

A window is not there in order to dwell too
much on its construction and framing.
A window is there in order to look through it
or have light falling through it.
Art is such a window.
(P.A. "HÖREN hören /
hearing LISTENING")

Window Piece: Seeing and Hearing the Music of Peter Ablinger
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You walk into a gallery room. There's a large display window with a view of the outside street. The room is almost completely silent and empty except for the presence of an upright piano near the window. Other than an unusual apparatus placed atop the instrument and what appears to be a computer situated nearby, the piano would appear as any other. As your concentration moves from the gallery space to a car you see on the other side of the window, you notice the giant contraption on top of the piano begin to move sporadically—you are immediately struck by the jolting sound of loud and dissonant aggregates of piano sound as the car drives by. Upon inspection you see a plethora of felt-tipped metal bars continually strike the keys of the piano, seemingly at random and in rapid succession until well after the car that originally distracted you is well out of view. Soon the room is quiet once again. Shortly thereafter the same process occurs again, except this time you pay close attention to the piano sound. The various combinations of otherwise ordinary piano tones activated by the machine sound somehow strangely similar to the sounds you might expect to hear if you were standing outside. The changes in volume, the pitch register, even something of the "harmony" bear a strikingly familiar relationship to the assumed sources—it's as though the piano continuously "re-plays" the sounds from the other side of the window, transporting the street sounds into the gallery directly through the sound of the piano.

This is a description of a typical encounter with Peter Ablinger's installation piece *Quadraturen IIIe "Schaufensterstück"* (Display-Window Piece). The work consists of an upright piano fitted with an automatic player device connected to a computer, all situated directly in front of a window opening onto an ordinary city street. A microphone is used to transmit the normal sounds from the outside (traffic, people walking by, wind) to the computer situated inside the gallery. With the use of special software, the computer analyzes the sound it receives and sends a musical reconstruction of the signal directly to the piano. As with much of the composer's work, *Schaufensterstück* can be said to provoke and question basic assumptions regarding perception: how in listening do we form an understanding of the world around us? In the case of Ablinger's *Schaufensterstück*, the noise of ordinary outdoor sound is transferred indoors after having been transduced through ordinary piano tones. Music and noise, inside and outside trade places. In combining the sight of the outdoor street scene with what would otherwise sound like abstract and dissonant piano music, one can actually make out the source of the corresponding outside sounds. With the added sense of sight, a viewer of *Schaufensterstück* is able to recognize *through* the contents of musical sound the identity of various noise sources. The contents of the ordinary exterior street scene become an extraordinary interior *mise en scène* revealed through the lens of musical sound.

During the past three decades Peter Ablinger has become an increasingly recognized name in both new music and experimental arts contexts throughout Europe and North America. From recent performances and gallery installations in Austria, Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Spain, to premieres of his concert music by groups such as New York's Wet Ink Ensemble and Klangforum Wien, to critical discussions of his work appearing in at least five different languages, the Berlin-based Austrian composer has become an increasingly important figure in art and new music communities worldwide. Originally appearing as part of Medienkunstlabor at the Kunsthaus Graz in 2004, the aforementioned *Schaufensterstück* was also recently installed in Spain as part of the Ars Automata festival in Madrid. *Schaufensterstück* fits comfortably in a traditional gallery context, in addition to its site-specific appearance in the fifth act of Ablinger's *Landscape Opera Ulrichsberg* (2009), a large-scale multi-media work dedicated to the rural Austrian town. With the notable addition of music composed for concert performance, these various contexts are typical venues for Ablinger's work. While artists and critics alike argue over distinctions between sound art, the gallery arts, Klangkunst and experimental music, Ablinger's work embraces a multitude of contexts, artistic media, and presentation environments.

Perhaps nowhere has Ablinger's multi-medial, multi-modal output been more clearly illustrated than in *Hören hören (Hearing Listening)*, his 2008 exhibition held in and around Berlin's historic *Haus am Waldsee*. The show contained works culled from throughout the composer's career, including works from a variety of media (sound recordings, sculptural works, video installations, interactive performance) and seemingly relevant to several artistic fields (music, sound art, sculpture, performance). All of this from a composer who, although having studied with composers such as Gösta Neuwirth and Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, has cited visual artists Gerhard Richter, Barnett Newman, and Antoni Tàpies as primary influences ("Klänge" 97). Ablinger asserts, however, that the move from working strictly in concert music contexts to creating installations in galleries has had nothing to do with transgression ("Keine Überschreitung" 86). After all, at an early age the composer studied graphic arts and free jazz, and as a kid Ablinger painted, wrote poetry and composed music, all in all not unlike the sum of his artistic activities today ("Klänge" 87). It should be emphasized however, that Ablinger's work comes out of composition; the ostensible media or disciplines involved in a realization become irrelevant when considering the underlying motivations. The composer writes that what presents itself in his work is not "beyond the confines" of the concert hall, but the very confines themselves ("Keine Überschreitung" 86). For Ablinger it becomes relevant when a work is to be realized, when a concept takes shape as a piece, that medium or discipline becomes significant.

