

## Let There Be Sound!

On Joanna Przybyła's "Sound as Architecture"

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The sound sculpture of Joanna Przybyła goes beyond visual art. Having studied music before visual art, Przybyła experienced singing in a choir with a symphony orchestra. Her musical experience became a key resource of her artistic inspirations, and later, she started to merge music and the visual arts: hence the birth of her sound sculpture.

One day, she visited a Romanesque abbey in France. There, she saw three persons, walking and singing freely in the empty old abbey." In that very moment, I discovered that sound is the best tool to express space," she recalls.

Some architects consider the air between the walls of a building almost to be akin to the space inside a large instrument. After realizing this herself, Przybyła thought that music would be an optimal way to express space, and by collaborating with architects, she started to curve architectural space via sound in the forms of her sound sculpture.

Dedicated to the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, her photo series "Sunlight Drawings for Arvo Pärt" captures the various forms of light appearing on the same sheet of paper. Even though the paper and its cut are the same, her photographs are all different, because each captures the light shining through from different angles. These thin lines of light leaping upwards remind me of the image of "Saut Dans le Vide (Leap into the Void)" by Yves Klein, yet are erotic as well, calling to mind "Concetto Spaziale (Spatial Concept)" by Lucio Fontana.

The challenge here, of capturing one motif in various images created by the potentially infinite permutations of light, echoes the musical challenge faced by Arvo Pärt, especially in his heavily loop-oriented composition "Spiegel im Spiegel (Mirror in the Mirror)". On the subject of light and the mirror, the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen Buddhist monk Dōgen Zenji wrote a beautiful text called "On the Ancient Mirror":

If the Clean Mirror comes in front of the Ancient Mirror, the Clean Mirror will appear in the Ancient Mirror. The Mirror in Mirror. Only light is there.

Pärt's composition of looping notes gives the listeners an effect that is almost like looking into the infinite lights of the mirror in the mirror. And just as Pärt nearly captured the infinite light in his music, Przybyła's "Sunlight Drawings for Arvo Pärt" also captured the infinite light her "drawings" of the same object.

Pärt's remark, "a composition comes as a single gesture, which is already, in essence, music," caused Przybyła to think that Pärt is not a pianist, but rather a sculptor. It reminds me how in 1990 the Venice

Biennale awarded a Golden Lion prize for “sculpture” to the photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher. Even though they use the photographic medium, their method of using typology for their series of “Water Towers” was considered to have reinforced the sculptural aspect of architecture. And just as the Bechers reinforced the sculptural aspect of architecture through the photographic medium, we might say that Przybyła has reinforced the sculptural aspect of architecture through her sound sculpture—akin to Pärt, for whom composition comes as a single gesture, and who offers a lot of free space for interpretation in the making of his music.

There are some musicians who have made music through a single note. Nam June Paik once made fun of his friend the composer La Monte Young, saying “La Monte Young had played one sound for a decade!” Also Brazilian bossanova composer Antônio Carlos Jobim composed the song “Samba de Uma Nota Só (One-Note Samba),” in which the main melody line consists of a long series that repeats a single tone. The rhythm of this tone, synchronizing with its scenery and ambience, leads the listener to enchantment.

Regarding the synchronization of sound, scenery, and ambience, French poet Paul Verlaine tried to describe the tone of an autumn wind by using the instrument name “violin” in the poem “Chanson d’automne (Autumn Song)”:

Les sanglots longs (The long sobs)

Des violons (Of the violins)

De l’automne (Of Autumn)...

The cold and lonely autumn wind makes long sobs, almost like the tones of a violin, which emerges from the bowing of its long strings. The sound waves and the vibrating image of the violin strings synchronize with the movement of the autumn wind: a kind of synesthesia.

If a single gesture of composition is music, a single brushstroke circle called Ensō is also a piece of Zen calligraphic art. The cosmology of Zen appearing in Ensō is similar to Przybyła’s cosmology expressed in her sound sculpture. To understand the cosmology of Zen and its synchronicity of sound and scenery, the following haiku by Matsuo Bashō’s might be the best example.

古池や 蛙飛び込む 水の音

(Furuikeya Kawazutobikomu Mizunooto)

The old pond, ah! A frog jumps in: The water’s sound.

(Translated by Daisetsu Suzuki)

To enjoy this Haiku, we need to imagine the sound within the entirety of the scenery surrounding it. What follows is my interpretation.

While Bashō was walking, he saw an old pond. First, he simply walked by. After passing the pond, he heard the sound “plomp!” from behind him. Then, Bashō thought that the sound had come from behind him, from the direction of the old pond, so this sound must have been created by a frog, jumping into the old pond.

The beauty of this poem comes from the poet’s imagination; Bashō imagined that this sound had come from the old pond, which he had seen before, so this sound must have been created by a frog, which he hadn’t yet seen. This is a simple poem made with one note, you might say, so the reader has a lot of free space to interpret. Once you can imagine the scenery, you will share the world of the poet. The image of small waves on the old pond’s surface synchronizes with the sound wave, and spreads from its center into its surroundings. So the center of the world will be the point where the frog jumped in, and the listening self located on its periphery becomes part of nature.

Also, the phrase “old pond” shows the longer time frame. We are living in a short moment, and see and hear changing sounds and sceneries; but unchanging nature is always there. Once you become part of nature, there is no self, and you can even melt into the scenery that surrounds you.

This is also the case with Dōgen’s “Ancient Mirror.” Even if the mirror is old, when the Clean Mirror comes in front of the Ancient Mirror, the Clean Mirror will appear in Ancient Mirror by crossing time. The Mirror in the Mirror. Only light is there.

In “Sound as Architecture,” Joanna Przybyła shares a cosmology with Bashō and Pärt. Almost like sound spreading from its birth-point to all that surrounds it, Przybyła’s sound sculpture spreads into the space and traces the form of the architecture, and even goes beyond the confines of the building.

In “Sunlight Drawings for Arvo Pärt” the light gives the “form” of existence, and in “Sound as Architecture” the sound gives the “tone” of space. Language cuts the universe arbitrarily and creates the meaning inside it, but sound itself is a universe, and by the arbitrary cutting of this universe of sound, people appreciate it as music. So it is with architecture; by cutting the space and creating space inside it, architecture comes into being.

So it goes like this...

In the beginning, the architect created the museum.

Then, the artist Joanna Przybyła came, and said, “Let there be Sound!”

The “Sound as Architecture” in architecture.

Only sound is there.

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