

Beyond the boundaries of music

some connections in Peter Ablinger's work

by Sergio Bové

What is new and which affects the idea of the work comes not necessarily from the internal recasting of disciplines, but rather from their encounter in relation to an object which traditionally is the province of none of them.

Roland Barthes⁽¹⁾

There are two streams of thought relating to the separation of the arts or the interrelation between them. The first, defended by authors such as Lessing, Pater, Greenberg or Fried,⁽²⁾ maintain the purity of each art unrelated to the others. A typical example of this tendency is that of the majority of contemporary or new music we usually hear at concert halls. Its traditional sources of inspiration and means of realization, as well as its outcomes, do not go much beyond the music itself and its musical and technical elements. This type of music seems to suffer a kind of autism which prevents it from extrapolating beyond its own limits and relating to the other arts and the world that surrounds it.

The other tendency, argued in the work of authors such as Shaw-Miller, Levinson and Barthes,⁽³⁾ is related to conjunction, synthesis, interdisciplinarity and hybridity among art forms. Here, music is not understood exclusively as an auditory discipline but as a field of activities with mutual feedback between them. They meet at intermediate places that are the province of none of them, grey zones, difficult to classify and label. These intermediate spaces lack a sense of belonging, they are places of anonymity, which the anthropologist Marc Augé called "no places": the places we 'pass through' in our contemporary society such as airport transit lounges, transport (buses, trains, cars, aircraft...), shopping centres, supermarkets, etc.⁽⁴⁾ Peter Ablinger's work is related to this synthetic, interdisciplinary and hybrid artistic tendency as well as these intermediate and ambiguous spaces which blur the beginning and end of something.

The change between concert and installation pieces, to me has nothing to do with transgressing (in what direction would that be?) As a child I painted, wrote poetry, composed. Today I do nothing different. The differences in the disciplines are irrelevant to the motivation underlying my work. They only become significant when I move from the motivation on to the realisation. Only then am I confronted with the reality of the limits of institutions - in the face of which I have to say: now, this and that I can only do in a gallery while the other part of my consideration only has a chance of being realised in a concert hall.⁽⁵⁾

Weiss/Weisslich 11, Prosa (since 1994), are text-scores where Ablinger sits in a place, writes what he hears, and imagines the sounds he is reading. These kinds of pieces are performed in the mind of every reader as a thought, they don't require physical execution or any "real" sound. The idea is to

create situations in which music forms part of the situation itself; for Peter Ablinger this situation is not so different from that of "real" music.

The electroacoustic pieces *IAEOV (1995-2001)* basically consist of the verticalization or condensation of successive events within the simultaneousness of a spectrum. According to the composer, these works have always been more like huge colored plates than music, nevertheless, they were created for the concert hall. These huge colored plates can be perfectly associated with the monochrome tradition in art. From traditional Chinese painting; through the paintings of Turner and Whistler, with the use of colour as light and the dematerialization of objects in the atmosphere; Monet's paintings, with the elimination of the horizon line and the occupation of the total field of vision that led to large-scale post-Cubist abstraction such as the paintings of Newman and Rothko; and Malevich, who in 1918 painted his first true monochrome, a white square on a white background in which the image and the background are nearly indistinguishable.⁽⁶⁾ In *IAEOV*, the more condensed the material and the denser the structure of the white noise (background), the more imperceptible the individual sounds are (image). It is not a matter of blurring the image, of making it disappear, but rather of widening the field, of giving it all the importance and meaning that has traditionally been given to the image.

Seeing and hearing (1994-2004) is, as its subtitle suggests, a series of musical pieces without sounds. They are photographs taken with extended exposure time and a moving camera. Ablinger says that the photographs originally served as studies for the concert works *IAEOV* but later became an independent series of compositions in their own right. For him, these pieces only make sense when he considers them as music, and when he gives them an additional meaning where seeing only has a preparatory function while hearing becomes an extra-physical process. In these works, no listener can hear the sound of any music player, either acoustic - a musical instrument, a chamber group, an orchestra - or electronic. The effect would be visual, but these pieces act as a visual metaphor for the absent melody or inaudible sound. The composer La Monte Young said to his partner Tony Conrad: "Isn't it wonderful if someone listen to something he is ordinarily supposed to look at?"⁽⁷⁾

As well as exploring these intermediate spaces through the interrelation with other artistic disciplines, specially the visual arts, Peter Ablinger confronts us in a very special way with the reality that surrounds us as well as the 'day-to-day' in which we are all immersed.

