

‘Becoming fully present’

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‘There was a strange stillness.

The birds, for example—where had they gone?’¹

When, in 1962, Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* triggered the beginning of environmental awareness—and in particular, an awareness of a whole, cyclical and large, noisy web of life—it was certainly also her powerful verbal images that drew millions of readers across the world. Carson’s vision of a looming deathly silence continues to speak volumes today.

Bill Fontana grew up in an age of growing environmental awareness, at the beginning of the 1960s, a Cleveland boy with an interest in music. His family lived in a neighbourhood situated between an industrial zone and a concert hall. This intensive experience of a world around him suffused both with music and the noise of production had an impact that was to shape his whole life.

‘The task of acoustic art and acoustic design is to fundamentally challenge all of the old historical definitions of noise and the resulting preconceptions that most people have about the sounds they live with’.²

The epochal steirischer herbst festival, *Bezugspunkte 38/88*, explored Austria’s 1938 ‘Anschluss’ to national-socialist Germany, a topic commonly repressed until 1988. Sound artist Bill Fontana installed a sound work in the city centre that is still remembered by many local people to this day: *Sonic Projections from Schloßberg Graz* was an urban ‘multi-channel installation’ that transmitted sounds from the top of the hill down into the town, and mixed live noises of the city with recorded sounds from all over the world. Invited by Graz curator Werner Fenz and Heidi Grundmann from ‘Kunstradio/Radiokunst’ at ORF, Fontana came to Austria for the first time. In the following year—also at Grundmann’s initiative—he transmitted the sounds of the Danube wetland landscape to Vienna, between the Kunsthistorisches and Naturhistorisches museums; this happened immediately after a debate about the construction of a hydropower plant there. In Graz, the Schloßberg clocktower was once saved from destruction by Napoleon, and so became a local symbol of resistance. In 1988, Fontana took sounds gathered from all over the world and transmitted them into the city from the Schlossberg for a period of five days, for several minutes each

hour. These included foghorns from San Francisco Bay, bells from Kyoto and birdsong from the Australian rainforest. Using what were then cutting-edge recording devices, loudspeakers and radio technology, these sounds were combined with the eight sound-delayed live recordings of places of historical significance around the city into a live mix in the radio studio. The studio was set up in the Landhaus—which once served as headquarters for the fascists—and, for one day, the acoustic map created by the overlapping was broadcast to the whole of Austria. Although it had sought to reconcile the past with the healing present, Fontana’s sound portrait of the city met with a heated climate of defensiveness. As a result, the ‘beastly shame’—as the work was dubbed by the Neue Zeit newspaper³—was vandalised after just a few days and consequently was cancelled by city politicians. Despite—or perhaps even because of—the explosive poignancy felt at that time, for many people those sounds from the Schlossberg still linger as a melancholic memory.

‘I am assuming that at any given moment there will be something meaningful to hear. I am in fact assuming that music, in the sense of meaningful sound patterns, is a natural process that is going on constantly.’⁴

Since the beginnings of his artistic work, Fontana has been moved by the possibility of a holistic perception of the ‘overlooked’. Beyond instrumented and composed music, this is about conscious listening and making us aware of the sound qualities and harmonies in everyday life. Using technical instruments and unfamiliar localization, he makes the acoustic properties of landscapes, places, objects, and especially buildings into an audible and accessible experience. As in the case of *Sonic Projections*, Fontana often uses the indirect environment as the source of his musical information. A level of abstraction arises from the shift of location and naming, conjuring up strong visual images.

Fontana grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, and showed an early interest in music. As a teenager he played the piano and clarinet, and from 1965 to 1968 studied music at the Cleveland Institute of Music as well as philosophy at the John Carroll University Cleveland, focusing on Wittgenstein’s logic and language analysis. In 1968 he enrolled at one of the most prominent universities of the time: the New School for Social Research in New York. There he studied composition—on a course shaped by John Cage, who taught there from 1950 to 1960 and was in contact with the university and with Fontana—together with philosophy. At that time the leading figures in Conceptual Art, experimental music and Fluxus Art taught at the New School. Years later Cage also supported him as a mentor for the project at the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco (1985/86) and wrote a letter of recommendation emphasizing the quality of his work, which he said ‘married’⁵ natural sounds like birdsong and the rushing sea with the metallic noises made by the stretching structures of the famous bridge.

