

Durational aesthetics: a common expanded field of sculpture and music

by Roy Boswell



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Summary

My thesis, 'Durational aesthetics: a common expanded field of sculpture and music' concerns the practical application of music in my sculpture practice, and the application of sculptural thought in my music-related work. I survey this topic both through examples of other artist's artworks, and through critical reflection on the making of my own sculptures for the Kuvan Kevät 2022 degree exhibition.

My works were presented under the shared title "One more thing before I go", a reflection of events in my personal life at the time of the making of the work. My aim in these artworks was to express musical thought through sculpture, and to preserve something of my connection to my Grandmother in the UK, who was very poorly at the time that I was making these works.

In my written thesis, I explore the particular ways in which I attempted to express musical ideas through sculpture, initially in the form of time, immateriality, impression and light. I reflect on my lack of consideration for colour, and then move on to the more literary aspects of my working process. Here, I reflect upon possible sculptural applications of music notation, the 'reading instruction' (which I borrow from the Finnish *'lukuohje'*), and finally, poetry.

In the last third of the thesis, I reflect on the work of three artists in particular who pioneered the common expanded fields of music and visual art, and to whom my personal ways of thinking around (what I term) 'music-sculpture' is indebted: Rolf Julius, Alvin Lucier, and Peter Roehr. I discuss the concealment of sounds and objects, repetition and minimalism, and the utility of what I have come to term 'provisional music': a kind of musical material that may be used as an interstitial material in sculpture, to support or uphold sculptural materials or structures.

I follow this with a brief reflection on a singular listening experience that began this process of artistic research for me – an event which took place during my MA studies at the Theatre Academy some time in 2013.

In my final conclusion, I list the ways in which I have found that music and sculpture may interact in my work. Far from being conclusive, I accept that I still haven't reached a conclusion, and that I expect to follow these lines of inquiry long into the future.

One more thing before I go



Installation view



One more thing before I go (panel 1)
260 x 65 x 20 cm
Cellulose, cord, colophony rosin, tissue paper



One more thing before I go (panel 2)

260 x 65 x 30 cm

Cellulose, wood, soap



One more thing before I go (window)
dimensions variable
Plexiglass, paraffin, rubber band



Red nude 1
dimensions variable
Lighting gel, natural light

Introduction

In Spring 2022, I presented roughly five sculpture works under the common title “One more thing before I go” at the Academy of Fine Arts (KuvA) Kuvan Kevät degree show in Helsinki. The works were displayed together with paintings by my then-partner Liisa Mudist, in the Majakka-room of the recently inaugurated Fine Arts Academy building at Haapaniemi.

This thesis covers both the making and background of the works I exhibited, as well as a broad survey of the common ground shared by the expanded fields of sculpture, music and writing.

The central questions that this thesis asks are:

To what extent can music (or sound) be considered sculpture, and vice versa?

Can sculpture be a frame within which time (music) passes?

Can a sculpture, or part of a sculpture, be expressed in a manner equivalent to that of a single exhalation of breath?

In addition, I propose that text or music (or *organised sound*) may be employed as a *material* in sculpture, like plaster or stone.

I do not go into music theory, as I have no such skill – instead, I speak from acquired knowledge and a personal philosophy of sounds, developed over my many years of experience as a sound designer for the stage, sound dramatist, and maker of music, combined with my last four years experience of working additionally with sculpture. I try to approach the subjects of sculpture, music, and writing with the same sensitivity I would afford each individual discipline and with consideration for their unique requirements.

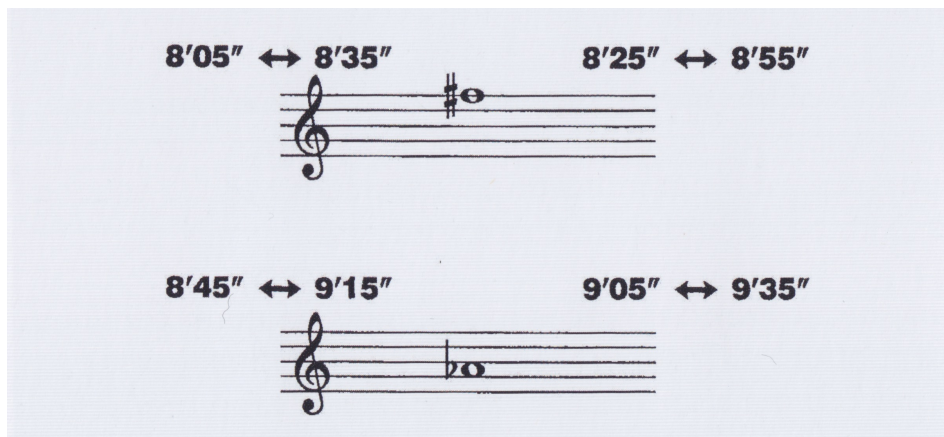
I have a synaesthetic tendency of associating sounds with emotional states, which means that I have strong emotional responses to different kinds of sounds (usually not musical ones) – some are positive, some negative. I have come to realise that my experience of sounds may be very different to those more neurotypical than myself; but then again, maybe it’s time to do away with these ideas of normalcy, and embrace complicated, unclear, nameless things.

Nearing the completion of my studies and the writing of this thesis, I’m not sure that I’ve reached a satisfying conclusion. Sounds are sounds and sculptures are sculptures. A sound can feel like a sculpture. A sculpture can contain or suggest an imaginary sound. There’s also necessarily a level of suggestion and a suspension of belief involved, a willingness to imagine and listen for things that are perhaps only barely there, if at all.

One possible approach to the combining of music and sculpture may be to make visual representations of musical ideas in sculpture. We may look at heavy things and imagine a low musical note, or associate a high pitch, an urgency, or fast tempo to a light, zig-zagging shape that shoots off at abrupt angles. This is not, however, the route that I have taken with my work.

The title ‘Durational aesthetics’ refers to Bourriaud’s ‘Relational aesthetics’¹; broadly because I believe that listening itself is fundamentally a human, social action, but also for the fact that one of the central ideas of this thesis is the proposal of durationality as a material in, and quality of, sculpture. In different ways, the works that I presented at Kuvan Kevät all asked questions about themselves in relation to passing time.

John Cage famously composed inside time brackets, like this:



The trumpet part from John Cage’s *Eight* (1991)

Cage used these brackets in what are known as his ‘number pieces’. The time frame displayed above the staff on the left is that within which the note should be begun, and the time frame on the right side of the staff is that within which the note should end.

The sculptures I showed at Kuvan Kevät had elements in them similar to Cage’s brackets: I thought of the sculptures as the frames, and as time passed through them, I hoped to find music.

Importantly, no audible music was presented in or alongside the works that I showed in the exhibition, but rather *qualities of musical thought*, which I tried to capture in a variety of elements present in the sculptures: impression, time, containment, and light were all significant. Understandably, these may not all be things that we normally associate with music, but for my practice at the time (which is still in process), they were the particular means for bridging the aural and the physical.

I explore these ideas through examples of artists working in the immaterial recesses of both music and sculpture; through nothingness, composition, provisionality, and the qualities of objects, sounds, and writing. Some shorter texts are placed in intermittently for rhythm.

Ready? 1, 2, 3, 4...

¹ Art that takes as ‘its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context’ – Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 14.

Nothing is real

I'm interested in nothing. It's difficult to explain. But this is the main theme of my work. To show nothing. But it's very difficult to show nothing, you have to show something.

– Rolf Julius ²

I want to be anonymous. I don't know how you get involved with uninvolved, but I don't want to be involved. My ambition is to be completely forgotten.

– Bob Kaufman ³

When talking about sound and sound art it's practically impossible to avoid mentioning John Cage and his profoundly influential ideas on the perception of sound and its significance to composition. The vast majority of those artists and composers that I mention in this thesis who lived and worked alongside Cage and in the post-Cage era have been deeply affected by his work: this is especially true for composers and artists such as Jō Kondō, Rolf Julius and Alvin Lucier. Despite the importance of Cage to my own way of thinking about sound and art more generally, I will try to keep this short overview as brief as I can, as so much information about the composer is readily available elsewhere.⁴

John Cage, inspired by Italian futurist Luigi Russolo's *Art of Noises*⁵, was interested in the possibilities of using traditionally un-musical sounds and noises as material for music composition. Extending this expansion of the field of musical material to the notion of silence through his interest in Zen Buddhism (which aspires to reach a state of 'nothingness' through meditation), Cage developed what would become his most acclaimed composition, 4'33" (1952). The piece is in three movements, the sum of which make up the duration of the title. Conceived for any instrument or combination of instruments, 4'33" requires that its performer(s) remain silent for the duration of the piece. The idea here, of course, isn't to achieve total silence - but to become aware of the sound of the environment that the piece is performed in. After all, no environment is truly silent, as Cage himself stated following his visit to an anechoic chamber:

It was after I got to Boston that I went into the anechoic chamber at Harvard University. Anybody who knows me knows this story. I am constantly telling it. Anyway, in that silent room, I heard two sounds, one high and one low. Afterward I asked the engineer in charge why, if the room was so

² David Keenan interviews Rolf Julius, *The Wire* #306, August 2009

³ Bob Kaufman (1925–1986) quoted in Maria Damon's *The Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 36-7.

⁴ A good starting point is Cage's own book *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Wesleyan University Press, 1961)

⁵ Luigi Russolo, *L'arte dei rumori. Manifesto futurista*. A letter to musician Francesco Balilla Pratella, March 11 1913

*silent, I had heard two sounds. He said, "Describe them." I did. He said, "The high one was your nervous system in operation. The low one was your blood in circulation."*⁶

Cage's life, coinciding with the invention of sampling and computer music, fit well with the idea of noises being used in a musical setting, although the composer's personal aspirations for how this technology may have been applied to the making of music remained, to an extent, unrealised. Cage's ideas came about during a time of significant cultural change in North America; Judson Dance Theatre was redefining contemporary dance and the burgeoning Fluxus movement was testing limits and altering the perception of artistic disciplines. Cage's ideas about nothingness and silence were so influential that they no doubt contributed to the zeitgeist in the 1960s, when a great deal of North American art began to concern itself with reduction, removal, the abandonment of material things, the abandonment of the canon – a kind of continuation of art movements like Surrealism and dada that had been born out of the horrors of the World Wars, now back again with a vengeance in the face of the Vietnam War and the struggle for civil rights.

Powerful artworks of protest and reduction, such as Yoko Ono's *Cut piece* (1964) and *White chess set* (1966), or works of plain denial like Yvonne Rainer's *No Manifesto* (1964) defined the direction of much art to come. *The history of modernism is full of strategies of refusal and acts of negation.*⁷

The tradition of non-rhetorical New Music that Cage helped to popularise swapped out figuration and gestural elements for a more intense focus on the structure and the material surface of the music itself; a recognisable, comparable turn similar to that of the post-modern switch to abstraction in sculpture. Of course, John Cage had many more interesting ideas beyond silence, such as his thoughts on the non-binary nature of mushrooms (Cage was an enthusiastic forager), the prepared piano, and the malleability of language both in his reductions of pre-existing written works and in his wonderful 'mesoistics'. Still, the idea of silence, or really, the idea of consciously listening to your environment, remains what he is best known for.⁸

John Cage's number pieces, which gave rather indeterminate, flexible instructions for the performer of his music inside time brackets, was a particularly interesting aspect of his work to me personally, and a practical way to introduce the presence of music-like structures within sculpture. I started to think of the sculptures that I was making as similar to these brackets, with the possibility of (imagined) sound or music happening within them. In the exhibition setting, this would of course be quite hard to convey without a great deal of tedious explanation. So instead of over-complicating things, I began to consider elements in sculptural work that I thought functioned in a similar manner to music, starting with time and fragility.

⁶ From John Cage's Lecture "Indeterminacy", in *Die Reihe No. 5* (English edition) (Theodore Presser Co., ed. Herbert Eimert and Karlheinz Stockhausen, 1961), 115.

⁷ Raphael Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting" in *The Turn to Provisionality in Contemporary Art* (Bloomsbury, 2023), 15.

⁸ This awareness of music's environment, its presence in life and its inseparability from the world it inhabits, is what composer Jennie Gottschalk has termed 'non-fictional music' – Jennie Gottschalk, *Experimental music since the 1970s* (Bloomsbury, 2016), 4.

Time



Andy Goldsworthy, *Iris blades pinned together with thorns filled in five sections with rowan berries fish attacking from below difficult to keep all the berries in nibbled at by ducks* (1987)

Andy Goldsworthy's sculpture *Iris Blades...* from 1987 comprises iris blades pinned together with thorns, with five sections of the piece filled with rowan berries - all floating on the surface of a pond in Yorkshire Sculpture Park in West Bretton. The work is documented in just a few photographs, and the piece would have changed or disintegrated within hours, if not minutes, of the pictures being taken. I find the precarity and time-sensitive nature of the piece to be very moving, and works like these continue to influence my ideas to a great degree.

There's something especially interesting about things getting close to non-existence, but perhaps not crossing that boundary.

