

I am Sitting in a Room

From a Listener's Perspective

"I am sitting in a room" - a voice speaks to us from a room different than the room we are in right now. We are listening to a man with a slight stutter, who tells us how his voice will be transformed throughout the duration of his sound piece: his voice will be smoothed out by the sound of the room in which he is recording his voice.

The voice belongs to the sound artist Alvin Lucier, who, in his well-known sonic piece *I am Sitting in a Room* from 1969,¹ experiments with the identity of the voice, the creation of space and how to make the inaudible depth of the room audible through the use of technology. The piece is created through a performance of recording and playing back audio in a repetitive pattern, so it creates a continuous circular movement.

In the following, Lucier's piece will be described in relation to sound theorists Torben Sangild, Frances Dyson and Brandon LaBelle's notion of sound, and to a corporeal phenomenology, as formulated by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This approach can be seen as problematic as art critic Seth Kim-Cohen writes: 'Why does sonic theory insist on pursuing the essentialist, phenomenological route already tested and largely rejected by art-historical accounts of minimalism?' (Kim-Cohen, 2009:92). I believe, however, that we can use phenomenological approaches to understand the process of how sound art is created and experienced in relation to the space, the body and the technology.

In the last part of the article, the phenomenological approach will be elaborated through the use of performance theorist, Camilla Jalving's notion of the artwork as a continuous performance and presence in its relation to an audience. The focus on the audience brings the phenomenological analysis of *I am Sitting in a Room* into a social context.² The performance theory will be employed in order to address how Lucier's sound work activates the listener to participate in the sonic performance of the piece through an engaged listening. It will be argued that the listener "remakes" the performance of *I am Sitting in a Room* through his or her listening. This leads to the discussion of listening as production, where the author's own listening -as a remake- of Lucier's piece will be included.

The purpose of this paper is therefore not only to explore sound art in a phenomenological perspective, but also to discuss how we perceive the world through sound as a continuous process of creation and an active act of listening.

I am Sitting in a Room

I am Sitting in a Room consists of a 15 minutes and 23 seconds long sound recording.³ We are introduced to the piece by the sound of Lucier's voice declaring that he is sitting in a room that is dissimilar to our own. His statement makes us aware of our own surroundings – the room. His voice activates a situation where the sound makes us feel a physical attendance. The voice creates a communicative presence that speaks to us to deliver a message. It is sometimes difficult to understand what Lucier is trying to say, due to his stutter.

His voice falters through the text that describes everything that is going to happen within the next 15 minutes:

I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed.
(Audio: 00.15 - 00.55)

As listeners, we know what is going to happen, but we do not know how it is going to happen. We wait, listening to Lucier's recorded voice. Then Lucier plays the recording out in the room he is sitting in and records it. This time we hear more of the character room. Lucier keeps playing back his recorded voice into the room and re-re(-re)recording it, until his abrupt speech has been smoothed and almost dissolved into the sound reflections of the room in which he has recorded and re- re(-re)recorded the piece.

Sound as Artistic Material

Sound is, as the sound and new media theorist, Frances Dyson, writes in her book 'Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture':

Three-dimensional, interactive, and synesthetic, perceived in the here and now of an embodied space, sound returns to the listener the very same qualities that media mediates: that feeling of being here now, of experiencing oneself as engulfed, enveloped, absorbed, enmeshed, in short immersed in an environment.
(Dyson, 2009: 4)

Sound offers possibilities of expression that are different from other artistic materials. Sound creates a presence in a room, by creating another room. Sound constructs suspense between being present where you are bodily, and being present where you hear yourself to be. This can create a presence and an absence at the same time in relation to one's physical place. This can happen by presenting to a listener an audible room different from the room she or he is in bodily, or by playing back a recording to the listener that was made in the same room, but at a different time. Sound affects our bodily cognition of being in time and space, because sound involves our sensing body, which is a unique quality that sound has as a medium.⁴

Sound art often uses these unique properties and the ability to include the whole body of the listener in a room in the sound piece (Engström and Stjerna, 2006: 40-41).

