

Sonic obstacles and conceptual nostalgia: Preliminary considerations on musical conceptualism and contemporary art

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Abstract: This paper is concerned with the aesthetic and discursive gap between music and contemporary art, and the recent attempts to remedy this in the field of New Music through a notion of “New Conceptualism.” It examines why, despite musical sources being central to the emergence of conceptual artistic strategies in the 1950s and ’60s, the worlds of an increasingly transmedial “generic art” and music have remained largely distinct. While it takes New Music’s New Conceptualism as its focus, it argues that the perspective on New Music it takes has wider implications in music and art. It begins by defining what exactly “New Music” refers to, and outlines some of the conditions for the recent rise of conceptualism in New Music. It then takes the work of the composer Johannes Kreidler as a key example of some artistic tendencies and theoretical presuppositions in New Conceptualism. Following this it draws on work in the field of sound studies in order to critically examine the theoretical attempt to connect New Music with contemporary art that is found in the notion of “Music in the Expanded Field.” To conclude it offers some reflections on how a more robust conversation between contemporary art and New Music can begin to be conceived.

Keywords: New Music; conceptualism; contemporary art; Johannes Kreidler; postconceptual art

1. *Introduction*

In his 2016 essay “The Terminology is in Crisis: Postconceptual Art and New Music,” the philosopher and art theorist Peter Osborne asks why, when a certain approach to music played a formative role in the development of conceptual strategies in art in the 1950s and ’60s,¹ the field of New Music has persisted in holding an institutional self-understanding that is distant from the

¹ See Buchloh (1990) for a historical account of the first phase of conceptual art, from 1962 to 1969. I will use “conceptual art” to refer to this specific historical phase and milieu, and “conceptualism” to speak more generally of the sources, characteristics, legacy, and uptake of conceptual art.

discourses of contemporary art (2018c: 185). While, Osborne argues, boundaries between “the arts” and their distinct mediums have diminished in the emergence of a “transmedial” (2018b: 22) “generic art,”² music has remained firmly medium-specific, conceived as the art of sound.³ Here I will extend Osborne’s reflections through an examination of what in recent years has been termed a “New Conceptualism” in music, a movement that has been a topic of significant debate at the Darmstadt International Summer Course, the historic home of New Music. In what follows I will examine some of the features of this New Conceptualism, and suggest some considerations that this examination raises concerning how we conceive of the relation between music and contemporary art.

Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens’s well-known argument for the “Idea Idea,” which claims that in conceptual art “*there is no physical medium: the medium is the idea*” (2010: 33), seems to be affirmed, at least in part, by Johannes Kreidler, one of the composers most associated with New Conceptualism:⁴ in his “Sentences on Musical Concept-Art,” Kreidler states that “[a] concept piece is entirely determined by one trenchant idea” (2013). Suggested here is a new point of convergence between New Music and contemporary art. However, sociologically and discursively, a clear gap between the art world and the field of New Music remains.

By considering some consequences of the uptake of something like the “Idea Idea” in New Music, I aim here to draw out some of the conditions for this persisting gap. An important grounding here will be Osborne’s definition of contemporary art as “postconceptual” art. By this Osborne means that contemporary art serves as conceptual art’s “philosophical comprehension and the elaboration of its consequences” (2018b: 21), most pointedly around the question of the ontology of the artwork. Conceptual art’s significance is, on Osborne’s account, not found in the artistic foregrounding of ideas *per se*, but in a more fundamental challenge to the significance of traditional art critical categories, with conceptual art making a demand for a form of evaluation distinct from modes such as medium, form, or style (2013: 48). Conceptual art introduces, at the level of the “historical ontology of the artwork,” conditions for the artwork including a necessary conceptuality, an infinite expansion of possible material forms, and a distributed unity of the artwork across different instantiations. But furthermore, on

² The term “generic art” derives from Thierry de Duve (1996), who uses it to describe the nominalist condition of art after a conceptualist challenge to the broadly Kantian aesthetic tradition.

³ Here I make no judgment as to the value or validity of placing music under the transmedial category of “generic art,” and offer only preliminary steps towards grounding such a discussion.

⁴ The other composer most commonly associated with New Conceptualism being Jennifer Walsh, whose work would require a quite different reading than that put forward here.

Osborne's account a certain "failure" of something like the "Idea Idea" provides a crucial impetus for postconceptual art, with the "strong" form of conceptual art, purporting to deal with concepts and concepts alone, revealing, contrary to its purposes, the ineliminable – but radically insufficient – aesthetic dimension of art. On Osborne's understanding, contemporary art, as postconceptual art, is thus a critical engagement with the legacy of conceptual art.

