

Not Quite Sound: Silence in the Gallery

Caleb Kelly

SILENCE IN ART IS HARD TO FIND, AS IS SILENCE IN THE ART GALLERY. TAKEN AT FACE value, much of visual art is silent. Paintings hang on gallery walls, not making a sound while gallery visitors wander quietly through the art spaces. The gallery once aspired to silence; the hushed voices of patrons mingled with the ambient sounds of the gallery (footsteps, café/bookshop, public announcements, and guided tours). Like the concert hall, the art gallery was a regulated space with unspoken rules and regulations for those who entered. In discussing John Cage's famously 'silent' work *4'33"*, Douglas Kahn states: 'It should be noted that each performance was held in a concert setting, where any muttering or clearing one's throat, let alone heckling, was a breach of decorum' (560). However, the art museum, quite unlike the concert hall, has transformed in recent decades from a silent, white-walled modernist art gallery to a much larger, industrial-sized space primed for crowds of art tourists. As I have written elsewhere, the contemporary art gallery is far from the quiet space it was once purported to be (2017). Instead, the new art museum is full of sound; much comes from the works themselves.

The current pinnacle of audio-intensive art comes from Melbourne-based artist Marco Fusinato. For the full 200 days of the Venice Biennale in 2022, Fusinato played noise guitar through six bespoke guitar amp stacks in the Australian Pavilion **[Figure 1]**. The work, entitled *DESASTRES* (2022), was thick with amplified sound at the threshold of pain. The result effectively silences the sounds

of the gallery environment. The presence of art visitors in the thousands are not heard within the gallery, and no conversations are audible above the tremendous volume of noise produced by Fusinato. The Australian Pavilion itself was quietened.



Figure 1. Marco Fusinato *DESASTRES*, 2022. Solo durational performance as installation 200 days. Installation view, Australia Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, 2022. Photographer: Andrea Rossetti.

Strategically raising the volume level of contemporary art is a move that circumvents the additional sound and noise created in these tourist-filled art destinations. But what happens to artworks that do not include audio or those that aim to approach, if not silence, then quietude?

Alongside the enlarged and loud contemporary art strategy, there is a long history of quiet, almost silent, and inaudible artworks within the gallery arts. This article will explore a range of practices that are not quite sound, not quite hearable, and sound as not sensed by a hearing ear. These approaches to artmaking cause us to reflect on what sound is as well as who sound is for, where sound becomes more than sound.

Making the Gallery Quiet(er)

In the late 1960s, several artists and composers questioned the expectations of what materials were acceptable for their chosen medium. This was especially

prevalent within sculpture and the emerging installation practices, including artworks that were read as post-minimalist (Pincus-Witten) or examples of the post-medium condition (Krauss). In what was deemed 'dematerialisation' by art critic Lucy Lippard, a group of artists made ephemeral artworks that were at times nearing immateriality (5). Rather than produce sculptures from traditional materials, such as marble, bronze and wood, artists produced works from less permanent materials, such as ice, leaves, sticks and wind. Artists also employed the gallery space itself as their material. The purpose for broadening such practices can be located in the prevalence of experimentalism at the time and the expansion of the arts in the wake of modernism.

A case in point is Michael Asher, who produced an empty and quiet installation for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 1969. The work was produced for the exhibition *Spaces*, curated by Jennifer Licht, which included five discrete galleries occupied by works by Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, Larry Bell, Franz E. Walther and Asher. Inside his gallery, Asher constructed a room with walls filled with fibreglass sound insulation to dampen the reverberation of the space. In addition, these walls rested on rubber wedges so that they were isolated from any vibration from within the building itself. Two layers of textured acoustical panelling were installed on the floor and ceiling (Asher 24-30). There was no lighting in the space, and no objects were installed. Thus, Asher's installation was literally an empty room.

Originally, Asher had planned to play electronically generated sound into his space but decided against this, leaving the exhibition room empty of sound and light (Asher 30). As visitors ventured further into Asher's gallery, they were confronted by an increasingly deadened acoustic and an increasing silence. Thus, in the absence of any visual art and the voiding of sound and light, visitors were made acutely aware of their own sensing and their expectations of the sound of an art gallery.

Other artists, including Bruce Nauman, Robert Irwin and James Turrell, alongside composers La Monte Young and Alvin Lucier, experimented with emptied art spaces at the end of the 1960s (see Kelly, *Gallery Sound*). Critical to this approach was their attempts to make the experience of the gallery architecture the medium of the works. In the process, they filled the gallery with a noisy silence.

