

The Art of Listening

A Sonic View of the Städel

'Do you hear the noise of my paintings?'

— Max Beckmann

I recently visited the Städel². With a Rembrandt exhibition on display (and by virtue of it being a Saturday), it was crowded and, consequently, noisy. I was quick to regret visiting on a Saturday. The soundscape of the Städel, however, activated a rather productive thought process on that pervasive, yet elusive entity we call 'sound'. Listening to the museum space, I ended up asking myself a few questions: How do sound and the visual work together? The art critic John Berger highlighted our situatedness in the visual space. But, what about 'ways of hearing'? How do we hear in a museum space? How does a space constructed for the visual sense approach sound? And, how does art approach sound? Let me start out with an example. For this purpose, I would ask you, 'dear reader', to have a look at the painting below and think about its sensory implications:



¹Max Beckmann, 'Still Life with Saxophones, 1926', *Staedel Museum*,
><http://www.staedelmuseum.de/go/ds/sg1159><.

² The Städel is a museum in Frankfurt that displays artwork ranging from the Middle Ages through to the contemporary era.

If, after viewing the painting, you had a somewhat visceral experience that evoked the sonic, then you've had very much the same experience I—and probably many others—must have had whilst studying it. Max Beckmann's 1926 'Still Life with Saxophones' (the irony has not gone unnoticed) is exemplary of the overlap of the visual and the acoustic. Of course, contemporary art is much more multi-sensory than art movements in the 20th century were. But we see soundscapes in visual spaces all the time. Even before the modernist movements, art epitomised synesthetic experience: It created sound through the visual. Beckmann asked his wife: 'Do you hear the noise of my paintings?'³ Yes, his 'Still Life with Saxophones' is noisy. It seems cluttered, somewhat claustrophobic. And, with jazz being the music of the avant-garde in the 1920s it is no surprise that the form features so prominently in Beckmann's still life. With its association with noise, the painting acts somewhat disruptively. It disturbs the etiquette of silence in the museum space. As a side note: a piece like this dedicated to jazz may act as a form of resistance to ideology — though Theodore Adorno, with his well-documented aversion to Jazz, is sure to disagree. Notably, Beckmann's expressionist painting was seized by the Nazis and labelled 'degenerate'. Sound, therefore, seems to figure as a form of sonic resistance to fascism too. The saxophone acts metonymically: standing in for jazz in general and its function as a medium for resistance. Let us now travel to the 17th century. In the 'Old Masters' section of the Städel, I am 'hailed' by a painting, another still life. Although not modernist, it evokes synaesthetic associations too:



³ Beckmann, 'Still Life'

This 17th century 'Still Life with Fish on Vending Counter'⁴, by the Antwerp painter Jacob Foppens van Es, evokes a sensory landscape long forgotten. How, I ask myself, would commerce sound like in the temporal space of 17th century Netherlands?⁵ For us, as non-contemporary viewers, the sonic quality of this image has the ability to conflate past and present; catapulting us to a bustling Dutch market space. I hear both the acoustic community of the market and the assembly hall of a fisherman's guild that, in all probability, commissioned this work. Foppens van Es through synesthetic associations therefore expertly recreates 17th century Flanders in sonic terms. The ringing of the knife on the far left of the painting, it seems, is still ringing in my ears centuries later. Indeed, I feel like I am sonically immersed in the hubbub of 17th century Netherlands. Thinking about paintings in sonic terms thus makes us hear an era that is long gone; an era long before technologies for sound recording existed.

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⁴ "The motif was [...] not chosen primarily for its symbolic protentional, but for tangible, practical reasons: both the patron and contemporary viewers will have understood the painting above all as a kind of certification of quality with respect to the merchandise offered for sale.' See Jacob Foppens van Es, 'Still Life with Fish on Vending Counter', ca. 1635 – 1640, *Staedel Museum*, > <https://sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/de/werk/stilleben-mit-fischen-auf-einer-verkaufsbank><.

⁵ Foppen van Es, 'Still Life with Fish'