

Transparent Sonic Sculptures in Site-Specific Intermedia Music

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1. INTRODUCTION

Special cultural sensitivity for sounds and sonic milieu or sonic *genius loci* of certain places can relate to contemporary unconventional music and audial arts. The tradition of musical appropriation of sounds and sonic environment already rooted in Luigi Russolo's futurism (the art of noise), and some very important impulses of paradigmatically different artistic exploitation of the sonic universe in our music, can be found in the thinking of Marcel Duchamp, and later John Cage as well. I have been working with experimental, alternative music for almost three decades and the more I have worked with the use and transformation of various sounds in "site-specific" musical pieces – I am focused on de-/re-/cross-contextualizing field recordings in contemporary music and specific sonic sculptures (if we can conceive of the large universe of audial arts as a kind of music) – the more I realized that the thoughts of these two great conceptual artists played a crucial role in my intermedia site-specific music. Let us focus our attentions on at least two points.

2. SCULPTURE MUSICALE AND 4'33"

Around 1913, Marcel Duchamp wrote on a small piece of paper just this sentence: *Sculpture musicale: Sons durant et partant de différents points et formant une sculpture sonore qui dure* [Musical Sculpture: Sounds lasting and leaving from different places and forming a sounding sculpture that lasts]. Nothing more, nothing less. But it has big impact on thinking about the nature and the phenomenality of sonic and audial arts as we can see even in the present time.¹ John Cage pointed out that Duchamp may have been the first person in history who had thought about music exclusively as this artistic gesture in spatial co-ordinates (talking expressly about sonic sculpture), and not in temporal measures.

Almost forty years later, in 1952, was premiered one of the most controversial works of art, the famous John Cage's 4'33", a temporal interval of silence, which

¹ Let us mention at the least the impact of Duchamp sonic conceptual works on the activities of contemporary artists in the context of s. c. field recordings. For example, in 2018 the Central European Network for Sonic Ecologies (CENSE) was founded in Budapest as a platform related to „sound art, ecomusicology, and sound per se, while keeping a central focus on deep environmental and social changes.“ Many artists of this community relate their thoughts and performances to Duchamp and Cage as well. See more: <https://cense.earth/>.

is interpreted and explicated in such various, disparate ways – e.g. including Buddha’s silent koan with white lily. But his friend, composer and conductor Steve Lucky Mosko, said to me (when I met him in Los Angeles, 2005), that it would relate to the essay *Other People Think* written by Cage when he was fifteen (1927).² Alongside other things, he wrote then in it that if people all around the world would stop in the same moment all of their activities just for one minute and would listen to the sounds, the world might change...! (I know the CD record of Cage reading his essay when he was almost 80 years old – it was fascinating...). As we know, absolute silence does not exist for the human being. Even in anechoic room of sonic vacuum we can hear sounds of our body – caused by our blood circulation and nerve system – as John Cage experienced there; after that he decided to have no intention while creating music, because the sonic semiosphere acts unintentionally, too.

In this context of 4 minutes and 33 seconds of “silence” full of micro-sonic events it is very interesting that Cage considered the listening in fact to be an act of composing... Slovakian musicologist Daniela Šterbáková deals with and analyses many problems of Cage’s aesthetics in the context of the philosophy of absence in her book *Ticho. John Cage, filozofia absencií a skúsenosť ticha* [Silence. John Cage, the Philosophy of Absences, and the Experience of Silence], Karolinum, Praha 2019. Paraphrasing her ideas, she claims that if we are trying to hear the silence, we are in paradoxical situation: “the more we prick up our ears the more intensively we have a feeling that we are surrounded by the sea of noise. It may seem that absolute silence is inaccessible for us.”³ Šterbáková analyses the problem of perceptible silence in dialogue with various authors: according to her John Cage has opened the question of silence in his music and texts, Roy Sorensen and Ian Phillips elaborated it in the frame of analytical philosophy. “Via the silence there are appearing the borders and mutual relations between ‘common sense’ thinking

and the philosophical one. Besides, we deal with uneasy questioning of the ontology of absences and the abilities of sense apperception. [...] Is it possible to perceive silence not only by ear?”⁴

Duchamp’s *Sculpture Musicale* and Cage’s 4’33” are quite distinct. In the first case we are confronted with only just one sentence written on a piece of paper, in the case of 4’33” it is an interval of (relative) silence, and it is precisely temporally delineated. The performative character of the piece, the live interpretation of the piece by the musician(s), is very important: it consists of three parts in duration 33”, 2’40” and 1’20” evenly divided by tacets. But for me, both could open paradigmatically totally different approaches of deep listening to the sounds in concrete unique environments...

