

“Listening is a Performative Act”—Case Study of David Helbich

Abstract. German artist David Helbich creates his art in the domains of sound art and performance. Although he is a composer by vocation and education, which is particularly important (he is a regular lecturer at the Summer Courses for New Music in Darmstadt), Helbich moves in the space “between”—between conceptual art and composition. His poetics rests on the active involvement of the audience in the creation of his works, through interactive concepts aimed at breaking down the barriers between performer and recipient. The listeners are actually the performers themselves, i.e., active participants in the musical event. In the paper, I will present and problematize the ideas of “earpieces” and “soundwalks” as concepts based on Cage’s idea of *contextual art* and which, in the full sense of the word, are based on interactivity. *Earpieces* are works created by listeners by covering their ears in an organized manner, marked in the “score” while *Soundwalks* involve active listening to the environment, whereby random sounds become part of an individualized sound score. Also, terms such as “self-performance” or “intro-activity” belong to the corpus of those we meet in the author’s work. The paper will try to shed light on those different aspects of Helbich’s sound art and the specific ways of musical communication that he achieves with them.

Keywords: David Helbich, *Earpieces*, *Soundwalks*, self-performance, intro-activity.

David Helbich is an author whose works involve moving “in between.” He is interested in the borderline aspects of music, where he approaches the conceptual, i.e., contextual art. What stands out in his rich and diverse oeuvre are works in which the audience plays an extremely important role—the audience is often the recipient and creator at the same time, and its roles are intertwined. In this paper, I will present and problematize certain specific forms that Helbich develops, giving them authentic determinants. I will outline the basic trajectories of his poetic path that leads him to intriguing artistic solutions. These are concepts that aim to redefine the established relationship between the author and the audience, moving along a line that implies a very broad understanding of music as such. In this sense, Helbich starts from an avant-garde basis, more precisely Cage’s attitude towards sound, going to authentically conceived sound spaces, which will also be discussed in the paper.

Key for the poetic direction of the German composer David Helbich are the questions of the relationship between sound and space, and recipient and performer. This is an artist whose creativity is based on the *concept* as the foundation of artistic expression. This concept is most commonly related to the artist’s need to establish an autonomous world within which different sound tests can be conducted, with the aim of researching divergent sound sensations, but also questioning the limits of the art of sound. In this sense, Helbich does not belong to those sound artists who use sound as just one of their artistic means, because the sound represents both his starting and ending point. It should be noted that he studied composition in Amsterdam and Freiburg and that he, as stated in his biography, is a “regular composition teacher at the Summer Courses for New Music in Darmstadt” (Helbich 2020). I stress this fact because I believe it is important for understanding the basic poetic positions of the artist I want to outline. His works range from “regular” scores to what we could call conceptual games, which will be the focus of this paper.

I will start from what I consider his “program poem” as presented in the text “Listening is a Performative Act.” Here Helbich (2016) says:

Music takes place between the ears.

Music takes place between people.

Music is a social space.

Music is a concept. It cannot be non conceptual.

Noise can be heard as music.

Music can be heard as noise.

Listening is a performative act.

Therefore, music for Helbich is a *concept* in itself: it is a set of sounds that the recipients perceive as something called music, which exists exclusively in the interpersonal interaction between creators and recipients. In a sense he is following the tradition of John Cage, when in a large number of works he affirms the idea of music as omnipresent, as sounds that surround us, and which he, as a composer, tries to bring to awareness

in the listeners. This is how John Cage (1961) described the meaning of writing music in his famous text “Experimental Music:” “One is, of course, not dealing with purposes but dealing with sounds. Or the answer must take the form of paradox: a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we’re living, which is so excellent once one gets one’s mind and one’s desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord” (12).

In the same vein, Helbich’s poetics is based on this way of thinking about music that led him to innovative forms of expression. The artist introduces special terminology to denote certain creative practices. I will mention works labeled as *Soundwalks*, *Earpieces* and *Intro-active sound meditation*.

1. *Soundwalks*

Soundwalks are pieces based on the idea of combining recorded soundscape tapes and listening to urban spaces. The participants in the project listen to a recorded tape of selected soundscape sounds, using semi-open headphones that allow for external sounds to be received as well, and they are given the task of moving along a fixed route, whereby the sounds of the surrounding space are mixed with the recorded ones. Examples are *Kortrijk Tracks* or *Maastricht Tracks*. Describing *Maastricht Tracks*, Helbich notes:

This book, along with eleven soundtracks, takes you on a trip to some very special places in the middle of this city, invisible to most visitors but less than an arm’s length away: a trip to the parallel universe of sensations and imagination, contemplative in some parts, absurd in others. *Maastricht Tracks* consists of sound compositions and instructions, which are divided between the book and the audio files. With the help of your participation the work will come to life and start to actually exist. You are the performer and the audience at the same time. (Helbich n.d. “*Maastricht Tracks* – Audio Guide”)

