

Digital Arts' Black Sheep

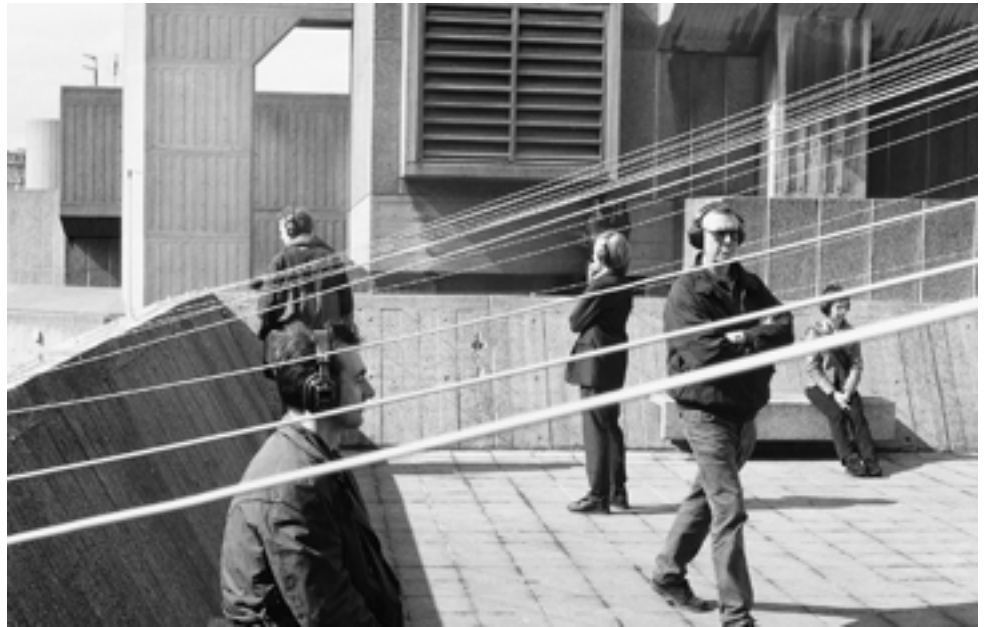
By Christina Kubisch

Contrary to the plethora of festivals dealing with the digital arts, digital music and digital media, there is essentially little discussion about what the digital means to us. It seems the term 'digital' has a kind of magic attraction which nobody can resist. In this way, the digital is not only a technological development, but a quality as such, which does not seem to be questioned. As a musician who has started her artistic career with tape recorder reels and patch cords, who has moved faders and buttons and who has edited tape by hand, this is confusing. Analogue is out, odd in any case, and unfashionable. Who wants to be like that? It seems to me like a tribe which hides its genealogical tree, because otherwise the black sheep of the family has to be called by its name.

I have been producing sound installations for more than twenty years, mostly site specific, both indoors and outdoors. Today I am working with digital media, though in many ways I sense the hegemony of digital culture differently than somebody who has grown up with it as a matter of course. This ambiguous relationship is mirrored in my works, which do not only use computer but make them the topic of artistic reflection. How do nature and contemporary technology relate? How do they influence each other and our perception of nature? These are questions with which I see myself confronted and which have been occupying my work since the beginning.

I have been enjoying working outdoors, because sounds of nature fascinate me more than instrumental sounds. At the beginning of the 80s I made large installations in forests and parks. Trees and plants were wrapped with electrical yellow-green cables and visitors wandered around with special induction-headphones. They listened, depending on their movements and the paths they took, to sounds in the air, by the trees, between the plants, along walls, fences and even in water and from underneath the soil. It was left to their own perception to decide whether these sounds actually existed in space or were produced through induction-loops of the cabled nature. Through this not only their auditory awareness was sharpened, but the visual sense as well.

If I listen to something attentively I give to it a very different visual awareness. These installations, such as *The Magnetic Garden* (1983, Vienna) or *Listen to the Walls* (1982, Lyon) consisted of concrete sounds or homemade electronic devices, that produced sound material. The result, however, was so similar to the existing natural sounds on site that the difference between true and false was difficult to determine. Often visitors lifted off their headphones to



Oasis 2000 - music for a concrete jungle, Hayward Gallery, London, 2000

listen with sharpened attentiveness to the familiar environment. Memories of earlier listening experiences were awakened.

