

# oude kerk

susan philipsz

*The Fall*, Susan Philipsz  
26 Nov 2021 – 27 Mar 2022

The work of Scottish artist Susan Philipsz (b. Glasgow, 1965) explores the emotional and spatial dimension of sound and focuses on the relationship between music and memory.

Central questions in her installations are: How can sound change your perception of a space? Does the meaning of music change when you hear it in another place than where you first listened to it? How does sound define a space and can it create a space within another space? In what way is sound a carrier of memories? And what role does melancholy play in this?

Philipsz has developed a new sound installation, *The Fall*, commissioned by the Oude Kerk. In eight silos, a composition by the country's most famous composer, Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1561-1621), arranged for her own untrained voice, can be heard. With her work, Philipsz explores the acoustics of Amsterdam's oldest building in a new way.

Interview  
Prior to the opening on 25 November 2021, artist Susan Philipsz spoke about the work with curator Marianna van der Zwaag.

*Marianna van der Zwaag: You first visited the church in 2018. Now we're at the point of installing the work. What can you remember about entering the Oude Kerk for the very first time?*  
Susan Philipsz: To me the interior of the Oude Kerk is this large empty space, with an amazing set of vistas and volumes. It's an incredible space, and walking in I really felt this sense of the emptiness and potential.

### My first impulse was to fill this space, the emptiness somehow, with sound.

*MvdZ: What struck you, or fascinated you, about it?*  
SP: What I found extremely interesting are these iconoclastic attacks (1566) in the Oude Kerk and their assault on the imagery and decoration inside the church, these gaps and absences that remain are compelling. The fact that it has been emptied due to the iconoclastic fury is really interesting. You feel that: the absence of the iconography, the decorations, the pews, those things that you would normally see in a church. It really resonated with me after reading Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988). Where he says: 'In the church, only the high bare, white walls, the vaults and the windows remained of the old gothic style. There is no painting on the wall, there is no picture anywhere. The church has been cleared like a gym.' That, I think, is really poignant. And then, when I learned more about the attacks, this story of Weyn Ockers, the lady who together with her maid was sentenced to death because during the storming of the Oude Kerk she would have thrown her slipper at a statue of Mary. The two women were publicly drowned on the Dam Square in a barrel filled with water. That was a horrible death, drowning in a barrel is a very brutal punishment. I was thinking about them, those women.

*MvdZ: There was a musician working here at the Oude Kerk at that particular time in history, who would become one of the greatest composers the Netherlands has ever known: Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621). He in fact prevented, together with the city government at the time, one of those gaps and absences you mentioned: the organs were not removed from the church. You became inspired by his music. What was it that inspired you?*  
SP: I had known about Sweelinck before, but it was a surprise when I entered the space, like 'he's here!' I really love his work. He was a contemporary of the composers of the Elizabethan era, which was known as the melancholy era. I think Sweelinck was very much aware of them as well. He even did an interpretation of a song *Flow My Tears* by his peer, composer John Dowland (1563-1626). I love this composition of Sweelinck, because it deals with these themes of melancholy that were so fashionable at the time.

*MvdZ: Melancholy is a state of mind that has always characterized the human condition. In Sweelinck's time people celebrated melancholy. When I look around I sense a reevaluation of melancholy. Not the one associated with depression,*

*but a healthy melancholy that can also be a source of creativity. What do you see?*  
SP: Yes, I think you're right. There has been a change recently and melancholia has had such a bad reputation. In his essay *Mourning and Melancholia* (1918), psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud believed that mourning was the acceptable face of sorrow, whereas melancholy was pathological, he saw it almost like a disease and that perception has been very strong ever since. However, if you go back to the Elizabethan era, and the time of Sweelinck, it was fashionable to be melancholic and so much creativity came from that. So, I'm happy to hear of writers and artists who have made arguments for melancholia in the present. In her book *Black Sun* (1987), philosopher Julia Kristeva talks



Koningsdagnummer 99 Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck. Foto: L&W Studio.

beautifully about melancholia in art and literature. I think there should be a place for melancholia in our everyday lives. A space for reflection and emotion that is a public and shared experience. In my works and exhibitions, I try to create that place: a space where you can feel comfortable being melancholic in public, and witness other people that you may not know, feeling the same way alongside you.

