

Blue (Yellow) - Rolf Julius
At Cortex Atheltico



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Rolf Julius

Blue Yellow

28/04/09 - 23/05/09

In thinking about the work of Rolf Julius, of Julius, I return again and again to a random, seemingly arcane sentence I stumbled across once reading John Cage. "A sound," he wrote, "has no legs to stand on." The context, the author, the rest of the two-page piece may or may not be important – I suppose John Cage is always going to be important – but the coexistence of sounds and legs and the act of (not) standing within one image or metaphor, one vision, definitely is. For it connotes a sound, liberated of legs so to speak, as a corporeal material entity in space and time that is off the ground, present and floating; it invokes a relationship between sound and ground that is central to the installations of Rolf Julius. Whether we consider his reduced grey lines of dust dissolving the corner where wall meets floor, or his sprawling floorscapes of lamps, light and shadows, of bowls and other vessels, pigments, fluids, speakers, wires meandering, bifurcating like veins or rivers, our gaze is directed downwards towards the ground although, like sound and unlike our bodies, it is never grounded. Rather, like the minimal movement of dust shifting upon sound waves emanating from tiny speakers, like the ever so subtly rippling water in bowls or on video monitors, it is free to drift and focus, to create and fill gaps, to conquer and be overwhelmed by space, to envision the universe for a moment in its vast entirety and to plunge into absolute nothingness.

Struck by this open-endedness, my mind involuntarily wanders back to the many titles of works by Julius delicately balancing upon the small word "for": Concert for Two Empty Surfaces, Dance for Nine Columns, Music for this Building and the Square in Front of It, or, as in the case of the present exhibition, für den Blick nach unten (for the downward gaze). Julius makes work for things and not about things. Just as he consciously "leaves the sounds alone", so that they might have the chance of becoming music, he leaves our gaze alone with the barest of materials, so that it might have the chance of becoming (something). But what does it mean to leave the sounds alone, to leave things alone – sounds and things and time and space? What does this "forness" sound, look, feel like? Why dust and plastic and glass, metal and liquid, hard and soft edges, stones and lamps? Why photography, film, drawing, text and sound? Why spaces outside and inside? Why floors and walls, corners, containers and wide open spaces? Why surfaces upon surfaces upon surfaces? Should we speak of music, sculpture, performance or installation? Should we be talking about Minimalism, Arte Povera, Conceptual art, the aesthetics of silence, of nothingtoseeness? About spirituality or materiality? About kinetics or stillness? About fragments or wholeness, synaesthesia? And does it all matter? Should we be talking at all?

A Sound Has No Legs to Stand on.

Thinking about the Work of Rolf Julius

Catherine Nichols

In stark contrast to its object, the discourse surrounding sound art – and hence the work of Rolf Julius who is widely considered a major exponent of this movement – is quite concerned with finding its feet, in finding legs to stand on. Indeed, approaches to this direction in art, which have radically proliferated since the late 1960s, have a considerable gravity about them. The very act of designating works incorporating the element of sound in some way as sound art affords sound a weight, a significance, which precludes it from being merely one of many elements in a work; it has a tendency to make sound central, all-consuming, and the other elements subservient, peripheral, perhaps even exchangeable. It has had philosophers like Adorno worrying over the integrity of the arts and music, art historians and musicologists wondering where they might locate the beginnings and the boundaries of the movement, and artists nervous about the limitations of subsumption into this necessarily fluid category.

There is no doubt that the designation has its uses and moreover its values, yet like any discursive figure, the risk of self-referentiality, of circularity, of producing one major cacophonous feedback loop is substantial. Perhaps more than any other art-historical label, sound art is faced with the particularly pressing urgency of subduing its overwhelming formal disparity and structural syncretism in a bid to present as some kind of legitimate whole. Whereas neither a straightforward sculpture nor a conventional painting are inclined to provoke obsessively ontological ruminations, artworks that transgress the boundaries of singular media, as is the case with so-called sound art, inevitably kick the discussion off in an ontological direction, distracting from the content and specificity of the individual work.



