

Absolute Nothingness – The Kyoto School and Sound Art Practice

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores how the concept of Absolute Nothingness as developed in the thought of three key Kyoto School thinkers Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe Hajime and Nishitani Keiji has influenced the practice of sound art. The paper examines the influence of these three philosophers on D.T. Suzuki and John Cage, the Mono-ha movement, and the Fluxus movement before examining how these influences have shaped sound art practice.

KEYWORDS: Kyoto, School, Absolute, Nothingness, Sound, Art, Nishida, Tanabe, Nishitani.

1. Introduction

The Kyoto School was a group of comparative philosophers and theologians working at the University of Kyoto between 1913 and 1963. Guided and inspired by the pioneering works of Kitarō Nishida the Kyoto School were renowned for their integration of Eastern with Western thought. They developed radically novel interpretations of place, body and experience informed by what Western commentators, most notably James Heisig (2001) has described as a meontology. Meontology lies in stark contrast to the Western concept of ontology. Where ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of being, meontology is the philosophical study of the nature of non-being or nothingness. Absolute nothingness does not merely refer to the absence of some 'thing', but refers to a supposed 'place' or field of potential within which things and no-things co-specify and define one another. This paper presents an overview of the ideas of key Kyoto school thinkers before exploring how these ideas came to influence and manifest themselves in sound art practices. The paper considers these links through John Cage and D.T. Suzuki, the Mono-ha movement, and the Fluxus movement. The first three sections of his paper discuss the works of Nishida Kitaro, Tanabe Hajime and Nishitani Keiji and they are highly indebted to Heisig (2001), Yusa (2002), Franck (2004) and Davis et al. (2011) who provide useful insight and render the often difficult work of the Kyoto School intelligible.

2. Nishida Kitarō

The founding member of the Kyoto school was Kitarō Nishida (1870–1845). He is often cited as the most important Japanese philosopher of the 20th century. In fact he is considered the first Japanese philosopher to engage with the Western philosophical tradition (Davis et al. 2011). Nishida was born in 1870 and lived through the Meiji Restoration, a period of time in which Japanese society transitioned from the feudalist *han* system of governance to the modern system of prefectures that exists today. For the two and a half centuries directly prior to the Meiji Restoration Japan had isolated itself from the outside world. During this time it began to embrace the world and to rethink its internal political and cultural systems to incorporate some of the global developments that had taken place during Japan's isolation. Nishida would contribute to this expansion and reinvention of Japanese culture, bridging the gap between East and West by rethinking Japanese thought in terms of the Western philosophical tradition. Having dropped out of high school, Nishida gained entrance to Tokyo's Imperial University obtaining a philosophy degree in 1894. He soon took a teaching post at a middle school and under the advice of his close lifelong friend D. T. Suzuki he also took up the Zen Buddhist practice of Zazen or sitting meditation. The down to earth nature of the practice provided a counter-foil for his lofty academic ambitions. He was a keen practitioner

who immersed himself deeply in Zen until the year 1905 when he completely abandoned his practice. Three years later he became assistant lecturer of Philosophy at Kyoto University and released his first book *An Inquiry into the Good* in 1911 at 40 years of age.

Nishida was interested in 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 *An Inquiry into the Good* aimed to establish consciousness as an absolute unifying principle for reality through the transcendence of the subject-object dichotomy (Heisig 2001,30–41). This interest in transcending the subject-object dichotomy would stay with him throughout his career. In developing his ideas Nishida adopted William James' concept of Pure Experience as "the original flux of life before reflection has categorised it" (James 1904). While James viewed Pure Experience as the foundation of the conscious individual Nishida viewed it as 'the fundamental mode of true reality' extending it to provide a unifying theoretical foundation for all of reality. Nishida viewed this reality as a dynamic unity of pluralistic but interdependent processes evolving within and as the activity of conscious experience. He viewed self-awareness as that aspect of this unity which is capable of mirroring the whole. According to Nishida an individual does not "have" experiences rather experience itself "has" the individual. As such the world mirrors itself in each of its contents and the unfolding of this mirroring within ourselves is what we think of as self-awareness. He believed that the mistaken apprehension of reality through a subject-object model gives rise to the sense of a separate self that thinks itself the owner of experience. Simple everyday direct experience was synonymous with Pure Experience in Nishida's philosophy and was the domain in which subject and object are unified and self does not exist. Nishida had hoped to establish pure experience as the absolute ground of reality but as his thought developed he built upon his ideas about pure experience to develop his concept of absolute nothingness.

