Serving Silence

Honi Ryan

I feel like I contradict myself every time I open my mouth.

Foreword.

My thanks go especially to all of those who chose not to talk to me.

And I would like to acknowledge Josephine Starrs, Sean Lowry and John Conomos for lending an ear to inaudible questions.

Serving Silence.

Set Menu

Visual feast

Aperitif

Silence is a word which is not a word, and breath an object which is not an object.

georges bataille.

Futility.

This paper serves as a part representation of a *Pursuit of Silence*[1]. It follows the narrative that led a life to this pursuit of silence, and the artistic practice that followed. To that life, silence presented itself as a structure within which it may become art, that is, a formula to realise art out of *nothing* but elements of everyday life. In that art is never pure, the everyday could not simply be left intact. When silence is an absence, implementing it in the modernist technique of sculpting by means of a minus proves an effective way of using the everyday as both the context and materials for creation, which manifested as *Silent Dinner Parties* [plates 1, 2, 3], and is the ongoing practice these words compliment. This trajectory is reviewed in the light of the art, philosophy, sociology, politics and histories that also allude to, and support, the art of silence. One dominant characteristic of silence is of course its very impossibility. Therefore in order to explore this idea of silence, it is important to acknowledge its impossibility. Pure silence is an unachievable absence.

That silence cannot be achieved has not stopped enthusiasts from trying, and there are many maps that lead to it's non-place. As it is here that the 'enemies' of silence are 'Linguistics and Noise' [see plate 1], the relationship silence holds to both are explored in these pages. When every journey has a beginning, middle and an end, silence has, over time, been implemented at each stage. Sometimes it provides a platform from which to start, sometimes the structure of execution, and sometimes is claimed as an allusive end. I am of the opinion that no silent journey can be fully realised or resolved. In a Beckettian sense, to search for silence is to pursue failure.

In order to explore the ways silence moves through art, the agnostic model[2] is here employed as the current state of contemporary art, considering parts of the histories that led to this point in light of silence. The agnostic model maps out an art after postmodernism that dissolves binary oppositions as "equivalently contestable positions" in an inclusive act and pluralism, suggesting that "contemporary artists are now both historically distant and increasingly ambivalent to the modernism/postmodernism dialectic", allowing works to be created and read through both, or neither sensibilities at once[3]. When 'agnostic' claims to be "without knowledge"[4] it could be seen as silent, in that it makes no overt statements for itself, but

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[1] *In Pursuit of Silence* is the title given to the documentation of my series of works *Silent Dinner Parties* (discussed further).
[2] Sean Lowry, 'The Agnostic Model. Art after Postmodernism?' in *Broadsheet*. Vol. 34 no. 3 Sept. 2005 p 162-165.
[3] ibid
[4] ibid

prefers to remain in relative openness in a non-exclusive notion that we simply "do not know"[5]. In lack of definition and imploded concerns, art becomes akin to silence; an effectual quest for an enigma, and illuminates the "view of art in which uncertainty remains the only certainty"[6].

As the paradox therefore becomes platitude, perhaps it is art's apparent pointlessness that pushes artists further away from an object oriented output. That sees them sculpting the intangible materials of human relations, with the social sphere as their boundless setting, and then using art discourse as a publishing tool.

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[5] ibid
[6] ibid

As Silence cannot be present here, amongst pages of words, I will do my best to introduce her main attributes to you, as far as I am aware of them. I have heard stories far and wide, whispers that fill the spaces she leaves behind, but in fairness, I can only tell you of my encounters with her.

Silence is impossible.

 I'm sure her arrogance is a result of her sought after position, as at any hint of her the interior trappings of my body, or surprise elements from my environment rush to fill her place.

Silence is humble, and willingly, instantly, vacates for them because

Silence is shy. She does not like social situations and is rarely to never found in them, indeed

Silence has never introduced herself to a living human, she is an enigma we can only allude to. In doing so we must be aware that

Silence has enemies. They are Linguistics, and Noise (and she has an estranged friendship with music).

Silence pokes at Death for existence, and like Death,

Silence makes room for Creation.

Silence does not understand Time, and reciprocally, Time does not understand

Silence. Any meeting of the two results in mutual confusion. This is no problem as

Silence likes games. Playing them willingly with temporal's plane, using as their only tools elements of the Everyday.

Silence always leaves a gap.

Silence holds the hand of Mistakology, who together form a comic duo. They communicate with Chance, but only via Skype. For

Silence is contrived, but finds a natural resting place in the pause mediated communication allows.

Silence is breakable. She balances the highest powers with ultimate vulnerability.

Plate 1. Honi Ryan. *Introducing [this] Silence*. 2007.

In a process of trying to lure Silence out of isolation and into the group environment I set up situations that I think would be best suited to her personality. These situations use only everyday elements for their execution, manipulating the ones Silence does not like. A group of people are presented with requested guidelines, and then invited over to my house for dinner. The requests are:

Please do not use words or your voice.

Please don't read or write.

Try to make as little noise as possible.

Please allow a minimum of two to three hours before breaking these guidelines.

People often ask in response, "Am I allowed to… [laugh is the most common]" to which I always reply "You can do what you want, they are only requests, and it is only a Dinner Party, nothing really out of the ordinary, only [repeat requested guidelines]"

I do not believe I have yet been successful in bringing Silence into the Social occasion. She is much more likely to linger when I request these guidelines only of myself, but the attempts have manifested as some unique and humorous dynamic sculptures that find their place in the space between people, as relationships, behaviours and communication forms.

Plate 2. Honi Ryan. *Pursuing [this] Silence*. 2007

Hola.

Wilkommen zu **eine** Nacht der Stille.

Stille. Wir haben das allein und (wenn glücklich) mit ein Partner, aber nicht oft in Sozialsituationen

We will try tonight to have as little sound as we **possibly** can

the following things are merely **requests** I would not be so bold as to dictate your actions

I try not to ask **too much** .. you are free in my house, as am I

please do not do anything **with your voice**. speak neither **with** words nor with sounds.
please do not use the written word.

please do not use your mobile phones, including **text** messaging if you must please go somewhere where

others cannot see or hear you

please stay with it for two – three hours .. for **effect**

So, I began with words, I am sorry for that. no more contradictions in **your head**!

Plate 3. Honi Ryan. *Eine Nacht der Stille (A night of Silence)*. 2007

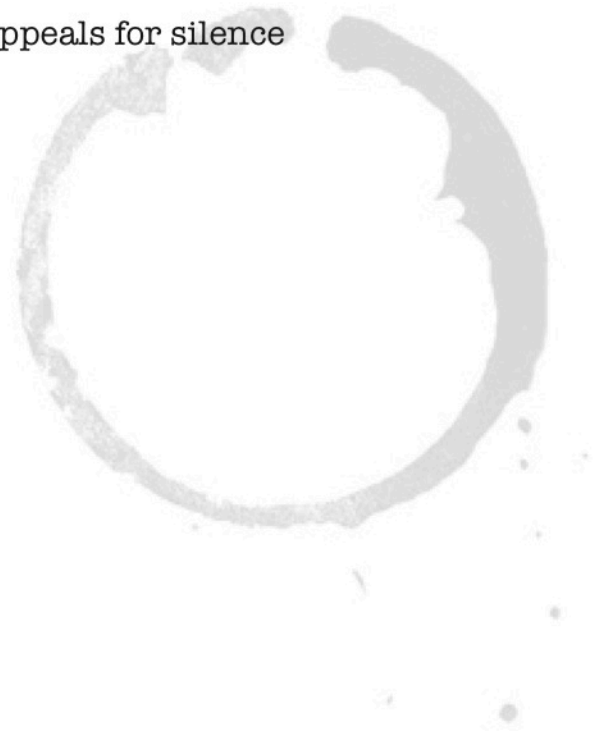Translation of the first three lines:

Hello,
Welcome to a night of silence
Silence. We can have it alone, and (if lucky) with a partner, but not often in Social situations.

Entree

the art of our time is noisy with appeals for silence

susan sontag

First Dish: Axiom.
The everyday served on a bed of contrived society.

Hiding behind every conscious move we make is a series of un-noted actions that carry us between things of importance, silently supporting that which is significant. Simple things we execute daily, some physiological (thinking, sleeping, perceiving, excreting), and some social (talking, writing, dwelling, moving, gathering) and some that are both (cooking, eating, sexual intercourse). They are the everyday. They breed the conventions of normality and define the structures of society, are the lowest common denominator for humanity, and provide a platform from which individuality emerges.

> The everyday is therefore the most universal and the most unique condition, the
> most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden.[1]

Michel de Certeau defines the 'tactics' of the everyday as 'ways of operating', which- as opposed to 'strategies'- do not depend on a place or institution to exist[2]. They are therefore not susceptible to elimination by physical destruction or the passing of time as they are partaken across borders and throughout the ages. Though definitely varied according to cultural praxis, they are the inherent parts of humanity.