Listening as Medium

When little in the way of materials is presented as an artwork, the audience turns to their own experience of the environment and their own sensing. In a silent space, a sense of one's own sensing prevails. This famously occurred for John Cage when he entered an anechoic chamber—an extremely quiet room used for

acoustical experiments and testing—hearing his bodily functions in a manner he had not experienced before. Robert Irwin and James Turrell took the anechoic chamber as material for an unfinished artwork and spent many hours researching the quietened environment in the pitch black and silent space (Weschler 128). While there, they listened to their own hearing, noting various effects the silence had on them. The medium of their planned installation was sensing itself.

Japanese artist Akio Suzuki has produced a series of fundamentally silent works. They emit no audio, and they make no sound. Yet these sound works are, at their core, sonic. The practice might be compared to Cage in that all sound that occurs during the performance of *4'33"* is part of the composition and the audience and performer activate the piece by listening to all the sounds during the work's three movements. However, in Suzuki's case, the outcome rests specifically on his listening.

An example of Suzuki's listening in practice can be seen in a photograph of the installation of *Economical Music* (2006). Lined up over wooden pallets, five continuous lengths of wood form a very large musical staff that is missing any notation—that is, the score is blank. Placed around the installation are twelve chairs from which the audience can listen. There is a photograph of Suzuki sitting in the installation, listening (Licht 130). In the fashion of *4'33"*, the visitor can experience 'economical music,' which requires neither instruments nor recordings; instead, the music is formed from any sound heard within the gallery.

Suzuki's most prominent project of this kind, *Hinatabokko no kukan (Space in the Sun)* (1988), was built by Suzuki from over 10,000 handmade bricks outdoors in Kyotango city, northwest of Kyoto. The structure was formed from two parallel brick walls and a floor between the walls. Once built, Suzuki sat between them for a full day before he abandoned the structure to nature. Between the walls, he listened. As with *Economical Music*, in documentation, we can see Suzuki listening and perhaps we can imagine his hearing. The key to Suzuki's installations is his own listening. What we might hear or imagine is beside the point.

High Volume and Inaudible

While listening produces a soundless outcome (even if we imagine hearing Suzuki's hearing, no audio is made), Suzuki's act of hearing cannot and should not be taken as a given. Michele Friedner and Stefab Helmreich identify a divide in the understandings of both hearing and seeing between sound studies and d/Deaf studies. Instead, for them, there may be a way to have an "acoustemology" (a sonic way of knowing and being in the world) that expands beyond a limited definition of the auditory' (75)—that is, beyond considering sound as though it were solely based within the act of hearing. Critical to their discussion are vibration and

infrasound, as in these instances sound is not defined as being purely a hearable phenomenon. Instead, they emphasise how sound can be understood as a 'vibration of a certain frequency in a material medium rather than centering vibrations in a hearing ear' (78). Their paper offers prompts for sound studies and Deaf studies scholars to connect. The first relates to how deaf people infer sound (75). Table manners are a particular example as there are a set of expectations as to the sounds that are allowed and those that are to be kept to a minimum, such as loudly clinking utensils on crockery and mouth sounds produced during eating.

Table manners are referred to as 'sound etiquette' by sound artist Christine Sun Kim. Kim was born deaf, and her work explores the relationships between sound, bodies and communication. She explains the process of having to learn about the sounds produced while dining; given that she could not hear them for herself, she instead inferred that she was making sounds that were audible to others (Kim). Kim's understanding of hearing sound combines visual cues, inference and sonic imagination. In a paper focused on Kim's practice, Eliza Tan states:

Whereas 'hearing' denotes audibility, 'listening' in the context of her work carries broader connotations. It encompasses the meaningful conveyance of non-verbal and non-cochlear experiences mediated by other sensory facets. It involves the whole body as a source of understanding. (Tan 247)

The whole body is a vehicle of hearing as Kim can 'hear' sound through vibration, as can non-deaf people. Sound thought of as vibration removes the hearing ear from the centre of listening, allowing it to be understood as something that is sensed multimodally.