A long time ago I did not know why I wanted to juxtapose these two diverse pieces on different occasions. I felt in some way that if we perform them and let them sound – despite the disparity of those significant artistic gestures (embodied in “four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silent sounds” and in “musical, or sonic sculpture which lasts”) – we can feel a close affinity of both in the experiences resulting from the perception of unpredictably sounding sounds. Certain centripetency between 4’33” and *Sculpture Musicale* occurred to me and transposed the way the perception of my sonic universe is structured. All the above became a kind of starting points of creation of acoustic, “comprovised” music⁵ in the context of saving/

⁴ Ibidem, last page of the cover.

⁵ The term “comprovisation”, which appeared in Slovakian musical contemporary culture around 2011, was accepted after quite interesting polemics. I think that an appropriate, meaningful application of this term is possible in the space of *consciously* mixed, balanced combinations of pre-composed and free improvised approaches in the field of unconventional music and its possible intermedia interferences. It is a matter of open discussion if this notion could also be used – while being aware of its limitations and risks – even outside the context of experimental music (e.g. since the beginnings of modern jazz), or even in other art media with temporarily performative textuality – conceptual art performance, happening, theatre, fine arts, etc.

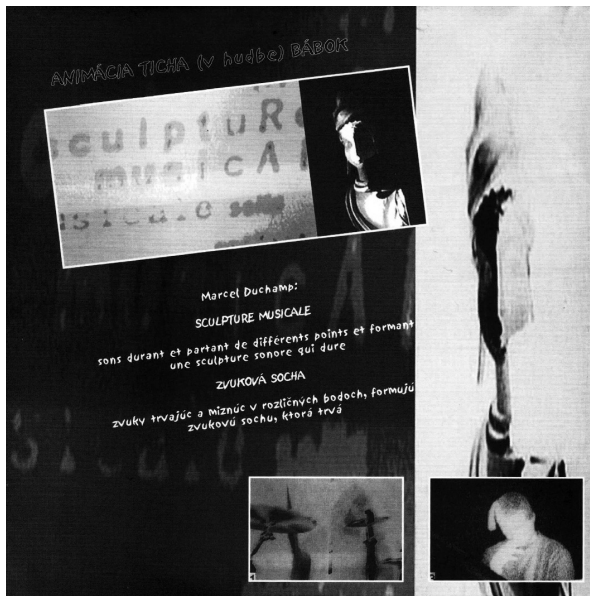
We can find a lot of examples of this approach in musical works of art already in the late 20th century, e.g. *Voyager* (1993) of the composer and trombonist George Lewis, in the piece *What is the difference between stripping and playing the violin?* (1997) of the laser koto player and intermedia, body-artist Miya Masaoka, in *The Perks* (1996) or *The Fence* (1998) of the composer and violinist Jon Rose, in *Verbatim* (1996) by the electronic music composer Bob Ostertag and his ensemble Say No More, or in *Revolutionary Pekinese Opera* (1995) created by the group Ground Zero of a bizarre composer and musician Otomo Yoshihide.

² It is one of the earliest of John Cage’s writings and it was presented in 1927 at the Hollywood Bowl, where he represented Los Angeles High School and even won the Southern California Oratorical Contest. See more: <https://www.lespressesdureel.com/EN/ouvrage.php?id=6491>.

³ D. Šterbáková, *Ticho. John Cage, filozofia absencií a skúsenosť ticha*, Praha 2019, last page of the cover. Quotation translated from the Slovakian original version by the author.

transforming unique soundscapes in Slovakia. Acting sounds of specific environments (with semantic social consequences) as a kind of unique complex music *sui generis* are involved in my artistic projects. I appropriated this approach – using the principles and inspirations from the already mentioned Duchamp and Cage impulses in explicit or implicit way – in various intermedia-musical pieces. Here are some examples of them in the time range of the last twenty years.