Although it may then seem ridiculous to suggest that the everyday can be separated from any human construct, or that it ever was, it enjoys a grand introduction into the institution of art, and with its silence broken became one of the loudest elements within. The artistic everyday begins a history of overt radicalism that sought to shake and reject the very institution into which it needed introduction. In a relative shout, dada[3] artist Marcel Duchamp, intending to 'put art at the service of the mind'[4] declared a household bottle rack a 'ready made sculpture' in 1914, three years later declaring a urinal to be a *fountain*. Duchamp was re-defining the aesthetic process from one of making to one of choosing, loading the object with layers of association. In doing so he instigated a conversation between artists, critics and curators that revolves around self-reference, and saw art begin to distance itself intellectually from a wider public. The effects of Duchamp's actions, in their traumatic and radical nature, could not be

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[1] Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life*. 1987, p 9.
[2] Michel Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. 1984.
[3] dada is a movement in art active in the second decade of the 20th Century.
[4] Marcel Duchamp, 'The Great Trouble with Art in This Country', in Sanouillet, M. and Peterson, E. (eds), *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp (Marchand du Sel)*. 1973, p. 125.

realised immediately. Rather they entered into a system of 'deferred action'[5], a time delay seeing the consequences of radical action only possible in retrospect.

> The status of Duchamp … is a retroactive effect of countless artistic responses and critical readings, and so it goes across the dialogical space-time of avant-garde practice and institutional reception. [6]

The subtler, quieter versions of the same actions, such as the pastiche of Francis Picabia, in whispered tones and recognisable forms, eased seamlessly into the institution, and set a framework for the eventual significance of Duchamp's actions. Picabia, somewhat silently supporting reform, perhaps did more to predict the working methods of artists today than his vocal contemporaries, as we now acknowledge the inevitable inclusion of art into art, and have moved into an era of 'subtle displacements'[7]. The conversation Duchamp begun was picked up in the activities of the 'neo' avant-gardes in the mid twentieth century. The Situationists, led by Guy Debord[8], with their systems of Dérive[9] and Détournement[10] extended the pre-war avant-garde's anti-ideology, promising to actualise the breakdown of the institution of art, using the acts of routine and the urban everyday as their medium. As in the *Silent Dinner Parties*, participants in a Dérive agreed to a common set of guidelines, to be adhered to in the throws of otherwise normal, daily actions. For the post-war avant-gardes the quest to realise the project of fusing art with life, was a means to an end, a desire for abolishment. To realise not-art in an act of disappearance, a "silence [that] exists as a decision – the exemplary suicide of the artist"[11].

When the institution of art is the voice, the publishing tool for the quotation Duchamp inserted at the heart of the artwork, the desire to quiet that voice may be read as French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty describes "a thought limited to existing for itself, independently of the constraints of speech and communication, [that] would no sooner appear than it would sink into the unconscious, which means that it would not exist, even for itself."[12] Non-existence through non-art presents itself as "the advocacy of silence expresses a mythic

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[5] Hal Foster, 'What's Neo about the Neo Avant-Garde', 1994, in Buskirk, M. and Nixon, M. (eds), *The Duchamp Effect*. 1996, p 30.
[6] Ibid. p 11.
[7] Ibid. p 26.
[8] The Situationists, otherwise known as the Internationale Situationiste (IS), were a group centred around French artist and critic Guy Debord, and were active between 1957 and 1972.
[9] Dérive was a technique used by the Situationsts which could be described as deliberate aimless wanderings through the urban environment. It was explained by Guy Debord in his 'Theory of the Dérive' which was first published in *Internationale Situationiste #2*, Paris, Dec. 1958.
[10] Détournement was the appropriation of elements existing in life and their de-contextualisation for re-evaluation.
[11] Susan Sontag, 'The Aesthetics of Silence' in *Styles of Radical Will*. 1966, p 9.
[12] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomonology of Perception*. 1945. Smith, C. (trans), 1962, p 206.

project of total liberation."[13] The liberation the avant-gardes sought inevitably found it's place in a continuum of communication. When art is dialogue, the avant-garde did "less to transform the institution of art than it did to transform the avant-garde into an institution"[14]. Art progresses how interlocutors subject themselves to "a taking up of other's thoughts through speech, a reflection in others, an ability to think *according to others* which enriches our own thoughts"[15]. Speech, or the artwork, in this regard can function as disruption, an intervention, the surrender of a train of thought to a group trajectory, an interpolation of surprise elements into formula.

Similarly, activist art and public art can seek to intervene on routine. When "the everyday constitutes the platform upon which the bureaucratic society of controlled consumerism is erected"[16] it provides the ideal domain for politically and socially concerned artists within which to work. The *Playground action on Norrebro* was a project in Copenhagen in 1968, where a group led by Danish artist and activist Palle Nielsen sought to provide children living in broken down housing complexes with playing equipment facilities. The group began by approaching the residents of a housing complex with a plastic bag containing two rolls, and a piece of paper with a picture of children playing on the street, stating:

> Do you have children yourself or do you just hear the children scream and shout in the stairwell and entrance when you come home? … have you asked your local council or your local residents' association about investments in child-orientation? Do you know that the authorities are empowered to give grants and are willing to invest in your children's well being if you demand it? [17]

It was a successful provocation, and in the space of one day the group had inspired reformative action in the residents who willingly participated in the activism.

The piece then found a second life within art, when Nielsen was invited to exhibit his activist work in the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. Under the title *Model for a Qualitative Society*, Nielsen installed a pedagogic play environment for children. Children were admitted for free [plate 4]. Herein, the art gallery became a venue for the first-hand execution of reformative action in society. As Nielsen's intentions were pedagogic, the institutional space provided a good platform. When art seeks social effect, the context it is executed in is crucial. When that

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[13] Susan Sontag, 'The Aesthetics of Silence' in *Styles of Radical Will*. 1966, p 18.
[14] Hal Foster 'What's Neo about the Neo Avant-Garde', 1994, in Buskirk M. and Nixon M. (eds), *The Duchamp Effect*. 1996, p 22.
[15] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomonology of Perception*. 1945. Smith, C. (trans), 1962, p 208.
[16] Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life*. 1987, p 9.
[17] Excerpt from the text included in *The Play ground action on Norrebro*, as included in Bishop, C. (ed), *Participation*, 2006. p 173-174.

desired effect is within the processes of sociability itself, the gallery rarely provides a pertinent space, unless the work comments on art itself. As Danish curator Lars Bang Larsen in talking of Nielsen's work states:

> To introduce social processes in the art institution is, according to Nielsen, socially irrational. Social processes should happen where people are, in direct relation to what they do. But Social reproduction is in dire straights, there is a strong need for the production of participation and for accessible metaphors for freedom. [18]

So, while artistic practice provides the 'production of participation' the institution here can only show it as documentation. The *Silent Dinner Parties*, dealing with the everyday functions of dwelling, gathering, communicating and eating provide a platform for experience that is most successfully realised in it's congenital environment, domestic space. It appears in the gallery as art documentation, which Boris Groys, in the catalogue that accompanied Documenta 11,[19] rightly describes as being "by definition *not* art, it merely refers to art."[20] When dealing with social practices, artworks live outside of the gallery and the artworld, in their inherent environments. They exist as situations in life. As Groys continues "art in this case is no longer present and immediately visible, but rather absent and hidden."[21] In this, artworks are being executed in reasonable silence, hidden from the public eye and the recordings of history until *successful*, taking that choice away from the artworld, and giving it back to the public sphere. Larsen goes on to say that the institution of art is "a vehicle positioned in such a way in culture that the statements it conveys are catapulted into society"[22] validating it as a tool for the enduring life of social comment. The silencing the avant-gardes spoke of, the art completely embedded in life as an end, has come full circle.

> One could even say that this is the definition of life: life can be documented but not shown.[23]

Life is now a beginning for a new generation of practice, evident in the concerns of artists working with social sculpture.

Social sculpture could be described as what French critic Nicolas Bourriard termed 'relational aesthetics' in 1998. Otherwise phrased as 'social aesthetics', the field refers to a movement in art concerned with human relations and their social context. Social aesthetics draws on some

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[18] Lars Bang Larsen, 'Social Aesthetics' 1999 in ibid p 176-177.
[19] Documenta is an exhibition of Contemporary Art occurring every five years in Kassel, Germany.
[20] Boris Groys, 'Art in the Age of Biopolitics' in the catalogue to *Documenta 11*, 2002, p 108.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Lars Bang Larsen, 'Social Aesthetics' 1999 in Bishop, C. (ed), *Participation*, 2006, p 175.
[23] Boris Groys, 'Art in the Age of Biopolitics' in the catalogue to *Documenta 11*, 2002, p 110.

of the formal properties explored by the Situationists in their encounters with the everyday, seeking effect outside the discourse of art with a view to social and political reform in a world where Bourriard claims

> the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist. [24]

The invisible stuff of the everyday, the space between people and the dynamics of communities are the materials engaged. They are often undertaken in discretion to the means of a heightened awareness. The social sculptor can collapse the system of 'deferred action' by accepting an initial silence, a preliminary transparency as an imperative part of the life of an important work. When positioned in a real and present situational time and space, social sculpture can ensure immediate relevance in life, and can resist deferral from art discourse by presenting the work as art only in its aftermath, already accomplished, the museum holding relics as documentation.

