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# What does silence sound like?

This text is based on conversations with sound designer Tatu Virtamo that were taped while we worked on my video piece *Room* (2008). The video work records the changes that take place in a bedroom after the occupant's death. In the beginning, the room is untouched, only the bedclothes have been removed. Then the space gradually begins to empty. All that remains is a single piece of furniture: an enormous, old-fashioned double bed. Finally the bed becomes surrounded by objects that belong to the room's new inhabitants.

The text describes the making of the video soundtrack and focuses on the question of how to render auditive the silence of an emptying room. The dialogue is divided into three parts. In the first part, I watch the raw footage of the video with Virtamo, and we state that silence does not really exist – there is always some sound. By the second part, the footage of the piece has been edited. We talk about its structure and wonder what silence sounds like. Is it sacred or mundane? In the third part, the soundtrack is already well on its way to being finished, but the sound designer is worried about its incoherence. We discuss the sounds one by one, analysing different types of silence. The last part of the dialogue also includes some thoughts that summarise the process. Finally, in the epilogue I draw these lines of thought together and describe the writing of the dialogue and my relationship to sound and artistic research.

Although the dialogue is based on authentic conversations, I have taken great liberties in editing it. This was necessary due to the vast amount of material: there were over 15 hours of taped dialogue and, unfortunately, tapes of two of the discussions had disappeared. The first and the second part of the dialogue are nevertheless quite faithful to their starting point: the discussions are abridged, but their structure has not been altered. The third part, by contrast, is compiled from four taped discussions like a jigsaw puzzle. The process of putting the puzzle together was very much like editing a video, and I was left wondering how far material can be manipulated without compromising its truth.

Towards the end of editing the text, I wrote in a grammatically more correct form, because colloquialisms undermined the credibility of the dialogue on paper. I have nevertheless sought to preserve the rhythm and sentence structures of the original spoken version. I have at times also left some professional jargon in the text. In my mind, I hear the text as if it were read aloud, a kind of radio play. I would in fact like to present the dialogue (or parts of it) in a live performance alongside the *Room* video. I have for a long time been intrigued by the idea that the analytical part of artistic research could itself be presented in the form of an artwork.



# I

## There is no such thing as silence

*The conversation takes place in my home, which also doubles as my studio. We are sitting in front of the computer, watching the footage of the video for the first time together.*

Elina: This is all the footage that I shot in that room over a period of six months in chronological order.

Tatu: You had no sound in these, right?

E: No, no sound at all. I was shooting the light, it was the morning sun.

T: I'm not sure whether it would be too conspicuous if the sounds were somehow in scale with the framing. When the camera zooms close, the sound too might have some additional details in it.

E: Yes, that's a good idea. I have never thought of sound in terms of size.

T: Yes, well, it's a rather abstract kind of size, of course, because sound is... abstract.

E: Could it be something as concrete as, for example, the sound of that spool of thread in the picture, or the alarm clock?

T: Well, of course it could, but it's easily too obvious if you have an alarm clock on the table and you can hear it ticking. It creates a kind of Hollywood association.

E: But it's not necessary to hear the ticking when the clock is in the picture. It could be someplace else.

T: Yes, or it could be there all the time, very quietly.

E: Right. The theme of time is important here – how time never stops.

T: You could of course also play with time, so that at some point you would cut off the ticking... not cut it off abruptly, but fade it out.

E: That might be one way to use it... so that the ticking could become the sound of silence, something you would only notice when it stops.

T: Yes. And of course the sound of ticking could also be manipulated, starting off with the pure, neutral sound, and then gradually passing it through a filter, so that it would change very subtly.

E: Wait! I can see more objects here that remind me of sounds: scissors, safety pins... and there's a thimble. Sorry, I interrupted you.

T: That's alright. Where is the flat, by the way?

E: It's on Kalevankatu. It's a block of flats built in the fifties.

T: I see.

E: It was a big flat; a family of five had lived in it, and in the end just the mother alone. After the mother's death, the flat was vacant for six months. The dead woman's daughter – my godmother – went there once a week to water the flowers and to have a cup of coffee, just as she was used to doing when the mother was still alive.

T: Right, we talked about it, if there should be some sound that would symbolise that routine.

E: Well – I thought there might be a text in the beginning, saying: ‘After the mother died, it took six months to sell the flat. The daughter went there once a week to have a cup of coffee.’ What do you think?

T: I’d have to think about it. The text is beautiful, but it gives the viewer a clue for how to watch the piece, and then that has to be taken into account in the audio.

E: OK. Hey, look, there’s someone in the picture! That means the flat has now been sold, and the new occupants have come to tear down the wallpaper.

T: It’s very different from the other shots. More concrete somehow.

