

Christina Kubisch

Christina Kubisch was born in 1948 in Bremen, Germany. She studied painting, flute and music composition, and electronics. In the 1970s, she participated in video performances and concerts, and since 1980 she has created an internationally recognized body of work with sound sculptures and installations. She added ultraviolet light as a significant stylistic element beginning in 1986. Many of her sound works are realized with techniques of electromagnetic induction: magnetic fields arise from interactions between specialized headphones and electric wires distributed in a space, and listeners wearing these headphones can access individualized combinations of sounds from the wires as they move through the space.

Kubisch creates synesthetic experiences in which embodied navigations of space become indistinguishable from musical form. Visually, her painterly treatment of wires references winding tree branches and other organic forms; sonically, boundaries between what is “natural” and “artificial” are deliberately confused. In *Oasis 2000—Music for a Concrete Jungle*, for one example, Kubisch transformed a concrete patio in London with wires and electromagnetic headphones so that listeners navigating the space experienced an unpredictable playback of sounds of rainforests, birdsongs, and flowing water recorded around the world. She posed the question, “What is true and what is false?,” suggesting that sounds with natural origins can seem “less genuine” than the synthetic sounds that permeate urban environments (Gercke 2000, 47–48). Her recent cycle of works, the *Electrical Walks*, change the perception of everyday realities by amplifying the electrical fields in an environment (Kubisch 2006).

Kubisch has been a professor of sculpture and media art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Saarbrücken since 1994 and a member of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, since 1997. She answered these questions via e-mail in August 2006.

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Tara Rodgers: I've read that you have very specific memories of sounds of your childhood. Can you tell me more about this?

Christina Kubisch: I grew up in a very flat part of Germany. People say that you can see today who will visit you tomorrow—which means it's so flat that you can look far into the distance. I remember the absence of loud, dramatic sounds/noises. Not much was happening besides wind, rain, little everyday sounds embedded in those from nature.

Your work is now recognized as having a strong synthesis of sonic and visual elements, but for many years you studied these disciplines separately and from different approaches (painting, flute, piano, improvisation, composition, etc.). How does your current work draw upon this formal training, or turn away from it?

When I studied there were no possibilities of studying something like new media, sound art, or other forms of synthesis of different art forms. Music was music, no images aloud. Painting was painting, and sounds were seen as disturbing the purity of the image. When I started to mix up things, many critics said I did it because I was neither a good musician nor painter.

Formal training is still very much present in my work. I have difficulties to let things happen in a chaotic way. The apparent beauty or clean structure of my installations hides the more chaotic things behind. So sometimes at the first glance things seem very aesthetic, but then become disturbing after a while.

During the early period in your career—roughly the 1970s into the early '80s—which of your many performances and exhibits stay in your memory as the most interesting to you, and why?

No choice. The process is the work, the risk is part of it, and nothing ever is really finished.

When did you start working with electronics as part of your creative process?

Early in the '70s. My composition for piano and five players, *Identikit*, from 1974, uses headphones and prerecorded rhythmic impulses. When I moved to Milan the same year I started to experiment with



Christina Kubisch. PHOTO BY MIGUEL ÁLVAREZ-FERNÁNDEZ.

all kinds of electronic stuff, serious or not. Many of them were modified analog electronic instruments, but I used custom-made objects as well. I always have collaborated with technicians and engineers, because you only can invent new stuff if you know something about what is already existing. The research on electromagnetic induction started in 1979, and the first installation with this technique using self-built receivers was in 1980.

Your technique of working with electromagnetic induction is unique and so characteristic of your aesthetic. Conceptually, what motivated you to create this system?

The wish to be independent from classical musicians and the world of classical music; the wish to create works where people could come and go whenever they wanted; the wish to create permanent longtime pieces and sound spaces.

It started when I studied at the Technical University of Milan in the end of the '70s. I had bought a telephone amplifier out of curiosity and tested its qualities in the laboratory of the school—strange sounds were coming out. After this, I investigated immediately about electromagnetic waves and induction principles.

