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Authors	Roddy, Stephen
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The Kyoto School & Sound Art: A Nothingness of the Absolute

Stephen Roddy

Stephen Roddy is an artist, researcher, and lecturer based at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) conducting work in computing and the creative arts. He holds a PhD in data sonification, the use of sound to perceptualize data and convey information. His current research/practice is focused on the development of cybernetic frameworks for the application of sonification, artificial intelligence / machine learning (AI/ML), and human–computer interaction (HCI) techniques in the creative arts.

Abstract: This paper explores the thought of key Kyoto School philosophers Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe Hajime, and Nishitani Keiji as a novel framework through which to consider the historical development and philosophical underpinnings of sound art. Connections and divergences between these thinkers and key developments in the history of sound art are analyzed and explored. After an introduction to Kyoto school thought, the intersections between the Kyoto School and relevant 20th-century art movements are examined. The paper then spotlights four important themes developed in Kyoto School thought and analyzes key sound art pieces in relation to these themes. The article closes with a brief concluding reflection.

Keywords: Kyoto School, sound art, Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe Haijime, Nishitani Keiji, D. T. Suzuki, Lee Ufan, John Cage, Fluxus, Yasunao Tone, Max Neuhaus, Bill Viola, Christina Kubisch, Hildegard Westerkamp, Salome Voegelin, Jean-Luc Nancy

The Kyoto School

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The Kyoto School was a group of 20th-century philosophers who undertook the task of integrating Japanese and Western modes of thought at a period when Japan was opening itself to the world in the Meiji Restoration following the isolation of the Edo period. These thinkers developed radically novel interpretations of place, body, and experience that were united and underpinned by the metaphysical principle for which they are, arguably, best known: absolute nothingness.[1] This concept originates in the work of Kyoto School founder Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), who defined it as a field of potential within which being and non-being mutually co-specify one another. It should be noted here that absolute nothingness does not refer to the absence or nonexistence of some state or phenomenon, but rather affirms the existence of an ultimate "within which" all of reality takes place.[2]

Nishida Kitarō

Nishida is often cited as the most important Japanese philosopher of the 20th century, and he was certainly the first to engage with the Western tradition.[3] His major contribution to Japanese culture during the upheaval of the Meiji period was to reevaluate Japanese thought, particularly topics from Zen Buddhism, in terms of the Western philosophical tradition. In the late 1890s under the advice of his close lifelong friend D. T. Suzuki, Nishida took up the Zen Buddhist practice of Zazen or sitting meditation. He became a keen practitioner who immersed himself deeply in Zen until the year 1905, when he stepped away from active Zen practice. By this time he had become preoccupied with the idea of reconciling the intuitive, nonreflective consciousness that he had experienced through Zen, with the logical and rational, reflective consciousness of the Western philosophical tradition. As such his first book, *An Inquiry into the Good,* aimed to establish consciousness as an absolute unifying principle for reality through the transcendence of the subject–object dichotomy, a common theme in Zen discourse.[4] His search for a means to transcend the subject–object dichotomy

led Nishida to further develop and iterate upon William James's concept of "pure experience" as "the original flux of life before reflection has categorised it.".[5] While James viewed pure experience as the foundation of the conscious individual, Nishida characterized it as "the fundamental mode of true reality," thereby extending it to provide a unifying theoretical foundation for existence itself. From this standpoint, an individual does not "have" experiences, but rather it is experience that "has" the individual because experience is both prior to, and contains, the individual. Accordingly, the subject–object distinction is somewhat addressed. For Nishida, this state of pure experience in which subject and object exist in an undifferentiated condition was synonymous with simple everyday experience.

He built on this in 1926's *From That Which Acts to That Which Sees*. There he argued that experience itself must unfold within a place/field/topos that would provide the necessary means for its existence and thereby provide the ultimate ground of reality as a "nothingness of the absolute." He used the term "basho," or sometimes "basho of absolute nothingness," to refer to this place, field, or topos. Heisig makes two important observations about the nature of Nishida's absolute nothingness.[6] It is a "nothingness" insofar as it is not of the world of being and so cannot be or pass away. It is "absolute" because it cannot be defined in relation to anything in the relativistic world of being "so that its only opposition to the world of being is that of an absolute to a relative." As such, absolute nothingness cannot become the subject of conscious experience nor can it become an object of experience. It functions through self-negation in that it nullifies any definition applied to it while at the same time providing the means by which any such definition could even be applied. It is the *absolute nothing* by which all of the *somethings* of *being* are rendered relative. This sidesteps the essentialism inherent in the subject–object model by preventing nothingness from being positively characterized or affirmed. Being a groundless ground, it provides an epistemic and ontological source that is an alternative to foundationalist descriptions of reality that posit

some bottom ground level upon which reality is founded. Nishida's concept of absolute nothingness then is not some empty void beyond the world but acts as a creative and dynamic principle at work within the world. It is encountered as the basho, or "that within which" the concrete realities of everyday life unfold as pure experience. Pure experience and absolute nothingness are two sides of the same coin in Nishida's philosophy, as absolute nothingness provides the basho in which pure experience unfolds.[7]

