

Exhibition September 23, 2020 – March 1, 2021

Sabatini Building, Floor 3

Disonata

Art in Sound up to 1980



Isidore Isou, *La plastique parlante* (The Talking Plastic), 1960/1987
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More than a hundred years ago, pioneers from various directions set out on expeditions into the hitherto unexplored realms of sonic phenomena and processes, previously the exclusive domain of musicians. The driving force was visual artists, but also visionary poets and musicians, even architects and engineers.

Regardless of the traditional definitions of their respective disciplines, these creators launched revolutionary physical and technical acoustic experiments. It was as if a kind of membrane in their ears that had previously blocked out the noises of this world had dissolved. An audible reality broke through that was pulsating with the life of the accelerated and fragmented machine age. These hitherto inadmissible sounds enlarged and simultaneously shattered the well-defined construct of harmony of the established Western music system. Though this music system had lost contact with the modern world, the ethnocentric narrative of its supposedly superior forms and styles was vigorously defended by its bourgeois protagonists. Yet the sounds and thoughts had long since been freed from their increasingly tight corset of rules.

Since then, everything in the context of sound was worth exploring: all possible notations (from scratches directly on a record up to ephemeral traces in the sand), all types of making sound (be it by mechanical and electronic machines or even by animals), all forms of staging (even in a desert or completely drunk), all references to styles (from ancient non-Western music up to the latest tendencies of popular music), and of course all acoustic effects (from silence to ear-splitting crashes). Using sound as a medium created the most creative and diverse practices, which all together form a highly heterogeneous universe of multifaceted sound languages, spaces, and processes. They range from phonic music to electronic synthetizations, from poetry to technical inventions, from radio art to film collages, from pure ideas to multimedia events, from painting to performance, from intimate encounters to spatial compositions.

**MUSIC
IS WHAT
YOU ARE
LISTENING TO
AT THIS
MOMENT**

George Brecht, *Music Is What You Are Listening To At This Moment*, 1989
© George Brecht, VEGAP, Madrid, 2020

The exhibition *Disonata* revolves around the history of these sound ventures. Some two hundred recordings, paintings, instruments, sculptures, scores, models, manifestos, photographs, and films span the period from the first experiments in the light of the technological and ideological revolutions by, among others, the Futurists, Surrealists, and the artists of the Dada movement, to the post-punk scenes in the mid-1980s. Between these two poles unfold a wide range of extremely diverse projects. They include the exceptional Philips Pavilion from 1958 with its spatial multimedia spectacle as well as a multitude of sound projects with explicit or loose links to groups and movements such as Lettrism, sound and visual poetry, Art Brut, CoBrA, kinetic art, New Realism, Fluxus, Zaj, Conceptual Art, and Pop Art.

Disonata proposes a roughly chronological approach rather than illustrating a thematic structure or a linear narrative. Its main and subsidiary paths invite the visitor to discover multiple content-based and aesthetic perspectives on the works in the space. They illuminate the relationships and overlaps of the major tendencies and themes of sound of the twentieth century, as well as the discontinuities. Moreover, they bring to light the special strength of each individual work, which unfolds its nuances above all in the inconsistent interstices beyond normative categories, and reveal the unclassifiable nature of art in sound.

In this sense, the exhibition can be understood as a veritable disonata: a composition that both reflects and transforms canonical forms within the audio culture. It sets the sounds free to resonate in full variety and intensity between us and the space. This not only broadens our comprehension of art in sound beyond what is standard knowledge, but we ourselves are also reflected in these sounds, allowing us to realize that silence, tones, sound, and noise are closely connected with our world of ideas. We discover that we perceive and interpret our world to a very great extent acoustically, probably even more than visually. In this respect, the exciting sound experiments conducted since the beginning of the twentieth century are as vibrant today as ever.