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Technology, Sound, and Subject

A Cross-Disciplinary Investigation

Introduction



Figure 1: Gilberto Zorio: *Microfoni* (1968), 2014, the BlainSouthern Gallery, Berlin. Photo: author.

Five vocal microphones are hanging from the ceiling in their cables. Although they seem to be randomly dispersed across the far end of the gallery space, they still form an installational whole that silently demarks a scene. A young couple, nervously giggling, approaches a microphone and tryingly puts it to use. As the space is filled with their outbursts, I realize that the microphones are not just a visual or auditory installation, but rather they function as an open invitation for anyone to become a speaker. I approach one of the microphones and hesitate a moment before I say, "Eehh ... Hello ..."

This short description, based on my own journal notes, encapsulates my first experience of the Italian artist Gilberto Zorio's installation *Microfoni* from 1968, which was restaged in 2014 for the ANALOG exhibition at the BlainSouthern Gallery in Berlin.

Zorio's installation has a palpable sonic presence, and yet, it is not music in the conventional sense of the word. It deals with (potential) speech acts, and yet, it is neither literature nor theater as such. It seems to fall between the well-established categories of art, and in doing so resists theoretical description by the use of conventional methods of musical or literary analysis. This kind of resistance can prove to be fruitful, because it challenges us to rethink our analytical, methodological, and theoretical modes of conceptualizing and analyzing art. Indeed, sound art practices like Zorio's and others have already given way to developments of new and still emerging paradigms.¹

Even though sound art practices can be traced back to the historical avant-gardes at the beginning of the 19th century, the established art world's interest in sound is a relatively new phenomenon.² However, the last two decades have seen increasing interest in sound, and today sound art can be found at many internationally renowned art events and museums, including Ars Electronica in Linz, the Venice Biennale, Documenta in Kassel, and MoMa in New York. For instance, in 2013 MoMa launched the exhibition *Soundings*, which was the first exhibition at this prestigious museum dedicated entirely to sound art.

This recent sonic boom has included a still growing amount of academic research in sound art, sonic art, or *Klangkunst* that discusses the specific qualities of sound as an artistic medium or listening as a specific modality in relation to art.³ However, the main focus of this article is not sound or listening itself. Perhaps my experience of Zorio's installation was influenced by the fact that the gallery space was almost empty on the day of my visit, or by the slight anxiety I witnessed in the young people as they spoke into the microphones. But the core of my experience was not centered around the sounds as such. Instead it closed in on the silent, albeit insisting way these microphones created a yet unoccupied space where anyone can become a speaker: gain a voice, be heard, and thus assert themselves as "someone" in a public space in front of an audience. According to the French linguist Émile Benveniste's theories from the 1950s, language is not a tool for expressing subjectivity; on the contrary, subjectivity is a linguistic category.⁴ It is by appropriating language in a singular act of enunciation that we become subjects. "Est 'ego' qui dit 'ego'" ("I is whoever says 'I'"),⁵ as he states.

- 1 Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art* (London: Continuum, 2007), xxiii.
- 2 Helga de la Motte-Haber, *Klangkunst: Handbuch der Musik im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. 12, *Klangkunst: tönende Objekte und klingende Räume* (Laaber: Laaber Verlag, 1999).
- 3 Key publications include: Helga de la Motte-Haber, ed., *Klangkunst: Handbuch der Musik im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. 12, *Klangkunst: tönende Objekte und klingende Räume* (Laaber: Laaber Verlag, 1999); Ulrik Tadday, ed., *Musik-Konzepte Sonderband*, vol. 11, *Klangkunst* (München: Edition Text + Kritik, 2008); Alan Licht, *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007); Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (London: Continuum, 2007); Kim-Cohen, *Blink of an Ear* (London: Continuum, 2009); and Salome Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (London: Continuum, 2010).
- 4 This is suggested by the title of his essay on language and subjectivity, "De la subjectivité dans le langage" (on the subjectivity in the language), from 1958, and by the chapter title "L'homme dans la langue" (man in the language), which groups a section of articles in his collected works. Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 159.
- 5 Benveniste, *Problèmes*, vol. 1, 160 (my translation).