In 1926's *From That Which Acts to That Which Sees*, he argued that consciousness itself must unfold in some still other more basic field. This field would provide the necessary means for the existence of that consciousness and so the ultimate ground of reality. Nishida conceptualised this field as an absolute nothingness. As Heisig (2001) observes Nishida's absolute nothingness is "nothingness" insofar as it is not of the world of being and so cannot be or pass away and it is an "absolute" because it cannot be defined in relationship 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." (Heisig 2001, 62). As such absolute nothingness cannot become the subject of conscious experience or 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 might 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 which posit some bottom ground level upon which reality is founded. Nishida's concept of an absolute nothingness then was not some empty void beyond the world but acted as a creative and dynamic principle at work within the world. It is encountered as the pure experience of the concrete realities of one's immediate location. Absolute nothingness developed Nishida's earlier ideas on Pure Experience by providing the necessary means for the existence of consciousness. Pure Experience and absolute nothingness become two sides of the same coin in Nishida's philosophy (Odin 1996, 80–81). Nishida developed his "Logic of Basho" or place around the idea of absolute nothingness. He conceptualised absolute nothingness as the ultimate *basho* (*place*) or eternal now in which consciousness is located and consciousness itself in which self and world unfold as the interplay of *relative* being and *relative* nothingness which results in the mutually interdependent existence of the peoples, things and process of that world.

3. Tanabe Hajime

Tanabe Hajime was another leading member of the Kyoto School. Born in 1885 he was 15 years younger than Nishida. In 1930 having been appointed by Nishida to a role at Tokyo University, Tanabe published an essay, *Looking Up to Professor Nishida's Teaching*, which was highly critical of Nishida opening a rift between the two that would never close (Heisig 2001). Tanabe rejected Nishida's pure experience as a starting point for his own thought and argued that Nishida's *basho* (*place*) of absolute nothingness had religious undertones. He also argued that Nishida's attempts to render absolute nothingness as a *basho* (*place*) had essentialised it as an extant object, presenting absolute nothingness in terms of a metaphysical ontology rather than a meontology, affirming negation rather than negating negation. For the starting point of his philosophy Tanabe drew from the Buddhist concepts of śūnyatā and dependent origination and Hegel's idea that the individual is always defined in relationship to other individuals to develop his concepts of pure relationship and absolute mediation. 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, 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 which 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 is impossible without the mediation of negation. 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. Tanabe also criticized Nishida's basho (place) of absolute nothingness as being too abstract and failing to relate to the concrete realities of the everyday world. He developed his logic of the specific as an alternative which aimed to account for the historical and sociocultural dimensions of reality. The logic of the specific provided an ontological description of absolute nothingness as the mediating force of specificity and specificity as the socio-cultural substratum of historical peoples. Tanabe's work grew increasingly religious over time invoking absolute nothingness as a religious dimension of life that could provide some form of salvation from the shortcomings of logic and reason as a means of describing the non-rational. In *Philosophy as Metanoetics* Tanabe turns to Shinran or Pure Land Buddhism to argue for absolute transformation through radical self-negation and submission to Other-Power a Pure Land concept which he equates with absolute nothingness.