The establishment of sound as an art form started in the 1940's but it was first constituted as its own field with the rise of avant-garde movements such as Fluxus and conceptual art that developed in the 1960's.⁵ Sound art is connected to the avant-garde by its attempt to expand the fixed framework of modernism and to break down the boundaries between the artwork and the audience (Millroth, 2002: 13- 19). The avant-garde goal of creating a fusion between art and lived life also included a desire to open the art towards the relational. Among others, the American composer John Cage succeeded in breaking down the boundaries of music so that it could include all possible sounds in his well-known composition *4'33"*. Music was, according to Cage, attention and liberation to all sounds (Sangild, 2003: 17-47). This trend inspired many composers and artists in the avant-garde environment, among them the sound artist Alvin Lucier.

Lucier was classically trained, but changed his way of composing after having heard compositions and performances by John Cage and David Tudor, as well as others working in a similar aesthetic. Soon, Lucier's method began to utilize different kinds of electronic equipment, from tape recorders to oscillators, studying of the acoustic possibilities of a room. In 1965 he wrote *Music for a Solo Performer*, a performance where human brainwaves were used to vibrate percussion instruments. In the middle of the sixties he became a member of the Sonic Arts Union, a collective for electronic music. However, he is mostly known for the sound pieces he has created alone, for example the piece *I am Sitting in a Room* from 1969 (Licht, 2007: 257- 158). Throughout Lucier's career he has studied the potential of sound as an artistic medium. His work is founded in an artistic aspiration to direct the listener's attention towards all sounds – even things and spaces that normally appear as inaudible.

The Voice

The voice is an essential element in the construction of *I am Sitting in a Room*. Lucier's speaking voice is an action placed in a given room at a given time. As listeners we witness how the room invades the speaking voice. In order to keep us listening Lucier creates a confidential relationship between him and us. He has thought of us as listeners and thereby witnesses to the process taking place in the piece. He talks directly to us in his speech: 'What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech' (Audio: 00.55 – 01.10). Lucier tells us what is going to happen and the reason why: 'I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have' (Audio: 01.10 - 01.40).

In the recording Lucier pretends to speak directly to us as if we were in the same room as him. But we are in a different room, in a different time. In the recording Lucier uses his voice as a technical instrument to create an imagined presence, a staged intimacy between Lucier and us as listeners. The intimacy experienced in the artwork is not connected to physically present person, but to a voice. The voice is physical and present to us. The voice is the instrument of our bodies; we use it and understand it bodily, because the voice is both inside us and outside us simultaneously (Sangild, 2003: 109). Lucier transforms his identity

as a person who stutters when he speaks into a musical composition. As LaBelle writes:

In *I am sitting in a room*, Lucier speaks his stutter, makes it the point of a composition and sonic process, conversing with himself, at home, so as to exorcise his own somatic quivers.
(LaBelle, 2006: 129)

In the end of *I am Sitting in a Room* Lucier's stuttering voice is no longer recognizable to us as a voice. The illusory presence that Lucier created with his characteristic voice and stutter is dispersed into the resonance of the room. We are led into chaos, not understanding what the voice is saying – it has become something other than a tool for communication. We now hear how the vibrating ambiances speak from different places in the room simultaneously. They move around each other in a swaying movement. Instead of describing the room in measurements and values, Lucier orbits the being of the room in a way that allows the space to expand and change. It is an artistic expression of the embodied cognition of the being as situated, diverse and phenomenological.

The Technology

Lucier shows how the recording technology, through a simple metamorphosis, turns the identification of the voice into the characteristic of the room. By doing so, Lucier dissolves the voice as a fixed identity and lets the sounds and resonances of the room take over the sonic expression. However, the voice is still the foundation for the sound piece – even when the voice fades and becomes only an impulse for the different resonant frequencies. In *I am Sitting in a Room* the voice as sonic medium meets the technology. The technology, the recording equipment and the sound production, slowly transforms the voice into the sound of transmission, reflection, resonance, feedback and reverberation. While the voice is changed by technology, new aspects of the voice are revealed by the use of technology. By playing back and recording his voice in the same room over and over, the spatial elements appear. We acknowledge how the piece is created from multiple layers of sound. The depth of the room gets more prominent in the soundscape. Every time a new recording of Lucier's voice gets played and recorded there are more resonances of the room to be heard. This expands the character of the sound work.

