Penelope: unheard (of).
Christoph Vögele, 2011
Translation: Fiona Elliott

The free zone between Chronos and Kairos, which is only just a home and certainly no place of refuge, throws out questions into space and then eliminates them.
Ludmila Vachtova[1]

Despite all the hermetic qualities that are perhaps inherent in my art, communication is my most important motivation.
Andrea Wolfensberger[2]

The work of Andrea Wolfensberger revolves around natural processes and existential questions. From the outset, time and temporality have shaped her themes, and these are the features that have also most frequently been discussed in the mediation of her many-faceted œuvre. With her choice of exhibition title *… then listen again …*, taken from Samuel Beckett's stage work *Not I* (1972), she draws our attention to listening as an activity in the here and now. As part of a communicative give and take in time and space, talking and listening are closely intertwined; in continuous interaction there no longer seems to be any spatial division between transmitter and receiver.

Speechless Sounds, Articulate Images

Yet there only certain works by Wolfensberger that make direct contact with the viewer's sense of hearing; more often than not her three-dimensional works and installations—for all their sculptural stasis and speechlessness—merely imply sounds and sound sequences. Paradoxes of this kind frequently arise in Wolfensberger's art. When she takes immaterial yet real voices—her son laughing, fragmented phrases by Beckett—and materializes them as sculptures, she gives visual, tangible form to what is otherwise only audible. And her works are distinguished by a communicative interplay between different levels, a perceptual to and fro that leads not only from listening to seeing, but also back from seeing to listening. Who could forget the artistic transposition of the boy's laughter into a huge, hollow, ridged cone (*jusqu'à ce qu'il fasse rire* ["*until he bursts out laughing*"], 2009), which, with all the suggestive force of a perfect metaphor, sets long gone laughter ringing in the viewer's ears? Wolfensberger's outstanding powers of observation and her willingness to engage with radical concentration in long-term projects, like a field researcher, has been attributed to a scientific mind. But in her pictorial inventions she is an artist through and through, whose ability to alight upon metaphors—in the form of articulate images—allows her to bring together different realms of human experience. The small metaphorical link—"as if"—is all she needs to progress from perfectly ordinary observations to enduring life principles.

Andrea Wolfensberger's interest in articulate imagery is not confined to metaphor alone, but also extends to translations from one medium into another: from video images into painting, for instance, as in the series *was uns blüht* (["what flowers we're in for"] 2003) and *von den hereinbrechenden Rändern* (["of collapsing edges"] 2006), which, with beguiling sensuality, invite us to look anew at the time-honored phenomenon of nature burgeoning and decaying in a garden.[3] Communication, as a form of mediation or transposition (literally: from one place to another) raises the question as to choice of artistic means. Yet Wolfensberger is not seeking art-immanent media debate, but rather existential exploration. The manifold translations and transpositions in her work—progressing from the filmic encapsulation of her own firsthand experience of her mother's garden via the selection

of individual film stills to their painterly transfer onto canvas—mirror the numerous processes of abstraction that ensue in our everyday perception and mediation of our world, and that lead ever further away from the original sensation. The process of understanding and making-oneself- understood is shaped by myriad chances and decisions. And when, in some paintings, Andrea Wolfensberger also deliberately integrates into the composition shadow images from the video stills—in effect a form of visual interference—she is alerting us to the indirectness and blurriness of our own "images of the world," constantly in flux, by definition endlessly changing.

The Challenge

It is precisely her awareness of the complexity of perception and communication that prompts Andrea Wolfensberger to create works that primarily connect with the viewer as a sensual being. The exhibition title *… then listen again …* is an appeal to our sense of hearing, and to all the senses that we use—in the here and now—to discern our surroundings. In so doing she turns our attention not to our intellectual but to our physical capacities of perception. And although she draws on a whole range of media in her creative work, in her heart and mind she is a sculptor who works with bodies in space—or a "performer" in her own right. Not as a live performer in front of an audience, but in videos such as *Wassergang* (*Water Walk*, 1993), wading against the current of a fast-flowing stream, dragging a camera behind her and filming the whole risky undertaking: "The performative aspect of fording the stream, where the artist puts herself at risk literally as well as in the narrative, in turn, signifies the menace to her own artistic position."[4]

