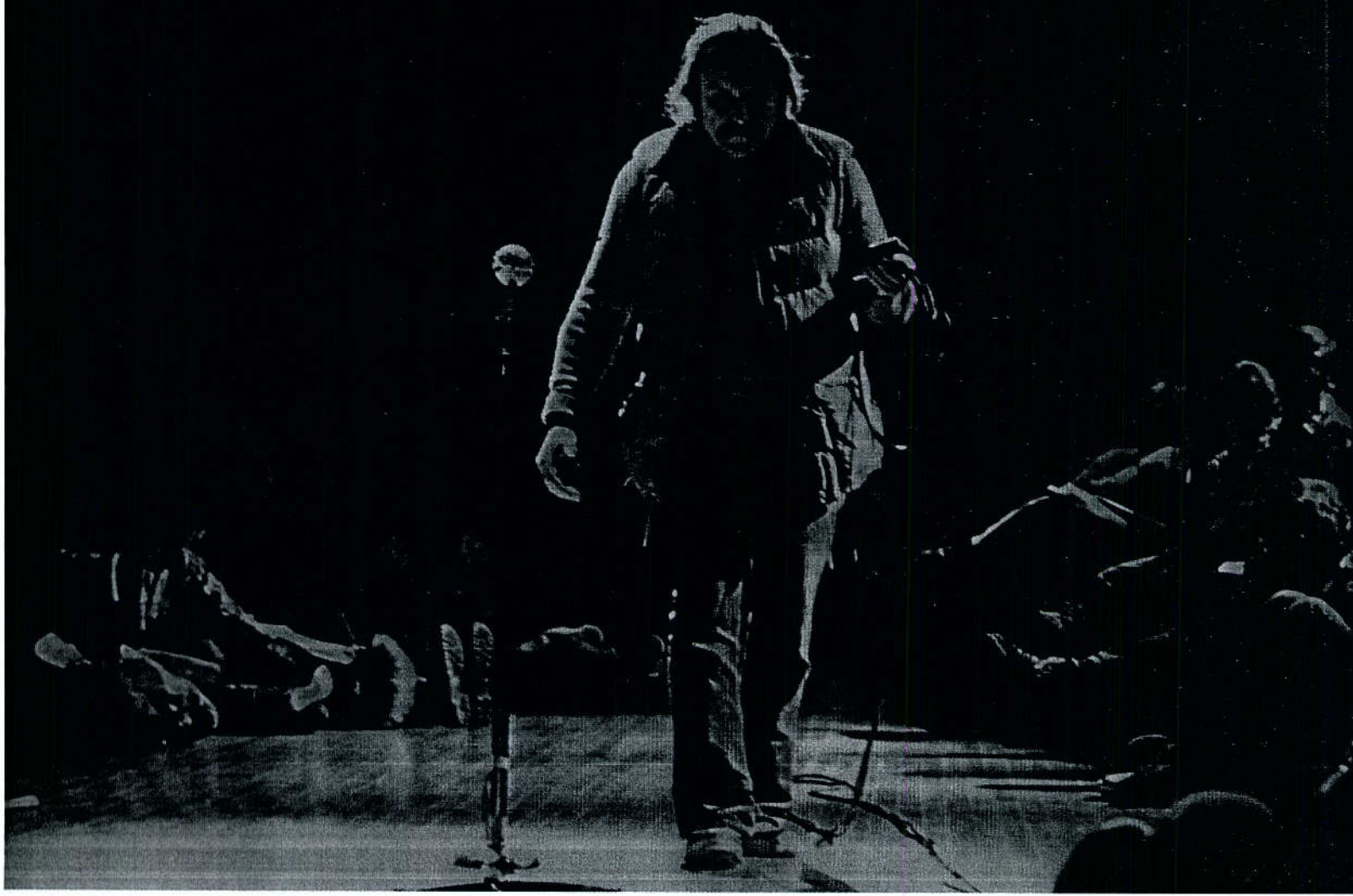


THE SOUND OF SPACE

In the late 1960s, a new generation of artists shifted our attention from the what to the where – from the art object to the physical space the object occupies. But history has overlooked those who used sound to explore this transition, argues Anthony Huberman

This page: Alvin Lucier, *Bird and Person Dying*, 1970s



Over the past 25 years there have been a number of exhibitions at visual arts institutions that have focused on sound. In the last five years their number has increased to the point of almost an art fad. Often they include a subset (sometimes even all) of the following: music, kinetic sculpture, instruments activated by the wind or played by the public, conceptual art, sound effects, recorded readings of prose or poetry, visual artworks which also make sound, paintings of musical instruments, musical automatons, film, video, technological demonstrations, acoustic re-enactments, interactive computer programs which produce sound, etc. In short, 'sound art' seems to be a category which can include anything which has or makes sound and even, in some cases, things which don't.