Tanabe Haijime

The concept of absolute nothingness was transformed in the work of Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962).[8] Tanabe rejected Nishida's take on pure experience as a starting point for his own thinking and was suspicious of what he saw as religious undertones to Nishida's rendering of absolute nothingness. While he agreed with the idea in principle, Tanabe disagreed with Nishida's formulation of absolute nothingness as a basho. He felt that this reified the nothingness, turning it into a kind of object by affirming the negation implicit in the concept rather than negating it. Tanabe also criticized Nishida's basho of absolute nothingness for silencing the historical and sociocultural worlds, an issue he would try to address in his own work. In developing his own philosophy he turned to the Buddhist concepts of śūnyatā or dependent origination, and the Hegelian notion that individuals are always defined in relationship to one another. For Tanabe, individuals are relative and can be both self and other, depending upon how they are encountered. Furthermore, all of reality is relative and interrelated. The individual contents of reality, objects, people, and social institutions can only exist and make sense in terms of their relationships to other "things." This he describes as "self-in-other" and for Tanabe, nothing can exist beyond these mutual co-defining interrelationships. He reformulated absolute nothingness in terms of absolute mediation, which for him is the animating principle that mediates the web of interrelations from which

reality is composed. Absolute mediation is the observation that "one" cannot be posited with the mediation of an "other" and that affirmation, or being, is impossible without the mediation of negation, or non-being. Tanabe's further assertion is that nothing can relate directly to another thing but that all relationships are mediated by further relationships, and this mediation is absolute in that it permeates all aspects and elements of reality.

Nishitani Keiji

Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990), another member of the Kyoto School, would further develop Nishida's idea of absolute nothingness He came into contact with Zen through the writings of D. T. Suzuki during a period of struggle in his early life. Suzuki's work shaped Nishitani's early understanding of Buddhism, and Nishitani would continue to admire and learn from Suzuki as he became personally and professionally acquainted with him later in life.[9] He began focused Zen practice in 1937, and in time Zen came to be one of two defining features of his philosophy, the second being nihilism. Like Tanabe, Nishitani spent two years studying under Heidegger at Freiburg at a time when Heidegger was also engaged with the question of nihilism; while Nishitani learned much from Heidegger's phenomenology, Heidegger in turn spent much time learning about Zen from Nishitani.[10]

In his approach to philosophy Nishitani's interests in nihilism, existentialism, and phenomenology were united. He concerned himself with the dynamics of interaction between the two extremes of essentialism, the belief that self and world contain some essential and objective root nature or substance, and nihilism, the idea that self and world are devoid of any objective nature whatsoever. He felt that people tended to get trapped in a vicious cycle of oscillation between these two extremes and aimed to interrupt this cycle through Nishida's

absolute nothingness. He viewed the nihilistic standpoint as a relative nothingness that can be overcome when a person turns the "Great Doubt" of nihilism back upon itself so that one's certitude about their own nihilism is dissolved or "trans-descended" in a standpoint of absolute nothingness that, in similar fashion to Tanabe, he identifies with the Buddhist concept of śūnyatā. In Nishitani's thought, this absolute nothingness or śūnyatā is a space in which the relative world of being is allowed to manifest in its natural "suchness" or immediacy, free of the errors of nihilism and essentialism that are relativized against the backdrop of absolute nothingness. In his appeal to śūnyatā Nishitani, like Tanabe, was using the language of Mahayana Buddhism to elucidate his take on absolute nothingness as a creative or productive force. Śūnyatā, in this context, negates the existence of an essential nature or substance for the self and the world. Instead, it affirms a relativistic model in which the self, world, and their contents exist within an interconnected web of mutual relationships, a phenomenon termed dependent origination. The central innovation here is in building on the work of Nishida and Tanabe to produce a philosophy of absolute nothingness that becomes highly personal for the individual thanks to its reformulation through an existentialist lens.

Historical Intersections

Having provided an overview of key ideas and thinkers in the Kyoto School canon, this section explores some of the historical intersections between Kyoto School thought and important movements in 20th-century contemporary art. It focuses on those influential figures who, having come into contact with ideas that find their root in the Kyoto School, would go on to shape and define the field of sound art.

Cage and Suzuki

John Cage is an important figure in the history and early development of sound art. Alan Licht credits Cage with taking some important early steps toward a sonic art by opening the musical world up to the inclusion of sound as compositional material and the act of listening as a creative process.[11] Brandon LaBelle notes Cage's engagement with the immediate and proximate nature of sound in his attempts to "see each thing directly as it is.".[12] He argues that Cage expanded Western art music's understanding of music reminding us that it was composed of sounds and laying some of the groundwork for a future sound art. However, Licht, LaBelle, and Douglas Kahn comment that Cage's work was still limited by the concepts of music and composition as the organization of sounds in time and as such provides a precursor to, rather than an early example of, sound art.[13] Whatever the case, Cage's work has played an important role in shaping sound art. Cage is famous for importing concepts from Eastern thought into Western art music, and the Zen-inspired concepts of chance, indeterminacy, and silence defined much of his work. Cage attended lectures on Zen delivered by D. T. Suzuki at Columbia University between 1949 and 1951 and cited Suzuki as one of his chief Zen instructors.[14]