When working toward reform, political or social, subtlety is now employed when compared to the acts of upheaval seen in the 1968 students uprisings attributed to the Situationists, and could be read as a movement away from overt spectacle in a generation of artists who respond to democracy having become a media spectacle, in the vein of Reagan, Schwarzenegger and Garrett[25]. Artists working in social spheres, such as Nielsen, seek to replace the trust figure when a discerning public cannot be sure who their local politician/actor is playing, and instead of trying to instigate thought that may lead to reform, simply execute the reform.

Social sculpture also provides a balance for the artist creating after "Warhol answering the Duchampian question of "what is art?"… brought art into philosophical awareness"[26], who wants to re-engage with a public who has been distanced by "art-as-philosophy"[27] through intellectual elitism (art finding an exclusivity in its inclusive nature). Paradoxically, that this can come about in a form of art that is often not recognised as art except within this elitist dialectic, could be seen to point to a pointlessness of contemporary art, if it must hide itself, become silent, in order to find relevance.

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[24] Nicolas Bourriard. *Relational Aesthetics*. 1998. Pleasance, S. and Woods, F. (trans), 2002. p 13.
[25] Named here are three political figures who came into positions of power after careers in the entertainment industry, as pop icons.
[26] Hal Foster, *Design and Crime*. 2002, p 124.
[27] Ibid.

Second Dish: **Intervention**
                             from a flaming sizzle plate.

I began to create art out of the everyday in the middle of 2006, in projects that began just after my house burnt down. I had moved to Cologne, Germany a month before, and I was in the flat, asleep, while it burnt. And so it was that my literal expulsion from the cocoon of private space saw my practice follow. I began to play games with normality in projects that sought to deconstruct my awareness of public routine. My approach to public space is that any manipulation within must be to create conviviality, as a rejection of fear, with a view to providing reflection in the spaces and time people move through purely anticipating the end, like standing in a queue or waiting for a train.

Haircheckpoint began as an inquiry into ideas of possession, as the subjective relevance of objects became clear after the fire. I would get ordinary, plain packages, boxes mainly, and put a small mirror inside it. On the mirror I would write a message, more often than not, it would say 'Hair Check Point' [plates 5 and 6]. I would then strategically place the object in the public and sit near it filming its life secretly.

I performed *Haircheckpoint* in five countries around Europe. The project took on new meanings with every space. In Cologne, the people loved it. Many who came in contact with it would pick it up and open it to find themselves laughing at their own reflection. Some would take it with them, some would not. In Holland, nothing happened to the packages at all. The strongest reaction was in London. The piece became an act of terrorism, which I saw as evidence of their heightened post 9/11 anxiety[28]. I was warned repeatedly that I risk getting arrested. In London I used A5 envelopes to alleviate some of the fear larger objects in the public transport system may evoke, and listened attentively as the same recorded voice that asked commuters to 'mind the gap' summoned inspectors to the operations control room over the loud speakers. I would place the envelope on a chair of a platform, and then cross the tracks to film from the opposite side. At least half the time the envelope was gone before I reached the opposite platform. Other times I managed to see people pick it up and run it to the safety of main control [plate 6]. Paris, a city as internationally renowned as London, saw the packages eventually swept up by the cleaners.

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[28] I refer here to the global repercussions of the events of *terrorism* that occurred in New York on September 11th, 2001.

Stadt Teaser (City Teasers), a group project I was involved in at the same time, were concerned with gauging responses to disruption, or provocation in public space. We brought the very notion of public space under heavy scrutiny, and in the end restricted ourselves to the squares and parks around the city. Beginning with simple displacements we would place boxes of water-bombs in areas of heavy pedestrian traffic, or section off areas of busy parks with construction tape [plate 7]. Perhaps impatient with the slow pace of results allowed by offering the public a choice to interact, or perhaps in a fit of self-importance, we decided we needed to force a public to engage with our objects.

With that intent, the project culminated by barricading an area of Friesenplatz, a central square, that included the exit of an underground station, in peak hour. A wooden gate was erected, and from it hung about 50 water-bombs between head and waist height. The people had to choose to either walk through the water-bombs, or climb over the barricades. The reactions of people were diverse, but the responsive decisions happened mainly in sequence, that is, people just did what they saw the person in front of them doing. Some (two in four hours) returned down to the underground to find alternative exits, but even those who were initially confronted, walked away with huge smiles on their faces. And when they rounded the corner to see us hiding there with cameras, sent big signs of appreciation [plate 8].

Plate 4: Palle Nielsen. *Model for a Qualitative Society.*
Moderna Museet, Stockholm. 1968

Amsterdam

Hamburg

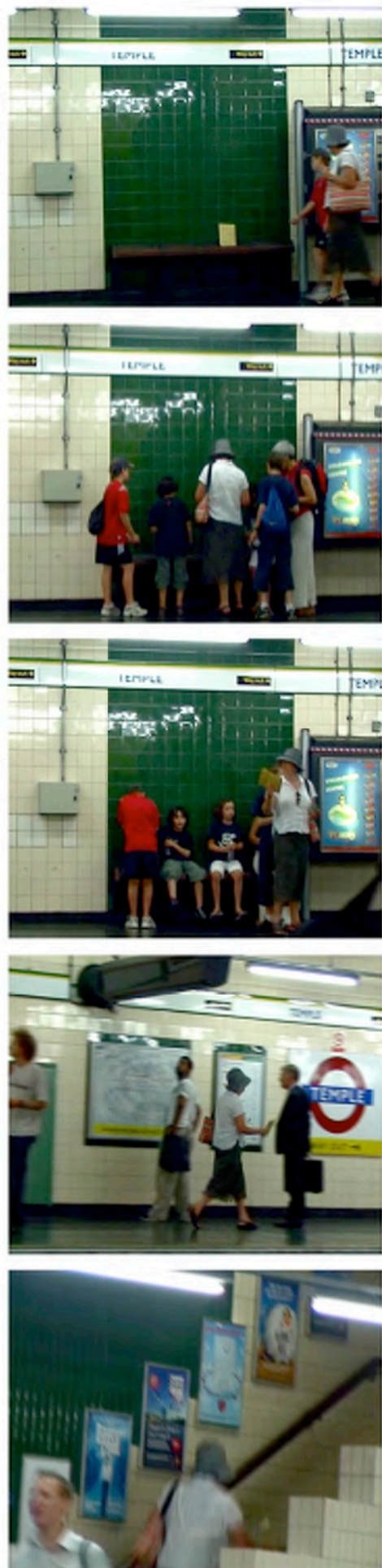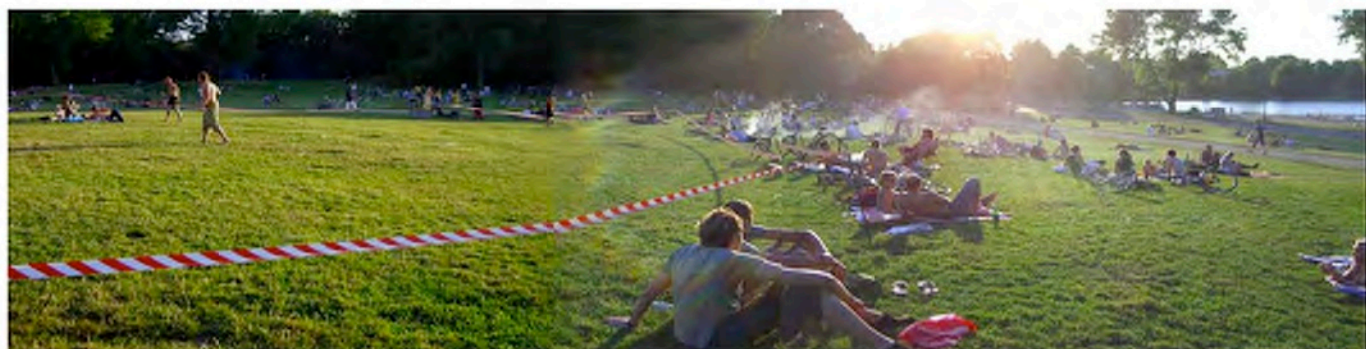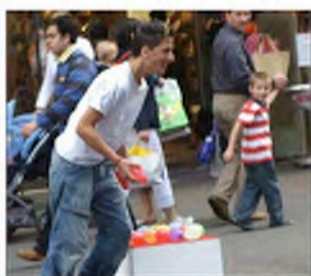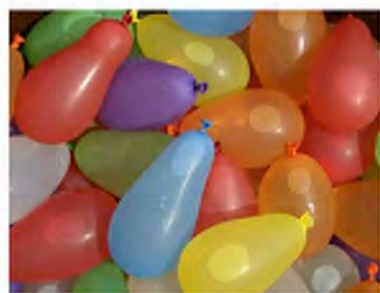London

