

Second Edition

BACKGROUND NOISE
PERSPECTIVES ON SOUND ART

Brandon LaBelle

B L O O M S B U R Y

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By
Brandon LaBelle

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Box with the Sound of Its Own Making: From Gags to Sculptural Form

A certain strain of modern art has been involved in uncovering a more direct experience of these basic perceptual meanings, and it has not achieved this through static images, but through the experience of an interaction between the perceiving body and the world that fully admits that the terms of this interaction are temporal as well as spatial, that existence is process, that the art itself is a form of behavior that can imply a lot about what was possible and what was necessary in engaging with the world while still playing that insular game of art.¹

—ROBERT MORRIS

It may be proposed that the social context and surroundings of art are more potent, more meaningful, more demanding of an artist's attention than the art itself! Put differently, it's not what artists touch that counts most. It's what they don't touch.²

—ALLAN KAPROW

Introduction to Part 2

Box with the Sound of Its Own Making: From Gags to Sculptural Form

Progressively, questions of context within artistic practice are brought to the fore in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. With the advance of chance as an operational method, the continual outreach to the audience as a contributing element to art, and the increasing relevance of everyday life as a field in which art should operate, spatial and contextual practice takes precedent. Happenings and Environments of the late 1950s extend John Cage's ideas around music directly into a visual art context, activating such context through performative and theatrical presentation: makeshift installations, alternative spaces, intermedia crossover, and collaborative projects. Such work sets the stage for a rethinking of the object of art by exploding its borders to encompass space, junk, bodies, and noise. Fluxus, in turn, follows from Cage's example, incorporating his expanded musicality in performative works that dilute the theatricality of Happenings toward a refined vaudeville whereby sound, text, object, and action coalesce in literal and perceptual games.

With the establishment of "alternative" spaces and artists' coalitions, such as the Art Workers Coalition, formed in 1969, a critical awareness of the art world and its respective institutions features through the latter part of the 1960s, maneuvering the rhetoric of contextual and spatial practice toward an ever more politicized pitch. With the development of Installation art, spatial and contextual concerns can be seen to find institutional footing within the art world: the Museum of Modern Art's "Spaces," the Whitney Museum's "Anti-Illusion," and "Using Walls" at the Jewish Museum, all presented in 1969/1970, aim to extend the institutional arena toward supporting installation practice.³ From this vantage, we can appreciate Cage's work as setting the terms for addressing such a larger arena of concern, philosophically in agendas of social change, and aesthetically in conceptualizing a practice that engages contextual conditions.

It seems important to situate such development in relation to “musical” practice, for music composition, performance, and method, and by extension the acoustical, function as prime media in such lineage. In this way, it is my interest to remind art history, as it evaluates and writes the developments of contextual and spatial practice from this period, of sound’s early figuring. Not so much to assert a privileged place for it but to recognize its position as a feature within such legacy. This, in turn, has another, more theoretical assertion and proposal: to figure sound practice as a distinct field that may lend itself to the modalities of thinking about space and the function of art in general.

Concept: Art as Idea

When Tom Marioni opened his Museum of Conceptual Art in San Francisco in 1970, the notion of “art as idea” had culminated into Conceptual art in general, framing the artist as progenitor of a neo-avant-garde program based on the production not so much of objects but of a new language, contingent, performative, and political. For Marioni, Conceptual art was an overarching attitude that sought to affirm art practice as social and performative, self-organized and liberating. To move from an actual art object, such as Pollock’s paintings, to Marioni’s drum-brush drawings or his Fluxus performances, such as *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends Is the Highest Form of Art*, is to summarize a larger historical move from Cage to Fluxus, Minimalism to Conceptual art, and to site-specificity and Installation art. What this larger trajectory has in common with its smaller counterpart, that is, Marioni’s MOCA, is its increasing engagement, on multiple levels, with language, space, and the place of bodies. Language can be seen to take a front seat in the progress of 1960s art, founded on the production of discourse, the dematerialized object, and the appearance of the document; the interrogation of institutional frameworks as a discursive event, as opposed to the production of objects, culminating in Conceptual art in the late 1960s and early 1970s as exemplified in Hans Haacke’s *MoMA-Poll* (1970) in which the artist mounted a text at the information center of the Museum of Modern Art, posing the question, “Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon’s Indochina Policy be a reason for you not voting for him in November?” Answers were subsequently written on pieces of paper and deposited into one of two transparent vessels, so the overall count could be registered in the accumulation of papers (visitors chose “yes” twice as often as “no”). What Haacke surreptitiously exposed was the Rockefeller family’s involvement in the Museum’s history and administration.

Increasingly, such textual acts articulate themselves in and against the domain of everyday life and the field of the social. Thus, the very space in which artists function and art operates are brought into both the production and discourse surrounding Conceptual art. As a culmination of “art as idea,” Conceptual art is itself a performance of language, for it not only uses language, as in Haacke’s

piece, Joseph Kosuth's philosophical art, or Lawrence Weiner's *Public Freehold*, projects that essentially give language away as public property, but beyond this as an attitudinal imperative to demarcate a space in which the artist speaks for him or herself.

Conceptual art shifts not only the materiality of the art object to an ever more disintegrated form but the very function of art to take on social, political, and cultural forces at work. This necessitates a critical relationship to both language and space, for we can identify language as the machinery of these forces, the gears through which such forces operate and perpetuate themselves, and space itself as the site of actualized consequence and transformation.

Cage

To return to John Cage, we can recognize his work as setting the stage for Conceptual art by its ambition to *reflect* on the function and materials of music *through* music itself. This reflexive operation becomes the backbone of Conceptual art, for to both reflect and create at the very same instant is to announce an increasingly self-conscious practice that speaks beyond the traditional aesthetic categories of beauty and the sublime, of self-expression as a kind of pure formalism or drama of feeling. Found in this announcement is a challenge to such conventions that for Cage necessitates a continual reflection upon the very medium (sound) and situation (music) of production.

Cage's initiation of a critical practice should be underscored as prefiguring the development of Conceptual art, not solely through expanding the very terms by which art can occur but, in turn, by falling short. That is to say, Conceptualism is both an outcome *and* response to Cage, for as Yvonne Rainer has pointed out, in looking toward everyday life as material for active listening, Cage didn't always recognize the political dimension of his own work. In disavowing "interest" and individual "ego," Cage can be seen to couch such things as everyday life in universal and essentialist terms, and thus miss the surface tensions of reality as doggedly marked by everyday struggle. The liberation of all sounds from the representational grip of musicality by insisting upon the materiality and specificity of sound often missed the intensities of social and cultural structures that *precede* and lend to the moment of listening. That is to say, we may leave behind the referentiality of musical argument for the sound world, yet sounds are in some ways always *marked*. The developments that were to follow Cage, and the establishment of Conceptual art, would come to probe, analyze, and rewrite such markings, and it would come to question whether everyday life was as "excellent" as Cage knew it. In this way, Cage sets the terms by which Conceptual art develops and at the same time can be criticized by those very terms.

What is John Cage's gift to some of us who make art? This: the relaying of conceptual precedents for methods of nonhierarchical, indeterminate organization which

can be used with a critical intelligence, that is, selectively and productively, not, however so we may awaken to this excellent life; on the contrary, so we may the more readily awaken to the ways in which we have been led to believe that this life is so excellent, just, and right.⁴

What Rainer points out is the legacy of Cage in relation to shifts in the cultural and social climate throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as exemplified in the full-blown project of contextual practice. As Rosalyn Deutsche states, contextual practice aimed to “demonstrate that aesthetic perception is not *disinterested* but contingent on the conditions in which art is viewed ...”⁵ (my emphasis). Disinterestedness, which Cage professed, is made suspect in the move toward an overtly site-based, contextual mode of production. The 1960s made it imperative that, as an artist, one become intensely *interested* in what is usually unseen, unheard, or unknown so as to investigate and uncover through an explicitly interested scrutiny, the very structural, institutional, and aesthetic presence of that which is given. Here, the materiality of sound as musical object, as amplified magnetic tape, as phenomenal presence is always coded by the language of listening. The “open work,” while engaging a listener in his or her own interpretation and experience, through a “plurality of signifieds” and a mobilized active listening, is thus “filled in” by contextual practice with specified meanings. Cage’s musical philosophy of all sounds overlooks, and potentially undermines, the positionality of sound—that is to say, sound’s liberated referentiality may not always lead us to experiences of freedom.

Such problematizing of Cage’s work weaves its way through the early 1960’s visual and performing arts milieu of New York. The increasing move from objects to events, as reflected in Happenings, Environments, and Fluxus, can be understood as the beginnings, as well as culmination, of a form of artistic practice that sought out the ever complex terrain of everyday life, the presence of bodies (artists and audiences alike), and the pressing urgencies of political and social agency that would stalk culture at this time.

In moving from Cage and more fully into Conceptual art, it is also my interest to underscore sound’s expansion beyond the proximate and immediate and toward broader materials, relations, and social interactions. To do so, I’ll look at the work of La Monte Young, Robert Morris, and Michael Asher, for each artist develops a practice that results in the idea of space itself functioning as a medium: Young with music, Morris on the terrain of sculpture, and Asher within installation art practice. Each while using sound through overt and covert techniques subjects it to various interrogations, from its corporeal and physical potential in Young, the intellectual and discursive in Morris, and the conceptual in Asher.

Notes

1. Robert Morris, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making," in *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), p. 90.
2. Allan Kaprow, "The Shape of the Art Environment," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 94.
3. For an insightful and informative book on the subject, see Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999).
4. Yvonne Rainer, *A Woman Who...: Essays, Interviews, Scripts* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 88.
5. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 237.

Chapter 4

Rhythms of Chaos: Happenings, Environments, and Fluxus

Working in New York in the late 1950s, artists such as Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg, Red Grooms, Al Hansen, and Robert Whitman initially staged what would come to be called “Happenings” and “Environments.” Happenings grew out of a distinct moment of art-making that followed on the heels of John Cage and Jackson Pollock, and the overall shift from an art object to a greater situational event based on chance, found objects, and theatrical performance. Kaprow actually staged his first Happening in Cage’s Composition as Experimental Music class at the New School for Social Research in 1957.¹ What Cage’s class introduced was the possibility of previously unrelated materials and strategies to function in approaching creative work. Chance, strategies for creating spontaneity, inventiveness with found objects, mixed-media aesthetics, and everyday life as stage all figure in the expanded scope of artistic action in which Cage figures and that was to take a deeper hold in the art scene in New York at this time. Since Cage was essentially teaching a course on “composition,” music was used openly as a matrix through which to explore methods of production and presentation. Essentially, Cage addressed the very act of making decisions, the artist being understood as not so much the maker of objects but as an individual in the act of making decisions as to what, how, and where art takes place and the systems by which to initiate its production. The produced object then is not so much a final work as a by-product of a larger decision—that of how to live life. In this sense, what follows from a Cagean outlook is an emphasis on process. Coupled with the dynamic use of paint, in the works of Pollock and other abstract expressionists, which revealed spontaneity, improvisation, and bodily action as productive ingredients in an art that sought to immerse a viewer, the move toward Happenings and Environments sets the scene for an absolute blurring of art and life.

Distinguishing Happenings and Environments is found in their respective move toward everyday life, as an attempt to strip bare the artistic arena of representational order exemplified in Hansen's proclamation that "chaos seems to be everyone's threat; I find it my rhythm."² Happenings stage actions (often scripted, often not) that collapse the art object as a refined aesthetic product onto the spaces of everyday life. As Kaprow observed in 1961: "I think that today this organic connection between art and its environment is so meaningful and necessary that removing one from the other results in abortion."³

Parallel with Happenings, Environments construct an artistic environment more than an object in which junk, random materials, and loose fabrications form an assemblage or scenography in such a way as to *become* art. Presented as participatory spaces or as backdrops to Happenings, Environments soften the line separating art from life to a point where it is difficult to distinguish the two—where actions teeter on the edge of banality or danger, objects are rendered disposable, devalued, and sounds and image mix in a flow of makeshift theatricality. Here, there is no art object *per se*; it cannot be pointed to, apprehended as fixed or stable. Rather it appears in the instant of enactment or participation, in the form of bodies and actions, speech and sound, as processional event. In this respect, the art object is literally enlivened and animated to a point where it loses its objectness, as an ordered form, collapsing from its own inertia onto the field of the everyday—aesthetics not of refined formalism but of cultural energy.

Bodies

In the erasure of the separation of art from life, as well as life from art, Happenings and Environments rely or bring to the fore the presence of the body—of artists and performers, of audiences and participants, and of passersby and their ultimate mixing. While notions of the body are easily thrown around in contemporary discourse, it is important to recognize that what we call the body in terms of art production has real significance at this time (and will gain further currency in the realm of Performance art). The body literally comes to replace the art object, for it pushes up into the realm of form to such a degree as to explode definition and the literal lines of material presence. Following Hansen, chaos functions as directive in determining practice, as a rhythmic pulse, a self-generating beat around which culture, as a life force, gravitates, for "like life, the happening is an art form of probability and chance. The action, material, products, items, sounds I integrate within a happening are results of life as I live it."⁴ As the body gains presence as an artistic medium, it brings with it questions of agency, location, and representation in such a way as to alter the aesthetic category as one separate or divorced from the real. The live body, the junk environment, the chaos and the total theater reveals the urgency and desire to make art jump off the page, from its base and into the immediate.

