

## **Disonata. Art in Sound up to 1980**



**ED VAN DER ELSKEN**

Karel Apel in Phonogram Studio recording the project *Musique Barbare*  
(Barbarian Music), 1963

B&W Photography

Nederlands Fotomuseum

© Ed van der Elsken

<b>DATES:</b>	September 22, 2020 - March 1, 2021
<b>LOCATION:</b>	Sabatini Building, 3rd Floor.
<b>ORGANIZATION:</b>	Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
<b>CURATORSHIP:</b>	Maike Aden (based on an original project by Guy Schraenen)
<b>COORDINATION:</b>	Beatriz Velázquez and Andrea Pérez Envid

In collaboration with:

The exhibition *Disonata. Art in sound up to 1980*, based on an original project by the recently deceased **Guy Schraenen**, analyses one of the lesser known aspects of 20<sup>th</sup> century art: the development of sound as a creative field separated from music, since the irruption of the historical avant-garde movements.

Museo Reina Sofia is devoting a central part of its autumn program, which includes several exhibitions and events, to contextualize the use of sound from a historical perspective and in contemporary creation, as well as its relationship with visual arts. The exhibition *Disonata* is one of the main features, but the list also includes: *Audiosphere. Social Experimental Audio, Pre- and Post- Internet*, opening on October 14, *Invisible Auto Sacramental: A Sonic Representation from Val del Omar* a new installation the inflammatory flamenco singer **Niño de Elche**, accessible from October 7; and numerous live events including the recently held *Archipiélago 2020* concert series of experimental music, which featured **Lucrecia Dalt** and **Jessica Ekomane**, among many others. All these elements configure a whole effort that aims to understand, study and show the importance of sound as a creative artistic medium both in historical context and in contemporary creation.

At *Disonata*, which has been organized with the collaboration of Comunidad de Madrid, the visitor will encounter almost 200 works, including recordings, paintings, instruments, sculptures, scores, models, manifests, photographs and films, made by revolutionary artists such as **John Cage**, **Marcel Duchamp**, **Hanne Darboven**, **Esther Ferrer**, **Elena Asins**, **Jean Tinguely**, **Isidore Isou** and **Chris Burden**, among many others.

More than a century ago, a few pioneering artists entered the hitherto unexplored terrain of sound phenomena and processes, formerly and exclusively in the hands of musicians. The driving force were visual artists, but visionary poets and innovative musicians were also involved, as well as architects and engineers. Pushing the boundaries of their respective fields, these creators favored a series of revolutionary acoustic experiments that went beyond the predefined categories of modern and contemporary art.

The exhibition, following the original project conceived by Guy Schraenen, is structured through different crucial moments: the futurist radical idea of creating instruments that produced noise; the visual artist's fascination with tape recorders at the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the development of capital multimedia experiments such as the Phillips Pavilion designed by **Le Corbusier**, with contributions by **Iannis Xenakis** and **Edgar Varèse**, for the Expo 58 in Brussels; the improvements of revolutionary artistic movements such as **Fluxus** or the Spanish collective **Grupo Zaj**; up to the mixed media post-punk scene of the 1980s.



DIETER ROTH AND BJÖRN ROTH  
*Keller-Duo* (Cellar Duo), 1980-1989  
Mixed media  
200 x 240 x 60 cm  
Dieter Roth Foundation, Hamburg; Dieter Roth Estate, courtesy of Hauser & Wirth

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## Initial ventures

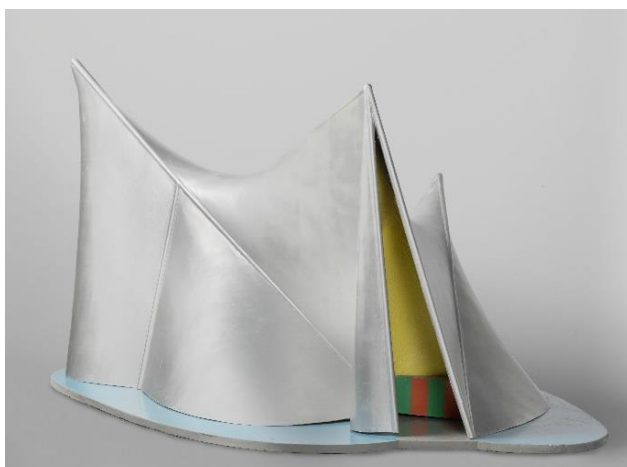
The exhibition starts focusing on the first decades of the 20th century, when some pioneering artists aimed to integrate the sound of modern times into the artistic experience. The Italian futurists, enraptured by the new technical and mechanical advancements, turned to the industrial and urban soundscapes as a source of creative material. In the first room, the visitor finds the *intonarumori*, intoners of roars, cracks, explosions and howls created by **Luigi Russolo**, who in his 1913 manifesto *L'arte dei rumori* [The Art of Noises] also imagined the orchestration “of department stores, sliding doors, the hubbub of the crowds, the different roars of railroad stations, iron foundries, textile mills, printing houses, power plants and subways”.