The composer further explains his idea behind this concept:

Maastricht Tracks approaches sensory perception as a performative act. It emphasizes the impact we can have on our own auditory, visual, or physical experiences, not only by being active, but also imaginative. We can perform hearing, we can play seeing, and we can act feeling. (Helbich n.d. “*Maastricht Tracks* – Audio Guide”)

So, the point is to intensify the auditory perception of the participants and to establish (often conflicting) correlation between the primary auditory stimulus, generated through headphones, and the secondary one that is looming, which together draw the listener into a complex and confusing perceptual relationship with the reality that surrounds them. This reality is in turn connected to the urban space, and moving through it is carefully programmed by a kind of movement score, i.e., map. As Helbich (n.d. “*Maastricht Tracks* – Audio Guide”) further states:

Each of the pieces focuses on a different relationship between you, me, and the city: you—the performer and audience; me—the artist; and the city—our environment. In a mix of actions and contemplation, the potential of headphones—both their technology and their social connotations—is channeled into various setups, some of which are fully-fledged listening pieces, others not at all... *Maastricht Tracks* in its entirety stands for a kind of manifesto of instructional performance and sound art.

We can tie this to contextual art, the one Cage inaugurated in 4’33”, in which the composition is directly built by the sound context. However, the very idea of moving through an urban space as a place for the “event” relates to the tradition of *dérive*, which was developed by lettrists and situationists. As Guy Debord (2006/1958) notes, these practices are: “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll” (62).

Helbich transgresses this situationist practice by adding a new meaning to it. To the purely visual perception of space, which contains the dimension of meaning, Helbich adds a double-layered auditory level, disorienting the listener and introducing them to the artistic game. It cannot be called a purely participatory art, since Helbich maintains a dominant position as an artist, guiding the participants along a set road map. He establishes artistic communication with the recipient who then communicates with the space they move through. The recipient is in this case also a performer—alone in the realization of the final product. This work is based on two of Helbich’s concepts: “self-performativity,” a rather self-explanatory term, and “intro-activity” which denotes the internalization of the artistic product. Helbich starts from the subjective experience, which

is always fundamentally internal, and which can remain and become completely internal, i.e., an authentic form of experience, which does not manifest itself towards the outside world.

The same applies to the so-called *Earpieces*.

2. *Earpieces*

Earpieces are based exclusively on listening to given sound sources, while covering the ears in a way determined by the artist's concept. Such is the work of *No-music*, subtitled compositions for ears.

The participant receives different auditory direction depending on the way the ears are covered, i.e., his auditory perception is directed in different ways and with different intensity. It is a kind of manipulation of spatial perception which in turn connects to Helbich's dealing with the relationship between sound and space, i.e., propagation of sound and its reception. Therefore, this concept deals with the idea of establishing relations with the environment which represents the source of sounds. Its manifestation in the consciousness of the recipient, i.e., the intensity and the way of receiving the auditory impulse, is determined by limitations of the sound flow.

The work is based on the concept of listening as a performative act. As the author notes: "The event triggers musical experience without being actually music" (Helbich n.d. "No-Music – Earpieces").

It is an attempt to creatively "work" with "silence," so to speak. Therefore, silence in itself (or even better—the sounds of the environment) becomes a kind of a building material for manipulation (again, conditionally speaking). The listener, in this sense, following the artist's concepts, creates an autonomous auditory experience, which is always unique, taking into account the different auditory "content" which changes from situation to situation. Helbich thus withdraws from the role of a content creator and assumes the role of a creator of a performative act.

3. *Intro-active Sound Meditation*

The pinnacle of this way of artistic thinking, "self-performance" as the author calls this body of work, is certainly the *Imagine There Was No Roof*, with the subtitle *Intro-active sound meditation*. The work includes a series of rugs and carpets that all have instructions for "imagined listening." The audience is therefore invited to recall a certain sound and mentally "manipulate" it. As Helbich notes:

Imagining, as much as remembering and anticipating, are all listening spaces adjacent to acoustics For this, the experience of sound is regarded as that of a movement: a back and forth, between the inner and outer spaces of our body, from the opposite wall, through our spiral shaped ear directly into the brain, and into the last corners of thought. And back.

While we hear sound, while sound swirls around us, we think it too. Somewhat analytically, yet also quite creatively: we think our hearing into existence. This physical and cognitive intrinsic element of the acoustic experience is the departure point and the source of the aesthetic results in the works. (Helbich n.d. "Imagine There is no Roof")

So, here we are already reaching anti-music, i.e., working with the concept which also includes "non-existent sounds," sounds that exist solely in memory. In this sense, the "work" "moves" into pure introspection, without real auditory stimuli. This work is very much in the same line as another of Helbich's conceptual games, this time a visual game called *Scores for Looking Out the Window (Eyepieces)*, which involves instructions on how to look out the window while imagining different visual situations.

