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*«Silence, understood as the refusal of language, could then become a way to escape the anthropocentric domain of politics and help us to establish a caring relationship to the world's speechless entities.»*

# THE POLITICS OF SILENCE

## Juan Barcia Mas

Juan Barcia Mas, born 1995 in Valencia, is an architect, writer and curator. He studied architecture at TU München and ETH Zurich. After graduating, he has been curating exhibitions and producing installations at gta Exhibitions and at the Sexkino Roland. He joined the Chair of Architecture and Urban Transformation (Newrope), ETH Zurich, in 2023. He is taking part in the upcoming «Zürich Biennale» exhibition at Kunsthalle Zürich, together with Shen He.



When we think about the notion of «silence» in relation to politics, generally speaking, we think about the absence of voice in political life, which is the antithesis of political power and agency. Silence is usually associated with notions of defeat, lack and absence. (1) There are ways, however, in which silence can become a powerful political sign of protest, as we have recently witnessed in the protests by Chinese students against censorship, who were marching, holding up blank pieces of paper. (2) Politicians might also choose to remain silent on certain issues, either with the aim of avoiding controversy, maintaining a neutral stance, or strategically withholding their opinions for political gain. (3)

It is not my aim, however, to dwell on a potential political agency of self-silencing, since it mainly points to language through its renouncement. It is certainly true that the identity of silence is always constructed differentially against its opposite: sound and language. However, I am less interested in silence as a tool that can be deployed to increase one's own political power and agency.

I am rather driven by the idea of silence as a different way to access reality — a mode of encountering the world that might take us beyond the limits of language and representation, which are only able to grant us reduced access to the richness and complexity of the experienced world. Silence, understood as the refusal of language, could then become a way to escape the anthropocentric domain of politics and help us to establish a caring relationship to the world's speechless entities.

Jacques Derrida famously gave an account of the preeminence of voice in the Western philosophical tradition, as a medium that brings the signifier and signified into immediate proximity. (4) Both meaning and its material carrier in such a proximity lead to the belief that speech is a faithful representation of thought itself and of an internal subjective experience. It is the direct utterance of speech that holds together the subject as a figure and, due to the fact that subjects hear themselves speak, creates the impression of consciousness. The voice is therefore key in recognising and granting subjecthood to human beings. (5)

Western democratic representation systems function primarily through the performative utterance of speech, particularly in parliament, yet also through mass media. The speech-less hereby, including those who are denied the right to speak, find themselves outside of it.

Bruno Latour famously criticises the fact that our realities are heavily dependent on non-human actors, which are nevertheless not acknowledged by our political systems. His model for a Parliament of Things includes both humans and non-humans in a sort of imaginary political representation system, granting the latter the right to be represented through human systems of language. «Natures are present, but with their representatives, scientists who speak in their name», (6) he writes. Including non-human entities in political representation systems is therefore only possible through an act of translation, for which a human actor — a scientist according to Latour — is needed.



Although it is certainly important to represent the interests of such entities in the decision-making processes that do affect them, it might also be important, at the same time, to open other ways of relating to the world around us that are not necessarily dependent on voice and language. Hence, silence is needed.

## ECOLOGY AND AESTHETICS

For Timothy Morton, taking the time to caress a cat can already be considered an ecological act, since it entails caring about a non-human being «for no particular reason». (7) It is an example of their idea of «tuning», by which they mean to establish a non-violent relationship with our environment. Silence and contemplation could hereby become tools to cultivate ecological intimacy and, more broadly, a more profound and caring relationship with the world. By remaining quiet and attentive, we can become more aware of the subtle interconnectedness of our surrounding world, often concealed under our word-clogged reality.

«For no particular reason» implies a certain passivity, or, on more active terms, a «willingness» to be overflowed by that which «just» comes to us. Silence, or «not saying anything», requires a similar passive attitude which increases the capacity for looking and hearing, that is, for receiving. It demands a readiness to «let yourself go», to let yourself be overpowered by external inputs. Susan Sontag writes similarly about contemplation in relation to silence and art, which for her implies a total surrender to the bewildered object: «Contemplation, strictly speaking, entails self-forgetfulness on the part of the spectator: an object worthy of contemplation is one which, in effect, annihilates the perceiving subject.» (8) There is one amendment to be made: every object is worthy of contemplation. Earlier in the same piece, Sontag even admits that, «[i]deally, one should be able to pay attention to everything.» (9) Certainly, art conceived as an object to be displayed in a white-cube kind of space, is meant to concentrate all of the aesthetic experience within itself. Sontag already recognized the power of silence so as to increase the sensorial response. However, in her writings, it is coupled with a defense of an aesthetics of reduction and emptiness, which is related to the growing influence of the minimalism of the 1960s. Also, it is concerned with the exclusive domain of art.