Plate 5: Honi Ryan. *Haircheckpoint* (packages). 2006

Plate 6: Honi Ryan. *Haircheckpoint London*. 2006

Stadt Teaser: *Park Action 2*. 2006
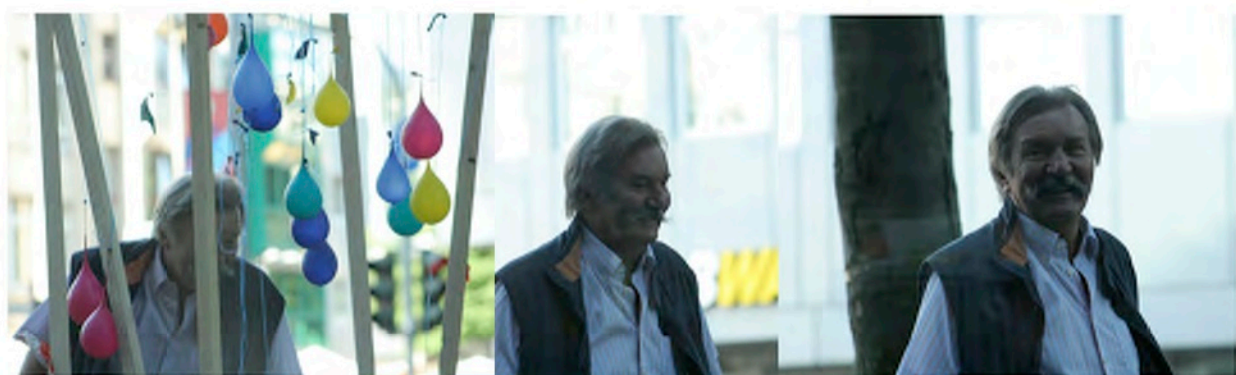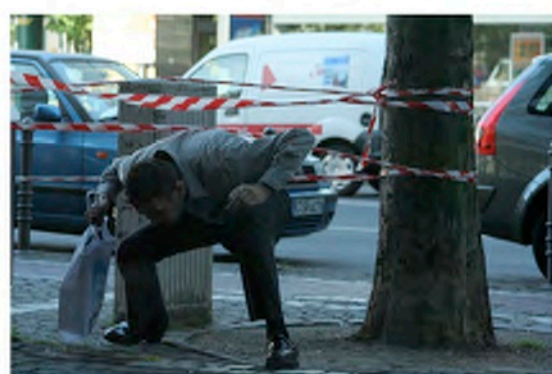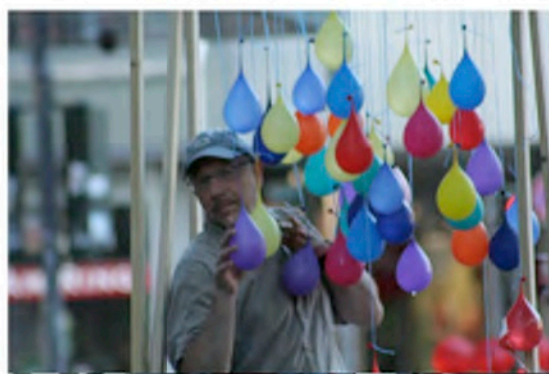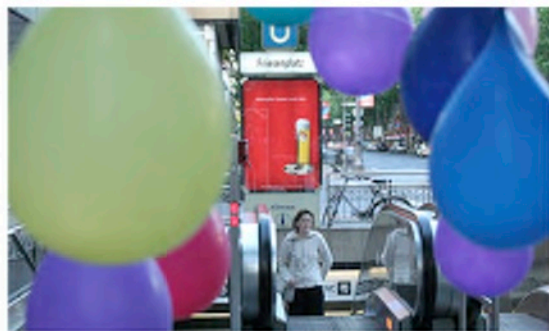

Stadt Teaser: *Schildergaße Action..* 2006

Plate 7: Stadt Teaser. *Actions* 2006
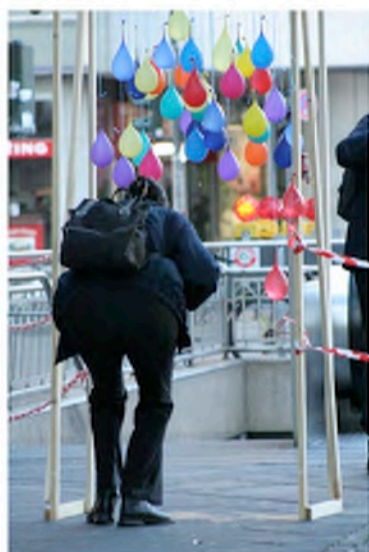
Plate 8: Stadt Teaser. *Friesenplatz Action* 2006

Mains

A sound accomplishes nothing; without it life would not last out the instant.

john cage

First Dish: **Prolix.**

Char grilled possibility with an interactive jus.

Silence can be a structure, which, in its use of absence becomes a non-structure. We have seen, historically, how attempts to silence, as an anti-ideology, may provide the starting point for contemporary work. Similarly, "the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence"[1]. John Cage proved in his experiments in the anechoic chamber that in life, pure silence is physiologically impossible, maintaining that "try as we may to make silence, we cannot"[2]. Where pure silence is unachievable in life, perhaps the only possibility we have for it is in death. In art, the author is dead, painting is dead, machines are dead, art itself is dead. With so much death in art discourse, perhaps it has found that silence. In this machine age death is not unachievable, at least as something we can interact with in life.

The death of the author was described by Roland Barthes in 1966, as a disintegration of the authorial position of the creator[3] exercising an existentialist[4] philosophy wherein the culmination of one's lived experience is the basis from which all perception is formed. With the author dead, it would appear that there is nothing left for us to do than to stand around, producer and spectator alike, and participate in mourning. Barthes' idea of participation can be applied retrospectively to all art of all ages. Its application in form saw the demise of the traditional relationship between artist and audience, prevalent in the performances and happenings of Fluxus[5] and still used today. As is the methodology in the *Silent Dinner Parties,* artists harness the energy, actions and space of their audience as the living stuff of an artwork.

Cage came to see technology, inherently lifeless, as holding the possibility for silence. It follows then that a recording of his seminal work, *4'33"* of silence, essentially being media with nothing on it, [see plates 9 and 10], is a more pure form of the piece than any live performance could purport to be. However, when silence is 'arrogant' yet 'humble' [see plate 1] a performance of silence is to fill a void with otherwise inaudible sounds. Cage's *4'33''*

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[1] Susan Sontag, 'The Aesthetics of Silence' in *Styles of Radical Will.* 1966, p 11.

[2] An anechoic chamber is a room used for engineering purposes that is completely soundproof. John Cage entered one in his own pursuit of silence. Free from any external noise, Cage described two sounds still audible, one low pitched and one of high frequency. Explained, these are the sounds of the interior functioning of the body, the high pitched the nervous system and the low pitched the blood circulation. Many writings of or about Cage refer to this experience, the quote is from John Cage, *Silence*, 1966, p 8.

[3] see Roland Barthes 'The Death of the Author' in *Image, Music, Text.* 1977, p 142-148.

[4] Existentialism is a strand of philosophy understood here according to French philosopher Jean-Paul Satre and his statement that 'existence precedes essence' in Jean-Paul Satre, *Existentialism and Humanism.* 1948.

[5] Fluxus was an international movement in art which had its roots in the experimental music of John Cage and his use of chance. The first organised Fluxus events are noted to be in New York in 1961.

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saw a full orchestra sit in an auditorium without playing their instruments. The audience here, even if unwillingly or unknowingly, became the creator with every noise they made constituting the work, as did the environment and the given sounds of the space. For Cage, silence provided a structure for indeterminacy. Contemporary experimental composer Frank Kölliges approaches sound with similar indeterminacy, by conducting a room in the round. Kölliges is a monthly resident in Odonien[6] who conducts 360 degrees of his space, pivoting on his point, asking the whole room to respond to his gestures in a series of noises which become a responsive dialogue of every sound the space has to offer, as he acknowledges even the input of the trains as they pass over the state of Odonien [plate 11]. Between Cage and Kölliges is the use of sound in the *Silent Dinner Parties,* which, in their construction of social space conduct communication, and in their absence of linguistics provide new ways of approaching it, relying entirely on the participation of the guests to build the work, whilst heightening environmental soundscapes. Group dynamics, and the relationships of all things a space has to offer are now being sculpted by artists in ways Cage and Debord alluded to, offering contingency they could only predict.

In that technology is dead, it's ability to hold silence is tainted if it needs interaction with life to exist. That relational aesthetics can be defined "as an approach to art making dedicated to social *interactions*"[7] brings to light that we are in the aftermath of an important shift from notions of participation to those of interaction. The term interaction has became analogous with the act of participating in technology-based art forms, in what is at least partially resultant of a process in the personification of machines in the last couple of decades, that saw the allocation of many things previously only possible in living organisms onto machinery, and vice-versa. For example, the 'virus'[8], and Stelarc did implant an ear on his arm.