We as listeners, witness the transformation of the room through time from being a silent room that we can move our bodies around in, to being an abstract, dynamic, audible space. We cannot hear the room in the start of Lucier's piece. While time is passing, the mute character of the room changes. Through the recording-sessions the resonances of the room are reflected more and more in the sonic composition. We now hear the room with an audible dimension of the depth of the room - a dimension that was unknown to us before. By the means of technology, Lucier enables the room to present itself to us as resonant frequencies replacing one another. We listen to the room as an identity with a

specific sound of space. What we hear is the space's *being-in-the-world* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 430; Marshall, 2008: 188). Ponty explains the notion of *being-in-the-world* in this way:

The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which the subject itself projects. The subject is a being-in-the-world and the world remains 'subjective' since its texture and articulations are traced out by the subject's movement of transcendence. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 430)

According to Ponty, the world must be understood as something we participate in with our situated bodies. The sound of Lucier's technologically mediated room surrounds us and through our participation in it we understand its being. We are placed in the world as bodies that sense and perceive the world as something we ourselves are part of. In Lucier's piece we are placed in the middle of the technological transformation of sound and space that merge over time.

Time and Space

Phenomena exist in time and space and that it is within these two basic conditions that we perceive the phenomena in the world, Merleau-Ponty argues. Our perception of the relationship between the world and ourselves only take place within the frames of space and time. The fact that the world exists in time means that the world is never a finished chapter, because it is altered into something new constantly. The transformation takes place in space, because it is within space that the phenomena can appear as they are to us right now and right here –unprocessed (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 430-431).

Sound is a temporal medium that makes the space ever changing – always developing into something new. In Lucier's piece we can hear how the process of change from voice to spaciousness takes form over time. The room is in a constant process; it is expanded through the sonic unfolding of the room in time and space.

The meaning of the sound depends on our corporeal embodiment of the sound, as it presents itself to us. This is not about the sound as an object, but about sound as a space for exchange between the inner and outer world through time. The spatiality of the sounds in Lucier's art pieces concerns the dissolution between his voice and the surrounding place. The sounds move from his voice out in the room and back again, as a reflection of the room. It creates a sonic interaction, an acoustic spatiality that was not there in the start. A transformation of space has taken place during the time *I am Sitting in a Room* last. In the end of the piece Lucier's voice has become total spaciousness.

Lucier's piece demonstrates the room's sonic performance of *being-in-the-world* – a space in motion, surrounding us from all sides with its resonant frequencies and enclosing us in our embodied perception of the world through time in space. We cannot comprehend the sound of the room as a meaningful

unity by only using our mind. We have to let our senses experience the room as part of our *being-in-the-world*, because the unity of the room is only presenting itself to us in our physical perception of the world in time and space.

Sound and Phenomenology

The corporeal phenomenology is based on the notion that we are situated in the world with our body and that our perception of place and time always starts with our own bodies as the center for our engagement in the world. Perception is then created through a corporeal embodiment of the world. This creates not one but many perspectives, since we move around in space and time (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 387).⁶

Lucier embodies the essence of corporeal phenomenology - because his work places our listening bodies in the middle of a space constantly transformed by time itself and by the means of technology. When we listen to Lucier's sound work we become involved and enveloped. We perceive the duality of the depth of the room – its ability to be close and distant simultaneously. The cacophonous polyphony creates cohesiveness of the past and future of the room in our experience of the *now* of the room.

The sound of Lucier's voice resonates in our body and we can only experience it as a whole. We hear our own embodied cognition of the sound. It is our relation to the transformation of the sound we hear. This cannot be perceived from one perspective only, because it develops procedurally through time and space. We perceive the space as something we are placed inside. As Ponty writes, 'After all, the world is all around me, not in front of me' (1964: 178). When listening to *I am Sitting in a Room*, we experience how the sound exists in the world and how the world exists in the sound. The sound of Lucier's piece invades our body and immerses us into its space. However, there is a difference between the sound and us as listeners. The sound theorist Torben Sangild argues, that to listen is to be something that the sound is not, because the act of listening is to be in a distance from the thing being heard. We can be close to the sound, but there will always be a distance between the ones who listen and the sound (Sangild, 2003: 102-105). In this way Sangild directs our attention to the listener as a crucial factor in our understanding of sound as an artistic medium.