3. SONIC SCULPTURES IN MUSICAL PROJECTS



Fot. 1. Page in the booklet of CD album tEóRia OtraSu: *Bábkový režim zvuku* [Puppet Regime of Sound], Animartis 2002 (private archive of Július Fújak).

Animation of Silence (in Music) of Puppets (2000)

The title of this concert study of music-intermedia usage of puppets and black puppet theatre in interpretation of the ensemble tEóRia OtraSu [thEoRy Of

Let us also mention some compromised initiatives in Slovakia: Marian Varga's solo piano concerts in 1990s, experimental pieces of composers Peter Machajdik, Martin Burlas and his cooperation with Ján Boleslav Kladiivo and Daniel Matej. See more: J. Fújak: *Why Comprovisation? Notes to Discussion on the Validity of a Notion*, [in:] *Various Comprovisations. Texts on Music (and) Semiotics*, Helsinki 2015, pp. 70–78.

Shake] (premiered at the festival Sound Off 2000 – Pupanimart in Old Puppet Theatre, Nitra) was linked primarily to the “Ticho” [The Silence] journal produced by artists from the artistic scene Skleňená louka [Glass Meadow] in Brno, especially by Moravian experimental composer and director Zdenek Plachý, the (co-)author of extraordinary intermedia pieces *Ťěžké doby bez taktu* [Hard Times Without Bars] (1997), *Stmívání v lomu* [Dimming in the Quarry] (1996).

After four minutes and thirty-three seconds of rather loud parallel noise of videoclips from MTV and various pop songs from CDs, I introduced the piece *4'33"* by John Cage. However, it was interpreted just by wooden puppets “playing”, performing the piece on musical instruments, sitting alongside them in a silent way... This musical work of silence was followed by *Sculpture Musicale* of Marcel Duchamp using the same wooden, already amplified puppets and Cage's recorded voice, where he reads the mesostics from this conceptual piece⁶ – they were at the same time projected on the silver screen.⁷ It was the very first time I had confronted both pieces of Duchamp and Cage, but in a special tension of puppet ironic context and in the conceptual frame of CD album *Puppet Regime of Sound* published two years later (Animartis 2002).

Nitrian Atlantises (2013)

I dedicated this acousmatic piece with sonic sculptures of concrete very special places to a very interesting part of the preancient local history of Nitra – the town that I have lived in for more than two decades – as well as to certain semantic parallels of this period manifested in the contemporary life of the city. Why such an apocalyptic title: *Nitrian Atlantises*? An

⁶ The record of Cage's voice reading his mesostics was borrowed from the CD album *Marcel Duchamp – Music by Marcel Duchamp* (Edition Block 1991).

⁷ A few years later in a symbolic way I re-opened the then devastated Concert Hall of a Region house in Nitra performing Cage's *4'33"* in a different way. I was standing in the middle of the ruined space, holding in my hands a white lily and paperboard with the inscription *O-TVOR / OPEN 4'33"* (2005). Just a week later, on another occasion I organized a happening together with my students. We let sound both pieces by Duchamp and Cage using sonic qualities of a room in the Nitra Gallery, including its walls, doorposts, space heaters, various artistic objects etc.

Melancholy (2017)