As a student he was greatly influenced and supported by Philip Corner, Dick Higgins (who in 1963 founded the groundbreaking Fluxus journal *Something Else Press*) and his partner Alison Knowles, whose performative work focuses on the perceptions of everyday phenomena as independent events and aesthetic experience. It was their perspective on the notion of a unity of art and life that led Fontana to the conviction that while all sounds—as Cage stated—were already there, we just could not perceive them, since our ‘Gestalt’-programmed perception—determined by the dominance of the visual sense—excludes them. The consequence of this is to singularize and to decontextualize everyday sounds so that they from pictures in your head. Language

¹ From: Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1962/2002, Boston/ New York, p. 2.

² Bill Fontana, ‘Zeitgleich’ symposium, Hall in Tirol, 1994, on <http://www.kunstradio.at/ZEITGLEICH/index.html> (accessed 02.03.2019).

³ Walter Müller, ‘Eine Affenschande’, *Neue Zeit*, 18.10.1988, p. 9.

⁴ From: Bill Fontana, *The Environment as a Musical Resource*, 1990, published online, <https://resoundings.org/Pages/musical%20resource.html> (accessed 07.02.2020).

⁵ Letter from John Cage, viewed by the author in Bill Fontana’s archive, 15.12.2018.



seems to be the first option for this, and sound recordings of their reproductions with location shifts the second.

A significant contribution has been made to this working method by the steady growth of consumer technology such as the tape recorders and contact microphones that Fontana uses to make a wide range of objects audible and perceptible.

Shortly after he graduated in 1970, Fontana worked as musical director of the Toronto Free Theatre and designed sound exhibits for the Ontario Science Center. In 1973 he began working with his former professors Alison Knowles and Pilip Corner which led to the installation of *Sound Sculpture with Resonators* at the Experimental Intermedia Foundation in New York in 1974. At the same time they collaborated on *Gentle Surprises for the Ear*, an interactive performance which brought him to Denmark in 1975: the piece consisted of a series of everyday objects laid out and suspended around a darkened room and ticketed with handwritten directions to touch them, or to check out their musical properties as described. A random concert with intermediary experience developed in the space and through interaction with the public.⁶ At

⁶ See <http://www.aknowles.com/gentle.html> (accessed: 02.03.2020).



Bill Fontana in the Australian Outback, 1976

this time Fontana also learned of the Balinese tradition of gamelan, in which music is regarded as a medium employed to make the flow of all cosmic energies audible. Fontana has devoted himself to this task throughout his oeuvre, and evokes it again in his *Primal Energies* installation at the Kunsthaus Graz in 2020.

From 1975 to 1978 Fontana lived in Australia, where he began systematic sound works and recordings, and came into contact with radio as a medium of communication and an artistic space for the first time. He produced a comprehensive set of recordings of everyday noises from various places on the Australian continent for the Australian Broadcasting Company (ABC). His work with experimental radio allowed him to buy and use the latest sound equipment and led to his most exciting work of the 1970s: *Total Eclipse, SE Australia, October 23rd 1976* is the striking acoustic record of a total solar eclipse, an extremely rare occurrence that is generally perceived first and foremost visually. Not due to happen at the same spot again for many years, the event was documented and broadcast by Fontana live from the rainforest. His recordings revealing the animals' acoustic behaviour during and after the eclipse—from the wild clamour of the birdsong and rustle of the trees through to complete silence, and finally the tentative reawakening of the forest—were transmitted via radio into the urban reality of Sydney. This transmission of the recorded natural sound to a place defined by man is a crucial component of the spatial experience of his sound sculptures, which essentially occur in people's visual imagination. Before the listeners' inner eyes their own visions unfold, as with my visions of colourful, iridescent birds in the green undergrowth being silenced as gradually all becomes still, slowly sinking into the dark.

As a consequence of this experience taking place in our imaginations and overlapping with our own situation, which expands in time, Fontana called his works *Sound Sculptures*, so using the relatively new conceptual construction from the combination

of visual and auditory vocabulary.⁷ It refers to the spatial and temporal manifestation of sound that he has carried with him as a concept since reading Duchamp's notes at the exhibition *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* in New York.

