

THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE: THREE EVENINGS OF FILM

Steve Seid, video curator at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, presents a three-part screening series of experimental films and video works dating back to 1936. "A Kind of Hush" examines the aesthetics of silence in avant-garde practice; "Sonic Slippage" and "Sourcing Sound" emphasize the use of sound as a subversive tool and subject of study.

Rice University Media Center
University Boulevard at Stockton Street, Entrance 8
Free

A Kind of Hush (91 minutes)
Monday, September 10, 2012, 7:00 p.m.

Opening reception, 6:00 p.m.
Includes works by Stan Brakhage, Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid, and Nam June Paik, with an introduction by Steve Seid

Sonic Slippage (76 minutes)
Monday, September 17, 2012, 7:00 p.m.

Includes works by Rebecca Baron and Douglas Goodwin, Bruce Conner, and Steina

Sourcing Sound (76 minutes)
Monday, September 24, 2012, 7:00 p.m.

Includes works by Rudy Lemcke, Semiconductor, and Scott Wolniak

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

As If They Were Not There
Saturday, July 28, 2012, 2:00 p.m.

Rothko Chapel
Sounds artists Jacob Kirkegaard, Steve Roden, and Stephen Vitiello use "silence" to create sound works.

Music for Silence
October 9, 2012, 7:00 p.m.

Menil Foyer
Pianist Sarah Rothenberg performs John Cage's 4'33" and works by Erik Satie, Arnold Schoenberg, and others in this recital.

Richmond Hall
Saturday, October 13, 2012, 12:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m.

Richmond Hall
Deborah Hay and six additional dancers perform her new site-specific work, *Richmond Hall*.

Silence is curated by Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art Toby Kamps and co-organized by the Menil Collection, Houston, and the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

This exhibition is generously supported by Louisa Stude Sarofim, Faye Sarofim, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Leslie and Shannon Sasser, Nina and Michael Zilkha, The Four Seasons Hotel Houston, Paul and Janet Hobby, Ann and Henry Hamman, Lea Weingarten, proceeds from Men of Menil, and the City of Houston.

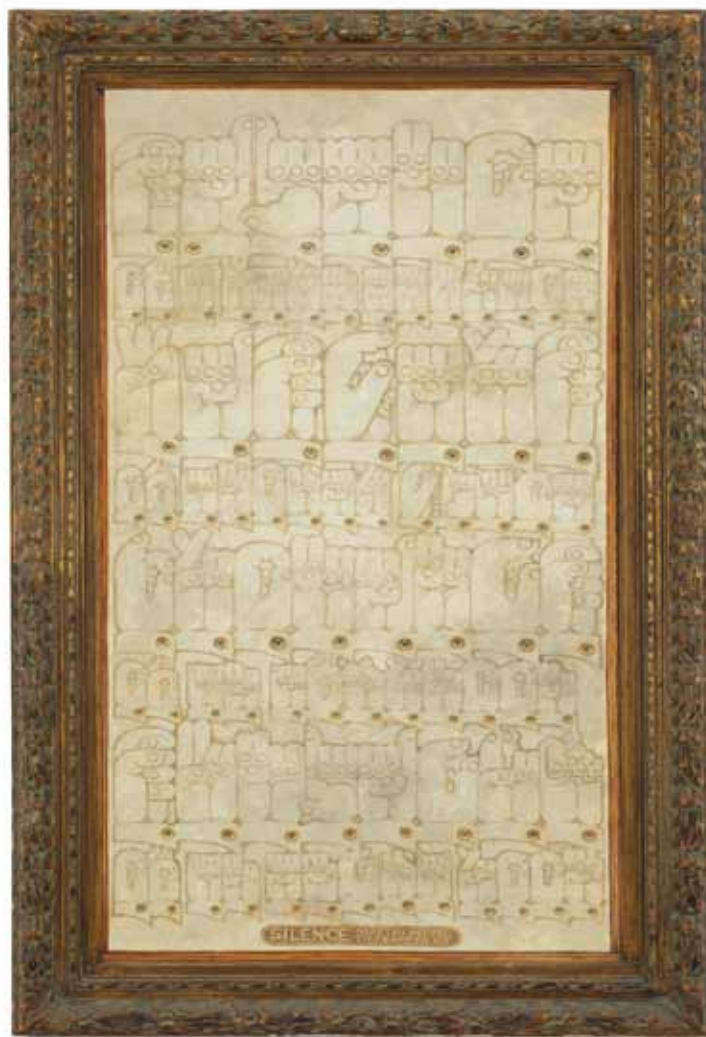
cover:
Martin Wong, *Silence*, 1982. Acrylic on canvas, 56 x 31½ inches. Courtesy of the Estate of Martin Wong and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York. © 2012 Estate of Martin Wong

