

In the Blink of an Ear

TOWARD A NON-COCHLEAR SONIC ART

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**A DOT
ON A LINE**

You can't have a window without a wall. To conceive of passage from one space to another, it is first necessary to imagine what stands between them. From time immemorial, what stood between music and the visual arts was blank space, a pure divide. In recent decades sound art has flooded into that space, reinforcing the inviolability of each island of practice while also providing a medium across which material, ideas, and practitioners may pass. Inspirations from Robert Rauschenberg were shipped to John Cage. A message in a bottle from Yves Klein was discovered on the seashore (at daybreak) by Luc Ferrari. By the same token, artists in the gallery were catching waves produced on the sonic side of the gulf. As early as 1967, Bruce Nauman was making video works of himself playing the violin, not only producing the sound of a musical instrument, but also exploring ideas about composition and performance borrowed from the currents of late-1960s experimental sonic practice. With the filmmaker Michael Snow, the composer James Tenney, and the sculptor Richard Serra, Nauman was one of Steve Reich's handpicked performers for the presentation of Reich's *Pendulum Music* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1969. Nauman's *Violin Film # 1 (Playing the Violin as Fast as I Can)* (1967–68) and *Playing a Note on the Violin While I Walk around the Studio* (1967–68) feature the artist engaged in repetitive, banal activities. Both works evoke the monotony of rudimentary instrumental practice and, at the same time, contemporary minimalist compositional tendencies. *Violin Tuned D.E.A.D.* (1969) enacts a jumbled cross-reference of the code of Western notation with the code of the English alphabet. Instead of tuning the violin according to harmonic logic, Nauman tunes it according to linguistic logic, facetiously declaring the instrument and, by association, the tradition of

Western music embedded in the violin, to be dead. Three decades later Nauman was still self-consciously indebted to the revolutions of Cagean aesthetics. His 2001 video installation, *Mapping the Studio II with color shift, flip, flop, & flip/flop (Fat Chance John Cage)*, acknowledges his long-standing engagement with Cage's ideas of chance procedures and openness to environmental events.

Examples of the exchange from the visual to the sonic and back again are everywhere apparent since the 1960s. From Cage's New School class emerges Fluxus and Allan Kaprow's "Happenings." Following these innovations, a relational-performative conceptualism becomes evident in works such as Nauman's violin pieces, Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969), Adrian Piper's *Catalysis* performances (1970), and Dan Graham's *Performer/Audience/ Mirror* (1975). An argument could be made that the performance and relational branch of conceptual art is a direct descendent of Cage's influence on visual arts practitioners. But this two-way ferment was not restricted to Cage's influence, or to North American arts. In Tokyo in 1960, the future Fluxus members Takehisa Kosugi and Chieko "Mieko" Shiomi, along with the media-art pioneer Yasunao Tone, formed Group Ongaku (Music Group), made up of art students and musicology students at Tokyo National University. Group Ongaku stumbled upon what Tone described as "an absolutely new music. It was an improvisational work of *musique concrète* done collectively."¹ In 1963 the South Korean Nam June Paik presented his "prepared television" works in his *Exposition of Music—Electronic Television* at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany. Starting in 1962, the Vienna Actionists (Günter Brus, Otto Mühl, Hermann Nitsch, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler)—members of the first generation of Austrians born during or after the war—engaged in an aggressive, often violent confrontation with the conventions of art, performance, music, and society.

1. Yasunao Tone, as quoted in William A. Marotti, "Sounding the Everyday: The Music Group and Yasunao Tone's Early Work," in *Yasunao Tone: Noise Media Language* (Los Angeles: Errant Bodies Press, 2006), 23.

In 1967, taking her cues in part from the Actionists, Waltraud Lehner changed her name to VALIE EXPORT (in capital letters). Her earliest work, which she describes as “expanded cinema,” includes the never-realized *Tonfilm* (Soundfilm; 1969). The typewritten instructions for *Tonfilm* read as follows:

a photoelectric resistor is built/surgically into the glottis and connected with a light sensitive resistor, which is attached to the outer skin below the ear. the photoelectric amplifier controls the volume. when there is a lot of light, lots of electricity is directed toward the amplifier, the volume is high. with low light it is the reverse.

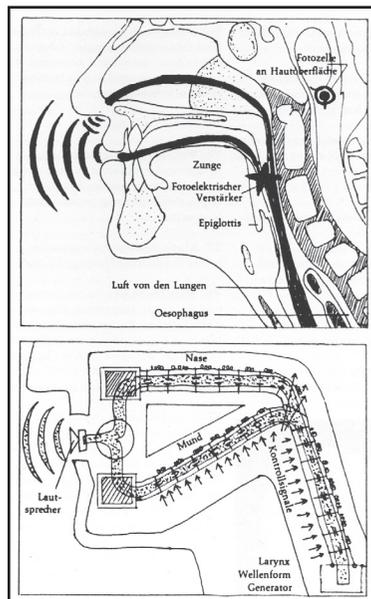
the live soundfilm works like this, people scream horrifically at midday—as a side effect of the glottis irritation enormous salivation and intestinal cramps etc. occur—with increasing twilight the register of the nation is subdued.

soundfilm offers a lively panorama of early morning chirping, midday slobbering and screaming and absolute night’s rest. communication is made possible over thousand meters, the secret disappears (evenings without speaking, midday only screaming) . . . also this is a new way of communication!²