*MvdZ: You loosely based your vocal piece for the Oude Kerk on a composition for harpsichord titled 'Mein junges Leben hat ein End'. Sweelinck based this piece on a German folk song with a beautiful, mournful melody. Does it also reflect the melancholy mood that was popular in Sweelinck's time?*  
SP: Yes, this particular work has this repetition and descending scale and

that was something I wanted to emphasize, these continuous falling tones.

### The descending scale also brings to mind the falling tear, the motif of the falling tear is like a metaphor for the fall of man.

Falling from the divine sphere to the depths of earthly life. That was something I wanted to emphasize in this church, and it's the title of the show, 'The Fall'. I think Sweelinck is about that as well, moving from the sacred to the secular. So, I do find him very interesting also for this reason.

*MvdZ: Your work shows a deep understanding of how music carries the memories, hopes and feelings of people.*  
SP: I'm interested in the emotive and the psychological effects of sound and in particular, singing. How it can define architecture and how it can make you aware of yourself. I've always felt, from the very beginning, that these were the concerns in my work. How sound can heighten awareness of yourself while making you aware of a particular place and time. This stems from my sculptural background, the act of singing is almost like a sculptural experience. Getting a sense of a person behind the voice is what interests me, rather than a mediated, polished and post-production voice. I really want to make it clear in my work that it's an ordinary voice. It could be anyone's voice. I think everyone can identify with the human voice, and I think when it is stripped down to just the voice and without any musical accompaniment, then you really do hear the flaws. So I recorded my voice dry. What you will hear in the Oude Kerk is completely dry, and of course, the acoustics of the church will make it sound less dry. When I say dry I mean I'm not adding anything to reverb or anything like that to make it sound better. So usually any voice that you hear mediated or recorded is made better post-production. But I don't do that because I want it to sound like anyone's voice.

### There is a person there, which you hear through the flaws, because it isn't polished.

*MvdZ: In your work for the Oude Kerk the act of falling is also important.*  
SP: Yes this idea of the falling, the descent of man, the coming down to earth, that grounding into the present. 'Mein Junges Leben hat Ein End' itself is beautiful, it has, as I said, this descending scale to create the feeling of falling, falling from heaven to earth. That was what he was about, in his music as well, and what was happening within the church and the iconography. I read that he managed to save the organ in the Oude Kerk from the iconoclasts by creating secular music and opening the church to the public. I think that's interesting. What is interesting about later vocal adaptations of the piece is that one voice covers the other every time the other voice needs to breathe, making it seem as if no one ever needs to breathe and angels sing instead of humans. But what I'm doing with this is making it more apparent by separating the madrigal. So by fragmenting it I'm making it more abstract. So the emphasis is more on the physicality of producing breath to create the sound.

*MvdZ: You use eight enormous industrial silo's in your installation here, hanging from the ceiling of the church. To emphasize this falling?*  
SP: Yes exactly, but also the feeling of separation and isolation, by having the sounds being more localized within the silos. Also, the silos echo the other verticals in the space like the long, stained-glass windows and may even suggest candles hanging low into the space.

### I arranged them in the space so that they appear to call to each other.

Each of them has a speaker inside that projects raw elemental tones made with my own voice that resonate inside the body of the container. Important is the fact that the voice is not a trained voice. Also, I'm not singing the lyrics from the piece, it's just the tones, so it's more abstract and more emphasizing the breath that's needed to project the sound. I want to really emphasize the acoustics of not only that of the church itself, but also the acoustics of these forms, which have their own acoustics within the space. So you do get a more emphasized sense of the separation of the voice. And I suppose I was also thinking about Weyn Ockers and her maid servant. Their voices are almost like these disembodied voices, spectral in a way, which come in these silos, if you like.

