

SCREEN ~ SOUND ~ STONE

Ho Tzu Nyen vs FOUDRE! and Christine Ott
7 June 2015 at the Church of Saint-Merry, Paris

10 years later.

Written by Lucie Gottlieb

In 2010, Ho Tzu Nyen, one of the most important Singaporean contemporary artists, directed the experimental film *EARTH*. As *EARTH* toured globally, various musicians were asked to provide live soundtracks, such as Oren Ambarchi, Black to Comm and the latest, FOUDRE!, a telluric drone quartet composed of Frédéric D. Oberland, Romain Barbot, Grégory Buffier, Paul Régimbeau, featuring Christine Ott on Ondes Martenot.

This text stems from a personal recollection of an audiovisual performance in the form of a film concert that took place in the 16th century gothic church of Saint-Merry, Paris, in June 2015: The live soundtrack performed by FOUDRE! for *EARTH*. The event was curated by the curatorial platform Lowave and the co-founder Silke Schmickl in the context of the festival *Singapour mon amour*. It develops into a reflection and analyse on the relationship between sound and images, sacred spaces as affective spaces, and the curatorial challenges and strategies involved.

Interplay between sound and images: a sensitive experience

The crowd walks down the nave of the Church of Saint-Merry, a symbol of Parisian Flamboyant Gothic style, slowly searching for a seat. In the choir, five musicians wait beside an array of instruments: Mellotrons, analog synths, electric guitars, and Ondes Martenot. Behind them, facing the stained-glass windows of the ambulatory, a screen stands at a cinematic scale. I can't recall if the church lights dimmed, as they would in a cinema. But soon, enigmatic images appear on the screen: a film projector running, a slow take revealing the site of an unknown disaster. Bodies lie scattered, seemingly oscillating between consciousness and unconsciousness, life and death. Light ebbs and flows, shifting between warm and cold, day and night. At times, a body steps into the foreground—moving a hand, blinking an eye—before its distinct form dissolves into a vast, unified entity. Shadows stretch, blurring the line between the individual and the collective. Everything merges and separates, breathing in a quiet rhythm—like a fluid, unbound organism. The musicians bend over their instruments, and a long, quiet drone begins to play. Like the images on the screen, the sound stretches, slowly pulsates, spreads its wings, and envelops the audience from the very first minute. In fact, the film's synopsis could just as easily describe the music performed live. The

musicians' egos dissolve; five become one, their instruments seemingly animated by a hive mind.

“It was all there in the sound, and at the same time, it wasn’t”: meaning and time

A whole apocalyptic world of melancholy. “It was all there in the sound, and at the same time, it wasn’t,” wrote critic and composer Michel Chion in *L’Audio-Vision*.¹ In this book, Chion introduces the concept of the *audiovisual contract*, shedding crucial light on the mutual relationship between sound and image in audiovisual perception. He departs from the prologue of Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966), asking: “Is the notion of cinema as the art of the image just an illusion?”² This *audiovisual illusion* is created by the interplay between sound and image, where sound is as essential as the visual itself. There is a general impression that “sound merely duplicates a meaning which in reality it brings about, either all on its own or by discrepancies between it and the image.”³ In *Persona*’s prologue, for example, three shots depict a palm being nailed to sudden sounds—loud thuds that make the impalement feel tangible. Here, sound does not merely support the visual elements; it shapes their impact.

However, the performance EARTH [FOUDRE!] operates differently. We do not hear what we see. There is no crackling fire, no wind in the leaves, no rolling stones, no whimpers, no snoring, no breathing—though we watch people lying in the rubble. There is no *materiality* in the sound, unlike in *Persona*, where the nail’s entry into flesh and bone is made painfully real through audio. And yet, if the relationship between sound and image does not feel immediate or necessary, that does not mean it does not exist.

As explained by Chion, sound can also skilfully create temporal illusions, sometimes convincing us that we perceive rapid movement in an image that isn’t actually there. Similarly, it can dramatise shots, slowing them down and “orienting them toward a future, a goal, and the creation of a feeling of imminence. The shot is going somewhere, and it is oriented in time.”⁴ In an exhibition text written by curators Edit Molnár and Marcel Schwierin in June 2015, we read that “what fascinates Ho about the medium of film is the materiality of time. In order to make this tangible to his audience, he slows down his films or speeds them up.”⁵ He is drawn to extremes—either fast and short films or long, stretched, and slow ones, such as *EARTH*. The artist is uneasy with films that have a conventional pacing, as they cause the viewer to lose awareness of time, becoming absorbed in the action. By contrast, “when the film is slightly too slow, time takes on a certain density or plasticity.”⁶ This effect is further reinforced by the music. FOUDRE!’s performance felt like a natural complement to Ho’s

¹ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New-York: Columbia University Press) 1994, 4.

² Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 5.

³ Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 5.

⁴ Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 5.

⁵ Edit Molnár and Marcel Schwierin, “Ho Tzu Nyen: *EARTH*”, exhibition archive, accessed February 13, 2025, <https://www.edith-russ-haus.de/en/exhibitions/archive/ho-tzu-nyen-earth>.

⁶ Molnár and Schwierin, “Ho Tzu Nyen: *EARTH*.”

film, in which long shots capture a breathtaking yet harrowing landscape—piled corpses, evoking visual echoes of European painting. It was a cinematographic journey in itself, rising from desolation through what felt like pastoral and sacred moments, ultimately reaching an impenetrable conclusion. Featuring sustained tones, slow modulations, and minimal harmonic changes, it created a unique sense of temporality that differed from more rhythmic or melodic musical forms. At times, the lack of distinct rhythmic structures and clear forward motion gave the impression that everything was suspended, creating a feeling of timelessness, immersing the audience in the sound and the image. Other moments felt elongated, or compressed due to the gradual variations in timbre and dynamics. Micro-temporalities emerged, creating an internal sense of dynamism, when one heard beating patterns between slightly detuned frequencies. But more importantly, the perception of time is highly personal and influenced by many aspects, such as the individual attention and expectation of the listener. Drone music can feel either immensely stretched or surprisingly brief.

To be felt, not to be understood

“Sensation as a unit of experience” is a phrase borrowed from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his study of perception. In his first chapter, he explains that, fundamentally, it is through “sensing” and sensation that one understands the way in which they experience a state of being.⁷ He defines sensations as pure impressions:

This red patch which I see on the carpet is red only in virtue of a shadow which lies across it, its quality is apparent only in relation to the play of light upon it, and hence as an element in a spatial configuration."⁸

Merleau-Ponty challenges the traditional Cartesian separation between subject and object, arguing instead that perception is always an embodied, lived experience. Sensation, for him, is not a discrete or passive reception of stimuli but an active, relational process that occurs between the perceiver and the perceived. He sees vision and movement as inherently interwoven, making sense of the world through bodily engagement. This resonates with *EARTH* [FOUDRE!] in several ways.

In his film, Ho Tzu Nyen constructs a slow-moving, immersive experience where perception is heightened through minimal yet deliberate movement. The 42-minute film unfolds at a painstaking pace as the camera glides with measured precision across a meticulously choreographed scene, revealing frame by frame the details of a post-apocalyptic landscape. Despite its resemblance to a static tableau, the artist emphasises that the subtle shifts occurring throughout its duration are essential to its meaning. Composed of three long takes, *EARTH* functions as a ‘videographic’ remix of 17th- and 18th-century Italian and French paintings, in which the human body is penetrated, fragmented, and reassembled. The work

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge Classics, 2022), 3-14.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 5.

reinterprets these classical compositions, translating them into an audio-visual experience that compresses biographies, philosophical ideas, and scientific anecdotes into highly staged and choreographed images and sounds. Rather than appealing to reason, the film communicates at a visceral level, directly engaging the body, sight, and hearing. By prioritising a pre-reflective experience over explicit meaning, *EARTH* aligns with Merleau-Ponty's idea that perception is always more than what is immediately given—it is an intertwining of history, affect, and material presence.

What *EARTH* does to paintings such as Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, Girodet's *The Sleep of Endymion*, and Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* is analogous to the transformations these images impose on the human body—a process of suspension, penetration, fragmentation, and reconfiguration. Thematically, *EARTH* explores cycles—of waking and sleeping, life and death, and rebirth—mirroring how the artist perceives and understands existence itself.⁹

For myself, at a very personal level, these works have as much to do with Western philosophy as certain Eastern ideas. I feel very close to Taoism and certain aspects of Zen Buddhism. So the form itself would, for me, have certain resonance with aspects of these beliefs and practices.¹⁰

This cyclical perspective is reflected not only in specific scenes and narratives but also in the film's structure. Its non-linear, looping format, where the final frame mirrors the first, reinforces a sense of recurrence. This is amplified by FOU DRE!'s music, which, lacking a clear directional progression, invites the listener to experience the present moment fully. The music resonates with Taoist principles of harmonising with the eternal now—embracing the unfolding of time rather than resisting it. Much like the Taoist ideal of effortless action (*wu wei*), the music flows organically, free from abrupt shifts or imposed structure. Rather than confining sound within rigid boundaries, it allows it to emerge naturally. The continuous nature of FOU DRE!'s drones fosters deep listening, inducing a meditative or trance-like state. As previously mentioned, this immersive quality enables the listener to lose track of conventional time, experiencing instead a more subjective, fluid temporality. By employing repetition, rupture, and wide movements, *EARTH* [FOU DRE!] elicits a sensory experience that transcends rational interpretation—it is meant to be felt, not understood.