The intermedia site-specific piece was co-created with the fine artist Slavomír Zombek, the poet Peter Milčák, and me. It has changed the site of a desolate cowhouse near the town of Levoča to a site-specific gallery/concert hall of sounding events. Zombek painted every column of the space in four colours (yellow, red, blue, and black) with numbers 0 and 1 in vertical modus as a binary code for different letters signed above them. The combination of them created Milčák's verses of his poem *Mare Tranquillitatis* (the name of s. c. sea on the Moon). On 24 June 2017 at 17:17 at the opening of the exhibition, I performed my improvised collage of three musical-sonic layers, which consisted of: 1. musical record of duo XAFOO we have with the legendary figure of Czech alternative music Mikoláš Chadima (fragments of our very first concert at the festival Genius Loci in Levoča, 2009), 2. my intuitive performance interventions in the given space of the cow-house, using and manipulating the debris as instruments to create a "Duchampian" sonic sculpture and with interaction of the audience during the vernissage, 3. sonic environment of the space and nature around, sounds of insect, bees, singing birds, wind in empty windows and some car being driven in the distance accidentally as well. I was really impressed by Zombek's transformation of the old desolate cow-house to the post-industrial melancholic gallery with Milčák's poetry in binary code on columns, so I finished my performance by the symbolic artistic ritual: with a little toy imitating the "moo" of a cow in one hand, in the other holding a big dried-up bough, I was scratching the walls and roof walking to the gate, where I entered into open territory as a cow-boy leading his imaginary herd.

Sonic Sculpture of Bin (2018)

The musical performance/event realized on 2 September 2018 in the deserted sugar refinery in Rimavská Sobota as site-specific sonic-musical piece was inspired by the already mentioned Duchamp's idea of *Sculpture Musicale*, and it was performed and interpreted by the great musicians Gabriela Vermelho (mezzosoprano, kvinton), Jan Kavan (cello) and me



Fot. 4. Old sugar refinery (detail of the bin), Rimavská Sobota, 2018, photo & © Július Fujak.

(bowed and semi-prepared bassguitar, percussion, concept). The event happened in the huge empty bin of the factory. I put two microphones outside of it to amplify all sounds of the environment, so the public inside could hear them from the speakers in front of them. Then we performed a kind of sonic happening with the debris and stones on the ground and started to play our musical improvisations – while the sonic universe of the bin from outer and inner space sounded still there – and so everything together was "lasting and leaving from different places and forming a sounding sculpture" (M. Duchamp). The experience from almost one-hour durative site-specific music –



Fot. 5. Performance of Petr Nikl *Švábení* [Cockroach Lure], New Synagogue in Žilina, 2019, photo & © Július Fujak.

with the opportunity to change the unbelievable big bin into musical instrument of sonic sculpture – was something extraordinarily special.

They say that later, this wonderful industrial relic of the whole refinery would be demolished due to a stupid plan to build there some big parking place for the shopping centre near this wonderful industrial relic. We know, all things must pass away, but our *Sonic Sculpture of Bin* will remain and last there at least.

Švábění [Cockroach Lure] (2019)

When I received the invitation from the New Synagogue – Kunsthalle in Žilina to create on 14 December 2019 a live improvised piano performance for the artistic project *Švábění* [Cockroach Lure] of the Czech artistic partner Petr Nikl, a very special theatre and fine artist, musician, simply a brisk intermedia bricoleur par excellence, I didn't hesitate for a minute. (T)his site-specific game with light, sound, and shapes – where the synagogue turned into a public art studio – created in real time-space by ink on a large surface of rice paper, laid on the floor, with the random movements of robot toys, was an adventurous challenge for me.

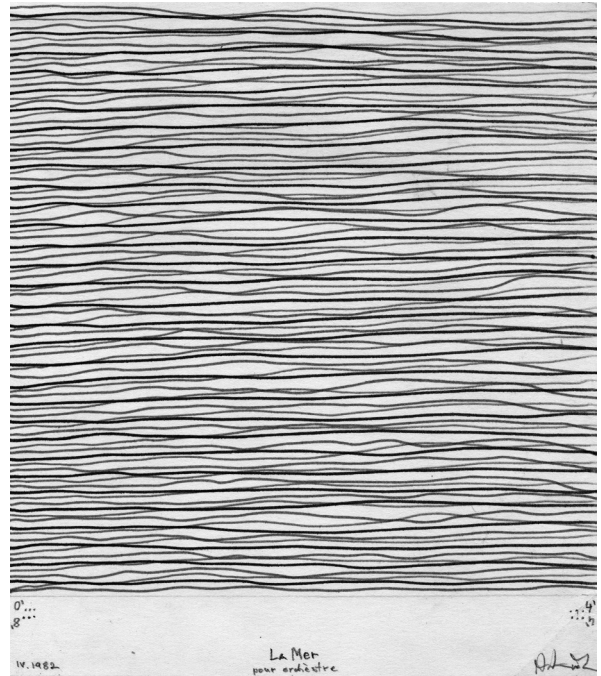
In the opening part of the event – where the child audience in almost complete darkness reacted very vividly to the flashes of light in Nikl's large cone-shaped cap as well as his unexpected movements and actions – I used little mechanical cockroaches in the string corpus of white piano and played various improvisations. I continued to work with the prepared piano in real time by using various material (paper, rubber, small pieces of wood, etc.). Nikl created the whole visual and theatrical part even in cooperation with the kids, my musical sculpture was shaped in inner or explicit dialogue with his interventions. An extraordinary experience that will not be forgotten...⁹