I will suggest here that examining the conditions for the continuing gap between contemporary art and New Music suggests a need to nuance how conceptualism is considered in relation to New Music.⁵ Highlighting what Osborne has called a dual relation between New Music and contemporary art of "identification and delay" (2018c: 185), where New Music has repeated some key gestures of artistic conceptualism, I will furthermore argue that such a nuancing is necessary if meaningful theoretical exchange between contemporary art and New Music is to take place. I will begin by briefly clarifying what exactly "New Music" refers to, and by rejecting a possible point of contention, which would claim that when Osborne speaks of a musical source for artistic conceptualism in "[John] Cage, [George] Brecht and [La Monte] Young" (185) he is speaking not of "New Music" but of "experimental music." By troubling this distinction I will suggest that the perspective on New Music I adopt here has wider implications in music and art. I will then outline some of the conditions for the recent rise of conceptualism in New Music, after which I will take the work of Johannes Kreidler as a key example of some artistic tendencies and theoretical presuppositions in New Conceptualism. Following this I will draw on work in the field of sound studies in order to critically examine the theoretical attempt to connect New Music with contemporary art that is found in the notion of "Music in the Expanded Field," and to conclude I will offer some reflections on how a more robust conversation between contemporary art and New Music can begin to be conceived.

2. *Setting the scene: New Music and experimental music*

The German composer Mathias Spahlinger's definition of New Music provides us with a point to start from. Spahlinger describes New Music as an open-ended project that has unfolded in and from Western art music since around 1910, that is, from the time that Arnold Schoenberg departed from the

⁵ Julian Dodd (2016) is among those within the philosophy of art who have challenged the strength of the distinction Goldie and Schellekens make between idea as medium and physical presence as mere means. While contributing to debates concerning the Idea Idea is not my goal here, I believe that reflecting on some features of New Conceptualism nevertheless suggests a challenge to the adequacy of the Idea Idea similar to that developed by Dodd.

tonal forms that had served as the organising structures of musical works, giving coherence to their immanent structure as well as to their reception. “Dodecaphony” and “serialism” are among the names given to Schoenberg’s attempts to work with musical material without harmonic organisation. For Spahlinger, New Music constitutes a continuation of the self-reflexive exploration of the character of musical material that this initial moment in Schoenberg’s work involved (2008: 590). The theoretical and institutional home of New Music has for over seventy years been the Darmstadt International Summer Course, where Theodor Adorno’s lectures in the 1950s provided a lasting philosophical grounding for New Music, albeit with a varied uptake of the dialectic Adorno maintains between artistic autonomy and a heteronomy dependent on social context.⁶ At this time the Summer Course became most closely associated with the music of the “Darmstadt School” of composers, a name used by Luigi Nono to refer to himself and others including Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, who took serial composition’s examination of musical materials to a near-scientific level.⁷

When Peter Osborne raises the question of why New Music has not followed the legacy of John Cage, George Brecht, and La Monte Young, that is, why the historical conjunction between music and the development of conceptual art that these figures mark is not reflected in contemporary New Music, the simple answer would then be that New Music is a musical tradition quite distinct from the tradition represented by those names. Until recently many working in music would have affirmed such a clean distinction. Michael Nyman’s influential 1974 book *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (1999) is emblematic of such a position, with Nyman arguing that we must distinguish between, on one hand, the primarily North American “experimental” practices of music that follow in the wake of Cage, and, on the other, a European avant-garde. “Experimental music” is taken by Nyman to stand outside of the dominant institutions of music and to undermine music’s precepts, being characterised by, among other features, open-endedness, an embrace of indeterminacy, a challenge to the authority of the composer and to distinctions between artist and audience, and a blurring of the lines between art and everyday life. The passage of these features from Cage’s music and musical thought can be directly traced into conceptualist artistic strategies through Cage’s association, as a teacher and peer, with artists including Allan Kaprow, Dick Higgins, and George Brecht (see Kim 2011). The “New Music”

⁶ Indeed conflict around the critical impulse of musical autonomy already arises with Adorno’s 1955 “The Aging of the New Music” (2002).

⁷ Samuel Wilson (2018) offers an interesting perspective on some of the contemporary significance of Adorno’s thought on musical material.

avant-garde, on the other hand, is posited by Nyman as maintaining an exclusive concern with musical parameters within a concert music tradition dating back to the Renaissance, continuing to insist upon the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the increasingly technical working of musical materials.

Nyman's distinction has left a long shadow, reflected not only in theoretical work but in institutional self-understanding and the self-identification of composers. And the territories of "experimental music" and "New Music" do have a degree of coherence, at least in terms of a kind of family resemblance. Yet recent work in musicology has done much to challenge the sharp distinction between the two, with Martin Iddon (2013) and Amy C. Beal (2006) among those who have shown a much greater intersection and exchange between these purportedly distinct traditions than has been supposed. As such we can now more adequately understand the many already evident markers of this exchange, such as the regular correspondence between Cage and Boulez between 1949 and 1954, and Cage's visit to Darmstadt in 1958. Nyman's distinction between the experimental and the avant-garde therefore does not explain New Music's lack of engagement with contemporary art, but only adds more difficulties to any attempts to address this problem.