Other works, which started in the pre-digital era, are based on sounds generated through the energy of solar cells: they save light, change it to electricity, feeding different sound generating devices. In the beginning this was cheap electronic trash. For example small alarm buzzers: if you didn't supply them correctly with electricity they sounded like insects or frogs or cicadas. These installations, presented in natural settings, interacted with the sounds of the environment. At times it happened that birds started to imitate the electronic buzzers, hinting at new and unexpected languages. In later works I used memory chips and computer controlled programs, but the quality was different because the variation of sound did not depend on any lack of quality of the devices used, but instead on the technical perfection of the digital control and the quantity and quality of the recorded materials. This contradiction has led to the development of specially designed devices, as in the solar-energy projects, that work without digital technology, react directly to light and produce for me still stunning sound combinations.

The idea to connect artificial sounds with real ones occurred at a time when the 'electronic' meant the 'new' and the 'real' was thought as directly perceivable in nature. Since the development of digital media, and through my different styles of working, these categories have shifted. Today all nature is available on demand. Every imaginable sound in nature is recorded, saved, and not only our familiar environment, but locations distant from us. While the first recorded songs of whales had been rare, they are available today with relaxation music, mixed with ocean waves and



Random Neighbours, greenhouses Pflanzen und Blumen, Hamburg, 1994



Photography by Dieter Scheyhing and Giacomo Oteri

Magnetic Garden, Göteborgs Konsthall, Gothenburg, Sweden, 2001

jungle birds, at the supermarket in a value pack. Knowing that data is available immediately creates the illusion that such information is somehow familiar, as if by direct experience. Such archival material, as in recordings of nature, are closer to us than its original. To many people the digital and synthetically produced and processed sounds of nature simply sound "better".

Recent installations of mine deal with this contradiction of synthetically reproduced auditory paradises. These installations (such as *Oasis 2000*, London Hayward Gallery, and *Le Jardin Magnétique*, Paris, Cité de la Musique, 2001) consist of arrangements of artificial plants. What is audible in these installations (again by induction-headphones) are, however, nature sounds of such an unusual character that most visitors believe they are electronically or artificially designed. But in truth such sounds are simply rare, mostly ignored or completely banal. As a result, when they are heard in the installation or artificial garden, they produce surprising effects of curiosity, strangeness or humour.

If we have to summarize my works in categories, I wouldn't hesitate to name it all "digital art". However, I try to present digital and non-digital reality as a way to confuse and to arrive at new definitions: to put the natural world in opposition to an artificial one which seems more familiar than the natural; or to relate the artificial world to a natural situation which appears stranger than the artificial.

My most digitally based work in this sense is probably *Mausware* (1998). On a round table lie ten computer-mice from various years; their cables are connected to real mice from a natural scientific institute, immersed in formaldehyde. From ten loudspeakers hidden under a table a tripping sound can be heard, a scraping, gnawing and scratching, which reminds the audience of the activities of mice in an empty old house. The audio of the

installation consists of recordings I made for many months of people working at their computers. These recordings were made by attaching a contact microphone to the person's mouse. Every digital worker showed his or her individuality by their special way of using the mouse. Quickly, slowly, nervous or even violently. Ten sound-structures of these recordings form the acoustic canvas of the mouse table, and rarely anybody has doubted the animal origin of the sounds.

Each medium creates its own clichés and is not by definition good or bad. Digital art has many facets, but its development does not only occur on a technological level. Therefore I find it necessary and indispensable to discuss critically the medium and its possibilities of use—but not in the sense of placing technology in opposition to ecology, or virtual art in opposition to real acoustic environments. Definitions are always limiting. The limitation set by purely digital festivals with purely digital art and digital announcements and digital tickets is not exactly exciting. Such events seem to me like the already mentioned tribe without a genealogical tree and the black sheep. (Translation by Sabine Breitsameter/Brandon LaBelle)

Christina Kubisch was born in Bremen/Germany in 1948. She belongs to the first generation of sound artists and has gained high international reputation. Trained as a composer, she has artistically developed such techniques as the magnetic induction to realize her sound installations. Kubisch has been a professor of sculpture and audio/visual arts at the Academy of Fine Arts, Saarbrücken, since 1994 and a member of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, since 1987. She lives in Berlin. For more information see: <http://www.christinakubisch.de>