Sometimes these 'sound art' exhibitions do not make the mistake of including absolutely everything under the sun, but then most often what is selected is simply music or a diverse collection of musics with a new name. This is cowardly.

When faced with musical conservatism at the beginning of the last century, the composer Edgard Varèse responded by proposing to broaden the definition of music to include all organised sound. John Cage went further and included silence. Now even in the aftermath of the timid 'forever Mozart decades' in music, our response surely cannot be to put our heads in the sand and call what is essentially new music something else – 'sound art'.

I think we need to question whether or not 'sound art' constitutes a new art form. The first question, perhaps, is why we think we need a new name for these things which we already have very good names for. Is it because their collection reveals a previously unremarked commonality?

Let's examine the term. It is made up of two words. The first is sound. If we look at the examples above, although most make or have sound of some sort, it is often not the most important part of what they are – almost every activity in the world has an aural component. The second word is art. The implication here is that they are not arts in the sense of crafts, but fine art. Clearly regardless of the individual worth of these various things, a number of them simply have little to do with art.

It's as if perfectly capable curators in the visual arts suddenly lose their equilibrium at the mention of the word sound. 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'.

In art, the medium is not often the message.

If there is a valid reason for classifying and naming things in culture, certainly it is for the refinement of distinctions. Aesthetic experience lies in the area of fine distinctions, not the destruction of distinctions for promotion of activities with their least common denominator, in this case sound.

Much of what has been called 'sound art' has not much to do with either sound or art.

With our now unbounded means to shape sound, there are, of course, an infinite number of possibilities to cultivate the vast potential of this medium in ways which do go beyond the limits of music and, in fact, to develop new art forms. When this becomes a reality, though, we will have to invent new words for them. 'Sound Art' has been consumed.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were busy art-historical years, with the particularly potent moments of artistic experimentation commonly associated with post-minimalism, performance art and the beginnings of video art. Transcending media and inventing new ones, several artists became increasingly self-aware of the way art works in (and with) physical space. The shift of attention from what an object is to where it is (and how the two are inseparable) brought art onto the streets, into lofts, abandoned piers, open fields, onto television and the airwaves. While Gordon Matta-Clark cut through buildings, Robert Smithson intervened with nature; Richard Long walked for miles, and Dennis Oppenheim cut lines in wheat fields; Robert Barry used radio waves, while Walter de Maria drew with lightning; Chris Burden shot at 747s taking off from airstrips, and Vito Acconci masturbated under the raised floor of an empty gallery. Overall, object gave way to place. The visual artists who challenged these limits found their way into the art historical mainstream through Brian O'Doherty's 'Inside the White Cube', a lecture which became a series of essays published in *Artforum* in 1976, famously describing the potency of 'the box', or the gallery, the container of all things art.

Never reaching the same level of recognition (in the art-historical narrative) were the artists also using sound to push these limits of space: Max Neuhaus, Alvin Lucier, La Monte Young, Barry Le Va, Terry Fox and Bruce Nauman. Such pioneers have more commonly discussed their relationship with the history of music, by referencing Erik Satie's furniture music or Karlheinz Stockhausen's serialism. The close conceptual alignments between the innovative project of the so-called post-minimalist visual artists and that of many sound artists working at the same time are striking, and contextualising them within this art-historical frame seems urgent: the narrative of the art surfacing in this period is incomplete without these important, and often missing, protagonists. At a time when visual artists reflexively considered the 'box' and pioneered a transition from hermetic object to porous space, artists working with sound similarly began making a fundamental shift from time-based music to place-based sound.