Moreover, the gap between contemporary art and music is not limited to New Music. While the diffuse work following Cage more often steps outside of the disciplinary and institutional boundaries of music than New Music does, there is nevertheless a distinct distance to be felt between the practices and discourses of "experimental music," broadly understood,⁸ and contemporary art. We could refer directly to Cage's retrospective turn to musical idioms from the 1970s onwards, or to La Monte Young's embrace of a neo-Pythagorean theology of sound (Joseph 2008), but more generally there is often a divide between the performative and (post)conceptual artistic practices that drew on Cage's work and thought and the musical practices that have enacted a kind of redisciplinisation of the insights that initially pushed Cage beyond music. There is, both historically and thematically, a stronger link between contemporary art and "experimental music" than there is between contemporary art and "New Music," but nevertheless in practical and theoretical terms we still find firm lines being drawn between the two. The complex historical, aesthetic, and social ecologies at hand in all of these contexts and distinctions is suggestive of why the discussion here about New Music and contemporary art has consequences beyond that particular musical milieu.

As such while the problem of the relation between New Music and contemporary art has distinctive features and should not be taken to be generally ap-

⁸ Such a broad understanding is captured in Gottschalk (2016).

plicable to other musical fields, I believe it offers a means of approaching a more general set of questions concerning music and contemporary art. One reason why New Music provides a useful starting point for this inquiry is that it has traditionally been something of a limit case in terms of cultural isolation, not only from contemporary art but from broader sociopolitical concerns.⁹ Another is that, through institutions such as the Darmstadt International Summer Course, New Music is easier to demarcate as a field of inquiry than broader terms such as “experimental music.” Furthermore, and what will be my primary topic of concern here, it is an apt moment to probe New Music, as recent years have seen some tentative steps towards going beyond the “Newness” of the development of musical materials with which it has been associated and into concerns associated with conceptualism and contemporary art, such as institutional critique, self-reflexivity, and intermediality. I will now outline this turn.

At Darmstadt in 2012 the composer Michael Rebhahn echoed the words of the Fluxus artist Joseph Beuys by delivering a lecture entitled “I hereby resign from New Music” (2012).¹⁰ In this lecture Rebhahn noted an increasing tendency among young composers to distance themselves from the term – and, tacitly, the institutions – of New Music. For these composers, Rebhahn claims, the “progress of material” is perceived to be a dead end, and marks a distinct foreclosure of musical possibilities in favour of a “box ticking aesthetic” (2). In a follow up paper of 2013 Rebhahn elaborates on this aesthetic, speaking of an artistic practice that involves “an implementation of techniques, methods, forms and rules” in the service of “solving” intra-musical problems (2013: 7). Moreover, Rebhahn associates this aesthetic with an institutional form, one that he claims is aptly described by the paradoxical term “Contemporary Classical Music”: in Rebhahn’s words “a style of combinations and adaptations, of allusions and quotations. A gallant mixture of serialism, complexism, spectralism, micropolyphony and of course *musique concrète instrumentale*” (13-14). The notion of “Contemporary Classical Music” makes abundantly clear the difficulties that New Music has had with self-definition and periodisation, and contrasts with the attempts made by thinkers such as Osborne to render “contemporary art” as a historical periodisation in distinction from terms such as modernity and postmodernity.¹¹

⁹ This is again indicative of a partial uptake of Adorno in some areas of New Music, privileging his concerns with artistic autonomy and musical materials while neglecting how for him these nevertheless stand in relation to society.

¹⁰ In 1985 Beuys produced a postcard with the phrase “hiermit trete ich aus der Kunst aus” (“I hereby resign from art”) written on it.

¹¹ In art theory there is even an emerging discourse around the “postcontemporary”: see Avanesian and Malik (2016). Elsewhere in music scholarship there have been attempts to more adequately

What Rehbahn suggests as an alternative to New Music as “Contemporary Classical Music” is what the philosopher Harry Lehmann has termed a *Gebalt*-aesthetic, or content-aesthetic (15; Lehmann 2010: 8). On Lehmann’s account, New Music’s material-aesthetic has been exhausted, and this necessitates a turn to content. This would involve an inquiry into the possible relationships between the artwork and the world, constituting a form of immanent art criticism that would bring conceptual clarity to the conditions of the work. For Lehmann, as for Rehbahn, this work is already underway – not in the form of a fully-fledged *Gebalt*-aesthetic, but in the undermining of the aesthetic standards of concert music that can be found in the recent turn within New Music to a musical conceptualism. In the next two sections I will consider how this “turn to content” is manifest in the work of Johannes Kreidler and through the notion of “Music in the Expanded Field,” treating these as instances of how a departure from New Music’s exclusive concern with musical materials has served to put New Music into conversation with conceptual art and with contemporary art, albeit through, in Osborne’s terms, a relation of “identification and delay” (2018c: 185).