THE MENIL COLLECTION

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SILENCE



THE MENIL COLLECTION July 27–October 21, 2012

What is silence? Why does it have such a grip on the imagination? Why do we automatically connect it to universal themes such as spirituality, memory, and time? This exhibition brings together works from 1916 to the present to ask—perhaps more than to answer—such questions. The art on view and the scheduled film programs investigate silence as both a subject and substance, reflecting the many ways artists have used it to shape space and consciousness. Elusive, possibly even non-existent in the real world, silence provides a means to push into new aesthetic territory and to express one of art's perennial functions: to give form to the intangible.

The quiet big bang at the heart of *Silence* is John Cage's famous 1952 composition 4'33", represented here by two versions of the score. Comprising three movements that total four minutes and thirty-three seconds, the piece involves no musician-generated sound. Instead, the ambient noises of the performance space form the work, reaffirming Cage's famous statement that "there's no such thing as silence."¹ 4'33" was partially inspired by Robert Rauschenberg's 1951 White Paintings, a series of white monochrome canvases that Cage described as "airports for the lights, shadows, and particles."² Like 4'33", they function as sounding boards for the receptive mind.

Cage's interest in the sounds of silence directly influenced a number of artists in the exhibition. Manon de Boer's video installation *Two Times 4'33"*, 2008, shows two performances of the piece by pianist Jean-Luc Fafchamps—the first with ambient sounds, the second with no soundtrack at all except for the clicks of the chess clock used to keep time. Stephen Vitiello brings Cage's assertion that the natural world is a composer to the visible light spectrum, using photocells and a computer to translate sunlight into sound. And the permanent installation located outside the Menil's main entrance, *Sound Figure*, 2007, by Max Neuhaus, generates a highly focused, barely audible reverberation to create a threshold between the noise of Houston's leaf blowers and traffic and the hush of the galleries. The artist most influenced by Cage's interest in chance, however, is Steve Roden, who uses related approaches to generate much of his work, often translating one system of notation into another. For example, in his painting *Listen (4'33")*, 2002, Roden used the lengths of the words in Cage's dedication on the proportional notation version of the score to determine the length of his brushstrokes. Also featured in the exhibition is Roden's written record of the experience of performing 4'33" daily for one year.

As the critic Susan Sontag noted in her 1967 essay "The Aesthetics of Silence," pure abstraction can be akin to silent prayer—a proposition made manifest in the paintings by Mark Rothko in the Rothko Chapel,



Joseph Beuys, *Das Schweigen (The Silence)*, 1973. 5 rolls of 35mm film varnished and galvanized in copper and zinc, height: 15 inches, reels: 7½ inches diam. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Alfred and Marie Greisinger Collection, Walker Art Center, T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 1992. © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

a world-renowned, ecumenical space for quiet meditation on the Menil campus. This reticence in modern art can be hermetic, as in the case of Ad Reinhardt's *Abstract Painting, 1954–1960, 80 x 50*, in which the artist aimed to eliminate any recognizable imagery that might link the mind to the outside world. Or it can be transcendental, as with Yves Klein's *Untitled (Monogold)*, ca. 1960. Made of gold leaf, a precious, spiritually charged material, the work conjures what the artist called "the void," a realm of pure possibility free from the limitations of materiality and personality. More recently, Jennie C. Jones has built upon the work of these artists by incorporating speaker grill fabric, acoustic paneling, and other materials associated with music recording and playback into her spare abstract paintings. Her goal, she says, is to reference two transporting avant-gardes, one in music and one in visual art.

The Dada and Surrealist movements too were concerned with penetrating surface appearances, but used more representational means to do so. The vacant cityscapes of Giorgio de Chirico, such as *Melancholia*, 1916, inspired Surrealist René Magritte, who credits his predecessor with creating "a new vision in which the spectator rediscovers his

isolation and hears the silence of the world.”³ Magritte’s *La chambre d’écoute* (*The Listening Room*), 1952, an image of a green apple filling a room, expands on de Chirico’s soft-spoken estrangement, and the scale-shift and closed window suggest a claustrophobic muffling of sound. Marcel Duchamp’s *With Hidden Noise*, 1916, an “assisted readymade” in which a ball of twine containing an unknown object is sandwiched between two metal plates to create a rattle, is an enigmatic emblem of art’s ultimate mystery, even to its maker.