E: Yes, although I tried to make it more abstract by shooting through the curtain.

T: The bed is still there.

E: It’s so big it didn’t fit out the door. Finally the new occupants got it into the bargain.

T: By the way, did you know them?

E: No, but they let me continue shooting while they redecorated the flat.

T: That’s great.

E: One day when I came into the room, a plastic sheet had been thrown over the bed. It was weird, because it somehow turned the bed into the deceased person.

T: Right.

E: When the redecoration was finished, I went there for one last shoot. Here is a nice shot from that day: the door swings, but there is no one in the picture.

T: That might be a place for an audio accent. But of course, it would be pointing a finger again, because it’s synced with the image.

E: Isn’t that a bit dogmatic, that the sound can never be the same as the picture?

T: I suppose it is.

E: That too becomes predictable.

T: There are a lot of unwritten rules in sound design, and that’s one of them. I mean, the idea that sound and image should both live their own separate lives. And another ‘rule’ is that if you ascribe sounds to objects – as we are doing here – you don’t want to use a realistic sound, or at least not a sound that connects directly with the object. Especially not if the image of the object is clear. The underlying question is of course, whether the image needs any additional sound.

E: Now that you said that, I realise I was a bit naive, looking for sources of sound in the images.

T: Well, it’s not necessarily a bad starting point. Realism too can be interesting. But the thing I would not do is to make some kind of a compromise. Let’s say that you have the sound of the alarm clock, and then you added some echo as if it were in some other dimension.

E: I agree, it sounds horrible. There’s no point in over-dramatising it.

T: I personally like to do abstract sounds whenever it’s possible. And as I warned you earlier, I have a rather musical approach to sound design. I like to hear something tonal in it.

E: I see.

T: By tonal, I don't mean that there would be a melody there. But if there's, say, a background hum in the soundtrack, you might be able to pick out a note in it.

E: I can imagine the sound of a spoon or scissors falling might be musical in that way, am I wrong?

T: No, you're not, and sounds can always be tuned. If you record a spoon clinking, you can alter its pitch.

E: I'm still intrigued by the idea that we might use existing things as sound sources in this work.

T: No, I wasn't proposing for the soundscape of this piece to be completely abstract. The contrast would be too great, because the footage is like that... intimate and realistic.

E: Right.

T: Another possibility is to underline the sense of realism. I once saw an installation in London where they had recorded an empty, silent space. The silence had then been amplified so that you could not ignore it. That might be an interesting starting point here, too – a soundtrack starting from silence.

E: Yes, it would.

T: Because there is no such thing as silence, there is always some sound.

E: That's true. And then there's also the possibility that the daughter is in the flat. Perhaps she's moving quietly, drinking coffee and drops a spoon on the floor. Something like that, you know?

T: Right, we could try someone walking in a room. Of course, it easily sounds a bit muddy, from a technical perspective that is.

E: I think it would be interesting.

T: Well, let's see what it feels like. I can record you in the kitchen.

E: Great!

T: It would be nice if you could get me some kind of a raw version of the image track. I could make a quick sound edit for it so that we could listen instead of just talking.

E: I'll do it for next time.

T: What about the text in the beginning, are you still...

E: Yes. I like it.



## II

### Silence: sacred or mundane?

*It has been six months since our last meeting. The image track is now finished, and I have just shown it to the sound designer at the start of the conversation.*

- E: That was it. I feel my part is now done. Or perhaps there's something in it you'd like to be changed?
- T: No. Or, I mean... it's much more dreamlike now that it has those crossfades.
- E: This is in fact the first time I have used long transitions like that. I have always avoided them somehow.
- T: Oh, I see.
- E: Yes, I've thought them a bit cheap. But now I find I'm interested in what happens when two images are superimposed.
- T: The space becomes somehow more dimensional.
- E: Exactly. Here, for example, the door fades in slowly. It's almost as if it were opening into the wall.
- T: It does become somehow... more sacred. Perhaps it's because of the slow movement.
- E: Did you think it was too slow?
- T: Not at all. How long is it?
- E: Nine minutes. The crossfades are always fourteen seconds.
- T: Nine minutes is a good length. And I do think the structure works. I'm happy to start making sounds for this.
- E: I'm glad.
- T: I can't think of any particular sound, but if you've got nothing against it, I might try something that would elevate the footage even more. I mean, something abstract rather than concrete.
- E: Well, I am giving you a free hand.