Hansen's description of the fusion of art and life indicates the complete dissolution of any line dividing the two. Such a development falls in line with Cage's aesthetic and philosophical project: to move from the cultural sphere of music to the rhythmic and chance-oriented events of daily life. As in Cage's Black Mountain event, Happenings form a "total theater" in which all objects and actions, all items and information, are collaged in a spectacle of anarchic action, where someone like Meredith Monk "... comes very close to putting out eyes, hurting herself badly or destroying expensive machinery," resulting in the nickname "Miss Danger of the happening world."⁵ In their makeshift, hands-on, and do-it-yourself productions, Happenings "invite us to cast aside for a moment these proper manners and partake wholly in the real nature of the art and (one hopes) life."⁶ The phrase "to partake wholly" articulates the developments of art at this time. For "to partake" situates art in line *with* an audience—and it does so *wholly* in such a way as to suggest "partake" as a form of "participation." To partake is to join in, to move closer, and to add something, of yourself, to the "real nature of art."⁷ "To partake wholly"—such is the recipe for an altogether different set of aesthetic ingredients, for notions of audience take on radical implications for art—not so much to be accountable, as an object of cultural attention, offered up for criticism, but more to figure as a situational catalyst in which "to partake" signals that one *be active*. To back up on the original statement, we might also ask: How to be active? In what way does being active figure? As Kaprow suggests in his reference to "proper manners," audience and art partake wholly so as to leave behind the "proper": to exit the stage of "proper manners" and arrive into "real nature." Real nature figures as the essential concern—it is what participation uncovers, makes knowable, outlines as the art experience. Yet hidden inside Kaprow's statement as the deep-seated hope is that real nature is not far from art and the aesthetic concerns of production, and that art may, through acts of participation and through cultivating situations of real nature, become indistinguishable from life and its nagging manners. Works like *Yard*, presented at the Martha Jackson gallery in 1961 (as part of the exhibition "Environments, Situations, Spaces"), function more like playgrounds than art objects: filling the front yard of the gallery with car tires, visitors could climb over the tires, hang out in the yard, sit and chat with the artist "according to our talents for engagement ... for we ourselves are shapes ... we have [different] colored clothing; can move, feel, speak, and observe others variously; and will constantly change the 'meaning' of the work by doing so."⁷ As such, Environments were conceived as a "form that is as open and fluid as the shapes of our everyday experience,"⁸ inviting the chance interplay of whoever was present to define the work, as an expanded palette.

Others, such as Dine, Oldenburg, and Whitman, also sought to explore the experiential and spatial potential of Environments by creating rooms of junk, ephemera, and assemblages, all of which add up to a cohesive yet unstable whole. Oldenburg's *The Store* exemplifies the inherent confusing of life from art characterizing Environments, as well as drawing upon the Pop art aesthetic of consumer

culture. Located at 107 East 2nd Street, *The Store* opened in December of 1961, selling objects made by the artist and his friends. Functioning as a “proper” store, as well as theater space for the presentation of Happenings during its two-month operation, *The Store* actively repositioned art into an overtly public arena in which “the viewer was synonymous with the customer and could participate, in the fashion of customers everywhere, by browsing and perhaps purchasing.”⁹

To partake wholly though must not be seen as perfectly utopian, as sublimely delicate, for real nature, as divorced from proper manners, is occupied, in turn, by the likes of Miss Danger and can and will lead to unexpected results. Recounting a Happening staged at New York University in 1964, Hansen describes how the audience began to heckle the performers until finally he invited them to enter the performance:

I offered to have them come into the performance area and take part in the happening in a more dynamic way. One of them called, “If we come into the performance you’ll be sorry.” In a slow Cagean voice I suggested they come up, one at a time and we would fight. They had already become participants in the happening and I thought it would be interesting to work with that. They didn’t want to do this, whereupon Freddie Herko walked up the aisle toward ... the leader and said, “I used to go to college.”¹⁰

Such descriptions express the confrontational edge of Happenings, for in fusing art and life—to *partake wholly*—the spectacle may collapse (and hopefully it will!) from its own inertia. It may antagonize audiences, “put out eyes,” and fall into hysterics, for Happenings are determined by an indeterminate set of occurrences and chance events that find their actualization in the instant of performance, as a meeting point or embodiment of inputs and their eventual outcome, as chaotic rhythm, not as random juxtapositions but as cultivated intensity. “Chance, rather than spontaneity, is a key term for it implies risk and fear...”¹¹ Such cultivation of chance, and ultimately risk and fear, adds to Cage’s liberated aesthetics by inserting corporeality a bit further, supplanting the freedom of silent prayer with the freedom of danger. Such freedoms must be underscored as inherently anarchic, exceeding the limits of cultural practice, for built into them is a desire to put art to use, or *misuse*, so as to make it live.

Splatters That Live

“Extolling the concept of ‘total art,’ Happenings implicitly challenged the traditional separation between media”¹² by throwing the heroic actionism of Abstract Expressionism off the canvas. Pollock’s “action paintings” take on different intensity in Happenings: Hansen’s *Hall Street Happening* at 3rd Rail Gallery in Brooklyn, in the backyard, with performers in windows, “a large man constructed of framing wood and corrugated cardboard” with “two girls making love on a bed” raised up on a

platform, with Larry Poons reading Robert Motherwell's Dada book from inside the constructed man's stomach;¹³ or Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy*, with bodies rolling around in dead animals, chickens, and fish, as a live bodily enactment of Abstract Expressionism's own visceral mark-making. Kaprow's own paintings, after 1952, develop out of an "action-collage technique" embodying all the "levels of meaning" the artist was after through the "acting out of the dramas of tin soldiers, stories, musical structures."¹⁴ The improvised splatters of Pollock's paintings, which form a network of interweaving lines connected in "chance-like" actions whose results drift from the authorial grip of the painter's hand (derived by the artist pouring paint from a can and down the end of a paintbrush handle) find their culmination in the multiplicity, drama, and "everything goes" aesthetic articulated by Kaprow: "The action-collage then became bigger, and I introduced flashing lights and thicker hunks of matter. These parts projected farther and farther from the wall and into the room, and included more and more audible elements: sounds of ringing buzzers, bells, toys, etc., until I had accumulated nearly all the sensory elements..."¹⁵

Whereas Pollock splattered paint on canvas, in physical and expressive gestures, Kaprow and others sought to extend their reach directly into the room to a point where the bodies of others would *inhabit* art, functioning not only as "action paintings with objects"¹⁶ but as intrusions into space (with buzzers and all). The frame of the painting is thus exploded by the dangers enacted by the likes of Monk—"putting out eyes, hurting herself badly or destroying expensive machinery" comes to replace the pouring of paint, the splattering of drips, and the solitary figure of the artist in his barn in New York. Whether "total spectacle" of performers, or audiences stepping over tires, "all meaning" and "everything"—objects, raw materials, bodies and junk, sounds and musical structures, toys, "tinfoil, straw, canvas, photos, newspaper"¹⁷—wrap the space of presentation with art's potential, as an invitation to partake wholly, unabashedly so.

Fluxus and the Extremes of Perception

The move toward everyday life and quotidian experience found in Cage's ongoing output of music, echoed in the tumultuous euphoria of Happenings, finds further iteration in Fluxus. Fluxus parallels Kaprow's Environments and the performative nature of Hansen's Happenings, all of which were overlapping in New York at this time. In the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s the New York art scene functioned as an interdisciplinary hive in which artists worked with dancers, dancers worked with musicians, musicians worked with filmmakers, and so on. As Philip Corner recalls:

... a group of dancers and musicians, and visual artists interested in performance, and writers were already meeting once a week in a loft on the Lower East Side. The rule was ... well there just were no rules. Just generosity of spirit and spirits burning with imagination and enthusiasm. Everyone was willing to try whatever any one of

the group wishes to try out. Neither was there any group, and kind of recognized belongingness; community of interest produced a cooperative unity. There was, as a line of research, that art = everyday life equation. Choreography made of non-dancers.¹⁸

That the concept of “total art” espoused by Hansen and “intermedia” practice announced by Fluxus arise from this moment is not surprising, for the very terminology suggests a breaking down of disciplinary borders, or rather, simply overlooking them through collaborative spirit.

In bold contrast to Environments and Happenings, Fluxus veers away from spectacular antics. “These works differed from Happenings in their rejection of the physicality and gestural vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism, favoring instead a conceptual rigor and attentiveness to ‘insignificant’ phenomena.”¹⁹ Yet, as Dick Higgins points out, Fluxus is more an “extension” rather than an opposition, embracing Abstract Expressionism’s move toward giving life to materials as they exist in reality.²⁰ The question of representation and interpretation so paramount to Cage finds curious parallel in the arguments regarding Abstract Expressionism, for both radically aim for essentialist aesthetics: Cage for the material purity of sound, as it relates only to itself, and the formalist aesthetics advocated by Clement Greenberg with regard to Pollock and others, which dramatizes the painterly splatters as fulfilling paintings obligation to its unique materiality: painting is *about* paint. Such essentialist and formalist ideas unfold the art object by reducing its meaningful references, and also opening up to new potentials in which representation, interpretation, and materiality are given new life: the art object, like the musical composition, is not so much a series of signs in need of interpretation but an organized event that aims to open out onto the field of meaning by inviting speculation, curiosity of perception, and the simplicity of ordinary materials to carry the imagination, as in Fluxus’s minimalist actions (referred to as “events” in distinction to Happenings), which flirt with imperceptibility.

Staging the imperceptible and insignificant aims for a shift in perception, for Fluxus asks us to take another look, and listen, to the small details making up the greater situations of everyday life by “radically isolating them” as singular events.²¹ As in Nam June Paik’s *One for Violin* (1962) in which the performer raises a violin slowly overhead and then smashes it across a table, or Dick Higgins’s *Danger Musics*, which consists of a series of actions, including the shaving of Higgins’s head, the single gesture is harnessed and refined so as to uncover its inherent intensity, banality, and minute detail.

As Hannah Higgins summarizes in her thoughtful account *Fluxus Experience*, “Fluxus is better understood on its own terms: as producing diverse primary experiences and interactions with reality, plain and simple.”²² Reality, plain and simple, finds its description by bringing our attention toward its most banal elements. As Higgins further underscores, it makes “the ordinary special” by creating “multiple pathways toward ‘ontological knowledge,’”²³ situating “people

radically within their corporeal, sensory worlds.”²⁴ To “situate people radically” resonates with Kaprow’s environmental art practice, and his call “to partake wholly” brings to light the incorporation of live performance to engage and activate an audience.

Events, Fluxkits, Fluxfilms, and the multiples produced, while functioning as objects in themselves, override the explicitly aesthetic properties for an “experiential” opportunity. Situational events are staged in established music theaters in front of audiences as well as completely unannounced, performed by a single artist, as in Robert Watts’s *Casual Event* (1962), which consists of someone driving to a gas station to inflate the car’s tire until it blows out, replacing it, and then driving home. It features in Fluxkits, which consist of an array of found and fabricated objects assembled in briefcase-like boxes and which invite audiences to fondle, caress, and engage with their contents. As a treasure chest of devices and gadgets, gimmicks and tricks, the Fluxkit intends to an enlivening of the senses, particularly that of touch, through a playful misuse of ordinary objects. The stark simplicity of such a gesture echoes the Fluxus ethos that “everything that happens is art,” but most directly, the physical and perceptual experience of participants. To articulate such ideas, Fluxus strips away the plethora of junk and theatrical posing found in Happenings, and their often elaborate scripts, creating instead events of small, ordinary, and simple gestures, considered, deadpan, humorous, and often on the verge of imperceptibility. George Brecht’s *Drip Music*, in which the artist drips water into a container, is exemplary in that it forces the listener into the delicate silence of near inaudibility: the ear must move closer to the quiet sounds, to follow each drip, as a universe of potentiality, each single drip an event, each resonance a sonic revelation. To stage the near imperceptible was to direct an audience toward the phenomena of perception itself.

Sound as Event

Many Fluxus artists, along with Kaprow, Hansen, and Dine, attended Cage’s seminar at the New School in 1957 and 1958, including George Brecht, Jackson Mac Low, Toshi Ichiyanagi, and Dick Higgins, and subsequently developed an interest in Cage’s musical strategies. Chance operations, dissolving the lines between art and life, and the introduction of things like silence as useable material all take root in Happenings and Fluxus, though Fluxus ultimately adopts the more “musical” interest. In fact, Fluxus performances can be seen as resolutely musical in so far as they are often staged as musical performance and rely upon a musical language, instruments, and conventions, even if at times no direct musical reference can be found. This though mirrors Cage’s own example, in which music grows increasingly open-ended, as a means rather than an end.