EXPORT’s intervention inserts itself into multiple linguistic circuits: the physical passages and apparatus from which the voice emanates, the intentionality ascribed to meaningful language, and the sonic control that allows for the conveyance of a verbal message. This network of processes is replaced by chirping, slobbering, and screaming. The latter-day sound practice of using photoelectric cells to convert light into sound is anticipated and turned on its ear. The implication of the “natural” conversion of light energy into sound energy is pushed to absurd extremes, in which communication is held hostage to

2. EXPORT, VALIE. *Tonfilm: Voice and Void*, ed. Thomas Trummer (Ridgefield, CT: The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2007), 105.

solar cycles. *Tonfilm* is a redirection of systems of control over the body and the voice. According to EXPORT, the voice of the people has already been ventriloquistically hijacked by the institutions of the state and the church and subjected to various “impairments, . . . rules, specifications, and norms of society.”³ *Tonfilm* simply redirects control from constructed societal concentrations of power to the irrefutable cyclicity of nature. It therefore does not commit any additional acts of symbolic violence. Instead, it converts the figurative violence of cultural control into the literal violence of the surgical incision into the body of the performer/performed subject. Impairments—whether institutional, surgical, physiological, or cultural (think of Lucier’s stutter)—are always components of speech. EXPORT’s gesture is to make this manifest by altering the type and source of impairment.



VALIE EXPORT, *Tonfilm*, 1969. Expanded movie, communication action. India ink and collage on paper. 11 ¾ x 8 ¼ in. © 2009 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VBK, Vienna. Collection of Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna.

3. Ibid., 106.

Tonfilm tries to intervene at what EXPORT refers to as “the beginning of speech, the voice,” which she identifies as the glottis.⁴ The work knowingly exposes the faulty notion of a biological origin, highlighting the inadequacy of purely medical, mechanical, or physiological identifications of speech. Speech is understood, instead, as a vehicle of identity and power. *Tonfilm* flips the notion of a non-cochlear sonic art, arriving at a non-glottal vocal art. As Derrida indicates in *Of Grammatology*, his extended critique of the logocentric privileging of speech over writing, the voice is not a conduit to the nature or the essence that underwrites the self. And EXPORT has explicitly stated, “I don’t want to get back to the origin in the sense of voice’s ontology, because that does not exist.”⁵ This deconstructive engagement with the voice is further removed from the circuitry of language-power due to its status as a thought experiment. Because *Tonfilm* has never been realized (and probably was never meant to be), its reappropriation of the voice is incomplete. The materiality of the voice is not controlled nor silenced, it never comes into being. The voice, as imagined by *Tonfilm*, is pure latency, infinite possibility, irreducible to in-itselfness.

In the introduction, I recounted a scene from the film *Down by Law* in which a prisoner instructs his cellmate about which preposition to use to indicate a window drawn on their jail-cell wall: “In this case, Bob, I’m afraid you’ve got to say, ‘I look *at* the window.’” The episode of prepositional confusion functions as a metaphor for the way in which sound has been conventionally construed. Both in practice and in theory, the sonic arts have more often listened *at* sound, like a window drawn on a wall, than listened *out* or *through* sound to the broader worldly implications of sound’s expanded situation. This book has been an effort to replace, or at least to supplement, the available options with a listening *about* sound. A non-cochlear sonic art seeks to replace the solidity of the *objet sonore*, of sound-in-itself, with the discursiveness of a conceptual sonic practice. Such a replacement

4. Ibid., 109.

5. Ibid.

adjusts the focus of producing and receiving sound from the window itself to its expanded situation. When such an adjustment took place in the gallery arts, after the reception of Duchamp, it was described as a turn from “‘appearance’ to ‘conception’” (Joseph Kosuth),⁶ from “the era of taste [to] the era of meaning” (Arthur Danto),⁷ from the “specific” to the “generic” (Thierry de Duve),⁸ and from “material, or, for that matter, the perception of material [to] the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation” (Rosalind Krauss).⁹

Jean-François Lyotard has made similar claims, arguing that postmodernism is a particular tendency within the cultural and artistic epoch of modernism. Central to Lyotard’s aesthetics is the notion of the sublime, borrowed from Kant and updated to agree with contemporary experience. Responding in part to Theodor Adorno’s dictum that “to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric,”¹⁰ Lyotard takes up the problem of representation. The beautiful, he suggests, relies on representation, on something corresponding to something else (even in the reduced isomorphism implied by Kant). The sublime, on the other hand, is a product of unrepresentability, of something exceeding the means of absorption or incorporation. Tellingly, Edmund Burke argued that beauty is accentuated by light (vision), but that the sublime is a product of not enough or too much light (blindness). Kant elaborated upon Burke’s distinction, detailing a mathematical sublime (when confronted with the immensity

6. Joseph Kosuth, “Art After Philosophy” (1969), www.ubv.com/papers/kosuth_philosophy.html (accessed December 8, 2008).

7. Arthur C. Danto, “Marcel Duchamp and the End of Taste: A Defense of Contemporary Art,” *Tout-Fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal* 1, issue 3 (2000), www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_3/News/Danto/danto.html (accessed February 9, 2009).

8. Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, October Books (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), passim; esp. see chap. 3, “The Readymade and the Tube of Paint.”

9. Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985; repr., 2002), 289.

10. Theodor Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” in *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967), 34.

of natural objects) and a dynamic sublime (when confronted with overwhelming forces). Arthur Schopenhauer imagined a spectrum with beauty at one end and the strongest sense of the sublime at the other. His scale culminates with the fully sublime experience of confronting the immense size and duration of the universe. In each case the sublime is an experience of negotiating a referent beyond representation: either too big or too small, too powerful or too incomprehensible. Kant believed that the sublime is an aesthetic feeling, created as the subject overcomes such unrepresentability by *coming to terms* with one's inability to contain or control the sublime object. This compresses the object; allowing the subject to subdue it by means of concepts such as *infinity* or *forever* or *impossible*. The subject then experiences the pleasure of capturing the uncapturable, albeit in abstracted form.