I wish to suggest that Zorio's installation creates a place for what Benveniste calls "the singular act of enunciation,"⁶ in which someone appropriates language and through that act constitutes themselves as an "I." Seen in this light, the microphones do not merely invite people to produce sounds, but also to constitute themselves as subjects. However, when engaging with Zorio's installation people do not necessarily use language. Some may just make random sounds. What really allows people to constitute themselves as subjects is therefore not language, but the sound-(re)producing technologies—loudspeakers, microphones, amplifiers, and wires.

The French thinker Bernard Stiegler is interesting in relation to Zorio's installation, because he extends Benveniste's theories on subjectivity from language to technology. Stiegler is in agreement with Benveniste; he also regards subjectivity as something that is not solely constituted on the level of the individual, but in "symbolic milieus" that exist on a pre-individual level.⁷ A symbolic milieu is

a relay across distances connecting beings through both their differentiation and mutual recognition. They are thus constituted by that milieu both individually, in the position of the I, and collectively, as establishing a we, and they can distinguish themselves only to the extent that they acknowledge/recognize each other in this milieu.⁸

Language is, for instance, a symbolic milieu that facilitates the "constitution and the expression of singularities."⁹ In line with Benveniste, Stiegler claims that we constitute subjectivity as we appropriate language in a dialog, where the person listening can become the listener and later the speaker. Stiegler calls this process an act of individuation.¹⁰

As mentioned, Stiegler is interesting in relation to Zorio's installation, because he claims that technology offers "a new milieu of psychic and collective individuation, which is at least as radically new as the writing of language was in its time."¹¹ The thesis I wish to pursue here is that Zorio's installation allows us to experience sound-(re)producing technologies as what Stiegler would call a milieu for individuation, for becoming subjects. Here it is the sound-(re)producing technologies—including the microphones, amplifiers, and loudspeakers—that function as a place where we can become subjects.

Furthermore, I suggest that this understanding of sound art and sound-(re)producing technologies does not only apply to Zorio's installation, but can work as a new perspective on sound art. The scope of my account is thus not primarily to suggest an entirely new methodology or approach to sound art, but rather to expand our understanding of the relation between subjectivity, enunciation, and media. Whereas studies of art conventionally focus on either the expressive subject of the artist or, in a

6 Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 80.

7 Bernard Stiegler, "Teleologies of the Snail: The Errant Self Wired to a WiMax Network," *Theory Culture Society* 26, no. 2–3 (2009): 37.

8 Stiegler, "Teleologies of the Snail," 37.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 35.

critique thereof, on the subject of the audience, my investigation interrogates the very intersection of technology and subjectivity as something that can be exposed and interrogated by the artwork itself.

Following Benveniste's theory of enunciation and Stiegler's ideas of technologies as symbolic milieus for acts of individuation, the article explores different aspects of this intersection of human subjectivity and sound-(re)producing technologies through a tentative analysis of works of sound art. Besides Zorio's installation, this article investigates Static Language Sampler's *Language Removal Service* (2004), Luc Ferrari's *Far-West News* (1998–1999), and Hong Kai Wang's *Music While We Work* (2011). The article does not present in-depth analyses of these works of art, but in a more tentative manner points to different ways in which the intersection of technology and subjectivity is at play in the specific cases.

Investigating sound art as a post-medial phenomenon

The thrust of my argument is that the study of sound art benefits from a cross-disciplinary approach combining linguistic theory, media theory, and sound studies. In suggesting this I seek to traverse the all-dominant approach to sound art that argues that the presence of sound makes sound art fundamentally different from, say, language, visual art, or music.

While the epistemological positioning may differ, what most recent publications on sound art have in common is that their argument in favor of one specific approach over others is based on the assumption that sound art is ontologically different from other art forms, music in particular. Musicologist Brian Kane convincingly describes this stance against music in the research in sound art, naming it "musicophobia."¹² The research in sound art often describes music as a temporal and inherently symbolic art form that unfolds an abstract structure of internal references for the listener to decode, while sound art is a tempo-spatial art form which in a more direct and strategic way plays with the recipient's audio-visual perception of space and time.¹³ In line with such thinking, some stress that sound is an artistic media that evokes space and bodies in a different way than other artistic media.¹⁴ Others, in turn, claim that music is something that is written in scores that we can see, while sound art requires an approach that is based on listening.¹⁵ Although he is critical of the discourse arguing for the specificity of sound, Kim-Cohen's argument is nevertheless to some extent based on "musicophobia," and he describes music as an auto-

12 Brian Kane, "Musicophobia, or Sound Art and the Demands of Art Theory," *Nonsite.org* 8 (2013), <http://nonsite.org/article/musicophobia-or-sound-art-and-the-demands-of-art-theory>.