George Brecht’s early development of the “event score” furthers the Cagean precept that all sounds can function as music and extends it by proposing that everything that happens *is* music. “Standing in the woods of East Brunswick, New

Jersey, where I lived at the time, waiting for my wife to come from the house, standing behind my English Ford station wagon, the motor running and the leftturn signal blinking, it occurred to me that a truly 'event' piece could be drawn from the situation."²⁵ Brecht's observations of an ordinary moment, and his realization that such occurrences can function as the stuff of art, is not a radical or original moment, for certainly the notion of artists looking toward the world for inspirational source has a long tradition. Yet a markedly different result occurs when art moves to highlight or frame this world *as* art in itself, rather than represent it through abstracted renderings or representational illusion. Such a move must be emphasized as forming a radical shift in the field of aesthetics, for it undoes the ontological status of the object by introducing that which traditionally remains outside the frame: art comes to function by creating nonsymbolic gestures shared through physical knowledge.

Whereas the antics described by Hansen as indicative of Happenings aim to create a total art in which performer and spectator converge to *form* an art event, for Fluxus such antics are replaced by literal actions whose presentation shuffles the perceptual viewpoint of what art and music are.

Incidental Music, 1961

George Brecht

Five Piano Pieces

Any number playable successively or simultaneously, in any order and combination, with one another and with other pieces.

1. The piano seat is tilted on its base and brought to rest against a part of the piano.
2. Wooden blocks.
A single wooden block is placed inside the piano. A block is placed upon this block, then a third upon the second, and so forth, singly, until at least one block falls from the column.
3. Photographing the piano situation.
4. Three dried peas or beans are dropped, one after another, onto the keyboard. Each such seed remaining on the keyboard is attached to the key or keys nearest it with a single piece of pressure-sensitive tape.
5. The piano seat is suitably arranged, and the performer seats himself.

Incidental Music redirects our understanding of the piano as sound-generating object by highlighting the accidental, the chance event, its status as material object, whose body holds within it a universe of potential sound. The piano as musical object *par excellence* is intentionally analyzed, in mock-scientific examination, so as to outline a lexicon of possible approaches toward unlocking its potential: altering its position, stacking blocks on its surface, taking its picture, fastening peas, and eventually occupying the position of pianist. Such labors form a catalog of

actions through which the piano may be approached. Brecht suggests that the piano, as we think we know it, may require another look, another understanding, another angle. “While Cage invokes the total, unpredictable configuration, permanent flux, and seems (theoretically) not interested in the quality of the individual things, Brecht isolates the single, observed occurrence and projects it into a performance activity, which he called an ‘event.’”²⁶

That sound figures dominantly within the construction of events underscores the move away from visual objects and their inherent stability and toward the vibratory, the performative, the humorous, the playful, the propositional, for sound undermines form, as stable referent, by always moving away from its source, while slipping past the guide of representational meaning by exceeding the symbolic, either in a drip of water or in a single pea tapping a piano key. The embrace of sound reflects Fluxus’s ambition to activate perception through a performative matrix that would bring situations into play, for sound is marked by its immediacy: in moving against the codes of representational meaning, it slips undercover to surprise the listener; it commands attention and disrupts the dividing line between subjects and objects; it happens all the time, from all sides.

Music starts in the mind. A sense of music is as individual as the individual mind. Music is the name given to a certain kind of perception of events in the world of sound. To be aware of sounds is to be aware of oneself; to be aware of sounds as music is to experience something capable of being shared. An experience shared is one that can be verified. It becomes more real.²⁷

Robin Maconie’s description uncovers aspects of musical and acoustical experience that Fluxus exploits. For music “starting in the mind” underscores subjective perception as a determining force—for the composer, it may figure as an intellectual activity, a mental process for the listener, music begins at the moment of perceiving it as such, as “perception of events in the world of sound.” Further, sound is the *prima materia* from which musical form is sculpted or made explicit, rendered comprehensible as cultural form. Maconie further emphasizes perception by referring to the self—sound and the self are wrapped up together, wedded as if inseparable, a kind of “acoustic mirroring” reminiscent of Guy Rosolato’s formulation in which the voice, as sonorous event leaving the body, returns to it, thus produced and received in one and the same instant.²⁸ The acoustic mirror is both produced and witnessed by the individual, as voice, for one speaks while hearing one’s own speaking, wedding the self and sound as a singular event. In speaking, I announce myself as an individual and am first recognized by myself, in the audibility of my own voice. The voice can be extended to include other sound events produced by the individual—as in the child’s gurgles, screams, and cries, which have real effect: the mother comes running, strangers turn and watch, siblings run away. In this sense, the self and sound are superimposed to form a heightened drama that extends past the visual, for vision distances the self from that which it sees—the field of vision

isolates objects, so as to apprehend them, whereas sound comes *upon* the individual, so as to apprehend him or her. Lacan's "mirror-stage" functions quite differently from Rosolato's "acoustic mirror." For Lacan, the child confronts itself as a separate object: in the mirror, it sees itself as an outlined body, positioned in the social field (upon the mother's breast), as a distinct subject, with form. To the image the child points and recognizes itself pointing, thereby seeing itself as distanced and embodied. Yet its body is only understood as coming from outside, in the reflected image—the self is thus made a distanced and containable entity in a scopic field.²⁹ In contrast, the acoustic mirror is a kind of sounding board against which the voice registers the child as a subject *embodied*, emanating sound outward, a producer of voice. Therefore, the self comes from inside, rises up to greet itself, and returns to itself. In this way, the voice restores the subject, rather than fragmenting it.

To follow Maconie, such a heightened coupling of sound and self operates in the social field—for to make sound is to direct it outward, to emanate the body beyond itself, as voice, as command, as being itself, with effect. Music, as the production of special kinds of sounds, conditions experience as a "shared event," for it circulates through the world as a cultural object with an intensity of meanings.³⁰ As part of the world of sound, music extends past listeners to enfold them in a collective experience, for music too emanates, entering the space of its occurrence and those present. Fluxus, in creating sound events that leave behind any traditional sense of the musical, ultimately asks the listener to consider not only music itself as sound but things incidental and accidental, even visual, as pertaining to the domain of sound, such as photographing a piano, or dripping water. Ultimately, music functions as a cultural arena for Fluxus, whose specific acoustical operations are exploited so as to direct attention to perception itself. In this way, Fluxus is *about* perception. It aims to "emanate" rather than signify; to embody through action rather than point to through representation, and it uses music to address the self in such a way as to aim for shared experience.

"Unlike the visual experience, therefore, which unfolds in front of and under control of the viewer and tends to be articulated from moment to moment, episodically, the listening experience is continuous, ever-present, and unavoidable, and by comparison less susceptible to direct control."³¹ The absence of control of sound lends to the events of Fluxus, for it hints at sound's immediacy to impinge upon a listener's perceptual field—to have immediate effect. It acts as an acoustic mirror in so far as Fluxus aims to dissolve the boundaries of subjects and objects: "What Rosolato suggests is that since the voice is capable of being internalized at the same time as it is externalized, it can spill over from subject to object and object to subject, violating the bodily limits upon which classic subjectivity depends..."³² In this way, we might understand Fluxus performance as a process of using music (whether a sound is heard or not) to set the stage for immediacy in which "bodily limits" are redrawn, where one does not apprehend an artistic object but laughs along with it. That is to say, Fluxus appropriates music as a direct route into the heart of perception.

Language

In contrast to Happenings, and preceding Conceptual art, language functions increasingly as a material for production within Fluxus. The Fluxus event score operates to not only give instruction but to function as text in itself, as in Brecht's *Five Events* from 1961:

eating with
between two breaths
sleep
wet hand
several words

Five Events is exemplary of the Fluxus language game, as it twists language into an event of the mind. It is both poem and instruction, haiku and manifesto, proposing an action of *reading* and *doing* to collapse the two, for reading the event score is to implicitly enact the score itself. Others of Brecht's works, such as *Three Aqueous Events* ("ice/water/steam") or *Piano Piece*, from 1962 ("vase of flowers onto a piano"), extends the appeal to cognitive process, for "Brecht believed that the task of the artist was simply to stimulate the viewer's imagination or perception."³³ In this way, the event score is a form of signification that, preceding Roland Barthes's influential poststructuralist "Death of the Author" (1968) essay, attempts to liberate language from the authorial grip not only of the author *per se*, but of the value system embedded in authoring.³⁴

La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 #10 (for Bob Morris)*, "draw a straight line and follow it," is indicative of the event score, for it raises a question: is it truly necessary to draw an actual line, to follow it concretely, in real time and space? Hovering on the edge of possible action, the event score stimulates the imagination, sets it going, for what is implied in *Composition #10* is that the line is physical *and* mental—it's a line of text read and followed to its end, and a line found within everyday life—it is nowhere and everywhere. "Event scores are poetry, through music, getting down to facts."³⁵ Here, language is an instructional game or musical score that situates the reader in the position of maker. Yet, paradoxically, what is articulated is that language becomes the art work: the event score articulates, implies, and performs the very thing written, yet only in the moment of its being read, as a textual act. This operates on what Dick Higgins calls the "postcognitive."³⁶ In contrast to the cognitive, the postcognitive is not so much an operation of interpretation that attempts to apprehend language, understand it as a singular meaning, but rather a performance *of* language. Such performance situates meaning in the event itself, not as a singular interpretive moment but as an extended and reverberating multiplicity resulting in laughter, reverie, action, conversation, and performance. It is a kind of secret passed in the operations of artistic practice to extend beyond the object to meet the viewer or participant, in their own head. "One anti-personnel type-CBU bomb will be thrown into the audience" (1969).

Philip Corner's outrageous event in blowing up the audience, in turn, suggests an exploding of the boundaries between subject and object, viewer and artist, by literally collapsing the two, making them grotesquely indistinguishable, for "... these cryptic phrases were equally valid as performance directives, physical entities, or states of mind; although they could be enacted, simply reading and thinking about them was sufficient to constitute realization."³⁷

We might, in turn, substitute the event score for music and propose that the sound events of Fluxus are also meant to be completed in the listener's mind, as a process of postcognitive realization—to be completed in the mind, and not before, not against the static object to which the mind may turn but before, or within, the instant of reception. Brecht's *Incidental Music* or Young's *Compositions* each situates music and the auditory event inside a reader's/listener's imagination. Sound is thus heard through its suggestion.

On the Aesthetical Terrain

"Fluxus transforms the avant-garde (as institutional critique, as iconoclasm) to become, in part, its opposite: aesthetic experience."³⁸ Following Hannah Higgins, the project of Fluxus aims to get inside the mechanics of perception, through post-cognitive, imaginary, and poetic events, activating the senses for ultimate "aesthetic experiences." Yet Higgins's reduction of Fluxus to "pure aesthetic experience" overlooks or under-hears that such events often carry cultural and social commentary. Performances, Fluxkits, event scores, Fluxfilms, and other projects, while acting as catalysts for perceptual immediacy in their experiential moment and subsequent "ontological knowledge," nevertheless lead an audience to a series of critical questions. That is to say, can't ontological knowledge contain, if not make possible, something like "institutional critique"? Works such as Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964), in which the performer seated on a stage invites the audience to cut away her clothes with a pair of scissors, shift the art object to experiential event in a way that *problematizes* such experiential participation as purely aesthetical.³⁹ Or even Brecht's *Drip Music* can be understood in relation to a legacy of Abstract Expressionism, whose own drips and splatters were thrown from a much more masculine source: Brecht's drip holds within it an implicit criticism of the works of someone like Pollock by intentionally producing much more limp and pathetic drips. Such pathetic drips, while serious, point toward the humorous, for we must not forget that Fluxus was partly motivated by the humorlessness of "gags," thereby "introducing a much-needed *spirit of play* into the arts."⁴⁰

The extreme, whether overtly dangerous or resolutely subtle, deeply minute or full of hilarity, seems to unsettle perception not for the sole purpose of reinvigorating its potential to understand reality through aesthetic experience only, but to, in turn, question how reality itself has been constructed. Stripping away the representational glare of signifying codes, predicated on a divide between object and subject, it is my view that Fluxus initiates not only immediate knowing but

activates such knowing in the field of culture by insisting on the difficulties knowing entails. Its interest in music and the dynamics of staging sound underscore a general thrust in the avant-garde to locate new media for generating active relationships between making and receiving. Thus, Happenings, Environments, and Fluxus make us radically aware of sound's potentiality to create work that retains a sense of immediacy, corporeality, and curiosity.

Notes

1. Cage, who had initially attended the New School as a student of Henry Cowell in the 1930s, made it a point in the 1950s to make himself available to younger generations. He taught at the New School from 1957 to 1960.

2. Al Hansen, *A Primer of Happenings & Time/Space Art* (New York: Something Else Press, 1965), p. 21.

3. Allan Kaprow, "Happenings in the New York Scene," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 18.

4. Al Hansen, *A Primer of Happenings & Time/Space Art*, p. 85.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

6. Allan Kaprow, "Happenings in the New York Scene," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, p. 18.

7. Allan Kaprow, "Notes on the Creation of a Total Art," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, p. 11.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

9. Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 19.

10. Al Hansen, *A Primer of Happenings & Time/Space Art*, pp. 52–53.

11. Allan Kaprow, "Happenings in the New York Scene," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, p. 19.

12. Barbara Haskell, *Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism and Performance, 1958–1964* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984), p. 33.

13. Al Hansen, *A Primer of Happenings & Time/Space Art*, pp. 12–14.

14. Allan Kaprow, "A Statement," in *Happenings*, ed. Michael Kirby (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1965), pp. 44–45.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Barbara Haskell, *Blam!*, p. 44.