Lyotard's equation of the sublime with postmodern aesthetics signals a different approach to the question of representation. The sublime object is no longer conceived strictly as the product of nature, as in mountains, oceans, and earthquakes, nor strictly as a product of the boundlessness of time and space. The sublime object, as it is now understood, is just as likely to be the product of human intervention. How can one conceive of the horror of Auschwitz, of Hiroshima, of the Rwandan genocide? How can these horrors be represented? Lyotard suggests that the sublime, as a Kantian category of modern aesthetic experience, is predicated on the notion that there is some content in the object that cannot be adequately conveyed in a given artistic medium. This locates the problem of representation in the adequacy, or inadequacy, of form to content. Which rhyme scheme can convey the content of Auschwitz? Which syntax, which metric pattern? The implication is that there is an *it* in the sublime object that cannot or will not be accommodated by the forms, materials, and conventions of an artistic practice. For Lyotard, this modern sublime is nostalgic because it yearns for something missing: something lost or something not yet attained. The fundamental misunderstanding of modern

aesthetics lies in its efforts to reclaim the real, the pure, the essential, the authentic; or to discover the secret, the answer, the truth, or God.

Modern aesthetics is an aesthetics of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure.¹¹

Herein lies the barbarity identified by Adorno. A poem that seeks to address the calamity of Auschwitz runs the risk of beautifying or fetishizing the content, offering solace and/or pleasure. In a modernist aesthetic, an irreconcilable friction exists between the domesticating tendencies of form and taste on one hand, and the feral disposition of nature, history, and human behavior on the other. After Auschwitz, form and content cannot be brought into correspondence. Postmodern aesthetics recognizes the fiction of correspondence, which underwrites the concept of representation. It is only a slight simplification to insist that the postmodern sublime is a reduction of the unrepresentable to an engagement with that very unrepresentability. Artistic progress and innovation are not driven by the need for a more adequate correlation of signifier to signified, but by the effort to more fully come to terms with the impossibility of representation. The sublime is not a matter of form, but of formlessness.

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the

11. Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?" trans. Régis Durand, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 81.

nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.¹²

For Lyotard, the sublime is also concerned with the question of time. In place of Husserl's conception of the now, Lyotard proposes the question *Is it happening?* replete with question mark. Rather than an impossibly frozen, impossibly indivisible moment, the *Is it happening?* is a cascading, infinitely divisible process of coming to terms. It asserts becoming as opposed to being, question as opposed to answer. It is not simply a statement: *It is happening*. This sublime sense of time, in the form of a question, is an acknowledgment of recursivity, of reflexivity, of self-awareness. Yet it is absolutely crucial to distinguish such self-awareness from the self-confidence, the self-sameness, the self-presence of essentialism. Lyotard's *Is it happening?* is supremely uncertain of its own constitution. The postmodern sublime, as described by Lyotard, does not reside in the instantaneous blink of an eye. The sublime inhabits the constant deferral, or—it amounts to the same thing—the constantly in-process duration of the blink of an ear.

Replacing the satisfaction of sound-in-itself with Lyotard's *Is it happening?* demands a rethinking of certain familiar works and episodes. In Cage's experience in the anechoic chamber at Harvard, he identifies two sounds: the high-pitches of his nervous system and the low tones of his blood circulating. In Cage's telling and retelling of the tale ("Anyone who knows me knows this story. I am constantly telling it."¹³), this episode carries the weight of sublime epiphany; a realization of the always and everywhere nature of sound that would forever alter Cage's aesthetics. Still, Lyotard's *Is it happening?* is critical

12. Ibid.

13. John Cage, as quoted in Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 190.

to Cage's experience. Douglas Kahn has identified a decisive "third internal sound" in Cage's anechoic episode,

the one saying, "Hmmm, wonder what the low pitched sound is? What's that high-pitched sound?" Such quasi-sounds were, of course, antithetical to Cagean listening by being in competition with *sounds in themselves*, yet here he was able to listen and at the same time allow discursiveness to intrude in the experience.¹⁴

The discursiveness of the *Is it happening?* of the "Hmmm," occurs without recourse to beauty or form. It is oblivious to the specifics of material and media. It is, most important, immune to the lure of nostalgia for the lost origin or the promise of an imminent telos. The revision (reaudition, rereading) I am suggesting is a transformation from the *it*-centrality of the Kantian, modern sublime, to the discursive and dispersive Lyotardian, postmodern sublime. The conceptual turn is a turn to the inconclusiveness of Lyotard's postmodern sublime, and away from the "solace of good forms." In what has been widely accepted as the founding moment of the sound-in-itself tendency—Cage's anechoic chamber revelation—it is crucial to recognize the anti-essentialist, nonphenomenological move that Cage must make in order to issue his proclamation "Let sounds be themselves."¹⁵ The essentialism of sound-in-itself is an illusory side effect of the discursiveness of the *Is it happening?*

Janet Cardiff's sound work since the early-1990s has persistently asked, "Is it happening?" Sometimes working alone, sometimes in tandem with George Bures Miller, Cardiff has pursued a singularly discursive implementation of recorded audio. Broadly speaking, her work takes three forms. She is most well known for her "walk" works, which