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While most theorists grappling with the terminology of sound art are quite prepared to concede the inherently problematic nature of the term, to admit their reluctance in using it, its very articulation often results nevertheless in the prioritisation of taxonomy and morphology. Thus the question of whether or not and why a particular piece might be considered an exemplar of sound art somehow seems to overshadow the simple observation of what is there.

According to this archetypal approach, Rolf Julius's works are described as inducing a synaesthetic perception, as producing sounds with repetitive structures which possess attributes such as colour, form, texture and dimensionality. They are described as combining optical elements with acoustic elements, as engaging with architectural situations, as investigating the potential of silence and so on. Of course all of this is appropriate and enlightening, but it continues to leave me wondering if this can be the extent of it. Do we not, by privileging sound, tend to gloss over the wildly divergent materials and forms sketched at the outset? Might it be possible, in thinking of sound as just another material – legs or no legs to stand on –, to adjust our apprehension of Julius's installations, to move away from simple dichotomies of acoustics and optics, of sound against the undifferentiated rest, towards a closer understanding of how the material coincides with the immaterial? A conversation between Shin Nakagawa and Julius conducted from January 1992 through to April 1993 suggests that such a readjustment is not only possible but crucial. Here, Julius spoke of both the importance of specific materials to his work and his treatment of sound or music as one such material. Noting the proximity of his practice to Minimal art insofar as the materials themselves have meaning, Julius explained that a piece of iron and a piece of music are the same thing for him, that he puts them in a space and does as they suggest: "I am not really intent on expressing ideas in the form of music, but rather about receiving something that is already there." Let us look, then, at what Susan Sontag would call the "transparency", or "the luminousness of the thing in itself" – in other words, at what is there.

As though guided by the contrary impulses of reduction (or disappearance) and monumentalism inherent to minimalist artworks, by the concomitance of the modest and the bombastic, I am having difficulty deciding whether to look first at works such as Vier Farbhügel, the four small piles of pigments covering small loudspeakers placed towards the centre of the expansive empty space of the Kunstquartier in Ackerstraße Berlin back in the 1980s, or the rampant installations of manifold materials and technical devices such as the Sound Cooking group of works that has recurred in various constellations from the 1980s through to the present. It is not as though one is historically or even ideationally prior, however; neither is it the case that one is a study, or a detail of the other. Both the formally reduced and the sprawling works are at once small and vast, everything and nothing. In tracing the trajectory of Julius's artist production, it becomes evident that it is a practice, akin to stirring ingredients, of moving predominantly found objects and substances around in space, allowing them to blend and unfold differently each time. In her analysis of the ephemeral in her father's work, Maija Julius describes Julius's strategy of recycling, of taking the old and adding the new in a non-linear, process-oriented continuum with a relative indifference to size, a strategy which frees us of the compulsion of speaking in terms of developments and hierarchies and allows us to focus on the ingredients, on sound cooking as a metonym for the fragmentary whole.

Like so many of Julius's installations, the variation of Sound Cooking installed at the recent exhibition at Museum Bochum, intones and, at first glance, exists within the realm of the horizontal. It is an environment, as opposed to an autonomous art object, whose components are spread out across the floor, both incorporating and setting themselves apart from the particular properties of the floor. We see woks containing dirt or pepper or pigments, photographs covered by sheets of glass beside sheets of rusting metal, little ensembles of roughly hewn stones, tiny loudspeakers buried within the dirt and cables and mini CD-players. Though we look down to see the work, there is no sense that our gaze is vertical for it is immediately drawn across the surfaces of the objects, delving into and out of containers, into vessels of dirt and minimal electronic music, and outwards into the indefinite, air and light. Rather, it is an archaeological and auditory gaze whose openness is given by the horizontality. Both in this sense, and in terms of the nature of the materials, there is a strong reverberation of Arte Povera, whose exponents similarly insisted on horizontality for its openness and favoured natural and industrial materials over the traditional materials used in high art such as marble or bronze.