3. *New Music’s New Conceptualism*

The tendency outlined by Rehbahn and Lehmann, that of a content-aesthetic, is aligned with a renewed attempt within New Music to take a reflexive position with regards to New Music’s institutional form and its relation to contemporary art, from the 2014 Darmstadt Forum entitled “New Conceptualism: A Dead End or a Way Out?” to the 2018 theme of “Defragmentation: Curating Contemporary Music.” The figure I will focus on here is Johannes Kreidler, a key composer in “New Conceptualism.” I am taking him not as wholly representative of this tendency, but as someone whose work captures a significant part of the artistic landscape and theoretical discourse. Kreidler himself offers an early sustained engagement with the compositional tendency of New Conceptualism in his 2012 Darmstadt lecture “New Conceptualism in Music” (2012). Here Kreidler claims that New Conceptualism has emerged because of what Lehmann terms a shift to content-orientation, which has been facilitated by new technologies offering the opportunity for pieces outside of concert hall settings as well as the challenge to received ideas concerning art

periodise music beyond the usual demarcations such as “post-1945.” A diverse forum published in the journal *Twentieth-Century Music* (Clarke 2017) indicates the seriousness with which this issue is now being engaged, but also the current lack of consensus, while a recent editorial in *Contemporary Music Review* treats the question of contemporaneity as a crucial political one for music and music scholarship today (Valiquet 2020).

objects that postmodernism allowed.

From these enabling conditions Kreidler sets out some varied, loose definitions and characteristics of this musical conceptualism. It can, says Kreidler, consist of a single idea that produces a whole piece; or of a principle that can be realised in different ways; or it can involve ideas that have to do with music but are not themselves necessarily sound artworks; or it can concern musical works where additional verbal or visual information is crucial to engaging with them. In terms of the “content” of these works, we can follow the composer Ashley Fure (Lehmann 2014) and Kreidler again by marking out three overlapping categories:

1. Re-enactments of the historical avant-garde
2. Works that are self-referential with regards to music
3. Works concerned with commercial value or the market

As Lehmann’s account of the transition towards a *Gebalt*-aesthetic suggested, the combination of the first two of these categories tends to come in the form of an undermining of the aesthetic standards of New Music, or more broadly Western art music, while the combination of the latter two takes the form of a critique of the institutions and channels through which the works are received and presented, and all three characteristics can often be found together.

Kreidler’s own compositional work reflects all of these tendencies. A re-enactment of the historical avant-garde can be seen, for example, in the “destruction” section of his seven-hour long *Audioguide* (2013/14), which, featuring dozens of string instruments being destroyed, vastly amplifies and multiplies the carefully measured smashing of a violin of Nam June Paik’s *One for Violin Solo* (1962) (or the smashed guitars of Jimi Hendrix or Pete Townshend), the visceral effect of this act deliberately diminished in the process. This temporal expansion thus turns an eye to the aesthetic force of music and undermines the aura of aesthetically striking musical moments. Temporal compression can play the same role for Kreidler, as in the case of *Compression Sound Art* (2009), among the materials of which are Beethoven’s complete symphonies compressed to one second, Britney Spears’s “Gimme More” played four hundred times in one second, and an audiobook of the Bible played in one third of a second. With the “destruction” section of *Audioguide* Kreidler also recalls his own *Protestaktion* (2011), an apparently spontaneous protest against the merging of two German radio orchestras, where Kreidler destroyed a cello and violin taken from orchestra members, bowing upon receiving audience applause. This apparent protest was later revealed to be a piece commissioned by the Gesellschaft für Neue Musik. Furthermore, Kreidler’s re-enactments of the historical avant-garde are not limited to his compositions, but also to his

theoretical output: his “Sentences on Musical Concept-Art,” for example, mark themselves as a reiteration of Sol LeWitt’s formative 1969 conceptual art document “Sentences on Conceptual Art” (1999). Indeed, in Kreidler’s output the distinction between musical works, essays, and didactic PowerPoint lectures is not always clear.

All of these elements are present in his 2009 piece *Fremdarbeit*, perhaps his best-known work, which takes as its focus the iniquities of globalised outsourcing. For this piece, Kreidler, working on a €1,500 commission, paid a composer in China and a programmer in India \$150 to imitate his work. We learn this from his presentations on the piece. Julian Day makes a favourable comparison between this work and an artistic postmodernism represented by Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons, one which is “unafraid to expose, frame and embrace the capitalist cycle of production” (2014). Meanwhile, in a 2016 lecture entitled “Why Political (New) Music?” Kreidler himself eagerly compares his work to what he calls the “subversive affirmation” of Santiago Sierra’s egregiously exploitative *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People* (2000), for which Sierra paid four Spanish sex workers a sum equivalent to the price of a shot of heroin to have a line tattooed across their backs (Kreidler 2016). *Fremdarbeit* is clearly “about” the exploitative nature of outsourcing, though it raises a common question about such work, namely whether it exposes the issue or merely repeats it (Iddon 2016: 41).

Yet there seems to be something more at work here. Martin Iddon’s (2016) investigations suggest that the Chinese composer and Indian programmer Kreidler named as his outsourced workers do not in fact exist. If this is the case, and Kreidler himself wrote the work and presented it in this distanced guise, then it is raising a quite different set of questions, most of them aimed directly at New Music. It seems to aim to expose New Music’s complicity in circuits of exploitation by turning this very exploitation into a pantomime performance. Iddon argues that with this attempted critique Kreidler ultimately only repeats a colonial othering (43), and I am inclined to agree. But there is more to consider with regards to how Kreidler conceives of the prominent political component of his conceptualism, and *Fremdarbeit* gives us a measure of how Kreidler thinks about the impact of his works and how New Music is to relate to its artistic and political outside.