The concerns of the Surrealists have continued through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Marcel Broodthaers picked up Duchamp’s playful threads in *Speakers Corner*, 1972, in which he staged a silent performance at the famously raucous site of free speech in London’s Hyde Park. The artist earnestly wrote advertisements for art and museums on a chalkboard while onlookers cheerfully heckled him, all the while maintaining the stoic demeanor of an art world Buster Keaton. And Mark Manders makes painstakingly precise renderings such as *Reduced Summer Garden Night Scene (Reduced to 88%)* and *Silent Head on Concrete Floor*, both 2011, of improbable scenes and figures, often utilizing a subtle scale shift reminiscent of Magritte’s work. The buzz of everyday life is hushed in his uncanny still lifes that give crystalline form to dreamlike thoughts and feelings.

In his famous 1819 poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” John Keats celebrated representational imagery as the “foster child of silence and slow time.”⁴ Beginning in the twentieth century, however, artists undermined the conventional association of art with quiet contemplation. Perhaps sparked by the latent sound in Duchamp’s *With Hidden Noise*, Robert Morris’s sculpture *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961, is a maple cube that broadcasts a three-and-a-half hour recording of the noises of its construction. Duchamp, and his proclaimed retirement from art-making in the 1930s, was certainly the spark for German artist Joseph Beuys’s silkscreen print *Das Schweigen von Marcel Duchamp wird überbewertet* (*The Silence of Marcel Duchamp is Overrated*), ca. 1973. Created as part of a performance, the work is a shout from Beuys to his predecessor, whom he believed discovered revolutionary new art forms yet failed to realize their full aesthetic and social potential. Similarly, two of Beuys’s sculptures on view engage with Duchamp’s idea of the readymade. The galvanized reels of Ingmar Bergman’s psychologically charged film of war and failed communication *Das Schweigen* (*The Silence*), 1973, may symbolize a leaden postwar Germany gripped by the horror of its unresolved Nazi past. *Noiseless Blackboard Eraser*, 1974, a felt schoolroom implement, references Beuys’s use of chalkboards to diagram his ideas for society and

creativity as well as his story of being rescued by Tatars who wrapped him in fat and felt after his plane was shot down during World War II.

Cosmically, silence represents an alpha and omega of being. To all cultures, silence is integral to acts of mourning and memory. In Doris Salcedo’s *Untitled*, 2001, two pieces of domestic furniture joined together and sealed with concrete form a kind of sarcophagus, alluding to the mute fear gripping victims of paramilitary violence in her native Colombia. Bruce Nauman’s flashing neon sign *Violins Violence Silence*, 1981–82, broadcasts an ultra-condensed narrative of the cycles of enlightenment (violins) and brutality (violence)—usually connected by silence—that run through history. Kurt Mueller’s *Cenotaph*, 2011, a jukebox filled with ninety-nine CD recordings of commemorative moments of silence that vary widely in length and concentration, highlights the struggle of the living to reflect on death and history. And Jacob Kirkegaard’s 2006 video *AION*, named for the Greek word for “eternity,” was made on location in abandoned buildings in Chernobyl,



Bruce Nauman, *Violins Violence Silence*, 1981–82. Neon tubing with clear glass tubing suspension frame, 60½ x 66½ x 6 inches. ARTIST ROOMS, Tate and National Galleries of Scotland. Lent by Anthony d’Offay, 2012. Exhibition copy. Image courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York, and Oliver-Hoffmann Family Collection, Chicago. © 2012 Bruce Nauman/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Ukraine. Recording, playing back, and re-recording the room tones of these radioactive spaces until the sound waves begin to interfere with each other, then manipulating the images to create a similar distortion, Kirkegaard has created a haunting memorial of a forever-still place filled with visible decay and invisible danger.