13 For instance Motte-Haber, *Klangkunst*, 1999, 13; Helga de la Motte-Haber, "Klangkunst: Jenseits der Kunstgattungen: Weiterentwicklungen und Neubestimmungen ästhetischer Ideen," in *Musik-Konzepte Sonderband*, vol. 11, *Klangkunst*, ed. Ulrik Tadday (München: Edition Text + Kritik, 2008); and Lilian Campesato, "Metamorphosis of the Muses: Referential and Contextual Aspects in Sound Art," *Organised Sound* 14, no. 1 (2009).

14 LaBelle, *Background Noise* (London: Continuum, 2007), ix.

15 Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence*, 8.

mous and “a-referential” art form,¹⁶ while sound art is thought to exist in a cultural matrix of narratives.¹⁷

Contrary to these emerging paradigms, the approach I wish to investigate is not specific to sound art. Instead of viewing artwork such as Zorio’s installation as something fundamentally different from other artistic expressions such as music or literature, I regard it as something that exists in a continuum of speech acts of which some are verbal, some are written, some are sounding, and some are musicalized.

Thus, my investigation is more in line with the so-called cultural musicology, which has proliferated over the last decades.¹⁸ Here a piece of music is not described as a structural, symbolically encoded, autonomous artwork notated in a score. Instead, what is explored is how musical phenomena constitute subjectivity in the broadest sense: both how specific examples of music negotiate cultural subject positions, and how the individual listener uses music and listening to create self-identity.¹⁹ However, my investigation focuses not on sound, music, or specific listening practices, but on the role of technology in relation to subjectivity.

Technology, art, and the subject of utterance

Zorio’s installation can easily be read in line with German theorist Peter Bürger’s theory of the avant-garde from 1974 that describes how the avant-garde artwork negates the category of individual production.²⁰ The lack of pre-composed content in Zorio’s installation can be experienced as a gesture that eliminates the authority of the composer or author. But even more so, it seems to be a generous invitation for others to become the privileged subjects of expression. One important indicator of this generous invitation are the concrete blocks that are placed underneath each microphone and thus function as pedestals or “soap boxes” for the speakers to stand on.

The open structures of this piece resembles those which the American composer John Cage observed in 1957 in the art of this time:

For in this new music nothing takes place but sounds: those that are notated and those that are not. Those that are not notated appear in the written music as silences, opening the doors of the music to the sounds that happen to be in the environment. This openness exists in the fields of modern sculpture and architecture. The glass houses of Mies van der Rohe reflect their environment, presenting to the eye images of clouds, trees, or grass, according to the situation. And while looking at the constructions in wire of the

16 Kim-Cohen, *Blink of an Ear*, 39 and 163.

17 *Ibid.*, 107.

18 Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton, eds., *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003). See for instance the preface.

19 For the latter, see for instance Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

20 Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), 70–120.

sculptor Richard Lippold, it is inevitable that one will see other things, and people too, if they happen to be there at the same time, through the network of wires.²¹

Indeed, when seeing Zorio's installation we also see other people who happen to be there at the same time, and we (potentially) hear them too. However, there is not only openness, but also a participatory element in Zorio's piece, because it does not randomly amplify *all* the ambient sounds in the gallery space. On the contrary, the singer's microphones used in the installation have few characteristics and mainly (though not only) pick up sounds that are close to them. Zorio's piece seems to focus on the participatory elements, including the agency of the audience and the relational quality of the installation. The piece can therefore be described as an example of art that engages the audience rather than communicates content, which is in line with Clair Bishop's idea of "participatory culture," Erika Fischer-Lichte's "performative aesthetics," and Nicolas Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics."²²

In this article I want to focus on this aspect of engagement. But instead of looking at the relation between artwork and audience I want to zoom in on the role of the sound-(re)producing technologies, and *how* they set the stage for participation.