- T: Right, you had the idea of letting me to do whatever I want. But I don't think that's a very good starting point, because it would give me too much... perhaps not too much freedom, but... too many choices. Sound is such a powerful element that you could use it to turn this piece into all sorts of things. It could become something entirely different from what you had in mind.
- E: Well, the idea about giving a free hand to a collaborator came up long ago, when I was shooting the video of the room. I had no idea what to do with the footage, so I decided to call in a sound designer to help me – like inviting a guest into the room. I initially thought of asking three different people to design three alternative soundscapes for the piece. Now the number of guests has fallen to one, but there may be more in the future.
- T: That's a nice idea, but I would feel forlorn if you had no wishes at all for me. Then I would have to think all the time about what you really wanted. I do prefer working with people who have a definite idea about what they want, and then I try to realise that.
- E: That's true, one doesn't usually leave one's guests alone, but socialises with them. And politeness is not bad, either.
- T: After all, the purpose of sound design is to support the visuals although the support can be through contradiction, too. But it always starts from a common idea of what the footage is expected to tell.
- E: That's a good point, that support can also be through contradiction. You can do the opposite to what's in the image.
- T: Yes, but you must be able to justify it, too.
- E: I must say I still don't have a very clear idea about what I want this piece to be. But when I watch the footage, I have a sense that the mood in the piece should be somehow gentle. Gentle and warm. Smelling of coffee.
- T: Right.
- E: And I'm still interested in the idea that the source of sounds would be something concrete.
- T: I'm sure that's what I will do: find sounds from the real world. I don't use any synthesisers.
- E: I like that.
- T: Then the sound gets a kind of fragile, organic quality... For example, think of a smooth sonic carpet. If you use a synthesiser, it sounds synthetic. But if you make it from real sounds, it always carries a hint of imperfection.
- E: Another thing I've always been fascinated by is how space opens through sound... as in when the sound tells you what is behind your back.
- T: You remember recording those steps, what do you think about that?
- E: I'm not sure.
- T: Me neither... When I watch the images, I don't hear any steps in them.
- E: No.
- T: It would somehow be too easy. I would start from something really abstract, very broad lines in the audio.

- E: OK.
- T: You once said that you don't want any ambient music, but what would you say if we laid out an ambient carpet... Maybe that's a scary idea?
- E: It's not scary, but I've got reservations about it, mostly because it has that word, 'ambient'. I'm not quite sure what it really means, but I've got this idea in my mind that it's like...
- T: Kind of New Age type of music...
- E: Yes. And I don't think that fits here. There are no other realities in this piece. On the contrary, it is very much of this world.
- T: Well, when we talk of ambient in sound design, what it really means is any kind of background sound. It could be a real recording made in a forest, or an unnoticeable background hum.
- E: Alright, I don't object to hearing a hum in these pictures. Building noises perhaps: pipes gushing, the lift moving...
- T: You remember the thing I once played for you?
- E: Vaguely.
- T: I had stretched out my own voice until it no longer sounded like a human voice at all. It was kind of tonal... These terms can be really annoying, because they don't mean anything.
- E: I think hum is a good term.
- T: But it would be underestimating the work to say I would put some hum in it.
- E: Well, I'm not sure about that. If you were to suggest an angel choir, then I would feel you are underestimating my work.
- T: But the hums and other things, they have a very real function... If you have discrete sound events in the piece, then there must be some way of binding them together.
- E: That's a bit like the 'room tone'.
- T: Exactly. It would be a kind of 'room tone', but elevated somehow. So that it wouldn't be just a neutral background noise, but quite strong sometimes, and it could change as the images change.
- E: The terms 'room tone' and 'hum' seem much better words.
- T: Yes, definitely no synthpop.
- E: Well, I wouldn't really expect you to do that. But hey, don't think too much about what I want, feel free to experiment with things.
- T: Yes, but the things you said, they are important. I'll have to listen to the recording to remember what we talked about. But nothing too musical, rather something concrete... The audio textures of concrete things.
- E: Or materials. For example, plastic is an important material in this piece – the kind of plastic you wrap objects in and finally an entire bed.
- T: The rustle of packaging film does sound nice...



E: Right, and I also like all sorts of tinkling sounds. But sacred, the word that you used... I wouldn't go in that direction.

T: OK.

E: Not to make it too elevated.

T: Of course it's always very easy to elevate things in art. All you have to do is to add some spiritual minor chord to the footage.

E: That's right, but I think it's more interesting to take death as an ordinary and material thing. Perhaps that's why I like the text in the beginning of the piece – that the daughter visits the mother's flat to have a cup of coffee. It's grief work, of course, but it manifests in an ordinary way.

T: We thought about maybe giving some audio marker for the human presence... What do you think about that now?

E: It could still be one starting point. So that we would hear someone is there... perhaps in the other room.

T: I remember the recording we made here at your place, it sounded pretty muddy. The clanging was terribly loud, but you couldn't make out what was happening.

E: Yes, there were too many sounds on top of each other.