As with excommunication, solitary confinement, or simply being cold-shouldered, silence can be a source of suffering. Michael Elmgreen & Ingar Dragset’s installation *The Date*, 2009, consists of a locked door and a videophone dramatizing a potential suitor being stood up for a date. Broadcast on the tiny screen, the silent minidrama that unfolds as expectation turns to disappointment is given a naturalistic jolt by the street sounds the viewer hears if he or she picks up the receiver. If not explicitly an image of the queer states that interest the artists or the tribulations of gay romance—anachronistically “the love that dare not speak its name”—the work is an emblem of the countless quiet tragedies occurring every day. David Hammons’s *Injustice Case*, 1970, a “body print” of a bound and gagged figure made of impressions of the artist’s own body in margarine and powdered pigment, draws inspiration from the court-ordered silencing of Black Panther Bobby Seale at his trial for disrupting the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Framed by an American flag, the work also symbolizes the contortions of the Constitution to accommodate slavery and the history of unequal justice for people of color. Execution is, of course, the ultimate form of silencing, and Christian Marclay investigates this chilling subject in an installation mixing silkscreen paintings from Andy Warhol’s Electric Chair series with his own paintings and studies inspired by them. Both Warhol’s and Marclay’s images are based on a photograph of an execution chamber, but whereas Warhol’s concentrate primarily on the electric chair in the center of the image, Marclay’s zoom in on a sign reading “Silence” over a door on the right. Implying both authority and an audience, Marclay says that for him this sign recalls the Latin acronym “INRI,” meaning “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” on Christ’s cross, and the doorway beneath suggests the passageway between life and death.⁵

Silence can also catalyze states of consciousness. For *One Year Performance 1978–1979*, Tehching Hsieh locked himself in a cage in a Manhattan loft for twelve months, refraining from conversing, reading, watching television, or listening to the radio. While eschewing the spiritual practices of hermits or monks who take vows of silence, Hsieh used quiet and isolation to strip life to its basics. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s video *Mouth to Mouth*, 1975, employs images of the artist’s mouth, Korean script fragments, and video static, accompanied by the quiet sounds of running water, to compose a deeply personal representation



Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance 1978–1979*, 365-Portrait, Day 1 and Day 365. Gelatin silver prints, 5½ x 4 inches each. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York. © 1979 Tehching Hsieh. Photo: Cheng Wei Kuong

of an immigrant’s loss of her native language as well as an emblem of the generations of women who—by fate or circumstance—have been denied a chance to express themselves. Martin Wong, a New York City painter who optimistically claimed to have invented the first paintings for the hearing impaired, uses stylized depictions of hands to relate a poem in American Sign Language finger spelling in his 1982 painting *Silence*. And in Tino Sehgal’s *Instead of allowing something to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things*, 2000, a dancer writhes silently on the gallery floor in a performance that gives physical form to novelist Joseph Conrad’s famous maxim, “we live, as we dream—alone.”

Finally, we come to Argentinean artist Amalia Pica’s Xerox montage *Sorry for the Metaphor*, 2005, in which the artist poses on a picturesque overlook in the Black Forest of Germany, dangling a megaphone by her side. Referencing both the sublime landscapes of German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich and the legacy of Latin American activist art and literature she has inherited, Pica depicts her ongoing quest as a young artist to find an authentic voice and perhaps a frustration or guilt over not knowing what to say.

This exhibition comes at an especially noisy moment, as the din of digital life increasingly hollows out silence and any attendant powers of concentration. It is fitting, then, that *Silence* takes place at the Menil



Collection. When the museum opened in 1987, Dominique de Menil wrote, “perhaps only silence and love can do justice to a great work of art,” and the institution strives to honor this vision. Cultivating an environment low in audio and visual noise, visitors to the campus—a neighborhood of art that includes the Cy Twombly Gallery, the Dan Flavin Installation at Richmond Hall, and, integral to the exhibition, the Rothko Chapel—discover a rare alternative to the cacophony of everyday life.

Toby Kamps, adapted from his essay “(. . .)” in the exhibition catalogue

Notes

1. John Cage, interview by John Kobler, “Everything We Do Is Music,” *Saturday Evening Post*, October 19, 1968, quoted in Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1988), 65.
2. John Cage, “On Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work,” in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 102.
3. René Magritte, “La Ligne de vie” (lecture, Musée Royal de Beaux-Arts, Antwerp, November 20, 1938), reproduced in *Secret Affinities: Words and Images by René Magritte* (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1976), 4.
4. John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819), in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 4th ed. (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1979), 2:825.
5. Christian Marclay, conversation with the author, December 2, 2011.