Benveniste argued that language is designed with an openness that ensures that anyone can appropriate it in a singular act of enunciation and become the discourse subject—the "I" across from the "you"—implied in the communicative act. This openness can, according to Benveniste, be seen in the so-called deictic shifters, words such as "I," "you," "here," and "now," whose referent shifts according to the specific situation in which they are used. The referent of the word "I" is simply the one speaking.²³ The act of enunciation is, then, not merely an act of communicating content and expressing who you are; it is rather, as already stated above, in this act that subjectivity is constituted.

In Zorio's installation this openness is not constituted by linguistic shifters, but through the specific "affordances"²⁴ of the microphones, the pedestals, and the loudspeakers. The microphones and the pedestals invite people to take action: to step onto the pedestal, to stand close to the microphone, and to make a sound. The loudspeakers project the sounds into the gallery space, and the sounds lead the audience's attention back to the person using the microphone, and thus this person becomes an "I" across from the potential "you" of the audience. The microphones are thus not merely a technology that enhances certain aspects of the world; they are performative

21 John Cage, *Silence* (London: Marion Boyars, 2004), 7–8.

22 Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation* (Cambridge: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2006); Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004); Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002). Bourriaud's ideas are already standard reference in the literature on sound art (see LaBelle, *Background Noise*, 248–49), and in general scholars tend to see sound art as something that engages the listener (see Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence*, 6–12).

23 Benveniste, *Problèmes*, vol. 2, 82 and 215–29.

24 Donald A. Norman, "Affordance, Conventions and Design," *Interactions* 6, no. 3 (1999): 38–43.

and constituent of sociality and subjectivity,²⁵ because they function as a space for acts of individuation—for becoming a subject.²⁶

A narratological and cultural view on utterance via technology

It has been suggested that recording is an act of enunciation. In his book on *Sonic Art* from 1997 the American composer Trevor Wishart distinguishes between different layers of utterance. As a thought example he mentions a case where someone is listening to a concert on the radio. Then all of a sudden the roof of the concert hall falls down and the audience screams. Now the listener is made aware of the fact that the music was produced by an orchestra playing in an actual concert hall. Then a voiceover says that we have just listened to a radio play or a piece of electroacoustic music, and with this statement the listener is made aware of the fact that the performance was also presented or uttered by the composer and via a recording. Most of the time these layers of embedded utterances are not obvious to us, as we generally listen to music without noticing the technological act of re-mediating the performance.²⁷ Wishart here stresses an important fact: namely that the act of recording is also an act of utterance, or enunciation, as I would call it in order to stress the theoretical implications of Benveniste's theory of enunciation.

The French composer Luc Ferrari's compositions are often almost 1:1 montages of everyday sounds. This is, for instance, the case in *Presque Rien No. 1* and in *Far-West News Episode No. 1* (1998–1999). In *Far-West News*, which was published and distributed in CD format, we hear Ferrari's own voice as a voiceover saying, "there was an opportunity to buy coffee" (at 1'59"), followed by a montage of sounds of people talking in a supermarket. This could be an example of the levels of enunciation that Wishart is talking about. In this case, there is clear distinction between these different levels of enunciation: The narrator talks in the present about events that occurred in the past, and these past events are presented to us in the montage in their own (past) present. It is this mixture of temporalities of experienced events that structures the level of enunciation in the piece.

In a critique of the German media theorist Friedrich Kittler's description of sound recording as a way to access "the real" unfiltered by the human symbolic systems of interpretation, Kim-Cohen stresses that what we hear in sonic art—including Ferrari's compositions—are not sounds alone, but rather "symbolic grids." These symbolic grids, in the production, interact with

the matrix of symbolic grids on the side of reception: the recorded sounds as received, the awareness of the process of recording, the recorder's interventionist presence in the recording, the listener's awareness of the walker/observer's awareness of himself.²⁸

25 Peter Poul Verbeek, *What Things Do: Philosophical Relations on Technology, Agency and Design*, trans. Robert P. Crease (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 130.