Without being programmatic about it – one always has the impression that Julius chooses certain materials because he likes them – he demonstrates an obvious preference for poor materials, extending to the "faint, somewhat indistinct and cloudy sounds" he favours over the grand sounds generally sought after. For their impoverishment amounts to an "emancipation", as Julius puts it; it removes them from the servitude of symbolism; it reduces the distance between art object and viewer as well as the presence of his own hand, of himself as producer.



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As an artist who “mixes with the environment, who camouflages himself”, he moves away from reified signs, not in order to create a new set of signifiers or an altered symbolism, as is the case with artists such as Joseph Beuys, but rather to be able to look at – and to enable us to look at – surfaces, to isolate specific and positive qualities, to become aware of relationships and space and how they give us a sense of temporality, perhaps infinity, and corporeality. This gesture is captured by the ubiquitous containers of metal or ceramics – or in other works soft materials such as plastic or paper bags – which gently hold their contents, as we see in the woks filled with grey-brown dirt, for example, or the bowls filled with water given its colour and consistency by dishwashing liquid. In their juxtaposition of the finite with the infinite, of the container with endless, barely inflected grains of dirt or droplets of liquid, they invoke infinity in an unpretentious way that the simple reproduction of infinity in the form of the form of an endless series could never achieve.

This sense of spatial temporality is similarly invoked by the photographs of objects also present in the installation which are printed and placed under panels of glass. Covering the two-dimensional, static, silent representations of acoustically charged three-dimensional objects, the reflective translucent surface of the glass is at once a further layer, a further alienation, and a window, a framing, focal device – a different form of “container”. Hence our gaze is alternately attracted and deflected, the deflection giving way to other sensory experiences such as the auditory or tactile, thereby undermining the seemingly natural dominance of sight. In shifting our attention between the actual dirt and the photographic representation of it, of speakers softly transmitting sounds to our ears and their photographic images below glass, the act of perception is expanded along with the pictorial space – all of a sudden the dirt’s hapticity and music come to the fore; our apprehension becomes compositional, synaesthetically scoring parts for the pepper we see/smell/taste/touch and ultimately hear, for the movements of light, the round or square shapes, the planar and three-dimensional and Julius’s assertion that “music is everywhere” begins to make sense.

The coexistence of stones and metal, of stones upon rusting metal, also offered to us by the installation might be thought to echo concerns explored by artists associated with Anti Form such as Richard Serra and Robert Morris, for whom the austere, preconceived status of Minimalist sculpture was veritably begging to be disrupted by the processual. In essentially doing something similar to what Rolf Julius calls “leaving things alone” in his own work, both Serra and Morris consciously incorporated factors such as randomness and gravity, weight and decomposition, allowing materials to find their own forms. While the rusting sheet of metal and seemingly scattered stones in Sound Cooking are redolent of some of the gestures of Minimalism and Anti Form, the fusion of these elements with the material of sound has a strange effect on process. The linear, irreversible process of rusting metal is overlaid by static chiselled stones, both of which are overlaid in turn by small music whose barely modulated repetitions and different form of weight and density pick up the sounds of iron rusting and paradoxically produce an aural space that halts process, or makes it cyclical – either way inducing a sense of stillness and quietude. Thus, in the same way that the dichotomy between the finitude of containers and the infinity of dust tends ultimately to invoke infinity, the dichotomy between linear process and stasis tends ultimately towards stillness and disappearance, towards an architecture de l’air, to use Yves Klein’s utopian vocabulary of the void.

The “architecture of air” brings me from cooking sounds and sound cooking back to the four piles of pigment on the floor, from the sprawling to the solitary. For rigorous formal reduction is as characteristic of Julius’s oeuvre as the more organic other. Just as the opulence of poor materials typifying the previous group of works lent itself to the examination of the way the various elements meet and superimpose themselves upon one another, the absolute minimalism of other groups of works such as the dirt lines, or the solitary rocks with speakers or the piles of dust or paint flecks in corners lend themselves to the examination of the way the works effect and generate space. Here the site-specificity of Julius’s approach is at its most apparent. In the work comprising four piles of pigments, for example, there is a direct referencing of the architecture of the space with its four corners. On the one hand the anti-formal scattering of particles of pigments in tiny piles and the wires meandering forth from them challenge both the vastness of the room and its linear geometry, which is underscored by the vertical lines of the radiators, sculptural entities in themselves. On the other hand, the placement of the piles in direct relationship to the corners of the room aligns them with – or even incorporates them within – the very same geometry that they undermine on another level.