While art's relationship with interaction continues to inspire the production and uses of new technologies, pushing boundaries of possibility, questioning legal propriety, moulding perceptions of space and the trajectory of narratives; in art and the everyday, both realities – real and virtual – are staying somewhat rigidly defined. People seem to prefer not to lose

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[6] Odonien is a self proclaimed Free State for art and culture in the West German city, Cologne. It began with the formation of a group of German, Austrian and Polish artists called the Pirates and is now run as a monachal system under the sculptor Odo Rump. They declared themselves a free state in 2006, initially you needed an Odonien passport to enter the site, but finding this restrictive, the Pirates opened Odonien to the public (in specified times) to hold diverse cultural events. The space is equipped with creative studios. I worked with the Pirates in 06/07. See www.odonien.de

[7] Nicolas Bourriard, from a selection of his writings in Bishop, C. (ed), *Participation*. 2006, p 160.

[8] Michael Winterbottom's film *Code 46,* 2003, an apocalyptic science fiction, shows this beautifully, as people in his projected future can ingest biologically engineered virus' to the means of manipulating their physical makeup, enabling them to perform desired tasks. The main character, played by Tom Robins, is employed to take an empathy virus, and conduct a series of interviews on people, his virus allowing him innately to know whether they are lying or not.

themselves to all engrossing sensory stimulation in the construction of their *Second Life*[9]. The past two Transmediale[10] festivals in Berlin showcased no submersive virtual reality interfaces. The very themes of the festival in 2006 and 2007, *Reality Addicts* and *Unfinish!* respectively, point to concerns of staying present in many realities at once, creating our digital personalities through full consciousness of our offline personalities. This is perhaps a product of what Russian artist and critic Lev Manovich described as interactivity failing to simulate the functioning of the mind[11] allowing us to maintain critical distance at all times. Even in gaming, possibly the most proliferate form of immersive interaction in society, the task of association (that Barthes gave to the spectator) is usually allocated to a predetermined series of text, image and sound clips. Even as the general functioning of the everyday is increasingly mechanised, the linguistically driven interface of the screen and keyboard remains dominant.

In an age when artist residencies occur virtually[12], the ARS Electronica is littered with people embodying their *Second Life*[13], where long lost friends are brought together on facebook[14] and business meetings occur over skype[15], our dependence on this linguistically driven electronic encounter is more prominent than ever. We have words and sounds and images in abundance. What is it then that the real space encounter has left to offer? That relational aesthetics takes the term 'interaction' to umbrella a trend in art that is deliberately not concerned with technological interfaces, is a call to answer just that question.

> The general mechanisation of social functions gradually reduces the relational space… these machines carrying out tasks which once represented so many opportunities for exchanges, pleasure and squabbling. Contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavours to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue.[16]

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[9] I refer here to people leading two lives, one in real space, one in digital space, and am making particular reference to a platform for this possibility: *Second Life,* which is an online world built by its users, and boasting to have more than 2 million residents. It is arguably the biggest phenomena in the creation of digital alter-egos (called 'avatars') in the past three years. See www.secondlife.com

[10] Transmediale is an annual festival for art and digital culture in Berlin, Germany, and represents current concerns of artists working with technology.

[11] For a discussion on this see Lev Manovich, 'The Myth of Interactivity' in Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 2001.

[12] This year Oz Co offered grants to artists working in extended media to take up virtual residencies in the online *Second Life* world.

[13] The ARS Electronica is an annual festival for Art, Technology and Society held in Linz Austria. This year it included an exhibition titled 'Second Cities', directly referencing the *Second Life* phenomena. Of particular interest to this argument is the piece by German artist Aram Bartholl, *Chat,* which is described on the ARS website as being "Just like in World of Warcraft or Second Life, two participants communicate with each other in the form of brief text messages input via keyboard. Immediately after they've been entered, the written communiqués appear in a comic-strip-like dialogue balloon projected above the speaker's head." Accessed online http://www.aec.at/en/festival2007/program/project.asp?iProjectID=14052 [last accessed Oct. 15, 2007]

[14] Facebook is an online social portal. See www.facebook.com

[15] Skype is real time voice, text and video communication shareware. See www.skype.com

[16] Nicolas Bourriard. *Relational Aesthetics*. 1998. Pleasance, S. and Woods, F. (trans), 2002, p 17.

Placing interaction topically back into a discussion of the social shows a reactionary move to our dependence on technology for communication, and asks that the real space encounter be redefined in order to maintain its validity. In a similar vein, American critic, Hal Foster uses the term 'chat rooms', which we know to mean online communities, to describe the real-space work of social sculptors[17]. It is not a regressive move. As the neo avant-garde approached the everyday in light of its introduction by the historical avant-garde, so must the social sculptor approach interaction in light of its technological history in the machine age.

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[17] Hal Foster, 'Chat Rooms' in Bishop, C. (ed), *Participation*, 2006. p 190-195.

Second Dish: **Surreptitious.**
Subtlety baked in smouldering ashes.

When my house burned down I was developing an interface called *inside-out* for a prototype Transparent Display System (TDS) [plate 12] with 235Media Cologne[18]. *inside-out* was to be installed publicly in the medieval structures scattered throughout the city. Concerned with the urban environment as an organic construct it called on biologically inspired imagery, generated from the relative heat of the user's hands when interacting with the TDS, that became wallpaper for the user to resurface the city with, using the glass screen and the city scapes behind it as their canvas [plate 13].

In a blaze these concerns were hushed. With my dwelling and all my recent work in cinders, I lost interest in the exterior shells of the city and started searching the interiors for present living signs of culture, actualised in the exhausting process of finding a houseshare in my stilted second language. I logged on to those flat-finder websites as often as I did my email. Realising that this nomadic status I held allowed me access to otherwise closed doors, and the true life of the city that laid behind them, I became obsessed. I call the work *Abode*. Indeed, well after I was settled in a lovely new flat, I continued this practice. In dossier style – I documented the process, digitally printing the advertisements, noting the conversations, and, with permission, photographing the spaces and people I encountered. The people who had rooms for rent became my unwitting performers, in the same way Alan Kaprow describes a possible form of audience participation in the 'happenings' in New York in the late 1950s:

> A varient … is the person who is engaged unwittingly with a performer in some planned action: a butcher will sell certain meats to a customer-performer without realising that he is part of a piece having to do with purchasing, cooking and eating meat. [19]

The project is also reminiscent of Sophie Calle's *Double Game*, the section *The Hotel*. Acting out a character from a fictional text by Paul Aster, Calle took a job as a chambermaid in a hotel in order to have access to the temporary homes of many, and photographed the traces of their presence. The objects and their arrangement in the space point to personalities and also to the subjective importance of objects as she sifted through the belongings people deemed worthy of the weight of a suitcase [plate 14]. Shown against the international style of the

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[18] 235Media is a technology development and arts management agency in Cologne, Germany. The TDS was their latest prototype, and is a glass oblong touchscreen approximately 1 x 1.5 metres. The glass interface is enabled by a grid of wires adhered to the screen, and the display is by means of video projection onto the glass. They offered this technology to students participating in a project called Mixed Realities with the Cologne International School of Design, to conceptualise uses for it. See http://art.235media.de
[19] Alan Kaprow, 'Notes on the Elimination of the audience' 1966 in Bishop, C. (ed), *Participation*. 2006, p 104.

hotel, the displacement of these objects allows them to speak as loudly as the words a journal might hold. Similarly, the generic style of post World War 2 architecture in a German city that was 95% destroyed in the war, and then rebuilt in a decade, saw the 50s style wallpapered structures I walked into time and time again, serve as a transparent background for culture. In a uniform manner, an enthusiastic young television camera man informed me "We are not one of those share houses where one wall is painted red, and another blue. We are different". He was right. Of his walls, one was green, the other mustard [plate 15].

The thing that kept me pursuing this practice was the exposure to the interview process, and the study of behaviour in this particular form of hierarchal social interaction. They have something I want, and they get to choose whether I can have it or not. Sociologist Hugh Dalziel Duncan, in his investigation into communication and the social order, describes "equality" as "the purest moment of sociability"[20]. The interview is an interaction that is not equal, and therefore not pure, similar to art. To summarise my findings from these quasi interviews would be to say that the less I said, the more likely I was to get the room.

Two things are in play here. One is to return to Barthes and the author. Where I embody, live, the artwork in this context, to allow my audience to own the content, filling it with themselves by letting them do all the talking, *success* resulted. The other is to approach the hierarchal nature of this social interaction, politically. Duncan continues, "Among social equals the democracy of sociability is really played"[21]. Equality is rarely found in political structures. How do we get what we want coming from a position of weakness? In light of two revolutionaries: Mahatma Gandhi and Mao Tse-Tung; I will call Gandhi the silent figure, in his use of *absence* through non-violence; and Chairman Mao the loud figure in his belief that "revolution is an act of violence"[22]. To this I will propose no definitive, but leave it in rhetoric as to which figure history is richer for. On silence and art, I will leave it with their respective words:

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[20] Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *Communication and Social Order*. 1962, p 23.
[21] Ibid
[22] Mao Tse-Tung, 'Report of an investigation into the Peasant movement in Hunan' in Stuart Schram, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-Tung*. 1969, p 253.