Time has been utilised, framed, depicted and alluded to in fine art in so many ways; in still lifes, installation, and performance art. For me personally, some of the most influential work relating to time was made by artists that were part of the Fluxus movement.

Fluxus and the immaterial

In his 1965 book *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*, Allan Kaprow describes his view on the future of art, a shift in the narrative that had already begun, at that time, to take place. He writes from within that change: '*[This] book [...] is not intended to be a summary after the fact. It has been written in the midst of a young activity*'.⁹

Kaprow's text covers many of the familiar ideas of Fluxus: the assemblage (the object that may be *walked around*), the environment (that may be *walked into*), and the happening (the *event*, and its sometime counterpart and instruction - the *event score*). The artist's vision for the new art also includes some of the shifts in other art forms of the time, which are now perhaps less associated with what would later become known as Fluxus; the broadening of the horizons of architecture to include LeCorbusier's ideas of 'habitable sculpture', and the continued expansions of the field of painting.

The big shifts in art in the late fifties, sixties and seventies would influence one another. The particular way that what we now call New Music happened was influenced, in turn, by Fluxus; many of the Fluxus artists had been students of Cage.

The shift to immateriality that Fluxus proposed was widespread and not limited to the US. In Japan, artists in the *Gutai Group* like Sadamasa Motonaga and Akira Kanayama made large scale inflatable (and deflatable) works, experimenting with time as an element in sculpture. Experimental, political, ephemeral performance and installation art was being made on the east side of the iron curtain by artists like Jan Mlčoch (Czech), Andres Tolts (Estonian), Ewa Partum (Polish), and the Serbian Bosch + Bosch group, often performed or made despite the threat of arrest¹⁰. In London, *The Signals Gallery* catered to the increasing interest amongst artists in impermanent and elusive materials. The activities of the community around *Signals* (founded by Gustav Metzger, David Medalla and Marvella Salvadori) had an important impact on the presence of the international Avant-garde in London at the time, bringing attention to South American artists like Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, amongst others. *Signals* was initially devised as a research center:

*Its intended goal focused on research into industrial materials, and natural elements such as water, foam, wind and smoke, as well as less tangible phenomena such as sound, light, heat and magnetism.*¹¹

⁹ Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1965), 150.

¹⁰ "Fluxus in the West was quite harmless, which it wasn't in Eastern Europe, where people were occasionally even exiled [...] In Eastern Europe, Fluxus became political and this was really tragic because, in the West, Fluxus was left-wing, interested in communism; Maciunas for example wrote letters to Khrushchev – completely idiotic, wasn't it?" – Art historian and curator Eha Komissarov in "Fluxus East in Estonia", *Estonian Art* 1/2009, 20.

¹¹ Anna Dezeuze, *Almost nothing: Observations on precarious practices in contemporary art* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 79-80.

The immaterial aspects of Fluxus are possibly best encapsulated in its event scores, and best recognised in the works of Yoko Ono, George Brecht, and Alison Knowles.

Event Scores involve simple actions, ideas, and objects from everyday life recontextualized as performance. Event Scores are texts that can be seen as proposal pieces or instructions for actions. The idea of the score suggests musicality. Like a musical score, Event Scores can be realized by artists other than the original creator and are open to variation and interpretation.

– Alison Knowles ¹²

Event scores, sometimes called verbal notation, verbal instruction, text scores, word scores or prose scores, are used in a variety of ways, and their use is not limited to happenings. They have been applied to the making or handling of objects, or they might suggest interactions between the writer and the reader: imaginary projections or impossible actions. They are also commonly used to score music, such as in the work of one of the founding members of Fluxus, Benjamin Patterson. In his essay on Patterson's *Lick Piece*, Fred Moten comes to a particularly interesting conclusion about matter being secondary to art itself in Fluxus:

*Fluxus occupies, is preoccupied with, the precarious balance between bare materiality and unsparing dematerialization. [...] More matter, less art? No. Because matter is only ever art's delivery system.*¹³

I wonder if this is true for a lot of ideas surrounding dematerialisation in art, not just in Fluxus. Gustav Metzger's auto-destructive works, John Latham's *Skoob Towers*... Any work in which the piece is made and then unmade; any piece that plants an idea, instructs to act upon itself, passes by, or flashes into existence momentarily. Seeing a problem unfold, but not necessarily getting to its solution, is interesting. Seeing a performer, or anyone for that matter, engaged in thinking, in concentration, often draws the attention of the viewer.

*There is juice left in compositional collision, in getting into trouble on canvas and then vividly getting out of it.*¹⁴

How to collide the material with the immaterial? The *delivery system*, the material, must necessarily be treated equally to, or intertwined with, the immaterial aspects of the message of the piece.

¹² Alison Knowles' website <https://www.aknowles.com/eventscore.html>, accessed 29 September 2024

¹³ Fred Moten, *Black and Blur: Consent Not To Be A Single Being* (Duke University Press, 2017), 142.

¹⁴ Martin Herbert, "Take Your Time" in *Slow Painting* (Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2019), 7.

Soap

My reliefs in soap, one of which featured in the Kuvan Kevät exhibition, were images of my Grandmother's house in Bristol. They were made using the soap that she used to use, and the scent was remarkably suggestive of that particular environment, of my Grandmother's home.



Working with soap, I came to find that it is a strong activator of memories - not only for the scent (which in itself can be highly evocative), but for its material association to the repetitive actions involved with washing. I love that it doesn't last, that it has a tendency to change relatively rapidly: the process of how soap dries and distorts or discolours is quick enough to be perceived within the timeframe of an exhibition, in a few weeks for example. I'm happy to have found time-basedness here too. Using soap has since led me to work with other cosmetic materials, including powder foundations and petroleum lotions.

The ephemerality of these materials is interesting in itself, but I feel there's also a kind of musicality to the probationary state of something that isn't fixed, something visibly meldable or fragile to the touch.

I love powders, pastes, oils, creams and gels. And I like to preserve their rawness. For example, traditionally, within the history of making sculpture, a powdered substance like plaster [...] would become a harder permanent form and structure. But I prefer to use it just as powder. In a way, I like to try to retard the potential within the material: to not let it lose that life that it can have at a certain point. [...] When making a sculpture, I stop quite near the beginning of the process with materials; to try to have paint that won't dry or plaster that won't set.

– Karla Black ¹⁵

Among the many very important lessons I learned earlier in my career, working with performance, was that you have to be patient. Dancers and actors need time to find their way around new material. A delicate new language that you are bringing into the performance space with your colleagues needs time and space to take form. In the process of making, you must allow things to settle before you can shape them. How often I've felt that the opposite is true in sculpture – allowing things to settle, to cool, to fix or to dry, usually means no more access to the malleability of the material. I'm grateful to have seen work by artists like Karla Black, who challenge a lot of these preconceptions of permanence involved with sculpture.

The impermanence of the soap piece that I exhibited was thrown into stark relief by how it seemed to coincide with other events in my life: I had only recently made it when I met my partner at the time; we exhibited our work together, and then, in an odd turn of events, the sculpture accidentally broke into pieces on the day that we separated. I've come to believe that an artwork can, and perhaps should, form a personal relationship with its viewer, like a performance or a story or a piece of music can sometimes do, and for that to last for just a limited amount of time. A few minutes, a week, a year, for example. The art is meant to come into your life and then leave again, and it should have proportions relative to your life, a duration that is understandable in relation to life. I suppose, here too, the most important thing is temporaneity and time. Everything has a duration.

This too shall pass. I don't know why.

The idea that a sculpture can remind us of our own passage through time is a comfort to me. We are here together, sharing this moment, and some things can only be seen right now, and then never again.

¹⁵ Karla Black interviewed by Becky Manson in *Karla Black & Kishio Suga: A New Order* (The Trustees of the National Galleries of Scotland, 2017), 24.

Impression, relief

Impermanence and time-basedness led me to think about traces and impressions: a mark left behind, an indication of an event in time. Impression became vital to how the work would take shape, particularly in the technique of its making: I would attach suction cups to the back sides of laser cut plexiglass shapes, and they would then be pressed into semi-dry paper paste, mounted on foam boards. The process left behind the marks of the images having been visited upon the surface, and because of the way they were pressed in, the displaced paper mixture would form slight ridges around the images, occasionally tearing the paper slightly.



Having had a lifelong love of fossils, the association I keep with this kind of impression is also rooted in an idea of unimaginable durations; deep, geological time. The choice to use paper (with its added implication of writing), was made for the tension between unrelatably long timescales and the more understandable durations suggested by the material.

The verticality of the pieces reminded me of my great aunt Pauline's house, which (to my childhood eye) always seemed to have a ceiling so high that it just ascended forever, ornamental cornice moulding disappearing into the darkness. Large gilt-framed paintings were placed high up on the walls, like some salon exhibition from the turn of the 20th century left partially (and permanently) uninstalled for lack of a tall enough ladder.

And despite the pomposity of awe-inviting verticality, my large paper works seemed to say so little. I think it was the fragility of the material, that slightly powdery surface, or maybe it was the illegibility of the pictograms, a vagueness in the delicacy of the impressions. I liked this worn-out quality, like something had touched the surface briefly, and already it was gone, and the mark would inevitably fade.



The two large relief works were made with paper powder mixed with water and dish soap.

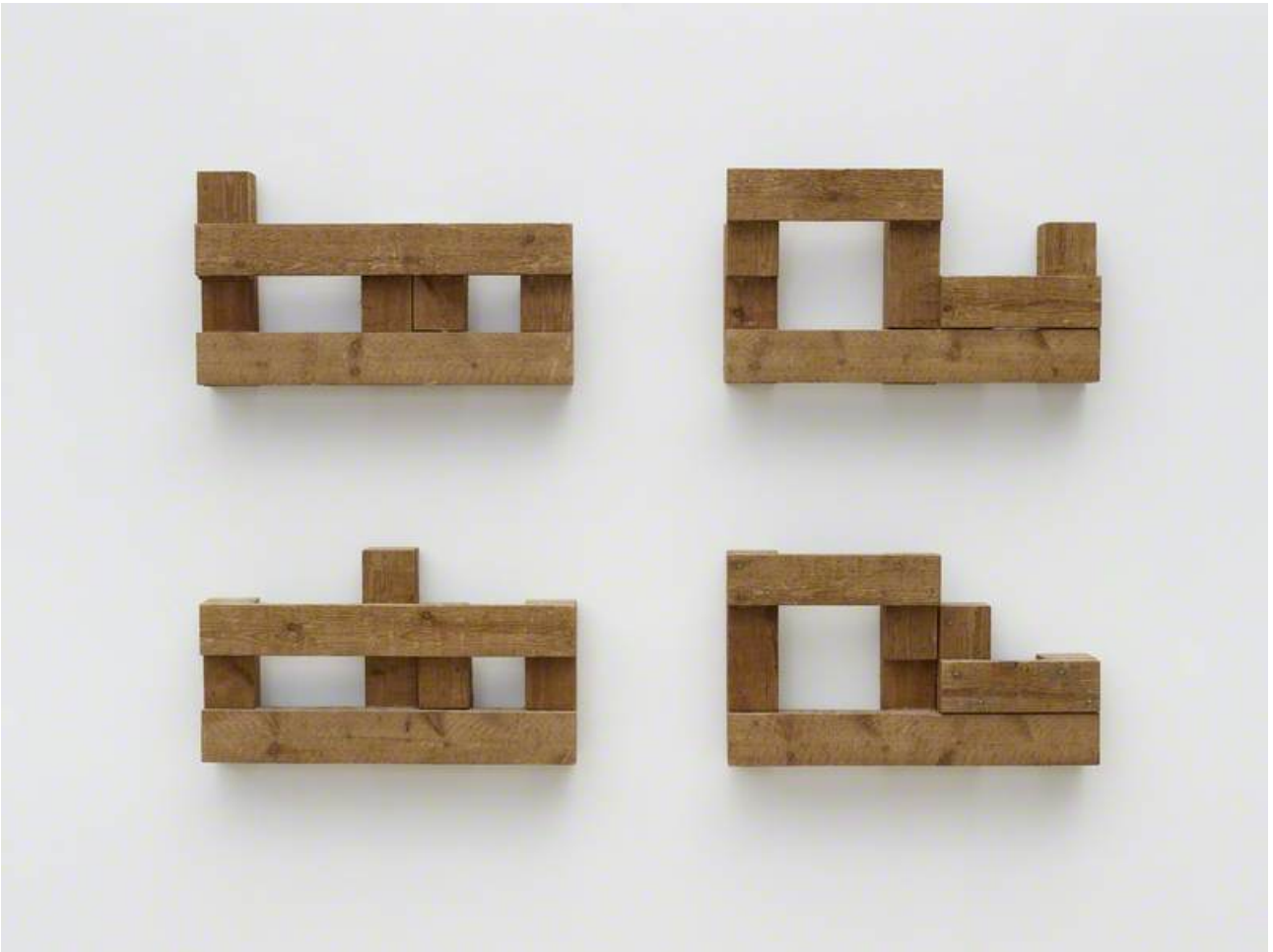
With regard to what influenced these pieces, I feel that Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* series from the late seventies had a considerable impact on my choice to pursue the technique of imprinted relief. The Mendieta pieces are so powerful, elemental, visually striking – but I was equally drawn to the soft, chalky pastels and uncertainties of Karla Black's works. Looking back, I see the influence of both in the paper panels. The texture of the material was as important to the work as the impressions; this fragile, dusty surface, almost like talc or makeup foundation. A certain visual simplicity and the allowing of space was another important factor in the work that I was making at the time. I felt very inspired by the sculptures of Emma Park and Alison Wilding, particularly the less crowded works of the latter.