14. Ibid.

15. John Cage, "Experimental Music," in *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 10.

employ portable audio players to trace a narrative thread through museum or city spaces. She has made walks in cities and museums around the world, including Münster (1997), the Villa Medici in Rome (1998), London's East End (1999), Central Park in New York (2004), the Bienal de São Paulo (1998), and the Museums of Modern Art in New York (1999) and San Francisco (2001). Second, she makes theatrical sets that the spectator either views from the perspective of an audience or moves through with the license of an actor. These works include *An Inability to Make a Sound* (1992), *The Dark Pool* (1995), *Playhouse* (1997), *The Muriel Lake Incident* (1999), and *Opera for a Small Room* (2005). Third, she makes audio installations in which an array of speakers create a spatially dispersed sound environment centered around a single narrative or musical core. For instance, in *Forty-Part Motet* (2001), Cardiff reinterprets Thomas Tallis's *Spem in alium nunquam habui* (1575), a piece of early English church music for forty voices. In the gallery, forty speakers are arrayed in a circle, each playing back the voice of one individually recorded singer. The spectator moves among the speakers, selectively, mixing the choir based on proximity.

Cardiff's particular enunciation of the *Is it happening?* works in the two directions suggested by Lyotard. Her work suggests that the *it* is not a stable product but a shifting process. Second, this process refuses the consolation of a static moment of judgment. Judgment always requires process time, yet some object forms propose themselves as suspended temporal points, willing to sit still for contemplative convenience. (It was Robert Morris's dissatisfaction with this conception of time and experience that necessitated his situational expansion of the minimalist, sculptural object.) Sound-in-itself similarly tries to objectify the auditory, ignoring its inexorable entanglement with time. But there is no such thing as a sonic freeze-frame. With audio recordings, if the playback is paused, the sound occurring at the moment of interruption does not hang, object-like, in the air, but evaporates, recuperable only in memory. Even the *objet sonore* does not hold still, compliant and constant. It shuttles in time, constituted

by a cascade of *befores* and *afters*, but lacking any positively identifiable *now*. (The concretization of sound is all the more confounding, given that Pierre Schaeffer must have been intimately acquainted with this reality.¹⁶) Cardiff's work exhibits a sophisticated relationship to the time in which it inescapably lives. Within the disjointed narratives of her walk works, the spectator/listener/participant is often confronted with media-within-media. In *The Missing Voice: Case Study B*, against a background of sound effects, Cardiff speaks directly to the listener, directing the route of the walk through London's East End and narrating the fragmented details of the *noir*-ish framing story. The walk begins in Whitechapel Library.

Sound of phone ringing, receptionist answering.

JANET: I'm standing in the library with you, you can hear the turning of newspaper pages, people talking softly. There's a man standing beside me, he's looking in the crime section now. He reaches to pick up a book, opens it, leafs through a few pages and puts it back on the shelf. He's wandering off to the right. Pick up the book he looked at . . . it's on the third shelf down. It's called *Dreams of Darkness*, by Reginald Hill. I'm opening it to page 88. "She set off back at a brisk pace in a rutted and muddy lane, about a furlong from the house she thought she heard a sound ahead of her. She paused. She could hear nothing but her straining eyes caught a movement in the gloom. Someone was approaching. A foot splashed in a puddle."

16. The act of editing magnetic audio tape depends on running the tape back and forth—into the before, into the after—across the machine's playback head. Recorded sound makes its non-object-like status apparent at every turn.

Scary movie music rises during excerpt from book, girl screams, music fades out.

JANET: Sometimes when you read things it seems like you're remembering them. Close the book. Put it back to where you found it. Go to the right. Walk past the main desk. Through the turnstile.

Sound of voices, conversations.

DETECTIVE: (Man's Voice, British accent.) One of the librarians recognized her from the photograph. . . .

Siren passes.

JANET: Turn to the right, Gunthorpe Street. A man just went into the side door of the pub.¹⁷

Occasionally the narrator plays a cassette recording, clicking the buttons of what sounds like a small, portable player. On the cassette we hear Cardiff's voice again. The cassette voice is compressed and hissy, another instance of the signifying capacity of low fidelity. The status of the second voice is unclear. At times it is simply the narrator's voice replayed. But at other times, it comes across either as a second person—a doppelgänger of sorts—or as Cardiff as narrator of a different story, recorded at a different time, extracted from a different set of narrative concerns. Sometimes the second voice lacks the confidence and authority of the first. While the intentions of the first voice are comprehensible—she is directing the route of the walk and

17. Janet Cardiff, *The Missing Voice: Case Study B* (London: Commissioned and produced by Artangel, 1999), www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/missing_voice.html (accessed February 2, 2009), slightly reformatted for publication.

supplying its narrative context—the meaning and circumstance of the recorded voice are more difficult to appraise.

Sound of tape recorder being stopped, rewound, replayed.

JANET: (Recorded voice.) A man just went into the side door of the pub.

Sfx [sound effects] of recorder being stopped.

JANET: I've a long red-haired wig on now. I look like the woman in the picture. If he sees me now he'll recognize me.

DETECTIVE: Found in her bag, two cassette tapes with a receipt and a tape recorder. . . . As far as I can tell she's mapping different paths through the city. I can't seem to find a reason for the things she notices and records.

JANET: (Recorded voice.) A naked man is walking up the street towards me. He's walking as if he is sleeping, staring straight ahead. He walks past me without seeing me.