Kim's installation *4 x 4* (2015) is seemingly silent. The work employs four prominent subwoofer speakers placed on their sides in the gallery's corner **[Figure 2]**. These objects, black and redolent of large-scale music events, seem to be awaiting activation, yet they are already in action playing audio just below audibility. The work was produced from four vocal song recordings that had their frequencies dropped to below 35 hertz so that their higher pitches were just within the range of audibility but the lower pitches were too low to be heard. The vibrations caused by these inaudible sound waves reinforced themselves in the gallery, creating a series of effects such as shaking tables or wine glasses at the opening and rattling the gallery windows. The majority of audible sounds within the installation were caused not by the sound waves produced by the speakers but rather by the vibrational effects of objects set in motion.



Figure 2. Christine Sun Kim, *4x4*, 2015. Sound installation. Installation view, Andquestionmark, 2015, Stockholm, Sweden. Courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly Gallery. Photo: Sara Linderoth.

In *4 x 4*, the audience both sees and feels the effects of the vibrations. Davidson explains:

One prominent way that [Kim] materializes sound is by placing the various modalities through which sound is represented—musical notation, waveforms, recorded street sounds, conversation transcripts, movie captions—in new and unfamiliar spaces. As a consequence, sound is experienced through multiple sensory inputs, or what sound studies theorists call ‘multimodal’ listening. (Davidson 60-1)

When thinking about the not-quite-sound spectrum, infrasound is a particular focus of attention in media and media art. Infrasound—sound waves at frequencies below the audible range of approximately 20 Hz—is experienced not through the ear but through the body. The waves are long; for example, a 7 Hz sound wave covers approximately 49 metres from crest to crest. These vibrations shake slowly. Their detection is used for monitoring earthquakes and volcanos—and nuclear testing following World War II—tracking slow oscillations with catastrophic consequences. The phenomenon of infrasound is surrounded by a wealth of speculative histories and stories of black noise, death rays, devastating weaponry, and Cold War paranoia. In anthropologist Sophia Roosth’s history of the infrasonic, she asks: ‘How, then, might sound studies admit into its purview those aspects of the vibratory world that are not, strictly speaking, *sonic*?’ (110),

given that ‘infrasound affords scholars the opportunity to interrogate sensoria ambiguity’ (110). For Roosth, sound studies offer a human-centric definition of sound that relies solely on the normal hearing range and leaves out ‘key sensory capacities for nonhuman animals’ (110), many of which can hear infrasound. She argues instead for a less ear-centric model of sonic perception, pointing to an ‘extracochlear modality’ that allows the sensory hierarchy to fall away.

As Shelley Trower describes, ‘sound, at its lowest and loudest, begins to break down into separate, palpable vibrations’ (1). As with so many histories of sound, especially those exploring sub-bass vibrations, Trower’s research begins in the dance clubs she attended in the 1990s. In the clubs, for her, ‘music seemed no less palpable than audible, and sometimes almost as painful as it was intensely pleasurable’ (1). In addition to feeling the music, Trower describes the low-end sound as visible, as we can ‘feel, hear and see a subwoofer vibrate, and see its effects on other bodies or matter’ (2).

Kim’s *4 x 4* is beyond the capabilities of the hearing ear, but it posits a sound art that is in excess of sound as defined by the human hearing range. The work engages sound waves below the wavelengths discernible to the human ear, but they can be sensed using the whole body. As a result, the work is formed from sound waves that can be felt by people on the deaf spectrum, including Kim herself, who is profoundly deaf, and her trajectory as a sound artist makes it clear that sound is a field available to both hearing and deaf people. Conceptually, the work opens the potential for sound within the arts that is resolutely non-cochlear. Thus, *4 x 4*, in what has become Kim’s signature style, foregoes audible sound to form a sonic practice filled with a raucous silence.

Scored Silence

Thinking about the limits of sensation, David Trippett points to individual compositions that contain musical elements beyond the human capacity for hearing, including the dog whistles in Per Nørgård’s *Fifth Symphony* (1994) (201). Trippett’s examples rely on actual vibrations; missing here are compositions that depend entirely on the sonic imagination. Fluxus event scores are an excellent example of this type of practice. La Monte Young’s ‘Butterfly Piece,’ *Composition 1960 #5* (1960) calls for a butterfly to be set loose in a concert hall. Although the beating wings of the butterfly certainly create actual sound waves, these incredibly quiet sounds are impossible to hear. Other Fluxus event scores rely on the imagination to hear their fantastical sonic outcomes. For example, Dick Higgins’s *Danger Music Number Nine (For Nam June Paik)* (1962) reads: ‘Volunteer to have your spine removed.’ Similarly, Kim’s work imagines sound through her use of written scores and often through non-sound-making events or actions.