4. Nishitani Keiji

Nishitani Keiji was born in 1900. In 1914 when he was preparing to enter High School his father died of Tuberculosis. Nishitani himself protracted the same illness and it was during this period of struggle that he first came into contact with Zen through the writings of D.T. Suzuki. Nishitani would later comment that his youth was a period absolutely without hope that lay in the grips of nihilism and despair (Heisig 2001,191). After his father's death Nishitani lived alone with his mother and his own battle with Tuberculosis took a toll on him both physically and mentally (for more see Heisig 2001). During high school Nishitani immersed himself in philosophy and is said to have carried a copy of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* like a bible while also engaging with the works of Dostoevsky, Ibsen, Emerson, Carlyle, and Strindberg. After graduation he worked as a high school teacher and adjunct lecturer while publishing in a number of journals. At this time his work focused on Bergson, Nietzsche Schelling, Kant and the European Mystics, Meister Eckhart in particular. In 1932 he took up a position at Kyoto University. Having had an interest in the Zen state of mind since youth he began focused Zen practice with Yamazaki Taikō in 1937. At first Nishitani used Zen as a counterfoil against which to balance the intellectual pursuits of his academic life. Over time Nishitani's engagement with Zen came to be one of the defining features of his philosophy. The other defining feature of his work was his engagement with Nihilism which was no doubt inspired by the struggles of his youth. Nishitani once commented that for him the choice to pursue a life dedicated to philosophy was a choice between life and death (Heisig 2001, 191). In similar fashion to Tanabe before him, Nishitani spent two years studying under Heidegger at Freiburg. During this time Heidegger had started also to engage with the question of Nihilism and while Nishitani learned much from Heidegger's phenomenology Heidegger in turn spent much time learning about Zen from Nishitani.

Nishitani's thought united his interests in Nihilism, Existentialism and Phenomenology. He recognised a tension between the two extremes of Essentialism and Nihilism and a viscous cycle of reactionary swinging between these two poles in the thought and behavior of the average person. Essentialism is the denial of the relative nature of self and world through the belief that all existent things have some essential substance or set of attributes that are inherent to them and define their identity and meaning. This implies an extreme affirmation or reification of the subjective ego and objective contents of the world. Nihilism, in this sense, is also a denial of the relative nature of self and world in the belief that self and world are devoid of any true nature, identity, meaning or ultimately existence. This implies an extreme negation of the subjective ego and objective contents of the world. Nishitani aimed to dissolve the tension between Essentialism and Nihilism through Nishida's absolute nothingness. For Nishitani the nothingness of the Nihilistic worldview is merely relative and can be overcome through absolute nothingness. This required a disciplined process of "self-emptying". To achieve this one must first accept the reality of the nihilistic world-view by embracing the little personal doubts encountered in everyday life fostering a larger realization of nihility in which a "Great Doubt" consumes all certitude about reality. Through a further embrace of doubt the certitude of nihilism itself is dissolved and nihilism is "trans-descended" to reach the field of absolute nothingness or *śūnyatā* which, according to Nishitani, envelops and pervades all aspects of reality as their most basic identity. 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 which are relativized against the backdrop of absolute nothingness. Nishitani used the language of Mahayana Buddhism to elucidate these ideas equating absolute nothingness with *śūnyatā* which posits that the lack of inherent existence of self and world is identical with the relative and interconnected nature of self and world.

5. Nothingness and Sound Art

The previous sections of this paper have introduced the lives and ideas of three key Kyoto School thinkers. The remainder of this paper will explore how these ideas have manifested themselves in, and shaped sound art practice.

6. Cage and Suzuki

John Cage is an important figure in the history and early development of sound art. Licht (2007) credits Cage with taking some important early steps towards 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. La Belle (2006) notes Cage's engagement with the immediate

and proximate nature of sound in his attempts to “see each thing directly as it is”. He argues that Cage expanded Western art music’s understanding of music reminding it that it was composed of sounds and laying some of the ground work for a future sound art. However Licht, LaBelle and Kahn (1997) 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. Whatever the case Cage’s work has played an important role in shaping sound art.

Cage is infamous 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 (Larson 2012). Cage attended lectures on Zen delivered by D.T. Suzuki in the late 1940s (Cage 1990) and cited Suzuki is as one of his chief Zen instructors (Brooks 2007; Larson 2012).