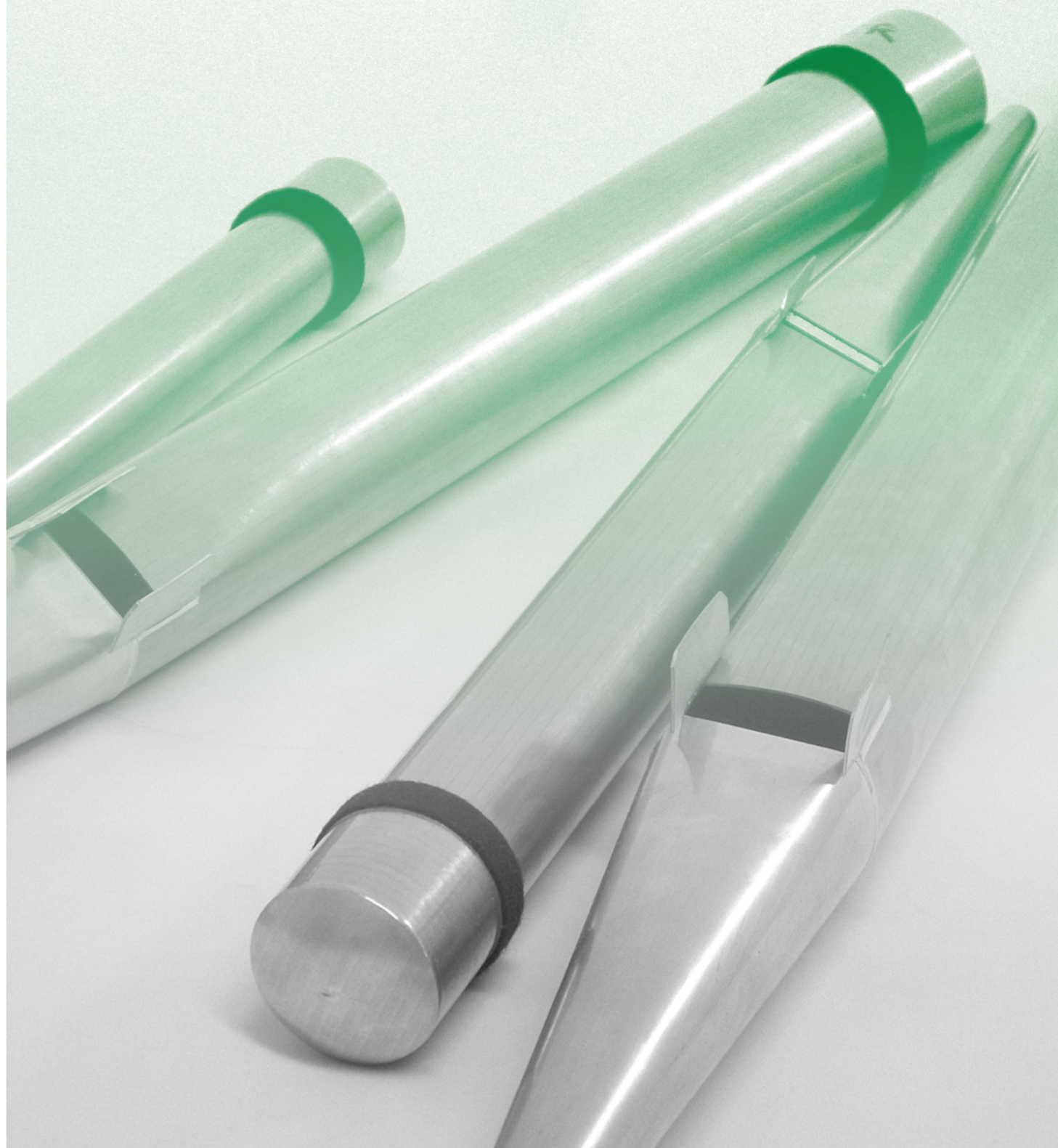
*MvdZ: I visited your presentation in Berlin earlier this year, in June, and there you also used objects based on the shape of silos. How did you come up with this idea to use silos? Normally these are only found outside, in rural areas.*  
SP: The silos have very interesting acoustics and I've always been fascinated by the acoustics of objects. I've often worked with architecture and its specific acoustics but more recently, I've been looking at objects that actually have a particular acoustics, like water wells and stairwells, barrels and silos. Silos have an amazing acoustics and just discovering what happens when you project your voice up inside a silo – it's an incredible resonator of sound. At Konrad Fischer Gallery, the space where we met, it is all about echo. It's really something that you cannot ignore, so I felt I had to address that in the work I made for that space. And so it became all about echo, not just the revibration of the space, but also the mythological Echo, the mountain nymph, which is where sound revibration is named after.

*MvdZ: Very interesting this echo, also thinking of a place like the Oude Kerk. As the oldest building of Amsterdam it is saturated with time, all those voices and echoes from the past are still here. Do you think sound ever dies?*  
SP: An echo in a space creates a sense of time and of time passing. It makes sound seem distant, as if coming from the past and by the time it reaches you it has crossed a distance from the past. There is this idea of sound always being there. This is something pioneer Guglielmo Marconi (1874-1937), the inventor of radio, once said: when sounds are generated, they never die or die away completely.

Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck: *Mein Junges Leben hat ein End*  
Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1561-1621) is considered one of the most influential composers of the Renaissance. During his lifetime, he was at the centre of Amsterdam's musical life. Sweelinck had an extensive teaching practice, composed psalms, motets and keyboard works and often played in people's homes with his Collegium Musicum. Sweelinck must have been disappointed when the Protestants abolished instrumental and polyphonic church music in 1581. Nevertheless, the church organs were preserved and Sweelinck played the organ of the Oude Kerk every day in service of the city council. Musicians from all over Europe came to Amsterdam to learn improvisation and composition from him, and he had a

### I thought it was such an evocative notion that all the sounds that we ever create are still out there.

*MvdZ: That's a nice bridge to a separate sculpture with organ pipes you created for one of the side rooms, the Collegekamer.*  
SP: I think when you enter that room, you feel that you're going into a room where people are sleeping, which is also a metaphor for death, mortality. The recording is of me breathing through these large organ pipes, which takes a lot of breath, and then those same recordings emanate from within the



Susan Philipsz, Together V, 2020, four organ pipes and sound installation view, Terry Bonafide Gallery, Los Angeles, 2020.

great influence on the music of his contemporaries and composers. With his daily organ performances, he stood at the cradle of the first public concerts. Whereas previously music was heard on the street, behind the closed doors of the court, or in church services, in the Oude Kerk you could just walk in and enjoy a daily concert. Susan Philipsz took Sweelinck's *Mein Junges Leben hat ein End*, a composition originally written for harpsichord, as the starting point for her installation. Sweelinck based the theme on a German folk song from his time. Sweelinck probably wrote his variations on this melody for one of his many German pupils who came to Amsterdam to take lessons from him. Intrigued by the descending scale, Philipsz derived the title of her work from the composition.

organ pipes themselves. Which have their own acoustics. So it's almost like the recording is playing the instrument.

*MvdZ: What do you hope audiences will take from your work?*  
SP: I'm interested in how sound can heighten your sense of yourself in a particular place and time. For that moment or those moments where you hear it, you're all of a sudden aware of your environment. You're aware of the place you're in, whether it's a beautiful setting like this church, or hearing a voice through the public address system of the supermarket. So all of a sudden you're engaged in

your environment. It's quite different to listening to music that normally takes you to another place, or you're very engaged with the performance. When I work somewhere, it's often about the place, activating the acoustics of the architecture and being aware of yourself – heightening your own sense of self and a particular place.

Biography  
Susan Philipsz (b. Glasgow, 1965) is a Scottish artist based in Berlin. She became known for sound installations in which recordings of her own voice often relate to the history and stories of a place. Her work has been seen and heard in numerous places. From remote places like alleys and subways to public spaces, like on a platform at the documenta in Kassel, the Erasmus Bridge in Rotterdam and recently an abandoned swimming pool in Bonn. Philipsz studied sculpture at the Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee and completed a Masters in Fine Art at the University of Ulster. She participated in the Melbourne International Biennial in 1999, the Triennial of British Art at Tate Britain in 2003 and the 16th Sydney Biennial in 2008. In 2010 she made a site-specific sound installation, *The Shallow Sea*, for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. In 2013, work by Philipsz was included in 'Soundings: A Contemporary Score', the first-ever major exhibition of sound art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. In 2010, she won the Turner Prize. It was the first time this prestigious award was given to a sound work.

colophon

The exhibition was a collaborative effort: artist **Susan Philipsz**, curators **Marianna van der Zwaag** and **Jacqueline Grandjean**, Susan Philipsz Studio **Eoghan McTigue**, creative producer **Chloë Sylvestre**, sound engineer **Jürgen Galli**, exhibition construction **Anything is Possible (Joep Munstermann, Robert Clarijs, Thomas Wildner, Meinbert Gozewijn van Soest)**, Restoration Architecture **BBM Ben Massop and François van der Gouw**, HMT Bouwtechniek **Herman Marquart**, Stahlhöfer **Jeffrey Visser**.

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**26 nov 2021 – 27 mrt 2022**  
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Oude Kerk

In the oldest building in the city (anno 1306), heritage, contemporary art and music come together. As an icon of the iconoclasm (1566), the Oude Kerk occupies a unique place in the Dutch cultural landscape. Besides its existence as a centuries-old monument where an important part of Amsterdam's history has left its traces, the Oude Kerk is an internationally oriented platform for contemporary art. With new work, artists and musicians explore the history, architecture and acoustics of this place in new ways every time.