17. Allan Kaprow, "A Statement," in *Happenings*, p. 45

18. Philip Corner, liner notes from his CD *On Tape from the Judson Years* (Milan: Alga Marghen, 1998). I might also insert, however minimally, the general cultural backdrop of the New York scene exemplified in the atmosphere of Greenwich Village in the early 1960s. We might recall how the Village became a hive of creative energy during the anti-Communist era of the 1950s, operating as a haven for leftist radicals, Beat poets, jazz players, and general anarchist bohemians. Gravitating around numerous coffee shops and bars, such as the legendary Café Wha?, figures such as James Baldwin, Bob Dylan, and Allen Ginsberg, to name just a few out of the many, all hovered in and around this community, participating in nights of poetry reading, music-making, theatrical happening, political meetings,

and conversation through an overarching spirit of sharing and reveling. To recall that such things were always happening on the streets in the Village, we might appreciate Corner's statement and recognize too that art practice was partially inseparable from the more sub-cultural popularity of such antics as found in the cafes and bars.

19. Barbara Haskell, *Blam!*, p. 49.

20. Dick Higgins, "Something Else About Fluxus," in *Art and Artists* (October 1972), p. 18.

21. Douglas Kahn, *Noise Water Meat* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), p. 226.

22. Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002), p. 59.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

25. Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 75.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

27. Robin Maconie, *The Concept of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 11.

28. For an account of Rosolato's theories, see Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, IN, and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 79–80.

29. See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror-Stage," in *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 3–29.

30. For more on musical meaning in relation to individual experience, see Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

31. Robin Maconie, *The Concept of Music*, p. 22.

32. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, pp. 79–80.

33. Barbara Haskell, *Blam!*, p. 53.

34. Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana/Flamingo, 1977), pp. 142–148.

35. George Brecht, quoted in Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, p. 79.

36. Craig Saper, "Fluxus as a Laboratory," in *The Fluxus Reader* (Chichester, UK: Academy Editions, 1998), p. 148.

37. Barbara Haskell, *Blam!* p. 53.

38. Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, p. 99.

39. Kristine Stiles proposes that *Cut Piece* "... becomes a representation of the translation of mental concepts into corporeal and spiritual deliberations on the problem of ethical human interaction." The aesthetical proposition of concepts being completed in a viewer's or participant's mind then takes on much more social weight from this vantage point. Kristine Stiles, "Being Undyed: The Meeting of Mind and Matter in Yoko Ono's Events," in *Yes: Yoko Ono* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), p. 148.

40. Dick Higgins, "Fluxus: Theory and Perception," in *The Fluxus Reader*, p. 225.

Chapter 5

Minimalist Treatments: La Monte Young and Robert Morris

The Fluxus project and its eccentric cultivation of singular events tunes the ear toward acute refinement, bringing perception and the field of the everyday up against questions of representation and experience. From butterfly wings and candle flames to imagined bombs, Fluxus totally revamps the aesthetic category. It, in turn, tosses sound into a far broader field of possibility, harnessing its dynamic so as to activate art's social and relational promise: to attract people's attention to attention itself. The work of La Monte Young contributes dynamically to the Fluxus project, while in turn setting the terms for the developments of Minimalism. His work throughout the 1960s, and to the present, extends auditory experience and the potential of experimental music toward an intensified refinement.

In contrast to Conceptual art's overt "idea-based" endeavors of the late 1960s, Henry Flynt's "concept art," coined earlier in 1961, refers more to the perceptual event: "For the first time in 3,000 years of mathematics an image is used as a notation-token, such that the image has to be completed in the reader's mind in the act of perception."¹ Like the "postcognitive" Fluxus event score, concept art is theorized as a perceptual process in which the image (concept) is experienced as an immediate presence—an art that presents to the viewer/listener an experience to be completed through the very act of perception, resonating with Nam June Paik's statement, "In a nomadic, post-industrial time we are more experience-oriented than possession-oriented."² Concept art can be found in the event scores of Brecht and others, articulating the Fluxus ambition to renew perception by collapsing the distance between art and life. Such interests also feature in the musical works of La Monte Young. "La Monte Young overthrew Cage's definition of the new as 'extravagant confusion.' His compositions presupposed a quasi-scientific analysis of music as nothing but a collection of sounds defined by frequency, amplitude, duration and overtone

spectrum.”³ Moving away from the overtly social dimension (or “extravagant confusion”) of Cage’s work, Young probes the perceptual and detailed world of sound to bring to the fore a music as pure concept, as a sonic image to be completed within the listener’s ear.

Having learned guitar and saxophone as a kid living in Idaho, Young studied at Los Angeles City College and at UCLA, in the early 1950s, and then studied composition at Berkeley in the late 1950s. Combining a dedication to jazz music, the likes of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Eric Dolphy, the works of Stockhausen and the European musical avant-garde, with an interest in the natural phenomenon of sound, Young’s music moves quickly through the 1950s to arrive at what would come to mark his significant works, that of extended duration, harmonics, or overtone, and psychoacoustics, presented through intensified volume.

His growing interests in just-intonation (or whole number frequency ratios) and extended duration are found in the early *Trio for Strings* (1957), constructed of long tones and silences. As fellow-minimalist Terry Riley recalls: “The *Trio for Strings*, which is a milestone in the history of Western music, is made up entirely of long durations. It is the most strangely unique serial composition that I know. The sound of the piece, which combines the patience of ancient China with the austerity of Zen Japan, is dominated by suspensions of intervals that carry us along static planes where our gravity-bound and worldly ideals of Western culture do not normally allow us to travel.”⁴ The composition also made quite an impact on his professor at the time, Seymour Schifrin, who went so far as to organize an informal performance of the work at his house in order to point out to Young his erred direction—for certainly the use of extended silences and notes were the result of a miscalculation or passing fancy. To Schifrin’s chagrin, Young became increasingly interested and excited in the sonic experience of frequencies and long duration, and he went on to further exploit their potential.⁵

Moving to New York in 1960, after a summer spent at Darmstadt as part of Stockhausen’s first workshop, Young was to exert an enormous influence in coalescing the artists working around Cage’s New School class and downtown New York into what would become early Fluxus. Organizing a series of events at Yoko Ono’s loft at 112 Chambers in 1960 and 1961, Young created a concentrated forum for the multiple strands of art activity happening at this time.⁶ In addition, his editorial work for the Fluxus compilation *An Anthology* from this time, along with Jackson Mac Low, reflects his overall involvement and influence upon the early days of Fluxus.

While Young’s work can be seen as an extension of the Cagean logic surrounding sound, his work shifts dramatically from the macroview of Cagean sociality to the microscopic palette of sonic frequencies.

I could see that sounds and all other things in the world were just as important as human beings and that if we could to some degree give ourselves up to them, the

sounds and other things that is, we enjoyed the possibility of learning something new. By giving ourselves up to them, I mean getting inside of them to some extent so that we can experience another world. This is not so easily explained but more easily experienced. Of course if one is not willing to give a part of himself to the sound, that is to reach out to the sound, but insists on approaching it in human terms, then he will probably experience little new but instead find only what he already knows defined within the terms with which he approached the experience. But if one can give up a part of himself to the sound, then the experience need not stop there but may be continued much further, and the only limits are the limits each individual sets for himself.⁷

The call to “give up” the human terms so as to reach the world of sound resonates with Cage’s attempt to strip sound of its representational codes so as to liberate music and the perception of it. Yet Young’s solution would not be in the multiplication of input—as in the Black Mountain event and later works, such as *Variations IV*—which operates on the human level, of individual bodies and their implication in a social field. That Young strives for the world of sound, as set not by human limits but by its own internal logic, can be seen to follow Flynt’s formulation of concept art and Brecht’s analytical intuition of near-imperceptible phenomena.

To explore the world of sound, Young dedicated himself to an increasingly “minimal” musical project—the “extravagant confusion” of Cage is replaced by the “Theatre of the Singular Event,” articulated in the series of text-based compositions from 1960 and 1961, such as *Composition 1960 #2*, which reads:

Build a fire in front of an audience. Preferably, use wood although other combustibles may be used as necessary for starting the fire or controlling the kind of smoke. The fire may be of any size, but it should not be the kind which is associated with another object, such as a candle or a cigarette lighter. The lights may be turned out.

After the fire is burning, the builder(s) may sit by and watch it for the duration of the composition; however, he (they) should not sit between the fire and the audience in order that its members will be able to see and enjoy the fire.

The composition may be of any duration.

In the event that the performance is broadcast, the microphone may be brought up close to the fire. 5.5.60

As Flynt further reflects: “In Cage’s compositions from the fifties, the audience perceived an event from which neither the composer’s intentional procedures nor the performers’ intention process could be inferred. The short text scores of Young went beyond the boundaries of music; and they manifested a sort of fantasy—paradoxical and self-referential—which was philosophically challenging.”⁸ Concentrating on a single action opens the viewer/listener to the microscopic details of perception: the fire is an elemental event, a performative action, and an acoustical occurrence, however subtle or challenging or paradoxical.

Working alongside Tony Conrad (violin), John Cale (viola), Marian Zazeela (voice drone), and Angus MacLise (hand drums), the “Theatre of Eternal Music” (or “The Dream Syndicate”) would enhance the singular event through an intense musical focus. From 1962 to 1965, the ensemble played endlessly, mainly at the loft of Young, as well as various art galleries, such as the 10-4 Group gallery, deriving their music by incorporating elements of Indian music and jazz improvisation, exploiting elements of “Modernism’s collapse,” exemplified in Cage, into a dedication to singular tones and their harmonics. Though, as Tony Conrad states, such relation to Cage gained much momentum through its critical position: “I heard an abrupt disjunction from the post-Cagean crisis in music composition; here the composer was taking the choice of sounds directly in hand, as a real-time physicalized (and directly specified) process.... As a response to the un-choices of the composer Cage, here were composerly choices that were specified to a completeness that included and concluded the performance itself.”⁹ Significantly, the Theatre of Eternal Music delved fully into the acoustical universe of single sustained tones, compounding their deeply droning sound with extended duration, bringing each performer into a unified state. “We lived inside the sound, for years. As our precision increased, almost infinitesimal pitch changes would become glaring smears across the surface of the sound.... When John Cale’s viola and my violin began to fuse, as though smelted into one soundmass, I felt that the Dream Music had achieved its apogee.”¹⁰

Hearing Subjects and Vibrating Bodies

The physics of sound and acoustics, along with the psychoacoustics of audition, lend significant insight onto Young’s work, for questions of listening and cognition (not to mention self-fashioned spirituality) figure prominently in his compositions. To direct attention to the details of sound, Young developed a musical vocabulary of pure frequencies, working with the overtone spectrum or harmonics and nontempered tuning initially produced with saxophone and tambura, and later with tone generators, piano, and voice drone. His music, in a sense, strives for the actualization of the very perceptual moment of hearing as a phenomenon in its own right: sustained tones, loud volumes, extended durations, harmonic frequencies all encompass an overarching sonic commitment that seeks to make sound an experiential event beyond the human limits of time and space, exploiting the ear as a physiological device and the mind in its moment of perception of sound stimuli.

To sculpt such unique music, Young puts to use different tuning systems than traditional Western music. To summarize, tunings are based on mathematical proportion or ratios through which two different pitches are related, and this ratio comes to determine the interval between them, whether as an octave (ratio of 2:1), a fifth (3:2), or a third (5:4). To establish a particular key, instruments are tuned starting from a chosen frequency and following the above intervals. Such an

approach though raises certain problems when moving from one key to another, as in much classical music, which since the Baroque period developed an increasingly “chromatic” character. To overcome such problems, “tempered” tuning was established, which averages out certain frequencies, as vibrations per second, replacing them instead with an approximation. In this regard, a tempered system is never absolutely “in tune,” for each octave is subdivided into twelve equal steps, thereby inserting this approximation while keeping the octaves “in tune.” In Western classical music, instruments are tuned to this end, for orchestras generally tune to an agreed frequency of 440 cycles per second (which was established as a standard at an international conference in 1939).¹¹ In order to achieve a more subtle and varied sonic palette, Young works with “just-intonation,” a system of tuning in which all the intervals can be represented by ratios of whole numbers, resulting in a virtually infinite variety of scales and chords. Other composers throughout the twentieth century, such as Harry Partch, Lou Harrison, and Edgard Varèse, have also worked with such tunings, retuning instruments, or creating their own, in order to explore a wider range of frequencies and intervals, shifting the entire musical palette away from tempered pitch and toward micro-tonality.

Young’s work further exploits the range of frequency and whole number tuning by working with the overtone spectrum, or those frequencies that are produced through the resonance of frequencies against each other. Overtones, or harmonics, lead us into the realm of psychoacoustics, for they heighten individual perception by activating the ear and its intrinsic neurophysiological functions. By playing a note on a particular instrument, we not only hear that note but a note an octave higher, another a fifth higher, then two octaves higher, and so forth. Through such harmonic resonance frequencies influence and “color” one another—what we hear is a kind of acoustical multiplication that occurs through our own experience of frequency, as the perception of the overtone spectrum. Psychoacoustics makes complicit the individual listener within the domain of music, as a physiological conspirator. Young completes the Schoenbergian “emancipation of dissonance” from earlier in the century by following through on Cage’s example—to liberate sounds, not as social chaos but as sheer frequency, as overtone, in which the singular sounding of a particular frequency acts to induce “tones which are not physically present in the auditory stimulus, but which are supplied by the human ear, nervous system, and brain.”¹² Such liberation must be seen not only on instrumental and musical levels but also on a perceptual one, in which music inaugurates new forms of hearing.