Suzuki Daisetsu Teitaro (1870–1966) was a Japanese philosopher and scholar who is said to have been monumental in the introduction of Zen to the West during the 20th century.[15] He was a professor of Buddhist philosophies at Otani University, Kyoto, where Nishida and Nishitani also worked as lecturers before joining Kyoto University. He also established the Eastern Buddhist Society and *The Eastern Buddhist Journal*, which Nishitani took over as chief editor in 1965 a year prior to Suzuki's death.[16] As mentioned previously, Suzuki was a lifelong friend of Nishida and a colleague of Tanabe and Nishitani. He is widely credited with bringing Zen from Japan to the West after the Second World War. In reality, Suzuki brought

an interpretation of Zen that was deeply influenced by the work of the Kyoto School thinkers. Robert H. Sharf and Martin Baumann note that Japanese Zen had been completely reimagined and transformed in the work of Nishida, Tanabe, Nishitani, and Suzuki himself, and it was this version of Zen that Suzuki brought to America and that would prove so influential in the history of 20th-century art.[17] Sharf also notes that Suzuki's thought underwent a dramatic shift upon the release of Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good* in 1911, as Suzuki adopted Nishida's concept of pure experience and made it the central principle in his presentation of Zen to the West.[18] He reorganized his understanding of Zen to position Nishida's pure experience as its essential core. Third-generation Kyoto School thinker Ueda Shizuteru relates the story that once when discussing the nature of Zen with Nishida and Nishitani, Suzuki grabbed hold of the table and began shaking it vigorously, exclaiming "Zen is like *this*!"—an act that, according to Ueda, deeply affected Nishida and Nishitani.[19] Tanabe, by contrast, took umbrage with the anti-philosophical bent of Suzuki's methods. He preferred logic and reason to the kind of experientialist nonrational approach championed by Suzuki.[20]

Suzuki's influence looms heavily over Cage's work. In the forward to his book *Silence: Lecture and Writings*, Cage tells the reader: "What I do, I do not wish blamed on Zen, though without my engagement with Zen [attendance at lectures by Alan Watts and D. T. Suzuki. reading of the literature] I doubt whether I would have done what I have done."[21] John Bramble and Peter Bradley along with Ellen Pearlman document how this rethinking of Zen profoundly influenced the transformation and development of artistic practices throughout the 1950s and '60s, impacting works by Rauschenberg, Pollock, Feldman, Klein, and Abramovic.[22] By the time Cage had begun to attend Suzuki's lectures, Nishida, who at this point was deceased, had completed the development of his concept of pure experience into the basho of absolute nothingness. As discussed, pure experience and absolute nothingness

became two sides of the same coin in Nishida's thought. Suzuki's lectures at Berkeley were deeply influenced by Nishida's work and, according to Kozyra, Suzuki and Nishida's interpretations of Zen were essentially the same.[23] John WM Krummel documents how Suzuki's and Nishida's ideas were mutually influential to one another; this is especially typified by the influence of Nishida's logic of contradictory self-identity on Suzuki's interpretation of the Buddhist concept of *soku-hi* or "affirmation through negation.".[24] In this somewhat paradoxical-sounding logic, A is A, precisely because A is not-A; something is what it is, precisely because it is not what it is. The world for Suzuki and Nishida is indeterminate, it is in a state of constant flux experienced as the suchness of reality. The only form of logic that can even partially describe this complex state of affairs is the seemingly irrational logic of soku-hi.[25]

Cage seems to have initially struggled with these ideas but, as Larson explains, they began to resolve for him when he visited the anechoic chamber at Harvard in the early 1950s. There he had hoped to find an absolute nothingness in the form of a perfect silence. Instead, silence manifested itself for Cage not as an absence of sound but as the sonorous activity of his own nervous and circulatory systems. Silence itself was composed of sound. Following the logic of soku-hi, the silence was silence, precisely because it was not silence. Cage produced two of his most celebrated works, *Music for Changes* and *4'33"*, on the heels of this revelation. *Music for Changes* was composed using the divination system described in the ancient Chinese classic *I Ching* or Book of Changes. Here, Cage devolved most of the decisions involved in the music composition process to the *I Ching* system. In negating his role as composer, handing it off somewhat to the *I Ching*, the musical work is nonetheless created. Following the thread of soku-hi logic from Nishida and Suzuki, the music is composed precisely because the composer is not composing. Soku-hi logic emerges to the surface again in a more refined manner with *4'33"*. If *Music for Changes* silenced the composer,

4'33" silenced the performer. Cage's score for *4'33"* informs the musicians not to play their instruments, and in the silence of the musicians, the sounds of the concert hall reveal themselves in their true suchness. The piece is played in not playing the piece. The sounds present in the given performance space become the piece and so the silence becomes the music. The sounds present in the performance space from one performance to the next are of course highly variable and specific to the given audience, venue, and performers. As such *4'33"* is indeterminate, different with every performance, existing in a state of constant flux.

Cage's ideas on silence show a parallel with Tanabe's idea of absolute nothingness as well as Nishida's. For Cage, silence was generative. It was not just an absence of or a basho in which sounds unfold, but instead "silence is all of the sound that we do not intend."[26] This echoes again the logic of self-negation by defining silence in terms of the negation of the intent of the agent, or composer. After his experiences in the anechoic chamber, Cage rejected the existence of an absolute silence that might become an object of perception. This is similar to Tanabe's criticism of Nishida's absolute nothingness on the basis that a true nothingness would not become an object to some subject. Tanabe's nothingness mediates the network of relationships that define our world. Like Cage's silence, it is a creative force. A second criticism Tanabe made of Nishida's absolute nothingness was its tendency to ignore and reduce or eliminate the sociocultural and historical world, silencing these dimensions in the process of negation. Kahn levels a very similar criticism at Cage, arguing that his concept of silence occludes the social and political dimensions inherent to sound and sonic practices.[27] Nishida would address and account for some of Tanabe's claims in his later work, improving his philosophy as a result.[28] One is left to wonder what Cage might similarly have learned from Kahn and later more recent Cage critics who have emerged in his wake. Cage's thought was substantially shaped by Suzuki and the Kyoto School thinkers, and his work and ideas have provided a foundational cornerstone for the field of sound art. He directly influenced a

wide range of practitioners, many of whom would become influential figures in sound art themselves.