Silence is a great help to a seeker after truth like myself.

Mahatma Gandhi [23]

Revolution is not the same as inviting people to dinner or writing an essay or painting a picture or embroidering a flower; it cannot be anything so refined, so calm and gentle.

Mao Tse-Tung [24]

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[23] Mathatma Gandhi in R.K. Prabhu, *Truth is God*. 1955, p. 61.

[24] Mao Tse-Tung, 'Report of an investigation into the Peasant movement in Hunan' in Stuart Schram, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-Tung*. 1969, p 252.

Please spend four and a half minutes with the following page.

Plate 9 and 10 (over page): Honi Ryan. *3 seconds short of Cage*. 2007

Plate 11: Frank Kölliges.Performance in Odonien.2007
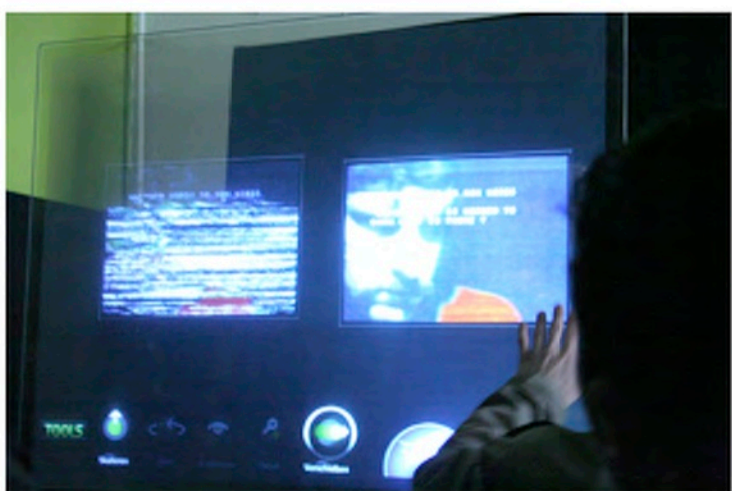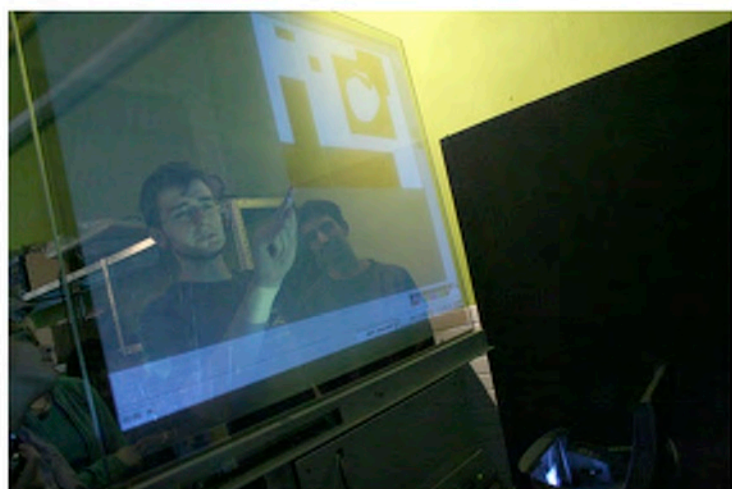
Plate 12: Transparent Display System (TDS) at 235Media Cologne
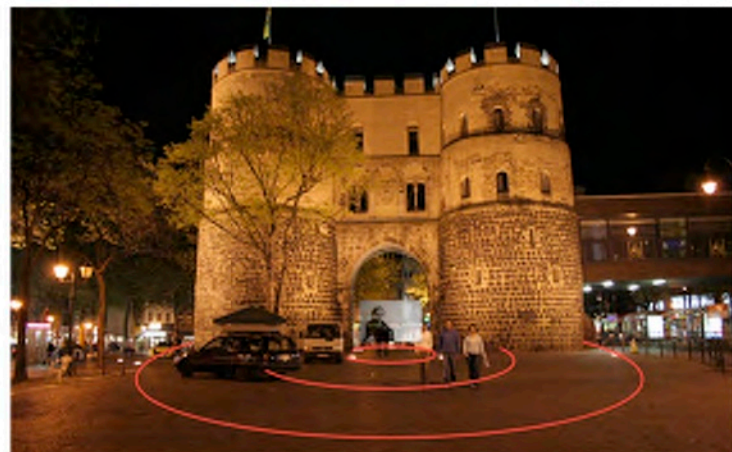
Zones of motion sensor input
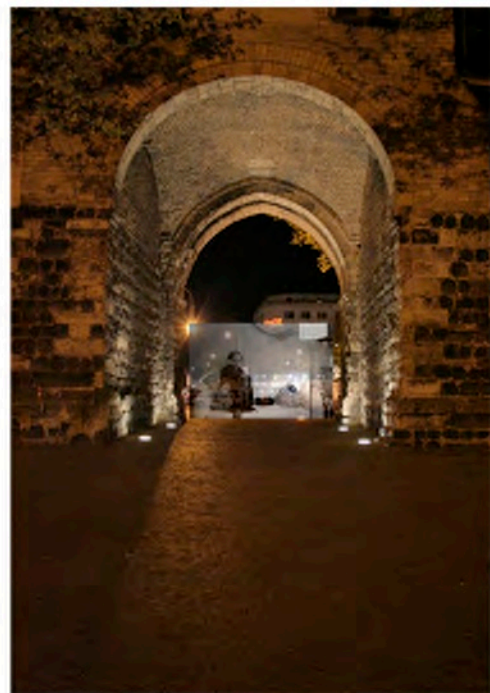
Zone 1 imagery
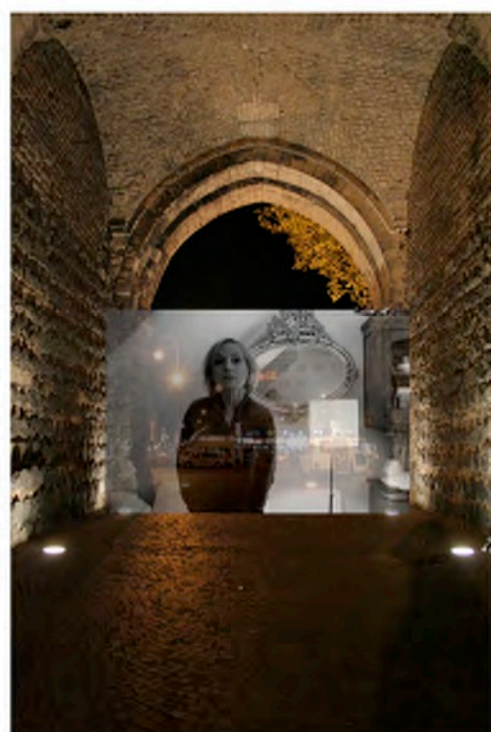
Zone 2 imagery
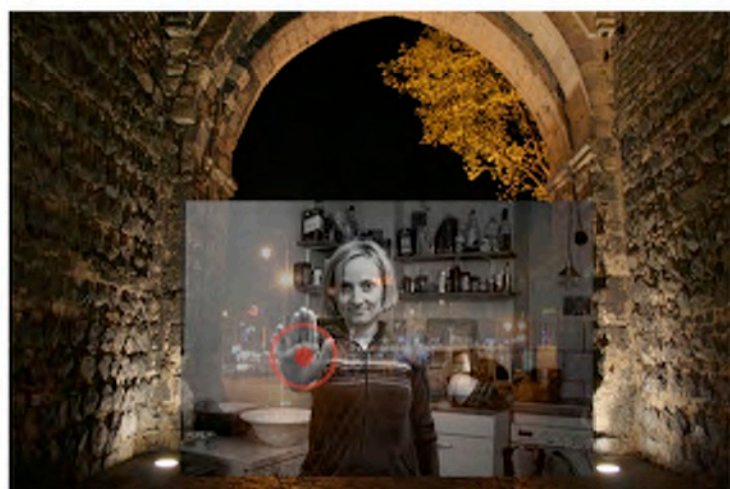
Zone 3 imagery with interactivity
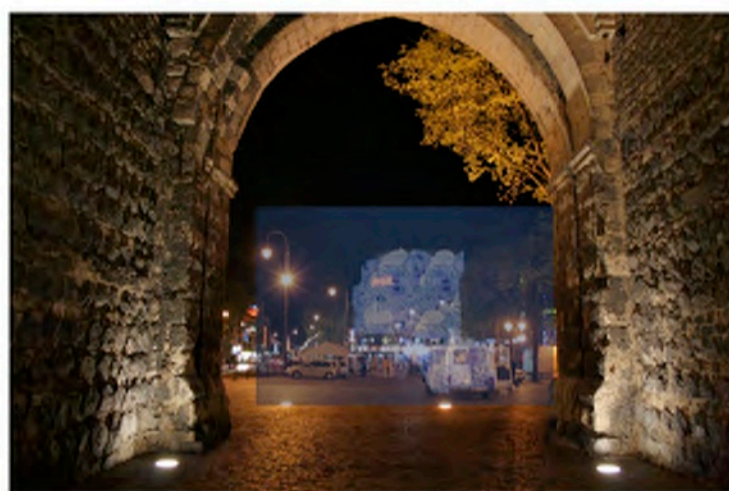
City scapes textured with biological imagery