T: It should probably be done by recording a few clinks from close up. I can make some tests.

E: I suppose people tend to think that the best way to create a genuine impression is to do things for real. But that's not necessarily how it goes.

T: No, it isn't.

E: One more thing about the sacred... It may be that my works tend to have a somewhat sacred mood, because my subject is light. And light is simply an element which elevates things. That nail wouldn't look interesting at all, if the light didn't strike it from a very specific angle.

T: That's true, I'm sure. It's a bit like echo in a sound effect... It makes the sound a lot bigger.

E: Someone might use the word 'poetic' or something.

T: Poetic is actually a good word. I'll have to start using poetic instead of sacred.

E: But even if you replace sacred with poetic, the problem remains. If the thing you do is exclusively poetic, the result is banal. You have to break the poetic quality in some way.

T: Right. I think that green plastic carrier bag is pretty good.

E: It's fabulous, the Prisma [bag]. Because it's not elevated in any way.

T: Would you like to have something similar in the soundtrack?

E: Yes, that would be nice.

T: It's a good idea. I can't think of something right now, how to do it, but perhaps with those concrete sounds. The sound of a car horn or something... Just a thought.

E: The bag is a great metaphor. There should always appear a Prisma plastic bag in both image and sound.





### III Types of silence

*The discussion still takes place in my studio, but this time we are sitting in front of the sound designer's laptop. We have met quite frequently in the past few weeks, and the soundtrack is well on its way.*

E: So you are worried that the soundtrack lacks coherence?

T: Yes, that's what I thought last night when I was editing this. I felt it was simply disjointed stuff scattered here and there.

E: I see.

T: The last time we turned down the background hum quite a lot. It's now so weak that it no longer works as a cohesive element.

E: But there are the images. They tie the sounds together.

T: Yes, well, I wasn't really watching them yesterday. The video was just playing in the corner.

E: No one will listen to the soundtrack alone.

T: No, of course not. But somehow one thinks about sound as a kind of independent element that should work even without the visuals.

E: Do you think the background noise should be increased, then?

T: I don't know, that didn't seem a good idea, either.

E: No it didn't, it sounded just like an airplane.

T: Although it was just pure silence.

E: Well, let's listen to this and see what it feels like. We can stop once in a while.

T: OK. Just let me tell you a couple of things first. First of all, this begins with a door opening and then closing again. I synced it with the opening title. I can't remember if we talked about it last time.

E: Yes, we did.

T: It's not too bad. Secondly, I added a tonal sound to where the space gets bigger. It's the sound of a piano, stretched out.

E: I see.

T: And then I have a few suggestions for the shot of the spool of thread. But let's get back to those once we've gone through the whole thing. Here we go...

E: The door was good. Real good.

T: It's a very light door, an interior door.

E: And here's the daughter.

T: Do you think the sound of the steps should be moved a little?

E: I don't know. On the other hand, it's nice that they begin before the image.

T: That puts them in our perspective, as it were. I mean the viewer's.

E: Yes, right. It's the viewer entering the flat.

T: But I would leave a little space after the door closes. If the sounds are too close, they create a sense of hurry.

E: Alright.

T: And the creaking sound, that could be turned down a little. That particular creak is very sharp in any case. Does it sound like the floorboards creaking? I've got a couple of other versions in this laptop.

E: Yes, it does. It sounds like a person standing in one place and shifting her weight from one foot to another, while staring at the nail in the wall.

T: And the stare lasts for almost half a minute. And then comes the cup solo. A few isolated clinks.

E: I like that the sounds are unusually sharp. It makes them mental somehow, inside the mind. Perhaps they are memories of sounds.

T: Yes.

E: And they linger. But I don't think you've added any echo to them.

T: No, I haven't, the echo comes from the fact that the cup is very thin china. It resonates.

E: I see.

T: I tried out a few cups, and this sounded brightest. I also tried a couple of different spoons, I tried to find the most fragile tools.

E: I also like this part where you lift up the cup. And put it down.

T: I could play you the 'slurp' that was cut out if you like.

E: No, don't. By the way, isn't that abstracting, too?

T: The slurp?

E: Yes, or the fact that you left it out.

T: Well, it could be something as simple as that.

E: What about the alarm clock, do you still think it would be best without any sound?

T: I think it's such an interesting image it doesn't need any sound. If you added some ticking, it would only ruin it.

E: By the way, that's an electric clock. It doesn't tick.

T: True, it kind of buzzes. A mechanical buzz.

E: Maybe that could act as the cohesive element?

T: It should be quite loud to be of any use.

E: Besides, it's fun when you see the moving hand, but can't hear anything.

T: I think it would be best to leave the clock alone.

E: That leaves a long silence here.