Traces of Kyoto School thinking as interpreted by Cage permeate experimental music and sound art to this day, and while Cage's impact may have been most strongly felt in the Fluxus movement, a more direct impact of the Kyoto School thinking is represented by Lee Ufan: the artist and critic at the forefront of the Mono-ha movement.

Mono-ha

Mono-ha, often translated mockingly as the "School of Things," was a loosely affiliated group of postwar Japanese artists who rose to prominence in the early 1970s.[29] They explored the encounter between natural and man-made objects encompassing a wide range of media, from large earthworks to smaller-scale sculptural pieces. Mono-ha rejected traditional concepts of representation and production, engaging instead in "non-making" and preferring to reveal the materials, properties, and interrelationships of things as they naturally appear in the world. As such these artists were concerned with the aesthetic dimensionality of natural and man-made "things" and the interrelationships between those "things" in their unaltered states.[30] Such works elevated the significance of interrelated things in their own right rather than reducing them to simple materials that might gain significance through their incorporation into some larger work.

The movement's foremost thinker was the artist, critic, and philosopher Lee Ufan. Lee drew heavily from Nishida's ideas on pure experience, absolute nothingness, and the logic of soku-hi. He applied Nishida's framework when creating and discussing his own work, and when writing criticisms of the works of his Mono-ha peers.[31] His renowned essay "Beyond Being and Nothingness—A Thesis on Sekine Nobuo" applied Nishida's philosophy to analyze and

interpret some of Sekine Nobuo's celebrated earthworks, including *Phase—Mother Earth* and an iteration of *Phase of Nothingness*.[32] Lee takes pains to point out that his work has nothing to do with Zen or Buddhism more generally and that viewing his work through that lens obscures it and misses the point.[33] In the Sekine essay, he doesn't contextualize Nishida against Zen scholars like Suzuki, but alongside philosophers like Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Nietzsche. His reading of Nishida recognizes the role of absolute nothingness in the logic of soku-hi, wherein "one defines what is by what is not (nothingness)." This he uses as a framework to analyze how Sekine's works are encountered and experienced by their audience, namely as a kind of nothingness that reveals the "vivid existence of the world," a self-contradictory basho in which "[t]he world is seen but no object is seen therein." In Lee's reading Sekine opens the audience to the world as pure experience. This encounter is facilitated through the mediation of absolute nothingness, which operates for Lee in accordance with the logic of soku-hi. Baek argues that it was Lee's essay, as opposed to Sekine's installation *Phase—Mother Earth* (1968), that marked the beginning of the Mono-ha movement proper.[34] As a result of Lee's widely influential writings, Nishida's philosophy is woven into the fabric of Mono-ha, reflected in some of its most important works and still an influential force in Japanese art and architecture to this day.[35] While Mono-ha is chiefly a historical concern, Lee is still active, widely appreciated, and approaching his work in a similar spirit today, stating in a recent interview: "I create a simple work to express its neutrality as well as its essential and lofty relationships with the surrounding space."[36] Mono-ha was only one of a number of important art movements in postwar Japan alongside Gutai, Genbi, and Hi-Red Center. However, it is Yasunao Tone of Group Ongaku who provides us with a bridge between sound art, Fluxus, and the Mono-ha.

Yasunao Tone and Early Sound Art

In May of 1960 a group of Tokyo-based avant-garde composers—Takeshisa Kosugi, Mieko Shiomi, Yasunao Tone, Yumiko Tanno, Mikio Tojima, and Shūkō Mizuno—formed the free improvisation and noise ensemble Group Ongaku. The interests and aesthetics of the group were closely aligned to those of the Fluxus artists operating around the same time in New York.[37] George Maciunas, the figurehead of the Fluxus movement, reached out to invite the group to join Fluxus, having been introduced to their work by Cage and others. For Tone, a key member of Group Ongaku and a highly regarded sound artist, Lee Ufan's theories of art-making, steeped as they were in the Kyoto School, were strongly resonant with those of the Fluxus movement. He noted that the Fluxus artists were drawing from the same well as their Mono-ha counterparts.[38] This observation may well be due to the shared philosophical underpinnings of both movements in the Kyoto School—Mono-ha through Lee, and Fluxus through a range of influences that are explored in the following section. For Tone and Group Ongaku, Cage's application of Zen in a musical context was nothing new, as they had been applying similar concepts, in a more advanced manner, in their own work.[39] In 1962, the same year he became a founding member of the Japanese branch of Fluxus, Tone created his first sound art installation, *Tape Recorder*, for the 1962 Yomiuri Indépendant Exhibition at Tokyo's Minami gallery. He concealed a tape recorder with a 30–40-minute-long tape loop inside a cloth bag. During playback, the loop would emit sounds at irregular intervals designed to provoke curiosity and further investigation by the audience.[40] LaBelle[41] and Licht[42] note the piece as an important early sound art work. While Tone never directly associated his work with the Kyoto School, the use of indeterminacy, the organization of the work in space rather than time, and the enfolding of the audience into the piece resonate strongly with the expression of Kyoto School thought in contemporary art.

