

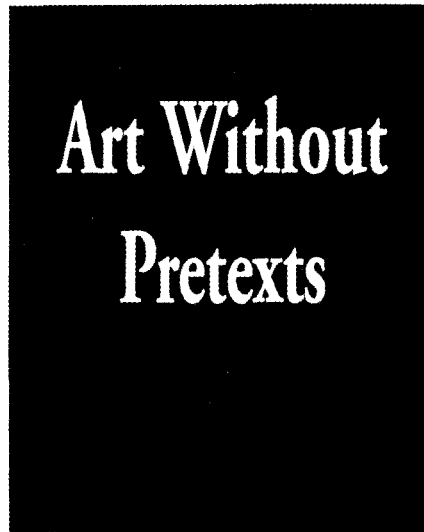
DEBATE: JUAN HIDALGO

In an experiment carried out in a soundproof room, John Cage discovered that there will be no absolute silence until we die [1]. However, silence, or at least what we usually interpret as silence, is an important part of his work, and indeed of all music.

The silence of ZAJ, that disconcerting silence present in Juan Hidalgo's work, has its roots in music, as does the measuring of time; both are fundamental to understanding the work of Juan Hidalgo and ZAJ.

Hidalgo was trained in the field of music, and his artistic career has consistently been full of planned or chance encounters with music as well as other forms of artistic expression.

In his home town [2] during the 50's, Hidalgo first began to compose music. Although the artist has called his work from this period "uncatalogable" [3], I would like to recount a couple of anecdotes regarding his early interest in avant-garde movements. His fascination for music was first aroused by a concert given by the German pianist Richard H. Stein, which he attended as a child [4]. This was apparently decisive in his interest in music and musical events, which he was to investigate extensively later on. His interest in music took him to Barcelona, where he studied with Xavier Montsalvage, and composed his first pieces. During the summers he returned to Las Palmas, where he took part in a little-known project (which has recently been rescued from oblivion by Lothar Siemens) with the writers and illustrators of the avant-garde magazine in the Canary Isles, *Planas de Poesía*,



including Manolo Millares [5], who participated in a ZAJ concert [6] with Hidalgo much later, in 1965.

Hidalgo continued his musical studies in Paris with Nadia Boulanger and then with Marescotti in Geneva, before moving to Milan, where he was a pupil of Bruno Maderna [7]. This was towards the end of 1955.

His work was soon to lead him to investigate atonal music. The evolution from Schönberg's twelve-tone music to the work of John Cage was already beginning to gain recognition.

It was then that Hidalgo met Walter Marchetti. Together they decided, in the late 50's, to abandon purely musical composition and dedicate their attention to investigating musical events. This encounter was the seed of what later became ZAJ.

ZAJ is indefinable [8], but it can perhaps best be classified in the areas of experimental music, open concerts, and musical composition which allows the performers to do what they want with the instruments, so long as they respect the designated space and time.

Juan Hidalgo's participation in various open music festivals [9] was also decisive in the radical development of his musical career. At one of these festivals, in 1958, he met John Cage, and the encounter propelled him forward in his search for new musical concepts, way ahead of the avant-garde in Spain. From then on, the chronometer replaced traditional time-counting in Hidalgo's music, which became "a temporal-auditory-spatial process of sonorous objects" [10]. For him, this meant that music was "no longer a mere concert product, but a living, changing being" [11].

After 1961, his musical creation became less prolific. The reason for this was a six-month stage he completed with the ORTF in Paris, where he composed *Etude de stage*, which is considered to be "the pioneer, or oldest piece of electro-acoustic music composed by a Spaniard" [12].

The creation of ZAJ was drawing nearer.

Without completely forgetting or abandoning musical composition, Juan Hidalgo began to move his attention towards the transformation of space. He managed to create spaces full of signs and silence, such as the ZAJ concerts.

Patiently, he "provoked" and challenged a bourgeois society whose cultural interests were just beginning to turn towards avant-garde ideas. The most interesting factor in the ZAJ concerts was the way they carefully stipulated both the factor of time and the situation of the participants. They were not participatory happenings [13];

their aim was not to “provoke” audience intervention, as the Fine Art students mistakenly believed at a ZAJ concert held at the Juana Mordó Gallery in 1976. Instead, Juan Hidalgo’s ceremonies contained their own beginning and end. He and the other members of ZAJ determined the space for the orchestra and the space where the ‘ritual’ was to be held. In this sense, their work can be linked to the most ancestral of musical rituals.

