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Sound Structures Experienced Underwater

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The idea of a submarine center took hold of me at the end of the 1960s. The path I followed to turn the idea into reality is described briefly here.

Like many other artists I had rebuffed the art market; I focused instead on reworking my book *Expansion of Art* [1]. But by 1969, I had finished a blueprint for my Submarine Center, which was composed of three sections: an audiovisual center, a center for theory and research, and an experimental diving center. Like a cybernetic system, these three parts were closely linked. In this synopsis, I focus on the concept of the audiovisual center, which included “sound art.” Although written almost 50 years ago, my 1972 book *Planet Meer. Kunst & Umweltforschung Unterwasser* captures

the concept precisely. It expresses an early concept of environmentally created sound art, but its view of the project is as relevant today as it was then:

The sound world of the seas. Their spatial restoration. A whole library of this sound world has been assembled since 1946 by the Narragansett Marine Laboratory of the University of Rhode Island: *The Reference File of Biological Underwater Sounds* [2]. The sound material in the audiovisual center can be handled, processed, set free, manipulated, superimposed, recorded, stored, reproduced by anyone. On the one hand, mechanical sound devices are available for this purpose. On the other hand, electronic devices.

Fig. 1. Jürgen Claus, Divers playing the bell tower underwater, 1979. (© Jürgen Claus)

Finally, as a third sound group, recordings from the submarine space are available. Special emphasis is placed on the experience of sound processing. PROCESS MUSIC. PROCESS SOUND STRUCTURES [3].

For the Submarine Center, I designed a “walk-in” diving sphere that was to be 10 meters high and half-filled with water. Above, it would have a platform, which would double as a changing room and include a unit for insights, information and communication. From this platform, the art lover, equipped with underwater breathing apparatus and diving suit, would descend into the sphere and enter the water. There, underwater, the diver would experience a new world of acoustics of different qualities and nuances.

I submitted my proposal to art curator Harald Szeemann, who curated *documenta 5* in 1972 in Kassel, Germany. For a variety of reasons, financial among others, I was forced to discontinue the work. However, I later had the good fortune of being able to design a similar diving sphere on land, which was completed in 1975 for a boat exhibition in Düsseldorf, Germany.

During a film shoot for *Planet Ocean: Underwater Art by Jürgen Claus* [4] in 1979, I explored another special artistic

experience with underwater sound. One of the central motifs of the film was a bell tower lowered into the ocean to a depth of about 15 meters. This idea came to me on the Greek island of Serifos. From the parched ground of that arid environment, plants emerged with white, bell-like flowers—for me, the stimulus to create a bell tower in the sea. The bell tower was filmed among the reefs of Long Island, Bahamas. It comprised a total of 12 bells of bright orange-colored glass suspended from an aluminum structure (Fig. 1). The bell tower was one and the same time a sculpture and an instrument played by divers with underwater flares in their hands. All our premises on land are destined for sound: We build rooms in a dimension in which we can communicate with each other. Under water this is completely different. One can imagine the underwater space of the sea as a huge concert hall. The association was perhaps best expressed in the poems of Pablo Neruda in which he counts bells ringing in the sea: “Quiero estar solo con el mar principal y la campana” [5].

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References and Notes

- 1 Jürgen Claus, *Expansion der Kunst. Action—Environment—Kybernetik—Technik—Urbanistik* (Reinbek/Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1970). Spanish edition: *Expansión del arte* (Mexico City: Editorial Extemporaneos, 1970); Japanese translation: 芸術の広がり (Tokyo: Shakei-Shi-Sho, 1972).
- 2 See Rodney A. Rountree et al., “Sounds of Western North Atlantic Fishes—Data Rescue”: www.fishecology.org/soniferous/soundpub2.htm (accessed 15 May 2018). “Of particular importance is the recovery of the original recordings of fish sounds that accompanied the landmark book *Sounds of Western North Atlantic Fishes* by Marie Fish and William Mowbray (1970). They examined 218 species from 59 families and found biological sounds from 153 species from 36 families. We have created a CD-ROM containing digital copies of sound clips from 171 species that produced sounds (both biological and incidental) as published in Fish and Mowbray 1970. We characterized each species as having weak (83), moderately (37) and strong (47) sound production (4 undetermined). Only 47 species from 24 families were observed to produce truly spontaneous sounds (no mechanical or electrical stimulation). Although Fish and Mowbray include 160 sonograms and 329 oscillograms, they fail to provide summaries of acoustic parameters such as frequency range, peak, amplitude, pulse rate, number of pulses per call, call duration, etc. We anticipate that this type of information would be included in a new National Archive of Fish Sounds.”
- 3 Jürgen Claus, *Planet Meer. Kunst & Umweltforschung Unterwasser* (Cologne: Verlag DuMont Schauberg, 1972) pp. 88–89. Spanish Edition: *Planeta Mar. Arte e investigación bajo el agua* (Mexico City: Editorial Extemporaneos, 1973) p. 98.
- 4 “Jürgen Claus, PLANET OCEAN, artists video”: www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZCOQgZN-YA (accessed 17 July 2019).
- 5 “I want to be alone with my essential sea and the bell.” Pablo Neruda, *Letzte Gedichte*, Spanish and German (Luchterhand, 1975) p. 171. In English: Pablo Neruda, *The Sea and the Bells*, William O’Daly, trans. (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1988).