Fluxus

Fluxus was an experimental international art movement that emerged during the 1960s and was composed of several influential artists, poets, architects, composers, and designers.[43] Directly influenced by Cage's music composition classes, Fluxus was founded and driven by Lithuanian American artist George Maciunas and counted Alison Knowles, George Brecht, Yoko Ono, Dick Higgins, and Nam June Paik among its members at different times. Fluxus was deeply influenced by both Cage's thinking and Zen more generally, and it would in turn influence modern sound art practice.[44] Fluxus involved many graduates of Cage's experimental composition classes at the New School in New York, and prominent Fluxus artist Dick Higgins pinpoints Cage's interpretations of suchness and the autonomous behavior of simultaneous events as being of particular importance to Fluxus. Suchness here refers to the way in which a given thing / process reveals itself in everyday experience independent of classification or analysis, while the autonomous behavior of simultaneous events is the result of allowing things to unfold in their natural, unadorned suchness without attempting to organize, rationalize or interpret them.[45] These concepts provided Fluxus with the theoretical basis to go about breaking down the division between art and everyday life. Yoko Ono produced a number of pivotal works that reflected Kyoto School thought in a Fluxus context.[46]

In one such work, *Painting to Be Stepped On,* she situates the audience inside of the piece by inviting them to step onto the painting and explore it from within. The installation consists of some oddly shaped canvas with pieces cut out and laid on the floor, with a card that indicates the piece is to be stepped on. The piece is presented in its unadorned suchness. Any activities that might be described as standing on the piece are permitted. The subject–object divide that normally exists between an observing audience and observed artwork is diminished in this approach. Instead, the audience is encouraged to experience the piece as they would any other normal object encountered in their everyday life. During this interaction, the canvas in

isolation is not apparent, as it might be if hanging on a wall. The parts stood on by an audience member are necessarily hidden. It is in the interaction between the canvas and the audience member that the piece is revealed as unique work specific to the experience of that individual. Even one's footwear becomes part of the piece. Heather La Bash argues that the recontextualization of space in this work, and Ono's work more generally, reflects Nishida's basho of absolute nothingness.[47] It structures a space in which the audience and artwork mutually co-specify one another, revealing the suchness of the materials in a manner that supports a wide variety of experiences of the work. Japanese Fluxus artists like Ono, Mieko, and Kubota embodied the concept of absolute nothingness in their communal approach to their practice, an approach that came to define the broader Fluxus ethos while also exerting a powerful influence over contemporary art trends in the 1960s.[48]

We can see the influence of the Kyoto School reflected in prominent Fluxus theorist David Doris's analysis of the relationship of Fluxus to Zen.[49] There, in describing the spirit and outlook of the Fluxus movement, Doris invokes Nishitani's interpretation of absolute nothingness as śūnyatā. This he uses to frame reality as a field of indeterminacy in which all things are both interrelated and in constant flux, a set of concepts that he holds to be at the core of Fluxus and reflected in the Fluxus event score. Similarly, Natasha Lushetich sees Nishida's absolute nothingness and interexpressivity (mutual co-specification) reflected in the Happenings of Allan Kaprow and Robert Watts, the event score, and the Fluxkits of Brecht and Ay-O.[50] Kaprow's Happenings were motivated by his own study of Zen under Suzuki, and he described them as exercises in self-observation intended to move one closer to pure experience.[51] For Kaprow, the boundaries between art and everyday life should be blurred so that art might come closer to this pure experience, a concept he undoubtedly inherited from Nishida via Suzuki. Lushetich further explores how Nishida's absolute nothingness manifests itself in Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film*, Alison Knowles's *Identical*

Lunch, and in Vostell's 1966 event score *Yellow Pages or an Action Page*.[52] For Lushetich, the conceptual underpinnings of happenings, intermedia, event scores, and Fluxkits are thoroughly indebted to Nishida's absolute nothingness, and at a more basic level, the approach of the Fluxus artists to space and time reflects his thinking. Fluxus was shaped by the influence of the Kyoto School thinkers, Nishida and Nishitani in particular. This is due in part to the familiarity of the Japanese Fluxus artists with Kyoto School thought, and partly due to a transmission of ideas from Suzuki and Cage. The result is an approach to art that reflects Nishida's basho of absolute nothingness, in which events are allowed to unfold in their natural suchness, and which is underpinned by Nishitani's rendering of soku-hi in which that which "exists" does so because it "does not."[53]

The Kyoto School and Sound Art: Some Themes

Liberated by the Fluxus ethos, artists began to move away from the standard musical approaches to sound. Under such methods, sounds were mere raw materials that might only become meaningful if carefully organized in time, and the job of the audience is to observe the piece from some point outside of it. This move was toward a spatial understanding of sound that was chiefly concerned with the organization of sounds in space and the integration of the audience into that space. Alongside the works described earlier, this approach was typified in an early sound art context by La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's *Dream House* (1969) and Wolf Vostell's *Elektronischer Dé-coll/age Happening Room* (1968).

This shift in perspective brought on by Fluxus resonates with Nishida's thoughts on art. According to Nishida, Western artistic practices were primarily concerned with the unfolding of art pieces in time (theater, opera, music, etc.) and with observation at a distance where the

audience members stand outside the piece and peer in (visual arts, sculpture). He advocated for a new organizational principle, arguing that art required a basho of absolute nothingness in which the pure experience of the art piece unfolds and into which the participant and art piece are integrated and co-specify one another. Nishida's "active intuition," which builds on his "self-identity of contradictories," describes a relationship of mutual co-specification between action, one's active production of the world, and intuition, one's passive reception of the world. These were not distinct activities but two facets of a single action–intuition process. This distinction was of particular relevance to the arts, where artists both intuit and transform their world in a single act. The work shapes the artist at the same moment that the artist shapes the work. The two co-specify one another in a mutually poietic relationship within the broader context of a shared basho.[54]

Drawing from Nishida's influence, this privileging of organization across site/place/space rather than across time would become a central concern in the newly emerging field of sound art, as would the relationship of mutual co-specification between the audience and the artwork.