*'Musical Sculpture
 lasting and
 Sounds leaving from
 different places and
 forming
 sounding
 a sculpture which lasts.'*⁸

It was not just Duchamp but the entire legendary exhibition—which ran in 1968 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and explored the machine as part of an artistic way of thinking and creating—that had a lasting impact on him. The curator, Pontus Hulten, brought together artworks addressing the machine as a promise (as with the Futurists), as a danger (as with the Surrealists), or as a distinct aesthetic medium (as with Duchamp). Fontana's enthusiasm for technical and mechanical development and also for Wittgenstein's analysis of language underwent a physical translation. In a period of growing electronic and chemical influence on communication and perception of social reality, and the increasing awareness of how nature was changing, the show also implicitly raised the question of an actual dichotomy between man and machine, between culture and nature. The concept of the analytical staging of an everyday encounter between nature and culture runs like a thread through Fontana's work to this day. Famous as a result of his work with the Australian Broadcasting Company, Fontana was awarded a DAAD scholarship in Germany. Within this context he created compositions and live sound sculptures for the WDR 'Studio Akustische Kunst' (Studio Acoustic Art) in Cologne, including *Distant Trains* (1983), *Metropolis Köln* (1984), *Soundbridge Cologne—San Francisco* (1987) and was part of the groundbreaking exhibition *Für Augen und Ohren* (For Eyes and Ears) at the Academy for Fine Arts in Berlin, curated by René Block who for that event drew up a wonderful construction map of the development of New Music and Sound Art.

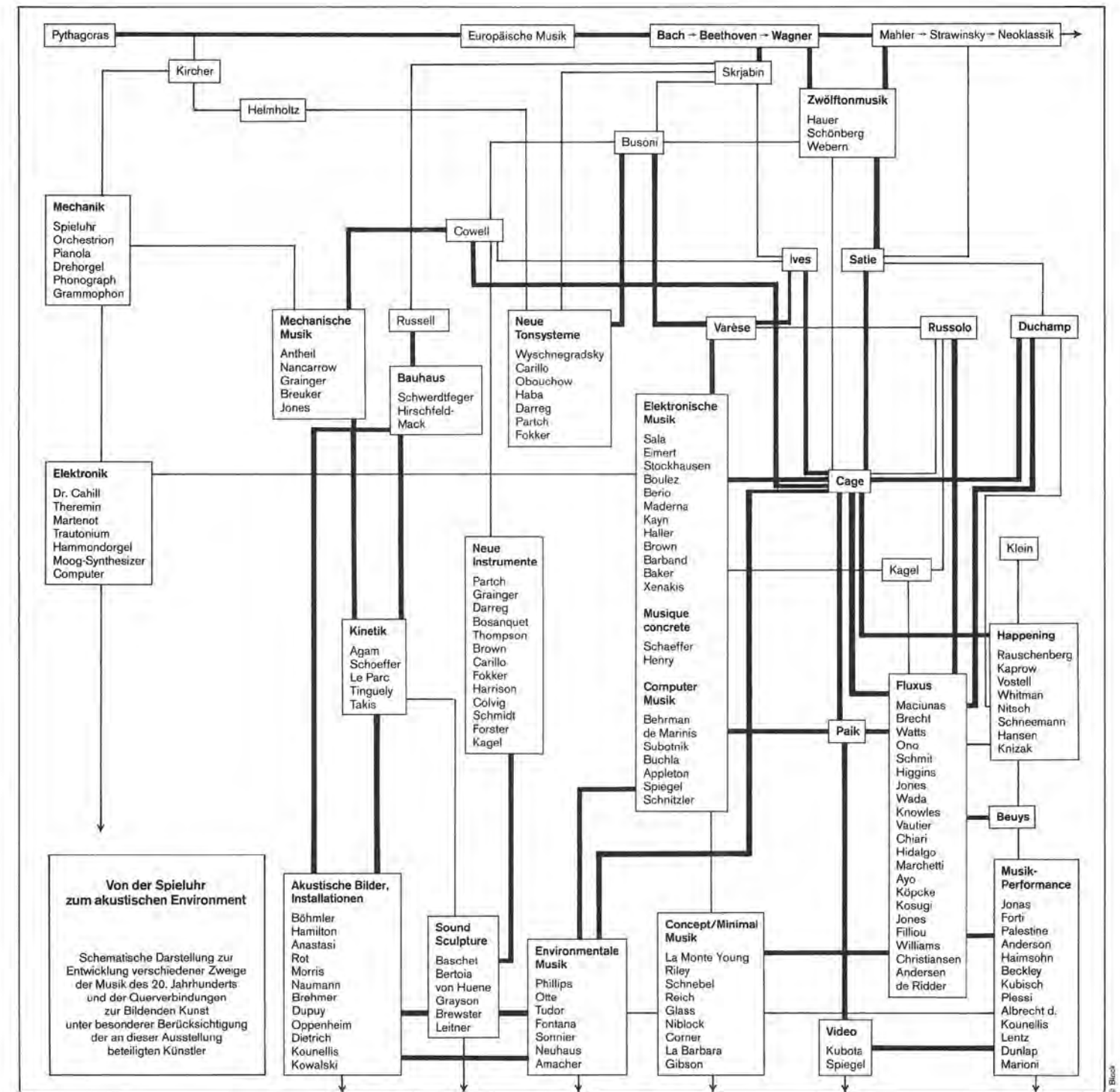
*'My work over the years has been an ongoing investigation into the aesthetic significance of sounds happening at a particular moment in time. This has led me to create a series of projects that treat the urban and natural environment as a living source of musical information.'*⁹