T: How about adding a creak where you see the shadow of the vacuum cleaner?

E: Good idea.

T: In fact, the silences between isolated sounds make this quite dramatic. You keep waiting, what's going to come next, or was that it.

E: And then all you can hear is the floor creaking.

T: Or steps. But there aren't too many of those, either, the person just walks past.

E: What's that *shhhhh* sound, kind of a whoosh?

T: That's just when the foot rises up from the floor.

E: It sounds like something being dragged.

T: That's true, when you record very quiet things like this, you notice there are many more events in them than you might imagine.

E: Do you think we might try the same kind of aesthetic with the steps as we had in the spoons and cups? Like recording them very, very close, and only a few steps at a time?

T: If you record the steps any closer, that will probably make the dragging sound only worse.

E: Oh, I see.

T: Yes. Microphones start to amplify lower frequencies if you put them very near the sound source. Then, when you move further away, the sound – the audio image picked up by the mikes – is kind of neutralised.

E: I see.

T: In other words, I think the steps should actually be recorded even further away. And I do think it's a good idea to try to make them define the space.

E: You're right.

T: I'll do some more testing for next time. But let's move on now.

E: Here the space opens up.

T: And here you also hear the tonal sound I was talking about. It's just an even hum that stays on the same note.

E: It's a little threatening.

T: Maybe, if you add anything that's even ever so slightly musical, it immediately creates an unreal impression. Or the kind of... sense of emptiness.

E: There's a window in these pictures. What about if we began hearing something from there?

T: Right, the light coming from the window is so strong that it almost demands a counterpart on the soundtrack.

E: All you can see from the window is the wall of the opposite house. But it's clearly in a city – there are no trees, no nature.

T: Cars might do.

E: Or children playing in the yard. That would be a possibility, although it's a bit clichéd.

T: I think the sound of children might be nice here. As a contrast to what's happened.

E: And they could be interpreted in many ways. Perhaps the sounds would not be coming from outside, but from the past.

T: I've got a recording on my laptop that we could try. It's children playing. Unfortunately it's in Swedish, because I made it in Stockholm... So, if we want something like it, we'll have to make a new recording.

E: I can't hear any Swedish in that.

T: I can't tell if there are any words in it, it's more like yelling.

E: I think this might be it, don't you?

T: I think it might... The good thing about it is that it's made in a yard outside a block of flats.

E: I also like the fact that you can't make out what they're saying. That's abstraction, too.

T: Well, let's use it then. I can make it a bit darker, so that it sounds coming from behind glass.

E: What's next?

T: A slurp of caffeine. And then the cleaning starts.

E: The funny thing about this is that the coffee cup seems to be right next to you, but the vacuuming starts in another room, yet there are no steps in between.

T: But there's such a long silence between them that they are not perceived as a single sound event. I certainly wouldn't add any steps here.

E: Neither would I. It would be a bit dull.

T: So it would. Instead, we might consider the place where the vacuum cleaner comes in. It would be better if the sound began in a wider shot.

E: I don't think there is one.

T: The second best option might be for the vacuuming to begin with the cut.

E: That's true. The space seems bigger when you have two pictures superimposed over one another.

T: Now that I listen to this, it seems the vacuuming could be even softer.

E: Yes, it does sound a bit aggressive.

T: I was trying to record it so that there would be as few clanks as possible.

E: But otherwise I think it's a good sound.

T: Yes, it was lucky that my Grandfather had a Nilfisk [vacuum cleaner] that was still working.

E: The wheels made a nice squeaky sound there. And you could also hear grains of sand going up into the hose.

T: I should have thrown some sand on the floor, of course, but there was some there just by chance.

E: Now you lift the machine over the threshold.

T: It's coming closer all the time.

E: Yes, it comes real close. And at the same time, the picture becomes a close-up.

T: I'm not sure, maybe this close view stays on a bit too long. The noise is so loud here.

E: On the other hand, it's quite dramatic just before it is cut off.

T: Does it cut off in the right place now?

E: Yes, where the bed is covered under the plastic.

T: This is really a great sound. It takes many seconds for the motor to quiet down.

E: Yes, it's terribly moving. The last breath.

T: It has a really strong bass line. I'll have to turn it into a tune someday.

E: Then comes the epilogue: pictures where the mother's bed is surrounded by the things of the new occupants.

T: Chairs appear in the door opening, and a computer is on the table.

E: There's an inconspicuous 'room tone' here, isn't there?

T: No, there's nothing.

E: Nothing?

T: There's just silence. I mean... there are no sounds.

E: An empty track...

T: Of course we can try something for it.

E: It's quite a powerful effect, if there's nothing... at least in the movie theatre.

T: Right.