Although the majority of the analysis presented thus far has focused on Nishida's contribution—and his impact on the arts is undoubtedly greater than that of his fellow Kyoto School thinkers—themes also emerge from the work of Tanabe and Nishitani that are of significant relevance to sound art.

For Tanabe, art was deeply connected to self-awareness, being an expression of it, and while his philosophy failed to provide a detailed account of aesthetics, Heisig argues that his thinking was fundamentally artistic in that it aimed to provoke a new way of seeing reality.[55] Tanabe held that art should provide an immediate connection through subjective feeling to the universal values that transcend the individual and reflect instead the larger concerns of

human life. Rooted again in his notion of art as an expression of self-awareness, he advocates for a focus on the ordinary and everyday, rejecting the sentimental notion that art should provide a form of escape from the trials of human life.

Drawing from his notion that absolute nothingness (or śūnyatā) was the original mode of being of the objects and processes of the everyday world, as they exist prior to categorization or conceptualization, Nishitani viewed art as a means of revealing the absolute in the everyday and the permanent in the temporal. He lays out his thoughts on art in a 1953 essay on ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arrangment. There he identifies two broad approaches to art: an inauthentic one concerned with the ultimately futile task of projecting an illusory sense of permanence in and through time, and a second approach that gains access to an authentic permanence beyond time, absolute nothingness, by embracing temporality. He noted that "finitude in itself, in being thoroughly finite, represents the eternity behind it. Time itself, in being completely temporal, becomes an eternal moment."[56] Bringing the everyday object to conscious awareness causes it to "float in emptiness," revealing its "suchness": the aesthetic dimensions of its immediate concrete reality. In a similar fashion to both Nishida and Tanabe, awareness plays a creative role here to the degree that the art only comes into being for a given subject when they bring their awareness to it. For Nishitani, nothingness is a creative force, and to bring awareness to a thing, revealing that nothingness, is therefore a creative act. Nishitani shares T. S. Eliot's conviction that authentic art should embrace the everyday, but he took this idea even further when stating that "the activity of everyday life is itself connected with art and is equal to the arts of the chosen people of culture."[57]

The themes explored here by Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani emerge time and again in sound art as core concerns of the field. As explored in greater detail below, sound art embraces spatial presentation and emplacement over temporal organization. It enfolds its participants

into a work, allowing the audience and the artwork to mutually co-specify one another. It illuminates the ordinary details of normal, everyday life, calling one more deeply into the world rather than providing an escape from it. It often removes the hand of the artist by favoring values of more universal importance instead. It embraces listening, the paying of aural attention, as a creative practice in and of itself. As such the Kyoto School thinkers provide us with useful tools for analyzing and contextualizing sound art practices.

Sound Art—Theme 1: Place Over Time

The term *sound art* is generally used to reference the nonmusical sonic art form that emerged to prominence in the latter half of the 20th century and that is primarily practiced through the medium of sound installation.[58] A range of practitioners and commentators have differentiated sound art from music by stating that sound art is about the nonperformative, site-specific presentation of sounds in space and music is the performative organization of sound in time.[59] Here in this cursory elucidation of the differences between music and sound art we are immediately forced to confront a central theme distilled from the reading of the Kyoto School and its influence on 20th-century art presented in the previous section. The focus on the organization of the artwork in a site/place/space over time directly recalls Nishida's call for art to unfold within a basho, rather than across a given span of time. Owing to the convergence of influences explored previously, these ideas have permeated sound art practices from the outset. The Philips Pavilion installation for Expo '58, often cited as the first substantial sound art installation, recontextualized works by Varèse and Xenakis by presenting them as an eternally looping sonic environment, situated within a unique architectural space that completely enfolds its audience.[60]

The focus on sound as presented in space, over sound presented in time, has defined much of the narrative around sound art.[61] Liz Kotz describes how Neuhaus's 1977 Times Square piece

introduced a set of ideas about how sound can be used to define a space.[62] At the same time, as Cristoph Cox notes, Neuhaus's installation approach also echoes the attempts of experimental composer Morton Feldman (another Cage acolyte) to liberate "pure duration" from "clock time" in music.[63] These are ideas borrowed from Bergson and embraced up to a point by Nishida, who iterated over Bergson's idea in his argument for a notion of time built around an "eternal now".[64] For Neuhaus, building on the ideas of Cage and Fluxus, sound and space are intrinsically linked, the sound draws the listeners' attention to the space in which it is situated, and thus the artwork is presented as a sonically mediated place. A similar recontextualization of sound in terms of space takes place in Bernhard Leitner's work, his Sound Spaces in particular. While influenced by Cage and Fluxus, Leitner's practice also draws from his background as a trained architect. He treats sound as a building material, using it to define and form space and thus approaching the language of architecture with a sonic vocabulary.[65] In its embrace of the austere, the visual dimension of Leitner's work falls within, and makes various references to, the minimalist tradition led by Donald Judd in 1970s New York.[66] Kyle Chayka draws a link between Nishitani's aesthetic philosophy and the works of Donald Judd, and of the minimalist movement more generally.[67] Chayka argues that Nishitani's statement that absolute nothingness "points directly to a most intimate encounter with everything that exists" provides an excellent summation of minimalist art, and Judd's work in particular, as it stood in 1964.