*Sound of recording being stopped.*¹⁸

It is typical of Cardiff's work to fold time and persona into itself in this fashion. Not only the recording-within-the-recording, but also the reference to "the woman in the picture"—apparently Cardiff herself—complicates the understanding of identity and temporality. As Cardiff has pointed out, this complication extends to the role of the listener:

18. Ibid.

If you're listening to a tape recording and you hear a different tape recorder playing inside "your" recording, it puts you as the listener into a unique space. You can tell that it's more in the past than the main voice is, but then where does that position you as listener? The first voice is more real somehow, closer in time and space to your reality.¹⁹

The doubling of identity is a product of time. The past, in the form of memory, constantly infiltrates the present. Discussing the complexity of subjectivity and temporality in Cardiff's work, Eric Méchoulan describes experience as always, at the very least, double:

In fact, we must conceive of each instant as always offering two faces, where present perception is virtualized in the memory of the present, just as a fleeting immediacy is duplicated in an immediacy that remains and grows. Thus every present is bordered here by perception (a first immediacy), and there by memory (a second immediacy), so that the past is never cut off from the present, but on the contrary is contained in it, folded within it like a protein. However, we must add a third mode of immediacy to these two, one where each present is overwhelmed by the very contemporaneousness of these two heterogeneous registers.²⁰

Reading this passage is likely to invoke the very sense of déjà vu it describes. We have encountered this overlay of past and present elsewhere. It is implicit in Kierkegaard's conception of consciousness as a collision between ideality and reality and in Douglas Kahn's identification of Cage's "Hmmm," both instances of Peircean thirdness.

19. Janet Cardiff, "Conversation with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev," in *Janet Cardiff: A Survey of Works Including Collaborations with George Bures Miller* (Long Island City, NY: P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 2001), 22.

20. Eric Méchoulan, "Immediacy and Forgetting," trans. Roxanne Lapidus, *SubStance*, issue 106, vol. 34, no. 1 (2005): 148.

The self-certainty of self-presence finds no purchase in this multiplication of time and identity because it relies on the impossibility of a return of the already impossible now.

In the mediated reality of Cardiff's walks, this destabilization of experience is achieved in more than one way. The environment in which the walks take place is much more than a narrative setting. The gallery spaces of the museum or the streets of London's Shoreditch neighborhood activate the experience of the work. They are not passive sets, but constantly transforming social-architectural-commercial organisms. As the listener navigates the fictionalized version of the environment as presented in the audio, one is simultaneously navigating the factual physicality of the actual locale. Some critics have taken issue with the exercise of control in these works, questioning the latitude of the listener's participation and freedom as Cardiff explicitly directs the pace and progress along a designated route. Such concerns are certainly worth considering. But this criticism overlooks the crucial role the listener plays in negotiating the facticity and the significance of these two overlapping environments. Cardiff has asserted that this negotiation reveals fact by contrast with fiction, making the listener acutely aware of the reality of his or her self and situation:

The way we use audio makes you much more aware of your own body, and makes you much more aware of your place within the world, of your body as a "real" construction. What is reality and authenticity if not that? If you give someone hyper-reality, then they have more of a perspective on what's really real. You are hearing the sound behind you, and you know it's not real, but you want to turn around and look for it.²¹

But the experience, for instance, of *The Missing Voice: Case Study B*, is nearly the opposite. As one navigates London's East End,

21. Cardiff, "Conversation with Christov-Bakargiev," 16.

the fiction of the audio and the fact of the streets become confused. Just as a not-real sound can cause the listener to turn toward it, the sound of a very real oncoming car can be ignored as part of the audio. The result is not a greater awareness of what is real, but of the absolute contextual constitution of perceived reality. Even reality is made manifest, not by its self-evident content, but by its peripheral framing particulars.

In the anechoic chamber, Cage heard sounds he considered “really real.” At the same time, perhaps without realizing it, Cage’s “Hmmm” negates the bluntness of the *in-itself* and instead opens onto the expanded situation of sonic experience. Ultimately, the mythic value of the anechoic chamber episode does not depend upon sound-in-itself. The discursiveness of what Kahn describes as the “third internal sound” has the effect of a referral. The sound-in-itself refers to additional, supplemental facts: blood, nerves, life, and so forth. Cage’s epiphany is not a direct effect of sound-in-itself. That epiphany, and the legacy it has inspired, refers instead to a text revolving around the semantic unit of “sound-in-itself.” The sound at the heart of this story is not anchored to inviolate phenomena but to terms in opposition. Even this, the *ur*-moment of essentialist listening, must construct its significance from its *parerga*, the connotations and indications that surround, inform, and, according to Derrida, constitute the *ergon* (work): the *thing-itself*. It is from this *parergonal* material that a non-cochlear sonic art constructs itself. The phenomenal is reduced in favor of the expansiveness of the textual and the discursive. Objects are replaced by processes, including the process of questioning the urge toward objects (first and foremost, the sonic object). The normally supplemental *parerga* become central to the act of encounter.

Much contemporary artistic practice is marked by an absence at its center. The maturation and increasing sophistication of appropriative strategies build complex structures on the foundation, not of something signified, but of apparently descendent signifiers. There is

no stable *it* to which this work refers. The referent has been replaced by the ever-receding, ever-expanding process of signification. The film manipulations of Douglas Gordon, the cinematic installations of Angela Bulloch, the plunderphonics of John Oswald—these are all constructed from a chain of signification, shimmying in relation to time, space, identity, intention, and meaning. This is accomplished partly as a result of time-based media. Where an appropriative work by Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince, or Sherrie Levine stood still as the spectator tried to parse its relation to its precedents, the newer work continually slips back into the past and forward into the future as material from a known source is both remembered and anticipated. At the same time, this simple backward and forward in time is problematized by the fact that remembered material from the source is anticipated in the appropriation (the past in the future), and by the fact that, once it arrives, this anticipated remembrance slips into the second-generation memory of the appropriation (the past-in-the-future: first in the present, then in the past).