The song of farewell to the dead [14], the most abysmal of songs, consolidates the space around it [15]. Any kind of musical performance delimits the space surrounding it, like apophatic art. It is, therefore, the singularity of music which marks out Juan Hidalgo’s path; he creates objects and visual compositions which act as landmarks along the way. As Fernando Castro Flórez has said: “ZAJ ceremonies are held in a constellation which is at once ancestral and radically modern” [16].

Juan Hidalgo’s work went on to transcend its own musical origins. And so, when we listen to his piece *Rose Sélavy* (1976; for celeste and piano), we interpret the melodically repetitive sound of the keys (not unlike the jingle of a music-box) as the same critical, symbolic intention with which Marcel Duchamp noted down his ideas for the *Gran Vidrio* on old gas bills [17].

The relation between Hidalgo’s musical *Rose Sélavy* and the alter ego of who they called the ‘grandfather of ZAJ’ [18] becomes clear as soon as we enter ZAJ territory.

Duchamp’s attitude can be summarised perfectly by his affirmation that “there is no solution because there is no problem”. This is perhaps the main characteristic he shares with ZAJ. And it

is what led Breton to define Duchamp as one of the most intelligent and uncomfortable men of the early 20th century. This discomfort, this idea of an action which leads nowhere (or perhaps the sound of the veins pulsating which Cage heard in the soundproof room) is precisely what links ZAJ to grandfather Duchamp.

The root of the uneasiness provoked by a ZAJ concert is basically an ever-elusive enigma, which remains unsolved perhaps because there is no solution. Behind the concerts, the etceteras and the ZAJ books, something remains hidden; that factor which Duchamp called ‘infra-levity’ [19]. More or less, it is the space between our hand and the skin of another.

This disturbing feeling that there is something hidden behind the strictly organised ZAJ actions, leads us to follow the artist’s footsteps to the very origin of tragedy; to the oracle which replies only when it is asked correctly.

ZAJ undoubtedly affronts even more disconcerting concepts. One cannot ask questions; one can simply receive. Receive an image, a silence, perhaps a sound.

This lack of passion, or the hidden face behind the mask, may lead ZAJ spectators to mistakenly interpret a lack of meaning. Such was the response to ZAJ’s first event in 1964; the public were invited to accompany the group to move three wooden sculptures through the streets of Madrid [20]. What defines ZAJ actions is their exactness and exquisiteness (again, stemming from their musical background), which differentiates them from other artists who also used urban space as a sort of new artistic geography [21]. The innovation of ZAJ resided in its concept of situating the spectators

mathematically in time and space.

ZAJ therefore implied a far more radical rupture than their exquisite events might lead us to believe. They were also ironic and uncomfortable. In Spain in the 60’s, when artists did not enjoy freedom of expression due to the political situation of the time, ZAJ undoubtedly caused discomfort. Yet this discomfort was not dramatic like the “sacral aura of Beuys’ actions” [22], nor socially rebellious like the work of other artists which was considered “epiphanic” [23]. ZAJ was a frustration, announcing something which never arrived. Yet perhaps the rest simply did not realise; the rest, those who always die, as Marcel Duchamp had written in his epitaph.

Through this discomfort, ZAJ was able to reflect back to the public, making them aware of their role as extras, as ‘voyeurs’. In short, they acted as a mirror to our mind, forcing us to think about what was happening. This is very similar to Zen philosophy (a great influence on ZAJ), which “pushes us beyond logic to fall back into ourselves...from where we had never ventured out” [24].

Visually, the eye is not accustomed to watching a show where nothing happens, or where inaction plays the leading role. In ZAJ concerts, like in most music, nothing is undetermined or concealed, except the meaning.

Juan Hidalgo, with ZAJ, paved a new path and left tracks along the way: invitations to ZAJ concerts, ZAJ etceteras, ZAJ books; all as concise as the notes in a personal diary, where one word is enough to remember an event or series of events, or a mixture of feelings and memories. But as well as this, Juan Hidalgo began to create or find ready-

mades, in which he distanced himself from his work so as to offer it to the spectator.

This distance culminates in his photographic series, where he portrays sex as something which is no longer 'prohibited' (the enigma par excellence); instead, his images imply a cold, ironic, even scientific relationship with sex. Quite the contrary to pornography which attempts to stimulate the viewer. In his series *Barroca triste y Barroca alegre* and *Mujer y flor*, sex is separated from desire and turned into an enigma. Here, photography is an end in itself, unlike the etceteras or cards which serve to tell us of something which is happening beyond our comprehension. The artist simply portrays the beauty of a baroque flower whose pistil is the human pistil. Although many viewers considered such images pornographic, nothing could be further from the truth; there is a mathematical irony behind Hidalgo's creations, even in the way he orders the piles of pornographic magazines on the table. It is a clinical representation of sex which is, in itself, a paradox. And equally paradoxical is the eternal union between Eros and Thanatos, which Juan Hidalgo reflects in the titles of some of his photographs, memento mori of the beauty of naked bodies.