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Together the piles create several spaces within the space: there is the space inside the four piles, the space outside and then the visual-acoustic environment as a whole. The emptiness of the microspace at the centre which we can apprehend from the outside gives us a sense of the void overall in which we find ourselves. Beyond their architectural function, however, the pigments simultaneously work as part of a musical score, whereby the sounds coming from speakers below the blue, yellow, red and green pigments acquire a timbre and colour the otherwise uninflected white-grey space. A similar approach can be seen in *Empty Music* (1988) conceived for the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Here, Julius placed two panes of glass on the ground in an empty room in front of two large windows, each balanced upon a small loudspeaker emanating a music of emptiness through the barely visible glass in both an architectural and musical citation of the windows transmitting the music from outside into the space within.

Sound may not have legs, but, as we have seen, it undeniably has a body – a body, a material, sculptural entity in permanent flux at the boundaries of visual perception. A vital element in Julius's work, it is nevertheless one among many materials, layers, nuances which are assembled by Julius in spaces by way of a sensitive offer of a thing existing, becoming. While he references the materials and structures of directions in art frequently caught up in challenging the boundaries of art and the art object – Arte Povera, Minimal art, sound, performance, installation art – his concerns are less programmatic than they are compositional, phenomenological, architectural, aesthetic. With their at times wild, at times rigidly simple assembly of poor materials rich in texture and sensory invitations, his works are about – or rather for – approaching silence, absence, nothingness through sound, presence and somethingness. Yet more than anything else, they are music for the eyes.