It is easy to forget a basic fact of appropriation: it is a relational practice. The appropriating work enters into a relationship with the appropriated material. This relationship may be collaborative, confrontational, even downright violent, but it is always dialectical: signifier versus signified. For Jarrod Fowler, this dialectic is rhythmic. Or when thought in reverse, percussion is a dialectical process: one thing engaging, striking, or bouncing off another. Fowler, a drummer by training, is fundamentally interested in the two-way, dialectical, appropriative relationship between two materials. The interaction of drum skin and stick, for instance, shares important attributes with the interaction of text and voice. Fowler's artistic practice since 2003 has organized itself around this idea. Fowler engages the most basic unit of sound production: the beat. At the same time, he conceptualizes rhythm: the musical concern that, more than any other, has defined the revolutions of twentieth-century music, from Stravinsky's rhythmic provocations, to the percussive audacity of Varese and Ligeti and Reich, to Cage's

rejection of harmony in favor of rhythm, to the centrality of the beat in both minimalist composition and popular music of the recording age. Fowler's operations are, by turns, literally, figuratively, metaphorically, and metonymically rhythmic and/or percussive.

Since his emergence from the Boston free-improvisation scene of the early 2000s, Fowler has translated the dialectics of rhythm from a *physical* process of interaction into a *conceptual* process of interaction. Over the course of half a decade, Fowler has released a torrent of conceptual CDs under titles such as *Distribution as Rhythm*; *Translation as Rhythm*; *Argument as Percussion/Agreement as Percussion*; *On Pulse, Repetition, Percussion, and Layers*; *On Botanic and Rhythmic Structures*. In Fowler, the sensibilities of European modernism and those of ritual cyclicity, as described by James Snead (discussed in chapter 5), are brought together in a percussive dialectic. Fowler's long-standing interest in plants—he is a horticulturist by trade—puts him into meaningful contact “with the seasons, a broader measurement of time, and an other (the plant kingdom).”²² At the same time, Fowler is deeply invested in postwar musical and artistic practice, citing as influences Cage, Fluxus, minimalism, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, and experimental hip-hop. The two apparently discontiguous areas of experience initially come together for Fowler's practice in the “systems of field guides, morphology, taxonomy and their translation.”²³ For Fowler's early work, field guides to trees, birds, insects, and so forth provided

a way to get outside of my musical context but to bring something else in. At that point in time I really liked those early Sol LeWitt cubes, and I liked the early Kosuth work, and I was really inspired by Douglas Huebler's stuff—the map stuff—all

22. Jarrod Fowler, as quoted in Susanna Bolle, “An Interview with Jarrod Fowler,” *Rare Frequency* Web page, WZBC radio (Boston, 2007), www.rarefrequency.com/2007/07/jarrod_fowler.html (accessed February 2, 2009).

23. *Ibid.*

of that first-wave conceptualism. I was really, really inspired by that; how those guys are dealing with authorship, how they're dealing with time, how they're dealing with space, how they're dealing with the object, how they're dealing with legitimation, and how this is given any meaning or value by anybody. All of those late-modern to postmodern considerations.²⁴

LeWitt, Kosuth, and Huebler certainly turned to systems and processes to generate the form and content of their work. But each of them seems to have chosen his specific system for a reason beyond system-for-system's-sake. Each looked to systems rooted in fundamental inquiries regarding the conditions of existence—for Lewitt it was geometry; for Kosuth, epistemology; for Huebler, sociology. Their systems are both generative, purely as systems, and neutral in a sense. But they also lead back to fundamental philosophical questions and profound aesthetic problems. Fowler may have turned at first to field guides and the systems of morphology and taxonomy they represent. But his work quickly moved from the application of these systems in a somewhat arbitrary fashion, to a much more incisive questioning of the very notions of morphology and taxonomy and the portability of their application.

Fowler's CD *Translation as Rhythm* (Errant Bodies, 2006), is an extended rumination on, and experiment with, this problem. The first track, "Wittgenstein to Fowler," takes the chapter structure of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, one of the most notoriously elusive texts in Western philosophy, and translates it into a rhythmic structure. Wittgenstein's text is organized in seven numbered sections with numbered subsections, taking the form: 1, 1.1, 1.11, 1.12, 1.13, 1.2, and so on. Each section is intended as a comment or elaboration on the previous section, so 1.1 comments

24. Jarrod Fowler, conversation with the author, Norwich, CT, August 16, 2008.

on 1, and 1.12 comments on 1.1. Fowler transports, or (his word) "translates," this structure into a series of electronic clicks. Each section is represented by a silent duration equal in seconds to its number (e.g., section 1.12 is 1.12 seconds long). The start of each section is denoted by a click. The result is a sequence of clicks, moving farther and farther apart in time. "So you literally think of those numbers [of the *Tractatus*] stacked up against each other. So you have click, click . . . click click click."²⁵

The morphology of Wittgenstein's text, its form, is dictated by its taxonomy, the classification and subsequent ordering of its contents. The organization of the book, significant to its mode and meaning, becomes the model for Fowler's rhythmic organization:

Wittgenstein begins the *Tractatus* with very logical, matter-of-fact, and concise philosophical statements about the world as such. And the work ends with him pretty much saying "I've just talked a whole bunch of nonsense." The way my piece replicates this is that initially one can understand his pulse and then, over forty-plus minutes, it becomes mostly silence with one click every seven seconds.²⁶

Following the book's movement from lucidity to obscurity, Fowler's structure becomes more diffuse, frustrating the desire to make rhythmic sense of it. The work functions as a demonstration of sound-as-sense.