I am Listening to I am Sitting in a Room

In the previous, sound has been analyzed and discussed from a phenomenological perspective. The analysis of *I am Sitting in a Room* has shown how the relationship between voice, resonance and technology unfold and transform one another through time and space in relation to a listener. As the performance theorist Camilla Jalving writes 'The "doing" of the artwork is in this sense not a narrow internal matter restricted to the physical object, it is on the contrary inseparable from the audience'(Jalving, 2011: 13).⁷ The sound is inseparable from its audience in its relation to it. It is the difference between listener and sound that makes this relation possible. The relation is constituted in a social and historical context. When we listen to a sonic piece we perform it in a

new social and historical situation, different from the one the piece was being made (Jalving, 2011: 54). Lucier's piece was created in one point in time and we listen to it at another point in time. There is a difference between the two points in time. However, when we listen to Lucier's composition, the different points of time collide, even though they do not fuse. When we listen to Lucier's sounds, we perceive the room as part of our subjective personal experience, as bodies situated in a world. In our action of listening we actualize Lucier's performance of *I am Sitting in a Room*.

The acknowledgement that we as listeners are active in the creation of the piece through our interpretation produces new possibilities for sound work, artist and audience, such as how we can understand sonic art 'but also the perception in itself as a performative act, as a kind of staging or appropriation.'⁸ (Jalving, 2011: 26) It is not only about the self-referential act of embodied cognition, it is also about the experience of perceiving the sound work in a social context where we exist simultaneously as listeners and performers of the piece as something that is present to us here and now. Listening is performance. The performance of an artwork is a coalition of past and present - of done and doing. *I am Sitting in a Room* comes alive when we hear it through an engaged listening and actively participate in its recreation.

Listening should not be understood as only an immaterial act. Listening as a performance can also unfold in the process of redoing the piece or investigating parts of the sonic performance or appropriating the overarching concept through an act of production. I will argue that artworks like *Four Rooms*⁹ by Jacob Kierkegaard, *I am Sitting in a Room*¹⁰ by the computer artist Residuum, *I am sitting in a room*¹¹ by Laboratuar performance lab, the *Video Room*¹² by the YouTube artist Canzona, *Untitled. Interactive sound piece*¹³ by digital media artists David Tinapple and Joel Kraut, Phillip Stearns' *Compression Study 01*¹⁴ and my own remakes¹⁵ can be seen as material manifestations of listening as performance. These pieces are made as works of their own but also as a way of listening, as expressions of an active performative listening and doing of the Lucier's piece.

My own experience of listening and remaking *I am Sitting in a Room* led me through a process of recording and re-recording (and re-re-re-recording) my own and other people's voices on sound or video. I did it because I wanted to investigate the process unfolding in Lucier's piece and because I saw *I am Sitting in a Room* as an open manual that invited me to explore different recording technologies and to manipulate the voice with the use of different spaces.

When re-performing *I am Sitting in a Room* in a resonant chamber at the Danish Technical University I hoped to experience the transformation of the room from inaudible to audible, but also to feel the difference between being present in the resonance versus hearing it on Lucier's recording of the resonant space.¹⁶ Instead of using a tape recorder, as Lucier did in his piece from 1969, I used a computer for recording and playback. This is a conversion from analogue to digital media, where sound is created in a system of discrete logic. What the digitalization means due to a sonic context is a book in itself and can therefore not be discussed further here.¹⁷ The point with including my own remake of

Lucier's piece here is to show how his piece, as a manual and as a sonic event, is not only an embodiment of corporeal phenomenology, but also a social performative event that invites others to participate in the piece, through active listening as a re-doing of the piece (the listening does not have to include a remake of a piece, but it can).

My other remake or appropriation of Lucier's soundwork called *I am Sitting in a Different Room*¹⁸ (also recorded at the Danish Technical University), is an inverted version in that it is recorded in an anechoic chamber because I wanted to investigate the physical nature of the room. Was it a totally anechoic chamber where no resonances (technical flaws) were to be heard? What I got out of the process, and here I quote my former teacher at the Computer Music Center¹⁹, Douglas Repetto:

was unexpected and wonderful. Instead of bringing out the resonant frequencies of the room (of which there are almost none) it instead brings out the technological resonances of the equipment she used: the electronic noise of the digital recorder, the acoustic coloration of the microphones, the inevitable hisses and clicks of the physical world. (Repetto, 2011: 3)

Even though my process of recording my homage to *I am Sitting in a Room* gave me sounds I did not intend or expect, the experience of the gradual process of abstraction that is created when the sound is affected by the physical space through the use of technology was present. It was not present in the same way as when I listened to Lucier's own recording, it was present as a performance of 'a doing and a thing done.' (Diamond, 1993:1) as the cultural theorist, Elin Diamond writes.