This sensorial experience is also applicable to the experience of the musicians themselves. In an interview to Mikael Robert-Goncalves, Frédéric D. Oberland from FOU DRE! says: “when you are performing in front of the images – and especially when there are five musicians improvising –, it's impossible to dissect precisely each information coming to you; you have to evacuate the image exegesis to better encounter, with the others and in the moment, the film with his general movement. With a sensitive synchronicity.”¹¹ After the performance, Ho

⁹ Catherine Wilson, “Ho Tzu Nyen: Earth,” a-n, 2011, accessed 10 Januari 2025, <https://www.a-n.co.uk/reviews/ho-tzu-nyen-earth/>

¹⁰ “Ho Tzu Nyen: Earth,” a-n, 2011, accessed 10 Januari 2025, <https://www.a-n.co.uk/reviews/ho-tzu-nyen-earth/>

¹¹ Frédéric D. Oberland, “Hitting the original pulsation,” interview by Mikael Robert-Goncalves, Lowave,

Tzu Nyen went and congratulated them, saying that they had manage to meet “*EARTH*’s pulsation.”

The church as context

The location adds yet another layer of meaning to the performance and to the visitor’s perception and experience. According to Dagmar Hoffman-Axthelm’s study of the “metamorphosis of musical space exemplified by Church and Chamber” (1986), the spaces in which music is performed imbue it with specific and distinct meanings. What is considered sacred music –meaning in the service of religious worship, set apart, special, or not for common use– such as choirs, hymns and mass settings, carries a spiritual and immaterial quality, in contrast to the “concrete” music of profane, lived spaces of the chamber. According to Hoffman Axthelm, this distinction has been dissolved in the concert hall, which was designed to liberate music from social constraints and remove its functional role, granting it aesthetic autonomy.¹² I’d argue that the White Cube– a similar historical construct, assure an identical role towards contemporary art. However, the ritual of the concert has evolved since Hoffman Axthelm’s study, and so has the one of the exhibition. Many artists address the spaces in which new music is presented. Luca Francesconi artistic director of La Biennale Musica in Venice for example, claims that it’s not the format of the concert that is redundant, but the concert hall.¹³ Likewise, we see an increasing desire from artists and curators to work outside the museum’s walls and the traditional White Cube, which introduces new specific conditions and challenges for production and exhibition. In this situation, curator Silke Schmickl decides together with the artists to make the performance happen in the church of St-Merry. But a hosting gesture from a sanctuary surpasses a simple loan of walls and placing there an artwork affect the perception of the visitor in many different ways.

In an interview I conducted with Schmickl, she talked about another event where the soundtrack of *EARTH* was performed by a different band, Black to Comm, at the Lenbachhaus, in Munich, Germany. The musicians were playing in the gallery space, while the audience was standing, coming and going.¹⁴ The visitor experience she describes and the fluid engagement of the audience contrasts drastically with the ones at St-Merry, where people were sitting, listening for the whole duration of the performance, watching people oscillating between life and death, in the immensity of the Gothic architecture.

The church as instrument

September 2015, <https://www.lowave.com/singapour-mon-amour/p3.htm>.

¹² Maria Anna Harley, *Space and Spatialization in Contemporary Music: History and Analysis, Ideas and Implementations*, (USA: Moonrise Press, 2016), 113.

¹³ Maria Anna Harley, *Space and Spatialization in Contemporary Music: History and Analysis, Ideas and Implementation*, 114.

¹⁴ Silke Schmickl, interview with the author, 19 February 2025.

Sound is inherently spatial, and if performing in such a monumental space can be challenging the results are worth it. Frédéric D. Oberland explains that in St-Merry “the sound is wide and powerful yet thin and precise. Like in every church, it reverberates a lot, some frequencies are stronger than others and we had to think about it before the installation.”¹⁵ The church’s surfaces made of stones and acoustically, these elements allow sound waves to travel freely, with almost no obstruction. The hard material of the walls reflects the sound waves instead of absorbing them. More than just an element of decoration, the columns are carefully placed by the architects so that they can allow the sound to bounce from one surface to the other, so that it lingers in the air. It is being transported upwards towards the vaulted ceilings which in turn act as a canopy, reflecting sound downwards and outwards. The reverberation is prolonged, the echoes blend the notes, creating a continuous sonic tapestry that envelops the listeners.