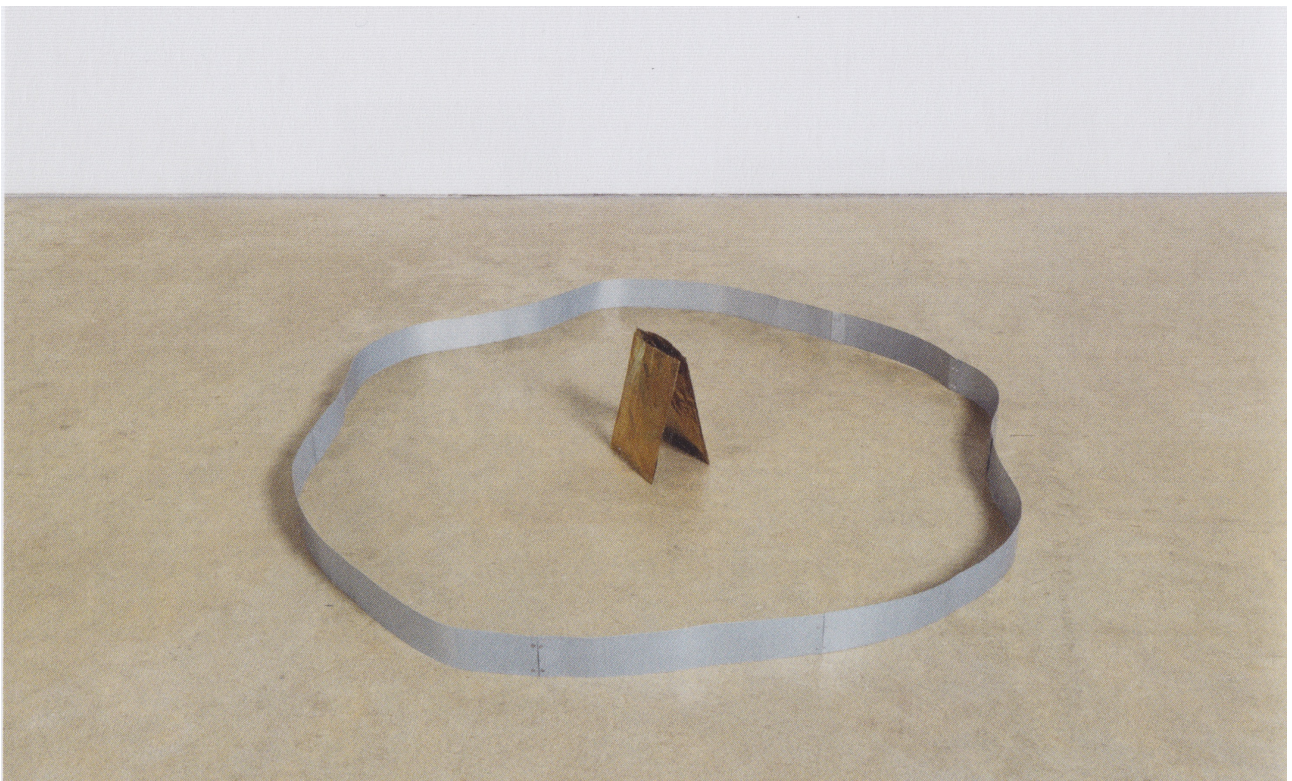
Ana Mendieta, *Untitled* 1976



Karla Black, *Comfort in Common* 2022



Emma Park, *4 Sculptures 'Untitled December 1978'* (1978)



Alison Wilding, *Untitled* (1980)

Much of my work in the two years leading up to Kuvan Kevät had dealt with my Grandmother and my relationship with her, and the house she lived in on the North side of Bristol. I had felt helpless, unable to be there for her, as she had been isolated with worsening dementia during the pandemic. I was finally able to go back to the house after the covid restrictions were lifted in November 2021. It had been almost two years, and the house had been vacant for about half that time, my Grandmother having been taken into a nursing home. The house was tied up with her life so completely, that when I was there alone, I realised it was no longer the same. I took casts of all the different surfaces of the walls that I could find, without ever really knowing why. The casts were small, irregular thicknesses, oval and oblong shapes. It was here that I started carrying the idea of surfaces into what would become my work at Kuvan Kevät – this, and the way light hit the interior surfaces in the house.



Casts of various surfaces in my Grandmother's house, November 2021.

Light

I wanted to find a way to bring some of the sense of the light and textures of my Grandmother's home to the exhibition. A vague notion of music was present at this early stage of devising the works. I knew I wanted it inaudible, a simple presence, a potential of sound. Just before I left the house in Bristol for the last time, I took some of the plexiglass panels that had been part of the very 70s decor in the kitchen ceiling and brought them back to Finland. I ended up using the panels as they were, placing them over the windows in the exhibition space. Their texture contributed further to the themes of relief that I had been working with, and I was very happy with the way they interacted with the sunlight.



I placed some spring onions cast in paraffin on the window ledge alongside the plexiglass panels. The onions were significantly related to the house in Bristol as well, as my earliest memory of eating anything at all was of these new spring onions, grown in my Grandmother's garden. I would sit on my great grandfather's lap out there at about three years old, looking into the house, and we would eat the onions together, raw.



My red nude pieces initially started out as explorations of queer desire, inspired by Olivia Laing describing the figures in David Hockney's painting *Adhesiveness* as 'squat scarlet figures like pornographic Mr Men'¹⁶. I liked the idea, and not being familiar with the Hockney painting in question, I made some drawings of my own based on what I thought Laing's description might have looked like. These works started out as monochromatic red figures, cut out of primary red lighting gel and hung in windows, so that their shadows would move across the room with the sun, over surfaces, furniture, people. I imagined a kind of relief on the body of the spectator, touching, reaching out, passing over and onward.

With hindsight, I think most of the works that I showed in Kuvan Kevät were involved with the idea of light and lightness in their own ways. The red lighting gel piece that would cast its red shadow with the sunlight was an obvious one, but the onions on the windowsill had this quality of light to them too, in that they were pale, nearly translucent, almost like a glass frog or a deep sea fish. The textured plexiglass panels let light through too, as did the three wrapped blocks of colophony rosin that sat on the lower shelf of the left-most paper relief.

I was pleased with how these works came to life in the abundant natural light of the exhibition space at the beginning of summer.

¹⁶ Olivia Laing, *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency* (W. W. Norton, 2020), 47.

I had hoped to produce a body of work that would persuade the viewer to think of a kind of musicality, but this appears to have been harder than I thought. I often associate the most memorable experiences in my life to music. Sounds remain viscerally emotional for me – sometimes they are too much. And something simply visual can already contain so much sensory information in itself that adding an audible element would be redundant, trite, too obvious. Working as a sound designer, devising music and sound for the stage, I would often opt for silences, trying to allow for visual elements to express the same things that sounds do.

I believe there's potential for music in visual things. I often think back to John Latham's son Noah Latham speaking over the video of his late father's artwork *Encyclopedia Britannica* (in which each page of the encyclopedia is given a single frame of the film, pages flipping at high speed in black and white, many of them over-exposed): *'It's so strange for being silent, because it's a kind of silent music'*¹⁷.

The methods by which we reach a completed work are necessarily different depending on what we are making, of course. There are possible intersections between the objects of sculptures and the auditory pull of sounds and music, and they aren't always obvious. Through the exploration of the material terms of time (and by extension, a realm adjacent to music), I based my works in things like frailty, light, impression, and concealment... but, for some reason, I never once gave much thought to colour at all.



¹⁷ Noah Latham quoted in *John Latham: Films 1960-1971* (Lisson Gallery DVD, 2010)

Colour 1

One day, I met a person who made me see the world in colour

it was really special actually

and I started to think about colours in a new way. I became aware that I use colour quite sparingly. I came to realise that much of my work is monochromatic. Why is that?

I hadn't thought about how delicious a painting can be, how inviting of myriad senses it is when you see something with paint layered thick and heavy, colours, like a cake like a peach

like

David Hockney

for example, or

Lois Dodd

Rose Wylie

I want to understand colour, but how can I see it now when the world is so washed out, so sun-bleached, bone-dry and pale? The answer is to keep looking, which I will do I will I will I will I will

I daydream a green colour field painting

The film blue by Derek Jarman

The red wind in Anne Carson's reinterpretation of Stesichoros' Geryoneis

and from these constituent parts I begin to mix into the greys of my life new colours

Colour 2

*Geryon was a monster everything about him was red
Put his snout out of the covers in the morning it was red
How stiff the red landscape where his cattle scraped against
Their hobbles in the red wind
Burrowed himself down in the red dawn jelly of Geryon's
Dream*

*Geryon's dream began red then slipped out of the vat and ran
Upsail broke silver shot up through his roots like a pup*

Secret pup At the front end of another red day

– Anne Carson ¹⁸

Anne Carson's *The Autobiography of Red* (1998) begins with the author's reinterpretation of Stesichoros' poem *Geryoneis* from the 6th century BCE. The fragmentary poem tells the story of Geryon, a red monster that lives alone in a cave on a small island where he keeps large cattle. Heracles eventually comes to the island and slays Geryon and steals his cattle as one of his twelve labours. Carson's story goes on to tell the story of Geryon, a winged red monster whose monstrosity goes mostly unnoticed in his surroundings in an unspecified, fictional version of contemporary North America. His queerness hides in plain sight. The intensity of Carson's use of colour struck me extremely powerfully, particularly in the first fragment of her interpretation of the *Geryoneis* (quoted above). Later in the book, the manner in which Carson uses Geryon's redness to convey discomfort in one's own skin; his worry of being found out; the way he hides his wings inside a large coat: all of these things drew me in further. The colour, its monochromaticism, its association with shame, fear and anger, washed over the entirety of the book – I have rarely, if ever, had such an intense association of colour with a written work as with *The Autobiography of Red*.

Monochromatic things seem to have a distancing effect in their plasticky quality. It's so unusual to see something plainly monochromatic in nature that it almost repels the viewer, and yet, it can have a powerful emotionally intense quality at the same time.

The power of nature that comes to us through colour. What does colour do to us, in relation to nature? And I said, "it is as if nature was alive and conscious and wants to affirm its presence, its power". It is colour that makes us realise the intensity of nature.

– Etel Adnan ¹⁹

¹⁸ Anne Carson, *The Autobiography of Red* (Cape Poetry, 1998), 9.

¹⁹ Etel Adnan interviewed on the youtube channel *Van Gogh Museum Extra*, published May 18 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odzjLhDDKdc>, accessed September 30 2024.

My relationship with colour is in process, and I have only come to realise in recent years that I have spent most of my life not thinking about colour at all. I didn't consider the monochromaticism of my works at Kuvan Kevät until almost a year after the exhibition. The individual pieces were each practically in single colours: the white cellulose panels, the green relief in soap, the green wax onions, the off-white textured plastic panels, the amber rosin blocks and the red gel figure in the window... I've come to a very strange, complicated situation in which colour has become harder to make sense of the more I think about it.

Amy Sillman puts it into words better than I ever could:

*'So how do you use color?' people ask me all the time. An impossible question, as though I were to "know" something about time, sex, sound, scent, heat, touch, emotions, how color performs like sex in language. Color is something that I can only describe, which lives in the memory and sensation of the skin, the feelings of touch and handling itself.*²⁰

Colour's equivalent in music is timbre, the colour of the sound – although, to me, timbre has the power to cover the aural counterpart of texture too, and to waver in and out of one colour and the next. And of course, colour requires context - the adjacency of other colours - to come through. The same is true for timbre. I like how Andrew Cranston describes working in a narrow range of colours, using what he calls *intervals of tone*: *'to use a musical analogy, it's like working within a single octave'*.²¹

²⁰ Amy Sillman, *Faux Pas* (After 8 Books, 2022), 75.

²¹ Andrew Cranston, *Never A Joiner* (Ingleby & Anomie, 2023), 90.

Composition and notation

He asked me what I thought composition was, he heard my piece, he liked it, he thought it was too “colourful”. And I said, “I’m not interested in colour”. I said “My definition of composition is: the right note in the right place with the right instrument!”