Again in “Why Political (New) Music?” Kreidler responds to what he considers to be “standard arguments” against political aesthetics. Among these arguments are that “Music can not make political statements,” that “Music could make political statements, but only in a didactical way, in a short-term way,” that “Political aesthetics functionalizes music, it destroys its autonomy, it cries for subsidies and relevance,” and that “Political (new) music doesn’t

change anything. If you want to do politics, do politics” (2016). The arguments that Kreidler lays out and addresses seem to take as their invariable premise a notion that music and politics shouldn’t mix, rather than any possible arguments concerning competing understandings of how the relationship between music and politics should work; perspectives such as an Adornian claim that autonomy and political import are inseparable do not here arise. In his response to these arguments, Kreidler notes that there is good and bad political music, and furthermore he sets out to defend didactic works, asking if teaching and learning are, after all, so bad. *Fremdarbeit*, we might suppose, is to be valued for teaching the audience about outsourcing, or about the financial circuits that allow New Music to sustain itself.

This position suggests how Kreidler’s work can be positively understood as treating New Conceptualism in terms akin to Goldie and Schellekens’s “Idea Idea,” yet it seems to me to also reflect the partiality of Kreidler’s uptake of conceptualism. Kreidler’s adoption of conceptualism broadly conforms to the “strong” conceptualism that Osborne attributes to Joseph Kosuth and Art & Language, which attempts a “purely” conceptual art devoid of aesthetic characteristics. On Osborne’s analysis, as previously noted, from the vantage point of contemporary art this strong conceptualism is treated as a failure, insofar as it reveals the aesthetic as “a *necessary*, though *radically insufficient*, component of the artwork through the failure of its attempt at its elimination” (2013: 49). Such a strong conceptualism is also at hand in Iddon’s critique of Kreidler, when he describes Kreidler’s conceptual music in terms of a nostalgic desire for the “semantic strength” of conceptual art (2016: 36).

Yet already in New Music there is a tradition of accounting for this “failure” of a pure conceptualism. The didactic nature of musical conceptualism that Kreidler champions, where what seems to be at work is the hopefully unhindered transmission of an idea from composer to audience, stands in contrast to a certain “dislocation” that Osborne notes as being crucial to Adorno’s understanding of music’s social meaning (2018c: 197). For Adorno, serialist and post-serialist music is characterised by a gap between compositional intelligibility and the experience of listening: that is, between the conceptual and the aesthetic. While Kreidler acknowledges the persistence of such a gap when he notes that some works of conceptual music require additional verbal or visual information to be understood, the gap here is bridged by sharing this information, with explanatory lectures and documentation providing the audience with the key to the work, as in the (albeit seemingly misleading) case of the outsourced contributors to *Fremdarbeit*. In this process it seems that the aesthetic is absorbed fully into the conceptual: for Kreidler the sensuous art

object itself is rendered not only insufficient, but irrelevant, a “metaphor” for the concept (Kelly 2017: 18).

The composer Max Murray also suggests a shortcoming of didacticism by making a distinction between the performer and the interpreter (Lehmann 2014). Murray argues that in works that are grounded in the explanatory character of the concept, the performer’s role in realising the work is inhibited. They do not, Murray says, have their own moment of dialectical connection with the work, any opportunity to analytically engage with the material. This, he says, is the paradox of the conceptual idiom: a music that aspires to the level of sociological critique often begins with the total disenfranchisement of the performer. This point resonates with Adorno’s account of performance, as when he writes that “[a]dequate performance requires the formulation of the work as a problem, the recognition of the irreconcilable demands, arising from the relation of the content [*Gebalt*] of the work to its appearance, that confront the performer” (2013: 146). What is at stake in Murray’s critique is that the content-turn compromises the dynamic relations that content already holds in musical contexts, silencing tensions through a reduction to the overarching single concept.

If we accept Murray’s critique, and I believe it is a credible position, then it appears that New Conceptualism has failed to integrate one of the most significant critical legacies of the work in music that was integral to the emergence of conceptualism. This legacy is found in a history of attempts to undermine the hierarchical and communicational relationship between composer, work, performer, and audience, a gesture represented in John Cage’s somewhat gnomic remark that “writing is one thing, performing another, and listening a third; and that there is no reason for these three operations to be linked” (1961: 129). The performative indeterminacy that Cage developed alongside students in his New School class on experimental music, including Allan Kaprow, Dick Higgins, and George Brecht, sought to free performers and listeners from strict adherence to the score and the dictates of the composer. In so doing they opened a set of performance and aesthetic possibilities that were key to the artistic shifts of the 1960s (see Kim 2011). The result is that Kreidler’s New Conceptualism in music plays out with a quite different set of priorities than at least one important strand of conceptualism in art, and does not make the same challenge to the ontology of the artwork. If contemporary art is understood as postconceptual art, this distinction renders putting New Conceptualism into conversation with contemporary art more difficult.