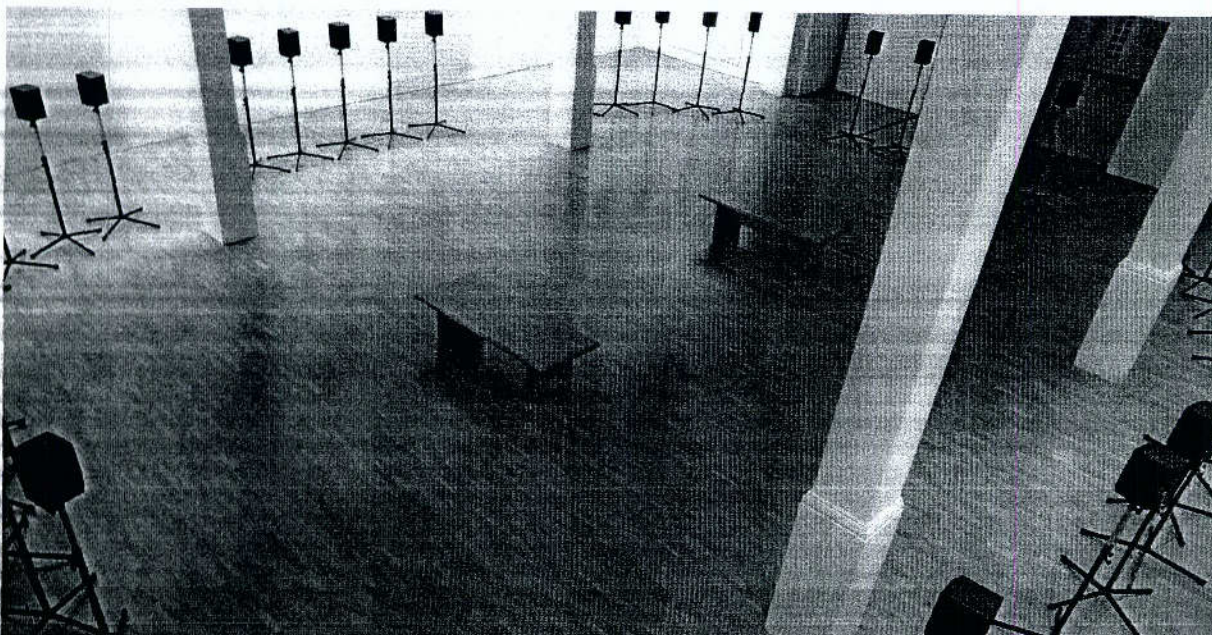
John Cage's *433*" (1952) is perhaps one example that does actually appear in art history textbooks. The note-less composition was meant to draw the listener's attention to the ambient sounds of the place in

which it was 'performed': the sounds of the nearby street, of creaking concert hall seats, of whispers, of yawns. Cage revealed the concert hall as a place with its own Duchampian readymade aural personality.