– Morton Feldman ²²

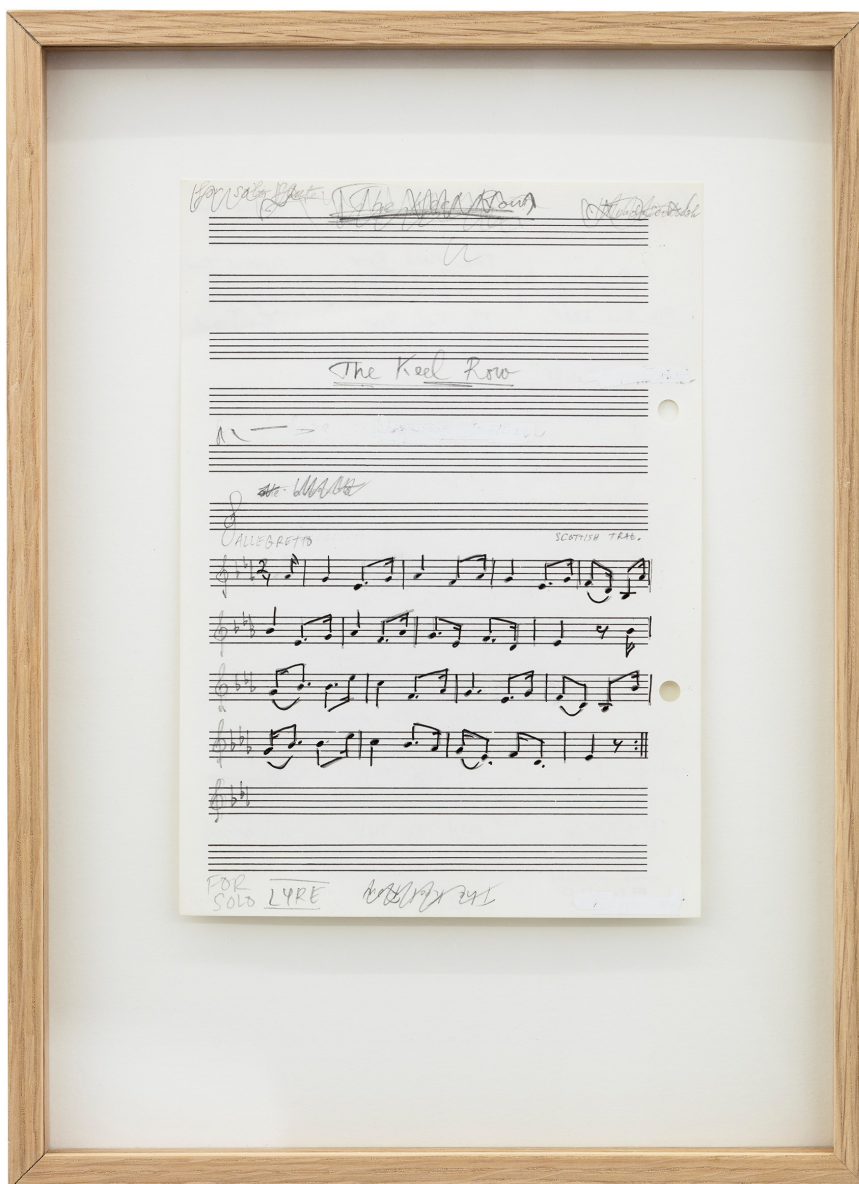
I am not a skilled reader of music. The notation convention of Western music is just one approach, of course, but it’s widespread and generally understood to be a practical way of going about it. Long before my thesis work, I was trying to find ways of expressing music as part of a visual practice, and to include music as a practical material alongside other sculpture materials. Usually, for me, this hasn’t meant audible music in the exhibition space. It’s more like playing a short recording into a glass bottle, and then corking it, trapping the music inside; I like the idea of imagining music, or of different ways for music to be present in a visual form. In order to express this, it may be necessary to include some written music sometimes: to have a small text score or a short passage of notes on a stave in the info card alongside a sculpture; or to carve music directly onto the surface of an object; or to suggest the presence of music by any other means.

Music notation, however, isn’t accessible to most people. I don’t like the idea of being out of reach to many, especially when I hope to make work that speaks to people who aren’t necessarily already invested in the music scene... But I’ve also come to think of it as an invitation to imagine what the marks on the stave *could* sound like. Just the appearance of music notation can be enough to cause a simple exercise in imagining music. I think a certain simplicity is important too. Jani Ruscica’s piece *The Keel Row (for solo lyre)* is a lovely example of music being presented as an art object, in that it is simply a framed manuscript page with some handwritten music and other markings on it. Even without the skill of sight-reading, the suggestion of music that it evokes is wonderful. The information attached to Ruscica’s piece further implies the participation of a performer, no longer present²³. The simple indication that the piece was, at one time, performed on solo lyre (perhaps in the very space that the artwork is shown) is yet another way of bringing music into the exhibition – through the memory of it.

Julius Eastman (1940-1990) was a composer of magnificent, hypnotic music based both in uncompromising repetition and improvisation. Eastman’s compositions were often fragmentary, without bar lines, pushing back against the organisation of other minimalist or process musics of the time. Composer George E. Lewis describes it as “*communitarian*”, practically reliant on the involvement and interpretation of others. In an interview with vocalist and movement artist Elaine Mitchener, composer Mary Jane Leach explains about how speaking with the people that Eastman performed his music with has been a necessary part of staging his work since his death:

²² Morton Feldman, “Lectures IV” in *Essays* (Beginner Press, 1985), 146.

²³ The technical information of the piece listed on the artist’s website reads “*hand written sheet music, framed, 23 x 31 cm, live performer, lyre*”



Jani Ruscica, *The Keel Row* (for solo lyre), 2016

*[Eastman] was used to working pieces out with the musicians during rehearsal and it sort of relied on people being familiar with the music and passing it on. Those people who had performed with Julius are invaluable resources because they can tell you what the rehearsal process was like and without them it would be a lot more difficult.*²⁴

Scores are, fundamentally, flawed and incomplete representations of music as-yet (or previously) unheard: they are containers for possible music. Minimalist composer Terry Riley, in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, describes music notation as a 'probationary state' of music, responding to Obrist explaining how Boulez had previously said that 'notation is never finished, [Boulez] doesn't believe in the fact that all comes to an end in a notation'.²⁵

²⁴ Mary Jane Leach interviewed by Elaine Mitchener in *Un-forgetting Julius Eastman* (BBC Radio 4), November 6 2018

²⁵ Hans Ulrich Obrist. *A Brief History of New Music* (JRP|Ringier, 2015), 171.

So, the notation of a piece may be any number of things: an incomplete instruction, a probationary state of music, a space for free interpretation within boundaries set by the composer, a simple frame for sound events to occur in, or an attunement, a preparation of the performance that makes the music possible.

The works that I showed in Kuvan Kevät didn't use scores or any significant method of notation, but the sculptures still fulfilled certain actions, or asked to be interacted with in certain ways. Sometimes an instruction is unnecessary, and the surrendering of control frees things up. The actions that objects suggest are often so simple that the idea of an instruction being attached to them is unnecessary; like providing a score for the use of a door handle.

Similarly, the interactions and actions of my sculptures were very simple. The red nude in the window cast its moving red shadow on the floor and walls, while the large paper panels ascended towards the ceiling, asking the viewer to crane their neck. Sometimes the interaction that the sculpture suggested was unexpected to me: the paraffin onions were handled so much by exhibition guests that by the end of the show, they had crumbled into pieces. The sculptures were frames within which these events took place.

In *Harmonielehre* (1911), Arnold Schönberg writes about the concept of *Handwerk*, the acquired skill of composing, which he compares at length to carpentry. In Schönberg's description, composing is compared to the craft of making a functioning object, a piece of furniture for example: the correct and appropriate materials must be chosen in order to complete the finished product.

*If I should succeed in teaching the pupil the handicraft of our art as completely as a carpenter can teach his, then I shall be satisfied. And I would be proud if, to adapt a familiar saying, I could say: "I have taken from composition pupils a bad aesthetics and have given them in return a good course in handicraft."*²⁶

The association of composing with craftsmanship is still very much in line with how music for classical instruments is viewed and taught even today. Some parallels are there in sculpture too, to an extent, but fine art appears far more prepared to admit that these skills are not always necessary for the making of a good artwork. The choices involved in making a work can and should go beyond craftsmanship, and very often, these would appear to be the things that push boundaries.

²⁶ Arnold Schönberg, *Harmonielehre* (Universal-Edition, 1922), 7. Translated from German.

Of course, many composers come to their work with a more open approach. Jō Kondō suggests a more subtle kind of composing: that of simply listening.

Composition is an activity [...] of appropriately arranging the selected sounds so as to achieve the desired content-substance [...] This is not so much an activity of 'creation', it's perhaps closer to the truth to call it an activity of 'discovery'. The composer, far from expectorating sounds into the world, searches for appropriate sounds in the world by straining their ears to pick them out. To compose, one must first be a homo audiens (listening human).²⁷

Perhaps the paths into music can be condensed even further. The composer Helmut Lachenmann said two particular things about composition that I took note of at a lecture he gave at Musiikkitalo in 2023:²⁸

Composition is soft control of the acoustic space and the situation

and

*Music is a sounding situation
with a system
inside of it*

How do these thoughts change when we replace ‘composition’ and ‘music’ with ‘sculpture’?

²⁷ Jō Kondō. *Homo Audiens* (MusikTexte, 2022), 46.

²⁸ Helmut Lachenmann at *Musica Nova: The Music of Our Time* lecture series, Musiikkitalo, Helsinki, March 9 2023.

The ‘reading instruction’

While I don’t claim to be a composer, I consider working with the organisation of sound a significant part of my practice - organisation in the way that composition (music) is organised sound; organised sound, organised materials, objects, texts.

My sculpture practice shares similarities with my approach to music, sound, and writing, but it is not really the same. It has a more general arc into which things get placed to fit a shape or a contour or a thread that leads the viewer from one point to another, or a few further points, if they happen to follow one another in such a logical manner. Not that logic is key to narrative, sculpture, or music; but in everything I do, I aim for a certain built-in ‘reading instruction’, which should be present and almost immediately understandable. There’s nothing worse than having to explain. There’s nothing worse than being asked what it’s about.

As I come from a background in (non-conservatory) music and sound art, my personal relationship with the world has primarily been experienced through hearing (although, ironically, I am a terrible listener – or so I have been told). I always loved music, thanks to my father, who is a retired music-related English teacher, and sometime composer (nowadays a novelist). I got through a somewhat troubled youth playing music with my friends, before enrolling in the sound design course at the Theatre Academy in 2009. After graduating, I drifted somewhere between sound art and radio drama²⁹. I saw that there was space for composition in writing for voices. I devised lecture performances and went and spoke bits of text I learned off by heart in front of audiences. In one performance, I was required to stand in the spotlight, half-naked, while I recited with an intensity that I distinctly remember having to dig too deep for, every single time I performed it. One night, I stepped out and locked eyes with the politician and actor Jani Toivola sitting in the front row, and I almost forgot all my lines. I wrote and wrote and wrote for other people to say things I imagined in their voices. Years later, Jani Toivola played a part in one of my radio plays. I’ve come to think that this writing for voices was a kind of composing for speaking and invented social situations instead of instruments. Everything has a duration, and within that set frame, it’s possible to make things.

The notion of composition was right there, and yet it eluded me. I applied to the Time and Space department at the Fine Arts Academy a handful of times, always getting rejected (with retrospect, I can see it would have been a poor fit). It wasn’t until I found myself without my usual reliable tools of text, phrases, noises and durations in a pottery studio with my friend Joel Slotte, that I started to realise that there was something to making things with the hands that went beyond thought. I had played instruments before, and although it doesn’t necessarily show, my relationship with the guitar feels fluid and intuitive to me - it still carries a level of thought and cerebrality, however. Even when the hands are doing things freely, the action still avoids the deep, dreamless waters that you can achieve with some forms of sculpture.

When it comes to sculpture, I have to listen to what feels intuitively right, and to learn through these experiences to get to a similar point in my writing and in my music. The bodily experience of sculpture sits at a different point than that of music – it’s lower in the body, far more intuitive and

²⁹ The difference between British radio plays and the German Hörspiel tradition, and its particular influence on the Finnish way of doing things, will need to be reserved for a separate thesis.

demanding of a kind of ‘switching off’. It’s like feeling your way forward in darkness, and you just have to do it in order to see where it takes you. Its nature is older, more in tune with the body-imagination than the more cerebral processes that music and sounds (or writing) suggest.

The idea of art coming into itself through intentionally allowing space for the subconscious is of course not new, and can be traced back to at least the turn of the 20th century; a time when art movements retreated into the self in response to the horrors of war; when automatic writing, spiritualism and seances began to excite the imaginations of those in positions to influence the direction of culture. Later, Jackson Pollock would describe the relationship between his work and the necessity of not knowing - clearly (although perhaps, ironically, unconsciously) influenced by ideas of spiritualism and automatic writing in particular:

When I am in the painting I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well.³⁰

The formulation of a coherence in any structure, by any means, is present both in the restrictions to reasoning that Pollock placed on his understanding of his own work, and in any method of delineating or framing imposed by the artist. We do this in painting, in sculpture, in music, in writing, in performance art - in everything, really. To make a comparison to ritual (arguably the foundation of all art practice), the success or failure of any ritual practice hinges on the coherence of the internal logic of the ritual itself³¹. Consciously denying oneself any other approach but that of trusting intuition is perfectly reasonable. In the long history of making things, the surrendering of the maker’s own will to that of a higher power than themselves – whether that be the spirit realm, or a god – is not new. Choosing to not reason with the process of making is a simple, self-imposed rule that enables an action to be carried out in a simple, clear manner.