Andrea Wolfensberger demands a lot of herself. And the viewer's encounter with her work is similarly intense and challenging. Its impact, in certain video works, can be a literal influx of sounds and voices. Amongst the high points of the exhibition is a large scale presentation of the video installation *Hitzewelle* (*Heat Wave*, 2003), which creates a persuasive connection between the shimmering vibrations of Wolfensberger's images and a musical paraphrase by the singer and composer Marianne Schuppe. In response to the threatening, unfathomable nature of the hot volcanic landscape, Schuppe has created a memorable sound design that "gets under our skin," not only filling the space and allowing us to feel its physical form, but also entering into our own bodies. "Moreover, it is only by transmitting the sound through loudspeakers that the installation unfolds in space, filling the air between the area of the projection and the walls with vibration, physical presence and action."[5] The dialectic of silence and swelling sound raises the tension, heightens our attention: "The sound only commences after some minutes have passed. A chorus of women's voices is heard, which gradually multiply in irregularly timed canonic entries. A bewildering, increasingly numberless mass of voices forms layer upon layer, endlessly intensifying the melodic structure. . . . The voices build up into an indefinable soundscape and culminate in a rising and falling rushing noise."[6]

This sound edifice, created with great sophistication from a single voice—her own—is the musician's response to a comparable process in the artist's work: the source material for Andrea Wolfensberger was a short, black-and-white super-8 film of a stone desert on one of the Aeolian Islands. She started by transferring this into a video format and changed the speed of "groups of eight data packets into an aperiodic algorithm."[7] During the course of her work on the video, she made a total of around 45,000 edits.

On the Sense of Non-Sense: Signs of Life

This uncommonly elaborate process designed to achieve specific visual effects almost has an air of obsession about it, which seems to emerge from time to time in the work of Andrea Wolfensberger. A comparable, stunning multiplicity is seen in the two *Matrix* paintings (1993), whose minute execution required the artist in effect to turn herself into a numerical painting machine. The complex, yet arithmetically perfectly logical structure of one of her number paintings then served as the basis

for the video cut of *Hitzewelle*. The highly regulated procedure was not unlike "weaving" a carpet, it calls to mind Penelope and her sensible senseless weaving, passing the time torn between forbearance and longing. Wolfensberger's effort "weaving" her *Matrix* paintings or building up *Hitzewelle* seems just as "unheard of" as her struggle through the water or her harmless sounding *Winterspaziergang* (*Winter Ramble*, 1995), shot in deepest winter as she, for no apparent reason, scales a steep, snow slope with a running camera on her back.

The seeming senselessness of Wolfensberger's survival training (all but swept away by the rushing water) and her endurance tests in the face of a positively endless task, recalls the non-sense that surrounds and spurs on the lonely figures in Samuel Beckett plays. Besides the exhibition title, *… then listen again …*, there is a whole group of sculptures that relate to Beckett's *Not I*. In this play a single female character delivers an extended monologue, which—in fragmented half-sentences, with numerous pauses and repetitions—revolves around something terrible and traumatic, which it is impossible to make sense of. To create her sculptures, Andrea Wolfensberger started with a sound recording of this monologue and drew diagrams for individual fragments of text, illustrating—in the form of silhouettes—the rise and fall of highs and lows, the rhythmic progression of sounds and pauses. (fig.) Next she took this two-dimensional scheme and materialized it in three dimensions, in effect extending the sound out into 360º. As though they were pearls, the artist then fed the ensuing forms—spherical, concave and convex—onto a string, which is attached to the ceiling, so that they seem to flow irregularly downwards, like raindrops, without ever reaching the floor. Descending in clusters they resemble rain running and streaming down, and seem to have an affinity with the senselessly screeching voice of the woman in *Not I*, trying so hard to have her say yet ever unheard. This multi-part installation is completed by one additional item: a text frieze of an excerpt from the Beckett monologue runs along all four walls of the room. In the round, yet getting nowhere, it stands as a metaphor for the continual searching and self-preservation of a lonely existence.

Having created her sculptural realization of sounds for the installation *Not I*, Wolfensberger chanced upon a startlingly similar image in a scientific illustration: a photograph of air bubbles freezing as they rise upwards in icy water. The act of speaking consists of a similar process of breathing out, with air expelled in short bursts, which is generally taken—for humans and all living creatures—as a sign of life: "Is he breathing? Can she talk?" are the first questions doctors and paramedics ask as they arrive at an emergency. Even senseless "talking to a brick wall," as in Beckett's monologue, is proof of life. For in *Not I*, a woman who has been mute for many years finds her voice again (and returns to life), however incomprehensible her fragmented speech may be.