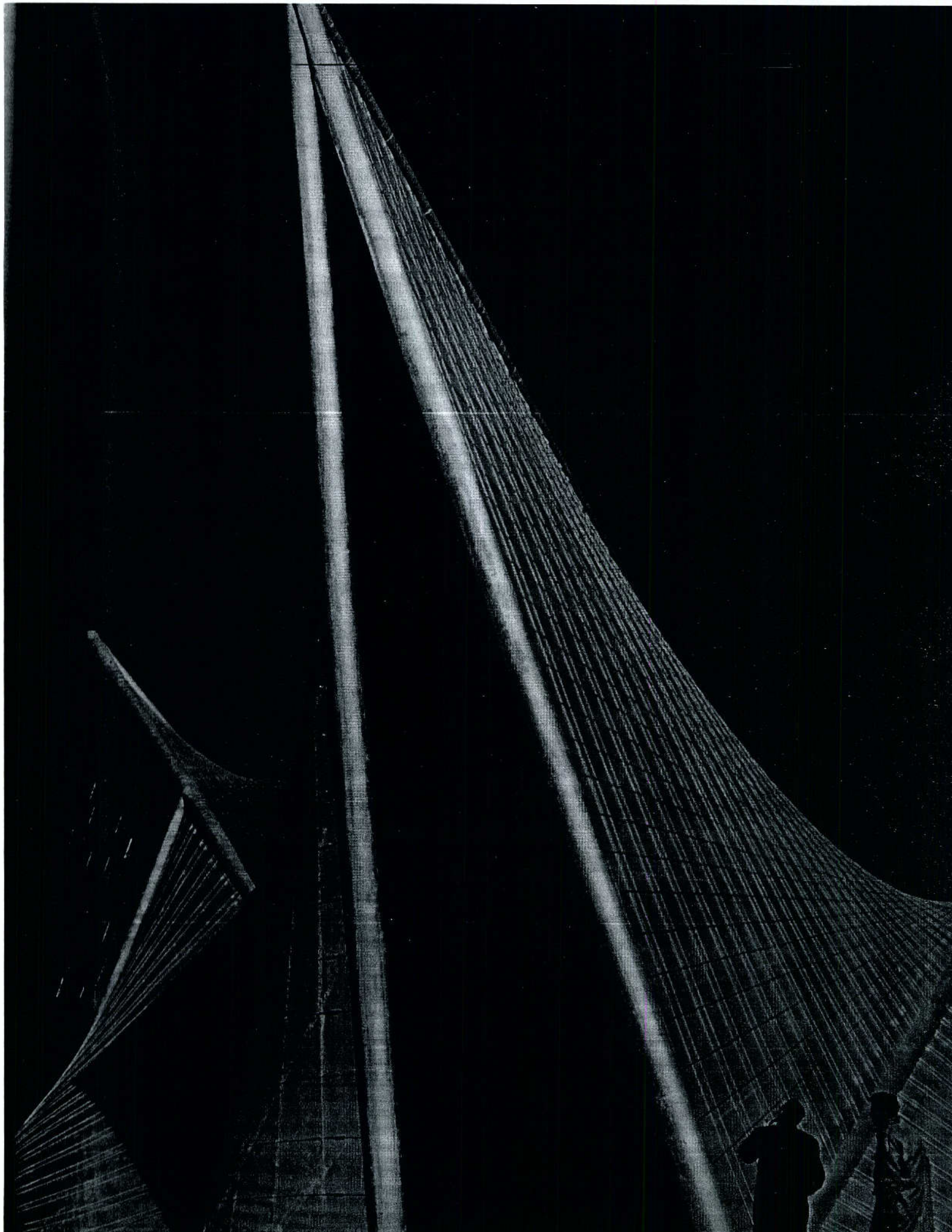
Cage, though, was still working within the pre-determined architectural characteristics of the concert hall. A more elaborated experiment, bringing space in contact with its own sound, occurred in 1958, when Le Corbusier was invited to design the Philips Pavilion at that year's World's Fair in Brussels. Working at the time as his assistant and chief engineer was the Greek composer Iannis Xenakis, to whom the bulk of the Pavilion's design of an immersive multi-media environment of sound and light is actually indebted. The intention, obviously, was ultimately a commercial one: to flaunt the high-tech savviness of the Philips Corporation. French composer Edgar Varèse was commissioned to create music for the Pavilion to give the architecture an aural texture. He wrote the famous *Poème Electronique*, played over 400 loudspeakers installed throughout the structure. This was not a concert or a performance with a beginning, middle and end; it was an environment designed for and with sound. This landmark experiment marked a transition from sound treated musically to sound treated architecturally: rather than sound as a musical progression through time, here was a sonic exploration of space.

Widely acknowledged as a challenge to the sanctity of the calm exhibition space, Robert Smithson moved outdoors in the 1960s and 1970s to create his famous earthworks, where the art object was at the mercy of such fluctuating and indeterminate variables as the weather, the tides and natural erosion. Like Smithson, sound art pioneer Max Neuhaus began working outside in 1965, in search of the sounds of bustling crowds and the richer and more chaotic overlappings of natural space. First an accomplished concert musician of considerable notoriety and repute, who performed with Cage and Stockhausen, Neuhaus renounced his career in concert halls to devote himself to what he ▶

The 1958 Philips Pavilion was an environment designed for and with sound; a sonic exploration of space



Left: La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, *Dream House: Seven + Eight Years of Sound and Light*, sound and light environment, MELA Foundation, New York
Right: Le Corbusier, Philips Pavilion, Brussels World Fair, 1958



called – and was the first to call – ‘sound installations’. In 1966, Neuhaus took Cage’s ‘433’ to where he felt it should belong: in the streets. In a performance piece called *Listen*, audience members gathered at a specified location, where Neuhaus stamped each person’s hand with the word ‘listen’, and proceeded to lead a walk through New York sites such as the 14th Street ConEd power plant or PATH train stations. Rather than worrying about producing any sounds himself, he pointed to the way a sonic where becomes a musical what.