Fowler has engaged with other source material in similar ways. On *Translation as Rhythm*, he also tackles Joseph Kosuth's *Text/Context* (1979), in which two adjacent outdoor public billboards display related texts referring to each other and to their respective methods of linguistic and visual communication.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

What do you see here? The text/sign to the right presents itself as part of something else, something we could normally take for granted. What you expect to see has been removed, to be replaced by a kind of absence, which attempts to make visible what is unseen. This text/sign would like to explain itself, but even as it does, you continue to look beyond it to something else, that meaning that seems provided in advance by a location of which it is already a part. This text/sign wants to see itself as part of the “real world,” but it is blinded by those same conventions which connect you to it, and blinds you to that which, when read, is no longer seen.

Can you read this? This text/sign to the left expects you to read more than it provides, but it provides more than is needed to mean what it does. What it says, how it says it, and where it says it either connects or separates you from what it is. This text/sign (like other things seen here before it) is trapped by conventions which constitute its conception of the possible in terms which deny what they would want to suggest. Is the relationship of this text/sign to itself any different than this text/sign is to this context? To read this text/sign is to erase that erasure which this must become in order to say more than that which is said here.

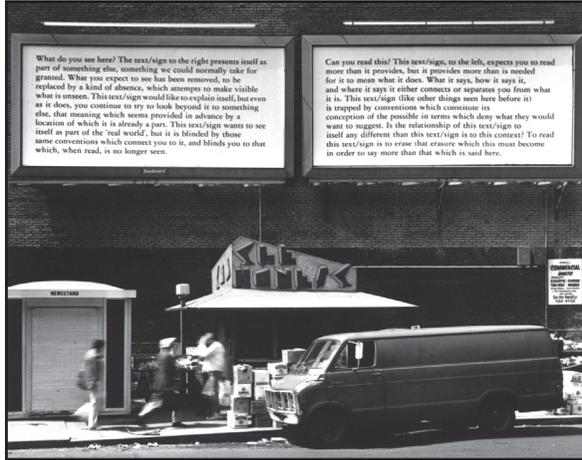
Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990*, ed. Gabrielle Guercio (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), plate 24.

Fowler alters the texts, changing “see” to “hear,” “text/sign” to “speech/recording,” “read” to “interpret,” “make visible what is unseen” to “make audible what is unheard,” and so on. The texts are then read simultaneously by a speech synthesizer, with the left text on the left side of the stereo field, the right text on the right. Fowler often employs standard computer speech synthesis software as a kind of voiceless voice for the asubjective presentation of text.

This piece, “Kosuth to Fowler,” lasts all of one minute. Yet it manages to confirm, contradict, and conflate many of the confirmations, contradictions, and confluences of Kosuth’s original work. It is as literal a translation as one can imagine from the visual text of Kosuth’s original billboard presentation, to the realm of audio. The audio text is nearly identical to the visual text. Yet the simultaneous transmission of the two texts accomplishes something that would be impossible with Kosuth’s original. The space between the two texts, literal and essential in Kosuth, is erased in Fowler. Their simultaneity, made

possible by sonic presentation, problematizes the cross-referentiality of the two texts. The stereo separation is not complete: one channel bleeds into the other, making it impossible to say that one text is completely the “left” text and the other is the “right.” They impinge on each other’s virtual, stereophonic space, giving the lie to the spatial illusionism of stereo. Nor is Fowler’s choice of Kosuth’s texts incidental. “Kosuth to Fowler” revisits key questions of Kosuth’s *Text/Context*: the conventional nature of seeing and reading, the absence that sits where the signified is assumed, and the unbridgeable separation between signifier and signified. But in Fowler’s translation a term such as “conventions” becomes a “shifter,” in Roman Jakobson’s sense of the term: a word whose specific content is provided by its context. Just as the word “I” is filled differently by each speaker—referring to me when I use it, and to you when you use it—the word “conventions” has one set of meanings when Kosuth uses it to refer to public billboards, advertising, and the experience of finding text in a space usually reserved for images. It has another set of meanings when Fowler uses it to refer not only to the “speech/recording” at hand, but also to Kosuth’s original work and to the typical modes of intervention of conceptual works of art; not only to the transposition of the visual to the aural, but also to the act of subverting a subversion.

Fowler’s percussive dialectics extend beyond localized events in which one identifiable material impacts another. Each entity is already the product of differential processes. The dialectical process is never as simple as $1 + 1 = 2$. Every 1 is also implicitly and unavoidably many. So the sum of $1 + 1$ is closer to infinity. Fowler’s dialectic functions at a higher level of abstraction, colliding broad categories of practice to produce significant reverberations. Fowler’s practice tests the tolerance of a discipline the way a structural engineer might test the tolerance of a steel foundation, investigating the discipline’s ability to withstand challenges to its integrity. His *Distribution as Rhythm* series (2006) is an interruption of the commercial circuits of music.



Joseph Kosuth, *Text/Context*, 1979. © 2009 Joseph Kosuth/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Joseph Kosuth.