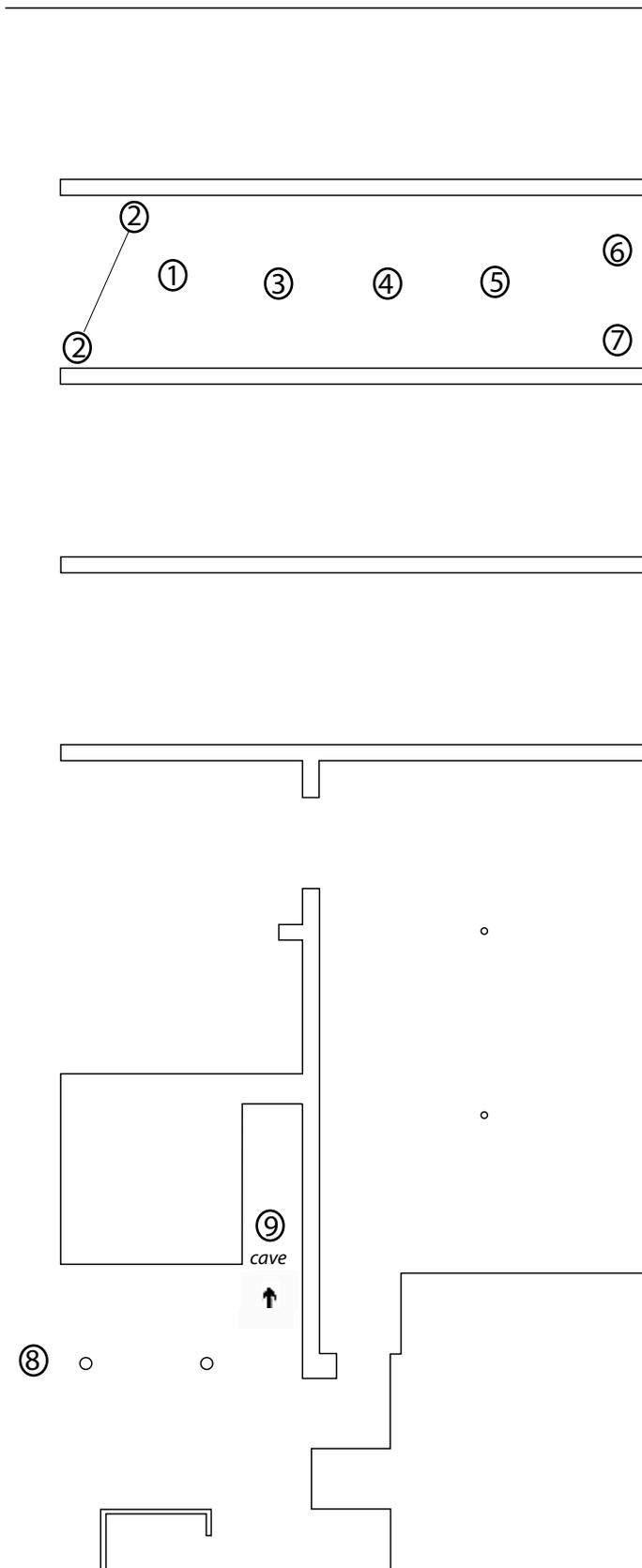


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Rolf Julius Blue (Yellow)

1 - *Broken piece (ash)*, 2008
Clay pot, speaker, clay dust, MP3, Data Cd
26 x 26 x 14 cm

2 - *Rücken (dos)*, 1975 /2008
Dyptique, numeric prints
25 x 18 cm (x 2)

3 - *Stone field C*, 2006
24 stones, 1 speaker, MP3 player, Data Cd
55 x 55 x 9 cm

4 - *Stone field B*, 2004
37 stones, 2 speakers, MP3 player, Data Cd
62 x 56 x 12 cm

5 - *Stone field A*, 2009
29 speakers, pigment, MP3 player, Data Cd
43 x 43 x 3 cm

6 - *For the clouds (fishes)*, 2008
Blue pigment, cables, MP3 player, Data Cd
variable speaker size 16 x 24 cm

7 - *Blue (yellow)*, 2009
2 melamine bowls, 1 speaker with blue pigment,
yellow washing up liquid gelified, MP3 player, Data Cd
28 x 17 x 6 cm

8 - *Wall drawing (cortex)*, 2009
4 speakers, cd player, cd audio
variable size

9 - *Raining*, 2009 - 20..
Installation
variable size
Basement - visit on request
Cave - visite sur demande



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Broken piece (ash)