Sound Island, Fontana's 1994 installation at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, is another work that analyses both the imaginary worlds of national identity and also the rules of acoustic visualization and verbal images. Using eight loudspeakers he transmitted the rushing of the sea off the coast of Normandy onto the façade of the Arc de Triomphe. Due to the complex acoustics, the white noise of the crashing waves absorbed and masked all other noises. Emerging from the metro station, people were surprised by the sound of the roaring surf as they walked past the structure in the middle of the multi-lane traffic island. The coastal area, inscribed in cultural memory as the scene of heavy losses during the Allied invasion of German-occupied France, was mixed before the inner eyes of the passers-by with the arch as a visible symbol of French supremacy. On the observation platform, 16 loudspeakers played the transmissions of ambient noises from 16 visible locations. Thus what the eye saw was in line with acoustic reality. You could look as far as the eye could see, and from the sounds also imagine the life and goings-on there. Fontana has more recently

⁷ Other artists such as Alvin Lucier and Harry Bertoia also began to use this term at the same time. See: Alvin Lucier, *Music on a long thin wire*, 1977, see: Alan Licht, *Sound art: Origins, development, and ambiguities*, online publishing 2009, p. 9, see: <http://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/organized-sound/article/sound-art-developments-and-ambiguities> (accessed 07.02.2020).

⁸ From Duchamp's 'Green Box' *The Bride Stripped Bare* by her Bachelors, Even (1934), quoted in Bill Fontana, *Resoundings*, a text on the occasion of the production of the sound sculpture *Pigeon Soundings* in the Cologne Diocesan Museum St. Koloman; *Original recordings from 1994 made before the reconstruction, as an installation in the new construction since 2007*. see: <http://www.resoundings.org/Pages/Resoundings.html> (accessed 20.03.2019).

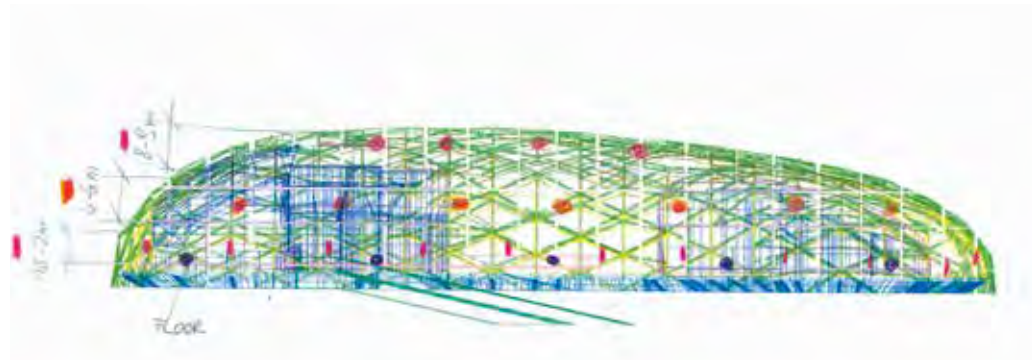
⁹ Bill Fontana as part of his talk within the framework of the international conference *Music and Landscape. Soundscape and Sonic Art*, 29.10.2016, a cooperation between the University of Music and the Performing Arts (Institute of Music Aesthetics) and the Kunsthaus Graz.



