

**A reading of the *'Sound Art or Klangkunst? A reading of the German and English literature on sound art'* by Andreas Enström and Asa Stjerna, by Mehmet Ali Simayli**

This essay is based on the text 'Sound Art or Klangkunst? A reading of the German and English literature on sound art' by Andreas Enström and Asa Stjerna, aiming to explore my field of work regarding the relationship between the discussed discourses on sound art and Klangkunst. It intends to delve into the differences in meaning among various languages on a specific discourse and to investigate their effect on me and my perception of the mentioned domains.

In the essay, borders and character traits that define the two forms of sound-related fields of art are discussed from contextual, cultural, and tendentious aspects. Klangkunst and Sound Art are two labels for different tendencies in sound-related art that have developed in different countries and art scenes and have the same meaning in two different languages, English and German. They have evolved through separate paths throughout the years and have been molded in certain arts and scholarly environments. As a reason for this separation, it can be seen that some artists who work in specific fields of sound, found the term "sound art" ambiguous, and created a trend towards drawing certain characteristics for a realm that they were working in. Max Neuhaus' strong criticism of the term, in the introduction text to his exhibition 'Volume: Bed of Sound' in the year of 2000, is a clear statement, explaining why sticking to the term "sound art" is not clear and explanatory for different forms of art.

"I think we need to question whether or not 'Sound Art' constitutes a new art form. [...] It's as if perfectly capable curators in the visual arts suddenly lose their equilibrium at the mention of the word sound. These same people who would all ridicule a new art form called, say, "Steel Art" which was composed of steel sculpture combined with steel guitar music along with anything else with steel in it, somehow have no trouble at all swallowing 'Sound Art.' [...] In art, the medium is not often the message. [...] Much of what has been called 'Sound Art' has not much to do with either sound or art." <sup>1</sup>

Also in the mentioned essay by Enström and Stjerna, the term Sound Art, with its use in the English literature mainly from the United Kingdom and United States, is considered as a wider and vaguer label for sound-focused art.

This aspect reveals itself clearly when the history of sound-related art is approached from the perspective of the term "sound art." In such a way of conceiving the history of "sound art," putting a milestone would be harder than sorting remarks that gave shape to the flow of the development, trends, and tendencies of "sound art." On the other hand, Klangkunst's establishment is historically and conceptually clear. From the need of a label for an art form that involves crafting the spaces acoustically and sculpturally, and including other characteristics, Klangkunst's foundation is a statement towards the art scenes and a manifestation of a form that is built on seeing and hearing.

The historical freshness of the channelization within the fields of sound and space-related art gives many opportunities to new fields and forms to breed, as well as artists to manifest, radicalize, and underline new tendencies to make them spread. The openness, as a result of this atmosphere, is one of the most attractive aspects and motivation for me to work in the field of sound-related art, which consists of many aspects. By acknowledging Neuhaus' critique, and the emergences such as creating fresh breeds with clear indications such as

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<sup>1</sup> First published as an introduction to the exhibition "Volume: Bed of Sound", P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, July 2000.

Motte Haber's introduction to Sonambiente Festival in 1996 which led the way to the anthology of Klangkunst in 1999, which established Klangkunst as a genre (Gattung), I believe in the possibility of a variety of movements to pave the way for feeding each other. This polyphony would bring new discourses among the sound community and create a micro-model of a society where the infinite aspects of discussion take an elevated status than languages and academia in general, urging the community to come up with different solutions.

Locating the field of work as an artist demands a certain awareness which can be interpreted from one's perspective about their surroundings, themselves, and the conception of the time involving past, present, and a personal overview of a possible future. Each direction in time can be interpreted and already has been interpreted from personal point of views, with variety of intentions, mainly with political or religious motivations. Regarding self-perception, having an opinion and the right to choose over things, turns into a creative and artistic approach toward societal games and agreements. This process travels among the statement that says that every action carries a political statement within itself. From an artistic approach, the potential of time in the realm of design and fiction can inevitably be interpreted in the domain of space due to its dimensional sensitivity. Further extending this connection to sound and other sensory inputs; one can focus on numerous fields, that the material is intersectionally existing within its' location and functionality, by carrying the world inside the artist's thoughts from a psychological perspective. Contemplating the material and source, both physically and ideologically, is what motivates me about exploring the combinations of sensory traces and perceptual outputs, which, I believe, shapes the aura of an artwork.

Forms, movements, trends, and tendencies in art take different shapes in their development processes. Enström and Stjerna put the following notions as helping figures in the development of the Klangkunst movement: "...musicologists, publishing houses, music journals, and galleries, which together has helped to establish Klangkunst as an important artistic expression" (Engström, Stjerna 11).

The collaboration between artists and institutes, and their co-existence on the same ground have been secularly visible since the Renaissance. The situation and the system today are a form of a similar bonding, which back then we observed in the financial and patronal realm. According to the liberal way of thinking—an individualistic approach to the ideal—the capital leaves artists, and the rest of society, helpless to collaborate with any kind of institutionalized source, for whom possible expectations would correlate with profit.