To be frank, I do not think much about the relation between my work and the tradition. My sources of inspiration I find somewhere else. They spring from the present, my environment, everyday life, or, if I have to name one of the arts, then it is visual art rather than music.⁽⁸⁾

Paul Klee said that art does not reproduce the visible, but makes visible what is not. Ablinger makes visible those everyday elements on which we do not usually focus our attention. He gives meaning to the events of our reality and environment that are normally meaningless for us. He makes conscious what is unconscious. He brings to the foreground what is at the background and focuses our attention on those "transitory, peripheral, and incidental" aspects of our everyday lives.⁽⁹⁾

Weiss/Weisslich 13 - vinyl record (1995) consists of a 7 vinyl record edition from which the "musical sound" has been removed. The only sound that is emitted therefore comes from the dust and scratches in its grooves. How many times have we heard vinyls and after a certain time eliminated from our auditory field every vestige of scratches and background noise produced by the needle? We only hear the "musical sound", the sound that, because of a scale of values, has meaning. We do not hear the background noise, we expel it from our auditory field. It is a sound which does not have any meaning for us. Due to this scale of values, but not to music itself, we isolate this sound object from our musical experience and we turn it into an inaudible one. What the composer does in this work is to take this background noise and present it to us without conditions. He eliminates every "musical" image as well, as he widens the background so that we can not escape. The needle scratches on the vinyl grooves occupy all our auditory field. He reverses our scale of values. He gives meaning to that which has traditionally lacked it. He isolates this object in order to accentuate it. In the work of the visual artist James Turrell we can notice this kind of isolating and 'heightening' of something:

If you look at some portions of the New York sky, you can have an amazingly beautiful part of the sky. But you don't notice that when you can see the rest. This is one of the things that happens in my work: I isolate something, often something that is actually occurring outside, whether a sunset or this light event. So you feel it heightened even though you see less.⁽¹⁰⁾

In the same way that Turrell selects a portion of the New York sky, Ablinger does something similar with these background sounds which in fact turn out to be incredibly beautiful. He isolates them in order to imbue them with the meaning they deserve.

Weiss/Weisslich 23 (1995) and its mobile version *Weiss/Weisslich 36 (1999)*, both works for headphones to which fixed microphones are connected through which you hear via the headphones what the microphones pick up. Some time ago, Peter Ablinger gave me one of these sets of headphones. He took me to his studio window, opened it and waited silently. Knowing nothing about the headphones, I began to look through the window and waited for the sort of thing you would normally expect to hear from them: some "music", speech, radio, etc. After a while, I started to hear the reality that surrounded me, that same reality which had been there before I put the headphones. The experience had a great impact on me. I perceived the difference between that "pre-headphone reality" and this other "post-

headphone reality". That first reality which I had not been conscious of and the second one, which I was now aware of. Those two realities that were the same but at the same time were not. The key lies in this difference, in being aware of this sound reality that surrounds us, in the everyday things which are there but which go unnoticed by us. It is through this key difference that the composer makes visible (audible) all these transitory, peripheral and incidental aspects of reality that, because of that scale of values previously mentioned, we do not perceive. As he says: "the same is not the same".

Voices and piano (since 1998) is an extensive cycle of pieces, each for a single recorded voice and piano. The voices are all taken from spoken interviews or pieces of writing, mainly by celebrities. The function of the piano is not the mere, traditional accompaniment of the voice; according to Ablinger, it is in competition or comparison with it. The piano copies the voice through a spectral and temporal scanning of it. The finer the scanning, the more figurative and realistic the outcome and the closer the matching of the piano to the voice. The coarser the scanning, the more abstract and further from reality the outcome and the less the piano is matched to the voice. When we listen to somebody speaking, we usually pay attention to the story he or she is telling us as well as to the semantics and meaning of the words. James Turrell talks about this but in relation to light:

The quality of light is diminished if you use the light to bear a message. For instance, the cinema. That is light, but you don't pay attention to light. You pay attention to the story in it, so you don't get the light's power.⁽¹¹⁾

With "meaning" you tend to pay attention to story, so you are taken by that, rather than being transported by the power of light itself. Light's power is felt as when you look into the fire. It engenders a state of drifting off. I don't want to lose light's power by putting a storyline over it. I want the light itself.⁽¹²⁾

Although in *Voices and piano* the story is superimposed on the music, the composer focuses our attention directly on the sound of the words, as Turrell does with light. Once again, he makes audible something which is not: now, when we listen to a speech, we hear its music, not only its message, its story. It is like arriving in a country where we do not understand the language or what people are saying to us. We miss the story, the message, the meaning of the word, but if we remain calm, we are able to listen to the music of that language. We can pay attention to what we do not ordinarily hear, "the alchemy of the word" - as the poet, Hugo Ball, said about phonetic poetry:

We must return to the alchemy of the word, we must even give up the word too, to keep for poetry its last and holiest refuge.⁽¹³⁾

The poetry's last and holiest refuge, Ball says, is the sound, not the meaning. Music is the sound with no meaning. Poetry becomes a form of music, the voice and speech in *Voices and piano* too.