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La mer – hommage à Milan Adamčiak: *La Mer* (2021/2022) ...

Part I. *Mer la*

Part II. *La vie dans(e) la mer*

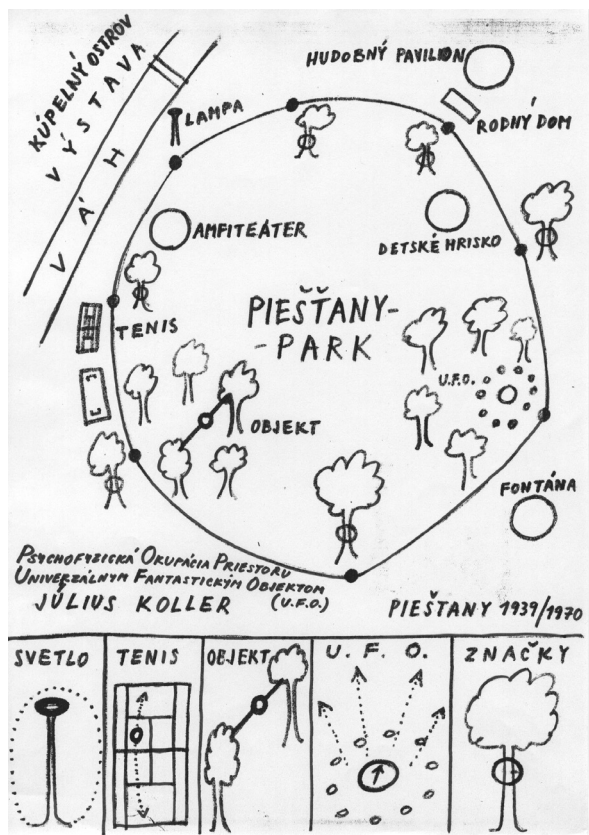


Example 1. Milan Adamčiak, *La Mer pour orchestre*, 1982, courtesy of Erik Adamčiak.

An unforgettable Slovak intermedia artist *sui generis* and a modern-day polymath Milan Adamčiak (1946–2017), my “zen master”, was *inter alia* the author of original graphic scores and notations. By one of them, *La Mer – pour orchestre* (1982), he expressed an implicit hommage à Claude Debussy's eponymous symphonic work of art. His graphic score (see it above) is also originally intended for the symphonic orchestra, but, unfortunately, it has not yet been realized that way. There were just various chamber performances, and some of them were not adequate to Adamčiak's intent. My *La Mer* is loosely inspired by Adamčiak's piece; I tried to appropriate and transform his idea and advance it into a new, different context. The musicians of my two ensembles, Hypianosis+ & guests Mikoláš Chadima (flute), Peter Katina (accordion), and tEóRia Otr-Su [thEoRy Of Shake], either respected my new graphic sketch (Part I., recorded in Empire Theatre, Hlohovec, 2021), or they devoted themselves to the unpredictable improvisational multi-dialogue (Part II., recorded live in A4, Space of contemporary culture, Bratislava).

⁹ The video record of the whole event: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gk-NfoNUdgl>

An important, thematically organic component of both parts is formed (in the stereo panorama) by subtle field and hydrophone recordings of the Adriatic sea (above and below the sea level) near the island Korčula (in Glogovac – Part I., and in Lenga – Part II.) made by a remarkable personality of the contemporary sound art, Manja Ristić (provided from her project *11 Days*, summer 2020). She gave them to me selflessly – thanks to that I could make my dream come true to incorporate the musical and sonic “sea currents and waves”.¹⁰ Adamčiak, who loved the mere sound and recording of a forest stream would, I think, be quite happy about it...