E: It's kind of a... dead sound.

T: Yes.

E: It might fit the theme here. In fact it would be a perfect match.

T: Hm.

E: That's it. It's an awfully fine way of finishing the piece: the vacuum cleaner going out, and all the other sounds at the same time.

T: Right. I wouldn't add anything there.

E: Just emptiness. A dead sound.

T: Yes.

E: It's quite a lot, really, that the work has a good ending. And I don't think this is scattered at all.

T: Well, if you really concentrate on listening, it does have a fairly clear structure.

E: It does. By the way, I just realised that there are two time levels in the piece. The time in the image is six months, but the sound is in real time.

T: That's true. In that sense, the image and the sound are in a contrasting relationship.

E: And although the sounds are concrete, they are not used in a very realistic way.

T: No, they aren't.

E: In fact, the soundscape is quite close to what I was thinking about when we started. Perhaps it's not quite the way you thought it would be, but there are elements of it anyway. A certain abstraction.

T: Well, it's certainly evolved quite a bit. We began by recording steps and cups here at your place, and then we did the same thing in a much more complex way.

E: Or more sophisticated.

T: Or cinematically, in the sense that we haven't just recorded someone doing things, we've tried to record all elements separately, and to put them all together to try to make a good piece that would nevertheless – ironically enough – sound as realistic as possible. Or organic, although there's nothing organic in the way we made it, it's a jigsaw puzzle.

E: Right.

T: It would've been nice to write a tune for the piece. But I think all those clicks and buzzes tell the same thing with somewhat different sounds.

E: That's a good way to put it: tell the same thing with different sounds.

T: Let's listen to the spools of thread now. Here's one spool that starts rolling and falls on the floor.

E: Real nice sound.

T: Yes, it is.

E: Why don't you try it over the shot of the sewing accessories.

T: Perhaps it would be better over that one, where the picture starts to fade out, so that the sound happens only when the picture is already fading.

E: That's a good idea. It'll create a sense of movement.

T: Then I have these other drop noises. This one's a needle.

E: Lovely sound. Fabulous.

T: Hm.

E: I absolutely want this one too. Where can we use it?

T: It might fit in somewhere after the children's sounds. Where the longest silence is.

E: Let's try that. It could be a transition sound that returns us back to everyday reality.

T: Would you like it to come when the sounds of the children are still audible?

E: They might be there, just a little. What do you think?

T: It's not a bad idea. But I think I would insert it a little later, so that there's already some silence first.

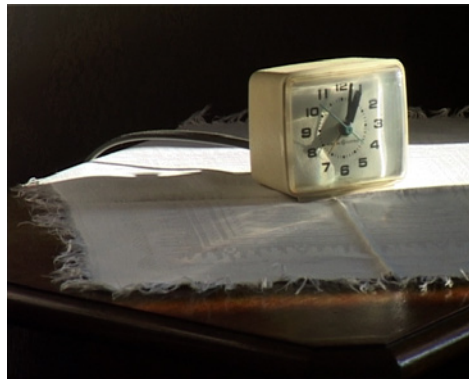
E: OK.

T: Somehow it would be nice if it were distinct from everything else, so that just a single needle would drop in the midst of silence. Isn't there a saying, that you 'can hear a needle drop'? That's when it's really quiet.

E: Yes. It's interesting to see how in this piece we are actually all the time using sounds to build silence. And in the end, there's a total, dead silence. The different types of silences are all in use.

T: True, this is mostly silence. Usually there are sounds practically all the time, with silent moments in between. But here it's the other way round.

E: If you think about this process as research, it could be put in one question: 'How to give silence a sonic form?' Or in more ordinary parlance, what does silence sound like? Don't you think?





## In conclusion

My idea of artistic research is basically quite simple, because I feel that every work is a kind of study in itself. The challenge is to render that research visible and taping the actual process of making a piece was one attempt to do that. There were at least two reasons for focusing on sound design. First, it was easy, because sound design is collaboration which requires that its participants voice their thoughts. Second, sound remains for me a fascinating, strange element that I first encountered when I began working with the moving image in the early 2000s. Through this work, I wanted to learn more about sound.

In my first video pieces (*Pure*, 2002, *The Lovers' Bed*, 2004, and *Words Left Behind*, 2005) sound had been present as a text that was read aloud. I mostly used my own voice, and I also edited the soundtracks myself. I next tried collaborating with actors (*Do Not Disturb* and *Kitchen Conversations*, 2006). In these works, sound design was done by professional film sound designers who contributed not only their expertise but also the idiom of cinematic drama. Virtamo and I met when I was searching a sound designer for the piece *Tango Lesson* (2007). He was not a film professional, but a student of theatre sound design at the Theatre Academy Helsinki. In retrospect, it was a good starting point for our dialogue because we were both a bit on unfamiliar ground.