26 Stiegler, "Teleologies of the Snail," 1.

27 Trevor Wishart, *On Sonic Art* (London: Routledge, 1997), 239.

28 Kim-Cohen, *Blink of an Ear*, 182–83.

The main focus of Kim-Cohen's argumentation here is not the embeddedness of levels of enunciation in the finished piece, but rather the sociality and symbolic grids of which sounds are always and already part. Where Wishart's perspective can lead to a narratological analysis of sender positions in relation to the told, in line with Gérard Genette's account of focalization or Seymour Chatman's notion of the implicit organizer in films,²⁹ Kim-Cohen's perspective leads to a more general observation of the social and cultural nature of recorded sounds. Kim-Cohen's emphasis on the practice of recording points toward something that is not merely work-internal, but also related to the act of using sound-(re)producing technology. With its fragmented montage of everyday sounds and its lack of consistent narrative structure we never learn anything about the subject who talks and records in Ferrari's *Far-West News*. However, thanks to the technology we still experience *a* subject talking and recording.

Exteriorization

In Kittler's account of the phonograph this technology serves as a supplement to human memory:

If the phonographic disk had self-consciousness, it could point out while re-playing a song that it remembers this particular song. And what appears to us as the effect of a rather simple mechanism would, quite probably, strike the disk as a miraculous ability: memory.³⁰

We exteriorize our memory when we record sounds or songs, Kittler claims. The technology remembers for us. Stiegler claims that the interior (the memory) does not precede the exterior (the recording). Rather the interior and the exterior are constituted in movement between the two, which leads him to conclude that they are the same thing.³¹ I think it is common for people to doubt whether they actually remember the scenes of their childhood pictures, or if it is the pictures that have installed and ensured the memory in us. Stiegler even talks about human beings *as* a process of exteriorization.³² To be human is therefore, according to Stiegler, to be a technical being.³³ In *Far-West News* the narrator's voiceover is filtered, making it sound distant. In effect it sounds as though the narrator is further away from the listener than the field recording of him in the supermarket—which is an event the narrator comments on. Via the recording the past thus becomes a more present tense of the narrating voice. It seems difficult not to read *Far-west News* as a piece about memory and about recording as a means of exteriorizing memory. And thus also about subjectivity, about *who* it is who

29 Gérard Genette, *Figures*, vol. 3 (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972); Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

30 Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Withrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Berlin: Brinkmann and Bose, 1997), 31.

31 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, vol. 1, *The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 142.

32 Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, vol. 1, 148.

33 *Ibid.*, 50.

remembers: Is it the narrator? The language? Or the tape recorder? And is Ferrari as a subject, ultimately, separable from the act of recording?

New technologies—the tape recorder and the microphone

In the 1950s the scene of sound-(re)producing media changed dramatically, when the tape recorder was commercialized. From then on the situation in the Western world changed: It was now fairly easy to bring the recorder along and record real-world sounds, just as it became easier to mix and distribute recorded sounds. In the milieu around the larger radio stations in, for instance, Paris, Cologne, Stockholm, and New York, composers and sound technicians began exploring these new potentials.³⁴ This would later be called electroacoustic music, which refers to various concepts such as tape music, electronic music, and acousmatic music. Seen from the point of production, we could say that new technologies gave way to new means of production, which in turn led to new ways of communicating and producing art. But perhaps the arts were not only investigating new means of producing art, but also the new conditions for human memory and subjectivity brought about by the new technologies, including the tape recorder?

The German researcher Marion Saxer describes sound art as a process of medial *Ausdifferenzierung*, where the technological media of music—for instance, microphones and loudspeakers—are exposed and thus noticeably differentiated from the musical sounds.³⁵ But perhaps Zorio's installation is not just a media critique that forefronts the otherwise hidden media of music? Perhaps it is part of a broader examination in the arts of the new sound-(re)producing media developed in the post-war era, as a milieu for the process of individuation? A medial *Ausdifferenzierung* not of music, but of humans? Ferrari's electroacoustic experiments, which he began in the early 1960s, can also be seen as part of such an examination.

Reconfiguration as a critique of cultural industry

Stiegler is a media pessimist in the sense that he notices that the symbolic milieus are integrated in new modes of organization, where the production of the symbolic becomes industrial. The problem is, according to Stiegler, that the symbolic ought to be an object of *exchange* and *circulation* and not consumption. The act of individuation is always something we do in a larger "we" in a process of transindividuation whereby "technical innovations are socially appropriated."³⁶ In the large media and entertainment industry he observes what he calls the "short-circuiting" of transindividuation.³⁷ According to the Danish researcher in aesthetics Jacob Lund, the role of contemporary

34 Simon Emmerson and Denis Smalley, "Electro-acoustic music," *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/08695>.