Durational elongation is another characteristic of Young’s work, extending the psychoacoustic aspect. Early on, Young became fascinated with the idea of producing a sound for a very long time. His idea was that if you extend a note durationally you’re able to better hear all the harmonic nuance within frequency—for it takes the ear time to adjust to the frequencies heard, to in a sense grow sympathetic to them. His *Trio for Strings*, while based on a serial method using the tone row, has built into it extended silences and elongated tones. In this way, the

music aims to resonate the ear canal in such a way as to complete the composition. Duration for Young is not a question of minutes or hours, but days and years. As Philip Glass proposes: “This music is not characterized by argument and development. It has disposed of traditional concepts that were closely linked to real time, to clock-time. Music is not a literal interpretation of life and the experience of time is different. It does not deal with events in a clear directional structure. In fact there is no structure at all!”¹³

An additional aspect must be underscored in relation to Young’s work, and that is spatiality. For even though a great deal of his works are staged, in so far as an audience remains in one particular location in relation to the sound source, such as a piano, much of his work also operates as an installation. In contrast to discussions within the *musique concrète* tradition and the acousmatic construction of the sound object, which focuses much attention on the presentation of sound to a stationary listener, thereby creating a “virtual” auditory space,¹⁴ Young emphasizes the movements of the individual to generate spatiality. In this regard, auditory experience is determined through the bodily flow of an individual whose decisions as to where to be constructs the composition and the subsequent articulation of space.

Young’s Dream House is exemplary of such an approach. Dream House was initially conceived of as an environment of light and sound and functioned to house Young’s collaborations with Marian Zazeela, whom he had met in 1962, becoming his partner in both life and work. By developing the Dream House, Young essentially constructed a home for his work to be heard and experienced, for the Dream House functions to spatially express the musical works by complementing them with Zazeela’s light installations and allowing the necessary conditions for loud volume and extended listening experience beyond the usual concert setting. Beginning in 1964 with *The Tortoise, His Dreams and Journeys*, the Dream House continues to this day, functioning to activate sound through a spatial and perceptual situation. As John Schaefer recalls:

The Dream House installations usually ran for several days at a time, with live performances of up to eight hours at a time.... Distinguishing characteristics of these sound and light environments included long, sustained instrumental drones playing with or against the electric tones, creating whole fields of audible harmonics, and often Indian-sounding vocals, the latter often done by Marian Zazeela and La Monte Young themselves. High volume was also an attribute ... to the extent the sound took on physical mass—or better, the actual physical movement of sound waves became apparent in a way that was exhilarating for some, painful for others, but in any case inescapable.¹⁵

In contrast to the acousmatic tradition, the Dream House is formed at the moment an individual enters the sonic field—immersed as in a fluid, sounds oscillate across a range of frequencies through the movements of the body, enfolding the self in a sonic architecture that cannot be said to either exist or

not, for while dimension is articulated, space recedes as predicated by walls. Whereas musique concrète relies upon the loudspeaker in creating a virtual sound space—the loudspeaker positions sound in relation to a positioned subject—Young's Dream House positions the loudspeaker to mobilize the individual through real space.

Such an interest in auditory space is further extended in his use of musical instruments and their particular tunings. In conjunction with the Dream House, Young's *The Well-Tuned Piano* positions the piano to highlight its relation to a given architecture. Begun in 1964, the composition is a work for justly tuned piano in which micro-tonal chords and intervals unfold at an intensely slow pace. Taking its structure from Indian raga music, which is generally structured around a series of melodic lines that the performer can improvise over a period of time, lingering on some lines while building climaxes through repetition, *The Well-Tuned Piano* consists of a similar structure, its skeleton providing a series of chordal opportunities for improvisation. The composition has rarely been performed live, though Young has dedicated years to its development; like all his works, *The Well-Tuned Piano* evolves and gains new material every time it is played, or reconsidered, thereby extending its duration, which is somewhere around five hours.¹⁶ Since its tuning is of such special accuracy, Young often insists on the controlled conditions of a given space so as to maximize the instrument's tonal range. For the given spatial situation can be seen to enhance or interfere with the instrument's sound, and the overtone spectrum—that is to say, Young works with the given space as an extended instrument through acoustically conversing with it.

In 1976 the Dia Foundation decided to support Young and Zazeela by purchasing a building for the sole purpose of housing their difficult and austere projects. In 1979, they took occupation of the old Mercantile Exchange Building in lower Manhattan, finally creating the perfect Dream House, a living/working laboratory for the continual exploration of auditory experience. Taking the chordal structure of *The Well-Tuned Piano*, Young installed tone generators in each of the rooms of the building. Each room presented one set of frequencies, or chordal environment, along with Zazeela's light installation *The Magenta Lights*, turning the building into an extended instrument whereby each room added up to form the entire composition. By moving through the different rooms, a visitor would create the composition: spending time in one room, sleeping in another, avoiding others, acted as a form of improvisation, a kind of performance in which sound, space, and the individual unite.

Through the use of multiple frequencies sustained at high volumes, the environment of the building is made a partner in composition, for such frequencies acoustically activate the rooms, tuned to their dimensions and surface reflection or absorption. Listening thus occurs on both acoustic and psychoacoustic levels, for frequencies interweave to create harmonic overtones that shift in relation to one's physical location. By moving around, shifting balance, and relocating one's ears around the room, the tonal dynamic dramatically changes. This functions in

relation to what Maryanne Amacher refers to as “the third ear,” for such overtones do not necessarily exist in real space but are created inside the resonating ear canal. This is made intensely active through the creation of “standing waves.” As Young explains:

There are compelling mathematical and physical reasons for employing sine waves [single frequencies] as the foundational units of analysis for sound waveforms.... When a single continuous sine wave of constant frequency is sounded in an enclosed space, such as a room, the air molecules in the room are arranged into complex geometrical patterns of oscillation. Because of the parallel surfaces established by walls, ceiling, and floor[s] of typical enclosed spaces, standing wave patterns are created when a sine wave is reflected from a given plane (without absorption) and then travels back, superposing itself with the original wave. The amplitude of the reflected wave algebraically adds and, at certain points, cancels the amplitude of the original wave. Adding the contributions from the components of the original wave and the reflected wave, we can create standing waves in the space. A standing wave does not propagate but remains anchored at certain locations in the room, called nodes.¹⁷

Standing waves thus create a field of fixed points, or nodes, which in themselves are highly active zones that in their organization create a field of molecular oscillations and patterns that “allow the listener’s position and movements in the space to become an integral part of the sound composition.”¹⁸ In this sense, the work exists partially within a listener’s experience of it: musical patterns and acoustical events unfold as a listener moves around the room, and the oscillations alter in minute sheets of tone. As Young points out, the room itself functions as an enlarged instrument, fulfilling what Marshall McLuhan and Edmund Carpenter define as “auditory space,” for “auditory space has no point of favoured focus. It’s a sphere without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing the thing.”¹⁹ Young’s work creates the space of its auditory occurrence—that is to say, sound and architecture are no longer separate but interpenetrate to form a single entity, “creating its own dimensions moment by moment.”²⁰

Discursive Twists: Robert Morris

Young’s practice, while performing Concept art, can be understood to engage the viewer/listener with an increased intensity—his musical works, in their extreme duration and rigorous technique, demand much from the receiver. In contrast to Young’s work and its physicality, the artist Robert Morris develops a more discursive treatment of relational experience.

One of the more actively versatile and productive artists of the 1960s, Morris moves from the Judson Dance Theater and early Fluxus to Minimalism, site-based sculpture and earthwork. Having been introduced to Young by Cage in San Francisco in 1960, they each subsequently relocated to New York where they

have worked ever since. As a participant in Young's Chamber performance series organized at Yoko Ono's loft, Morris presented his *Passageway* project in 1961. Constructed out of wood, two parallel walls curved throughout the space, tapering into a claustrophobic narrowing. The corridor formed a sculptural environment visitors walked in and out of. In stark contrast to Kaprow, Morris's environment was pointedly hard and antagonistic to participants, where body and environment conflict rather than commingle.²¹

Concerns of physical experience undoubtedly reflect Morris's involvement with the Judson Dance Theater and the new dance performance developed in the works of Ann Halprin, Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti (at the time, Morris's wife), Steve Paxton, Tricia Brown, and Lucinda Childs, all of whom Morris worked with at the Judson Church. Contemporaneous with Happenings and early Fluxus, the Judson Dance Theater sought to overcome the tradition of modern dance, exemplified in Martha Graham's work, by stripping dance of psychology and spectacle. Much of these new works established a spatial language through the use of props and sculptural structures, as exemplified in Simone Forti's *Slant Board*, also presented at Yoko Ono's loft in 1961. Choreographed for a group of dancers and a wooden ramp fitted with ropes, *Slant Board* forced dancers to negotiate the difficult angle of the ramp, holding themselves up with the ropes. The dance thus unfolds as a spatial conversation in which body and object *produce* gestural movements, as dancers negotiate the ramp through movements noticeably strained and difficult. Such difficulty instigates a positioning of the body, marking the object not so much as a generator of free movement but as an intrusion upon it.²² Morris's *Passageway* functions in much the same way: the narrowing of the walls confront the visitor with a spatial tension. In turn, the work begs the question: what is a viewer's relationship to such a work of art? What are viewers to make of the art object that forcibly positions their sense of viewing in such discordant proximity, in a passageway leading nowhere?

Morris was in fact producing similar props for his dance performances at this time. His *Column* work from 1961 (his first sculptural work after giving up painting) was constructed for a performance at the Living Theater in New York (to benefit the publication of the Fluxus' *An Anthology*). The work consists of a gray, rectangular column eight feet high by two feet square. Positioned in the center of the stage, the column is presented for three and half minutes, and then toppled over by pulling a string, to remain horizontal on the stage for another three and half minutes.²³ That the sculpture relates to literal action beyond dramatic narrative as well as to the scale of the body hints at Morris's involvement with the Judson Dance Theater and its vocabulary of task-oriented actions stripped of expressivity. It also highlights Morris's ongoing questioning of the place of the body in the production *and* reception of art.

Morris's *Passageway* and *Column*, while performative, point to an interest in sculpture, materiality, and perception as object *and* event. As in subsequent works, *Passageway* stands as an object in space, a material articulation, while

housing a participant's body inside a performative situation, where object and viewer become inseparable.

While the extreme simplicity of *Passageway* demonstrates a substantive departure from the chaos that shaped Happenings ... it inevitably recalls their desire to manipulate audiences as well as to draw upon an insistent aggressiveness. Yet Morris had exchanged the loose, episodic, and theatrical form, with its narrative implications, and the expressive texture of the Fluxus event—which may be seen as deliberately continuous with Abstract Expressionism—for a radical contraction of impact.²⁴

No more chaos, no more of Hansen's rhythms or Brecht's perceptual textures; performance void of narrative, or aggression, replaced by a subdued and studied literalness. Morris's work is a material investigation, essayistic in tone. His *Column* explores a primary sculptural effect: how does an object change when it is presented vertical and horizontal? Do we understand this as the same object in each given position? Or does the shift in position also redefine the object—in short, is the *column* still the same once it is toppled over?

Questions of perception, as we've seen in Happenings and Fluxus, take on paramount importance in art production at this time and echo the work of phenomenology exemplified in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose work gained a North American audience from 1960 onwards. Published in French in 1945 and translated into English in 1958, Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* stands as a seminal work on the study of perception predicated on an investigation of corporeal presence. As the study of essences, phenomenology is a transcendental philosophy, yet in contrast to metaphysics, it begins with the implication that the world is always already there, as a material interface or physical presence. In this way, "consciousness is always consciousness of something"²⁵ and essence is always figured in and through the world. Perception is therefore *situated* in the very space from which it arises. As Merleau-Ponty elucidates: "Phenomenology is the search for a philosophy which shall be a 'rigorous science,' but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we 'live' them."²⁶ Merleau-Ponty's work uncovers the body as a determining force, "a system of systems devoted to the inspection of a world and capable of leaping over distances, piercing the perceptual future, and outlining hollows and reliefs, distances and deviations—a meaning—in the inconceivable flatness of being."²⁷ Thus, "meaning" is found in the body's very movements and digressions, the pulses that trigger movement *toward* the world, and that brings dimension to the "flatness of being." It is only through such movement or motoric engagement that meaning happens:

All perception, all action which presupposes it, and in short every human use of the body is already *primordial expression*. Not that derivative labor which substitutes for what is expressed signs which are given elsewhere with their meaning and rule of usage, but the primary operation which first constitutes signs as signs, makes that which is expressed dwell in them through the eloquence of their arrangement

and configuration alone, implants a meaning in that which did not have one, and thus—far from exhausting itself in the instant at which it occurs—inaugurates an order and founds an institution or a tradition.²⁸

Merleau-Ponty inserts into the field of knowledge corporeal presence in a way that challenges or supplements analytic thought, which can be said to “interrupt the perceptual transition from one moment to another, and then seeks in the mind the guarantee of a unity which is already there when we perceive. Analytic thought also interrupts the unity of culture and then tries to reconstitute it from the outside.”²⁹

Such theories of the body, as not so much antithetical to thinking but as constituting it, can be placed alongside the work of Morris and many others at this time. The artist’s *Untitled (Box for Standing)* (1961) performs the body in much the same way *Passageway* did, giving narrative through minimal construction to the play of body and object. Built out of wood according to the dimensions of his own body (essentially his height and width), *Box for Standing* is a wooden frame meant to house the artist. By referring to the dimensionality of the artist’s body, the frame enacts the very space that surrounds that body. It points to it as performing subject articulating and articulated by space. Interwoven into a conversational nexus, the body, art, and space are thus never devoid of the other: the empty frame anticipates Morris’s body and, by extension, his body implies the space of the frame—it fulfills the anticipation that the form announces.