Example 2. Július Koller, *P.O.P. U.F.O. – Psychofyzická Okupácia Priestoru Univerzálnym Fantastickým Objektom* [P.O.P. U.F.O. – Psycho-physical Occupation of Place by Universal Fantastic Object], 1970. Courtesy of The Július Koller Society, Bratislava.

¹⁰ The piece *La Mer* – hommage à Milan Adamčiak: *La Mer* (2021/2022) is part of Július Fújak's album: *Transparent Sculptures* (Hevhetia 2022).

ÚÚ-FFF-ÓÓÓ – hommage à Július Koller: *P.O.P. U.F.O.* (2021)

Underappreciated in life, and today, unfortunately, celebrated only after his passing, the great Slovak conceptual artist Július Koller (1939–2007) sketched in 1970 the map & plan of the s. c. gaming environment called *P.O.P. U.F.O. – Psychofyzická Okupácia Priestoru Univerzálnym Fantastickým Objektom* [P.O.P. U.F.O. – Psycho-physical Occupation of Place by Universal Fantastic Object]. More than fifty years later, the curator Daniel Grúň asked me to create something for the vernissage of Koller's exhibition in his birthplace Piešťany. So, on 16 September 2021 at the local park, we have, together with him and the performer TJ Vjuga, realized a sound walk around a large fictitious UFO as it was cartooned by Július Koller – at the marked points on the map, we have recorded various unique sonic environments, Vjuga's performative sonic interventions, and observed unidentified/universal phonic objects (u.f.o.).

Along with the quintet Hypianosis+, we have also recorded collective improvised etudes coordinated by me in a beautiful small Empire theatre in Hlohovec in the same year, on 26 November – by chance, on the very first day of the third lockdown in Slovakia, which during the corona-crisis has psycho-physically occupied our space in a radically different way.¹¹

4. SONIC PHOTOGRAPHY IN SONIC-MUSICAL SCULPTURE

All these site-specific works of intermedia-music art refer to Duchamp's idea of *Sculpture Musicale* only in the sense of a primary impulse, as they are more the result of dialogical symbiosis of various field recordings, a kind of sonic “photographs”, and composed or improvised music – they are *de facto* invisible, translucent, transparent sculptures passing in their ever-changing eventuality (its specific performative

¹¹ The personnel of ensemble HYPIANOSIS+ in these recording sessions was: Július Fújak – coordination, piano, bassguitar, percussions, Martina Janegová – piano, percussion, Nikolaj Nikitin – saxophone, electronics, Miloš Železnák – electric guitar, electronics, Martin Kukučka – drums; TJ Vjuga, a. g. – voice, sonic interventions in the park, and Daniel Grúň, a. g. – voice, field recordings.

textuality). By the way, maybe the parallel with photography is not accidental here. In his book *La Chambre Claire. Note sur la photographie* [Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography] 1980, Roland Barthes introduces two aspects of photography: the *studium* – connected with the subject, context, culture, and history, and the *punctum* – something that can unexpectedly rivet our attention and is often hidden in the details but is not related to clearly verbalized meaning or beauty.¹² Can the *studium* and, in particular, the *punctum* pertain not only to photographic but also to field sonic recordings of concrete, unique environments and sometimes (seemingly) banal situations in their special inner existential dimension made manifest during the experience of listening to it?

They became an organic part of my musical thinking in the creation of my own musical transparent sonic-musical sculptures, carrying even within them a trace of *kairos*¹³; the trace of something existentially valuable, often hidden in what we tend to miss in our everyday life. No wonder, it is, after all, so very translucent and transparent...