These reductions to the concept are reflective of a general tendency in Kreidler’s work. This is an ostensibly political music, but it disavows itself of the field of tension between artistic autonomy and political commitment that we

find in earlier work in New Music, like that of Luigi Nono or more recently Mathias Spahlinger,¹² in favour of an eclectic and vastly plural postmodernism. Yet here such a postmodernism seems to be reductive concerning a set of important distinctions, absorbing them all within the concept. Contrary to the “radically disjunctive contemporaneity” that Osborne argues characterises the postconceptual condition of contemporary art (2018b: 16), its “transcategorical *ontology of (transmedial) mediations*” (23), Kreidler’s work risks taking as its organising category a recentered and reified New Music, despite the explicit attempts made to break with its solipsism. Where contemporary art, understood as postconceptual art, deals with the necessity of the malleability of the borders between artist and audience and between art and everyday life, New Conceptualism may on the contrary reaffirm the authority of the composer and the unity of the art object. To further account for this character of New Music’s New Conceptualism I will turn to another perspective on it, and to discussions concerning the notion of “Music in the Expanded Field.”

4. *Music in the Expanded Field*

In “The Terminology is in Crisis,” Osborne suggests that the 2016 Darmstadt Summer Course theme of “Music in the Expanded Field,” its name stemming from the art theorist Rosalind Krauss’s 1979 examination of the blurring of sculpture’s boundaries that had occurred in recent years, reflects a dual relation of New Music to contemporary art, one of “identification and delay” (2018c: 185). The term “Music in the Expanded Field” arises in a context comparable to that which Rosalind Krauss found herself contending with when she formulated the notion of “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (1979). What Krauss saw in what was being described as sculpture was an apparently diffuse set of practices – not only “traditional” sculpture but forms such as land art and seemingly architectural structures among them – that demanded rigorous demarcation. Under the threat of falling into groundless fragmentation, Krauss reinscribed the diverse practices then being named as sculpture into a formal diagram (Figure 1). This allowed for the discernment of an artistic logic at work, rather than ascribing the expansion of “sculpture” to only a postmodern eclecticism or pluralism.

¹² See Paddison (2015: 167-168). Notably, again, this work is strongly informed by Adorno’s thought. Max Erwin (2016) makes a strong argument for Kreidler’s work, and its politics, being continuous with Spahlinger’s, although I maintain that Kreidler’s relation to artistic conceptualism and contemporary art, which Erwin does not deal with, remain significant to how Kreidler’s work functions. For other perspectives on the politics of Kreidler’s work, see Reuben (2015) and Redhead (2015).

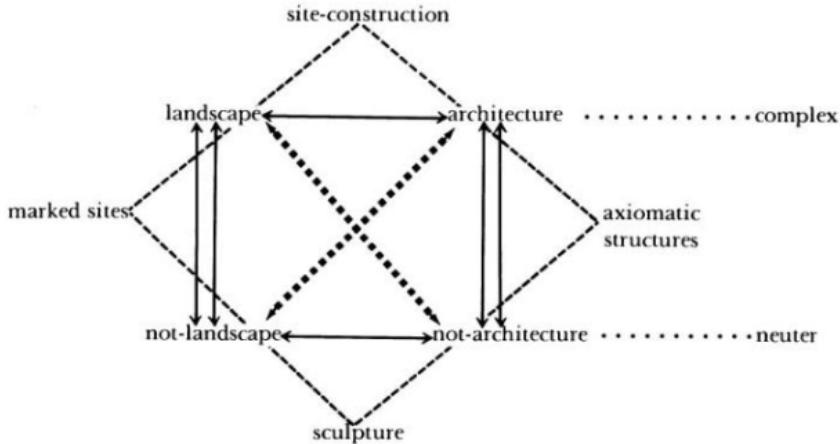


Figure 1. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," Krauss (1979, 38).

Yet for Marko Ciciliani, the organiser of the "Music in the Expanded Field" forum at Darmstadt in 2016, the topic of concern seems looser. Ciciliani's focus is on "music as a practice that allows the inclusion of non-sonic elements" (2017: 24), making some attempts to distinguish this from earlier intermedia practices and naming intertextuality, physicality, and modes of listening as three particularly relevant criteria (29). Speaking of the works that draw this combination of features into relation with music, Ciciliani notes that "if every single work that is created in the expanded field combines a mix of different discursive influences or references, it becomes an increasingly difficult task to decipher them" (28-29). Unlike Krauss, however, Ciciliani does not attempt to remedy this, and instead affirms the "vitality" and "liveliness" of this "Babylonian confusion."

Why the "expanded field" has found its way into New Music in an almost inverted fashion, embracing and encouraging fragmentation rather than trying to discern deeper logics, is a question that opens this inquiry beyond the bounds of New Music. A key source here is the sound theorist Seth Kim-Cohen, who in his 2009 book *In the Blink of an Ear* put forward a first sustained effort at situating music within an "expanded field," as part of his attempt to develop a theory of what he calls "non-cochlear sonic art" (2009). In brief, for Kim-Cohen the significance of sound art is its rendering artistic of the "extramusical" (39), that which he says music theorists have considered to be the

“foreign matter threatening always to infect” music (107). Social and political issues are at the forefront of these extramusical matters. Music, argues Kim-Cohen, has never succeeded in departing from a strict medium-specificity (37). To detach sound art from the phenomenological and medium-specific orientations that he believes plague its theorisation, Kim-Cohen takes as his guide prominent theorisations of the arts of the 1960s and ’70s, especially the work of Krauss. In this light he produces his own diagram of “The Expanded Sonic Field,” echoing the form – the semiotic square – of Krauss’s diagram (Figure 2).