Suzuki Daisetsu Teitaro, born 1870, 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 (Larson 2012). He was Professor of Buddhist Philosophies at Otani University, Kyoto where Nishida and Nishitani also worked as lectures 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 (Heisig 2001). As mentioned previously Suzuki was a lifelong friend of Nishida and 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. Sharf (1995) and Baumann (2000) 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 which Suzuki brought to America and which would prove so influential in the history of 20th century art. Sharf (1995) also notes that Suzuki’s thought underwent a dramatic shift on 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. He reorganized his understanding of Zen to position immediate Pure Experience as the essential core of Zen. Suzuki’s influence looms heavy over Cage’s work. Bramble and Bradley (2015) and Pearlman (2012) document how this rethinking of Zen profoundly influenced the transformation and development of artistic practices throughout the 50s and 60s impacting works by Robert Rauschenberg, Kerouac, Pollock, Feldman, Yves Klein and Marina Abramovic. By the time Cage had begun to attend Suzuki’s lectures at Berkley, Nishida, who at this point was deceased, had completed the development of his concept of Pure Experience into the *basho* (*place*) of absolute nothingness. Pure experience and absolute nothingness became two sides of the same coin in Nishida’s thought. Suzuki’s lectures at Berkley were deeply influenced by Nishida’s work. Krummel (2015) documents how Suzuki’s and Nishida’s ideas were mutually influential on one another and 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”. This concept is seen reflected in Cage’s sustained attempts to remove himself from the compositional process, as typified in *Music for Changes*, so that theoretically the music is composed without the participation, or at least without the direct input, of the composer.

Taking silence to be the sonic equivalent of nothingness, Cage’s ideas on silence have more in common with Tanabe’s idea of absolute nothingness than Nishida’s. This makes sense as it has been repeatedly noted that Cage’s thinking on silence was informed by his experience in an anechoic chamber at Harvard where silence manifested itself for Cage not as an absence of sound but as the sonorous activity of his own nervous and circulatory systems. For Cage silence was not an absence of sound or the locus in which sounds unfold but instead “silence is all of the sound that we do not intend” (Cage, 1961). This echoes again the logic of self-negation by defining silence in terms of the rejection of the intent of the agent, intender or composer. Cage rejects the existence of an absolute silence that might become an object of perception. This is similar to Tanabe’s first reason for rejecting Nishida’s conceptualisation of absolute nothingness, namely that an absolute nothingness could not become an object of perception. He argued instead that such nothingness must operate in the world as a mediating principle, which gives rise to and mediates the inter-related contents of the world through a process of self-negation. To experience Tanabe’s absolute nothingness then one would be experiencing the broad spectrum of worldly experience as mediated by this creative form of nothingness. A second criticism Tanabe made of Nishida’s absolute nothingness was its tendency to ignore and reduce or eliminate the social, cultural and historical world, silencing these dimensions in the process of negation. Kahn (1997) levels a very similar criticism at Cage arguing that his concept of silence silences the social and political dimensions inherent to sound and sonic practices. In reality Tanabe’s claims were overstated and Nishida revised and improved his philosophy in light of them (Heisig 2001) nonetheless they are interesting in the context of Cage’s ideas on silence. Cage’s work was important to the development of sound art and his ideas about silence and nothingness directly influenced a number of practitioners who would also go on to shape sound art. However, the most direct manifestation of Kyoto school thinking in art did not come through Suzuki but instead is seen in the Japanese Mono-ha movement which deserves a brief discussion here.

7. Mono-ha

Mono-ha, often translated mockingly as the ‘School of Things’, was a loosely affiliated group of post-war Japanese artists who rose to prominence in the early 1970s (Yoshitake 2013). They rejected traditional concepts of representation and production engaging instead in “non-making” and preferring to reveal the materials, properties and inter-relationships

of things as they naturally appear in the world. As such they were concerned with the aesthetic dimensionality of natural and man-made 'things' and the interrelationships between those 'things' in their unaltered states (Sekine 1986). Their works elevated the significance of inter-related things in their own right rather than reducing them to simple materials that might gain significance through their incorporation into some larger work. Some of the works produced by Mono-ha artists have drawn inspiration from the Kyoto school thinkers and Nishida in particular. Lee Ufan was an important Mono-ha artist and a leading figure in the movement. He published a two-part essay between 1970 and 1971 *Beyond Being and Nothingness – A Thesis on Sekine Nobuo*. The essay discussed a number of works by another important Mono-ha artist Seikine Nobuo. One of these was *Phase-Mother Earth* a large outdoor earthwork created in 1968. It was installed at Suma Rikyu Park in Kobe, and consisted of 2.2×2.7 m cylindrical hole cut into the ground behind which a 2.2×2.7 m cylinder of the same earth was placed (see Sekine 1980). In his essay Ufan interpreted Seikine's works in terms of Nishida's absolute nothingness and identity of absolute contradiction. Ufan's own work was heavily influenced by Nishida's philosophy and his writings about his work make constant reference to Nishida's concepts of absolute nothingness and pure experience (Kim 2007).