Noise.

Ablinger's engagement with noise is unique. An acoustic totality, the "everything always" quality inherent to noise is, according to Peter Ablinger, a representation of maximum information (all audible frequencies at once in the case of white noise), while simultaneously it somehow presents "less than nothing," existing as it were below silence ("Rauschen"). Noise is considered less than silence because since Cage we have been aware that silence is much more than silence; whether it comes from the sound from the ventilation duct or one's own blood circulating, there's always something to hear. With its tendency to drown out or mask other sounds, noise is quieter than no sound at all. Noise is more, however, because as one listens intently to the constant sound of a waterfall, for example, one experiences an excess; hearing *into* the sound, one experiences auditory "hallucinations" the way figures emerge while staring at a blank surface. The composer does not simply use noise as material within a composition, as the case, for example, in the *Etudes de bruit (Noise Studies)* by *musique concrète* composer Pierre Schaeffer. Neither does noise function in Ablinger's work as a symbol for unrest, a gesture of antagonism, or a representation of the spirit of "anti-": anti-music, anti-tradition, anti-authority, and so on. Rather, in Ablinger's noise work the emphasis is on the experience of noise as phenomena, its temporal existence in lived duration, as bodily sensation, or as concept stripped of materiality. Ablinger's extensive *Weiss/Weisslich (White/Whitish)* series includes ways of obtaining or encountering noise, recording noise, and describing what is heard in listening. Noise becomes the composition in and of itself.

Like *Schaufensterstück* Ablinger's *Weiss/Weisslich 7a, Rauschempfänger/Noise Receivers* (1994) depends as much on its visual and spatial presentation as it does its audible component. Its installation at Ablinger's *Haus am Waldsee* exhibition consisted of several consumer-grade, world-radio receivers each spaced about a meter apart, hung at ear level around the gallery and tuned to static. The nearly inaudible noise produced by each radio was easy to go unnoticed, drowned out by the normal sounds that occurred in the space (others walking by, the rustling of clothes, softly spoken conversations). One may not even be aware that the radios are emitting sound at all until moving closer to one of the devices. The piece becomes as much about being surrounded by the constant hum of these small everyday devices as it does the suggestion that at any moment some unknown sound or signal might be transmitted "through the ether," picked up by one of the in-between frequencies to which each radio is tuned.

Opposed to the endlessly sustaining and evanescent character of the noise found in *Weiss/Weisslich 7a, Rauschempfänger/Noise Receivers*, Ablinger's *two strings and noise* (2004) presents noise as an instantaneous and almost violently disruptive phenomenon. The work is for two instruments, violin and cello, along with a single "pop" to be produced over loudspeakers "as loud as responsibly possible" by using a recorded speaker pop, or by manipulating a faulty switch or a broken cable, according to the score. The extremely loud and isolated noise is heard unexpectedly after fifteen seconds of a soft, sustained tone held by both the violin and cello; the unison moves to a major second as the violin descends a whole step, a few seconds before the noise is heard. This speaker pop, the sonic equivalent of a vertical line, occurs at the exact midpoint of what in the string part serves as a diagonal line between two pitches a

whole tone apart. *two strings and noise* differs from Ablinger's work with static noise in that it deals with a single, self-contained noise, as opposed to sustained static sound. Upon looking at the composer's sketch for the piece consisting of a drawing of a single cross, one is reminded of Ablinger's background in graphic arts. One gets much more, however, from listening to the piece than explaining the process in visual or metaphorical terms. And while one might go on at length about the seemingly violent or disruptive nature of the pop in *two strings and noise*, I would be one to emphasize the phenomenal experience of the speaker pop within the work as a whole. The sharply dissipative noise is placed in the exact center of the reduced 30-second string texture. In listening, however, the latter 15-second duration is inevitably experienced as radically different from the first. After the pop one cannot help but to retain something of the sonic "afterimage" of the extremely loud noise in memory. The memory of the pop permeates the second half of the piece even though its sound is nearly instantaneous, almost non-existent. One is left with the anticipation of another, perhaps equally surprising moment during the second half, the upper limit of the sensation of contrast having nearly been shattered (along with one's nerves).