Plate 13: Honi Ryan. *inside-out (concept)* 2006

Plate 14: Sophie Calle. *The Hotel. Room 47* 1981

Plate 15: Honi Ryan. *Abode* 2006

Sweets
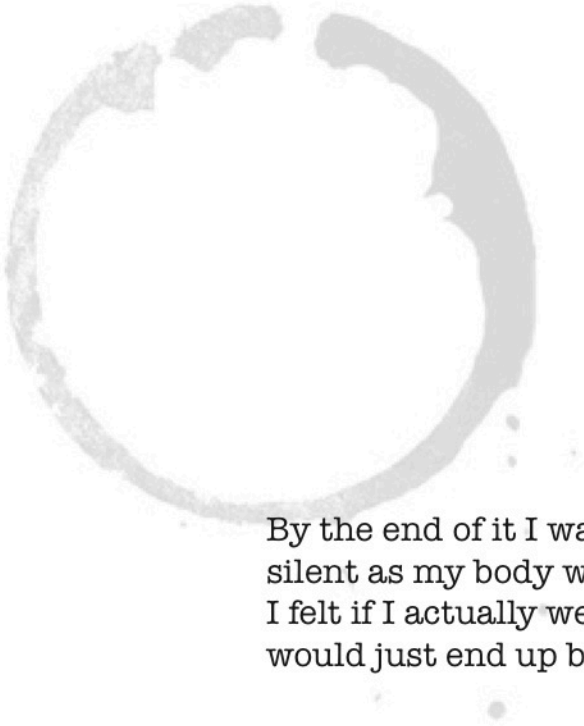
By the end of it I was actually stopping myself from being silent as my body was slipping into "nothing really matters". I felt if I actually went totally silent (which I could easily do) I would just end up being rude.

'Silent Dinner Party' Guest

First Dish : **Anarthria.**
Space Cake.

And so, we return to the roots of 'interaction', those sociologically grounded. According to American sociologist Sigrid Norris, the understanding of any given situation is broken down into a triad: Linguistics, Non-verbal behaviour, and the Material world. Linguistics and the non-verbal come from the human subject while the material world implies space and environment[1]. Of these three it is interesting to note that the only one that can be definitively broken down again, regardless of any other knowledge of the situation at hand, is linguistics, into the verbs: reading, writing, speaking, listening. The other two hold a relatively infinite realm of possibility. Within a system of binary justification, linguistics could then be seen to be diametrically opposed to silence. This is not to deny that ideas of silence stand in opposition to noise, but when silence is not found naturally, this scale works on one that consists of deliberate elements, like art. When applied to technology, as discussed in the previous chapter, perhaps this system explains a restrictive nature to mediated communication. Even when technology responds to contingency when driven by a human user, it is underwritten by the language of programming, and so somehow always remains within the boundaries of linguistics.

Through eliminating linguistics, this apparently ever-present, authorial element to interaction, the *Silent Dinner Parties*, are a constructed real-space that seek to redefine the syntax of communication, even if only momentarily. Within the 'agnostic' system of imploded binaries I have here supposed to be the context of this series, the *Silent Dinner Parties* work with both ends of the silent scales to which they refer. This, coupled with the impossibility of silence the events ask for, is a double negation, possibly rendering them relevant failures.

But all of that can be put down to wordplay.

The true life of the *Silent Dinner Parties* exists across the table, in the space between people, as a shift in behavioural patterns that have, so far, included a great deal of fun, and provided the guests with reflection on their own uses of communication, and the nature of sociability. It is the chance for people to live a new experience, but not without expense. Not using words in a group is hard. It is breaking habits and requires the participants to constantly *work*. But the participants are willing, and once the requested guidelines have been given, I do not take a position of authority, that is to say, I do not re-enforce the guidelines in any way except to

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[1] Sigrid Norris, *Analysing Multimodal Interaction*. 2004.

adhere to them myself. It is in the group dynamics how they will be interpreted, and manifest. I curate the guests according to different social dynamics. In groups, sometimes, all of the guests know each other intimately; sometimes no one knew each other previously. One has been a date with someone I had met only a few times before, and one with someone I lived with, but did not share a common language.

I do guide the event, in that I create the space and feed the people with a lavish three-course meal, which, incidentally, I must cook myself. For me this is part of the preparation process. Working with the food, catering for specific dietary needs of people and providing nice wine, is all a part of the energy I insert into the work and the lives of those who choose to share it with me. This use of food and the dinner party itself has a history I would like to acknowledge here only to say that the *Silent Dinner Parties* are not a feminist statement. For me the use of food is a platform to provide a context that we all know, intuitively. A level playing field for all of the participative guests to be at ease with, allowing them to focus on the task of being as silent as they can. The fact that it is around the dinner table is however very important, as central to the work is the idea of gathering, the social. None of us are strangers to relative silence alone, or even with a partner, and some of us are familiar with group meditation silences, such as the Vipassana notion of 'Nobel Silence'[2]. The *Silent Dinner Parties* specifically look at the group, social, real space environment, where words normally dominate, or the sounds of technology permeate.

The work may therefore be seen to be akin to Anne Graham's recent work at Sydney's Artspace *In Between Space*, a part of the aftermath series wherein Graham re-contextualised 8 rooms of dwelling into the gallery, and on opening night cooked in her constructed kitchen for the participants. However, in Graham's spatial displacement the work is less of the social sculpture it claimed to be, than an object placed in a gallery for re-evaluation, as Duchamp's *Fountain*. If the work stands to recognise that people are social in domesticity, then I would argue that people would so quickly get about being social that they would not be aware of it. If it was to highlight changes in behaviour when in the gallery, compared to the domestic space, then I would argue that the people who went to the gallery are likely to have done it many times before, and so the behavioural patterns would not change, either from that of their normal selves, or from that of how they normally are – in a gallery. Of the risk social

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[2] Noble Silence is the practice of not speaking before during and after meditation, in order to quiet the mind, and discipline the body to omit harmful speech. It is practiced by Buddists, Monks, Nuns and anyone undertaking prolongued periods of silent meditation, such as Vipassana.

sculpture holds of getting lost to it's very use of normality, creating "underwhelming art"[3], Joe Scanlan, assistant professor at the Yale School of Arts comments

> Time and time again I have found myself in a room full of people with no other obligation than to appreciate the moment, yet the group has always ended up exchanging pleasantries or planning dinner (if none had been served) ... relational aesthetics has more to do with peer pressure than collective action or egalitarianism.[4]

The *Silent Dinner Parties* work with a small group of willing participants, and requires the displacement to occur within themselves. As British author Jeanette Winterson said of the durational games she plays while viewing paintings "I have to work for art, if I want it to work on me"[5].

I have held five so far; two in Germany; three in Australia, with participant numbers ranging from 2 – 5 including me, and more are planned. Four out of the five have been recorded on video. I always ask for feedback after the event, which have often included people's expectations before the 'silent dinner party' as a comparison. I have collected snippets of silence in the form of text, video, photos, drawings, audio and objects. I will draw here on some of that feedback and point to some of the patterns that have emerged. The comments quoted are from guest participants followed by an indication of the country they occurred in: (G) for Germany and (A) for Australia. Language and grammatical errors are left as they were presented to me.

The *Silent Dinner Parties* have never been particularly quiet occasions, the attempts to communicate in silence proving quite boisterous and exhausting. This has been the same across cultures.

"I felt like our silent dinner was the loudest party on the block." (A)

"no medias make the people getting active" (G)

"I thought it would be less. There was so much going on and somehow I wanted to just sit there with the people but alone with my head." (G)

This last comment highlights the crucial difference between these events and a group meditation. People often say to me, when considering joining a 'silent dinner party' "What do people do, just sit around and look at the floor?" People's immediate association with the idea of silence is that of meditation and inertia. This is because we do not easily associate silence

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[3] Joe Scanlan, 'Traffic Control' in *Artforum International*, Summer 2005, p 123.
[4] Ibid
[5] Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects*. 1995, p 9.

with sociability. In this, it is a unique experience, which has been expressed by guests in comments such as

"I liked no words, and know it from being alone or with good friend, in this constellation it was new, and somehow challenging too." (G)

"Thanks for the experience – it was something different and has created much conversation for us since." (A)

On the difficulty people experienced:

"Torture comes to mind" (A)

"I had problems to communicate, I recognised tension, I was struggling with myself, because I was missing the medias a little bit" (G)

And of what people enjoyed, (apart from an abundant thanks for the food):

"I realised what in my mind is, drugs, sex, looking kinky..)) was funn..)" (G)

"I was just in such a comfortable state that again in hindsight I realised I let go of bullshit insecurities and appreciated the free reign to just be." (A)

I would not suppose to draw decisive cultural comparisons from such a rudimentary investigation, and there are many different cultural values, and situational particulars that encourage me not to, but there were two repetitive differences that spoke very loudly to me. One pertinent point is that in Germany, the people arrived, and left in silence. Having rigidly immersed ourselves in the concept, none of us had any perception of time, but I know they have gone for more than five hours. In Australia, two of the three have ended with someone in the group, who has been clock watching the whole time, declaring the requested duration over after two hours, and within 10 minutes everyone is talking again.

