

SONIC TURN

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The 1960s witnessed an unprecedented shift in the cultural soundscape, as the boundaries between music, visual art, and everyday noise began to dissolve. In tandem with the meteoric rise of pop music, which was rapidly transforming from mass entertainment into a vehicle for experimentation and countercultural expression, artists across continents continued to probe sound as a material in its own right. What had traditionally been dismissed as background or interference such as feedback, distortion, and mechanical hums suddenly acquired aesthetic weight, resonating with the radical energy of the decade. Sound and visual artists actively pursued chance-based operations and radical sonic experiments, thereby contributing to the articulation of sound art as a practice distinct from music. This convergence of popular innovation and avant-garde inquiry signaled the development of a heightened sonic awareness, one that would ripple across disciplines and reconfigure the role of sound in contemporary art.

As Grubbs (2014) notes, an important aspect of experimental music in the 1960s was that it was not primarily intended for recording but was instead predicated on being experienced in live performance; “music” that changes with each performance, indeterminate in duration, open-ended, non-idiomatic, spatial, and not necessarily reliant on a written score (pp. 1–2). The antecedents of what is now termed sound art can be traced to early twentieth-century avant-garde movements such as the Futurists, most notably Luigi Russolo’s manifesto *The Art of Noises* (1913), and Dada, where artists destabilised the boundaries of music and art by incorporating noise, mechanical sound, and nontraditional instruments into their practices. Building upon earlier sonic experiments, new avenues for the production and reception of sound continued to develop, generating aesthetic paradigms

that reconfigured how auditory experience could be conceived and enacted. The 1960s encouraged an aesthetic that conceived of sound less as an object to be mastered than as a phenomenon to be encountered and experienced.

Sound artists reconstruct and deconstruct sonic material, bringing it to the fore in order to render the unnoticed audible (Krogh Groth & Schulze, 2020, pp. 4–5). Krogh Groth and Schulze (2020) contend that the term “sound art” has been contested since its inception, and that its expansive definition continues to evolve (p. 10). The experimental practices and artistic developments of the 1960s continued to shape and redefine the scope of this wide-ranging term, and the legacy of that period still informs the role of sound within contemporary art. A major contributor to the development of sound in art was the Fluxus movement, whose interdisciplinary ethos challenged traditional boundaries between music, performance, and visual art. Fluxus, a transmedia movement that brought together diverse artists, emerged in the 1960s but continued to evolve in both membership and scope. In doing so, it profoundly redefined sound as a medium within artistic practice.

The Fluxus movement is closely associated with pioneering composer John Cage, whose practice consistently bridged diverse, experimental, and highly innovative approaches to sound. Cage’s embrace of chance and process deeply shaped 1960s visual art, encouraging conceptual and performative intermedia practices. He provided Fluxus artists with a conceptual toolkit that legitimised experimentation beyond traditional forms, turning noise into sound, action into art, and life itself into a stage for creative possibility. His teaching at The New School for Social Research in New York between 1956 and 1960 was pivotal and attracted key figures who became central to Fluxus or closely allied with it. Cage’s *4’33”* (1952), in which a pianist remains silent while the ambient sounds of the environment become the “music,” directly encouraged artists to think of sound, action, and event as compositional material. Cage (1961) sustained that silence was never truly empty, remarking that “try as we may to make a

silence, we cannot” (p. 8). Similarly, Salomé Voegelin (2010) argues, “[s]ilence is not the absence of sound but the beginning of listening” (p. 83). Rather than functioning as mere lack, silence becomes the threshold through which sound is perceived, interpreted, and ultimately understood as a situated event. According to Ben Johnston (2006), Cage’s compositions required enormous discipline (p. 218). His hybrid performances brought together artists from diverse disciplines, granting them a degree of autonomy to shape both process and outcome in response to personal and contextual particularities.

The 1960s were defined by innovative experiments that blurred disciplinary boundaries. The Fluxus movement, following Cage’s compositional strategies, continued to develop indeterminate and paradoxical scores (Keylin, 2023, p. 27). Fluxus brought together a diverse constellation of artists whose practices fundamentally reshaped the trajectory of contemporary art. Among the most significant figures was George Brecht, whose background in science informed his conceptual approach, leading to the development of event scores that not only anticipated participatory art but also foregrounded the role of time as an active medium. Alison Knowles, a founding member of Fluxus, created works that also actively engaged the audience, opening them to variation and interpretation and allowing chance elements to emerge through the actions of the interpreter.

Writing in *The New Yorker*, Alex Ross (2010) observes that in the 1960s audiences were largely unaccustomed to sounds of the kind Cage introduced and while in an art gallery or museum, viewers could simply turn away from works they found too “unfamiliar,” in the concert hall they felt trapped, unable to escape the bewildering sonic experience. The phenomenological work of the Fluxus movement foregrounded direct, embodied experience, inviting participants to encounter ordinary actions and materials anew, and thus to apprehend meaning as something emergent within lived perception rather than fixed in the art object. These innovations and alternative approaches not only transformed

experimental music but also propelled the soundscape, positioning listening as a central mode of artistic practice. The 1960s consolidated the groundwork for sound art as an independent field by expanding its conceptual basis. While numerous developments have unfolded since, the innovative approaches that emerged in the 1960s remain pivotal in shaping and advancing sound as an artistic medium.

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