For *Times Square* (1977), Neuhaus placed speakers under a grate on a pedestrian island. Passers-by might notice a ringing drone sound that seems out of place: amidst the traffic noise, the car horns and the police whistles, an invisible sound seems to capture the constant buzzing of energy and movement of the intersection, or the humming of the billboards’ electricity. Years later, Neuhaus would elaborate: ‘the sound is not the work; the sound is the material that I make the place out of, that I transform the space into a place with.’

Alvin Lucier was also engaged in an aural version of context-as-content, exploring how sound could reflect the personality of space. Most of this American composer’s ‘scores’ consisted of written instructions, much like Sol LeWitt provided notes on how to execute his conceptual proposals. In an early work, *Chambers* (1968), the composer asks to use any acoustic object that performers would play, gradually moving further and further away from each other in space, until each other’s sounds become inaudible. In his first trial, with conch

shells, the performers covered a span of half a mile before the piece came to an end. Lucier has been quoted as saying, ‘I simply want to find out what these environments do to sounds’ and discover how an environment can ‘intrude its personality on whatever sounds occur’. *Quasimodo the Great Lover* (1970) asks that a sound be carried, through relay ‘stations’, across the hallways and corridors of buildings, or even across vast expanses of ocean. Performers make a sound into a microphone, which is then played back on a speaker in another part of the building, picked up by another microphone situated further still, on to another speaker, etc. The audience hears the sound once it has gone through this trajectory, after it has accumulated any of the ambient sounds that any of the microphones along the relay-system might have picked up and added to the ‘composition’. What is interesting is not what the sound is, but its chorus with what the space might say back.

The most effective of Lucier’s experiments is surely *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1970). This work, even in its title, makes an explicit reference to the consideration of a where in addition to a what. In an empty room, Lucier recorded himself reading a text on a tape player. The recording is then played back in the room and recorded once again on a second tape. That tape is then played back in the room and recorded again on a third tape, etc, etc. After approximately 40 minutes, the voice sounds like an abstracted murmur, or a drone, as the room – acting as a filter between the recordings and their subsequent, consecutive and cumulative playbacks – imposes its own resonant



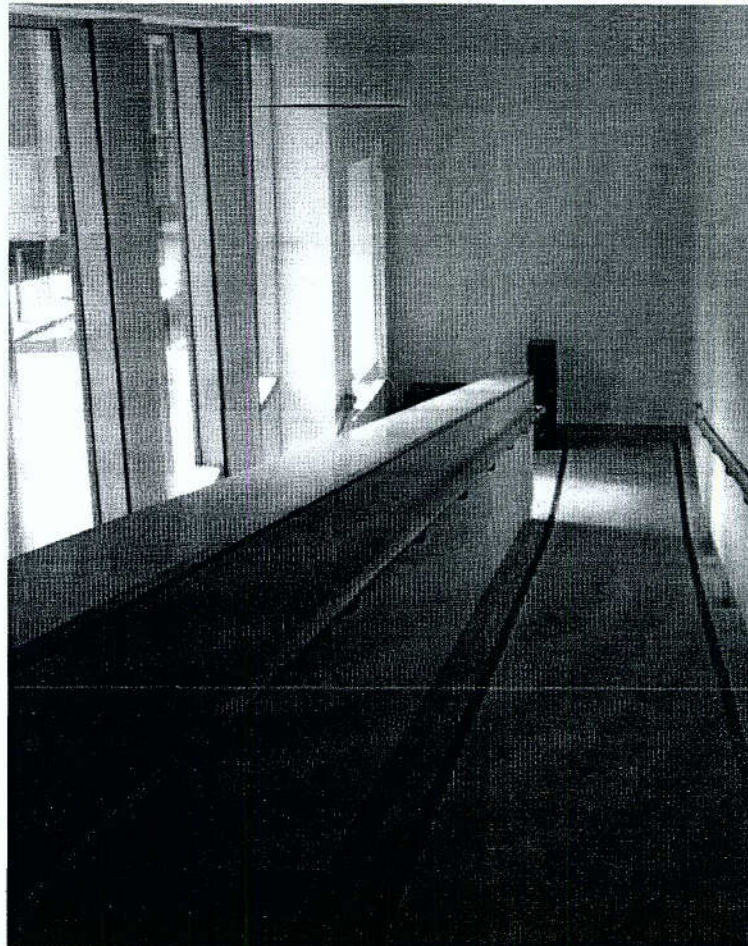
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frequencies into the speech. About this work, Lucier reminds us that 'every room has its own melody, hiding there until it is made audible'.