2008

Clay pot, speaker, clay dust, MP3 player, data cd,
26 x 26 x 14 cm

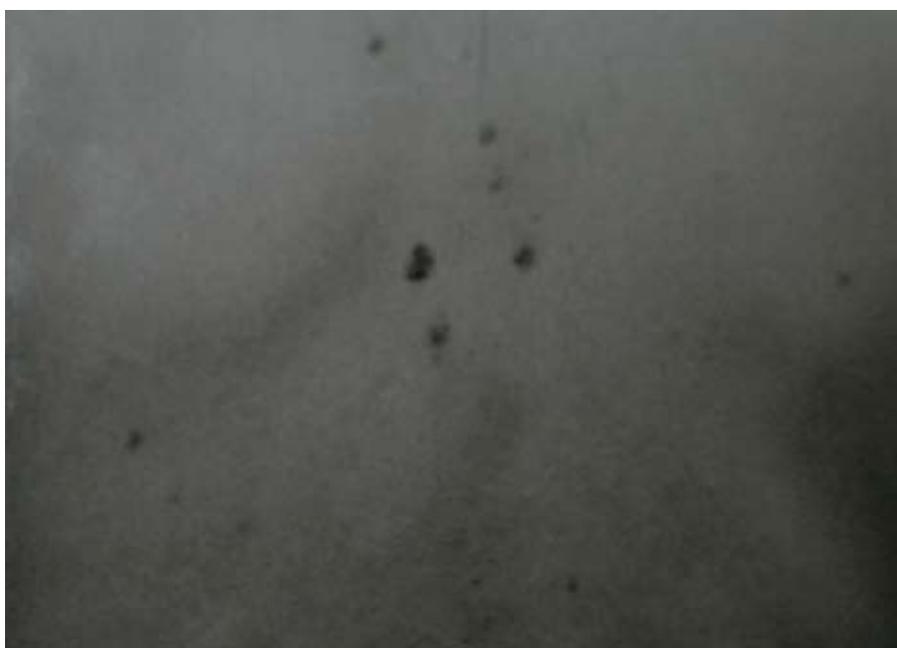
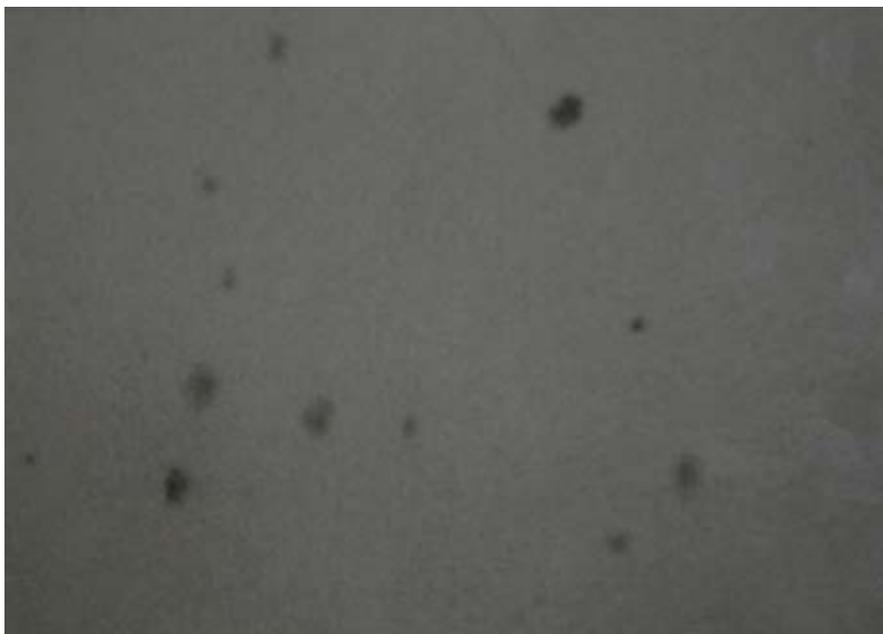


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Rücken (dos)
1975 - 2008
Dyptic, numeric prints
25 x 18 cm (x 2)



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From the left to the right

Stonefield C

2004

37 stones, 2 speakers, MP3 player, data CD,
65 x 56 x 12 cm

Stonefield B

2006

24 stones, 1 speaker, MP3 player, data cd
55 x 55 x 9 cm

Stonefield A

2009

29 speakers, stone dust, MP3 player, data CD,
43 x 43 x 3 cm



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Stonefield A
2009
29 sepakers, stone dust, MP3 player, data CD,
43 x 43 x 3 cm



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Stonefield B

2006

24 stones, 1 speaker, MP3 player, data cd

55 x 55 x 9 cm



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Stonefield C

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37 stones, 2 speakers, MP3 player, data CD,
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For the clouds (fishes)

2008

Speaker, blue pigment, cables, MP3 player, data CD,
Variable size



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Blue (Yellow)

2009

2 melamine bowls, 1 speaker with blue pigment, yellow washing up liquid gelified, MP3 player, data CD
28 x 17 x 6 cm