The church as affective space

As David Rastas writes in the article “Problems Integrating Contemporary Art into Ritual Spaces,” these spaces “are anchored in political, cultural, and social traditions that integrate multiple narratives of place, self, and history.”¹⁶ This idea resonates with Edward Relph’s exploration of place and space in *Place and Placelessness*, where he develops a language to describe the varying intensities of attachment and meaning between individuals and places.¹⁷ Relph introduces the concept of *insideness* to define the degree of connection a person or group has with a specific place, particularly in relation to religious and cultural contexts. For those within a particular faith, sacred spaces serve as sites where their religious identity is expressed through rituals and beliefs, forming a profound bond with the place. Conversely, for outsiders—whether from a different religion or no religion at all—such spaces cannot be approached as just any other place. Instead, they represent a spatial reality shaped by cultural and social structures that inherently demand a particular attitude. Relph terms this *existential insideness*, a self-evident relationship in which the sacred nature of a space necessitates reverence, even in secularised forms. Ultimately, the sacredness of a religious building is not solely dictated by theological doctrine but also by the broader social perceptions that shape how it is experienced and understood.

Curating contemporary art in a sacred place induces a meeting between two works of art: the religious building and its ritual architecture and the contemporary art displayed for the occasion. But these two elements also meet a visitor. Therefore, curating contemporary art in churches creates a hybrid space between the self and its intricacy of memories and attitudes, the place and its sacrality expressed through ritual and architecture, and the art itself as it is integrated in the church. It is in this immaterial space, in this state of flux where the exhibition resonates, that we find the meaning of this art experience.

¹⁵ Frédéric D. Oberland, “Hitting the original pulsation.”

¹⁶ David Rastas, “Problems integrating Contemporary Art into Ritual Spaces,” *Other Spaces*, 2018, https://otherspaces.org/ritualspaces.html#_ftn17.

¹⁷ Edward C. Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976), 8-26.

A perfect example of this phenomenon is the exhibition *Visitation Reformation*, showing five video-works of Bill Viola in Uppsala Cathedral. Parallel to the exhibition in the cathedral, on more video work by Viola, *Observance*, was displayed in Uppsala Art Museum. In the museum, the work was presented in a space with the remnants of a 16th century altarpiece, creating a dynamic tension between old and new, antique and modern technology, emulated by the altar's sacred history. This phenomenon is quite common in museums, where contemporary art is repositioned next to art objects from different ages. This demonstrates, as art historian Alessandra Galizzi Kroegel expresses, "the infinite possibilities of aesthetic perception that the same object offers when presented under different circumstances."¹⁸ When the artwork's context is changed, the spectator is incited to focus on different aspects. The artwork does not change, yet we see it differently. In *The Philosophy of Curatorial Practice Between Work and World*, Sue Spaid exemplifies this phenomenon with artworks painted by Joan Miró whose titles suggest birds, but their imagery does not. If a curator wanted to prompt a Miró painting's bird-aspect, they would exhibit it next to bird paintings, making the bird-reference more obvious.¹⁹ In the case of *Visitation Reformation*, or even the performance EARTH [FOUDRE!], structures from long-term collective memory (the gothic church, the cathedral, the altarpiece's remnants) assist in the creation of meaning. When contemporary art is placed in the church building, the work gains an aura of sacredness, and as a result the figures in the Viola's and Ho's videos look almost biblical. This affirmation is of course only possible if the notion of the sacred remains free and open, allowing the images to convey forms that are diverse and immanent.

EARTH [FOUDRE!], curatorial strategies: acts of care and dialogue

As previously demonstrated, the church is an affective space, capable of evoking a wide range of sensations in its visitors: awe, enchantment, consolation, transcendence. Exhibitions and artistic interventions within these spaces cannot be approached in the same way as they would be in a museum setting. Churches present unique challenges that must be navigated both curatorially and artistically, challenges that would not arise in a museum or even other historical sites. In *Curating Context: Beyond the Gallery and Into Other Fields*, Magdalena Malm describes such curatorial processes as particularly labour-intensive, requiring constant negotiation and the clearing of permissions. "Why is it worth it?" she asks. "Perhaps it is this liveness, the metamorphosis of development, the shifting and developing relations that make it all worthwhile."²⁰ Indeed, these relational dynamics offer new frameworks for understanding art and its place in the world.