In the early 1960s Yasunao Tone cofounded the seven member free improvisation and noise ensemble Group Ongaku with fellow composer Takehisa Kosugi. The interests and aesthetic sensibilities of the group were so similar to those of the Fluxus artists operating around the same time in New York (Pearlman 2012) that George Maciunas, having been introduced to their work by Cage, Ono and Ichiyanagi, reached out to invite the group to join in on the activities of the Fluxus movement in New York. Tone (1970) noted that Lee Ufan's theories on art making were very close to those of the Fluxus movement and that the Fluxus artists were drawing from the same well as their Mono-ha counterparts. This is of interest when one considers the influence of Nishida's pure experience and absolute nothingness on both Ufan and the Mono-ha movement as a whole. Tone himself went on to create his first sound art installation *Tape Recorder* for the 1962 Yomiuri Independent exhibition at Tokyo's Minami gallery. It consisted of a 30–40 minute long loop playing back on tape recorder and concealed in a cloth bag and intermittently emitting sounds intended to provoke curiosity and further investigation (Tone 2007). La Belle (2006, 151&153) and Licht (2008) note this piece as an early instance of a sound installation presented as a production proceeding Max Neuhaus' early works which are often cited as the first sound art installations.

8. Fluxus

Fluxus was an experimental international art movement that emerged during the 1960s and was comprised of a number of influential artists, poets, architects, composers and designers (Doris 1998). Directly influenced by Cage's Music Composition classes Fluxus was founded

and driven by Lithuanian American artist George Maciunas and counted George Brecht, Yoko Ono, Dick Higgins and Nam June Paik, amongst its members at different times. Cage's thought deeply influenced the Fluxus movement (Larson 2012) and the Fluxus movement would in turn influence modern sound art practice (Kahn 1999). The Fluxus movement was interested in breaking down the division between art and everyday life and a number of prominent artists from the Fluxus movement were engaged with both Zen thinking and the philosophy of Kyoto School thinkers. La Bash (2008) notes how Yoko Ono's *Painting to be Stepped On* structured space in terms of Nishida's concept of space in Eastern art where the observer is situated inside of the space of the art piece and integrated into it rather than positioned outside looking into or at the space as he believed to be the case in Western art. Nishida developed this idea in *An Inquiry into the Good* (Nishida 1913) while developing his philosophy of pure experience. La Bash argues that this conceptualisation of space is a prominent and defining feature of much of Ono's work. Ono would go on to create her own sound art installations. Her 1961 piece *Voice Piece for Soprano* is also notable because, like *Painting to be Stepped On*, it embraces Nishida's concept of space in Eastern Art but introduces it into a sound art context. This may in part be due to the influence of Cage who encouraged Ono to embrace her Japanese heritage in the development of her practice (La Bash, 2008). Whatever the case Ono has continued to produce pieces of this nature with the most recent arriving in November 2016 in response to the US presidential elections. Doris (1998) examines Nishitani's interpretation of absolute nothingness as *śūnyatā* and follows the concept through Suzuki and Cage to Dick Higgins thoughts on mutual interdependence and also to its manifestation in the Fluxus event score. He argues that the *śūnyatā* concept as described by Suzuki, was highly influential on the thinking of the Fluxus artists. Lushetich (2011) also examines the challenges to the prevailing notions of art presented in the Happenings of Kaprow and Watts, the event-score and the Fluxkits of Brecht and Ay-O contextualizing these in terms of Nishida's absolute nothingness and the interexpressivity which she argues that it manifests. Kaprow himself noted that his Happenings were exercises in self-observation intended to move one closer to "pure experience" and were motivated by his study of Zen under Suzuki (Kaprow and Kelley 2003; Zepke 2009). For Kaprow the boundaries between art and everyday life should be blurred so that art might take one closer to this pure experience, a concept he undoubtedly inherited from Nishida via Suzuki. Lushetich (2012) further explores how Nishida's absolute nothingness manifests itself in Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film*, Alison Knowles *Identical Lunch* and in Vostell's 1966 event score *Yellow Pages or an Action Page*. Finally Lushetich (2014) ties these strands together by examining how prevailing modes of thinking on the topics of space and time exhibited by the Fluxus movement, along with the concepts of Happenings, Intermedia, the event score and Fluxkits are indebted to and best characterized, in terms of Nishida's absolute nothingness. Lushetich's work highlights how the Fluxus ethos was shaped and determined by Nishida's absolute nothingness,

