

The Renaissance Society

at The University of Chicago
5811 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, IL 60637

Museum Hours

Tuesday - Friday: 10 am - 5 pm
Saturday, Sunday: 12 - 5 pm
Closed Mondays
www.renaissancesociety.org

Lewis Baltz
Manon de Boer
Troy Brauntuch
Paul Dickinson
Ryan Gander
Geissler and Sann
Gran Fury
C.M. von Hausswolff
Harold Mendez
Jonty Semper
Harry Shearer

Several Silences

April 26 – June 7, 2009

Opening Reception: April 26, 4:00–7:00 pm

Featuring a talk between curator Hamza Walker and Thomas Trummer
curator and Project Manager of the Siemens Arts Program from 5:00–6:00 pm

Silence=Rose

<p>There is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes sound.</p> <p>John Cage</p>
<p>The art of our time is noisy with silence.</p> <p>Susan Sontag</p>
<p>Now the sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence. And although admittedly such a thing has never happened, still it is conceivable that someone might possibly have escaped their singing; but from their silence certainly never.</p> <p>Franz Kafka</p>

Premiered in 1952, *4'33"* is one of the Twentieth Century's most notorious art works in any medium. John Cage considered it his most important work. A musical composition in three movements, it features a pianist who, without ever touching the keys, sits in silence, reading a blank score for a duration that is the work's namesake. In the absence of music, listening becomes an acutely active experience as ambient sounds emerge from and recede back into a spatially and temporally defined silence.

"There is no such thing as silence." Coming from the composer of *4'33"*, this assertion is no small claim. Since external stimulus and its corresponding cognitive response constitute what it means to be, their complete absence is unimaginable. Silence can be signified but never made manifest since it is impossible to give form to what does not exist. No matter how literal, signification of silence remains strictly symbolic; the paradox being something has to be used to represent nothing, whether it's an empty gallery, a blank page, or music scored for no sound. In this regard, silence has an aesthetic that over the course of the previous century evolved into a discourse.

Titled after an essay by the late philosopher and literary theoretician Jean-François Lyotard, *Several Silences* is a group exhibition exploring various kinds of silence. As a discourse, the aesthetic of silence has been thoroughly domesticated within the visual arts. Although silence arose out of conditions calling for the negation of art, it has subsequently become a familiar subject—no longer the avant-garde ideal it once was. This is not to say silence has lost significance. If anything, it has become a more potent antidote to a culture of distraction. Silence, however, is not the absence of communication; rather it is dialectically in opposition to communication so that one sustains and supports the other. Inextricably bound to communication, which it tacitly evokes, silence itself is a form of communication with many meanings. There are voluntary and involuntary silences—some comfortable, others not. There is Cage's silence, which calls for the distinction between clinical and ambient silences. There is silence as conscious omission or redaction. And then there is memorial silence.

Several Silences features two works taking *4'33"* as their subject. A paradigmatic work, *4'33"* has been the subject of critical analysis, tribute, and parodies both scornful and loving. The last of these aptly describes

Carl Michael von Hausswolff's *4'33"* (81')—a misinterpretation of *4'33"* as a unit of length rather than time. Produced as a seven-inch vinyl pressing of an eighty-one inch spiral, the gesture transcends the status of joke through the redoubling of its irony. By rendering *4'33"* an unplayable record, Cage's composition achieves absolute silence through the muteness of the object.

Well known for her strikingly personal film and video portraits, **Manon de Boer** has recently turned her attention to music. In the case of *Two Times 4'33"*, pianist Jean-Luc Fafchamps performs the composition twice. The first time, the camera focuses solely on the pianist. The second time, it pans over the audience, capturing ambient sounds. On its surface, *Two Times* is a literal illustration of *4'33"*. Making it visual and having it performed twice, however, raises *4'33"* to a level of hyper-reflexivity. The contemplative consumption of silence by a young, well-heeled audience suggests avant-garde strategies have become ritual. With *4'33"* achieving canonical stature, alternatives to a traditional relationship between art and audience (a key goal of the avant-garde) have been effectively neutralized.

Cage's quote implies that only in death is there absolute silence. A theme recurring throughout the exhibition, death figures in varying degrees of directness with the most explicit being the neon sign reading Silence=Death. A graphic slogan designed by the AIDS activist collective **Gran Fury**, *Silence=Death* circulated as posters and stickers throughout the country. The neon sign version was commissioned by the New Museum in New York and displayed in their storefront window. Capped by a pink triangle referring to gay concentration camp prisoners, *Silence=Death* was the most prominent AIDS campaign of the 1980s. At face value, the statement *Silence=Death* recapitulates Cage's assertion regarding absolute silence. But Cage's silence is for Gran Fury one of oppression. A work of classical music for piano, *4'33"*, despite its radical nature, belongs to a humanist tradition. Gran Fury questions that very sense of humanity, which, in light of public apathy towards the AIDS pandemic, warrants the transvaluation of moral progress that occurs whenever and wherever genocide takes place.