The other is that in Australia, people seem to think that if they mouth words, they are not using words, and were more likely to continue to interact with their personal technology. From this, if I am to generalise, the approach in Germany was through the concept, and Australians generally saw it as a time to live through, for the sake of 'art'. This can be shown through the attitudes the people entered with:

"I expected the feeling of helplessness. I expected that you could see sympathies and antysympathies much better" (G)

"I expected a bigger fokus on the good and bad tensions by having fokus on facial expression, gesture and behaviour" (G)

"At first I thought why bother? What's the point?" (A)

"Basically I didn't want to do the silent dinner night, and therefore felt that "I am being forced to do this" … but as it is for a good cause "ART", went along with it" (A)

And of the enduring effects:

"I basically waited patiently for the time to be up" (A)

"Somehow it's just a decision to talk, I didn't come into critical situation and Xtended till today" (G)

An Australian participant came to realise:

"Surely embracing our evolution and our ability to communicate, the very same ability we utilise every day to learn how to operate computers, cameras, i-pods, stereos is not a bad thing. I do wonder however how many arguments between lovers would occur without voiceboxes! Probably more if it was mine that was removed... I'd turn into a raving pathetic alcoholic who wets their bed!

I talk.

Its what I do.

Its how I feel whole.

Its why I'm not a fish!"

And a German participant created a series of drawings and paintings from the experience [plate 16].

Second Dish: **Founder [2].**
 Failure flan with simulacra syrup.

In 1927, at the age of 32, artist and designer Buckminster Fuller took a hiatus from communication. He "took a vow of silence, pledging not to say anything until he truly had something significant to communicate"[6]. For nearly two years he did not speak to anyone except his wife and daughter. As Fuller embodied, to alleviate speech is, for the better part, to remain in a relative lack of resolve. This can be true in the individual or the group, in what Sontag describes as one "use for silence: Providing time for the continuing or exploring of thought. Notably, speech closes off thought"[7]. Applied to the group dynamic in the *Silent Dinner Parties*, the lack of speech is equivalent to a lack of 'repair structures', which allow the evenings to linger in a lack of resolution.

The 'repair structures' of interaction are described by Norris to be implemented in communication as a corrective device when misunderstanding occurs[8]. I extend those repair structures to function to bring someone back to the point when one digresses from the group trajectory of a conversation that aims for resolve. Repair structures keep a conversation on track, toward the fastest state of resolution. They are opposed to conversational pastiche or free association. Repair structures are nearly always linguistic. Of course, everything can be said without words, but the process is slower. In my experience hosting social situations in silence, people therefore resign to indeterminacy readily. When a 'silent dinner party' has been broken in the form of speech while the group is together, the ensuing conversation has consisted nearly entirely of repair strategies. The group, together, breaks down the events of the evening and rights all the wrongs of communication they have just experienced. One guest commenting "I wanted the whole time just to talk about the fact that we're not talking."

Experientially, from my point of view, people's passions come forward. They stop to think about the elements of their life they share with you, and think to please the body, and the eye. Finding new ways of filling in time, desires manifest, and restrict themselves to fewer boundaries. They do not seek permission, nor dwell in the need for feedback. People rely on their own perceptions, and allow themselves to let irrelevancy go.

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[6] Lloyd Steven Sieden, *Buckminster Fuller's Universe*. 1989, p 93.
[7] Susan Sontag, 'The Aesthetics of Silence' in *Styles of Radical Will*. 1966, p 19.
[8] Sigrid Norris, *Analysing Multimodal Interaction*. 2004, p 94.
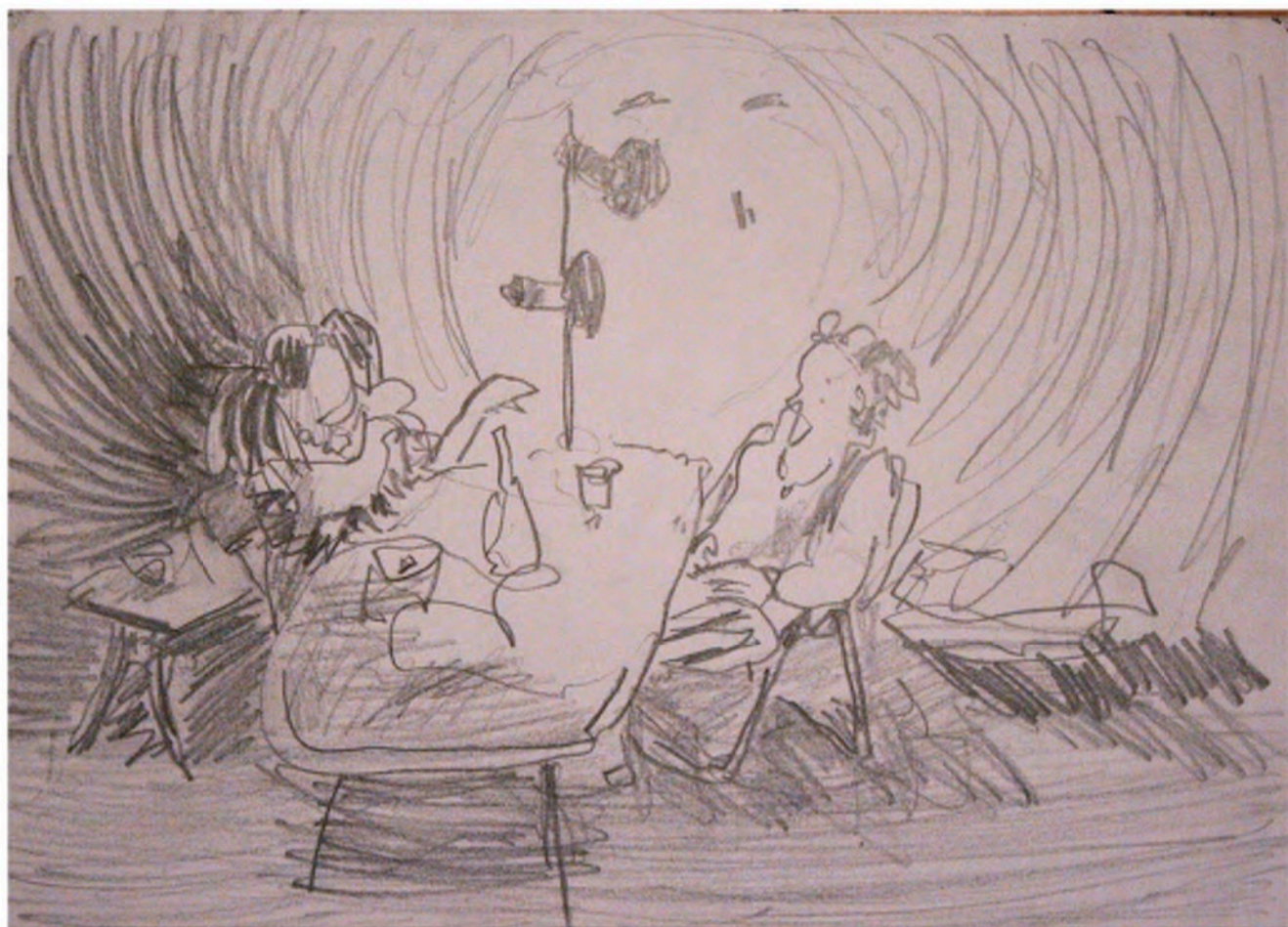
Plate 16: Andreas Huyskens.*Silently Sitting* 2007

Nightcap

We are only lightly covered with buttoned cloth; and beneath
these pavements are shells, bones and silence.

virginia woolf

Empty Chairs at Empty Tables.

What began in futility, can only end in failure. In it's impossibility, art in pursuit of silence, is an art committed to failure. Not the failure of art, an art of failure. When silence is complete absence, an impossible nothingness, undertaking its pursuit is the resignation that a journey to the destination it alludes to; nowhere, is a better activity than the option; nothingness. It is an acknowledgement of the simultaneous relevance and irrelevance of art after postmodernism, of its ability to be everything and nothing at once.

As I have discussed, the *Silent Dinner Parties* harness failure twofold. First, they cannot achieve what they purport to be, as there is always sound. Second, the lack of resolve in the communication is a kind of failure. Action is used to cancel action, through repetition without resolve.

By dooming art to failure, we guarantee its life. By making art an act in futility, that very futility becomes its perpetuating life force, proving itself only through making, doing and being, continually, futile.

And so, we clear the table for the next sitting.

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They saw us? Aiaiai I should have known.

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