Placing limitations on one’s work is helpful not only to the artist, but often also to the person who experiences it, as Arnold Schönberg states below, when describing the structuring of a piece of music:

One can comprehend only what one can keep in mind. Man's mental limitations prevent him from grasping anything which is too extended. Thus appropriate subdivision facilitates understanding and determines the form.³²

³⁰ Jackson Pollock quoted in Edward Lucie-Smith’s *World of Art: Movements in art since 1945*, (Thames & Hudson, 2020), 25.

³¹ “If there is no coherence to one’s mythological internal framework then there will be no outward coherence to one’s ritual activity or magickal art” Danny Sargent, *Global Ritualism* (Llewellyn Publications, 1994), 67.

³² Arnold Schönberg, *Fundamentals Of Musical Composition* (Faber and Faber, 1967), 1.

Schönberg continues:

*The smallest structural unit is the phrase, a kind of musical molecule consisting of a number of integrated musical events, possessing a certain completeness, and well adapted to combination with other similar units. The term phrase means, structurally, a unit approximating to what one could sing in a single breath.*³³

When I first read this, I found myself more excited about sculpture than I had perhaps ever been: I obsessed over the idea of a sculpture that could be expressed in a single exhalation. Soon, I found that this kind of thing is actually far more difficult than I was prepared to accept, but I carried this idea all through my work in preparation for *Kuvan Kevät*. In some way, I feel the idea of the single breath can be associated with visual simplicity, lightness, a single colour, the artwork as a frame for time to pass through. The notion of the single breath felt more prominent in some works over others, but the simplicity (lightness), combined with the emotional resonance I was going for were best represented in the red shadow of the seated figure in *Red Nude 1* and the soap relief *Three Waterdale Gardens*, which sat on the shelf of one of the paper panel pieces.

Individual elements like lightness, colour, or even the idea of the single breath can begin to form a language, a vocabulary that the artwork speaks in. The vocabulary of a sculpture is made up of its materials, its form, and physical qualities like weight, texture, or balance. Its language can also include immaterial things, but the first things we see, often the surface parts, are those that we most directly associate with the way that the artwork expresses itself. In performance, the first thing you see when you enter a performance space is often just a first impression; the set design or a performer already present on stage as we enter – but this is only the beginning. What follows is the ‘reading instruction’, very often a near-subconscious set of actions or behaviours on the performer’s part, a change in lighting, or a change in any other kind of register that sets the tone of the performance from its outset: it atunes and directs the audience’s attention and guides the particular atmosphere towards what the piece actually is.

My interest is in the ways in which this kind of reading instruction may be applied to sculpture, and perhaps more particularly in how things like music or text could be part of the broader aura of an artwork. I’ve previously tried to approach this through writing lists: a way of collecting and ordering materials and their qualities.

One such list places materials that I use in sculpture on a scale of hardnesses. This tentative material scale starts in hard materials like metals, stone, and wood, and then proceeds to softer things like foam rubber, wax and bubble gum; and then further still into vaseline, powders, oils, liquids, vapours, scents; and finally into sounds, music (real and imaginary), internal monologue, etc.

With this scale, I propose that all material is time-based, but the softer or more fluid the material, the more discernible (faster) its time-basedness is.

³³ Schönberg, *Fundamentals Of Musical Composition*, 3.

Another list collates qualities (and their opposing forces) shared in common by sculpture, music, and text.

Quality

Opposing force (where applicable)

attack (striking impact)	slow attack (gradual impact)
buoyancy	non-buoyancy (tending to sink in a liquid or fall in air)
center of gravity / balance	imbalance (precarity?)
centrality (focus)	peripherality
colour / light	darkness
containment (also framing)	boundlessness, flowing over the horizon
contrast, difference	sameness, similarity, another repetition
density	porousness
direction	aimlessness
duration	stasis
dynamics	no range
echo	anechoic space
edge	blur
fiction	non-fiction
figuration	abstraction
hardness	softness
harmony	disharmony
idiom	incongruity, inconsistency, improvisation
line, continuity	wash, ambiguity, homogeneity
magnetism	repellence
materiality	immateriality
movement	stillness
pitch (another kind of balance?)	discord
rhythm	isolated events / units
repetition	movement without discernible pattern
rhetoric	expressionlessness
shape (form)	a lack of definition
scale (size)	?
site-specificity	generality
solidity	fluidity
sonority	thinness of texture, a loose weave
tension	resolution
texture	flatness
thickness	thinness
tone	noise
volume	hollowness
warmth (temperature)	coldness
weight	lightness, or weightlessness

These lists are necessarily incomplete, sometimes nonsensical or incompatible with real life. I tend to use them sparingly, usually as something to refer to when I become unsure about how to proceed. They are like waymarkers that keep me from straying too much from the path.

Text as a material in sculpture

A poem is a 'line' between any two points in creation. In its passage it includes – meaning here it passes through – the material of itself.

– Charles Olson ³⁴

Because the light poured on the sheet of paper and at night the poem hummed under the kindness of a single light bulb it always struck me as a live thing, this invention, the avant-garde poem. Synonymous with the day, or night, exactly as long as me. Interruptible and pure, the form being as complex and simple as my experiences.

– Eileen Myles ³⁵

Text is to poetry what sound is to music. What object is to sculpture. Is that right?

Like music, language can acquire sculptural qualities, like *'a lie worn smooth by repetition'*³⁶. The exhibition text often influences the perception of a work, and I think that the way someone reads it is important too. They may hear it in their internal monologue, which is also a kind of sound: the voice in your head. These thoughts soon led me to poetry, significantly due to the influence that L.M. (a poet as well as an artist) brought to my life. A poem, a song, a sculpture; all of these could be intertwined together, I thought.

Richard Tuttle's monograph *TheStars*³⁷ collects images of the artist's sculptures and places them alongside his poetry and the descriptions of the works. Seeing Tuttle's small, provisional objects placed next to the descriptions on one hand, and the poems on the other, makes me feel excited for the possibilities of suggesting fictional, sur-real contents for artworks. I began to think about ways of incorporating music into works in the same manner as these little poems, a short melody in my head, written out as a little score alongside the other material specifications of a piece. A sculpture made of cellulose could also include music, hidden ideas, imaginary sounds and significances. But how to convey these things without the written elaboration?

Thinking about it now, I don't think I can detach Tuttle's poems from these particular works. Once the connection has been made, it's there for good. In some ways, I think the power of language is so overwhelming that the simple suggestion of poetry (or a particular poem) being associated with an object can become a significant part of the art object's whole identity. Perhaps this material in sculpture is the material of *rhetoric*.

³⁴ Charles Olson, *The Principle of Measure in Composition by Field: Projective Verse II*, ed. Joshua Hoeyneck (Chax Press, 2010), 15.

³⁵ Eileen Myles, "How To Write An Avant-Garde Poem" in *The Importance Of Being Iceland* (Semiotext(e), 2007), 154.

³⁶ Will Self attributes this line to William S. Burroughs in the essay "Junky" in *Why Read* (Grove Press, 2023), 138.

³⁷ Richard Tuttle, *TheStars* (Modern Art, 2022)

Erik Satie included written messages in his works meant only for the performer to see; little instructions and atunements, often absurd or nonsensical. Satie would ‘*write for piano, and from 1912 onwards took to adding comments or rubrics which were not sung or spoken, but contemplated by the pianist before or during the performance.*’³⁸

Written language may be expressed in many different ways in sculpture: through the use of typographical forms, or having poems displayed alongside the sculptural work or as part of its description, or by including sheafs of printed poetry in, amongst, or as part of the sculpture. Writing, like music, can equally be one of the materials of sculpture in itself. Additionally, the constructions in language that we use are comparable to physical structures in sculpture, and musical structures too.

*Now I’m alone on Robyn’s back porch, looking out at the tall grasses of her yard. Robyn doesn’t garden, she ungardens, as she puts it. In the August humidity, I feel a rising euphoria. I recognize this as the aura that precedes the work of writing, like the aura that precedes a seizure or a migraine. An idea is hovering before me, spectral and electric. The idea is just slightly out of reach and I will spend hours at my desk before I can grasp it, before I can work it on the page. But it is here now in the weeds, ungardened.*³⁹

The way Eula Biss uses the image of the aura here, the ‘rising euphoria’, is magical to me – it feels like a mental structure, a kind of metaphysical sculpture in text. Taking this thought further, I want to share an example of the idea of music being given physical form through writing – as it is in this excerpt from Missouri Williams’ novel *The Doloriad*:

*In the dormitory that night Marta stood on her bed and sang in circles, long loops of made-up words [...] she continued her tuneless song with an even greater effort of feeling; the sound of the thin, high voice that belied the physical solidity of her body trembled across the rectangular stone room [...] Marta changed key. Now her voice was low and unsteady, and Jakub thought that she was singing about the city, that in her trembling song he could make out the contours of its ruins, the defeated buildings with their black mouths, the tumbled walls and the broken cornices...*⁴⁰

This short paragraph already contains so much like sculpture to me – it has form, direction, a duration, all these musical things that I would hope to be able to contain in an object. It is a description of itself; a self-contained mental structure; a sculpture first in text, then in music.

³⁸ John Potter, *Song: A History in 12 Parts* (Yale University Press, 2023), 187.

³⁹ Eula Biss, *Having and Being Had* (Riverhead Books, 2020), chapter “Art (3)” paragraph 2, Kindle.

⁴⁰ Missouri Williams, *The Doloriad* (Dead Ink Books, 2022), chapter “If Only Someone Would Get Aquinas in Here (I)” paragraph 9, Kindle.

Language denotes, assigns and organises, and it also has the power to pull reality out of the air. The sometimes unsupported structures that it can form, like those present in the works of writers who test the limits of comprehensible language like David Melnick or Maija Muinonen⁴¹, create their own, unique dimensions of existence. Faced with the impassable elements of language, we are forced to confront questions about ourselves, and how our words have the power to manifest strange, new realities.

I remember speaking a word whose meaning I didn't know but about which I had some inkling, some intuition, then inserting that word into a sentence, testing how it seemed to fit or chafe against the context and the syntax, rolling the word around, as it were, on my tongue. I remember my feeling that I possessed only part of the meaning of the word, like one of those fragmented friendship necklaces, and I had to find the other half in the social world of speech. I remember walking around as a child repeating a word I'd overheard, applying it wildly, and watching how, miraculously, I was rarely exactly wrong. [...] [You] derive your understanding of a word by watching others adjust to your use of it: Do you remember the feeling that sense was provisional and that two people could build around an utterance a world in which any usage signified? I think that's poetry. And when I felt I finally mastered a word, when I could slide it into a sentence with a satisfying click, that wasn't poetry anymore—that was something else, something functional within a world, not the liquefaction of its limits.

– Ben Lerner ⁴²

⁴¹ For example: David Melnick, *Nice* (Nightboat, 2023) and Maija Muinonen, *Sexdeathbabies* (Teos, 2019).

⁴² Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2016), 105-6.

Music is a text or a situation

I avoid the difficult questions of whether I should
concentrate on music or on writing or on sculpture
by trying to make them all happen at once

I can't do it reliably, but never mind

and then sometimes music is just text or a situation
and an object is just the name of the object repeating
with the word music inside it

a bad example, but maybe like this: ⁴³

vasevas
evaseva
sevasev
asevaseva
sevasevasev
asevasevaseva
sevasevasevasev
asevasevasevasev
vase (music) vase
vasevasevasevas
evasevasevaseva
sevasevasevasev
asevasevasev
asevasevas
evasevasev
asevasev
asevasevasev
asevasevasevasev

⁴³ To be honest, I'm not really a fan of this sort of typographically represented 'text-sound poetry' but its importance to sound art and poetry in the 1960s and 70s shouldn't be underestimated. I believe that the work of the Swedish text-sound poets in particular was a groundbreaking kind of exploration into interdisciplinary art. Many works by the artists involved in the movement (such as Sten Hanson and Åke Hodell) achieved genuinely interesting results which I personally believe further broadened the horizons of sound art and its related activities in particular. For more, see the archive at Fylkingen, Stockholm, or the anthology *Text-Sound Texts* by Richard Kostelanetz (William Morrow & Co., 1980).

