

Golo Föllmer

Musical Materialism

1996 – big sound arts fest in Berlin. Also there Paul Fuchs, although he isn't a typical sound artist at all. For these today almost all use electronics, computers and loudspeakers. The sound artist has sounds produced. Fuchs on the other hand is a maker. And makes sounds himself.

Fuchs sees himself as one half music-maker. Yet he doesn't approach even this half in a traditional sense, not having studied either an instrument and its virtuosity, or musical forms and their connections, as they are usually taught at the universities. Instead he has built his instruments by hand and then simply produced sounds. In his early years Fuchs rejected all musical tradition, hitting bare stones against one another in a completely intuitive interaction between people, in order to hear raw material stripped of all cultural layers.

The other half of Paul Fuchs is a sculptor, his original calling. He learned this after training as a metalworker, and in the usual way as it is taught in the art schools. Here lie his artistic roots, in the forming of material. The path from sculpture to sound though was a short one. Handling the material, the loudness of working on it, the traces of different surfaces – this is close to the process of forming sound in music. In both the main focus is on the material, which has its specific color, its roughness, its temperature. The contact with it is bodily and immediate.

While Fuchs in his sculpture forces the material into clear forms, in his music making he first forms the characteristics of the material, the physical components and the crystalline structure of his sounds. He creates on two levels: he builds instruments, which produce new sound materials, and then he plays this material, like someone pronouncing a word. In this way it is spoken, it exists. Reality has experienced an irreversible transformation by receiving these new elements. Material music, he calls this.

Paul Fuchs and the percussionist Zoro Babel presented this material music in August 1996 in the Parochial Church in Berlin on such instrument, one of which, the "Machine", they have built together. One can hear a sound spectrum spread out over time, its sources possessing the appropriate well-sounding names: "Sunbass", "Ballast String Cow" or "Hand". One hears surfaces and outlines, positions and movements, an improvised playing with material, space and situation, whose details arise out of the contact of the musicians with the historical site, with each other and with the audience. Fuchs and Babel do not

present a finished and set musical piece, but rather a musical performance, reflecting the complexity of the total situation.

A selection of these instruments from the "Ballast String Ensemble", as Fuchs calls the group, was shown in the Sophiensäle in the historic center of Berlin. Crowded together, filling the small room up to the last corner, the instruments stood there and waited impatiently to release the sounds from their material. They are acoustical treasure chests (or rummage boxes), which in the moment of physical contact between person and object spit out sound music like a jack-in-the-box. Tickling the instruments is fun. The most beautiful sounds though arose when this acoustic space slipped out the door into the courtyard, and the buzzing and ringing sparkled in the sunlight, somewhat cooled down from the acoustic heat in the room. The music, a kind of mechanized-humanoid ambient, never became boring during the four weeks of the exhibition, either for the visitors who produced it or for the listeners in the courtyard. For an unimaginably rich score is written in the sound arsenal of the instruments, which can be realized without musical knowledge and skill. Curiosity alone suffices for the amateur sound explorer to discover the sonorous rhythm of the "Hand", the different sound levels –the roaring, whimpering and singing – of the "Ballast String Instruments". Everyone can play with these Orff instruments of sound arts.

On the Pariser Square "The Long I" was located: slim, supple and with its moving upper part rising 28 meters into the air, a visual counterpoint to the monumental Brandenburger Gate. David dancing in front of a frozen Goliath – movement, which for Fuchs "allows sounds to become visible, like a bass tone sunk under the range of hearing". Audible frequencies though could also be discovered; if one put an ear to one of the pipe openings, the sculpture revealed its secret personality as eccentric collector of sounds around the square. What at first seemed an undefined buzzing was, strongly filtered through the resonance of the pipes, the roaring, shouting and droning of the public square, to which tourists come in order to more or less enjoyably shudder in front of the mystical, heavily loaded image of German history. Fuchs however shows them the profane noise of the present – their own voices, the construction noise, the traffic: the living noise of the city – and reveals its mystique. In this way he draws attention from the nostalgic transfiguration of history to the vitality of the present.

Beside the former State Council Building another steel sculpture was erected, smaller than "The Long I", seemingly modest and young beside the monolithic East German building. The "High B" sculpture literally has it inside: the ear pressed to the rising pipe perceives the energy of the wind, powerful and forceful, in conflict with the energy of the steel when the passing wind causes the rod above to turn and bob. Here one can directly hear the fascination of these works for Paul Fuchs: he has realized his childhood desire to become a bridge builder through the "detour" of art, by challenging the laws of nature,

working together with steel and statics. "How high can I go?" is one of the questions which drives his work with construction, material and form. But it is also his wish to create everyday realities, conforming to aspects of functionality – just like a bridge. In the process he spans the gaps between art forms, his works naturally achieve a unity of the audible, the visual and the touchable, just like everyday objects do. The new and old desire to unify the arts occurs in his works without the help of complicated concepts, but rather arises all by itself during his handling of the material. "It makes no sense at all wondering about the meaning of life," he says, "life itself, movement, perception makes it worthwhile being alive. That's what obsesses me". It's life as a whole which he reflects in his art, for he doesn't believe in a separation of its different spheres. For him everything always functions together, and can't be disconnected at all; for this reason Paul Fuchs works on the spheres with his impressive metalworker hands all at the same time. And allows us then to hear the material.

Translation: David Sánchez

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