I-127 (2002) is a work for electric guitar and CD playback. Each of its 127 sections lasts about 38 seconds and contains a similar structure. First, the guitar plays a clean and quiet descending scale composed of a simple series of whole steps and half steps. This scale is interrupted by the jarring sound of a loud field recording of a busy street corner in Berlin. Often occurring unpredictably on an upbeat or an odd metric division within the mostly regular paced descending scale, the street recording is accompanied by the guitar playing a transcription of the same material. After the field recording with its superimposed guitar accompaniment, the guitar returns to another quiet descending scale. The guitar transcriptions in *I-127* are created using a similar process to the one used in *Schauenfensterstück*. A spectral analysis extracts prominent tones out of the dense noise texture, condensed in this case to a single monophonic line notated for each section. With the added distortion effect, the electric guitar transcription becomes acoustically noisy to match the character of the field recording. Combined with a somewhat rhythmically disjointed quality these sections are somewhat reminiscent of atonal guitar noodling found in free jazz. The effect becomes stranger, however, upon noticing the precise rhythmic coordination with the field recording (made possible with the aid of a click-track).

I-127 is in many ways similar to *two strings and noise*. Each section in *I-127* might be visualized in a manner similar to the rightward-leaning cross used to represent *two strings and noise*: the initial descending scale and its continuation after the noise correspond to the diagonal line, while the vertical line represents the interruption of the field recording and its transcription. The entire figure of the lopsided cross is stretched horizontally: the diagonal two-note figure in *two strings and noise* turns into a full-fledged scale in each section of *I-127*, while the instantaneous speaker pop expands into a momentary sonic portrait of the Berlin cityscape. Interestingly, however, the ostensibly contrasting elements of scales and noise may be more closely related than one would think. During guitarist Seth Josel's New York performance of sections 33-127 of the piece for his CD-release on Mode Records (2009), the presentation of the "raw" material of cleanly descending scales was clearly contrasted to the intermittent spurts of raw outdoor sound heard over loudspeakers. Amidst the quiet descending scales, however, one would occasionally hear the real sounds of the Brooklyn streets surrounding the Diapason Gallery creep in and overtake the soft sounds of the electric guitar. On the other hand, after even half of the 95 iterations of the consistent process (scale, noise, scale), one began to notice subtle patterns and similarities amidst the otherwise highly differentiated noise textures. Perhaps it is no coincident then that one of Ablinger's first "noise pieces" was *Weiss/Weisslich Ia*. (1980), a piece containing only a long descending scale using the white keys of the piano. *Weiss/Weisslich Ib*. contains the same scale in descending order.

Place.

In Ablinger's work, place is often foregrounded through sound. His piece *Weiss/Weisslich 12* (1994/95), for example, consists of 40-second sound recordings of the interior silence of 18 different churches throughout Brandenburg. Or, as in the case of *Schauenfensterstück*, his work may serve to reveal something inherent within the site of its presentation—whether that might be the concert hall, the gallery, the urban landscape, or an ordinary architectural space. In his ongoing site-specific series, *Orte/Places* (since 2001), three architectural locations within walking distance are chosen in a city and an instrumental score is created which contains the resonant frequencies (or room formants) for each location. After performing the score, both the instrumentalists and audience walk to the next location. The walk, Ablinger

insists, is part of the piece (“Orte”). So far the work has been presented in Graz, Oslo, Buenos Aires, Warsaw, and Luxembourg.

In Ablinger’s interactive work *Weiss/Weisslich 36, Kopfhörer/Headphones*, the site of performance becomes the subject of scrutiny and examination. A participant is given a set of headphones containing a pair of built-in microphones that simply amplify sounds that might otherwise go unnoticed (sounds ordinarily too soft or distant). A kind of aural prosthesis or an acoustic magnifying glass, the *Kopfhörer* allow an extension of hearing in terms of both intensity and proximity. In my own experiences with the piece, the *Kopfhörer* have been shown to not only to reveal but also to effectively alter the situation in which they are used. Upon wearing the oversized contraption and walking through the *Haus am Waldsee* exhibition, along with obtaining a detailed aural portrait of the lake and its tranquil surroundings, I could sometimes hear several pieces of Ablinger’s sounding at once, and would occasionally find myself eavesdropping unintentionally (at least initially) on the conversations of others. Recently, eight of the *Kopfhörer* were given out during the intermission of a concert given in the Konzerthaus Berlin by Ensemble Zwischentöne, a group founded by Ablinger in 1988, which continues presently under the direction of artist and composer Bill Dietz. A subtle feeling of uneasiness permeated the interval. After several of the concertgoers wearing the headphones had exclaimed something to the effect of, “Hey, I can hear you from all the way over here!” there was perhaps a sense of loss of the normal intra-social privacy one feels during a concert intermission. While I was perfectly comfortable discussing the evening with Mr. Dietz himself and among others, I couldn’t help but to wonder about the effects of this peculiar intervention upon the normally impenetrable, presumably inalienable social component of the concert experience. Perhaps alterations or “extensions” to perception may have specific social consequences as well. And sociality, as we all know, is a vital component of the site of any concert.