Box for Standing seems to propose that the body is always already housed within a given “frame,” whether the frame of perception, the frame of the material world, or the frame of art history, and that any subsequent viewing or understanding must, in turn, witness or contend with the frame as a contextual presence. In this case, Morris as the artist figures as the determining materiality and producer of the work itself—not so much as autobiographical narrative but as corporeal presence, as weight and volume. Wedding formalist sculpture with notions of presence encapsulates the language of Minimalism of which Morris is integral, and which these early works begin to outline.

As Jack Burnham proposes: “Morris’s sculpture is essentially criticism about sculpture.”³⁰ Such self-reflective concerns of the body in relation to objects, the understanding of forms as sculptural vocabulary, finds articulation in the full developments of Minimalism that Young and Morris initiate, in music and sculpture. As Edward Strickland describes: “Minimalism is used to denote a movement, primarily in postwar America toward art . . . that makes its statement with limited, if not the fewest possible, resources, an art that eschews abundance of compositional detail, opulence of texture, and complexity of structure. Minimalist art is prone to stasis (as expressed in musical drones and silence . . .) and resistant to development. . . . It tends toward non-allusiveness and decontextualization from tradition, impersonality in tone, and flattening of perspective though emphasis on surface. . . .”³¹ Carter Ratcliffe furthers such definitions in his book *Out of the Box* when he states: “The Minimalist object is clear, static, and blank.”³²



Robert Morris, *Untitled (Box for Standing)*, 1961. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Static, blank, only surfaces, eschewing abundance, of drones and silences.... While such descriptions point toward a material presence stripped bare of excess, they in no way register the abundance of perceptual stimuli such stasis and surfaces may deliver, as well as the theoretical register of such formalism. Where Ratcliffe, throughout his book, underscores the “tyranny” of the Minimalist cube as ridding art of any vestige of bodily presence or imaginative zeal as forces of radicality, he seems to do so at the risk of minimalizing Minimalism. For Morris, dealing a death blow to “process” for “idea only” opens sculpture up to that of architectural space and the relational proximity of the viewer. That Morris’s work, and early Minimalism in general, *does* silence the “extravagant confusion” of Cage’s project as an amplification of noise and sociality, it underscores the increased concern in the early 1960s to look more closely at the details of noise itself—that is to say, Cage’s work in letting a lot of stuff in leads future artists to the project of sifting through, in minute extraction, the conditions by which noise itself is heard, understood, coded, and decoded. In this regard, phenomenology can be understood as playing a critical role, for in moving away from the strictures of analytic thought to a concern for concrete and corporeal reality, it raises the question: how does concrete reality present itself to me as concrete? What are the conditions by which reality becomes known?

Morris’s Minimalist sculptures (prefigured in *Column*), such as *Untitled (Slab)* (1962), *Untitled (Cloud)* (1962), and *Untitled (Corner Piece)* (1964), register the artist’s expanded sculptural concerns in which a reduced and geometric vocabulary of rectangles, squares, slabs, and cylinders hover in space and aim for a *gestalt* of form. For example, *Slab* is a rectangular volume raised just off the floor. Constructed out of plywood, measuring twelve by ninety-six by ninety-six inches, and painted what would become known as “Morris gray,” it negates sculptural vocabulary as representational or referential to things outside itself. Instead, it directs a viewer’s attention strictly to the object as it relates to that which is around it. As Donald Judd observed on first viewing *Slab* at the Green Gallery in New York in 1963: “Morris’ pieces are minimal visually, but they’re powerful spatially.”³³ In this regard, *Slab* proposes the art object as inherently relational: by creating sculptures whose formal properties are brought to a lowest common denominator, the object functions to deflect a viewer’s understanding to that of spatial information and perception itself. That is to say, the object no longer contains meaning as a private communication but initiates meaning through activating space and perception parallel to his more overt performative work. Such concerns feature in Minimalist music as well. Young’s music, in featuring increased stasis and repetition, comes to “stand” in space as a vibratory form in relation to a listener. And further, the work of Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Tony Conrad, John Cale, and Philip Glass, in cultivating the use of pure frequencies, drones, repetition, and overtones, push music and notions of tonality toward a static field of micro-events, sonic details, and perceptual intensities that take on physical weight and mass, for “unlike traditional dialectical music, [Minimalist] music does not represent a physical event but is the actual *embodiment* of this event”³⁴ (my emphasis).

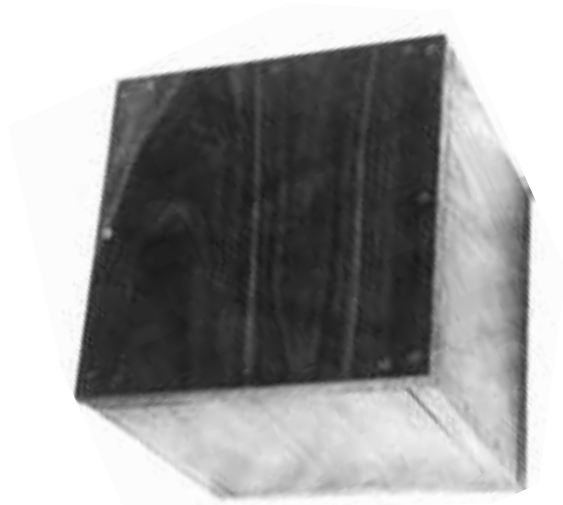
As Morris states: “But what is clear in some recent work is that materials are not so much being brought into alignment with static a priori forms as that the material is being probed for openings that allow the artist a behavioristic access.”³⁵ Such works as *Slab* and *Corner Piece* position not so much the artist’s body, as in *Box for Standing*, but the body of the viewer in such a way as to aim for truth, yet truth founded upon individual perspective, in the building of perception. As Merleau-Ponty suggests: “The intrinsic order of meaning is not eternal.”³⁶ Rather, phenomenology, while a philosophy of essences, aims to “put essence back into existence . . .” through an emphasis on the “facticity” of being.³⁷ In this way, questions of presence engage sculpture as choreography for stimulating physical movement. Through the position of the viewer’s body in various places within a gallery space, the sculpture takes on dimension: as a material presence with weight, mass, and volume, set against the given space of the gallery that, in turn, informs the perceptual experience. That is to say, the sculpture functions not so much as an object to behold but as a material matrix aimed at conversing with its surroundings—as a “behavioral” unfolding akin to Young’s *Dream House*. Minimalist art and music moves toward relational interests in which the presence of a viewer or listener, an object or sound, and the spatial situation form an extended conversation.

Sound as Text

Concerns for presence and the production of meaning are given a curious iteration in another of Morris’s boxes, that of *Box with the sound of its own making*, from 1961.³⁸ The work consists of a wooden box (measuring a cubic nine and three-quarters inches) containing an audio speaker that amplifies a recording of the very process of building the box. Part-Minimalist sculpture, part-performative action, and part-conceptual game, *Box . . .* operates according to what Morris describes as “a death of process . . . and a kind of duration of idea *only*.”³⁹ Collapsing process onto idea, *Box . . .* resonates as a self-referential object: what is heard is process and yet what is seen is the result of such process.

The perception of sounds, as indexes of real events, shifts dramatically according to their locations in space. The auditory space, theorized by McLuhan and Carpenter and activated in the works of Young, takes on a different character in Morris’s *Box . . .*, for how can sound “define its own dimensions” in its boundless and unfixed occurrence within the confines of nine and three-quarters cubic inches? How does perception, in the immersive *Dream House*, operate through Morris’s *Box . . .*?

Box . . . can be said to displace the real with the recorded, and in doing so, stage a conversation between immediacy, as presence, and reproduction, as mediation. In this way, phenomenological presence is teased out as a game of process and perception: as an object *Box . . .* is both here and there, present and past, audible and fixed, for its presence is made dependent upon the recording of its past, thereby



Robert Morris, *Box with the sound of its own making*, 1961. Photo courtesy of the artist.

making explicit the presence of the box as material form through the replaying of its very construction. Such play seems to echo Merleau-Ponty's very own description of a cube in the opening pages of *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which he elucidates the inherent tension between the ideal, conceptual form and the actual, experienced variable.

Such concerns find further articulation in *Card File* (1963), consisting of a wall-mounted, vertical flat card file in which each card refers to a stage in the making of the work, however abstract: materials, mistakes, names, numbers make available all the details of the production of the work in alphabetical and circuitous order. Containing forty-four headings, *Card File* consists of hundreds of cross-references. The first entry reads: "Accident 7/12/62, 1:03pm. Three minutes late from lunch due to trip. (see Trip)." Under Trip we find: "7/12/62. 1:30-2:03pm. To Daniels Stationary ... to look at file boxes." Another entry, "Dissatisfactions," reads: "The artist expressed his disappointment that everything relevant will not be recorded."⁴⁰ This reaches such a degree of self-referentiality that Morris, in a letter from January 1963 asks Cage himself to take detailed notes of his own observations of the work with the intention of including these in the card file.⁴¹

While implying the presence of the artist at work, *Card File* also reveals art as a series of mundane decisions and actions, acts above all housed within language, as opposed to creative acts infused with inspiration. For the library cards form an archive in which art as process and art object as carrier of meaning turn back on each other—that is to say, the art object consists of language

as a material yet that also performs to refer us to its production process, of meanings and their erasure, decisions and their banal mishaps, of additions and subtractions.

To follow the twists and turns through Morris's *Box ...* essentially leads through a semiotic minefield in which one reading is detonated by another, one view blurred against the perspective of another. The reproduction of sound splinters the purely phenomenological while at the same time recuperating it, for "a reproduction authenticated by the object itself is one of physical precision. It refers to the bodily real, which of necessity escapes all symbolic grids."⁴² In this regard, Morris's *Box ...* is really two boxes: the one presented in front of me as a finished and stable material fabrication, and the other as the continual replaying of its building, as recording buried inside the other. Therefore, perception oscillates between the two, left to wander through the divide created by presence and its reproducibility, between the "bodily real" and "reproduction authenticated by the object." Yet there is a third box that remains out of frame, and out of the remaining documentation, that of the tape machine, which in 1961 was exceptionally too large to fit into the other box, the one enclosed on itself. Using a Wollensack quarter-inch reel-to-reel tape recorder to record the three-and-one-half-hour action and to playback, this tape machine is also in the form of a box, as a compartment of gears, heads, reels, and knobs that spin around to playback in electromagnetic fidelity the "original" moment of construction. That Morris seeks to eliminate this third box seems to add to the dislocation of presence the work enacts. To remove the tape machine from view (as the artist states, the tape player was either presented hidden within a pedestal or behind a wall⁴³) is to erase its presence from the work and the all too real hardware of sound reproduction. While Morris relies on this, in the form of sound, he also buries it inside the material box, rendering it absent, as pure information only, as process and idea. For Morris and his *Box ...*, sound functions as text rather than object, as purely indexical rather than bulky materiality, an element inside the discursive sleight-of-hand the work seeks to perform.

Listening as Reading

What interests me about Morris's *Box with the sound of its own making* is not only that he positions sound as physical material appealing to the senses, but how it shows that such perception is also potentially "textual," that is, something to be read. Whereas the Fluxus reading of event scores aims to take imaginary flights into suggestive poetics, Morris stages an intellectual riddle. Within the conceptual framework of his work, sound is woven into an object to cause perception to confront the difficulties of finding truth: the Fluxus game, in aiming for the immediate and sensual leaps of imagination rely upon a poetics that situates language as part of the game of art. Morris furthers such work by adding his own brand of intellectualism by which "concept art" becomes "conceptual art."

Box ... appeals to an active listening that is analytical: what I hear does not so much complete my experience, as fulfilled perceptual plenitude, as in Young's work, but leaves it hanging by staging a representational question: which is the "real" box? Its physical, wooden dimensions here before me, or its sounds, which emanate from within, as an index of its past? Is the art object, like *Card File*, found in the process behind the object, or in its final form? From here we might ask: how does perception locate itself across the epistemological terrain of representation and experience, as textual *and* sensual? Following Merleau-Ponty, how do the experiential real and the conceptual ideal deal with each other?