Seeing Hearing, Hearing Seeing: Remembering

Careful listening is one way that we can be attentive to human beings and any living creatures. As a mother Andrea Wolfensberger's hearing is fine-tuned to the "sounds" made by her two children, and she makes direct reference to them in a number of works. The German writer Barbara Köhler, who has long been a personal friend of the artist and her work, has described the artist's sensitive treatment of her subjects—always leaving them space—with a poet's linguistic precision: "The children enter the picture, one by one and slowly, every movement is given additional space, time. They playfully reach beyond the boundaries of the picture, seem not to be caught in it, not completely pictured, their bodies don't act inside the screen."[8] In concentrated, moving works Andrea Wolfensberger has focused on her daughter's violin playing (*Kinderlied* [*Children's Song*], 2003), on her son's laughter (*jusqu'à ce qu'il fasse rire*, 2009). The second of these includes not only the aforementioned large cone, which embodies the sound on the basis of voice graphs in the same way that fragmented sentences are "realized" in *Not I*, but also a sequence of fifteen photographs, recording the few seconds of the boy's laughter. In the camera shots we see the laughter steadily growing until it has taken such hold of the boy's body that he throws his head back to let all the

laughter out—his mouth wide open like the bell of a trumpet. The picture sequence, which is made up of stills from a short film and confirms this source by the inclusion of shadow images, shows the boy's head rise and fall. From a distance it looks like a mighty wave, reaching its peak and ebbing away again. However silent and blurred these images of arrested time, they nevertheless present us with such a vivid impression of the child's long spent laughter that we are sure we can hear it—which is also how memory works: silent images deep within us give rise not only to sounds, but also to smells and tastes from the past. The memory that was to be served by the original film, capturing a moment in the childhood of this now much older boy, instigates a process of animation, which is also part and parcel of the realization and reception of art.

In the film that forms the basis of the video work *Kinderlied* (2003), we see a similar desire on the part of a mother recording images of her daughter's violin playing so that one day she can replay the memory and hear her again, see her again. But the picture-in-a-picture visible in the background (a detail of *Madonna with a Violet* by the late-medieval master Stephan Lochner) also indicates an artistic intention that is lent further weight by the child's remarkable seriousness and concentration, which in part arises from the modifications to the sound and speed: "The artist has slowed down the sequence to _0 of normal speed. The bright sound of the violin has been transformed into a growling, penetrating bass line; the movements of the girl, absorbed in the music, are now tortuously slow. The sound is wholly at odds with the barely visible contact of the bow; the almost violent swell of the waves of sound clashes with the sight of contemplation and calm. The temporal extension sees visual and acoustic moments escape from their original frame of reference, they collide, highly charged and out of control above and around the viewers' heads."[9] Yet for all the implicit threat in the bass tones, they can also—paradoxically—be taken as a release of tension, as Barbara Köhler writes: "The concentration of the little violinist is transferred as suspense, the bass tones however demonstrate that it is actually a reduction of tension, a much lower frequency than particularly the violin, a very high-strung instrument, is able to produce."[10] In reality the bass tones of Andrea Wolfensberger's *Kinderlied* recall neither the sound of a violin nor the joy of a children's song nor the light voice of a little girl. If anything the dark sounds sooner seem to relate to the strangely black, bird-like wings of the angel watching over the young violinist. It may be that the black-winged angel and the slackened bass sounds, the all but immobilized images are telltale signs of the darker underlay to childish light and life, our certain knowledge of transience. Could it be that this guardian angel is an angel of death, the *Kinderlied* a song of the dead, that all these memories are no more than an all-embracing memento mori?

Breaking Waves: On Practicing

The wave is a leitmotif in the work of Andrea Wolfensberger—and it bespeaks her open yet profound intellect, for in the wave she has found a metaphor that is not only common to diverse senses and elements, it can also highlight varied temporal, spatial, and communicative sequences: sound waves, wave forms on land and in water, the ebb and flow of life itself. One of her most extensive pieces, presented in this exhibition on eight monitors, is the multi-part video work *NIEMANDS FRAU: MOVIES* (["Nobody's woman: movies"], 2007), which was realized in collaboration with Barbara Köhler. Their progressive exchange of ideas unfolded during a lengthy period of mutual inspiration. Barbara Köhler had already spent years working on a major collection of poems refiguring themes from the Odyssey, *NIEMANDS FRAU : GESÄNGE* ["Nobody's woman: songs"],[11] when she saw the video made by Andrea Wolfensberger off the shores of Crete. In response to these moving images, she wrote leukothea : white outs and added it to her existing twenty-one Odysseyan songs. For her part, the artist now selected seven extended poems and created new sequences from her original film footage as counterparts to these poetic texts. The ensuing video work—self-contained, an interconnected theme and variations, eight in all—can be read as an autonomous artistic paraphrase of Barbara Köhler's songs. The words, voiced by the poet herself, are integral to Wolfensberger's

films, by virtue of both their meaning and sound. Their rhythms play into the constant motion of the waves that fills the video sequences. In her original desire to capture these images, the artist set out into "deep waters," struggling to stay afloat as she trained her camera on a gleaming ship on the horizon. Above all she was determined not to lose sight of the ship—that ancient metaphor for yearning and rescue. But she went out dangerously far. She had to trust herself that neither she nor her camera would go under: seeking out danger as a challenge to one's own will to live (through) or an extreme form of active empathy? A few years ago *NIEMANDS FRAU : MOVIES* was shown in the company of another work, based on a press photograph of African boat people, underlining the political relevance of Wolfensberger's Odyssey. As she herself has said, "My works just aren't 'loud,' not even the large ones."[12] Yet that is also precisely the reason why some may fail to realize the deep commitment and radical nature of her work.