The discourse about the terms Klangkunst and sound art has several bases. Language is the clearest factor that augments the literary conception of the two terms. As in a conversation between two people, the clearer point which is defined becomes the obvious one. As the lingua franca of the world of colonialism, the quantity of academic and non-academic resources is dominated by the English language. The academia from countries except for the United Kingdom and the United States mainly collaborate with the encouragement of the state as well as other institutionalized communication organs to make publications in their languages, or they work in the domain of English academia to strengthen their integration within the academic world and to be present in the global community. In the example of the movement of Klangkunst, it is seen that the term is mainly used in Germany and among German-speaking institutes and organs. In such a situation and development, where the language evolves into the definition of an art movement to such an extent, people who are not able to communicate with a certain code are automatically excluded, even though Klangkunst or any similar examples do not have an exclusive nature. The stylistic language and narration within the artistic production

have a clear contextual bonding and communication with the time and place where it is produced. Furthermore, it carries a cultural input within, as a result of the mentioned aspects of time and space, as well as the artists' self which is fed by the culture, that is transmitted through language. Even though artistic production has the potential of transcending cultural dogmas and boundaries, it may be observed that there exists a connection between stylistic language and verbal language throughout history.

In this sense, I find international communication between different approaches, views, movements, and tendencies, both scholarly and non-scholarly, as an important aspect in order to separate artistic production from any kind of national sovereignty or dominance. Sound, as a being, and then a material, carries the multi-dimensional aspect of being involved in a variety of subjects of thought. Thus, sound-related art has the potential to combine, cooperate, and contemplate multiple subjects of study simultaneously. At this point, the methodology requires a certain way of thinking and skill set from the artist to think analytically, creatively, and critically about the medium, subject, or message of the artistic production. The term sound art and its' usage in English literature, does not clearly define or describe a specific model or a concept of art. However, it gives enough space for nested combinations around sound art to occur. For the twentieth century, the term sound art accompanied a lot of different fields of sound-related art, however, it could not distinguish itself as a form of art on its' own. In the twenty-first century, with new movements, approaches, and thoughts — especially since the last decade of the century — sound-related art had new breeds from different backgrounds which would define new shapes and borders among the field of sound such as Klangkunst, and other movements and collectivization attempts in the realms of politics, architecture, psychology and many more. I locate myself in a wandering position in my creative process; to find the methodology of expression within different mediums and occasions, keeping sound as the main material to work with a variety of further domains of study, I keep exploring new potentials.

Distance, as one of the most important parameters in the perception of sound, is also a representation of the cognitive distance between the source and the receiver. This phenomenon in psychological distance and perception of sound is visible in political and economic domains, as well as the arts and the accessibility of arts. The overcoming of cultural separations via collective perceptions and artistic discourses would involve extra-lingual topics as discussed in the text by Andreas Enström and Asa Stjerna. To extend the scope of the last argument of the text, which discusses how the discourse on Sound Art and Klangkunst does not involve any other languages, I found out the distance within my mother tongue, Turkish, and the discussed discourse. A simple search in Google Scholar through the open-source database of the Turkish Council of Higher Education reveals to me that only three works of Master's theses on space and sound relationship, where definitions of sound art are used, have been published. Additionally, there are no books or publications existing about the subject in the Turkish language. The factors that obtain the visible cultural cliff between the cultures and societies which are similar factors causing the anglicization which is mentioned in the last paragraph of Enström and Stjerna's essay, is not only indisputable in the academic field but represents an axiom that has been the case throughout the entire history of modern society.

“But the stronger English gets, the more isolated German, as well as other languages in the rest of the world’, becomes. The authors of this text do not have German or English as mother tongue. We are Swedes and consequently belong to ‘the rest of the world’. With very few exceptions, in the area of sound art in Sweden, the references are English and the awareness of the German discourse is almost zero. The anglicization of the

academic world is an undisputable fact. It helps to bring research areas closer to one another, but there is also an obvious countermovement, which tends to separate discourses and thereby makes the world a little poorer” (17, 18).

However, the meanings and terms being used for certain concepts in different languages may also shape one’s perception towards a subject from an ‘a priori’ standpoint. The science of etymology enlightens the modern meanings of words, concepts, and their development by tracking the codes of the language that reveals a general overview of how meanings evolved in certain groups, societies, and nations. The most apparent example of the differences in meaning and their effect on me, in my mother tongue, Turkish, is the word “ses”, which has multiple meanings, blurring the specifications in its essential definitions; sound, voice, and audio. This phenomenon of differences in meaning within a single word leads to misconceptions such as the term “sound art” to mean both “voice art” and “sound art” in Turkish.

From a deconstructivist perspective, narration does not hold a fixed meaning. Cognition and mental processes add another level of complexity to cultural and societal media and to the application of meaning. That’s why, the personal effect of meaning differences, as demonstrated in the example of the word “ses”, yields a blank space for a thoughtful interpretation of meaning, where the concepts of fixedness in meaning trigger a skeptical contradiction in my own perception; this could perhaps be an example of what Derrida calls the “disparate resounds” (Derrida 10).

This conclusion considers subjects such as the potential of openness in the term sound art, possibilities in new movements focusing on interdisciplinary studies with their mutual material consisting of sound, economics of accessibility in arts, audibility of different languages in academic sound studies, interpretation of meanings with the example of the word “sound” in different languages and how their interpretation supplies a creative process within itself. As subjects of further research, I am drawn to these questions and intend to pursue them while locating my field of work in a non-binary space, considering mainly the medium and method.

## Works Cited

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