CONCLUSION

As I answered in 2021 to the special questionnaire of CENSE Almanac, the existentially semantic dimension

¹² In these contexts, we can mention the different understanding of temporality in history as Jaroslav Vančát, writes in his text *Fotografie jako časotvorný koncept* [Photography as a Time-creating Concept] ("Atelier" 2006, no. 19, p. 10): from the cyclic mythological model through linear models – the Ancient Greek model of time passage from the past and the Christian model orientated to the future – and those of modern Renaissance and Cartesian. In the fine art of painting, the Renaissance brought the concept and sign construction of the simultaneous image plat – the ability to perceive everything in the painting in one moment. We transferred this concept to photography, but – as Vančát claims – this sign construction is not correct. We cannot see the image simultaneously, in every place at once... In present times, after Einstein's theory of relativity – when any universal conception of time is indefensible – the synchronicity of time in the imagination is not an ontological givenness, but a historically conditional concept. Vančát claims that the touch of reality towards photography is bilaterally interactive because the picture is also interactive towards our understanding and assignation of something as reality. I think, there is a certain analogy with the understanding of dialogical dimension of sonic photography.

¹³ *Kairos* – the ancient Greek notion, which expresses the non-linear, non-chronological temporality of "that right moment" when we feel our being in the spiritual fullness of *pleroma*.

of sounds plays a very important role in our lives anywhere and anytime we happen to be, maybe more than we are aware of it. And the older I am, the more interesting is to me to focus my attention on *kairos* in sonic events. They can project in a certain way the existential essence of our lived moments enacted in the concrete and unrepeatable spatial and temporal context, related to often un verbalized meaning or beauty. Sometimes I feel the need to record them and use them in my artistic works – transparent sonic sculptures as a part of site-specific music in intermedia context – sometimes I just enjoy them in my private endeavour to enrich an inner homeostasis without any need to record them at all. The aim of them is discover and to develop a special, creative sensitivity and new ways of perception of sonic elements, their meanings, and important significance of them in our daily being. If we are more sensitive, and open to accepting and understanding the (sometime implicit, sometimes radical) otherness of sonic "suchness" then we become able to accept and understand more the otherness in human relationships.

So, maybe instead of the expected analytical conclusion let me finish the paper in John Cage's favourite way – by a mesostich, which I wrote intuitively and by controlled chance:

J u s t
s O n i c s c u l p t u r e s
o f H a r m o n i c
N a t u r e

C a n
h e A l
o u r G l o b a l
i l l n E s s

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Cage John: *The Silence*, transl. Jaroslav Štastný, Radoslav Tejkal, Matěj Kratochvíl, tranzit.cz, Praha 2010.

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Vančát Jaroslav, *Fotografie jako časotvorný koncept* [Photography as a Time-creating Concept], „Atelier“ 2006, no. 19.

Keywords

sonic environment, site-specific, experimental music, sonic sculpture, sonic photography

SUMMARY

Július Fujak

Transparent Sonic Sculptures in Site-Specific Intermedia Music

The paper deals in the first part with the centripetal juxtaposition of Marcel Duchamp's *Sculpture Musicale* and John Cage's *4'33"*. Both pieces became the starting points of the author's creation of acousmatic comprovised music saving/transforming unique soundscapes (mostly) in Slovakia. The sounds of specific environments (with semantic social meanings) as a kind of unique musical-sonic sculptures were involved in his musical artistic projects: e. g. *Animation of Silence (in Music) of Puppets* (2000), or *Nitrian Atlantises* (2013) dedicated to the part of the pre-ancient history of Nitra as well as to semantic parallels of this period in the contemporary life of the city. *Melancholy* (2017), co-created with the fine artist Slavomír Zombek and the poet Peter Milčák, has changed the site of a desolate cowhouse near Levoča to the site-specific gallery/concert hall of sounding events. *Sonic Sculpture of Bin* (2018) inspired by Duchamp's idea mentioned above was realized in a deserted refinery in Rimavská Sobota as site-specific sonic-musical piece, as well as other transparent sonic sculptures *Cockroach Lure* (2019) with intermedia artist Petr Nikl, and two pieces, *La Mer* (2021/2022) and *ÚÚÚ-FFF-ÓÓÓ* (2021), dedicated to two great Slovak conceptual intermedia artists, Milan Adamčiak and Július Koller. In the final comment, the author writes about the phenomena of sonic photography – related to the ideas of Roland Barthes' *La Chambre Claire* – which can be appropriated as an organic part of transparent sonic-musical sculpture.