Kim has come to be known for her notation-based scores that have been blown up in scale from works on paper to become large mural-sized drawings. These works combine elements of musical scores, event scores and graphic representations of American Sign Language (ASL).

Her work *Pianoiss ... issmo (Worse Finish)* (2013) is one example of this [Figure 3]. In music notation, a 'p' denotes the dynamics of a tone in terms of the loudness or forcefulness of the sounds being produced in relation to previous sounds. If one played at 'f' (forte) in a loud and robust manner and then came across a 'p' (piano), the musician would perform more quietly. Adding extra 'p's to the score makes the tone quieter again, and three 'p's is very, very quiet. Piano becomes pianissimo (pp), and pianississimo (ppp). In Kim's drawing, more and more ps are added to the flow chart until they become a blur. The score never calls for silence itself. Instead, it asks for a sound that exponentially moves towards an imagined silence that can never be fully realised.

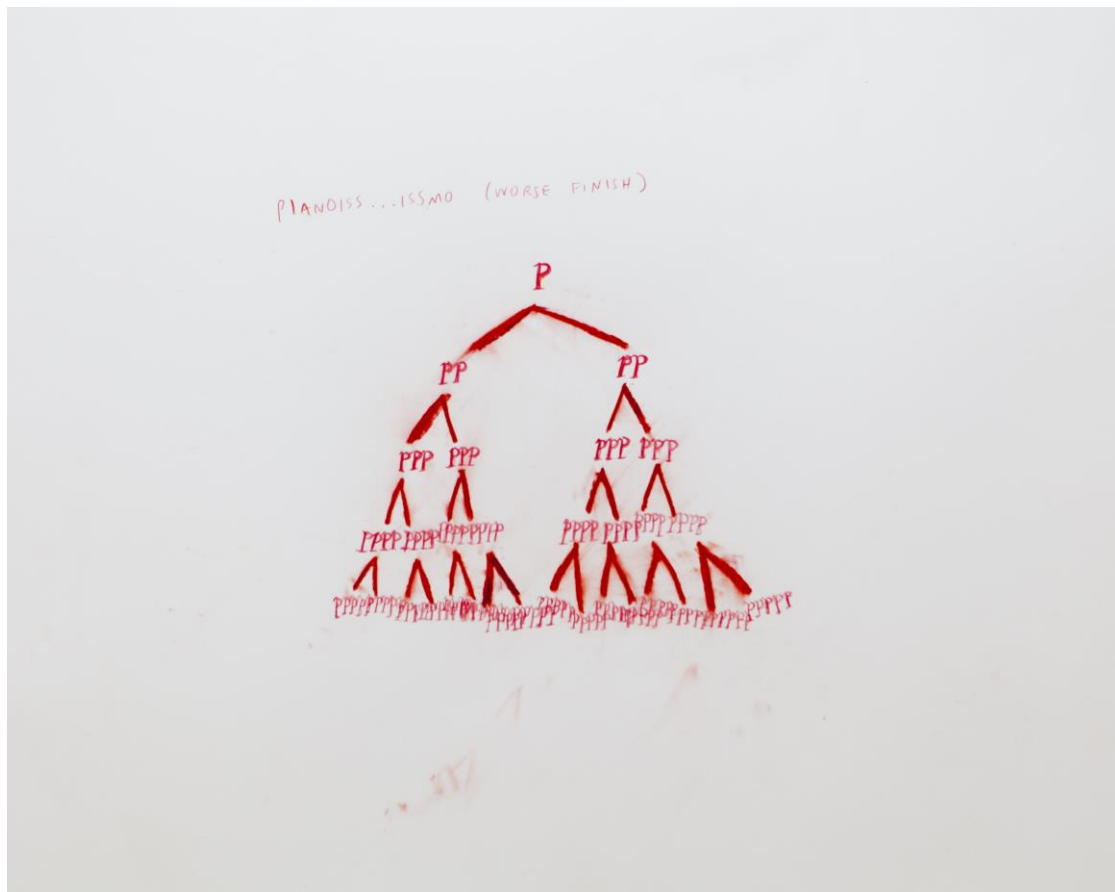


Figure 3. Christine Sun Kim, *Pianoiss ... issmo (Worse Finish)*, 2012. Transcript, pastel and pencil on paper. Courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly Gallery. Photo: Erica Leone.

