

Latent sound

On Clara Oppel's "Object without sound"

From Florian Neuner

Clara Oppel's work invites us to reflect on whether there can be a soundless sound art, a sound art without sound, and perhaps also on whether this would not even be desirable - a question that initially seems paradoxical, since sound installations, sound sculptures and interventions by sound artists are by definition characterized by the fact that objects or installations shown in exhibition spaces are accompanied by an acoustic level that is an essential component of these works, even if it does not completely take centre stage and turns the viewers into listeners. Time and space art interpenetrate in these works. The appearance of so-called sound art in exhibition contexts often thrives on the unexpected confrontation with situations in which there is nothing or very little to see, but all the more to hear instead.

What irritated contemporaries about Anton Bruckner's music - even more than some dissonances and harmonic daring - were the many pauses, empty spaces and gaps, which were interpreted as resting and stopping points and which enabled listeners to reflect on what they had just heard and prepare themselves for what was to come; Peter Gülke speaks of "pneumatic passages". Here we encounter "negative music" for the first time, which was to become virulent in the avant-gardes of the 20th century - right up to the much-quoted "silent piece" by John Cage. As you know, in the famous 4'33, a pianist sits at his instrument, on which he does not strike a single key during the piece. Without this framing, we would not be able to hear the silence or its absence. Because there is always something to hear - even if it is in your own body. "Negative music" is therefore not always already in the world and omnipresent, but requires a framing in order to be "heard": Musicians not playing, a tape on which nothing can be heard, a bell that nobody rings. Of course, these images also evoke images of sound: When we see an impressive gong hanging on the stage, for example, which is not being rung, we are probably preoccupied with the idea of what it would sound like.

Analogous to "negative music", there is also "negative sound art". If we take the analogy further, this means: a setting in which all the conditions are apparently / supposedly in place for something to be heard, but nothing can actually be heard. Perhaps loudspeakers are visible that suggest an acoustic dimension to the work, or the title of the work suggests

a "soundtrack" that is then missed. In this way, the absence of sound can become thematic in a sound installation.

In view of the work we see before us, however, the question arises: is there really nothing to hear? We are separated from the loudspeakers that form the lettering by a pane of glass. Is this barrier perhaps preventing the possibly very quiet sounds from reaching our ears? Would we hear anything if we tried to be very quiet for a few minutes and listen intently? Would we hear anything if we entered the room behind the glass? Or is what comes out of these loudspeakers simply imperceptible to the human ear, would dogs be conceivable recipients? Since Clara Oppel describes her work as an "object without sound", we can assume that these attempts would not be promising and that nothing actually comes out of the loudspeakers. Anyone familiar with the *TONSPUR_display* series and this display case will not be expecting any sounding objects here anyway. What is decisive, however, is that Clara Oppel is not presenting a mock-up of a sound sculpture here. The 113 loudspeakers are wired, so technically it would be easy to use them as sound sources. In a sense, we are dealing with a sound sculpture in latency.

This is not the first time Oppel has worked with lettering formed from loudspeakers. She also speaks of "sound poems" when, for example, she forms the word "change" from small round loudspeakers - as she did in Salzburg in 2018 - or quite succinctly "da", as she did in 2016 at the MAERZ gallery in Linz. Nor is this her first "object without sound". One such object was exhibited at Kunsthaus Essen in 2007 and is entitled *Bad Glasses*: instead of lenses, loudspeakers are inserted into the frame of the glasses. Cables are attached to them, but only loosely and without a connection to a sound source. You can't see with these glasses, but you can't hear anything through the speakers either. Image and sound cancel each other out - a wonderful synaesthetic confusion.

So there is nothing to hear here - apart from the experiences that you can naturally have as a listener of "negative music", especially in a busy day and night passageway like this passage. But there is something to read, and we have to talk about the statement "I can't hear you". A clear, understandable sentence that doesn't need much interpretation, but it does raise the question: Who is speaking? And from what position? If I am standing in front of the window facing the silent loudspeakers, this statement could escape me. In a way, I am being mirrored, and the glass of the display case also reflects the surroundings, depending on the lighting conditions. "I can't hear you" - if I were to say this as a viewer, it would raise another question, namely: who is this you that I am addressing and apparently assume is behind the loudspeakers? Am I standing here expecting someone to speak to me through these loudspeakers? If I turn the tables, other questions arise: Who is

addressing me with the statement "I can't hear you"? An author / artist or another entity? The relationship between sender and receiver is held in abeyance. But if I turn it around and put myself in the role of the sender, I can actively shape the situation - and to a certain extent I do so when I stand in front of the lettering and speak. However, whether I am heard is another question that I cannot answer. The succinct sentence "I can't hear you" therefore raises different questions and is able to set a conundrum in motion.

At the beginning of this article, I asked whether silent sound art might not even be desirable. Thirty years ago, the sound-sensitive art historian Michael Glasmeier observed: "Almost everywhere where art is presented, it beeps, whispers, rattles, makes noise or vocalizes in such a way that it is a pleasure. The peace and quiet of the viewer is gone, especially as in a museum, for example, with its open doors and escapes, the most minimal sound event often finds an unexpected echo. So gone are the days of quiet contemplation in front of a work of art." In the meantime, the trend described by Glasmeier has become even stronger, but this is by no means the cause of the triumph of sound art, if there is one at all - on the contrary: sound art is based on a reflective, even critical approach to acoustic material, while many artists deal with music and sound in a rather insensitive and coarse, even unmusical way and use the "soundtracks" of their works to score points in the attention economy. Good sound art, on the other hand, does not contribute to the acoustic littering of the world, but is an invitation to deal more attentively with the audible, not to shout over the other works in a group exhibition, but to invite people to listen. Clara Oppel's art is an example of this. She speaks of "ephemeral soundscapes" and "acoustic minimalism". With her site-specific art, her finely staged listening spaces, she succeeds in confidently asserting herself against the media overkill of contemporary art. She develops her installations in the field of tension between the visible and the audible and always uses volume only extremely sparingly as a design tool. At times, the extreme of soundlessness is reached and the sound art falls silent, has to fall silent. Only to soon become audible again and all the more succinctly.