Juan Hidalgo's career, his very personal path, has been characterised by his particular ability to move through space. The artist once "referred explicitly to Japanese theatre, which is formed by two millennia of processions" [25].

Juan Hidalgo's last action was a beautiful concert involving silence and precisely measured time. It was based on matter and fire: the artist set small fragments of paper alight and once they

had burnt, only ashes remained. Then he gathered up what no longer existed, and left.

The greatest achievement of Juan Hidalgo and ZAJ is undoubtedly their creation of space: around their performances, around themselves, around their ready-mades, and always originating from their musical compositions. It is a space limited only by desire; the same invisible line which separates the célibataires from the mariée. Perhaps it is the very secret hidden at the end of the *Gran Vidrio*.

"there is always a secret because there is always a secret there is always a secret because there is always a secret always..." [26]

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- [1] Recounted by J. Cage in *Silence* and reproduced by F. Castro Flórez, De Juan Hidalgo, CAAM, 1997, p.294
- [2] Juan Hidalgo Codorniú was born in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in 1927.
- [3] According to Lothar Siemens on p.259 of the catalogue De Juan Hidalgo, CAAM, 1997.
- [4] Apparently, during this concert, the German musician "performed a massive 'cluster' by suddenly sitting on the keyboard", cfr. Lothar Siemens in the above-mentioned text.
- [5] In the edition of *Planas de Poesía* dedicated to Chopin, he published a composition for voice and piano called "Letrilla", based on the text of Góngora.
- [6] This took place in the Edurne Gallery (Madrid) at an exhibition which lasted only one day, in which Millares participated with his 'artefacts' (also called 'artefacts for Peace') on the 25th, along with Alberto Greco.
- [7] Juan Hidalgo has attributed his training in avant-garde music specifically to four musicians: Bruno Maderna, René Leibowitz, David Tudor and John Cage.
- [8] As Daniel Charles explains when he quotes David H. Cope, who classifies ZAJ among the groups dedicated to "mixed-media" performances, calling it "Mexican theatre of the absurd", in ZAJ, Gobierno de Canarias, 1987.

- [9] He participated in the Darmstadt festivals in 1957 with *Ukanga* and in 1958 with *Caurga*.
- [10] According to Lothar Siemens in the above-mentioned article.
- [11] Lothar Siemens, op. cit., p.162
- [12] Lothar Siemens, op. cit., p.262
- [13] The first ZAJ concert began with the performance of 4'33" as a homage to Cage; dissociating the act of the "performer" from the act of the listener, but also from that of the creator, and thereby allowing the "automation of the performance", according to Cage, as quoted in Daniel Charles, op. cit., 1955.
- [14] See Alejo Carpentier's "Los pasos perdidos", where he explains the theory of musical creation stemming from the farewell to the dead.
- [15] See Eugenio Triás, "*Lógica del límite*"
- [16] Fernando Castro Flórez, p.291, "De Juan Hidalgo", CAAM, op. cit.
- [17] Something which always obsessed Duchamp was the idea of establishing a link between meaning in his work and in his life. The fact that he wrote the notes for the *Gran Vidrio* on gas bills (gas comes from 'geist' which means 'spirit' in German) seems to lead to the idea that gas=spirit lights up the célibataires.
- [18] Juan Hidalgo chooses Man Ray's photograph of Duchamp dressed up as Rose Sélavy (another alter ego like the Marchand du Sel) and plays with the similarity in sound between Rose c'est la vie and Eros c'est la vie, to present the grandfather of ZAJ.
- [19] See Octavio Paz, "*Apariencia desnuda*".
- [20] 19th November 1964, from 9:30 until 10:58 am, from c/Batalla del Salado to Avenida Séneca in Madrid. A year before, the Argentinean artist Alberto Greco (popular at the time in Madrid) had also carried out an urban happening.
- [21] '*La Internacional Situacionasta*', quoted in relation to ZAJ by F. Castro Flórez in the above-mentioned CAAM catalogue, had suggested using urban space for la dérive, which could be related to these urban happenings.
- [22] Valeriano Bozal, op.cit., p.245
- [23] Valeriano Bozal, p. 243, "De Juan Hidalgo", CAAM, op. cit.
- [24] José M^a Parreño, p. 276, "De Juan Hidalgo", CAAM, op.cit.
- [25] Cfr. Daniel Charles, op. cit.
- [26] Juan Hidalgo: "...¿Y el secreto?"