¹⁸ Alessandra Galizzi Kroegel, "The museum of contemplation," in *Religion and Museums: Immaterial and Material Heritage*, ed. Valeria Minucciani, (Torino: Umberto Allemandi & C, 2013), 80.

¹⁹ Sue Spaid, *The Philosophy of Curatorial Practice Between Work and World* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).

²⁰ Magdalena Malm, *Curating Context: Beyond the Gallery and Into Other Fields* (Stockholm: Art And Theory Publishing, 2017), 13.

St-Merry: A Church of Experimentation and Outreach

In 1975, the church of St-Merry was chosen by Cardinal François Marty, then the Archbishop of Paris, as a site to "invent new models for the Church of tomorrow." Until 2021, St-Merry pursued its mission as both a pastoral centre and a church of outreach. Equally led by clerics and laypeople, it was open to marginalised Catholics who were not always accepted in other parishes. The goal was to enable prayer services that could take diverse forms and styles, fostering encounters with different groups and actively engaging in research and reflection on faith and its intersections with contemporary culture. St-Merry became a space where artistic practices and spiritual exploration coexisted, providing a model for rethinking how sacred spaces can serve as arenas for cultural engagement.

A particularly striking example of such engagement was EARTH [FOUDRE!]. In our conversation, Silke Schmickl described it as “the poetic side of Singapour mon amour festival, between life and death in the Gothic Church”. Funded by the state, the festival was otherwise curated within cultural institutions such as the Centre Pompidou and the Musée du Quai Branly. However, this specific event, taking place within the resonant and historic atmosphere of a church, underscored the potential of sacred spaces to host contemporary artistic dialogues. The site itself shaped the experience, influencing both the audience's reception and the artists' approach to their work.

EARTH was meant to have several soundtracks, but in this case, Ho didn't contact the musicians. Was the curator merely a facilitator, helping the artist to bring his visions to life, or did she play a more interpretative role, shaping new narratives around the work? Silke Schmickl personally knew Frédéric Oberland, the initiator of FOUDRE!, and Ho Tzu Nyen. While she trusted them, the collaboration remained a risk, as they had never worked together before. The artists familiarised themselves with each other's work independently before coming together for the project. Ho Tzu Nyen, in particular, was enthusiastic about bringing together a diverse group of musicians for this unique endeavour. Susan J. Hazan articulates this curatorial dilemma: “Where do we, as mediators of art—curators, reporters, journalists, critics, ethnographers, museum interpreters—serve art best? By authoring an inspiring, subjective yet fictitious new reality in the interpretation of the work, or as facilitators of the work, where we simply find a way to allow the art to have its own voice?”²¹ This question becomes particularly acute in ephemeral, site-specific works that cannot be repeated in the same way. In fact, *EARTH* [FOUDRE!] was a singular moment in time, an experience that will never happen again in exactly the same way. As an audience, we listened together to an audiovisual piece, unaware back then of its uniqueness. There is an almost sacred quality in this ephemerality—“perhaps we do not even want it to happen again”, said Silke Schmickl.

²¹ Susan J. Hazan, “Commentary and commentary on commentary,” edited excerpts from the New Media Curating discussion list, 27 March 2001, accessed 12 November 2022, <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/new-media-curating.html>.

Conclusion

In this convergence of moving images, live sound, and sacred architecture, EARTH [FOUDRE!] became more than a film or a concert—it transformed into a collective ritual of perception and emotion. The encounter at Saint-Merry Church transcended the boundaries of cinema and music, inviting the audience into a meditative state where time and space dissolved. Curating within sacred spaces demands a unique set of skills, sensitivities, and ethical considerations. Churches, as affective spaces, imbue artistic interventions with additional layers of meaning, compelling curators to navigate not only aesthetic concerns but also historical, spiritual, and communal dimensions. The challenge lies not merely in negotiating permissions or adapting to unconventional venues, but in embracing the transformative potential of these encounters—the liveness, the shifting relations, and the ephemeral beauty that leave an indelible impact on both artists and audiences alike.

A fundamental challenge in event-based productions, however, is the question of memory and documentation. Writing this text has been difficult: how can I capture the essence of such a fleeting performance? What forms of archiving can account for embodied experiences that defy traditional methods of documentation? The only tangible traces I had were the music album released after the concert and the information from festival's press release, recently completed by a conversation with the curator. The rest had to be dug from my own memory—an unstable, subjective archive. And yet, perhaps this fragility is part of the experience: it sought not to be fully captured but to evoke ineffable emotions—ones that linger long after the final note has faded and the screen has gone dark.