Similarly, Fernanda de Almeida sees Nishitani reflected in Bill Viola's work.[68] She observes that Viola detects anxiety about mortality and the finitude of human life, which resembles Nishitani's anxieties about the spread of nihilism in the modern era. Nishitani's thinking here was a further development of Tanabe's fears that our rapid technological development has brought us to an existential precipice. According to de Almeida, Viola's work extends and breaks standard representations of time. By exploring the temporal finitude of human life, it

confronts the audience with a field of "nihility" that can only be overcome through an act of surrender or acceptance. De Almeida argues that this process is consistent with Nishitani's trans-descendance, wherein the nothingness of human temporality is relativized, and thus subdued, as one assents and concedes to absolute nothingness as a metaphysical principle. In this way, Viola's work breaks from the culturally dominant paradigm that describes time as an objectivized sequence of equally spaced units, for a model that reflects time in terms of human experience. While the parallels with Bergson are apparent here, it is only through Nishitani's process of trans-descendance that the audience can go from experiencing a piece in "clock time" to experiencing it as "pure duration." Youngblood detects a move toward a spatial treatment of sound in Viola's work.[69] His videotape works treat sound as a physical material that can be deployed in an architectural capacity to structure spaces. This expresses itself in Viola's collaborations with John Cage's longtime friend and collaborator David Tudor. He detects spatial structuring in Viola's work with Alvin Lucier, likening his approach to sound as a material for structuring space to that of Neuhaus, Leitner, and Young.

Sound Art—Theme 2: Everyday Experience

As discussed previously, Nishitani had a strongly held belief that art should be closely connected to everyday life. This is an important recurring theme in contemporary sound art practice that probably rose to prominence in the art world with Marcel Duchamp's Readymades in the early 20th century. Seth Kim-Cohen's call for a "non-cochlear" sound art suggests something similar to Nishitani in that it asks us to move past the purely sonorous dimensions of sound to embrace its social, political, philosophical, and technological dimensions.[70] This encounter with sound as enfolded into a network of meanings stretching beyond the purely perceptual also recalls Tanabe's absolute mediation wherein a thing is made meaningful in its relationships to other things. Kim-Cohen celebrates Luc Ferrari's

Presque Rien 1 (Almost Nothing 1), a piece composed of recordings of the hustle and bustle of life in Korčula, a small Dalmatian island fishing village he visited in the summer of 1967. He points out that the piece maintains its connection to social reality while operating as an artistic composition rather than a documentation of fact. Ferrari subtly edits his recorded materials, compressing time and in the process emphasizing the everyday lives of those in the village. Like one of Nishitani's ikebana practitioners, he uses a few choice cuts to liberate the material from its original context, allowing it to "float in emptiness," with its "suchness" revealing the direct everyday experience of the place for the listener.

Suzuki made Nishida's pure experience the fundamental core of his interpretation of Zen, bringing it to America and introducing it to a generation of influential 20th-century artists. This had a massive effect on the arts as practitioners began to focus on the primacy of immediate, everyday experience. This is evident in early sound artworks like Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961), a simple wooden box from which emanated a three and half hour recording of the process by which the box was created. Similarly, Dennis Oppenheim's *A Sound Enclosed Land Area* (1969), in which he recorded himself walking a pre-mapped route on the streets of Milan and played it back within the gallery, brings the real and immediate into the manufactured and abstract space of the gallery. The practice of soundwalking, developed by R. Murray Schafer[71] and extended into new aesthetic territories by Hildegard Westerkamp,[72] also echoes Nishida's concepts of pure experience with its focus on the unmediated experience of the immediate sounds in one's environment. This too resonates with Tanabe's belief that art should be focused on the concrete and immediate realities of everyday life. Tanabe's work explored the troubling notion that technological advancement was bringing humanity to an existential precipice, a concern shared by Schafer, Westerkamp, and the other artists and ecologists who worked with them on the World Soundscape Project. They characterize noise, those unwanted sounds that have increasingly

overrun large portions of the global soundscape since industrialization, as a form of pollution. Their solution for this problem involves a recommitment to listening, immersing oneself in a direct experience of the soundscape as a means of building an empathetic relationship to first the environment and then the world at large. Tanabe's thinking resonates here again. From his viewpoint, to experience the soundscape in such a focused manner is to develop a network of mutually co-specifying interrelationships to it, through a process of absolute mediation. In his later work, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, Tanabe would come to view absolute mediation as a kind of compassion insofar as it asserts the primacy of the mutually co-specifying interrelationships between self, world, and other over an egocentric fixation on self alone.[73]

Sound Art—Theme 3: Removal of the Artist

Neuhaus's first sound installation, *Drive-In Music* (1967/68), used 20 low-powered RF transmitters along a 600m stretch of Lincoln Parkway in Buffalo, New York, to create a series of overlapping sound zones drivers could tune into on their car radios. Sounds were synthesized on the spot in reaction to the environment using homemade equipment. For Brandon LaBelle, Neuhaus is inviting the audience to participate in the creation of the work by making choices about how to traverse the sonic zones and thereby perform one's own unique piece.[74] Neuhaus removes himself, thus granting creative control to a public who, in going about the quotidian task of driving from point A to point B, gives life and definition to the artwork. There is an accordance here with Nishitani, for whom art was an everyday occurrence. He held that art emerged in the daily activities and lived experiences of the members of a given cultural community and was ultimately shaped and structured by that culture. The concept of the artist as a distinct cultural actor begins to break down in this rendering, because to live one's life within a given cultural framework is to create art. Likewise, the concept of the audience becomes less meaningful as each individual member of

a given community acts as both artist and audience member. Neuhaus's stated aim for the piece was to insert works into the daily lives of the "public at large," allowing them to come to and take possession of them on their own terms.[75] The distinction between artist and audience was as meaningless for him as it was for Nishitani. Neuhaus surrenders authorship through his submission to the public but also in part through a submission to the radio and synthesis technology through which the piece comes to life.

