To start with, silence can be thought about as an 'acoustic fact' – 'any interval of the oscillographic trace where the amplitude is indistinguishable from that of background noise' (Duez, 1982: 13). When used in a work of art, silence undergoes a number of recontextualizations and transformations. For example, in John Cage’s composition 4’33” (1952), it is first re-mediated into scores in three versions: musical, graphic, and linguistic. Then, it is performed by a musician in front of an audience. Finally, a video-recording of the performance may be posted on YouTube, or a member of the audience in a 'live' performance may narrate the experience of the performance to another person. To take another example, Joseph Beuys’ Das Schweigen (The Silence) (1973), is a sculpture consisting of five reels of 35mm film containing Ingmar Bergman’s feature film Tystnaden (The Silence) (1963) varnished and galvanized in copper and zinc. Here, Bergman’s transposition of silence as an acoustic or anecdotal fact into a psychological drama is further recontextualized and transformed into a silent or silenced object. The transposition of silence from one semiotic mode to another does not produce simple 'semantic equivalences' (Iedema, 2003). On the contrary, our interpretation of 'displayed silence' in each instance of re-mediation and performance is subject to varying systemic constraints and material affordances. As this paper argues, it is these spaces of contrast and change across modes and materialities that are sites of creativity. Cage’s and Beyus’ pieces are not likely to be perceived as artworks unless their transformative element is appreciated in the first place. This may, partly, explain general public’s continuing scorn for ‘silent’ art, especially 4’33”.

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