Sometimes the thing of music is just notes together
repeating themselves in time,
expressing a kind of stationary solidity
the qualities of a sculpture:
size, weight, surface, texture, edge,
temperature, colour, line
just expressed in sounding terms

Sound becomes static like a sculpture in the music of
minimalists like Éliane Radigue or or
Julius Eastman
the sizes and textures and heft of sculpture are also
there in the work of Jakob Ullman or Eva-Maria Houben
or Rolf Julius

or it's like Alvin Lucier hiding music inside cupped
hands, in teapots and amphorae, vases

But perhaps most of all, the shape of a sculpture in
sound is made through pure, unchanging repetition, as
in the sound collages of Peter Roehr
Who repeated and repeated endless tape loops of
recordings he made of adverts or radio broadcasts
and then threw himself into the sea
sinking like a stone

Music in the expanded field of sculpture, and vice versa

In my search for sculpture that uses music (or music-like thought) as a material, I discovered that many of the artists I came across would not be considered part of the fine art field. The rather redundant need to separate art forms from one another and have practitioners specialise creates an especially vexing division between the plastic arts and music. In my previous attempts to find ways of bringing together the various ideas of music and sculpture, I've written music that aims to behave like sculpture (*As funny as life as true as art*, for flutes and chamber organ, 2022); I've made sculptures that have an element of time-basedness in them but no audible music (*Red nudes 1-2*, 2021), and I've also introduced audible sound to my work, such as in a newer piece called *Songs for puppy* (2023), which frames a graphite drawing with a running reel of magnetic tape that plays a short, looping piece of music around the image. I've made a piece for piano four-hands, intended to be played by two people at once, in the presence of a small wax figure (*Queen of waxes*, 2021), and I've made sculptures using colophony rosin - the material string players use to add friction to their bows.

I always try to avoid gimmicky, clunky audio technology or even the heaviness of the notion of a composition. Some of my more composed pieces (*Eight small music sculptures*, 2023) are meant primarily to be performed and heard as music (or 'music-sculpture', as I would prefer to term it). In these cases, I don't consider the scores an important visual part of the work. They are merely functional aspects of something that takes its shape in a different manner - a kind of compromise, as a score often is anyway.

None of the above ideas that I've been experimenting with would have been possible without the groundbreaking work of the artists that worked in the intersecting areas of music and sculpture since John Cage, who, in his own right, arguably made their work possible in turn. The sound artist Rolf Julius (1939-2011) would bring audible, near-static sound pieces into the gallery alongside small readymades, the speakers themselves being part of the sculptures; the composer Alvin Lucier (1931-2021) created a unique form of sound sculpture in negative space through resonances in rooms and chambers; and Peter Roehr (1944-1968) made miniature sound collage, in which a short snippet of audio would repeat over and over, creating the impression of a near-physical form. The approaches to sound in the works of Julius, Lucier, and Roehr have significantly influenced my thinking around music, sculpture, and 'music-sculpture'. The ephemerality of their art is perhaps what draws me in the most, and I find that there is a shared air of delicacy in their work similar to that of many of my favourite pieces by sculptors like Rachel Whiteread, Richard Tuttle, Lygia Clark and Karla Black, or painters like Andrew Cranston, Lois Dodd and David Hockney.

Peter Roehr, who died tragically young at just 23 years old, produced a surprisingly coherent and rich body of work in his short life – an oeuvre of approximately 600 works that was curiously rigorous and strict in its highly controlled simplicity. Best known for his montages repeating a single image again and again, his audio work did almost precisely the same. Roehr himself stated:

*I alter material by organizing it unchanged. Each work is an organized area of identical elements. Neither successive nor additive, there is no result or sum.*⁴⁴

Roehr's sound pieces would repeat short snippets of audio, often material that he caught on the radio or the TV. The recordings would invariably last mere seconds, and he would loop them seemingly endlessly, always unchanging, relentless in their tight, austere forms. In these hypnotic, closed loops, I was sure I could discern a form take shape in audio space... A sculptural object in the mind.

*Bodensee, Konstanz, Drei, Zwei, Null, Gefallen Eins. Bodensee, Konstanz, Drei, Zwei, Null, Gefallen Eins. Bodensee, Konstanz, Drei, Zwei, Null, Gefallen Eins. Bodensee, Konstanz, Drei, Zwei, Null, Gefallen Eins. Bodensee, Konstanz, Drei, Zwei, Null, Gefallen Eins. Bodensee, Konstanz, Drei, Zwei, Null, Gefallen Eins. Bodensee, Konstanz, Drei, Zwei, Null, Gefallen Eins. Bodensee, Konstanz, Drei, Zwei, Null, Gefallen Eins...*⁴⁵

Alvin Lucier's composition *Chambers*⁴⁶ (1972) begins: "Collect or make large and small resonant environments", followed by a long list of these possible environments, including sea shells, rooms, and cupped hands. The second half of the score is a similarly long list of actions, preceded by the instruction "find a way to make them sound". The list of actions suggests 'blowing, bowing, moving', and many others. The similarity to Richard Serra's *Verb List* (1967-68) is significant, both works suggesting the imagining of a further thing; the making of sound in the case of Lucier, and drawing for Serra, through their suggested actions.

The precursor to *Chambers*, and arguably Lucier's best known piece, is *I Am Sitting In A Room* (1969). Somewhere between a science experiment and a meditation on impermanence and the echoes that things leave behind, the piece acts as a unique delineator of aural space. The work begins with a simple, short text; a spoken score which acts simultaneously as the central material of the piece:

*I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech. I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have.*⁴⁷

The recording of this text being read is played back into the same room, then that recording is played back - and the process is repeated, again and again - until the speech dissolves into resonances; the echoes of speech in the particular room it was recorded in. This piece succeeds in making demonstrable and observable the resonances of a space through the gradual subtraction of

⁴⁴ Peter Roehr quoted in 1964, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Roehr, accessed September 9 2024.

⁴⁵ Peter Roehr's tonmontage *Bodensee* (1966). *Transcribed*.

⁴⁶ Alvin Lucier, *Chambers* (Wesleyan University Press, 1980), 3.

⁴⁷ Alvin Lucier, excerpt from the score to *I Am Sitting In A Room* (1969) in *Chambers* (Wesleyan University Press, 1980), 30.

the human voice – and yet what we are left with, the resonance of the room, is in fact articulated by the echo of a person’s presence.

Rachel Whiteread’s sculpture *Ghost* is a more visual, object-based reflection of Lucier’s *I Am Sitting In A Room*, but arguably, it does much the same thing visually that Lucier’s piece does aurally. In *Ghost*, Whiteread made a plaster cast of the negative space, the interior, of a Victorian living room.



Rachel Whiteread, *Ghost* (1990)

Ghost was hand cast and I made a lot of it entirely on my own. It was the first piece in which I realised that I could absolutely disorient the viewer. While I was making it, I was just seeing one side at a time. I then took all the panels to my studio and fixed them to a framework. When we finally put the piece up, I realised what I had created. There was the door in front of me and a light switch back to front and I just thought to myself: ‘I’m the wall. That’s what I have done. I’ve become the wall.’

– Rachel Whiteread ⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Rachel Whiteread quoted in the article “Constructing the Ephemeral” by Eckhard Schneider in *Rachel Whiteread: Walls, Doors, Floors And Stairs* (Walther König, 2005), 9.

Rolf Julius' works, situated in a space between music and installation art – and often referred to by the artist himself as 'small music' – were focused on 'guiding sounds towards music'. These small musics, playing in tiny speakers and displayed together with objects (stones, panes of glass, pigments, paper) would form a unique complexity, a little environment or system that would begin to live a life of its own.

Some of Julius' works are named for a colour, placing a sound alongside a monochromatic object, such as the two yellow painted speakers in *Two Yellow Spots* (1983). Sometimes he would put small speaker elements in bags filled with powdered pigments or spices, or place a speaker in a little pile of dirt in the corner of the gallery. The sounds in these speakers would produce noises, often high-pitched, shrill little dissonant buzzings and susurrations made with field recordings and little signal-producing hummers, modified with the use of amplification, dimming, overdubbing and distortion: '*a filigree web of voices in the middle of unintelligible whispering, a buzzing and acoustically flimmering maze, the frequency of animated nature*'.⁴⁹

Rolf Julius never really differentiates between seeing and hearing: '*the material itself has meaning. The materials, a piece of iron sheet or a piece of music are for me the same thing.*'⁵⁰

He further discusses 'seeing' music in this excerpt from an interview with Shin Nakagawa:⁵¹

SN. You often use the expression 'looking at music'.

RJ. It is very important to look at music. Especially, looking at the surface of music.

SN. Why do you choose the verb 'to look' and not 'to listen'?

RJ. I look at music. I look at the surface of music. I feel music with my hands. All the senses are included in my art work. [...] If one trained one's senses even a little, the difference between looking and listening to music would not be so big. The senses of listening, looking, touching, feeling and smelling are for me all very close together. [...] Suppose I make music for sand. I put the sand in a small speaker in the corner of the room. Then you hear music with a sandy surface coming out of the corner.

Julius would use sand and other materials like this, often partly covering the small speakers in his works. He would have the physical qualities of the sound interact with the physical qualities of his materials. I've found myself particularly drawn to Julius' use of speakers and powders hidden inside plastic and paper bags, a sculptural idiom that he continued to work with over many decades.

⁴⁹ Christian Schneegass, "We see the tea bowl and do not hear it" in *Rolf Julius: Small music* (Kunstverein Bremenhaven, 1991), 7.

⁵⁰ Rolf Julius, *Ilmaa, air* (Kiasma / Studio N, Museum of Contemporary Art publication 29/1994), 15.

⁵¹ Julius, *Ilmaa, air*, 17.



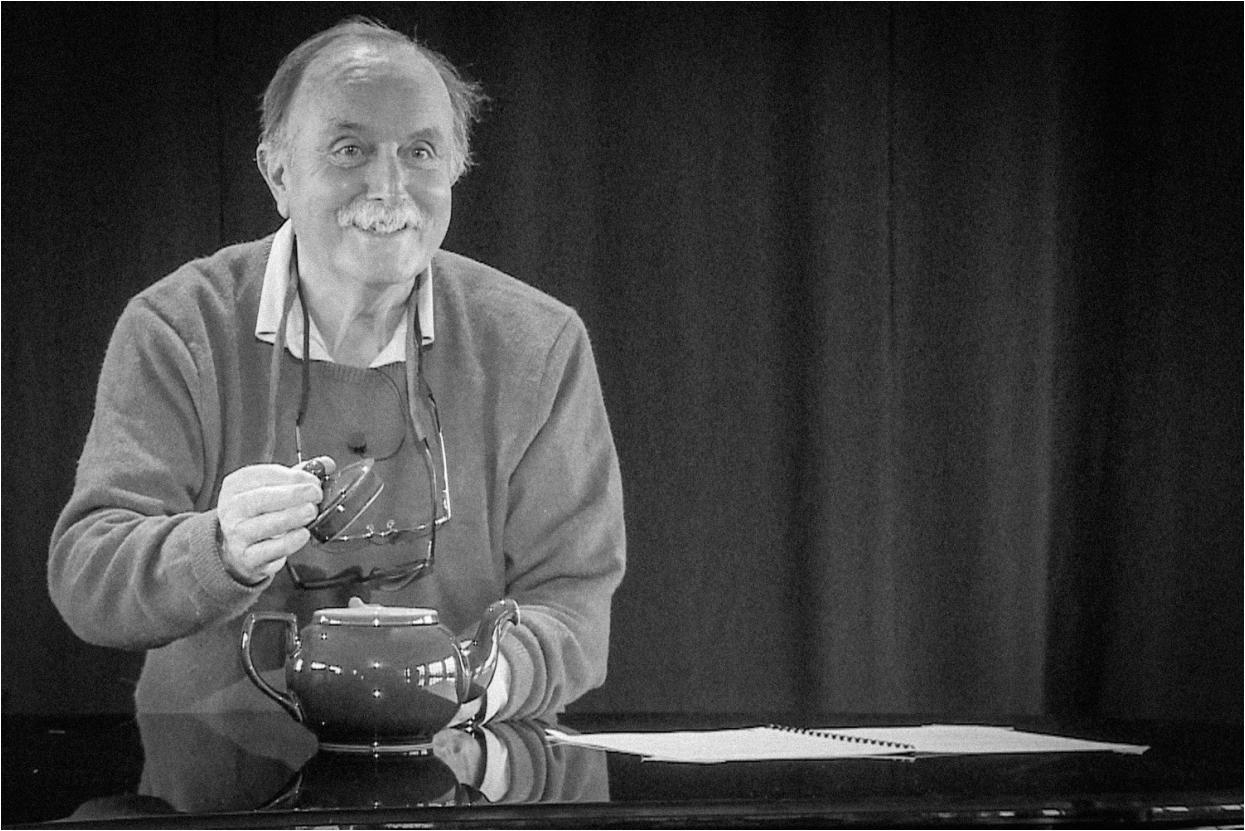
Rolf Julius:

Music for old paint (1983/2017) (above)

Unknown title (1983) (top right)

Grün Gelb (1987/2015) (bottom right)

Rolf Julius' and Alvin Lucier's work seem to find a significant intersecting point at Lucier's *Nothing is Real (Strawberry Fields)* (1990). In this piece, a pianist plays short phrases from The Beatles' *Strawberry Fields Forever* (1967) at varying octaves. As the pianist plays, the music is recorded on a dictaphone, and then, in the second part of the piece, the recording is played back in its entirety into a small loudspeaker hidden inside a teapot. By lifting the lid of the teapot, the player changes the resonant frequencies of the recorded music.