There is a similar thread running through Christina Kubisch's *Electrical Walks* series, which have taken place in more than 75 cities worldwide. In each one audience members are equipped with a map of interesting local electromagnetic fields in local public spaces and a set of augmented headphones.[76] These headphones have been made sensitive to electromagnetic fields by the addition of induction coils. Setting out alone or in groups, audience members navigate between waypoints in public spaces, following some instructions on the map as they go. The artist is absent in the role of artist but fills other cultural roles such as a map maker, tour guide, technology designer, and facilitator. The concern with the fabric of the daily life of a community is still present, but the focus has shifted to those layers under the surface that we can only detect when they are transduced into a sensible range by some technology. Whether experienced alone or as a group, no two walks are the same. Even as the route remains fixed, the cycles governing the electrical signals may not remain so. We can draw parallels back to Nishitani here: his embrace of the everyday, and his submission of the artist to the everyday, the public, and the culture in which they are situated. However, Nishida's active intuition is equally relevant in this context given that the work emerges in the relationship of mutual co-specification between the listener and the city. A given city provides the conditions and infrastructure by which its own intricate tapestry of electromagnetic fields is established. The rhythms of life in that city then govern the cycles of those fields. Finally, the listener explores their map and encounters the fields as transduced

through the augmented headphones, and thus the piece is both brought into being and experienced in the same moment. As in the Neuhaus piece, distinctions between artist and audience become irrelevant. Commensurate with Tanabe, both approaches meet the listener in the everyday, involve them in the production of the work, and reveal to them their immediate connection to a larger world.

Sound Art—Theme 4: Listening as a Creative Process

Active intuition is a useful concept by which to consider our final theme, listening as a creative practice. While developing her philosophy of sound art in *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art*, Salomé Voegelin sees listening as a creative act and more specifically an interactive act.[77] She considers listening to be a means of both engaging with the world and simultaneously partaking in its generation. In this rendering, sound is a form of knowing that unfolds as the temporal relationship between the process of listening and that which is heard. At the same time re-integrating the object/phenomenon that would traditionally be thought to originate the sonic experience from some point beyond experience and perception.

Borrowing from Nishida's terminology, the relationship of mutual co-specification between that which sounds and that which listens *is* sound itself, unfolding in time. To the extent that listening and hearing can be classified in terms of self-awareness, Voegelin's thinking can be compared with Tanabe's view of art as an expression of one's self-awareness. Her heard sound exists solely and completely in awareness as a result of a practice of listening through which it is also mediated. Any imagined sound-generating object/phenomenon beyond awareness is just that, an imagining on the part of the listener. This imagining is itself solely and totally contained in awareness, just as is the sound. One's self-awareness then is hugely

complicit in the generation and shaping of heard sound. As Voegelin notes: "The listener is entwined with the heard. His sense of the world and of himself is constituted in this bond."

In *Listening*, Jean-Luc Nancy offers a similarly integrated model of listening that dissolves the distinction between listener and heard, which permeates Cartesian models of sound introduced in Schaeffer's reading of Husserl.[78] Nancy argues instead for a model that overcomes the subject–object distinction in favor of a form of listening that Hudson places closer to Voegelin's approach.[79] The parallels between Nancy's wider philosophical system and Nishida's have been explored by Krummel, who notes that both thinkers ultimately conceptualize the world as a relativistic, historical, and social dynamism that has as its original source a kind of absolute nothingness.[80]

This idea is echoed by Clarke, who, in his analysis of sound and listening, argues that Nancy, Nishida, and Nishitani position their listener as a kind of "abyssal subject" who in listening encounters a "śūnyatā of the sonorous, a silent horizon, in the phenomenological sense, from which all other perceptible horizons emerge."[81] Clarke sees this silence as a creative force that is typified in Cage's *4′33″*, in which the silent and sonorous are interwoven, co-specifying one another through a process that Nishida would call active intuition and Voegelin would call focused listening. Voegelin holds that the creative capacity of listening is both presupposed by and underpins the aesthetic dimensionality of sound and is thus critical to our experience of sonic artworks. To listen to a work is to bring it into being for the listener in both its personal and more public dimensions; it is to collaborate in the creation of the piece.

Concluding Reflections

The relationship between Kyoto School thought and sound art is complex. While there can be points of contrast and divergence in philosophy and approach between the two, there is also a wealth of parallels and interesting points of historical contact that might explain how these parallels came to be. While this article has traced the latter connections, it is the parallels and points of intersection that I find to be of most interest. In particular, the themes originating in Kyoto School thought that we see surfacing in new guises time and again in sound art suggest a deep and close relationship between sound art and the Kyoto School. The influence and importance of the Kyoto School is increasingly acknowledged beyond Japan, and with this increased recognition comes a better understanding of how the movement continues to shape and influence a broad spectrum of creative arts practices. The value of Kyoto School thought to sound art is in both its vitality as a creative framework for the artist and the audience and as an analytical tool by which the critic and theorist might enrich our understanding of sound art. A similar recognition of the dual critical and creative expressions for this philosophy was made by Ufan Lee in relation to the Mono-ha movement. It is the author's sincere hope that this article might lead to a comparable recognition of the correspondences between sound art and the Kyoto School and thereby encourage a similar form of engagement with Kyoto School thinking in sound art theory and practice.

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