The making of *Room* differed slightly from my earlier works in that when I shot it, I had no idea what I would do with the footage. This also underlined the role of sound in the work. Because I did not know what to do, I decided to invite the sound designer as a 'guest' to the work and give him a free hand. I at once had the idea of inviting more guests, asking each one to design a different soundscape for the room. This introduced an aspect of research into the work from the beginning, although the form of research was altered when my first guest did not want to be 'free' and we began making the soundtrack together. Instead of comparing finished soundscapes, I now focused on one soundtrack and its almost imperceptible details.

Already prior to this work, I had been interested in dialogue as a genre in writing, and I initially planned to edit the discussions between Virtamo and myself into a text. I had also used dialogue in a few artworks, although I had not tried recording as a medium. For *The Lovers' Bed* and *Words Left Behind*, I gathered lines from telephone conversations and from Marguerite Duras' novel *The North China Lover* (Editions Gallimard, 1991). In *Helene* (2003), artist Hannele Rantala and I wrote down discussions we had had when looking at paintings by Helene Schjerfbeck (1862–1946), and in *Kitchen Conversations* I recollected things said around the kitchen table in my home. On the basis of these experiences, I was intrigued in particular by the sense of lightness arising from the rhythm and structure of speech. I hoped that dialogue would give me an opportunity also in research to write without using weighty propositions, in a more allusive way.

When the video had been finished I transcribed the discussions word by word, and began editing them into a more readable form. Silence became a central theme of the text from the outset, because it was the thing the conversations kept returning to again and again. At the end of the text I suggest that silence might also be the 'research question'. The suggestion remains without a response because it is directed for the reader, nor did Virtamo seize the idea in real life. Artistic research was not his passion, at least not when *Room* was made, but rather my 'thing'. I am certain it made the division of labour clearer between us. In any case, our roles were rather conventional: I had commissioned the work, and the sound designer sought to realise my wishes. The exceptional thing about the project was how much time it took – we spent nine months perfecting a nine-minute soundtrack. We did not work actively on it all that time, of course, but we did have time to experiment and to consider different options at length. Another charming aspect of our cooperation was that the work was truly 'homemade', with no great financial or

technical resources. The recordings that called for absolute silence were made by Virtamo at night time upstairs in his grandfather's house in a space that was like a sound-insulated studio.

Although silence became the foremost theme in the writing process, there are other recurring motifs in the dialogue. One of them is the 'contest' between Virtamo and myself over the issue of abstract and concrete (or realistic) sound. It may derive from the different basic character of sound and image, because, as Virtamo points out, sound is intrinsically immaterial. Personal preferences were also involved: Virtamo said he liked to create abstract sounds in which you can discern a tone, whereas I was fascinated by ordinary rustlings and clinkings. The slow movement of the crossfades introduces another concept – the sacred – which is subsequently replaced by the word 'poetic'. In a similar fashion, the green plastic carrier bag in one shot becomes a symbol for the everyday or mundane. It is interesting to note how much of the conversation consists of the effort to define concepts, and how hard the speakers have to work to ensure that words mean the same thing for them. By the same token, I have not considered it necessary to define concepts again in, say, footnotes. Using the word 'slurp' to illustrate abstraction is in any case much better than any dictionary definition.

The result of the negotiation between the abstract and the realistic is ultimately a kind of synthesis – the abstraction of realism. Although the sounds in the work are recognisable sounds issuing from everyday objects, they are not used in a realistic way. It is at times unclear whether a sound issues from external or internal reality, and if the source of the sound is in the picture – such as the spool of thread – the sound is not heard in sync, but first when the image is already fading. There is also another theme in the text that involves abstraction: the need to maintain separation between sound and image. This was something Virtamo wanted to change subsequently. In particular the line where he speaks about the unwritten rules of sound design, caught his attention. 'It sounds as if I were saying that sound and image should always be separate,' he said, 'although good sound design consists of making sounds that fit the work in question.' I myself was not bothered by the phrase about unwritten rules, because I recognised the ideal immediately from the world of experimental cinema. Who would merely want to 'illustrate' pictures with sound? But it is true that sometimes the need to avoid such illustrative use of sound can acquire almost comical aspects. This happens in our dialogue when we consider how or whether to include a sound for the clock in the video. 'It creates a kind of Hollywood association,' says Virtamo, 'if you have an alarm clock on the table and you can hear it ticking.' In reality, however, the clock in the shot does not tick because it is an electric clock. But the grip of Hollywood is so strong it takes a long time before we grasp the fact, although the power cable behind the clock is clearly visible in the picture.