Based on these three categories of works that we find in the work of this artist, we can reach three circles of problems while considering them.

4. David Helbich and Three Circles of Problems in his Works

The first "problem" is related to the phenomenological consideration of the concepts. In this sense, *Soundwalks* could be examined through a prism of phenomenological research concerning the relationship between space, i.e., auditory fields, and focal sounds. Adopting Husserl's terminology, philosopher Don Ihde notes that listening within the environment itself implies intentionality and the establishment of relations between ubiquitous and focal sounds. As this author claims: "Within intentionality there is the 'ray of attention'; the 'intuition of essences'" (Ihde 2007, 21).

Helbich plays with precisely this property of the auditory experience, offering to the perception two auditory plans, i.e., shifting perception away from the field that is present, to the field that is explicit. As Ihde further notes: “The field is what is present, but present as implicit, as fringe that situates and ‘surrounds’ what is explicit or focal” (Ihde 2007, 73).

Also, he plays with the relationship between the auditory and visual fields of perception that face each other. The auditory perception of the sounds of the environment implies the activation of the visual imagination as well; however, in Helbich’s works there is a conflict between the actions of these senses due to the presence of different auditory planes. As Ihde notes

both surroundability and directionality must be noted as copresent. This “double” dimensionality of auditory field characteristics is at once the source of much ambiguity and of a specific richness that subtly pervades the auditory dimension of existence.

Both these dimensional aspects of auditory presence are constant and copresent, but the intentional focus and the situation varies the ratio of what may stand out. There is also a noematic difference in relation to what kind of sound may most clearly present itself as primarily surrounding and primarily directional without losing its counterpart. (Ihde 2007, 77)

In Helbich’s works these elements of perception are mixed.

As for the second group of works called *Earpieces*, they explore yet another phenomenological question concerning the directionality of listening and perception of the environment, i.e., spatiality of the auditory field. Namely, as the aforementioned phenomenologist notes:

It is clear that within the auditory field we may speak of the direction of a given sound (it comes from behind me) and of particular sounds we may perceive as being near or far from us. But as a field, we must say that it surrounds us. I am immersed in the auditory field that displays no definite boundaries such as those of vision. The sound field, unlike the visual field which remains in front of me, displays an indefinite space in all directions from me. (Ihde 2007, 206–207)

Covering of the ears in Helbich’s work also changes the perceptual relationship to the sound field, i.e., it becomes spatially distorted.

Finally, the third group of works, labeled as *Intro-active sound meditations*, are based on the imaginative aspect of the auditory experience. According to Ihde (2007),

In the most general terms, auditory imagination as a whole displays the same generic possibilities as the full imaginative mode of experience. Within the active imaginative mode of experience lies the full range from sedimented memories to wildest fancy. ... In fantasy I can presentify and represent the sounds of the world. (131)

Thus, these works are counting on the developed imaginative component of the sound potential of the individual who “participates” in the work.

The second problematic circle concerning these works is connected with their aesthetic direction, whereby they rest on the basic Cage-ian idea of sound, already mentioned before, i.e., a fluxusian attitude towards art, as formulated by George Maciunas in 1963: “promote a revolutionary flood and tide in art, promote living art, anti-art...” (as quoted in Phillipot 2022).

Therefore, this last group of works is moving towards anti-music, i.e., an exclusion of the basic artistic means from the artistic experience through intellectual transgression.

And finally, the third problematic circle is connected with the ontology of the musical piece, i.e., the question of the existence of music (read: sound). In all three cases it is the listener who becomes the performer, and the sound impression exists as autonomous and unique; while in the last case it remains only on the imaginary plane and the plane of the artist’s intellectual experiment. As the author notes when talking about *Soundwalks*, but also about the general direction of his work: “ultimately this was more about us being our own material” (Helbich n.d. “Play With Your Ears (interview on City Tracks)”).

In all three cases, however, the author remains inviolable, so it is not a question of open participatory type creations, but of conceptual creations that function in a certain public context. It is therefore interesting that the author does not renounce his position as a composer; he does not call himself a conceptual artist, considering that he continued to work with sound, only in a different context, whereby the material is being found around and within the individual, i.e., the audience. Helbich describes this dominant position as an

artist of extremely authentic works with the following words: “The world is chaotic, but what I offer is highly structured. In that sense I am still very much composing” (Helbich n.d. “Play With Your Ears (interview on City Tracks)”).