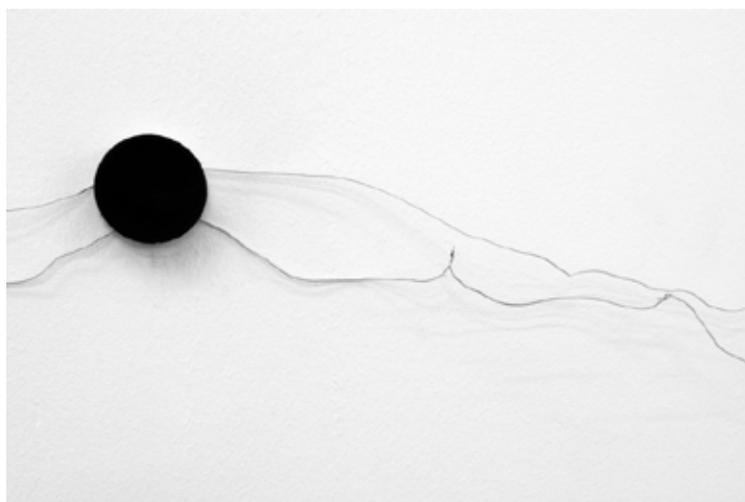
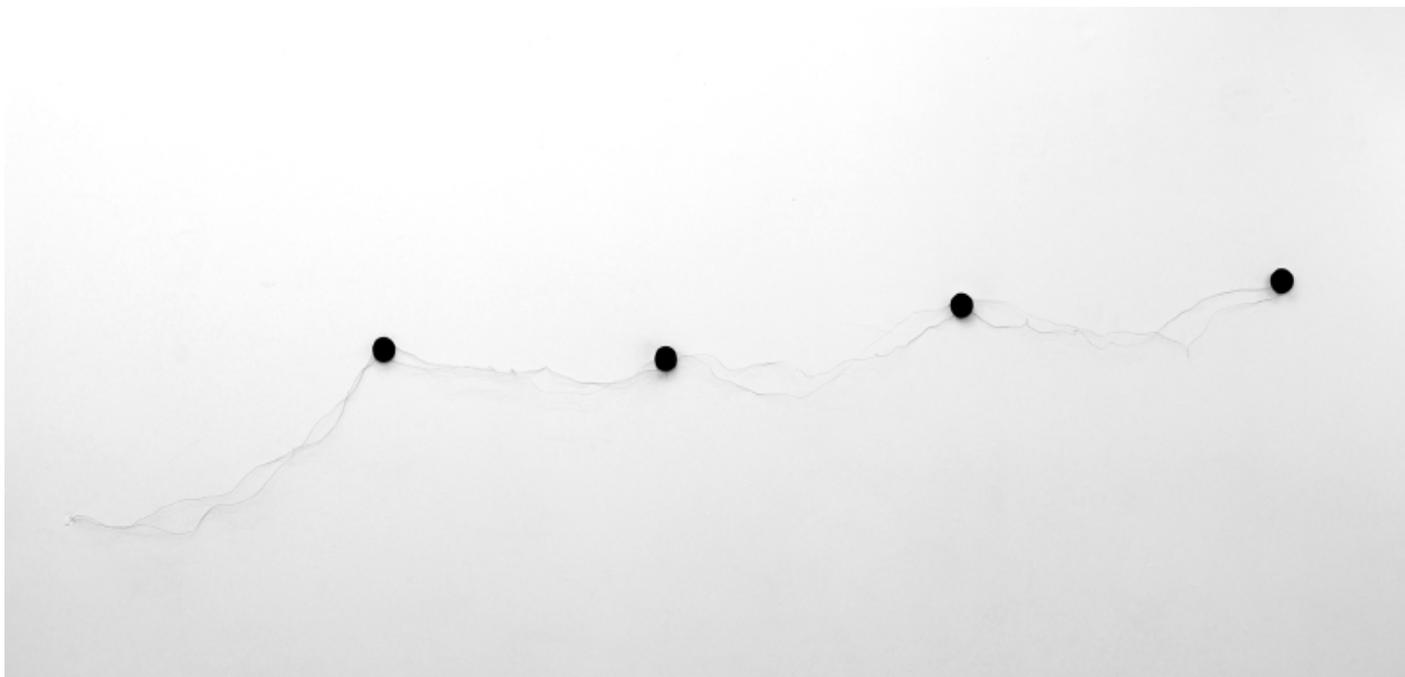


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Wall drawing (cortex)
2009
4 speakers, CD player,
Variable size



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Raining
2009
2 screens, 2 speakers
Variable size



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