The world is a process and sound art as an artistic medium can match this because to produce sound is a process. Our listening to *I am Sitting in a Room* can point our attention to not only the merging of past and present inherent in the piece, but also to a being-in-the world that is shaped by an interconnected web of relations existing in time and space mediated through technology. Sound art provides us with spaces where we can listen to our surroundings and actively participate through our perception and modes of production.

¹ http://ubumexico.centro.org.mx/sound/source/Lucier-Alvin_Sitting.mp3, located 01-20-2012

² Phenomenology has, among other things, been critiqued by art-historians for not having a social element.

³ There are other versions of *I Am Sitting in a Room*, some lasting more than 45 minutes.

⁴ See also LaBelle's description of sound as an artistic material in his book 'Background noise: perspectives on sound art': ix –xi.

⁵ Even though artists in the early avant-garde movements such as Dadaism and Futurism did a lot of sound experiments. For example did Luigi Russolo make a manifest for the sound in 1920. However the sound experiments were identified as part of an artistic visual practice.

⁶ A large part of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is a refutation of the formal science and metaphysical dualism, strongly associated with the philosophy of René Decartes. The essay, *L'Oeil et l'esprit* from 1961 (In this essay the translation *Eye and Mind* by Charleton Dallery from 1964 is used), was written as part of a confrontation with Descartes' concept of the mind as a non-corporeal matter and his notion of the linear perspective with mathematically constructed lines (We can find the linear perspective in Renaissance paintings or architectural buildings, for example, the painter Masaccio's *Santa Trinità* or the architect and engineer Filippo Brunelleschi's dome of the cathedral in Florence). Merleau-Ponty argues that the Cartesian sciences, which believe that everything can be measured and weighed, transform the things of the world into something they in reality are not (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 177). Because a phenomenon, Merleau-Ponty explains, cannot be described objectively through a scientific observation and registration of data (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 160).

⁷ Translated by the author. In Danish the quote reads: 'Værkets 'gøren' er I den forstand ikke et snævert internt anliggende forbeholdt den fysiske genstand, men tværtimod uløseligt forbundet med betragteren.' (Jalving, 2011: 13)

⁸ Translated by the author. In Danish the quote reads: 'men også sansningen i sig selv som performativ, som en form for opførsel eller selvscenesættelse.' (Jalving, 2011: 26)

⁹ Jacob Kierkegaard: *Four Rooms*, 2006: <http://boomkat.com/cds/22750-jacob-kirkegaard-4-rooms>, located 01-25-2012

¹⁰ Residuum: *I am Sitting in a Room*, 2005: http://www.archive.org/details/residuum-i_am_sitting_in_a_room_mp3, located 01-25-2012

¹¹ [laboratuar] performance, research and project lab: *I am sitting in a room*, 2007: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8Q-4adwVck>, located 01-26-2012

¹² Canzona: *Video Room*, 2010: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icruGcSsPp0>, located 01-25-2012

¹³ David Tinapple and Joel Kraut: *Untitled. Interactive sound piece*, 2006: <http://countably-infinite.org/collaborative/lucier/>, located 01-23-2012

¹⁴ Phillip Stearns: *Compression Study 01*, 2011: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxTX5vE3b84&feature=player_embedded, located 01-20-2012

¹⁵ Stina Hasse: *Jeg Står i et Rum*, Variationer: <http://cargocollective.com/stinahasse#977182/RESEARCH>, and Brøl: <http://vimeo.com/15943169>, both located 01-26-2012

¹⁶ Stina Hasse: *Jeg Står i et Rum*, 2009: <http://soundcloud.com/stinahasse/jeg-st-r-i-et-rum>. located 01-07-2012

¹⁷ See for example Frances Dyson's book *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* from 2009 and Mark N. B. Hansen's *Bodies in Code Interfaces with digital media* from 2006.

¹⁸ Stina Hasse: *I am Sitting in a Different Room*, 2009: <http://soundcloud.com/stinahasse/jeg-star-i-et-lyddodt-rum>, located 01-26-2012

¹⁹ The Computer Music Center at Columbia University: <http://music.columbia.edu/cmcl/>, located 01-27-2012

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BIO:

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