5. Conclusion

The artistic poetics of David Helbich are based on transgression. He explores varying ways of “liberating” composers and listeners from “conventional” expressive frameworks. *Soundwalks*, *Earpieces*, and *Intro-active sound meditation* are just some of the different experimental attempts by this artist to break free from the predetermined relation frameworks between the composer and the recipient. He toys with auditory perception, ranging from the affirmation of the sound context in *Soundwalks* and *Earpieces*, to imaginative realms of “internal” sound, to a unique intellectual game in *Intro-active sound meditation*. Helbich further toys with the recipient’s perception, which actually forms the individual’s final auditory experience, or, in the case of sound meditations, stimulates the imagination of participants. This brings us back to the very beginning and the title of this paper, and the fact Helbich directs the attention to the process of listening itself, whether “external” or “internal,” insisting on the concept that it is a “performative act.” In a certain way, his works represent different forms of exploring this initial premise of his art. Through his work, he demonstrates the potentials of such a framework, creatively encouraging listeners to actively engage their perception and intellect in realizing their own relationship with the sound. In that sense, they become performers and creators of their own “artistic experience,” with the guidance of the author who provides innovative conceptual frameworks for such a receptive experience.

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„Klausymasis yra performatyvus veiksmas“: Davido Helbicho atvejo analizė

Santrauka

Davidas Helbichas – vokiečių menininkas, kurio kūryba susijusi su judėjimu *tarp*; jį dominanti sritis – ribiniai muzikos aspektai. Tačiau ir pagal pašaukimą, ir pagal išsilavinimą jis yra akademinis kompozitorius. Į straipsnio pavadinimą įterptas sakinyš iš Helbicho teksto „Klausymasis yra performatyvus veiksmas“ (jame menininkas savo idėjas pristato poetine forma):

Muzika vyksta tarp ausų.
Muzika vyksta tarp žmonių.
Muzika yra socialinė erdvė.

Muzika yra konceptas. Ji negali būti nekonceptuali.

Triukšmas gali būti girdimas kaip muzika.
Muzika gali būti girdima kaip triukšmas.

Klausymasis yra performatyvus veiksmas. (Helbich 2016)

Jo poetika remiasi aktyviu klausytojų įtraukimu į kūrybą, pasitelkiant interaktyvias koncepcijas, kuriomis siekiama sugriauti barjerus tarp atlikėjo ir recipiento. Klausytojai iš tiesų yra patys atlikėjai, t. y. aktyvūs muzikinio įvykio dalyviai. Straipsnyje pristatomos „pjesių ausims“ (*earpieces*) ir „garsinių pasivaikščiojimų“ (*soundwalks*) idėjos kaip konceptai, grįsti Johno Cage'o *kontekstualaus meno* principais, kurie visomis prasmėmis remiasi interaktyvumu. „Garsiniai pasivaikščiojimai“ – tai kūriniai, kuriuose jungiamos iš anksto paruoštų įrašų ir einamuoju momentu besiskleidžiančio miesto erdvių garsovaizdžio klausymosi patirtys. „Pjesės ausims“ grįstos tam tikrų garso šaltinių klausymusi uždengus ausis menininko nurodytu būdu. Šio mąstymo būdo (menininko įvardijamo kaip *self-performativity*) viršūnė, be abejo, yra kūrinys *Imagine There is no Roof* („Įsivaizduokite, kad stogo nėra“), turintis paantraštę „introaktyvi garsinė meditacija“. Čia, galima sakyti, jau yra pasiekama „antimuzika“, t. y. dirbama su konceptu, kuris apima ir neegzistuojančius garsus, arba garsus, egzistuojančius tik atmintyje. Šia prasme kūrinys *persikelia* į gryną introspekciją, neturinčią realių garsinių dirgiklių.

Remiantis trimis minėtomis kūrinų kategorijomis, aptinkamomis menininko kūryboje, prieinama prie trijų probleminių ratų. Pirmasis probleminis ratas susijęs su fenomenologiniu konceptų apmąstymu; antrasis – su kūrinų estetinė kryptimi, besiremiančia Cage'o garso idėja, t. y. *fluxus* kryptčiai būdingu požiūriu į meną. Trečiasis probleminis ratas susijęs su muzikos kūrinio ontologija, t. y. muzikos (arba garso) egzistavimo klausimu. Visais trimis atvejais atlikėju tampa klausytojas, o garsinis įspūdis egzistuoja kaip autonomiškas ir unikalus. Paskutiniu atveju jis lieka tik įsivaizduojamoje menininko intelektualinio eksperimento plotmėje. Kad ir kaip būtų, visais trimis atvejais autoriaus vaidmuo išlieka neginčijamas, vadinasi, kalbama ne apie atviro dalyvavimo tipo kūrybą, o apie konceptualią kūrybą, veikiančią tam tikrame viešame kontekste.