35 Marion Saxer, "Klangkunst im Prozess medialer Ausdifferenzierung," in *Musik-Konzepte Sonderband*, vol. 11, *Klangkunst*, ed. Ulrik Tadday (München: Edition Text + Kritik, 2008).

36 Stiegler, "Teleologies of the Snail," 39.

37 Ibid.

art is to reconstitute a symbolic milieu that has been “destroyed by the consumerism of the culture industries, and try to reappropriate and reassociate the media and technical milieus that have become dissociated.”³⁸

It is easy to see how the new sound-(re)producing technologies available in the post-war period offered new possibilities for sound production and reception to both radio networks and the sound artists. But instead of seeing this development as two parallel tracks, one within the commercial framework of the radio station and the other within the field of arts, the art field can also—as it has often been suggested before—be seen as a critique of the cultural industry. The lack of conventional content in Zorio’s installation, which is open to any sound, and Ferrari’s 1:1 soundscape of trivial everyday sounds can be experienced as a resistance to the overflow of content, intention, and manipulation in the cultural industry. Here we are not entertained or thrilled, but just faced with ourselves (in Zorio’s installation), or perhaps with our own boredom or disorientation (in Ferrari’s recordings). However, I also believe that there is a critical potential in the way the art field creatively plays with the sound-(re)producing technologies that are standard in the cultural industry. One way to describe this critical potential is to look at such works of art as an investigation or even reconfiguration of the sound-(re)producing media as a symbolic milieu.

A similar critical potential can also be found in *Language Removal Service* by Static Language Sampler published on the CD *The Agents of Impurity* from 2004. On the more than four minutes long track we hear no words, only the sounds of the movements of tongue, lips, mouth, teeth, breath: the sounds that are left when words are removed from speech. Here the materiality of the human body is placed at the forefront, the body that is often forgotten, because we focus on what is being said and not on the bodily process of saying it. This piece also brings to the fore the level of recording and postproduction, because the removal of language is a gimmick only possible due to the postproduction. The level of recording hereby reveals itself as a hypermediated space.³⁹ The piece is also an eerie desubjectivizing gesture where we, on the one hand, are left with no clues as to who the speaker is, and on the other hand, are placed in uncomfortable proximity to the actual bodily act of speaking. We can no longer identify any specific subject in this piece, and therefore it seems to point toward a more general level of preindividuation. Instead of merely distinguishing between media immediacy and hypermediacy, we might ask what possibilities for becoming a subject these different media provide?

Music While We Work—*hacking and resistance*

This is also the question posed in the Taiwanese sound artist Hong-Kai Wang’s work *Music While We Work* (2011), which is a project Wang made together with factory

38 Jacob Lund, “Artistic Re-Appropriation and Reconfiguration of the Medium’s Milieu,” *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 44–45 (2012–2013): 129–34.

39 Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (London: MIT Press, 2002), 33.

workers from her hometown. The workers were given recording technologies and, based on Wang's instructions, recorded the soundscape of their everyday lives. The sounds and still footages from the recording process together form the material for the audio-visual installation *Music While We Work*. The piece was exhibited as a part of the Taiwanese pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2011 along with other sound art projects which gave underprivileged people, for instance homeless, a chance to make themselves heard. In *Music While We Work* we do not hear the voices of the workers, only the rumbling, noisy soundscape they live in. Neither are we given any narratives that will enable us to understand who these people are.



Figure 2: Hong-Kai Wang: *Music While We Work*, Venice Biennale 2011. Photo: Hong-Kai Wang.

Kittler claims that “[w]hat remains of people is what media can store and communicate. What counts are not the messages or the content [...] but rather [...] their circuits, the very schematism of perceptibility.”⁴⁰ In Wang's piece it seems as though the focus is on these circuits and the “schematism of perceptibility” rather than on the content or the message. There is the risk that the only voice the Asian factory workers in Wang's piece can gain in the Western art sphere of material and cultural privilege is that of a “subaltern other.”⁴¹ And if we look at the installation with critical eyes the only one who gains any presence, as a subject on an international scene, is the artist herself. However, the lack of speech can also be seen as an attempt to expose their

40 Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, xi.

