

THE PROJECT

Silent Indexicality was an exchange project between cultural practitioners in Hamburg and Detroit, divided into three modules. It began with collaborations and research in Detroit (1st module), followed by a virtually coordinated deepening at both locations (2nd module), and concluded with the presentation of preliminary results at the Fleetstreet Theater in Hamburg (3rd module).

Silent Indexicality attempted to explore how history is inscribed in material – and how these traces can be performatively activated without simply reproducing them. It was concerned with transmission (sound, text, image, gesture) and its productive failure: what happens when signs are no longer clearly decipherable and mediated memory becomes a „promise“?

POINT OF DEPARTURE

The idea for Silent Indexicality emerged in 2024 from a chance conversation between Kerstin Niemann and Thomas Baldischwyler. While Niemann was describing her residency at FILTER Detroit, Baldischwyler spoke about a project in which the Detroit collective Pure Rave and the German Institut für Feinmotorik had independently rearranged identical records in Detroit and Hamburg with artificial „skips“.

Baldischwyler was keen to point out that Pure Rave works with found material. When Niemann then brought Scott Grooves into the conversation, the field of possibilities widened: he too transforms traces of urban space by turning found objects into artistic works. It was a natural step to connect Grooves' recycling-based practice with Baldischwyler's then-current interest in repurposing and reworking shipping cartons.

The sound artists mentioned above reflect, through their practice, the semiotic concept of indexicality. Analogue media such as film, photography and vinyl records are described as indexical systems because they maintain a causal connection between object and sign. The index directs attention toward something that factually existed in space and time. This is precisely what is also immanent in the objects and images of Grooves and Baldischwyler.

It became clear at this meeting that indexicality could serve as the common denominator of very different working methods – and thus as the starting point for a potential exchange between Detroit and Hamburg.

DETROIT

Before arriving at the FILTER Detroit Research Residency – the beginning of the first module – Baldischwyler had already sent the collective Pure Rave four European pressings of the MC5 LP „Kick Out the Jams“, released in 1968. In the very first week of his stay, an improvised setup of turntables was installed in front of the site of the original live recording: the ruins of the former Grande Ballroom. The performance recorded there on iPhones was intended to reattach the indexical reference to the recording location back to the object – including the errors and skips audible in the records after years of wear.

Early research into the Cass Corridor Movement and the work of artists such as Gordon Newton and Cay Bahnmiller further placed Scott Grooves' practice within a historical continuum. In a text written by Cary Loren for the art blog Three Fold Press about Bahnmiller, Baldischwyler encountered the term „Spent Material“.

He visited the author at his bookshop and was introduced there to Leni Sinclair. She had not only been the photographer of the images on the cover of the MC5 LP and active as a political activist with the White Panthers, but also – as part of Trans Love Light Co. – responsible for the iconic light show at the Grande Ballroom in the late 1960s.

Piece by piece, a cultural-historical analogy to Hamburg's Grünspan Club began to emerge – a club that had made headlines in Germany at almost the same time with its disco lights. This was largely due to the „Mußegesellschaft m.b.H.“ co-run by the later writer Bernd Cailloux and the stroboscopes it developed. In his 2005 novel „Das Geschäftsjahr 1968/69“, this conflict appears as a leitmotif: „counterculture as commodity“.

This critique of commercialisation, formulated retrospectively by Cailloux, makes visible not only a moral loss but also a media-technological shift: when culture no longer happens but primarily circulates, it no longer points to the actual place but to the medium that transports it. The index is not dissolved in this process, but re-anchored.

Will Lawson's solo work – he is otherwise part of Pure Rave – involving house and techno record labels analysed and modified by early AIs can be read as one such case of re-anchoring – except that here the trace leads not to the object but to the archive. In this case: to the internet platform Discogs. The generated label is no longer indexical to actual records, but indexical to the database. What emerges is not a representation of the world, but a „silent“ parallel.

SILENT INDEXICALITY

An exemplary artistic work on the silencing of indexes is Harun Farocki's series of essay films from the early 2010s, aptly titled „Parallel“.

In it, Farocki observes how the relationship between image and reality shifts with computer-generated imagery. He shows digital worlds from video games in which landscapes, bodies and perspectives become increasingly realistic – and yet sacrifice something decisive: they have no past. Nothing there has been „recorded“ or „taken place“; everything is modelled, calculated, generated. In doing so, „Parallel“ makes visible that digital images not only produce new visual worlds, but also undermine the functions of images.

Indexicality carries a promise: this was once real. In Farocki's „Parallel“, this promise falls silent. What is shown are examples of an image-world that is visible without ever having „been there“.

GESTURE

Drawing on Wolfgang Müller's performance „Deaf Music in Sign Language Form“ (1998) and the work of artist Christine Sun Kim, sound can be described as an embodied, spatially organised event that is not bound to a purely acoustic concept. The sign language dimension was not conceived as mere translation, but as an integral part of the performance central to the third module of SI. It reorganised perception.

Semiotically, this can be made more precise: sign language is a fully-fledged language with its own lexicon and grammar, possessing systematic indexical means. Deictic references, spatial reference points and direction of gaze anchor relations between persons, places and events.

In the performance, text passages were realised through AI voice output (text-to-speech) and simultaneously articulated in sign language. The synthetic voice produced sound, but remained largely decoupled from the body and from social address. Sign language transferred this disembodied symbolism into an embodied, spatially addressable presence, making tangible that „silent indexicality“ which arises in the tension between trace, medium and event.

HAMBURG

The location where, within the framework of the third module, the aforementioned reflections came together in a series of events with talks and the central performance, was the Fleetstreet Theater in Hamburg.

Approaching the theatre from the city centre, the first thing one noticed in the right-hand display window were Will Lawson's animations of record labels, which he had analysed and modified by an AI.

In the auditorium, one saw Scott Grooves' small-format painting boards bearing imprints of bicycle parts. These were combined with a rough reproduction of an advertisement for the Detroit label Happy Records, founded by Mike Banks in the early 1990s: a construction worker on a bicycle, bearing the claim „Happiness is a state of mind unaffected by one's environment“.

Opposite this wall hanging was a monitor showing, among other things, the aforementioned documentation of Pure Rave's performance in front of the Grande Ballroom – without sound. The sound appeared instead as the movement of the ruin. Beside it sat a shelf with the partially destroyed sound sources from the performance.

Also on view were a solo work by Thomas Baldischwyler made in Detroit and a collaborative work with Scott Grooves. These were accompanied by archival material that attempted to situate the ideas behind the installation in more stable contexts.

At the first event, Kerstin Niemann – in a setting not unlike a salon conversation – spoke in English with Scott Grooves about the tactile concepts behind his spatial practice.

A week later, the performance by Pure Rave, the Institut für Feinmotorik and two sign language interpreters followed; it took place in German, as did the closing panel on lost maps with Daniel Jahn, Johann Scheerer and Thomas Baldischwyler.

CONCLUSION

Kerstin Niemann and Thomas Baldischwyler are not semioticians. The concept of indexicality entered the project through thinking out loud. The potential value of the performance and its surrounding installation therefore lay not in an insight, but in the attempt: it established a framework for perception in which the conditions of the digital present could be observed – disembodiment, loop, access, disruption, activation.

It made tangible that indexicality is not only a semiotic category, but also a media-economic one: trace was once possession, possession was exploitability; digital availability breaks open this logic and relocates value to platforms.