Ablinger’s *Palastmusik für Infra- und Ultraschall* (2010) is an installation for 8-channel sound created for an ongoing series featuring sound works by international artists installed in and around Berlin’s historic Schloßplatz, organized by the Austrian group TONSPUR. Currently on view until late May 2010, Ablinger’s piece consists of eight sets of special loudspeakers installed underneath a long wooden bench, spaced at regular intervals, stretching nearly a quarter of a kilometer across a pathway overlooking the site of the recently demolished Palast der Republik, the former seat of the GDR parliament. The audible (and inaudible) component of the piece continues Ablinger’s use of the diagonal scalar structure like the one found in *I-127*. The basic structure used in *Palastmusik*, in fact, may be thought of the exact opposite of that of *Weiss/Weisslich I*, though in this case the familiar range of the piano is almost entirely avoided. Sine tones extend beyond the range of the piano, into the subsonic (where sound turns into pure vibration) and the ultrasonic, beyond the upper limit of our threshold for hearing frequencies. Each proceeding at a unique tempo, the speakers play a descending C-Major scale starting from the lowest note of the piano and continuing until the sound is well below the threshold of hearing. The same white-note scale also ascends starting with the highest note of the piano until the sound moves into a range perceivable only by infants, bats, and dogs. The location of each speaker corresponds to a number representing one of eight “life stages” from 10 to 80 years old; for each position the sound is adjusted according to the presumed degree of hearing-loss a listener at that age might possess (give or take a few decades if the subject has been exposed to copious amounts of loud rock music). While the slow, gut-wrenching pulsations are felt indiscriminately by sitting just above one of the speakers, the ability to hear the ultrasonic tones varies considerably from listener to listener.

Palastmusik marks what is absent with what is invisible and inaudible. It refers to what was by presenting that which is imperceptible. A bygone era of division. Sound that is beyond sensory capacity and inhuman, while below, subhuman, and underneath (our asses). While referring to the past, the piece provides a frame for perception in the present. In my own experience of the work the sub-audio vibrations provided a counterpoint to the ordinary “life rhythms” of the Schloßplatz: sitting on the snow-covered bench overlooking the sun-drenched city square, the sound of snow crunching on the ground as people walked by, the sight of dozens of variably sized snowmen covering the area where the Palace once stood. During the opening for *Palastmusik*, moving from one speaker position to the next, I had the thought that perhaps as with Ablinger’s *Orte/Places*, *Palastmusik* might be as much about the process of moving from one place to another, as it is a single location. Sound is relocated to the kinetic, as physical sense, or relegated to non-human species. And as it turns out, materials from the “Palazzo Prozzo” apparently embarked upon a migration of their own; more than 35,000 tons of steel girders were shipped from the

Palace's demolition site to the United Arab Emirates for use in the construction of Dubai's recently unveiled "Al Burj", presently the tallest building in the world.¹

Language.

Ablinger's engagement with language has ranged from the instructive (scores consisting of written text), to the descriptive (text pieces in which sounds are described), to his work with *phonorealism* in which the materiality of speech is examined using familiar musical materials. In Ablinger's scores the composer often uses text to describe processes used to realize performances or situations, to fabricate objects or create images, or simply to invoke thought. His work *Listening Piece in 2 Parts* (2005) consists of the following text: "part 1: the change from the large room to the small one / part 2: the change from the small room to the large one". The two lines of text are separated and placed by the respective entrances between two different-sized adjacent rooms. Arising from Ablinger's interest in architectural spaces and perhaps owing to a proclivity to work with the preexisting conditions of a space—here the "givens" of the gallery—this reduced text score articulates (at least half of) the activity required in order to read the installed score. Upon reading the entire text, one realizes that she may have effectively already performed the piece.

