

The Gaze: an Important Part of Listening

My piece is for the downward gaze. I have taken the leftover piano sounds of simple sound sequences, which Aki Takahashi recorded for me, and used them in my composition. I had recorded these sounds with a DAT recorder, but the recording was not good enough. There was this white noise on it, which hid the piano sounds, sometimes more, sometimes less. We did a retake and that one was fine. However, I used the failed recording in my piece for the downward gaze. "Failed" is probably the wrong expression, though, since it turned out that it was precisely this irregular noise that made the connection from ear to eye. After all, I wanted to have my piece played back under a sheet of glass, over which I had sprinkled black pigment through a sieve (a simple, open loudspeaker was installed under the glass). The fragile timbre of the piano sound, which I had changed during the composition process, melted into the finely dusted black surface. Yet it did not remain there for long, but broke loose, once again becoming independent music that no longer needed the visual. In the original piece, there was a square black surface and directly next to it, set somewhat back, a smaller, round red one. Both colored surfaces were equal parts of the composition, which worked with the non-musical pauses. These pauses were meant to be non-musical - they were either too long, or had no form, something I had intended - but the colors were supposed to substitute for the music when it was still. So: sound / red and black colors / red or black colors / sound / nothing / etc. I liked the piece; it worked best when I didn't concentrate upon it, but heard it in the background. Then, one year later I had a show in Turin, in a wonderful gallery in a clear, bright, industrial space. I wanted to install my *Music for the Downward Gaze* here, but I discovered that the visual part could not be realized the way it ought to be. I enlarged the black surface to an 80 x 80 cm. square, and instead of the round red surface, I placed another, smaller black square next to it. It was musically justified, since my piece was installed in a larger context with other works. After completing the technical side of the work, checking the volume more carefully, and then after the first, relax listening - which was, more precisely, a relax viewing - I was astonished to realize that, for the first time, I heard a piece of 'pure music'. What had happened, why had the piece changed so drastically? It's certain that the size of the big black surface contributed to this, but it attracted the gaze and held it for a while. And the small, new black surface did its part, for one, because its black was a bit, a very little bit, blacker, and for another, it had a more matt surface. The angle created by the relationship of the surfaces also contributed. There were a number of other reasons for the experience, but I was only interested in one in particular: that the visual part of the composition had become so autonomous, it was such a pure art object, that enabled the acoustic composition to also present itself as an independent composition. I had discovered a way to show music without having to give up listening - I had made pure listening possible.

But it would also have been all right if things behaved differently and in other ways. So the visual part of the work is autonomous, as described above, yet it might also have been that the large black surface, upon which my eyes rested as I listened, was alone the decisive aspect. The black was large enough to hold the gaze and to signal relaxation, or perhaps excitement, to the brain. That was enough to enable me to listen to the acoustic part of the work as 'music' music. Which leads me to something: I not only heard the music as such, but also as a sound sequence. I heard it in its musical context, which obeys other criteria. The instigation for this, and here I am, back at my previous thesis, was that, through the presence of an autonomous art work, I (as the person participating in the process) was esthetically excited and therefore prepared to react as described.