The work *Wachstum und massenmord* (2010) also pose some questions that extrapolate the boundaries of music itself. They are linked to questions which arise within the sphere of the visual arts and philosophy. The work is for title, string quartet and program note. From this peculiar "instrumentation" established by the composer, a matter related to the borders or limits of a piece of music, to its "frame", is raised. According to Immanuel Kant, the frame of a painting is an external complement that makes the form of the work of art clearer and more intuitable as well as exciting and sustaining the attention directed to the object itself.⁽¹⁴⁾ As from the "instrumentation" of this composition, the frame of the musical work is enlarged. The piece no longer contains just "the music" but the title and program note too. The composer focuses our attention on this new content, comprised of these three elements which are no longer supplements of the "real" work, the string quartet. Connected with this "real work", the string quartet, Peter Ablinger tells us that the rehearsal is the piece. The musicians get their parts immediately before the live performance of the piece - they are waiting for them on the musical stands - and they have to make a sight reading of them. They have to rehearse in front of the audience as if they were in private, with no theatrical gestures. The work *Box with the sound of its own making*, by the visual artist Robert Morris, consists of a wooden cube containing a tape recorder and a speaker. The tape plays the sounds that were recorded when the cube was made, including the artist leaving the studio. Morris thus transports the listener away from his present location in time and space to a moment and location, before the completion of the work. This moment - the making of the cube, the process, "the rehearsal" - is the work too. In *Wachstum und massenmord*, the listener is also referred to that moment before the "piece of music". The frame of the work is moved to another space and time, and our attention is focused on the rehearsal, on the process, though with a significant difference to Morris's piece, where the realization and consummation of the work is presented to us simultaneously. Ablinger's piece does not reach its completion. It is unfinished, but not in the way that a preliminary study or preparatory outline of something is unfinished; it is the final work itself which is incomplete; a work of art that by some paradoxical means has to reject the type of work that it is in order to take on the appearance of a work of art that, rather than stretching, has to become disembodied, to separate from itself, to function. This sketch that becomes a finished work is not a mere outcome, but the moment of a process destined to remain in suspense. Pliny remarked on how satisfying it was to see the last works of some artists and their unfinished paintings because it is possible to observe the remains of the sketches as well as the very conception of the artist. Traditional figurative painting also reserved a place for the sketch. Leonardo, one of the greatest exponents of figurative art, left room for the *non finito* as well as the vague form of the *sfumato*, he even left his *Gioconda* unfinished; Vasari praised those contours which remained suspended between the visible and invisible; the last Titian talked of the fleeting softness of those objects in the distance of our vision, being

present without being so. The unfinished is also one of the most characteristic features in modern painting. Picasso claimed that finishing a picture was like killing someone; Cézanne that finishing merely served to attract the admiration imbeciles; and Malraux that a finished work had not necessarily been completed and a completed work was not necessarily finished.⁽¹⁵⁾ Peter Ablinger raises the question in connection with *Wachstum und massenmord*: "Can the piece be performed another time by the same quartet?" And he answers: "I would say, yes, as long there is something left to rehearse."⁽¹⁶⁾ And I would add: as long as there is something left to sketch.

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, "From work to text" in *Image Music Text* (Fontana Press, 1977).
2. Simon Shaw-Miller, "Separation and conjunction: music and art, circa 1800-2000" in *See this sound. Audiovisuology 2* (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute Media.Art.Research, Linz/Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig, 2011).
3. Simon Shaw-Miller, "Ut pictura musica" in *Visible deeds of music* (Yale University Press, 2002); Jerrold Levinson, "Hybrid art forms" in *Music, art, & metaphysics* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Roland Barthes, "From work to text" in *Image Music Text* (Fontana Press, 1977).
4. Marc Augé, "Los no lugares. Espacios del anonimato" (Editorial Gedisa, 2008).
5. Peter Ablinger, "No transgression"
6. Barbara Rose, "Monochromes, from Malevich to the present" (University of California Press, 2006).
7. Edward Strickland, "Minimalism:Origins" (Indiana University Press, 1993).
8. Peter Ablinger, "The sounds do not interest me", interview with Trond Olav Reinholdtsen in *Parergon* (Oslo, 2005) and in *Musiktexte, No.111* (Cologne, 2006).
9. Robert Irwin, "Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees" (University of California Press, 2008).
10. James Turrell, "Looking at the light", conversations with Ana María Torres (IVAM - Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno - Exhibition Catalogue, 2004).
11. Ibid.
12. James Turrell, "Plato's cave", conversations with Ana María Torres (IVAM - Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno - Exhibition Catalogue, 2004).
13. Raoul Hausmann, "Poema fonético" in *Correo Dadá* (Ediciones Acuarela, 2011).
14. Paul Duro, "The rhetoric of the frame. Essays on the boundaries of the art work" (Cambridge University Press, 1996).
15. François Jullien, "Teoría del esbozo" in *La gran imagen no tiene forma* (Ediciones Alpha Decay, 2008).
16. Peter Ablinger, *Wachstum und massenmord* introductory explanation.