Derridian blind tactics and the Gramscian production of social life. Driven by the Fluxus ethos a number of artists moved away from the standard musical engagement with sound through the composition of sounds in time and towards the organisation of sounds in space as typified in La Monte Young's *Dream House* and Wolf Vostell's *Elektronischer Dé-coll/age Happening Room*, 1968.

9. Sound Art

This paper will now explore how the rethinking of Zen undertaken by the members of the Kyoto School and introduced into the 1950s American Avant Garde by Suzuki has influenced the development of sound art practice. It will focus on a number of key themes in sound art practices that have been influenced by Kyoto School thought. These are the focus on site, place and space over time in sound art, the audience and the art work's co-specification of one another, a focus on the everyday, the removal of the artist, and listening as a creative practice.

Nishida argued that Western artistic practices of his day had historically been concerned with time or the unfolding of art pieces in time (theatre, opera, music etc.) and with observation where the audience members stand outside the piece and peer in (visual arts, sculpture). He argued that art required a *basho* (place) 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. He further argues that art arises from historical cultural life and so is shaped by and tied to it (Nishida 2011). Tanabe argued that art should be engaged with concrete ordinary life (Heisig 2015). Nishitani argued 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 categorisation or conceptualization. For Nishitani art was a means of revealing the absolute in everyday. Commenting on the Japanese art of cut flowers or *Ikebana* 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" (Nishitani 1995). Bringing the everyday object to conscious awareness causes it to "float in emptiness" revealing its "suchness"; the aesthetic dimensions of its immediate concrete reality. The discipline of sound art shares these concerns. Sound art embraces spatial presentation and emplacement over temporal organization. It exposes the aesthetic dimensionality of the everyday and the mundane. It enfolds its participants into the work allowing audience and artwork to co-specify one another. In doing so it often removes the hand of the artist and embraces listening as a creative process in this co-specification.

Sound art is a contested term (Kahn 2008; Licht 2009). For the purposes of this paper the term is used to reference the non-musical sonic art form that emerged to prominence in the latter half of the 20th century and is primarily practiced through the sound installation.