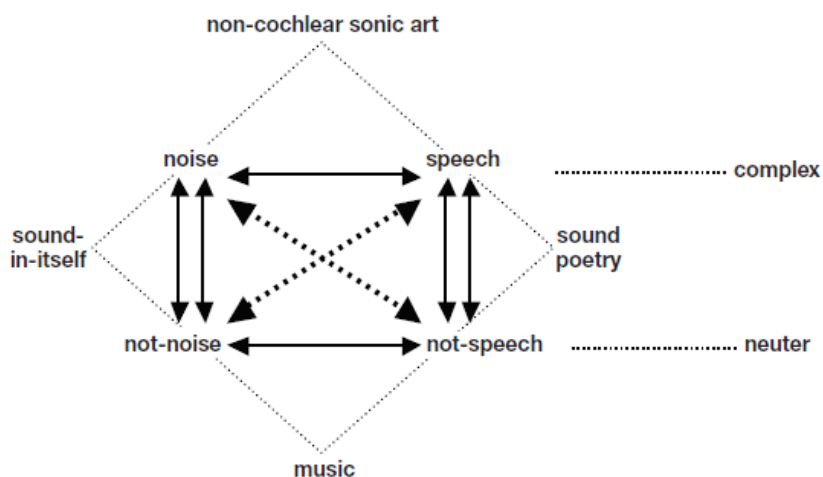


Figure 2. “The Expanded Sonic Field,” Kim-Cohen (2009: 155).

This almost direct mapping of the history of sound in the arts onto the history of sculpture that Kim-Cohen attempts seems to me to introduce significant problems, and problems that are indicative of the difficulties faced when considering music in relation to contemporary art. Firstly, the map of “The Expanded Sonic Field” does not have the explanatory capacities of Krauss’s diagram. Where Krauss’s diagram depicts a distinct and specific historical problem concerning the notion of sculpture, Kim-Cohen’s draws together historically scattered artistic threads, the specificity of which is lost when placed into formal relation. Yet perhaps more significant is Kim-Cohen’s framing of his notion of the “non-cochlear.” Again this notion is derived from Krauss (1990) and her theorisation of the “non-retinal” in the work of Marcel Duch-

amp, but, as Brian Kane has argued, Kim-Cohen's non-cochlear does not retain the complex character of Krauss's non-retinal. For Krauss, the non-retinal puts the viewer in the position of producer: no longer simply a receiver of light on the retina, but bringing to experience an account of the diverse physiological conditions that make up vision (187; Kane 2013). For Kim-Cohen, on the contrary, it seems that the non-cochlear has nothing to do with perception. On Kim-Cohen's account, the purpose of sound art is to bring attention to what Ciciliani called the "intertextual" – social, institutional, and so on – situation of the work. Where for Krauss the non-retinal, in line with the key concerns of conceptualism, finds an aesthetic agency that is distributed across work and audience, with Kim-Cohen we find something more homogeneous, where work and reception are merged into the network of the artwork's cultural relations.

This appears to be again, as with Kreidler's conceptualism, a reduction of the disjunctive complexity of the question of sound in the arts into singular conceptual distinctions and explanations. Kane (2013) offers a useful insight into what is at work here when he speaks of a "musicophobia" that characterises much theoretical work on sound art.¹³ Kim-Cohen offers a definition of sound art against which music plays the false opponent, the straw man. By opposing the non-cochlear and the cochlear in a way that Krauss does not oppose the non-retinal and retinal, Kim-Cohen suggests an interpretive distinction between his diagram and Krauss's. While in Krauss's diagram sculpture is related to site-construction through their shared relation to a set of affirmations and negations (landscape or not-landscape, architecture or not-architecture), Kim-Cohen presents a simpler opposition between music and non-cochlear sonic art. This denies *a priori* the possibility of articulating a more subtle, yet still disjunctive, relationship between sound art and music, and in turn can only, on one hand, simplify sound art's place in contemporary art and, on the other, disqualify any substantial relation between music and contemporary art. This is troubling, then, for any attempt to consider the status of "Music in the Expanded Field." If it is only a case of placing music alongside and against its perceived others, then such a notion will not have explanatory or creative potential at a formal, historical, or aesthetic level.

¹³ Mirroring Kim-Cohen's position is that of Christoph Cox, who, like Kim-Cohen, opposes sound art to music, but does so by arguing that sound art deals with the materiality of sound while music is a symbolic art dealing only with ideal relations (2018: 87). For Kim-Cohen the problem with music is that it is the medium-specific art of sound; for Cox, on the contrary, what is valuable about sound art is that *it* is the medium-specific art of sound.