The work calls for the greater and greater softness of an unknown sound. Thus, the sound of the work can be anything we can imagine that can be made quieter.

Davidson points to Kim's drawings and installations, commenting that they 'make sound visible and tactile while enabling her hearing audience to listen through a deaf optic' (60). *Pianoiss ... issmo (Worse Finish)* asks, what does it mean for a deaf person to imagine a sound as being quieter than its previous rendition? And does such a sound sound different to a hearing person?

Kim's scores ask viewers to think about how things sound, often in relation to something that resolutely does not have a sound. In a series of drawings realised directly onto gallery walls, Kim diagrams *The Sound of Frequencies Attempting to be Heavy* (2019) and *The Sound of Temperature Rising* (2019). Using a four-lined stave (based on her use of four fingers to sign in ASL), the drawings imagine these sounds as a musical score. Here her sonic imagination is coupled with ASL, and the works are formed at the junction of imagined sound and invented sign language diagrams.

Conclusion

Elsewhere, when writing about seminal concepts closely associated with John Cage, I argued that we need always to understand sound more than sound ('Materials of Sound'). In the discussion above, sound is always understood to point towards more than itself, as it can never be without a history, culture or political situation. Thus, even sound practices that are not quite sound, inaudible, or approaching quietude all rely on our understanding of the meaning of sound. They also rely on a sensing body although not always on a hearing ear. It is here that the critical combination of our senses and an understanding of how and what we are sensing is brought to the fore by the practices discussed above. In the process, a noisy silence ensues, one that, in its near silence, sounds out as loudly as a room filled with guitar amplifiers.

CALEB KELLY is Associate Professor of Media Art Theory at the University of New South Wales, Australia. Born in Aotearoa New Zealand, he has published widely on sound in the arts including *Gallery Sound* (2017), *Sound* (ed.) (2011), and *Cracked Media* (2009). Recently he has curated the touring exhibition *Material Sound* (2018-2022) and *Materials, Sounds*, and the Black Mountain College (Asheville USA, 2019).

Works Cited

- Asher, Michael. *Writings 1973-1983 on Works 1969-1979*. Ed. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983.
- Davidson, Michael. *Distressing Language: Disability and the Poetics of Error*. New York: New York UP, 2022.
- Friedner, Michele, and Stefan Helmreich. 'Sound Studies Meets Deaf Studies.' *The Senses and Society* 7.1 (2012): 72-86.
- Kahn, Douglas. 'John Cage: Silence and Silencing.' *The Musical Quarterly* 81.4 (1997): 556-98.
- Kelly, Caleb. *Gallery Sound*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.
- . 'Materials of Sound: Sound As (More Than) Sound.' *Journal of Sonic Studies* 16 (2018). <<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/456784/456785>>. 3 Aug. 2022.
- Kim, Christine Sun. 'The Enchanting Music of Sign Language.' TED talk, 2015. <https://www.ted.com/talks/christine_sun_kim_the_enchanting_music_of_sign_language?language=en>. 3 Aug. 2022.
- Krauss, Rosalind. *'A Voyage on the North Sea': Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2000.
- Licht, Alan. *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories*. New York: Rizzoli, 2007.
- Lippard, Lucy, and John Chandler. 'The Dematerialization of Art.' *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*. Ed. Lucy Lippard. New York: Dutton, 1971. 46-50.
- Pincus-Witten, Robert. 'Eva Hesse: Post-Minimalism into Sublime.' *Artforum* 10.3 (1971): 32-44
- Roosth, Sophia. 'Nineteen Hertz and Below: An Infrasonic History of the Twentieth Century.' *Resilience* 5.3 (2018): 109-24.
- Tan, Eliza. 'Voicing the Sociality of Sound from a Deaf Perspective: Christine Sun Kim's Plenitude of Silence.' *Oxford Art Journal* 43.2 (2021): 239-60.
- Trippett, David. 'Music and the Transhuman Ear: Ultrasonics, Material Bodies, and the Limits of Sensation.' *The Musical Quarterly* 100.2 (2018): 199-261.
- Trower, Shelley. *Senses of Vibration: A History of the Pleasure and Pain of Sound*. New York: Continuum, 2012.
- Weschler, Lawrence, and Robert Irwin. *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1982.