René Block, from: *Für Augen und Ohren* (exhibition catalogue, Academy of Fine Arts, Berlin, 1980)

begun to 're'combine images with sound. For instance, the sound of the temple bells in *Silent Echoes*, extracted and abstracted by high-frequency microphones and seismic devices—his first audiovisual work, composed for the London gallery Haunch of Venison in 2009—were combined with close-up images of the ringing bell in high image resolution as a video. As an internal and external phenomenon before the eyes of the viewer, his abstracted works become whole sound-images. For *Desert Soundings* on the roof of the OK Center in Linz (2014) he juxtaposed high-resolution video images of the moving desert sand of Abu Dhabi with the acoustic recordings of vibration sensors buried in the sand. Both an acoustic and visual experience at the same time,

Technical sketch for the installation of the sound system in Space01 by Martin Beck



the overlapping waves and lines moved by the wind on the creamy white sand combined with the sounds of constant movement that no one had ever been able to hear before.

Within the context of the conference *Music and Landscape. Soundscape and Sonic Art* at the Graz University of Music and Performing Arts, the Kunsthaus Graz commissioned Bill Fontana with a site-specific work for the inner courtyard of the Kunsthaus building. Since 2017 *Acoustical Visions of the River Mur* has brought the sounds of the River Mur, which is connected to the Kunsthaus via its extinguishing system, into the courtyard. Pipes act as sound amplifiers bringing the burbling and trickling sounds to the surface for the visitors. It is especially in these recent, aesthetically arranged works that it is as if the beliefs of the gamelan musicians are once again confirmed. Image and sound describe an energy that flows through everything and becomes perceptible in a composed overlapping. Fontana extracts recognizable patterns from the recordings that complement one another in picture and sound. Using technical devices, he commits himself in this way both to technology and nature and, through the sensory experience of their aesthetic relationship, manages to show them in fragile coherence.¹⁰

*'When simultaneity makes time spread in dimension, multidimensional sound becomes more material.'*¹¹

The question as to what energy sounds like is answered in the exhibition *Primal Energies* and the public sound project *Sonic Projections* by drawing attention to a holistic perception of energy and the environment: in the domed space of the Kunsthaus, Fontana's *Primal Energies* immerses us in the acoustic and visual structures of solar, water, wind and geothermal energy. Eight places in Portugal, California, England, Italy, Germany and Austria, their sound sources and cinematic views, are assembled in three-dimensional space on 64 loudspeakers and eight projection surfaces into a spherical composition of the properties of cycle energy. For this Fontana uses the latest technology in spatial sound acoustics (Meyer Sound Galileo GALAXY), so that the composition can develop not only in time but also in space. *Primal Energies* explores very current and, for the developers at Meyer Sound, prototypical possibilities of multidimensional soundscapes and uses the influence of movement on the viewer as well as the level of content as a theme for the multi-dimensional composition. In addition to the acoustic and visual recordings collected from across the world, there is a transmission site located on the dammed River Mur in Graz. A tree near the hydropower station is linked to the total composition with live sounds and images. Connected to a sound meter, the tree transmits its environmental sound through its beautifully wooden resonance. Its roots, which since the start of

¹⁰ This article was previously written and printed as Bill Fontana. *Sound Sculptures in a shorter form for Music and Landscape/Soundscape and Sonic Art*, ed. Christa Brüstle, *Studien zur Wertungsforschung, Vienna/London/New York 2019*, pp. 237–245. The text was expanded and adapted for this publication.

¹¹ Bill Fontana in a conversation with the author on 19.12.2019.