5. *Dead ends and ways out: reflections in lieu of a conclusion*

The issues that I have suggested can be found in Kreidler's work are not the same as those I argue we find in Kim-Cohen's, but the two converge on a number of points. They both seem to want to evacuate any aesthetic component from their respective fields of inquiry in favour of a turn to content and concepts; they both seek to achieve this through a kind of repetition of 1960s and 1970s artistic conceptualism; and they both take an oppositional stance towards the field of music, albeit Kreidler from within and Kim-Cohen from without. What is limiting in both is a loss of the constitutive tensions that can be said to make up art and music, replaced with a set of neat distinctions and oppositions on which they firmly place themselves on one side or another.

What does this mean for New Music and its New Conceptualism? By way of a conclusion I want to offer some tentative considerations. First, it is crucial to recognise that music, and its theorisation, has a history, or histories, of its own, and that impressing upon music a critical model that derives from a different history brings with it significant risk. Adorno's influence on the philosophy of new music has perhaps been overwhelming to the point of demanding a counterreaction, but his reflections on the complex procedures of performance and the relation between content and form are of direct relevance to thinking the function of conceptualism in music (2013: 146). The partiality of the New Music uptake of Adorno's insights into musical materials and the potential for a renewed engagement with Adorno is reflected in Fumi Okiji's recent, counterintuitive, turn to Adorno to examine the complex overlap of the social, the aesthetic, and the political in jazz performance (2018). Okiji's work stands as an exemplar of immanently thinking through how musical autonomy and social situatedness can exist in a dialectical relation.

Moreover, it is necessary to recognise that even the musical gestures that were crucial to the emergence of conceptualism took on a difference valence in relation to music than they did when adopted into the visual arts. Cage, for example, rejected the notion that his *4'33"* (1952) was a conceptual piece, arguing that it in fact served as a reintroduction of sensation and listening into an understanding of music that was already placing the conceptual (such as the laws of harmony) above the aesthetic (1976: 123). G. Douglas Barrett's (2016) studies of composers including the Wandelweiser group and Peter Ablinger show how musical practices can take on social and political concerns on an immanent basis, and the distinctions this reveals between modes of political investment in art and music offers a firmer basis for putting music and contemporary art into conversation than does any too hasty identification between the two.

This leads on to a second consideration, namely that it seems to me that a

certain kind of philosophical theorisation limits the scope of how conceptualism is to be understood in the arts. The Idea Idea and the *Gebalt*-aesthetic risk taking on, precisely, the content of conceptual art while ignoring its form. The proposal that conceptualism in the arts is about ideas, concepts, or content misses out on how conceptual art did not only seek to reverse the priority of the aesthetic and the cognitive, but sought to displace and deform the ontology of the art object itself (Sutherland 2016: 110-111; Osborne 2018b: 20). Likewise, the perspective of conceptual art could not be said to be wholly within an otherwise ontologically untouched “art,” as Kreidler’s New Conceptualism may be with New Music, even if his vantage point from within is a critical one.

While there was doubtlessly a component of conceptual art that sought, as Kreidler does with New Music, to show that art is fully immersed in the circuits of the global economy (Alberro 2003), conceptual art equally had direct and practical links to internationalist, feminist, and other contemporary political movements that presented an external challenge to the art world (Sutherland 2016). Thus while New Music has begun to adopt some of the terminology and themes of conceptual art, it is not clear to what extent it has adopted the wider scope of conceptual art’s political impetus. At Darmstadt’s 2016 Summer Course, for example, only three of the seventeen composition tutors were women, and just one of ten visiting composers.¹⁴ A favouring of white European and North American composers is even more marked, with George E. Lewis’s research showing that, of 4,750 performances in the history of Darmstadt, only two were of works by non-white Afrodiasporic composers (2019). A political New Music would be a peculiar thing if it did nothing to undermine, and seek to change, the aesthetic and social conditions that produced this situation.

This depiction of New Music as a field defined by exclusion shows it is crucial for New Music to come to terms with the histories that it, for institutional and aesthetic reasons perhaps yet to be studied, missed out on. For example, in jazz and improvisation studies, impressive frameworks of analysis that span aesthetics, microsocial dynamics, social formations like race, and globalised politics have been developed by theorists including George E. Lewis, whose extensive history of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians marks a daunting standard for work on contemporary music to come (2008). As Lewis (2019) observes, there was musical work ongoing in this milieu that, while matching the aesthetic ideals of New Music, was nevertheless not seen as

¹⁴ Pressure from the Gender Research at Darmstadt group have resulted in attempts at reform, though not without difficulties for those pushing for change, as the composer Ashley Fure (2016) has described.

fit for Darmstadt. Concepts and content will not be enough to come to terms with how New Music has framed itself and how it can frame itself in the future, and for as long as musical conceptualism attacks New Music from a distant position of the “identification and delay” with conceptual art, New Music’s response cannot be adequate to the real problems it faces. Only by refiguring the disjunctive relationship between music, sound art, and contemporary art, from a position adequate to the histories and institutional forms of each, will an image of how music and contemporary art can relate begin to emerge.

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