

Sentience

Sentience is an immersive artistic work intended to evoke the oceanic feeling and surface the mystical dissolution of the boundaries of the self through an ambient, embodied sonic composition that will be performed overnight in an abandoned synagogue in Hégenheim, France.

The work is a political piece that engages with the dehumanization embedded in our current social systems and disrupts it, silently, by creating a space for people to experience their fuller humanity, which is our interweave not only with one another, but also with nature itself, the fact that we are nature, through affective encounter with this way of being. The political nature of the work is so fully embedded into its form and structure—invisible, unspoken, and yet palpably acting—that the intention will be to shroud it completely, to avoid the aestheticization of this politics, and to instead spread the intention toward interconnectivity through embodiment, affect, and sound in our creation of a space for transformation.

This is an often neglected and suppressed source of art's political potency. This is a special type of politics however: a micropolitics, which works through imperceptible forces and impacts upon one's subjectivity. This politics is not conscious, literal, or chosen. Through mobilising affects, sensation activates and challenges our capacity to move, to experiment, and to change. In contrast to the explicit, literal politics of most so-called conceptual art, the politics of affect can be thought of as pre-political, since its politics is non-verbal and nonconscious. Sensations then are created and they produce affects, which are defined not by how they are interpreted, but by the unpredictable and singular impacts they have upon the viewer/participant. Affects attune us to the world of the virtual, in ways which can help and inspire us to reconfigure the actual.¹

We consider what we are doing political because, on a fundamental level, the political is how we deal with one another, how we deal with *the other*. With this work, we attempt to push ourselves up against our boundary with *the other*, in the sense of approaching *alterity*—whether it is the other self or the boundary with nature—to hopefully break through the edges of our “selves”. With Freud, Spinoza, and Romain Rolland, we think, experience, and reach toward an encounter with the oceanic feeling, to have a sentient experience of totality and oneness, and from that limitless space, we can reconsider what the “other” means. With Lacan and Freud, we engage with the deep intimacy of *the other*—“the most neighborly neighbor is actually within,”² and the ego is created through our perpetual reliving of the mirror stage; we become everyone we’ve ever identified with, endless permutations of projected identifications.

With Spinoza, we meditate on transindividualism: “The whole of nature is one individual thing, whose parts, i.e. all bodies, vary in an infinite number of ways without any change to the whole individual.”³ An individual person is made up of many bodies as well,⁴ in a continual process of becoming through exchange, affection, relation, death, and birth of different aspects of the self.⁵ Made of and moving through this substance, a Spinozan human being is profoundly integrated with the whole of reality. “Each individual, as an existing mode, is the totality of the conditions of his existence, given in an infinity of other individuals,”⁶ Balibar wrote. He specifies, “our common notion of nature: this is the concept of the individual as a determinate level of integration, subsuming other individuals.”⁷

¹ Autonomous Artists Anonymous, 2017. “Political art without words: Art’s threat of emergence, and its capture within signification and commodification”, *Ephemeria*.

² Jacques Lacan, 1959–1960. *Seminar VII*, p. 187.

³ Baruch Spinoza, 1677. *Ethics*, E2P13s.

⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, E2P13P1.

⁵ Spinoza, E4P39s.

⁶ Étienne Balibar, 2018. *Le transindividuel*, p. 188.

⁷ Ibid.

With Martin Buber, we wonder if the divine lives in relation, this encounter, the space between us. “The human being is not he or she, bounded from every other he or she, a specific point in space and time within the net of the world; nor is he a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. But with no neighbor, and whole in himself, he is THOU and fills the heavens. This does not mean that nothing exists except himself. But all else lives in his light.”⁸

Sentience will exist in one form in an abandoned synagogue to explicitly activate the sacred. We are building the work through deep meditative encounter with nature, silence, and sound, both developing preparatory sound baths and installations and creating visuals that layer the rain, the lake, leaves drifting, the fullness of the silence, the voluptuous void, along with reflections, refractions, vibrations, and distillations on metal sheets and other instruments that we choose. The images will later be layered into the overnight sonic experience through projections of and on the sheets and onto walls of the synagogue to add to the ambient immersion.

The synagogue will be set with pillows and mats to be comfortable for reclining and sleeping. We find concerts to be profound places to rest, and find that people seek the opportunity to rest in art spaces—in museums, we watch visitors sit gratefully on the floor in spaces only halfway inviting such a posture. Through the choreography of the space, we invite a yin receptivity, an allowance, and also a disruptive intimacy, to collectively, sacredly, sleep, drift, dream together.

The full-night performance will end, silently, at daybreak. Compositionally, the piece will focus on the repetition of long sounds created by the gentle vibrations of materials—allowing them to speak—and silences over the length of the night, to the point where they become indistinguishable from each other, exactly in order to bring us to the limits of our perception; we lose the ability to perceive a linearity or a logic in the arrival and departure of the sounds, the progression of time stops being a progression and is just a plane, or nothing.

It is in the space opened up between two sounds (or more, or less, or even within) that the possibility of touch opens itself—and what is touch if not an encounter with alterity, outer and inner? In silence, the absence of the sound that disappears begins by giving form to a space that fades—or expands—until we are confronted with a shapeless silence, which gains a physicality and a certain permeability with respect to the meaning that we try to articulate onto it—none of it sticks; it “disengages the senses from signification”, suspends them, and this “‘suspension’ is touch itself”.⁹

Silence can also appear in sounds, as we find when the very limits of our perception are tested, such as with extended durations or seemingly limitless repetition. These are moments where sounds lose their directionality, their function—or we begin to fail in our attempts to bring them into our world of signification as they gain a physicality that we feel or sense. Perhaps, then, what we experience in silence, or in silence in sound, is our being pushed up against a limit, where we cease to hear and start to sense; our sensing is doubled back on itself by the impossibility of encountering true silence, an otherness that we can never perceive.

⁸ Martin Buber, 1923. *I and Thou*, p. 8.

⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, 1994. *The Muses*, p. 22.