Alvin Lucier in the film *No Ideas But In Things* (2012)

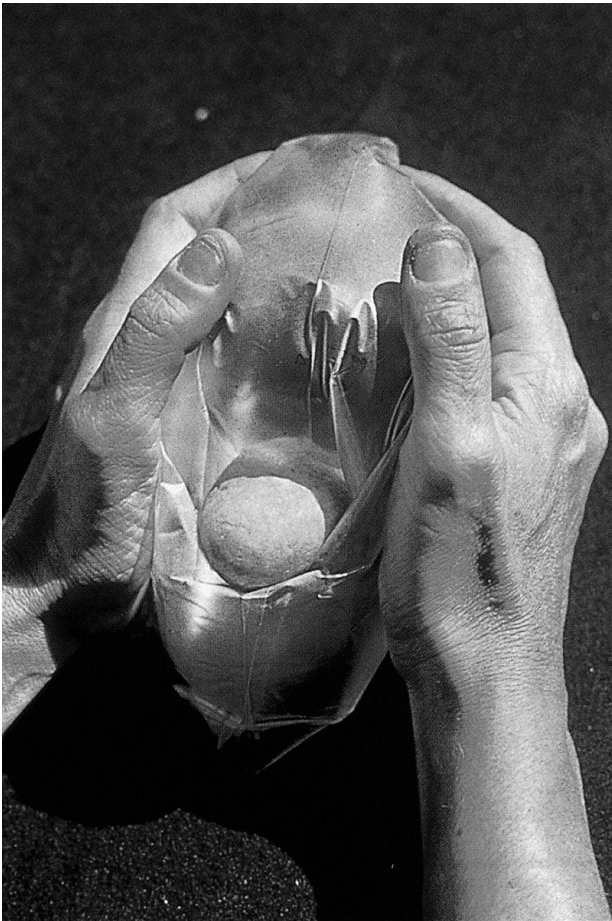
*'This [the teapot] is a small room. This [the lid] is the roof. A small house. When you lift the roof up, the sound changes.'*⁵²

Lucier uses the teapot to demonstrate the spatiality of sound, but it also has a magical, playful quality to it. The speaker hidden inside the teapot is very similar to the speakers hidden in bags in Julius' work. Both use quiet, sibilant sounds. There's a sense of something being so close to the edge of perception that it may not exist at all: an invitation to lean in, to hear something that is almost not there. The feeling is that if you listen very carefully, you might hear that presence change. Julius placed small speakers amongst his other objects and materials as if he was feeling out a materiality for sound itself, looking at the surface of music – is this music a liquid? A powder? A stone?

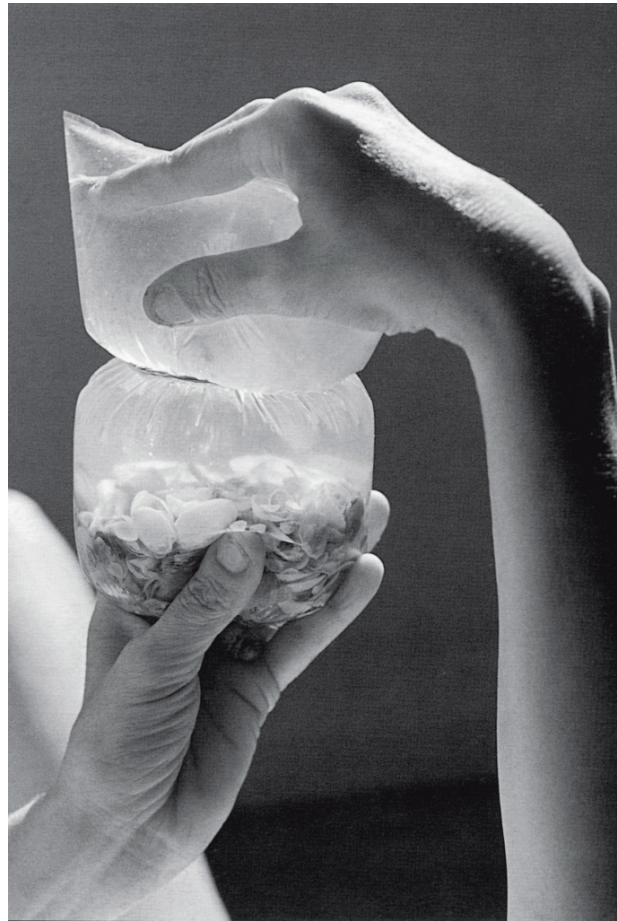
Similar to Julius' bag pieces are the plastic bag works of Brazilian artist Lygia Clark. These works are meant to be interacted with: the person experiencing the artwork has real bodily involvement with the pieces, and the viewer is also the one to 'make' the piece.

⁵² Alvin Lucier speaking about *Nothing Is Real* in the film *No Ideas But In Things*, dir. Viola Rusche & Hauke Harder (WERGO, 2012)

‘Air and Stone’ asks its viewer to inflate and then close a clear plastic bag, and then place a stone on top, while ‘Water and shells’ asks to have a plastic bag filled with water and seashells. The bag is then twisted around at its centre to form two sections, similar to an hourglass.



Lygia Clark, Air and stone (1966)



Lygia Clark, Water and shells (1966)

When I recently saw Clark’s bag pieces in person for the first time⁵³, they were presented without the requirement for interaction. Two separate iterations of *Air and stone* were shown in a vitrine, wrapped in orange netting, with the alternative title *Nostalgia do Corpo (Nostalgia of the Body)*.

They were somehow even stranger like this, without the requirement for interaction. The handling of Clark’s pieces, specifically the very particular manner in which the viewer was instructed to handle them, had given the works an air of performance art. The utility of sculptures in performance adds a durational layer to the work, but also, oddly, and particularly in the context of the stage, a layer of fiction. Marina Abramović famously said ‘*Theatre is fake... The knife is not real, the blood is not real [...] Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real*’⁵⁴. I don’t agree with this entirely, because it oversimplifies both performance art and theatre.

⁵³ *Angel With A Gun: Homage to Guy Brett* at Alison Jacques, London, 10 May – 15 June 2024.

⁵⁴ Marina Abramović interviewed by Sean O’Hagan in *The Guardian*, Oct 3 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/03/interview-marina-abramovic-performance-artist>, accessed September 18 2024.

The difference is not between the art forms, but in the situation; it's about the agreement with the audience. It doesn't matter if it's performance art or theatre – the *stage* fictionalises everything. This is why sculpture loses all its power when placed on stage. It ceases to be real, it becomes scenography or a prop. The stage contains and holds all the things placed on it, and uses objects as vehicles for the advancement of events on the stage in relation to the performer, and perhaps secondarily, in relation to the experience of the audience.

In both Julius' and Clark's bag pieces, it was the containment or concealment that I felt drawn to, the placing of something in between the viewer and the object, creating a distance between the two, much like the separation of the audience and the stage. In a vitrine, you see the work itself, but the material may appear something that it is not – judging with just your eyes, a papery material may appear to be cement or plaster, or an uncertain something in between. With just the eye to rely on, the medium often *mystifies the work*.⁵⁵ Sometimes, the work is too fragile to touch, like the pigments and powders in some of Rolf Julius' pieces, or the colophony rosin panels that I showed in the exhibition.



⁵⁵ Michaël Borremans: "I like sculptures even better when I cannot touch them. As in painting, I like for the medium to mystify the work", *The Acrobat* (David Zwirner Books, 2022), 28.

The opaque, deep amber rosin has a strong connection to music for me, as it's the same material that string players use to add friction to their bows. The three blocks of rosin were cast and wrapped in a tissue paper that my Grandmother had kept pristine in a drawer in her house, possibly for decades. To me, this too was a potential music, an ancient material like the colophony concealed in something which had been handled with the utmost care and attention. My Grandmother was careful like this with everything: she was always very precise, very oriented towards detail, possibly because of her having grown up poor in the interwar period, and then having lived through the decades of rationing that followed. Really, I think she was an artist at heart. I hope to be as measured with my materials and methods as she was with everything in life, and maybe that's my aspiration too, to be thankful and attentive to everything in life.

I will end this chapter with a quote from Rolf Julius that I feel shows his complete trust and belief in his materials. Making art, for Julius, seemed more like an exercise in guidance of the extant qualities of the materials, rather than applying a heavy-handed force of composition upon them:

It disturbs me that we speak about something. About music. About painting. Put yourself in the place of a sound or, let's say, a color which a painter paints on a picture. Yellow green white: they are mixed to make a glaring green and are slapped on the canvas with exuberance. There they stay glued for the rest of their lives. Who asked the colors, the tones, the sounds whether they wanted this at all, whether they like it? We make decisions over their heads. Let us give them back their freedom, let them decide themselves; if you leave the sounds alone the music comes by itself and all the tones, colors, sounds, the loud, crooked, small, beautiful, brilliant, yellow, yellowed, soft and off-key ones all feel good.⁵⁶



Rolf Julius, *Music in a corner* (1983)

⁵⁶ Rolf Julius, *Small music* (Kunstverein Bremenhaven, 1991), 39.

Repetition

By looking into the stone, I have given my body up to repetition. Once you step into the rhythm that sculpture demands, you simultaneously find yourself saying 'no' to some of the requirements of progress and growth, consciously or unconsciously. Sculpture explores surging motion, form, connections and densities. Its energy flows inwards, and like other artistic disciplines, it repels expectations associated with planning or forethought.

[...]

Sculpture [...] is a refusal through action. Despite the fact that repetition contains a kind of ontological stasis, it is still in continuous motion, demanding that you trust in the rhythm.

– Iisa Lepistö ⁵⁷

Repetition [can also be] used to turn a singular gesture into a background for new things to emerge.

– Erno Aaltonen ⁵⁸

Sculptor Iisa Lepistö writes with great insight about the labour of sculpture and its mysterious ways of interacting with the body and the mind of its maker. There's something so absolute about the material of stone, and how it refuses to interact. I find myself thinking about Bruce Nauman's score *Body Pressure*, and its suggestion of pushing through solid surfaces:

Press as much of the front surface of your body (palms in or out, left or right cheek) against the wall as possible.

Press very hard and concentrate.

Form an image of yourself (suppose you had just stepped forward) on the opposite side of the wall pressing back against the wall very hard.

Press very hard and concentrate on the image pressing very hard.

(the image of pressing very hard)

press your front surface and back surface toward each other and begin to ignore or block the thickness of the wall.

(remove the wall) ⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Iisa Lepistö, *Kieli Graniittia Vasten* in *Nuori Voima* 2/2023, 42-43. *Translated from Finnish.*

⁵⁸ Erno Aaltonen, *How Does The Stage Work?* (UrbanApa, 2024), 79.

⁵⁹ Bruce Nauman, *Body Pressure* (excerpt) (1974).

Lepistö looks into the stone and finds the rhythm of working. According to Deleuze⁶⁰, repetition is always a process of change – that which is repeated is never an exact copy of what came before. Repetition contributes to generality, and in every repetition, something distinct occurs. Each iteration is unique, despite carrying with it something from the previous.

A comparison may be made between the repetitive action of sculpting stone and the playing of an instrument, of interpretation. There's difference in how we interpret: vibrato, for example, is something controlled by the string or wind instrument player, yet everyone does it differently. In every controlled thing, there are elements of no control and chance.

In Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting In A Room*, the material repeats, and we are aware of its change through the gradual process of the piece. In Roehr's sound montages, the copying is in and of itself the work. Nothing in the material changes except for the amount of times the exact same recording is repeated, and yet, something *does* change. Attention is redirected or lost, a rhythm emerges, or the simple multiplication of the loop creates an impression of volume or mass.

Repetition could be argued to be one of the most important elements of minimalist music. In Steve Reich's *It's Gonna Rain* (1965), two identical copies of the same short recording of a preacher in San Francisco are played side by side. Throughout the piece, they phase out of time with one another, and then phase back again. Phasing is a particularly interesting technique used in conjunction with repetition, contrasting one repeating material with another.

Steve Reich is often viewed as a pioneer of minimalism, but credit is rarely extended to John Coltrane, who had an undeniable influence on the formation of the style, as composer George E. Lewis attests:

*One gathers the sense that except for [Julius] Eastman, minimalism's progenitors would all be white. However, one of the signal influences on early musical minimalism, and one still largely unacknowledged in many music histories, was John Coltrane. [...] a piece such as the 1960 recording of My Favorite Things is essentially a minimalist improvisation using repetition as a primary element. Coltrane's use of repetition precedes Reich and Glass, and is roughly coterminous with that of Young and Riley, both soprano saxophonists who, like many, were taken with Coltrane's sound on that instrument.*⁶¹

Histories of art and music have a disgraceful tendency to dismiss and sometimes entirely delegitimise artists that don't fit the mold of the white, male artist. The fact that Julius Eastman's music went largely unheard for more than fifteen years after the composer's death is sad proof of this. Eastman didn't play nice with the establishment, which famously angered John Cage, who, despite also being gay, did not accept the younger composer's revolutionary queer outlook. Similarly, Benjamin Patterson is rarely seen mentioned in relation to the Fluxus movement, despite being one of its most prolific and influential representatives. As long as whiteness is considered the norm, the centre to which other identities are marginal, white artists will continue to languish in the

⁶⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (Columbia University Press, 1994).