For the purpose of this essay, however, architecture and landscape should be thought of as environments that could encourage (and belong to) such a contemplative mode of experience. An environment, so Morton, is not a «neutral empty box, but an ocean filled with current and surges. It environs.» (10) Again, to achieve a more heightened sensorial experience of an environment, silence, or the absence of speech, becomes a powerful tool.

Lately, the discourse on architecture has taken on a strong political stance. The discipline, and all its associated actors, should be held accountable for their actions





(fig. a) Image: Vasil Shterev  
@thepowershit



(fig. b) «Not really sure where and when», 2023.  
Image: Vasil Shterev @thepowershit



within a fragile and already damaged world, most of us agree. There is a real need in valuing existing structures, reducing the extraction and depletion of materials and in imagining spaces that aesthetically and programmatically speak to a variety of gender, racial and class identities and are also able to accommodate a wide array of different species. All of which belong, mainly, to the process of designing and planning. In fact, some architects are already proposing exercises of self-silencing, which in the field of construction translate to an abstinence towards erecting new structures.(11)

However, architecture can just as well be politically engaged, with regard to the sort of experiences it promotes. Its everyday, sensuous experience dramatically affects the way in which we relate to the world. What if political agency could be found at the core of the discipline, that is, in its very spatial aspects? What if silence is one of its most powerful «political» instruments?

When experiencing it, there is little necessity for «understanding» architecture in intellectual terms, but just to take it «as it is», as part of the aesthetic phenomenon of the world. Morton again: «Things are encrypted.»(12) Language is one way of cutting an access to reality, one which is concerned with the production of meaning. Silence is a way to escape the burden of meaning.

Architecture that promotes silence, or the absence of voice, would to some extent refuse the politics of the spoken word, the politics as we know it. Though if it strengthens our attentiveness for other species, beings and things, it might take politics out of the human-governed domain of language.

## CITY FORESTS

«We walk between the tree trunks, small, incorporeal, and imperceptible to ourselves, as their sound, as what could never again become forest or external day and perceptibility. We do not have it — all that this moss, these strange flowers, roots, stems, and shafts of life are or signify — because we ourselves are it, and stand too near it, this ghostly and ever so nameless quality of consciousness or becoming-inward. But the note flares out of us, the heard note...»

— Ernst Bloch, *Philosophy of Music*(13)

Bloch describes the dissociation and annihilation of the subject Sonntag was talking about. An ontological becoming — «[w]e ourselves are it» — takes place as soon as we walk through the forest with a heightened awareness of it. The spatial metaphor of the forest has been widely used as the prototypical example of the silent encounter of the humans with pristine, originary and long forgotten «nature» scapes.(14) However, it is not my intention to give a pastoralistic account of a rediscovered and transcendental notion of nature. Instead, I would like to argue that an experience such as the one described by Ernst Bloch in his «*Philosophy of Music*» can be encountered

in the city as well. In any case, today no site on earth is left out of the influence of human activity, even if some may seem as they are (eg. the forest). Timothy Morton gives the example of the silent Rothko Chapel, a place for spiritual contemplation through appreciating art. Its paintings work as portals for «the future future». (15)

What if, however, silence could be found not only in the quiet murmur of the forest or the inwardness of the chapel, but in the noisiness of the city and, even in its loudest place, the rave. Raves are both a sensuous individual and collective experience, as well as a form of contemporary political manifestation. Proof of this is the immediate banning by the Italian far-right government as it took power last year. (16) In contrast to a protest, however, it is non-verbal and it does not necessarily support a specific political demand. Instead, raves are propositional, in the sense that they already convey the feeling of what a different way of relating to each other could be like. Tavia Nyong'o takes the techno club as the example of a place which offers anticipations of utopian consciousness. «I am thinking of course about the utopian margin of a music that so insistently and improbably raises our expectations of an oceanic feeling of oneness with humanity, all life, and the joyous rhythm of the cosmos», he writes. (17)

We move between bodies, unknown, yet familiar. The place is small, incredibly small, and everyone is just cramped in. Outside, we suspect, there might be already daylight. Inside, the place is brimming with sound, fog and sweat. We don't speak, however. Even though we are all caressing each other incessantly in the most intimate proximity. We are all oriented towards the source of sound, absorbed by it, floating in the sweat with the pounding, repetitive rhythm. It proves hard to keep oneself together, immersed in this (contradictory) sense of freedom and connectedness, together with the feel of dissolving... and yet becoming part of a larger whole, in a tiny space.