A number of practitioners and commentators have differentiated sound art from music by stating that sound art is about the non-performative, site-specific, presentation of sounds in space and music is the performative organization of sound in time (Licht 2007). The spatially distributed installation of Varèse's and Xenakis' work at the Phillip's Pavilion during the 1958 Brussels World Expo is often cited as the first substantial sound art installation (Licht, 2008). The fascination with the interplay between sound and space has, for better or worse, defined much of the narrative around sound art (Khan 2008). For example Kotz (2009) maintains that Neuhaus' 1977 *Times Square* piece "crystallize[d] a set of ideas about sound as a way to define a space" which drove a body of work that explored the spatial and perceptual instability of sound in public spaces. Neuhaus treats space and time in a similar way to that of the Fluxus artists. His concept of the installation bears more resemblance to a Fluxus event or happening than a traditional musical performance. At the same time, as Cox (2011) notes Neuhaus' installation approach also echoes Morton Feldman's attempts to liberate duration from clock time in music. Henri Bergson developed the concept of duration to differentiate between one's direct phenomenological experience of time as a dynamic and malleable phenomenon as opposed to fixed clock time (Bergson 1946). However, Nishida criticized Bergson's duration for not adequately accounting for the "eternal now" which Nishida conceptualised as a present moment that realises absolute nothingness and also contains both past and future simultaneously (Nakatomi 2016). Cage and Feldman were friends and Feldman, like so many of the 1950s Avant Garde, had adopted Cage's Zen-inspired aesthetics in his own compositions (Boutwell 2012). In fact a number of influential early installation artist took their points of references from artists who had been touched by the Kyoto School's reimagined Zen. After the works of Cage and the happenings and events of Fluxus, sound art practices began to move towards a more full engagement with the site in which works were situated. Works were increasingly expressed both in and as environments rather than individual objects. Deriving from a lineage extending back to Duchamp's ready-mades (a similar link is evident in Kim-Cohen's (2009) Non-cochlear sound art) and owing also to the fact that Suzuki had made Nishida's conception of Pure Experience the essential core of his Zen, the concrete and the everyday facts of life were increasingly explored in sound art. La Monte's aforementioned *Dream House*, "a building in which continuous sustained tones would be heard in perpetuity" (Licht 2008) represented a step in the direction of exploring sound in and as an environment. Robert Morris' *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* (1961), a simple wooden box from which emanated a three and half hour recording of the banal process by which the box was created, was reflective of the embrace of the concrete, immediate and everyday in sound art. 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 challenges traditional distinctions between the site-specific piece, the gallery installation and the soundwalk. Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's

Audio Walks take participants on walks around predetermined routes and introduce an audio component to proceedings delivered over headphones. The practice of soundwalking, which is indebted to Westerkamp (1974) and Schaefer (1977), echoes Nishida's concepts of pure experience and absolute nothingness with its focus on the unmediated experience of the immediate sounds in one's environment. It also echoes Tanabe's belief that art should be focused on the concrete and immediate realities of everyday life (Heisig 2015). The embrace of space in sound art has been linked to concept of site specificity and while early sound art practices were engaged with the conceptual and concrete realities of space, more recent artists and theorists have begun to focus on the concept of place (see LaBelle 2015). A more recent installation to engage directly with the question of space in terms of Nishida's thought was *Presumed Wind Load* by Yves Netzhammer & Bernd Schurer. It was installed in 2014 at the Gray Area, San Francisco for *Milieux Sonores: Sound and Imaginary Space* curated by Marcus Maeder. The piece drew upon Nishida's logic of *basho* (place) in its juxtaposition of real and imaginary spaces mediated by sound and spatiality in the context of an installation.

In LaBelle's (2006) discussion of Neuhaus' first sound installation *Drive In Music* 1967 he notes that Neuhaus is inviting the audience to participate in the creation of the work because the sounds were received by the individual's car radio and mixed on the basis of the driver's speed, location, and trajectory. There is the sense of a removal of the artist from the equation here, in order for the piece itself to become realized in this work. This recalls Cage's compositional approach and the logic of *soku-hi* or affirmation through negation as interpreted by Nishida and given to Cage through Suzuki. McMullen (2010) argues that Cage's attempts to remove himself from his pieces were misguided and did not go far enough, instead they served to further entrench Cage in the role of composer, gaining him international notoriety as such. She recommends Pauline Oliveros as exemplary of a composer who has negated themselves in their work thanks to her "focus on embodiment, improvisation, and the dismantling of the mind/body dualism". This echoes the ideas of the Kyoto School thinkers who each grappled with and developed philosophies to overcome the subject/object divide. Likewise LaBelle (2006, 5) notes that Cage was still very much in control of the modes in which he chose to remove himself from his work. Whatever the case the removal of the artist and the integration of the audience into the creation of sound art is a recurring theme. This surrendering of control in sound art practices can be achieved by passing control to a participating public or to a technology. Kubisch's *Electrical Walks* provide the audience members with the means and technology to participate in the generation and structuring of the piece, as does the practice of sound walking more generally. Likewise many of Mary and Bill Buchen's public installations have an interactive element that requires public participation. David Rockeby's *Very Nervous System* defers control through his computer vision algorithms and computational sound synthesis techniques to allow the participants to control and determine the behavior of the installation through their physical