It has been my argument that Cage sets the stage for such questioning by developing work based on process, contextual awareness, and conceptual strategy. Though extremely different from Morris and most of the Fluxus generation, it's through their work that Cage's productions can be more thoroughly glimpsed in this way. Thus, the very question of representation expressed by Cage can be identified as the pervasive and overarching philosophical and problematic of neo-avant-garde art.⁴⁴

Young's *Dream House* as sound/space operates through an insistence on the activation of perception as an event. Such activation is understood as arriving through an intensification of volume, duration, harmonics, and spatiality to deliver sound as a prolonged immersion. The oscillating sonics of the *Dream House*, as a space of total physical immersion, stand in contrast to Morris's discursive and mediated sound—the box that plays back sound, in the confines of nine and three-quarters inches, does not aim for a plenitude of listening. In contrast, it displaces such presence by introducing a semiotic jag, for the recording comes from another time and place, yet only in so far as it refers to the box itself. In this sense, the sound points to another reality, for we can understand the box was built at another moment, made explicit through the presence of the recording. This other moment of the past is buried within the box itself—literally, the sound plays from inside, suggesting, in turn, that its very presence relies upon that which has already happened, as a kind of internal structure or historical event. Thus, we hear the box's material construction as both an index of labor as well as a phenomenological problematic: the box is *more* than what is apparent to the eye. In this regard, we can further understand the function of the frame in the artist's *Box for Standing* as posing a phenomenological articulation in which presence—here, Morris's body—is underscored as complex. For the frame stands as that which surrounds the body, and which the body is reliant upon to, in a sense, be "seen" as a body. The frame and the recording are not simply material presences but articulations that come from some other side, place, or time that both complete and displace the moment of pure presence.

Such a back-and-forth relay though opens out, or narrows down, onto what Morris describes as "duration of idea *only*." In "idea only" Morris attempts to evacuate an object from the artist's personality, to arrive at "Blank Form," as a way to sidestep expression as originating from the artist's hand. Yet in contrast to Fluxus and its belief in stepping past the object as mediating surface so as to arrive directly

in front of a viewer as an immediate presence of real experience, Morris questions such belief through the making of objects and situations that unravel the conditions of presence. That is to say, the experiential is confounded through a discursive twist, which underscores the “mediation” of perception even in its very immediacy.

Notes

1. Henry Flynt, quoted in Louwrien Wijers, “Fluxus Yesterday and Today,” in *Art & Design: Fluxus* (1993), p. 9.

2. Nam June Paik, *ibid.*

3. Henry Flynt, *ibid.*

4. Terry Riley, “La Monte and Marian, 1967,” in *Sound and Light: La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela*, eds. William Duckworth and Richard Fleming (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1996), p. 21.

5. See Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington, IN, and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993).

6. Such works as Robert Morris’s *Passageway* and Simone Forti’s *Slant Board* were presented as part of the series, as well as works by Flynt and Richard Maxfield.

7. La Monte Young, quoted in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen R. Sanford (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 79.

8. Henry Flynt, “La Monte Young in New York, 1960–1962,” in *Sound and Light*, p. 81.

9. Tony Conrad, “LYssophobia: On *Four Violins*,” in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, eds. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 315.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 318.

11. See Michael Chanan, *Musica Practica* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 63.

12. John Molino quoted in Aden Evens, *Sound Ideas: Music, Machines, and Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 47.

13. Philip Glass, quoted in Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, trans. J. Hautekiet (London: Kahn & Averill, 1999), p. 88.

14. See Trevor Wishart, *On Sonic Art* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998).

15. John Schaefer, “Who Is La Monte Young?” in *Sound and Light*, p. 32.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

17. La Monte Young, “The Romantic Symmetry,” in *Sound and Light*, pp. 214–215.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

19. Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan, “Acoustic Space,” in *Explorations in Communications*, eds. Marshall McLuhan and Edmund Carpenter (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 67.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Such conflict did not go without response, as can be witnessed in Yvonne Rainer’s graffiti on the walls of Morris’s work: “Fuck you Bob Morris.” (Though who’s to say if this refers to the work itself, or some other conflict. . . .) See Kimberly Paice, *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1994), p. 94.

22. These concerns can also be seen in Forti’s *See Saw* from the same year. Here, the ramp is replaced with a wooden beam balanced precariously on a central pivot. Choreographed

for two dancers, movements occur as a balancing act, each dancer struggling to remain atop the board while gently edging toward falling.

23. Originally, Morris had planned to be inside the column and to topple it over by his own bodily force, yet replaced this plan with the use of string after suffering a concussion during rehearsal.

24. Kimberly Paice, in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem*, p. 94.

25. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. xix.

26. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. vii.

27. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in *Signs*, trans. Richard G. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 67.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

30. Jack Burnham, "Robert Morris: Retrospective in Detroit," in *Artforum*, (1970), p. 71.

31. Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, p. 7.

32. Carter Ratcliffe, *Out of the Box* (New York: Allworth Press, 2000), p. 136.

33. As quoted in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem*, p. 106.

34. Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, p. 90.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

36. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in *Signs*, p. 69.

37. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. vii.

38. Morris first publicly showed *Box ...* at a concert held on March 31, 1961, at the Harvard-Radcliffe Club in Boston. The concert presented the works of La Monte Young and Richard Maxfield. Morris reportedly went along unexpectedly with the intention of performing his *Water Sculpture*, but the organizer refused to allow it. See Henry Flynt, "La Monte Young in New York, 1960–1962," in *Sound and Light*, pp. 60–61.

39. Robert Morris, "Letters to John Cage," in *October* #81 (1997), p. 71.

40. From *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem*, pp. 126–129.

41. For an informative essay on Morris's correspondence with Cage, see Branden W. Joseph's "Robert Morris and John Cage: Reconstructing a Dialogue," in *October* #81 (1997).

42. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffery Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 12.

43. In conversation with the author, 2005.

44. This is not to overlook that representation on some level has always been a question within art practice, yet what may distinguish Modernity is that it is marked by a more active and thorough questioning of representation's ability to convey truth.

Chapter 6

Conceptualizations: Michael Asher and the Subject of Space

The growing concern of bodily and spatial experience instigated through Happenings, Fluxus, and Minimalism gained momentum throughout the decade of the 1960s as artists progressively turned toward ephemeral materials, process-oriented situations, and spatial alterations in the making of work. Morris's considerations of sculptural experience, and his ongoing theoretical writings, formed the basis for a heightened intellectual ambition in probing what art could be and in what way it could address a viewer. That the making of objects expanded beyond the traditional studio practice of an artist can be seen in the development of Installation art in the latter part of the decade. The exhibition "Spaces," which opened at the end of 1969 at the Museum of Modern Art, additionally reflected the growing forms of practice in which the artist's studio collapsed onto the space of exhibition: "In 'Spaces,' the artists treated a space large enough for the viewer to enter as a single work, rather than as a gallery to be filled with discrete objects. Emphasis was placed on the experience the viewer would have. The works included in 'Spaces' were installed directly in the galleries, tailored to the configurations of the spaces they occupied, and were dismantled following the exhibition."²¹ Whereas Morris's sculptural works from the early 1960s activated a spatial relation by setting up sculpture as a perceptual object shifting according to a viewer's perspective, "Spaces" proposed that a viewer "now enters the interior space of the work of art—an area formerly experienced only visually from without, approached but not encroached upon ... presented with a set of conditions rather than a finite object."²²

Curated by Jennifer Licht, "Spaces" included works by Michael Asher, Larry Bell, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, artist/engineer group Pulsa, and Franz Erhard Walther. Each of the artists responded to the exhibition with various approaches, through the use of process, ephemera, or audience participation. Michael Asher's

installation worked through these aspects by incorporating a relation to auditory experience. The installation consisted of an existing space to which the artist added two further walls, leaving two entry and exit points onto the space. In addition, Asher added a series of acoustic modifications to the space, essentially attempting to dampen sound reflection, as well as interference, from outside spaces. Through such modifications, the installation functioned to absorb sound and reduce acoustical reverberation. In short, the room was silenced. Initially Asher had intended to install a tone generator in the space, with the idea of amplifying specific frequencies into the room; yet after consideration, he decided to pursue an alternative direction by accentuating the space's absorbent capabilities. Such silencing, for Asher, was utilized as a means to "control and articulate sensory space,"³ so as to create "continuity with no single point of perceptual objectification," and in contrast to "phenomenologically determined works that attempted to fabricate a highly controlled area of visual perception."⁴ Emptying the room of visual differentiation, from sightlines to acoustic zones, from visual distance to aural contraction, Asher altered a viewer's expectations, turning the experience of art viewing into an acoustical absence.

The work reflected the artist's overall interest at this time to question the given attributes by which art comes to function, which for Asher were based on issues related to visibility and objectness and were further reflected in a number of



Michael Asher, installation for "Spaces," 1969/1970. View of the installation and the northeast entry/exit. Photograph by Claude Picasso. Courtesy of the artist.

works. As with the previous installation, his piece at the La Jolla Museum of Art at the end of 1969 consisted of spatially altering a room so as to heighten or deliver auditory information. To do so, a series of walls were constructed and inserted into the gallery space, creating entry and exit points and allowing sound equipment to be hidden from view. This equipment consisted of an audio oscillator, an amplifier, and a loudspeaker, which amplified a frequency of 85Hz at a level just above audibility. In addition, Asher covered the floor in white carpet to dampen the vertical movement of sound, paralleling the existing acoustic tiling already in place on the ceiling, and he masked the existing lighting through reflective shielding, to diffuse any direct lighting and corresponding shadow. In contrast to the work for "Spaces," here Asher aimed to create a highly reflective acoustic space. As the artist explains: "The vertical surfaces responded to the sound frequency, which caused them to resonate as if they were tuned, while the horizontal surfaces, due to their sound-dampening effect, reduced the frequency. The cancellation of the sound waves occurred when these frequencies coincided ... at a point exactly in the center of the gallery..."⁵

Questioning the operations of art production as predicated on the fabrication and presentation of objects, Asher attempted to navigate between the prevailing aesthetics of Minimalism and the then emerging field of Conceptual art, seeking to both question the former while moving away from some of the philosophical riddles found in the latter. In doing so, Asher continually sought to incorporate the space itself into the making of work, leading a visitor to question the presence of given conditions. That Asher does so through a continual application and incorporation of sound, whether in methods of amplification and reverberation or reduction and absorption, may reveal aspects of the artist's practice and the general artistic atmosphere at this time, as well as articulating a potential of the auditory to figure alternative views on perception and materiality. The ability to fashion concrete presence through audible structures allows Asher to raise questions as to what constitutes an object and, in doing so, to problematize the vocabulary of sculpture and object-making at this time. Thus, sound creates opportunities for rethinking materiality in general by introducing the perceptual question of whether acoustical additions and subtractions may in the end come to constitute, quite literally, an artistic object or not. Sound seems to supply Asher with a critical vantage point in his pursuit to adopt the spatial characteristics of the gallery for art making, to turn them on themselves: the subtle but invasive refashioning of gallery spaces indicative of his installation practice goes hand in hand with the introduction or erasure of acoustical features. Thus, we might consider them as partners in Asher's probing of the conditions of art in general and the very spaces in which objects come to take on power.

His earlier piece for the Whitney Museum exhibition "Anti-Illusion: Procedures/ Materials"⁶ six months prior to "Spaces," in the summer of 1969, further reveals the artist's ambitions. In contrast to the other projects, for "Anti-Illusion" Asher presented a "plane of air" positioned between two of the gallery

spaces within the Museum. Produced by blowers forcing air through a plenum chamber, the work was made manifest through activating a molecular condition: “The piece is a cubic volume of space, circumscribed by an activated air mass within the confines of that space. The space is acknowledged by the pressure felt when moving into or out of its confines. The disembodied literalism of the piece neatly alludes to a slab form without carpentry.”⁷ As in his other projects, Asher’s plane of air functioned as a spatial situation defined not by visual reference but by the pressure of air: whether with audible sound or not, both installations create form through a molecular alteration, bypassing visual materiality. Whereas Morris’s sculptural works question the perception of forms through a display of their inherent positionality, Asher’s plane of air alters the perception of form by changing its inherent materiality—can it be said that form may exist strictly through the molecular characteristic of air? “Asher intervenes in given situations by subtly altering or shifting aspects of their structures. As a result, he draws attention to previously unapparent or unarticulated aspects of them.”⁸ By shifting perception toward the seeming immaterial and away from visual perspective and the apprehension of imagery, Asher also shifts the understanding of what may constitute an art object or experience—not only is space brought into play as an embodiment of an art object, as material relation, but the question of what constitutes space itself is brought under scrutiny. In this way, we can see (or feel) Asher’s work from this time as questioning the new-found realm of Installation art as predicated on the appropriation and use of space: is space as readily available as it may seem? That is to say, is space neutral? And further, what defines space? By stimulating understanding of space from one of graphic dimensions, as governed by the architectural drawing that hovers over and above space, as an abstracted item one can point to, or even with Morris, as an area separating the viewer from the object, Asher’s volumetric structures redefine spatiality through the tactility of the aural: felt sound and constructions with air pressure.