Troy Brauntuch's photo-based conté crayon drawings on stretched-cotton continue his investigation into illusionistic images severed from their context—an investigation he has maintained since gaining international recognition as one of the artists in Douglas Crimp's seminal 1977 exhibition *Pictures*. Since then, the work has become increasingly personal. The hushed chiaroscuro slows viewing down to a self-reflexive gaze. *Untitled (Shirts numbers 1, 2 and 3)*—one of which is depicted on the other side of this poster—feature folded men's dress shirts haphazardly stacked in retail shelving units. These catacomb-like images qualify as silent insofar as they do not disclose a reference beyond what is depicted—this to

the extent of harboring a secret. As it turns out, the image's source is a photograph of the interior of a Wall Street clothier taken by the artist in the days immediately after September 11, 2001. The only liberty Brauntuch has taken is to eliminate mounds of ash in the source. As still lives, these works belong to the subgenre of the vanitas, paintings whose allegorical objects refer to the transience of life and the impending nature of death.

The photograph by the German collaborative **Geissler and Sann** is likewise mute as to the place it depicts. It features a lone chair at the end of a rough-hewn cinderblock corridor with a muddy dirt floor. The boot prints are the only sign of activity in an austere interior lacking finish and detail. Both the chair and boot prints speak of an absence the work's title, *personal kill #13*, brings into chilling focus. The work belongs to a series documenting U.S. Army Garrison Grafenwöhr, which is a MOUT-site (military operations on urban terrain). These camps are used to train soldiers in close combat situations where they will have to overcome the natural reflex of being unable to kill at close range. The series is titled after *On Killing*, a book by Lt. Col. Dave Grossman.

In Vietnam, the term "personal kill" was used to distinguish the act of killing a specific individual with a direct-fire weapon and being absolutely sure of having done it oneself. The vast majority of personal kills and the resultant trauma occur at this range.

Although out of sight, training soldiers to kill is hardly out of mind. Despite our awareness, it remains a subject over whose ethical dimension we fall silent as if to acknowledge Jimmy Carter's words, "War is evil, but a necessary evil."

Part of the New Topographies movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, **Lewis Baltz** is a key photographer of his generation best known for his stark documentation of Southern California's tract housing and corporate industrial parks. *Anechoic Chamber*, *French Telecom* belongs to a later series entitled *Sites of Technology*, 1989-1991. An anechoic chamber is designed to produce a clinical silence that in this case is for testing sound-sensitive electronic devices. In the anechoic chamber, Baltz has found a crystalline subject in which to mirror the steady march of late capitalism. Eerily lit from below, the interior is lined with acoustic tiles stifling in the degree they are all encompassing. This coffin-like setting seems capable of absorbing any screams of protest; a silencing that is in effect the byproduct of a rigorously imposed silence.

In addition to being portraits, Andy Warhol's screen tests are exercises in silence. Although comedian and video artist **Harry Shearer** did not set out to recast Warhol's screen tests, that was *The Silent Echo Chamber's* unintentional result. An entertainment industry insider, Shearer acquired video footage of well known media pundits as they face the camera in the minutes

before going on air. Featuring the likes of Henry Kissinger, Karl Rove, Michael Moore, John McCain, Chris Matthews, Hillary Clinton, and Larry King, and installed in a bank of video screens, *The Silent Echo Chamber* is a rogues portrait gallery of "talking heads." Known for constantly expressing their views, the pundits' silences often come across as uncanny. In the moments before they assume the guise of their public selves, they seem nude without their speech.

One could look solely to recordings of silence to get a sense of the topic's variety. *Several Silences* features two recordings that although conducted under very different auspices function as honor memorials. London-based artist **Jonty Semper's** interest in memorial silences began with an archival project, *Kenotaphion*, in which he compiled and issued on CD the two-minute Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday silences held in memory of those who died in both World Wars. As an extension of that project, Semper recorded the minute of silence held in honor of the late Princess Diana of Wales who died in 1997. Recorded in Hyde Park, London, and issued as a seven-inch vinyl pressing, it captures the ambient sound of birds chirping and a baby crying in the distance. Immediately following is another minute of clinical, studio silence. In comparison to the studio silence, the honor memorial recording teems with life.

Having done sound work on low budget feature films, Chicago-based artist **Paul Dickinson** made "room tone" the subject of *Tableau Vivant*, a vinyl L.P. of ambient silence he recorded at the now defunct Terra Museum of American Art. Room tone is the ambient silence specific to a given room recorded for the purpose of being inserted into film scenes requiring the signature silence of their location. In the case of *Tableau Vivant*, Dickinson gathered the staff into one of the museum's galleries where he then made a recording as they stood in silence. In addition to ambient noises, are faint rustlings indicating the presence of a group collectively constructing silence. Unbeknownst to anyone, let alone the artist, *Tableau Vivant* would eventually become a memorial silence given the Terra Museum's fate.