⁶¹ George E. Lewis in his foreword to *Gay Guerrilla, Julius Eastman and His Music*, ed. Renée Levine Packer and Mary Jane Leach (University of Rochester Press, 2015), xiv-xv.

largely unrecognised privilege of not needing to define their work in relation to their identity. In his essay *Does Abstraction Belong to White People?*, choreographer Miguel Gutierrez describes his reaction to reading vague, non-committal descriptions of works at a William Eggleston exhibition:

*Who has the right not to explain themselves? The people who don't have to. The ones whose subjectivities have been naturalized. It enrages me. No, it confuses me. I'm all for being confused, for searching, for having to do a bit of work. But the absence of explanation is somehow... somehow... somehow what?*⁶²

Repetition contributes to generality. Instead of repeating the same mistakes over and over again, more attention should be (and in recent years, happily, has been) turned towards the de-centering of white, cis-gender experience. The process of change is slow, perhaps particularly so in the field of classical music, but progress is being made towards a more equitable, just future for all.

Another kind of repetition is the repetition of rehearsal, of learning. The manner in which we learn to do something is entirely dependent on the circumstances in which it happens. I can get lost in sculpture, but my aims for the work are always far more grounded in reason than what I do when I work with sounds or music. I think this is because I've learned much of the skills I apply to sculpture later in life, in an academic setting. Music, sounds, the things I grew up with and which I didn't always have language for, are far more rooted in intuition and emotion.

Making sculpture and music feel very different to me in practice, in their weight, in my access to spontaneity, in the work of planning... The things you learn at a younger age feel more intuitive, closer to the bone, in more direct communion with the emotional self, and at the same time, less grounded in words, meanings, and rationalisation.

⁶² Miguel Gutierrez, *Does Abstraction Belong to White People?* (Bomb Magazine, November 7 2018), <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2018/11/07/miguel-gutierrez-1/> - accessed 30 September 2024.

Extra-terrestrial cubist flamenco

In the liner notes to Finnish musique concrète composer Patrick Kosk's album *Mondweiß*, I am drawn to how the writer describes Kosk's "cubist" compositions: '*a form in which the structural characteristics of a space fall short of their duty [...] creating an image that does not aspire to be whole, only hinting at possibilities*'.⁶³

I wonder if a similar logic is applied in the description of an improvised piece performed by Derek Bailey, Keith Tippett and Philipp Wachsmann in the press release of one of several re-issues of Bailey's live concert series entitled *Company*. The trio is here described as playing "*extra-terrestrial cubist flamenco*"⁶⁴. How wonderful is that?

I often find descriptions of music far more exciting than music.

Perhaps what I want is to make sculpture that is a kind of music more exciting than music itself.

⁶³ Björn Gottstein in the liner notes to Patrick Kosk, *Mondweiß* (Edition RZ, 2008), 8.

⁶⁴ *Company*, *Epiphanies I-VI* (Honest Jon's Records, 2020), *press release text*

Provisional music as a material in sculpture

I like to write all the time so sometimes if I'm in the bar and I might write a little phrase for a string quartet, or I might write a little phrase for a flute... Since I don't write with the piano anymore, I see that the music I write is very thin. The piano is almost like a calculator. So if I don't have a calculator, the tendency is to make the music a little simpler. It doesn't have a lot of notes. It's kind of transparent and very clear.

– Julius Eastman ⁶⁵

The nature of process is the material of my work, in the sense that I don't really make objects, but rather work in a syntax of relations and transfers. I think about sculpture as something that is grounded in material and objects, but is, at the same time, external to them. [...] If the sculptural object acts as a carrier of movement or vibration conducted through it, then it doesn't really have a singular fixed materiality of its own, as it relies on a flexible relation to an immaterial circularity that is equally sculptural. [...] Sculpture is sensitive to a condition, or perhaps sculpture is a condition? Something that can be conditioned, that can, in turn, condition things.

– Nina Canell ⁶⁶

Exploring the ways in which music could be used as a material in sculpture, I was especially drawn to Raphael Rubinstein's essay *Provisional painting*, which explored a trend in painting at the time that the essay was written in 2009, in which artists would produce work that appeared 'uncertain, incomplete, casual, self-cancelling, or unfinished'⁶⁷. Rubinstein writes:

Provisional painting is not about making last paintings, nor is it about the deconstruction of painting. It's the finished product disguised as a preliminary stage, or a body double standing in for a star / masterpiece whose value would put a stop to artistic risk. To put it another way: provisional painting is major painting masquerading as minor painting [...] the provisionality of [the] work is an index of the impossibility of painting and the equally persistent impossibility of not painting.⁶⁸

Rubinstein's essay made me wonder about the possibility of 'provisional music'. A music that is almost peripheral, or which might serve a function within the sculpture object: like a scaffold, a support structure, a dissolving suture.

What would it mean for a music to be so spare, so small, that its function begins to move more into a realm of material use, rather than that of something to be heard?

⁶⁵ Julius Eastman interviewed by David Garland, *audio recording*, 1984

⁶⁶ Nina Canell interviewed in *Muscle Memory*: Nina Canell & Robin Watkins (Walther König, 2019), 39.

⁶⁷ Raphael Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting" in *The Turn to Provisionality in Contemporary Art* (Bloomsbury, 2023), 27.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

The artists of the Wandelweiser group, a loose collective centered mainly around contemporary music (but which also includes poets and visual artists), have worked with a lot of the questions that I pose here. Much Wandelweiser music is tentative, slight, often using extended silences as part of the compositional material. But even here, there's little chance of getting away from a sense of coherence or completeness when it comes to sounds and music. It makes me wonder if the problem is the frame, and if so, what do 'provisional' painters and artists like Richard Tuttle or Mary Heilmann do, that so effectively undermines the frame's significance?

On the other hand, when it comes to music, perhaps it's a question of scale. To really achieve the qualities of a Kimber Smith painting in sound or music, perhaps the aim should be for a brevity that would reflect the tentative nature of the painting. Maybe it's that the material of music itself is merely the delivery system, like Fred Moten said.⁶⁹

I try to approach these thoughts through a body-imagination of hearing. The provisional music that I aim for extends (or contracts) its utility from a listening experience to a support beam, an interstice, or an extension of the object of sculpture.

And what I really want from my work isn't so unusual – the reliable weight and presence of objects, recognisable musical gestures. All of this can reside within a wide plain of perhaps less obvious things happening: things that take time and concentration and aren't immediately rewarding.

A field of audio like a woven texture with events inside; small compositional elements that are as brief as a breath, a brushstroke, a near-physical shape in the imagination...

*A mental construct just off register from physical presence.*⁷⁰

Composition as complex or as simple as any sculpture, and where the manners of being of objects and sounds overlap: waymarkers, miniatures, signs, warnings, invitations, gifts.

Provisional music as a material in sculpture,
and sculptures with durational aesthetics.

⁶⁹ "Matter is only ever art's delivery system" Fred Moten, *Black and Blur: Consent Not To Be A Single Being* (Duke University Press, 2017), 142.

⁷⁰ Carroll Dunham, *Into Words, The Selected Writings of Carroll Dunham* (Badlands, 2017), 73.

Jardin's secret

In an art history class, the lecturer tells us she has a very rare recording of an early electronic piece by composer Kaija Saariaho (1952-2023). She agrees to play it to us on the condition that we do not record it on our phones or tell anyone that we've heard it.

"Saariaho gave this to me personally," she says. "It was made some time in the 80s at an electronic music studio in North America".

The lecturer presses play. A reedy soprano (either a recorded human voice or a synthesizer) warbles in the speakers, a short, simple melodic line of perhaps four slurred notes intersected by another instrument, a lower bass note that moves underneath as the melody repeats, unchanging.

We listen for about ten minutes, the music remaining much the same throughout. Eventually, the lecturer cuts the recording off abruptly: "It doesn't really have an ending", she states, bluntly. The spell is broken.

My memory of the piece may not accurately reflect the way it actually sounded, but this is how I remember the situation. There was an air of solemnity to the listening, I think mostly because of how the lecturer had asked us to keep the listening itself secret. Coming together around the object of the music became an event in which we observed the presence of this precarious, fragile thing that had entered the space, requiring our collective attention and stewardship (however temporary) to survive. The music itself was sort of unremarkable, something almost-there and in process, not quite complete. In the end, those aspects of it were the ones that made the greatest impact on me (and upon which I would base much of my sculptural-musical thought from thereon in)... An impressionistic quality, all the precision and clarity that so much contemporary composition seems to strive for replaced with mushiness, something un-thought-through, like a smear of colour. An abstract expressionist music, a non-specific music, a "why do we need to make music sound so exact when we already have recording devices" kind of music, a music in opposition of auditory realism, a music that should by now have caught up to the age of mechanical reproduction in its aesthetics. I long for this messiness, the feeling that it could be a music like a sculpture - that it could sound like this from this angle, but when you move and look at it side-on, it changes.

The memory of the recording - and perhaps more significantly the way in which we heard it - has stayed with me for more than ten years. That static, looping quality is another thing that I've come to associate with what I think of as a kind of sculptural music: an object whose outline is shaped in repetition and the melodic movement, whose texture is defined by timbre, while still maintaining a sense of motion, an active invocation of the shape, size, volume and surface of the object, that kind of changing of perspective.

A (musical) idea is something that may be expressed in a single exhalation of breath.

In many ways, I think the lecturer shared something that was special beyond Saariaho's music, and I would argue that the setting, the presentation of anything can be almost as significant as the object of art itself. This, to me, is another reason why the context of showing work in a gallery or a museum isn't always enough. Art doesn't need that environment to come into itself. The composer gave the lecturer this music, and then the lecturer gave it to us, a group of six students in a classroom. Sometimes it's important that art should be a gift, and perhaps more so than in any other aspect of a work, it is a gift in the work's presentation.

Conclusion

You learn how little you know. It becomes much more difficult because the hardest thing in the world is simplicity. And the most fearful thing, too.

– James Baldwin⁷¹

Having worked my way through the various (often very vague) thoughts and ideas that I had during the making of my works for Kuvan Kevät, I can make at least a tentative division of the roles of sound and music in my sculpture practice as follows:

1) Music, or sound, may be used as a material in sculpture. It may manifest as something audible; or it could be something notated, written, or otherwise described – silent, but present as markings or a visual representation. These musics can be hidden within or written on the object of sculpture, or they may be present in the description of the work. The info card of a sculpture can describe a work made of coal, soap, a sustained tone at pitch, and two bars of flute music on paper, for example.

2) Music, or sound, may be a sculpture in itself: the way it sounds may suggest a shape in a repeating figure, or in any other aspect of the musical qualities of a piece. A score may include sculpture materials in addition to written music. A score may be written for sculpture materials alone.

3) The material of music or sound may be applied for its utilitarian value over its musical value in a sculpture using ‘provisional music’. Its simplicity and aim for functionality (a scaffold or a glue) needn’t mean that the musical material be unappealing, simply that it might be comparable to the effort of a single exhalation of breath.

4) A sculpture, too, can be like an exhalation, or it can be a sounding or silent situation with a system inside of it. Sculptures may be frames that more time-based events and materials pass through, including music, light, and poetry.

Through this process of writing, I’ve become aware that I still have much to explore when it comes to these topics, and many questions remain unanswered. Reaching a point in which the shared expanded fields of sculpture and music might converge, in a manner that somehow inherently contains its own ‘reading instruction’ (requiring little to no explanation), may be the hardest part.

Then again, I know that the simplicity I’m seeking is already there; it’s present in the interaction between the sculptures, time, and the people that experience them.

⁷¹ James Baldwin interviewed by Jordan Elgrably, *The Paris Review* Issue 91, Spring 1984.

Durational aesthetics seem to lean into relational aesthetics. Asking someone to imagine or listen with you is a fundamentally social act. I think this is also what Jō Kondō means when he talks about the *Homo Audiens* (the listening human), or what Rolf Julius meant when he called for allowing sounds, colours and materials an autonomy of their own. Instead of making things, we can help guide things that are already there. In addition, we can collect materials, images, ideas, tools, frames of reference, little chains of melody... Anything, really; there's a place for everything, and there is a time for everything, too. Ursula LeGuin proposed that the history of the world, instead of being viewed as a linear continuity of heroic conquest and the overcoming of obstacles, could instead be seen as a history of gathering, made possible by the invention of the pouch, the container – and how those that came before us sustained life through these acts of salvaging, organisation, and sharing. So I end, finally, with a quote from *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*:

*If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it's useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people, and then later on you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter in a solid container or put it in the medicine bundle or the shrine or the museum, the holy place, the area that contains what is sacred, and then next day you probably do much the same again - if to do that is human, if that's what it takes, then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly, for the first time.*⁷²

In loving memory of Joan Ethel Mavis Boswell (5.12.1923 – 24.9.2022).

⁷² Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, (Ignota, 2019), 32-33.

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