On a technical level, what was your process like when you were first developing it? How has the system evolved over the years?

I tried to change what was used technically for amplifying the voice (in such systems as simultaneous translation) to better sound quality, by using different sizes of coils, putting them as well in various positions. Then, together with my engineer, I developed portable wireless headphones, which, from the original headphone, had only the speaker left. As well I built a system of induction loops, which were sound carriers and were used as visual and acoustic material for many sound installations. In recent years, focusing more and more on the origins of induction, the electromagnetic waves, I built a new series of headphones which are particularly sensitive to these waves.

Especially for your works that are inspired by architecture, what aspects of a space are you most drawn to? Are there certain spaces you've worked in which have been most inspiring?

Hard to say. Mostly places which have lost their original functions, which were used in many different ways, but have been destroyed, al-



Christina Kubisch, *The Bird Tree*, Taipei, Taiwan, 2005.

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tered, forgotten. Places of power that have become storage rooms, for example; a mansion that has turned into a hospital; a palace that has turned into a manufacturing space, etc.

In your works with light or solar panels, the interplay of light and sound is very integrated, becoming more like a sense of atmosphere. Is this something you strive for?

Atmosphere and sensual experience are very important to me. Much more than systems or programs. Though often there is a lot of precise work behind the work, like compositional structures or formal aspects, which you cannot see or hear. This is a remaining part of my strict classical education, I guess.

Many of your works are clearly tied to a certain space. But within that, there seems to be a very layered relationship with time—since you often draw on history, memory, and the real-time unfolding of sound and light. How would you describe how you approach time or temporalities in your work?

What a nice question. Time means flowing, changing, fragile structures. It means as well personal experience (you need time to have your individual discoveries of sensations and memories). Therefore I

try to avoid making clear, symbolic, or pedagogic statements. Things cannot be identified immediately, so you need time to decide what it is all about. You have to put to yourself questions about your very own memories.

Silence and stillness figure strongly in some of your works. I wonder how you conceptualize or define “silence.” Has John Cage been influential to you in this regard?

The history of art is not a chain of logical events. When I met Cage he impressed me because of his openness, his use of noise (and of course silence), and his ways of integrating chance operations and risk in his work.

I usually prefer silence to intense sounds, the quietness to strong noise.

But lately, since I started again with live mixes, I use the recordings of electromagnetic sounds, which can be very intense and even loud. I continue the work on silence for a new installation series as well.

Mostly silence and sound are connected to each other. Before the time of industrialization, very few poets used the word *silence*, because it was not something which was rare or in danger (this is my personal idea, of course).

Another theme in many of your works is a questioning of what is natural and artificial, or “true or false.” Tell me about your interest in exploring this realm.

Please ask yourself how many things you know by real experience and how many by digital information. When did you smell a humid forest ground the last time, or when did you observe a sunset or a real bird in the sky for a long time? I use these very commonplace examples because they are not common originally as an experience, but instead by their transmitted image or sound, by advertisements, and so on.

Tell me about your Electrical Walks series.

I always heard the basic sounds of electricity when using the induction headphones. But since the middle of the '90s there were more and more places which had other sounds like small rhythms, pulsations, and strange signals. I remember this particularly for an installation in San Sebastian in 1999, where I heard some mysterious signals coming into my own sound transmission. I found out that behind the walls

where my work was installed was a computer office. I decided to include these sounds and tried to know more and more about magnetic fields created by digital technologies. With the help of my engineer, Manfred Fox, we developed very sensitive headphones for hearing them better. The variety of what we got was really surprising. But the walks are as well a work of personal discovery of cities which, though familiar to you, change completely when walking around with electromagnetic headphones. This links again to “the true and the false,” and what is behind the surface.

And of course, the sounds are beautifully frightening.

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Kubisch's recent projects include an *Electrical Walk* in the city of Haarlem (2006); *Licht Himmel*, a permanent light and sound installation in a former gas tank in Oberhausen, Germany (2006); and *Night Flights* and *Five Electrical Walks*, two CD releases on Important Records (2007).