For her exhibition in Solothurn, Andrea Wolfensberger has created a new, approximately twelve-meter long work that fills the largest exhibition room, aptly entitled *Stehende Welle* (*Standing Wave*, 2011). Its visual undulations have been derived from a sound graph. The corrugated cardboard ("wave cardboard" in German) perfectly suits the motif and replicates it right down to the "microcosm" of the minute ripples of its structure. In the true sense of the word, a sound wave, the huge sculpture also recalls the topography of a landscape or the swell of the ocean. The fluidity and movement of language and water come to rest in *Stehende Welle*. With the brown cardboard finished with gleaming yacht varnish, the wave seems to become a sea-going vessel, in motion yet secure, a floating home with its own innate dynamics. At the same time, standing waves, almost suspended in motion, give those daring enough to ride the surf the most wonderful sense of dynamism and buoyancy.

The playful ease of surfing is achieved by concentrated perceptual awareness, by knowledge of the elements, by patient perseverance, and the courage to go on trying: *then listen again*. Andrea Wolfensberger shows us a supreme instance from the animal kingdom of acute awareness and endurance, in what must be one of her most beautiful and best known films, *Stare* (*Starlings*, 1995). The beauty of the constantly fluctuating shapes created by huge flocks of starlings, which she first saw and filmed during her stay at the Istituto Svizzero in Rome in 1991–92, exerts a unique fascination on the viewer. However, this apparently high-spirited behavior is triggered by the deadly threat posed by a bird of prey on the hunt. In order to confuse the aggressor, the flock surrounds its potential prey in such dense numbers that the hunter loses sight of it and ultimately flies off with nothing to show for its efforts. A single starling is protected by its kin. Andrea Wolfensberger's film perfectly conveys the barely comprehensible capacity of birds to continuously respond to each other in ever contracting and expanding formations, to react instantaneously and seemingly of their own accord to endlessly new patterns, played out in an endlessly compelling drama.

1 Ludmila Vachtova, in Andrea Wolfensberger, Arbeiten 1986–1989, trans. Ann E. Keep, Collection Cahiers d'artistes, Zürich: Pro Helvetia, 1990, unpag.
2 Andrea Wolfensberger, in "Refractory Fields of Reference—Andrea Wolfensberger, Ulf Wuggenig and Karen van den Berg in conversation", trans. Jennifer Taylor-Gaida, in Karen van den Berg and Irene Müller (eds), Andrea Wolfensberger, Zeit-Lupen, Lucerne and Poschiavo: Edizioni Periferia, 2007, p. 163.
3 On the subject of translations see Irene Müller, "Between the Lines," trans. Ann Cotten and Catherine Schelbert, in Andrea Wolfensberger, Zeit-Lupen (as note 2) pp. 182–190.
4 Karen van den Berg, "Unfolded Phenomenality, Nature as a form of observation in the work of Andrea Wolfensberger," trans. Jennifer Taylor-Gaida, in ibid., p. 172.
5 Irene Müller, "Between the Lines", (as note 3), p. 187.
6 Susann Wintsch, trans. from handout for the presentation of Hitzewelle at TWEAKLAB, Basel 2003.
7 Ibid.
8 Barbara Köhler, "A Given Time", trans. Ann Cotten, in Andrea Wolfensberger, Zeit-Lupen (as note 2), p. 117.
9 Irene Müller, trans. from "Anfragen an Zeit und Raum", in Kunstbulletin, March 2003, pp. 38–39.
10 Barbara Köhler, "A Given Time" (as note 8), p. 116.

11 Barbara Köhler, NIEMANDS FRAU: GESÄNGE, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007.—In the same year, 2007, Edizioni Periferia, Lucerne and Poschiavo, produced a special edition, entitled NO ONE'S BOX which consisted of a box containing, amongst other things, Köhler's book, an audio CD with songs performed by the artist, and a DVD with Andrea Wolfensberger's eight fil ms.
12 Andrea Wolfensberger, in "Refractory Fields of Reference" (as note 2), p. 154.