Closely associated with the post-minimalist visual artists, Bruce Nauman was first trained as a musician, and *Touch and Sound Walls* (1969) reveals his debt to the loop-delays by his friend Steve Reich. The work consists of two walls, about 40 feet apart, with microphones installed behind one wall and speakers behind the other. When the viewer touches the first wall, the sound emanates from the other, the walls being far enough apart to create a time-lag. *Diagonal Sound Wall* (1970) combines Alvin Lucier's interventions with the sonic frequencies of a room with Richard Long's walking pieces: a wall thickly padded with acoustical material is diagonally installed in a gallery. Walking through it, we perceive a pressure in our ears, as if the space was invisibly moving towards us, squeezing us or boxing us in.

While Nauman's multi-faceted body of work is most renowned for his use of video and sculpture, he created several sound-based installations directly engaging with 'the box'. With his video work already moving 'outside the white cube', many works were sited in his studio, thus breaking with the supposed importance of the gallery context. He created a series of five sound pieces, collectively called *Studio Aids II* (1967-68), which consisted of the sounds of '[a] Violin Tuned D E A D', 'Rolling on the Studio Floor', 'Jumping', 'Walking in the Studio', and 'Get Out of My Mind'. The last of this series, *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room* (1968), is a six-minute looped recording of the artist whispering the work's title – loudly, aggressively, softly, nervously – which is played back on speakers hidden behind the walls of an otherwise empty white gallery. This work used sound to create a keen – almost violent – awareness of the gallery 'box', as the sound accentuated the space's emptiness, its oppressive walled-in architecture, its social intolerance or exclusiveness, or its ability to 'house' intense emotions (even when empty). This work was one of many included in Nauman's more recent and even more dramatic installation *Raw Materials* (2004) at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. Brian Eno famously wrote of music as perfume: a porous material that permeates space and the body, and lingers in memory. Faced with lots of space and lots of bodies, the artist chose not a super-sized sculpture, but the most invading and borderless material of all: sound. With no objects to walk around or hide behind, viewers become victims of the artist's guttural orders to 'think, think, think', 'work, work, work', or 'get out, get out, get out'.

The contemporary relevance of these ideas is rich. Nicolas Collins, a composer and ex-student of Alvin Lucier, is updating his teacher's sonic manoeuvres into the realm of electronic feedback systems, as activated through architectural spaces. Artists like Joseph Grigely or Christof Migone follow the lead of Vito Acconci or Bruce Nauman in approaching the tensions, slippages and transitions between the written word and its enunciated aural cousin. Nauman's excursions into surveillance are picked up with radio-scanner hacker Robin Rimbaud, while his closed-circuit video installations are translated into sound circuits by Achim Wollscheid. Bill Fontana, Christina Kubisch and



Left: Bruce Nauman, *Raw Materials*, 2004, The Unilever Series, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London

Above: Barry Le Va, *Impact Run/Energy Drain*, 1969/2005 installation at ICA, Philadelphia

Right: Max Neuhaus, *Times Square*, 1977, long-term installation at intersection of Broadway and 7th Avenue, New York City



Ron Kuivila re-imagines sound installation in outdoor public spaces, owing much to Max Neuhaus, while Janet Cardiff transforms Neuhaus's performances into binaurally recorded 'audio walks' caught ambiguously between fact and fiction. If we learn anything from this, though, it is that sound can become less of a territory whose sanctity and separateness (or non-) from music is endlessly discussed, and instead find its own place, through its contributors and pioneers, in the history of art and ideas, alongside our favourite painters and sculptors.

'Vito Acconci: Sight/Sound/City', to 12 June. FACT, Liverpool (+44 (0)151 707 4444, www.fact.co.uk). In September, work by Christina Kubisch will be included in 'Sound Out', a series of installations in Cork, Ireland (www.nationalsculpturefactory.com). Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words, edited by Janet Kraynak, is published by the MIT Press, \$21.95/£14.95 (www.mitpress.mit.edu)



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