Meanwhile, in the Dada geographies, **Hugo Ball** took up his *Lautgedichte*, poems stripping sound one first step apart from the meaning-bound articulation of language while **Raoul Hausmann's** poetry performances started to involve corporal sounds, like those derived from breath, into a new artform that went beyond the limits of speech.

**Marcel Duchamp's** procedures of welcoming randomly processes in musical compositions- *Erratum Musical*-, as well as **Man Ray's** commentaries on instruments that refuse to sound -*Emak Bakia* [Leave me alone, originally dated 1926]- also belong to this first room's assortment of early art-sound enterprises. Man Ray's acknowledgment of the duration of artistic labour, with his eyed metronome imposing a visual and aural pace to the artist, searches for a new hybrid art (*Indestructible object*), while **Dziga Vertov's** film *Enthusiasm: The Symphony of Donbass* (1930) includes the noises of the Russian industrial power as the centre of its soundtrack.



**MAN RAY**  
*Indestructible object (Objeto indestructible)*, 1923 (1965)  
Metronome and photography  
22 x 11 x 11 cm  
Private collection, with the collaboration of Fondazione Marconi, Milano



**LE CORBUSIER & IANNIS XENAKIS**  
Model of the Philips Pavilion for Expo '58, ca. 1957 - 1958  
Metal, wood and polyester  
110 x 175 x 85 cm  
Rijksmuseum. Loan by Philips International BV

In the next room, the visitor encounters a symbol of the combination of technology and art after World War II: the contribution of the Philips corporation to the Expo 58 in Brussels. **Le Corbusier**, commissioned for the project, did not design a conventional pavilion, but rather a receptacle for his *Poème électronique* [Electronic Poem]. An artwork focusing on pure vision and hearing, it comprised a visual collage of projected images and an innovative sound piece, by Le Corbusier and **Edgar Varèse** respectively. The heavily-engineered sound equipment of the pavilion played Varèse's sound poem, producing several “routes of sound” through hundreds of loudspeakers.

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## The prominence of the tape recorder

The show follows with a space devoted to the magnetic tape recorder, which became an available tool for artists in the recovering post-World War II scenario. This device, modest as it may seem, encouraged several new adventures in the experimental paths of art in sound. It allowed the manipulation of excerpts with overlays, cuts and speed regulations, and was used by artists such as **Brion Gysin**, who worked on transposing the cut-up method to his visual and sound poems. His patterned, electronically permuted poem, *I Am That I Am* (started ca. 1958) obstinately works to undercut the meaning of what intends to encompass the most-meaningful possible, the human name for the divinity. The magnetic tape was also an important tool for the Lettrist movement, used in works by **Isidore Isou** (*Le plastique parlante*) or **François Dufrêne**. As the 1960s came in, the magnetic tape recorder was used against worn-out notions of music by artists such as **Karel Appel** (*Musique Barbare*) or **Asger Jorn** and **Jean Dubuffet** (*Musique Phénoménale*).



ISIDORE ISOU  
*La plastique parlante*, 1960-1987  
Intervened tape recorder  
19 x 40 x 34 cm  
Fabre Collection

## Sculptures and impossible instruments



JEAN TINGUELY  
*Radio Skulptur* (*Radio sculpture*), 1962  
Radio, iron, wire, feather, electric motor  
90 x 30 x 25 cm  
Museum Tinguely, Basel. Roche's cultural commitment

*Disonata* shows a complex constellation of instruments, machines and structures that questioned the formalist distinction between artistic disciplines, allowing different creative fields to combine in varied and interesting ways.

An interesting example is *Red Disc and Gong* (1940) by **Alexander Calder**, who was already integrating sound as another artistic variable in his work. Random silence or sound makes this work the remnants of an instrument, because it is not actioned, and hence it is not instrumental anymore.