Silence is an auditory phenomenon. Through its association with speech, however, it extends to visual communication. Tellingly, Cage cites Robert Rauschenberg's *White Painting* (1951) as influential to *4'33"*. With this as a prime example, silence's visual corollary in painting is often the black or white monochrome, or in the case of sculpture, the empty gallery. The idea of nothing, however, is also the province of conceptual art as its goal was the dematerialization of the art object. In that regard, silence, to use Susan Sontag's words, was "a means of purging art" of its materiality to the point where it effervesced into the realm of ideas.

Ryan Gander belongs to a post-post-conceptual generation arguably under the spell of Michael Asher and Bas Jan Ader in equal proportion. The whimsically long-winded title,

A sheet of paper on which I was about to draw, as it slipped from my table and fell to the floor clearly betrays a debt to the latter. Scattered throughout the gallery, *A sheet of paper* is comprised of 100 glass spheres containing a laser-etched image of a blank sheet of paper. The spheres are bubbles of frozen time, capturing the arcing of blank thought in a silent downward drift. As glass globes, they are anything but the dematerialized art object. Despite being impenetrably solid, however, they represent Platonic forms whose ideal resides exclusively in the mind. Moreover, their transparency, in de-emphasizing their visibility, reinforces their being a mental construct. But more important, their transparency allows the thought of nothing—represented by the blank page—to escape in a distortion of vision not unlike the experiences of Alice, the protagonist of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*.

If nothing has a bard, beyond doubt it is Samuel Beckett. With titles taken from Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*, **Harold Mendez's** *Nothing Prevents Anything*, and *Better Off Than Than When Life Was Babbble* are Duchampian readymades consisting of two discarded, white signage boards found on a university campus. Both were completely stripped of announcements, leaving them scattershot with staples and pinholes. In having nothing to say, the boards spoke volumes for Mendez who made no artistic gesture on their behalf since, in object form, silence is as silence is. Of greater importance, signage boards cannot help but refer to mass media, which the likes of Stéphane Mallarmé, and later Marcel Broodthaers, blamed for the devaluation of words and images. More fundamentally, Mendez's empty signage boards are an impoverished language's scarred and worn support that represents the further exhaustion of cultural resources.

Silence is rife with religious connotations. Benedictine monks believe we must exercise silence in order to hear God speak. But if modern art is a secular model of spiritual transcendence, silence is not a precondition for divine presence. Instead, it is God's profound absence. This would precipitate a crisis of representation as art could not transcend its materiality so as to give this idea form. This crisis was not only reserved for theological matters but epic historical events such as the unspeakable atrocities of World War II. After the Holocaust, whatever might be left to say was secondary to finding the means to say it. Art would willfully embrace its failure on all counts only to indulge self-negation, unintelligibility and the willful destruction and/or deconstruction of art. Silence has since shed its association with an avant-garde responsible for leading this charge. No longer the sign of an existential dilemma, it has since become a prized commodity. If that is indeed the case, perhaps the Rose Art Museum will find itself the unwitting beneficiary of the most valuable collection of all.

Related Events

OPENING RECEPTION
Sunday, April 26, 4:00–7:00 pm
Talk between Hamza Walker, curator of the exhibition, and Thomas Trummer, curator and Project Manager for the Siemens Arts Program, Munich, Germany, from 5:00 to 6:00 pm. This event will take place in Cobb Hall room 307 (directly below the gallery). FREE

GALLERY TOUR
Sunday, May 2, 12:00 pm
Hamza Walker, curator of *Several Silences*

LECTURE
Sunday, May 31, 2:00 pm
Kyle Gann, music historian, critic and composer
John Cage's 4'33"

In addition to being a renowned composer, Gann was the new-music critic for the *Village Voice* from 1986 to 2005. Since 1997 he has taught music theory, history, and composition at Bard College. He is the author of *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow; American Music in the 20th Century; Music Downtown: Writings John Cage's 4'33"* (Yale University Press). This event will take place in Cobb Hall room 403 (down the hall from the gallery). FREE

CONCERT
Monday, June 1, 8:00 pm
Jack Wright solo saxophone

Since the 1970s, Wright has exclusively played improvised music. An original and virtuoso saxophonist, his playing is deeply lyrical, with humor never far away. This event will take place in the gallery. FREE

CONCERT
Tuesday, June 2, 8:00 pm
Charlotte Hug (viola)
Lou Mallozzi (turntables, spoken word and assorted devices)
Fred Lonberg-Holm (cello)


This trio could be named after the '70s action film classic *Three the Hard Way*. Any one of them could hold down the fort solo. Together they constitute a triple threat. All have worked extensively as composer-performers in solo and ensemble settings. This to say, these are not timid souls. As an evening of improvised music, there will be sparks, and there will be combustion. This event will take place in the gallery. FREE

Several Silences and the related publication are based on a cooperation between The Renaissance Society and Siemens Arts Program.

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C.M. Von Hausswolff, *4'33"* (81'), 1992
seven-inch vinyl pressing

[that side]
Troy Brauntuch, *Untitled (Shirts 3)*, 2005,
conté crayon on stretched cotton, 63" x 51"
collection of Dirk Skreber



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