In the introduction I remark that the first and the second part of the dialogue are more or less faithful to the original, whereas the third part is edited like a jigsaw puzzle from four different conversations. The third part can also be regarded as a kind of reconstruction of conversations with Virtamo, because some of the recordings had disappeared. I began the reconstruction by assembling from the remaining recordings all the lines that involved some particular topic. Folders appeared on my computer with names like 'Steps', 'Cups', 'Vacuum cleaners', and so on. I then tried to write the lines into an authentically sounding dialogue. There was a lot of material, however, and I had difficulty trying to decide in what order to present the themes. Finally I checked the order in which the sounds appear in the finished work, and used the same structure for the dialogue. The jigsaw puzzle in the third part of the dialogue is thus a detailed image of the final piece, although in the dialogue the work is still unfinished.

In the introduction I also point out that the process of assembling the third part was not unlike the process of editing video that left me with the question of how much research data can

be manipulated. As a matter of fact, this applies to the entire dialogue, because the situation with the third part made me take ever greater liberties also in the first two parts of the text. For example, I began abridging the lines heavily, or dividing them into several lines, because this enhanced the impression of lightness. From a research perspective, the aim of achieving lightness may of course seem contradictory. Can lightness be analytical? Or does research need those 'heavy propositions' I was hoping to be rid of by using dialogue? Regarding whether editing is allowed or not, I think it is essential to distinguish between research data and result. In this work, the recordings represented the data, which I transliterated verbatim and entered into my archive. The finished, edited dialogue is not data, but a result. It is a consciously constructed entity the purpose of which is to articulate *Room* and the process of its making through the use of colloquial dialogue.

What, finally, is my 'research question'? My view of the research question is just as practical as my view of artistic research: I feel that every work presents its own question to me. For the most part, the question does not exist in prior to the work, but develops in the course of its making. The research question can also change, or there can be many such questions. When I was making *Room*, the primary question that emerged from the project was how to express with sound the silence following the mother's death. I was also fascinated by dialogue as a writing genre – could it be used for the purposes of analysis? On the whole, I am interested in the process of creating a work of art: how artistic decisions are made, how sound affects the image in particular cases, how the sound of a vacuum cleaner winding down becomes a dying breath. That process is also the thing I as an artist am most familiar with, and which I can therefore describe to others examining the work from other perspectives.

My artistic processes seem to lead me into a dialogue with a field of art or life I am not familiar with. In my previous work (*Tango Lesson*) that unfamiliar element was empirical science, and the dialogue took place through research literature. By contrast, the dialogue in *Room* consists of real discussions with a sound designer I had invited as a 'guest' to the work. Because of the format I chose, the text contains no direct references to other artists or writers. The original, unedited discussions did include mentions of some artworks, but as I was editing the text, I felt the remarks remained disconnected. Writing the afterword, I felt that a review of artworks addressing silence would be an entirely different topic, one whose place is not in this essay in which my research interest focuses on the process of the making of the work, not its contextualisation.

In my view, the 'findings' of research can be concepts, revisions or metaphors. One such finding in the discussions between Virtamo and myself is the green plastic bag, which helps us understand the difference between the sacred and the mundane. Another fascinating moment is when echo and light come together in the second part of the dialogue. Sunlight hitting a nail on the wall – or rather the shadow cast by the nail – suddenly appears to me like a visual echo, which 'makes [the object] a lot bigger'. I would hardly have had this association without the dialogue with the sound designer.

After Virtamo, the work had another guest from the Theatre Academy Helsinki when Pauli Riikonen, who studied at the Department of Lighting and Sound Design, made a second soundtrack for the piece as an exercise. This time I did not participate in the sound design at all, nor did Riikonen hear Virtamo's version before making his own. Yet there was much that was the same in the two versions. For instance, Riikonen had left in a long silent sequence around the middle of the piece – what I call 'dead sound' in the dialogue. To balance the silence, he used an intense, undulating sound which I initially interpreted as an electric drill, but which turned out to be entirely artificial noise. In the midst of the noise, you could hear familiar details such as a door banging or steps.

The most interesting thing about the experiment has been to observe my own reaction to one particular element in Riikonen's soundtrack. The sound was very quiet, hardly perceptible piano playing, and to my astonishment I was deeply moved by it. My reaction was all the more surprising because I had always said that I do not want any emotionally appealing music in my works. Riikonen's piano was not sentimental, however, it simply sounded like someone practising a piano lesson next door. Giving a free hand to the sound designer made me experience something that would not have been possible had he asked me for my opinion. Based on this experience, I am willing to return to my original idea of alternative soundtracks, and invite new visitors to *Room*. The mother's former bedroom has become a guest room.

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*Translation: Tomi Snellman*