Following these installations, Asher presented an installation work in 1970 at Pomona College in Southern California. Installed just months after the “Spaces” exhibition, the work was produced through architecturally transforming the gallery space by inserting a kind of hourglass shape: the front room was sectioned off from the second by a narrowed passageway, funneling visitors from the front and toward the back. In addition, the door of the gallery was completely removed for the duration of the exhibition, thereby allowing outside noise and debris to float freely indoors. As Lucy Lippard recalls:

One large irregular-shaped area appears to be two adjoining rooms; the rooms, one much larger than the other, are in the form of right triangles; the triangular rooms converge and flow into one another at their narrowest point, beginning a short passageway connecting the two rooms. One wall of each room has a corresponding parallel wall and corresponding angle in the other room, and both rooms are positioned so they are the reverse of each other.... Sound of traffic, of people

walking past the gallery—sounds of vibrations of the day that vary from minute to minute, hour to hour—all enter the project. Being exposed to outdoor conditions, the first small room transmits sounds through the pathway into the back room. They are amplified as they pass into the first room, but are further intensified as they enter the second larger room.⁹

Lippard's impressionistic description highlights Asher's interest and involvement with questions of space as a phenomenological composite beyond strictly visual terms. As Lippard points out, sound figures significantly in the work and, as with his previous works, features as a primary material through which space gets defined. Space and sound interlock in an expanded notion of the object. As in Young's musical work and the use of volume, reverberation, and frequencies to extend musicality into the realm of the overtone spectrum, Asher's early installation works draw upon the aural to reposition space—one might say, to amplify architecture's own perceptual spectrum, beyond its visual presence, as reverberation and molecular movement, as sensory modulation. Whereas previous works used noise generators and oscillators, or acoustical dampening, the Pomona project



Michael Asher, Installation at Pomona College, 1970. Detail of entry/exit and view into constructed triangular area. Photograph by Frank Thomas. Courtesy of the artist.



Michael Asher, Installation at Pomona College, 1970. Viewing out of gallery toward street from small triangular area. Photograph by Frank Thomas. Courtesy of the artist.

harnessed the found environment as sound-producing source. Here, the installation functioned as an expanded amplifier, an acoustical funnel for the modulation and attenuation of found sound, literally channeled through architectural space.

What can be understood in Asher's installations is not so much the sole use of space, as space itself *as* subject matter. This can be further witnessed in later works, such as his installation for Documenta 5 (1972), in which he divided a room in two by painting one half white and the other black, creating a dramatic architectural and perceptual analysis as to the conditions of experiencing space. Such work would progressively aim to take on the given conditions of gallery spaces and museums, as in his 1974 exhibition at Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles where the artist removed a partitioning wall between the exhibition space and the office area, thereby exposing or making indistinct the space of display and the space of business.

That space as subject matter gains significance is reflected throughout the 1960s, beginning with Happenings's "total art" and Morris's concern for subject-object relations, "for the space of the room itself is a structuring factor both in its cubic shape and in terms of the kinds of compression different sized and proportioned

rooms can effect upon the object-subject terms.”¹⁰ In outlining some of the terms of the “new sculpture” in his article from 1966 *Notes on Sculpture Part 2*, Morris retains notions of the object as separate from space and the viewer: art, while conversing with spatial considerations, is maintained as an object presented to the viewer’s gaze. For Asher and other artists, space itself is the object. Asher’s work suggests that space is never simply a given, already manifest in the thing presented to the perceiving viewer, as something neutral through which phenomenology and the experiential may pass unimpeded. Rather, space is determined by a set of conditions or systems, molecular and other, through which perception is directed and thus affected. Here, Asher expands Morris by following upon the phenomenological relation—that is to say, in beholding a work like *Slab*, perception oscillates from object to space to object again; Asher’s installations begin here, underscoring perception as inherently spatial, as already moving within a larger set of material presences often hidden from view. Asher’s early work, in turn, can be positioned between Morris and Young on the field of sound, for his works occupy that space between total immersion in a perceptual plenitude, as in Young, and the auditory discursivity of Morris, to introduce the acoustical as a problematic onto the spatial conditions of artistic presentation.

Spatial Twists

The question of space as subject matter ran throughout a number of artists’ works at this time, notably Bruce Nauman, whose *Performance Corridor*, also exhibited in the “Anti-Illusion” exhibition at the Whitney, consisted of two parallel walls separated by a twenty-inch gap and running twenty feet long. Reminiscent of Morris’s *Passageway*, the corridor made a viewer radically aware of the intrusiveness of space to shape experience. Such work is furthered in Nauman’s “video corridors,” in which a labyrinthine structure is fitted with live video cameras and monitors and shows a person’s movements in one section of the corridor at precisely the moment they enter another, thereby creating a kind of shadow play in which one is always followed by one’s own image. Or his corridor, *Acoustic Wall* (1968), defined by an acoustically treated panel cutting diagonally through a gallery space, creating a funnel-shaped space leading, as in Morris’s *Passageway*, to a narrowed dead end. Walking deeper in, information is removed further and further, as light and sound are erased, deadened from the perceptual field: one is left only with space itself, as total absence of other information, only the sterile materiality of the acoustical wall mirrored by the white wall of the gallery. Such spatial alterations find harder edge in the work of Barry Le Va, particularly in his *Velocity-Impact Run*, where the artist set himself the task of running as fast as possible directly into a wall, repeatedly for one hour and forty-three minutes. Performed at the Ohio State University art gallery in 1969, the action was recorded onto audiotape and presented by playing back the recording in the gallery space through a sound system. Amplifying the trace of the body within such extreme physical moments,

the recording makes audible the act not solely as physical exhaustion but as a confrontation with space through a double act of absence and presence. Whereas the body is literally exhausted by architecture, as a corporeal negotiation through live action, it systematically unhinges the space through an unsettling sonority. The presence of the body as pure physicality passing into its own audible double seems to map out an inherent tension between the body and the built environment, suggesting that physical presence is always already housed within architecture. Being in architecture is to a degree being itself, as architecture comes to partially determine the possibilities of experience through an intrinsic performative relation. Such concerns seem to resonate to a degree within the general frame of Minimalism, where absence is also partly its presence, an existing frame, or corridor, haunted by the coming or going body. Le Va stages his own disappearing act by leaving behind a sonic trace: the audio recording *recalls* the artist's body in its breaking apart, its exhaustion, its extreme physicality, as a kind of sound object hurtling through acoustic space.

That space is made subject matter at this time within an artistic environment that sought to question perception, the field of objects, and what constitutes experience points toward a larger cultural moment in which things like music and architecture also turn. Self-reflective, political, minimalist, articulate, and self-proclaimed, architectural groups like SUPERSTUDIO and Archigram sought to address the total field of society through the design of universal, transportable, self-empowering objects and spaces. SUPERSTUDIO's *The Continuous Monument* echoes Morris's *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, opening onto processes of rethinking, recirculating, and reappropriating the field of objects. While Morris probed questions of sculpture through phenomenological forms, SUPERSTUDIO aimed for a zero-degree of design, a minimalist object wrapped around the world, so as to eliminate bourgeois ideals of consumable objects, spatial injustices articulated through high and low, center and margin. "This process of repeatedly and critically reexamining the normal drifts and currents moving across the domestic landscapes has led them to design, or perhaps more appropriately to un-design, their surroundings..."¹¹ Whereas SUPERSTUDIO finds answers in the universal grid, Morris sees "random piling, loose stacking, hanging, giving passing form to the material" as operations of "disengaging" with "preconceived enduring forms and orders."¹² Asher's own conceptual interventions within architecture parallels such spatial concerns by engaging the material circulation of process in the form of sound and molecular movement, and through acts of architectural removal. Such seemingly negative gestures, or what Marshall McLuhan termed "anti-environments,"¹³ while removing, erasing, or collapsing form and function seem to do so with the intent of inciting perception to buried structures, apparatuses of influence, and conventions that position knowledge. SUPERSTUDIO's "Endless City," from the late 1960s, in which "possessionless wanderers" were left to "explore a city without spectacle and without

architecture as well"¹⁴ highlighted an architectural move toward not so much creating space as reflecting on the nature of it.

The artistic development of early installation art operates on the level of exploring and exposing the nature of space by appropriating given architectures and inserting a critical appraisal of found conditions. While definitively outside the realm of the architectural profession, such works, as in Asher's micro-alterations, create spaces that incite self-reflection while cultivating perceptual experience. For *Le Va*, such interventions continued to take form through acts of scattering physical matter throughout the gallery: breaking sheets of glass piled one on top of another in controlled action, or, for his work exhibited in "Anti-Illusion," covering the gallery floor in a fine layer of flour. While visitors did not necessarily step onto the flour, their movements in and around the space did slowly push the flour around the space, disrupting its original pattern through air currents. Thus, the work registers not only the single instant of a given appearance but all the absent physicality that has at some point traveled in and around the work.

Sound's Presence

Cage, Happenings, Fluxus, and Minimalism form a constellation in which artistic practice gains significance as a critical undertaking with a view toward an expanded perceptual terrain. Such a practice increasingly views itself as both formalistic and philosophical—that is, the production of objects features more as an event for *positioning* artist and audience, form and content, in a loop of self-reference so as to short-circuit the stability of meaning and representation and open out onto new forms of experience and information.

As we have seen, the move toward self-reference and language games operates to reflect upon the very conditions at play in the production of a work of art and its ultimate reception—Cage on the terrain of music, Happenings on the terrain of the spectacle, Fluxus on the terrain of language and the postcognitive, and Minimalism in terms of sound, space, and perception. Such a constellation poses art increasingly as a "contextual" practice. In contrast to Abstract Expressionism's obsession with the artist's physical actions that result in painterly marks, this new sense of practice figures such action in relation to audience, space, and experience in such a way as to make them implicit in the actual production of work itself. For whether *4'33"*, *Yard*, *The Well-Tuned Piano*, or *Box for Standing*, the very context (and their intrinsic elements) in which music is heard, spectacles are created, and actions are seen function as contributing factors.

What Conceptual art finalizes, beginning with Cage's philosophical questioning of the musical object and subsequent move toward everyday life, through Fluxus's minute deconstructions wielded in vaudevillian antics, and Minimalism's perceptual and geometric spatialities of sound and space, is the necessity on the part of art to reflect upon its own conventions. Conceptual art in a sense

politicizes Fluxus by shifting from an overtly performative mode to a covertly analytical one, from a desire for immediacy to a distrust of such immediacy. Such a move oscillates around questions of perception—as in Young’s Dream House, or even Morris’s spatial constructs—and questions of meaning. For if we follow Cage’s attempt to outlive representation by freeing sound from its musical harness through to the “total art” of Happenings and Fluxus’s further dissolving of the line between art and life—toward a postcognitive immediacy—we witness a general appraisal and suspicion of the function of art to produce “meaning” through representational forms only.

That sound features as a thread throughout the art scene of the 1960s is a testament to not only Cage’s example or influence, though this in itself initiates a great deal, but to a pervasive concern for the present. Against this narrative of artistic work, we might recall the political and social reality at this time, so as to recognize the intensity with which focus was placed on what was not only apparent to the eye but also what lurked behind. Presence and the present were brought into question by demanding that it come forward, in all truthfulness, and in all its otherness: representation could thus only be trusted if it demonstrated some element of contingency, and art-making a degree of performative criticality.

Sound is brought into play as media leading straight into perception and heightened immediacy, relocating the art object to that of spatiality and relational engagement: sound comes from a body and reaches another to leave behind static objects, thereby problematizing *and* freeing up representation; it, in turn, lends to the immediacy of perception, as spatial intensity enfolding the body in on itself, as tactile event, while it also displaces perception, causing it to stutter through technological mediation, continually shifting perspective across the here and now, original and copy, bringing the faint ephemera of a past back into the present to question how immediacy itself is constructed or always slightly beyond one’s grasp.

What such work adds to the legacy of experimental music and the emerging forms of auditory art is a *performative* potential by which sound is harnessed to engage spatial experience, spatial economy, and spatial politics: Young’s Dream House absorbs bodily presence into an architectonics of dynamic frequency by constructing what David Toop refers to as an “aerial architecture”;¹⁵ the phenomenological probing of Morris questions the exchanges and negotiations between subjects and objects within an elaborated field of production, while Asher’s installation works bring to the fore the very properties and conditions that make space available by inserting acoustical infiltrations. Thus, sound is not only an expanded musical vocabulary or medium for social anarchy, as in the case of Cage and early experimental music, but a radical form of materiality for creating, describing, and questioning the experiential event and its fabrication.

Notes

1. Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 88.
2. Jennifer Licht, introduction to the exhibition catalogue, *Spaces* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1969).
3. *Ibid.*
4. Michael Asher, *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979* (Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), p. 30.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
6. It is worth noting that besides the participating artists, the exhibition also featured concerts by Philip Glass and Steve Reich.
7. James Monte, from the introduction to the exhibition catalog *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969).
8. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965–1975* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), p. 58.
9. Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), p. 198.
10. Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), p. 16.
11. Peter Lang and William Menking, “Only Architecture Will Be Our Lives,” in *SUPERSTUDIO: Life Without Objects* (Milano: Skira, 2003), p. 28.
12. Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, p. 46.
13. Marshall McLuhan, “The Relation of Environment to Anti-Environment,” in *Innovations: Essays on Art and Ideas*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (London: Macmillan & Co., 1968), pp. 122–123.
14. Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. 145.
15. David Toop, *Haunted Weather: Music, Silence and Memory* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2004), p. 256.