By contrast, *Cristal* (1952/1980) by **Bernard** and **François Baschet**, is not an art object that produces sound, but a musical instrument in the form of a sculpture. And the object-machine *Radio-Skulptur* made by **Jean Tinguely** approaches radio waves in a quite different way from that of the Futurist forerunners, bringing daily life into the realm of art.

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Quite a few other productions that incorporate sound in objects were developed during the 1970s: the artist **Takis** had long worked with electromagnetic fields, aiming to render physical phenomena visible; **Pol Bury**'s string sculptures take into account the relation between the length of a string and the sound it produces; and **Dieter Roth**'s works, like *Keller-Duo* [Cellar Duet, 1980-1989] an unselective accumulation of toy organs, a synthesizer, and miscellaneous components was assembled onto a wall piece, show a radical approach to the sound and art binomial. The installation *L'Anticoncept* (1951), by **Gil Wolman**, a projection on a weather balloon in which sound is independently conceived through non-narrative monologues that include sung phrases and whistles that merge with noises, also explores the intersections of image and sound in art.

### **Fluxus and Grupo Zaj**

Although the early 20th century saw a significant number of important musical innovations, during the 1950s and 1960s the concept of musical composition significantly expanded, like in the works of **Fluxus**. *Disonata* is devoting a room to their revolutionary theories and methods.

Along with **John Cage**, of whom some musical scores are included in the exhibition, other artists such as **George Brecht** and **La Monte Young** followed the route to the transformation of notational music into graphics and texts. Among the possible different natures of a score, this room also shows the quite demonstrative stands of *Musical Economy No. 5* (ca. 1971) by **Robert Filliou**, which questions normativity and conventionality in musical patrimony.



ROBERT FILLIOU  
*Musical Economy No. 5* [Economía musical nº 5], ca. 1971  
Mixed media  
Variable dimensions  
Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole  
© Marianne Filliou. Photography: Yves Bresson/Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole

In this room the visitor can also delve into the important contributions made by **Grupo Zaj**, a Spanish collective in which artists such as **Esther Ferrer** or **Juan Hidalgo** questioned the notions of authorship and art, and made concepts such as randomness, simplicity or indeterminacy the fundamental axes of their work, as shown in Ferrer's *Concierto Zaj para 60 voces* [Zaj concert for 60 voices, 1983] or Hidalgo's *Viaje a Argel* [Trip to Argel, 1968].

### **New tendencies in the 1970s and 1980s**

The last rooms show how, since the 1970s, art and sound started to evolve into new directions, as in the works of **Hanne Darboven** or the Spanish artist **Elena Asins**, whose rigorous studies on structures (*Strukturen*) that get armed up from a multiplicity of finite element pay homage to Mozart's compositions.

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CHRIS BURDEN  
*The Atomic Alphabet* (*El alfabeto atómico*), 1980  
Photoengraving  
137.2 x 91.4 cm  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York  
Acquired by funding of Print Committee 2003.110

By contrast, **Józef Robakowski's** and **Ulises Carrión's** films delight in the earthly, here-and-now conditions of the bodily. They both struggle to keep pace to phenomena directly linked to the sonic experience, such in Carrión's *45 revolutions per minute*.

The threshold of the 1980s, particularly in the American and British contexts, came by in the midst of political conservatism and rampant capitalism. These were also the years of the antiestablishment punk impulse, as depicted in **Dan Graham's** collage film *Rock My Religion* (1982-1984) and **Raymond Pettibon's** *Sir Drone* (1989).

**Chris Burden's** *Atomic Alphabet* (1980) and **Ronald Nameth's** captions of **Andy Warhol's** influential live show *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* (1966) provide a thunderous finale for this show.

## Catalogue

Museo Reina Sofía is publishing an exhibition catalogue that, in addition to images of the works featured in the show, includes essays by authors such as **Maike Aden**, **Arndt Niebisch**, **Christina De Simone**, **Javier Ariza** and **Ricardo Dal Farra**, as well as texts by historical figures such as **Luigi Russolo**, **Pauline Oliveros**, **László Moholy-Nagy**, **Henri Chopin** and **Pierre Schaeffer**.

Note: As a hygienic-sanitary prevention measure, the use of headphones has been avoided in the exhibition. In order to all audio excerpts to be heard correctly and with the required quality, a new alternative audio system has been set up that prevents sound overlapping.

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