Two Part Invention, 32 Fotos (2003) is a piece that comes out of Ablinger's *Sehen und Hören* (*Seeing and Hearing*) series. The piece consists of a text score describing in precise terms the creation of 32 photographs by specifying exposure times and camera positions for the photographing of one red and one black postcard. Realized by visual artist Martinho Dias, the result consists of a series of photographs that reveals different kinds of overlappings and levels of transparency between the single color postcard and the background. Interestingly, Ablinger explains the origin of the piece as coming out of earlier attempts to increase the density instrumental ensemble works to a point where the texture would actually become color. Though stating that in *Two Part Invention* "hearing becomes an extra-physical process," Ablinger insists that the photos are "in no way visual art" ("Sehen und Hören"). I might add that the work also relies upon the score and realization model intrinsic to composition, of course extended in this case to include the medium of photography.

Ablinger's *Weiss/Weisslich 11B* consists of a series of eight written prose pieces, one of which is a 719-word unpunctuated text describing what the composer "actually heard" during the course of 40 minutes of simply sitting and writing during a residency at California's Villa Aurora. Created on October 7, 2001, from 10:38 to 11:18, according to the work's postscript, the piece reads as a kind of stream of consciousness, unedited phenomenological description of the sounds and visual phenomena of a tranquil everyday scene. The first 27 words read "THE UPWARDS RISING MAGPIE-LIKE CROAKING OF THE BLUE JAY THE NOISE FROM THE TIRES OF A PASSING VEHICLE A SLOW DOWNWARDS GLISSANDO OF A SINGLE-ENGINE PLANE" ("*Weiss/Weisslich 11B*"). The piece refers to the process of its own creation roughly midway through the work: "RUBBING OF PALM BRANCHES HIGH ABOVE A SLIGHT TREMBLING OF THE GLASS TABLE WHERE I SIT WRITING" (*ibid.*). Writing its own process of inscription, a work that observes itself perceiving. Hearing listening.

Whereas *Weiss/Weisslich 11B* mechanically turns experiences of sound into language, Ablinger's work with what he calls *phonorealism* consists of the sound of speech transduced into musical tones via the musical automata of the player piano. As with *Schauenfensterstück*, a spectral analysis is performed on an input signal—in this case a preexisting recording containing speech—and the analysis is re-synthesized, transformed back into sound through tones played across the range of the piano by the device sitting atop the keyboard. With practice or by using an accompanying printed text, one can actually discern the original speech, reconstituted only by piano tones. In Ablinger's recent *Deus Cantando* (*God, Singing*) (2009), the source of the "speaking piano" comes from a young native of Berlin reciting the International Environmental Criminal Court declaration co-authored by The XIV Dalai Lama. In *Quadraturen III*: "*A Letter from Schoenberg*" (2006) the source of the speech comes from a recording of a letter dictated by Arnold Schoenberg, addressed to a Mr. Ross Russell, vehemently decrying the latter's publishing of the former's *Ode to Napoleon* with a woman's voice. What is interesting in both *Deus Cantando* and *A Letter from Schoenberg* is the kind of perceptual oscillation that occurs. The same way one can choose to close her eyes or look away from the display-window during an encounter with *Schauenfensterstück*, one can ignore the text accompanying a playback of *Letter from Schoenberg*. On the other hand, the source of the

¹ "Berlin's Demolished Socialist Palace is Revived in Dubai | Germany | Deutsche Welle | 11.08.2008." *Home | Deutsche Welle*. Web. 07 Feb. 2010. <<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,3554502,00.html>>.

sound causing the activation of piano tones in *Schaufensterstück* may be out of view; or in *Letter from Schoenberg* one may recognize the voice automatically (especially after repeated exposure), or zone out voluntarily and perceive only extremely loud and fragmented piano music. *A Letter from Schoenberg* says something else by re-saying, re-playing Schoenberg's original speech, retooling "music" as its playback device. The original speech is effectively détourned; *A Letter from Schoenberg* highlights the misappropriation of which Mr. Russell is originally accused by repurposing the recording of Schoenberg's complaint, transforming its contents from mere music business chatter into a speech-music bastard child, an unstable half-breed between music and language. It becomes clear that abstraction, in some sense, relies upon the separation of the senses, that meaning is a phenomenon that occurs *across* perception.

Seeing and hearing; noise, place, language. Two senses and three fields out of many that intertwine in the richly-knit perceptual fabric represented by Ablinger's work. Bleeding into one another at their extremes, in the end these categories become difficult to parse. Ablinger's work is valuable because it is not only aesthetically, but perceptually complex; it continually asks, "How did we arrive?"—at these stable, defined categories, these limits of perception, the process by which meaning is birthed into existence. Ablinger's work continues to provoke—even to antagonize—our basic understandings of the way we understand the world around us. Through listening, a process that opens onto any and all senses, we uncover. The world is revealed.

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