gestures. Ximena Alarcon's (2007) *Sounding Underground* deferred control to participants in the creation of an interactive sonic environment from commuters' memories of the soundscape of the London underground. It could also be argued that Alvin Lucier's *I am Sitting in a Room* presents the portrait of a composer slowly losing control over his piece to the room in which the piece is located as the composer's voice subsides and the reverberations of the room begin to dominate the soundscape. In a similar vein Christian Marclay surrenders a level of control over his piece *John Cage* from his album *More Encores*. *John Cage* was created by cutting up a selection of Cage records and a gluing a selection of the pieces together to create a single playable piece thus deferring the agency of the creator to the process and technology in question.

In Neuhaus' *Time Pieces* we see an exploration of what the Kyoto School thinkers describe as a relative nothingness. Neuhaus' own thoughts on the pieces seem to be indebted to Schaefer's (1977) concept of the sound signal. Neuhaus (2006) notes that these works "form the sound signal with a silence rather than a sound". In these works a small sound is introduced into a space and gradually builds unnoticed for some minutes before abruptly disappearing. The absence of the sound becomes obvious to the listener, opening up a space of silence. In this way Neuhaus creates a sonic experience through the removal of sound. From the point of view of the Kyoto School, the silence is relative in that it is defined by its opposite, a sound. Yet the space in which this dialogue between sound and silence unfolds is an absolute silence. In Kyoto School thought, this space might be best defined as aural consciousness, the space of hearing and listening. Drawing from the perception of Tanabe's concept of absolute nothingness, hearing would be a passive process in which absolute silence mediates the interplay between relative silence and sound. Listening would be the act of consciously bringing an absolute silence to a sound in order to experience the self-contradictory interplay of sound and relative silence which define the identity of that sound.

In the culture that surrounds sound art practices, the status of listening is often elevated to become something of an art form, or at least a creative practice, in itself. This reflects Nishitani's idea that the process of paying conscious attention is a creative practice in and of itself. This is probably most true of the aforementioned practice of soundwalking (Westerkamp 1974), in which listening to one's environment is an end in itself. For Voegelín (2010) listening is creative and a listening practice can allow one to both engage with the world and to partake in its generation. Oliveros' (2005) Deep Listening practice aims to "heighten and expand consciousness of sound in as many dimensions of awareness and attentional dynamics as humanly possible". La Belle contrasts Oliveros' Deep Listening with the expanded mode of listening encouraged in Neuhaus' work, which he argues attunes the listener to a space of possibilities beyond oneself. Bill Fontana (2002) too makes the argument for listening as extended through recording technologies as a form of composition. These listening practices tend to move away from the kind of reduced listening introduced

by Pierre Schaeffer (1966) in favor of a more inclusive, expanded listening. In *Listening* Jean-Luc Nancy also argues for a new practice of listening. He critiques Husserl's phenomenology and the mode of reduced listening and its resultant object sonore (sound object) that Pierre Schaeffer developed from his own reading of Husserl's phenomenological bracketing (Kane, 2012). Nancy argues instead for a mode of listening that Hudson (2014) places closer to Vogelins generative listening practice. Krummell (2014) notes the similarities between the thought of Nancy and Nishida with both viewing the world as a relativistic, historical and social dynamism that has as its source an absolute nothingness. Clarke (2012) also appeals to Nishida and Nishitani in his description of Nancy's ontology of sound as a *śūnyatā* of the sonorous drawing a further parallel between the thought of Nancy and the Kyoto school.

10. Conclusion

This article has introduced some of the ideas core ideas of the Kyoto School and examined how those ideas have gone on to influence sound art practice. It has explored how absolute nothingness and pure experience were originally developed by Nishida Kitarō and further refined in the work of Tanabe Hajime and Nishitani Keiji. It also examines how D.T Suzuki and the Kyoto School redefined Zen in terms of these concepts in the early 20th century. It further traces the spread of these ideas into the Mono-ha movement and through Suzuki to Cage and later the Fluxus movement before discussing some recent manifestations of this line of thinking in sound art practice.

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