The hydroelectric power station south of the city makes the water rise. Trees standing in the water of the River Mur, December 2019



the power station have stood in the water, allow us to hear both the noises of the flowing water and also the power station's turbines. The basic sound of the water flowing and the swinging of the rotor merge into a rhythmic suction in space. The steam from the geothermal heat sweeps past the visitors as a gentle breath. Yet it is precisely the factor of the living plant, which experiences this simultaneously with the transmitted sound and incorporates itself into the existing patterns on site, that increases the feeling of a real continuum in which time, materiality and spatial levels are interlaced; relativity can be experienced here.

Just as Fontana identifies details from the acoustic sources, he also edits the films in the same way: close-ups are juxtaposed with panoramas, views of structural analysis multiplied, tonalities determined. In the installation, acoustic and visual patterns are aligned on the theme of cycle energy that, alongside an eerie urgency, render tangible a constantly pulsating existence.

*'I only hear the sky when an aeroplane flies over me.'*¹²

Parallel to the exhibition, *Sonic Projections* examines a perception of the environment as immediate surroundings. Just as the aeroplane makes the sky noticeable, it is often disruption that leads to actual perception. The resistance that emerged in 1988 from various circles testifies not least to Fontana's ability to discern sensitive points in a society. From today's perspective, the perceived provocation was based on a misunderstanding triggered by a lack of general information and—as was usual at the time—little active mediation work. Today, the main focus of *Sonic Projections* lies less with working on the 'dark stain' in the city's history, and more with perceiving the city as a model of community. The reenactment once again transmits unfamiliar sounds of the world (tropical birds, a windbuoy, Japanese bells, a San Francisco foghorn, etc.) for several minutes into the urban space, a gentle irritation that gives people a brief nudge. An essential factor is that the sounds stand out due to their unfamiliar localization and so reflect back on the actual place of perception. Today, the revival of the sound sculpture encounters a changed city, which is a delicate balance of use and overuse, democratic communication and economic marketing, of working, living and

¹² From a conversation between sound artist and academic Justin Winkler and a woman with a visual impairment—retold within the context of the public studio talk I: *Wie klingt die Stadt?*, Radio Helsinki, Graz, 25.01.2020.

protected space, and a city which, in its densification, increased traffic and growth in consumption, faces completely different demands to those of 32 years ago. Apart from technical development and usage for broadcasts of city sounds via the Internet, the Schlossberg is today a nature conservation zone intended to offer people somewhere to relax. It must be said that this is not easy, since there is also a concert stage located in the middle of the hill. The effect that this had on the installation was that Fontana has selected only 'clearly' unprovocative sounds and will transmit them alternately from the Schloßberg and the Kunsthaus in dialogue. The issue of education and inclusion is, in today's information society, more important than ever; the project will therefore be widely explained both in the press and also on social media. We as a museum will be offering an extensive educational programme for the duration of the project. Part of this programme focuses on the sensory perceptions of people with visual and hearing impairments and their perception of the city. In addition to expanding the project and mediation support, this flows directly as a prototype into city guidelines for inclusive mediation projects. Beyond this, long discussions with the city offices have led to us agreeing on an adaptable project scenario that outlines a possible reduction in volume or frequency of projections.

Against the backdrop of global warming, the world's tropical sounds represent an impetus for dialogue; about how we live with one another, and how we want to shape our future. A whole generation is setting out to ask for alternatives that bring an instability of interplay back into harmonious unison. Concerning the issue of environmental protection, the focus is on restricting overexploitation and on the return of extracted energy. It is not only on an atomic basis that everything is permeated with energy and strives for balance: as a whole, the world is defined by the physical laws of a constant exchange of energy. In order to address the living conditions of a constantly growing world population and its consumption, we need not just technological innovations and developments in energy and food production and use, but also political and economic decisions supported by each individual person. For this, in turn, we all need the greatest possible presence and attention.

When I recently asked Bill Fontana what has driven him to keep tracking the sounds around us across the world for 50 years now, using constantly changing new technology, his poetic reply was: '*to become fully present*'. What he was implying was that his work to date serves to make us become fully present—that is, to live in the here and now, to take in the present, to behave and act accordingly.¹³