41 Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

subalterity and to point to how they have been kept out of public discourse and heard merely as “noise.” In a discussion of the political potential the French thinker Jacques Rancière explains that when it comes to refusing workers the title as political subjects

it has traditionally been sufficient to assert that they belong to a [...] space separated from public life: one from which only groans or cries expressing suffering, hunger, or anger could emerge, but not actual speeches [...]. And the politics of these categories has always consisted in re-qualifying these places [...] in getting what was only audible as noise to be heard as speech.⁴²

In Wang’s installation the lack of speech and the presence of noise is striking, and it is difficult not to see this opposition as an opportunity to discuss the workers’ status as political subjects.

Wang’s work does not promise to create a location from which the factory workers can speak and be heard in a global context. Instead it seems as though the project merely wants to introduce the workers to a technological practice that may on a smaller scale develop into a local, personal media practice, which may or may not hold a global perspective, but still gives the workers agency. With this media practice they can exteriorize *their* everyday sensorial experiences, and in that sense also be empowered to “speak” on their own behalf, and not just be represented by a position of cultural and economic power. In that sense the installation not only interrogates the opportunities of the subaltern to produce speech; it also tentatively explores how they can be given political agency.

The sound art field seems in general to be full of projects where people are invited not to create new narratives or to organize existing narratives in a new manner, but rather to learn new media practices. We see an abundance of sound art walks, field recordings, and hackathons in the art field such as for instance the Monthly Music Hackathon in New York and the hackathon workshop at the Transmediale Festival in Berlin. At the Monthly Music Hackathon people experiment with creating their own hacks, old-fashioned sound circuits from scratch, or new sounds from existing sound-(re)producing technologies. This hands-on experience has no particular objective. It is not directed toward any specific creation of sound or any specific use of sound. One goal, however, seems to be to create sound-(re)producing technology that is not controlled by the industry. As one of the participants at the Transmediale Hackathon in 2015 stated, “if I buy a synthesizer I get the same sound as anyone else, but when I build my own circuits I will probably make small errors or other kind of quirky things [...] this will give my hack unique sound.”⁴³ This statement suggests that the hackathon is a way to participate in a resistance against the cultural industry and to reconfigure the symbolic milieu of the sound-(re)producing technologies.

42 Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 38.

43 Anette Vandsø, “Hackerthon,” unpublished interview, Transmediale 2015.

Perspectives

The small and tentative investigation I have conducted here deals with art with little or no narrative constitution of subjects. Instead these works of art scrutinize the very act by which we may appropriate sound-(re)producing technology in a process of individuation and transindividuation. With their lack of conventional narrative content in the form of fictional characters these artistic practices investigate the potential of such technological symbolic milieus. The works discussed here each reveal different aspects of these milieus and the act of individuation. In Zorio's piece the focus seems to be on the open structure of the milieu, and of the very act of individuation, of becoming a subject, an "I" in front of others. *Language Removal Service* seems instead to forefront the materiality of the body: the mouth, the teeth, the tongue as instruments or technologies. In *Far-West News* the recording functions as something that does not only present sound and sound events, but is also an essential tool for the very act of exteriorization. The works thus seem to scrutinize humans as technical beings in terms of sociality (*Microfoni*), body (*Language Removal Service*), memory (*Far-West News*), power and voice (*Music While We Work*).

In all cases there is an element of anxiety, discomfort, or distance: as though we are either too close or not close enough to that which is being presented. These works of art challenge our understanding of sound-(re)producing technologies as a transparent media through which we can communicate. Instead they are inseparable from the process of becoming humans. What conditions our culture, or us, is not mainly, or just, our thoughts and ideas, but also the technologies we use in order to communicate these thoughts and ideas. While sound art may at first sight seem to be a very introvert exercise directed toward a small audience in the art world, my analysis shows that it holds a larger potential, as it critically investigates our sound-(re)producing technologies—and even reconfigures them and creates new possibilities for them as symbolic milieus. And if humans are technical beings, as some would claim, then that investigation is crucial to more than just the art world.