Fowler commissioned a number of people, including the conceptual poet Kenny Goldsmith; the sound artist Brandon LaBelle; the noise/drone artist SCUTOPUS; the hip-hop beat-maker Durlin Lurt; and (full disclosure) me, to produce a CD that Fowler then distributed both commercially to stores and reviewers, and personally to friends and acquaintances. For Fowler, this is merely another form of percussion: bodies and ideas coming into contact and producing noise:

The concept of rhythm is this big, overlooked joker card that runs throughout lots of theoretical practice. I started creating works based on ideas hitting each other: the *Distribution as Rhythm* series published other artists' works with very little or no intervention on my part other than asking, "Would you be interested in being involved?" and then performing the Fordist, assembly-line aspect of production.²⁷

27. Ibid.

Rhythm is nothing but perceptible periodicity. By releasing a series of other people's CDs over the course of 2006, Fowler created a diffuse rhythmic pattern of diverse material, testing the boundaries between categories: artistic practice as it abuts commercial distribution, production versus curation, the thin line between authoring and authorizing. He condensed this metaphor with *Dissemination as Rhythm* (2007), in which he solicited a package of already-released CDs from the sound artist JLIAT. Fowler then handed out JLIAT's CDs to people he met in various contexts: performances, conferences, parties, and so forth.

Like Kosuth, Fowler uses materials (CDs, texts) and disciplines (philosophy, music) both as a generative apparatus and as content. He makes no hierarchical distinction between theoretical work and practical work, allowing one to fold into the other until they are distinguishable only according to context or the expectations of a given spectator. This is certainly a performative act, practicing what it preaches.

If you think of Deleuze, if you think of something like *A Thousand Plateaus*—and that's supposed to be read like you listen to a record—how do you differentiate that from sound art? Or Cage's books, how is that not sound art?²⁸

Depredation as Rhythm (2007) engages the work of John Oswald, who since the early 1980s has been manipulating, mangling, and transforming recorded music into new amalgams of sound and sense. But rather than appropriating Oswald's sound works, Fowler remixes Oswald's 1985 essay "Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative," in which Oswald first introduces the now widely accepted term "plunderphonics" to describe his practice. Fowler plunders the plunderer, creating three versions of the text: one

28. Ibid.

in which he removes all the letters of the word “rhythm,” leaving only characters not included in the word; one in which he removes all letters *except* the letters of the word “rhythm”; and one in which he removes all letters, leaving only numbers and punctuation, so “you get this little bit of percussion that’s left over”:²⁹

“_ _ _ r h _ _ , _ r _ _ _ _ r y _ _ _ _ m _ _ t _ _
_ r _ _ t _ _ ”

- _ _ r _ _ t _ _ y _ _ h _ _ _ _ t _ _ t h _ _ r _ _ _ _ ty _ _ tr _ _
_ _ _ t _ _ _ r _ _ _ T r _ _ t _ _ 1985.

M _ _ _ tr _ m _ t _ r _ _ _ _ . _ m _ _ r _ _ r _ _
m _ _ . M _ _ _ _ tr _ m _ t _ r _ r _ _ m _ _ . T _ _ r _ _ r _ r _ ,
r _ _ , _ _ _ y _ r _ , _ t _ , r _ r _ _ _ _ . _ _ _ _ _ h _ _
_ _ _ - _ m _ _ _ _ r _ _ _ _ _ r _ r _ _ _ m _ _ . _
_ h _ _ r _ h _ _ th _ h _ _ _ _ h _ h _ / _ r _ t _ h _ r _ t _ t _ h _ _ y _
_ r _ r _ _ _ _ _ tr _ _ _ h _ r _ _ th _ _ h _ r _ h _
_ _ _ _ _ tr _ m _ , _ r _ _ _ _ _ h _ h _ r _ _ _
_ _ _ t r _ r _ _ _ - th _ r _ r _ _ y _ r _ _ m _ _ m _ _
_ _ tr _ m _ t _ . _ _ m _ r _ , _ _ _ _ _ r _ r _ _ , tr _ _ _ m _
_ _ tr _ m _ t _ , _ _ m _ t _ _ _ y _ _ _ m _ t _ _ _ _ _
_ r _ t _ _ _ , _ _ _ tr _ _ _ _ _ t _ t _ m _ _ t _
_ y _ _ yr _ ht.

_ r _ _ m _ _
Th _ _ _ - _ _ _ , m _ h - t _ _ _ - _ t _ _ t _ _ _
_ m _ _ _ _ , r _ , _ _ r _ t _ , m _ _ m _ m _ _ r
_ _ _ _ , _ _ t _ r _ _ r th _ h _ _ r _ h _ tr _ _ _ y ,
_ _ th _ t _ r _ t _ , r _ _ _ . Th _ _ _ “ _ m _ _ ” _ , _ _ r
_ m _ _ _ _ t r _ , _ t _ r _ - _ _ y th _ _ t _ r _ ,
_ _ _ _ _ t _ _ _ r _ r _ _ t _ th _ _ _ t _ , rh _ _

29. Ibid.

m th_____ _ _ _h_t _ _t _____ _t_ry
 _r_r_t_ _t_ h_r_.
 m _y_, _rr_t_ _t_t_ _m_r_t_, _r_ rh____
 _r_____t th_ _t_t_ h_h_y_____y _rr_ _r_m
 th_ _r_ _t_ th_r_____ '_____ m_____t t_____. ____
 m_____r_rty_r_r_y_r_t_, _____, _h_____h_____
 _tr_____t? _my____, y_ m_y_ _t_ m_th____
 _m_r_t_ _rt_____r_h_r_y_____r_r_____r_y
 y th _tr_____ th_ _t_m_____tm_ R_h_t_r
 _r_h_tr_ _ _ _t_ M_r_r_y_____r_____ _ _
 _h_r_____ 'ym_h_y#3 1, _t_____r_m_t_____th_r____
 _r_r_m_t_. _r_m_____h_____r_t_ _ _r_tr_r____
 _y_my(_ _r_ _r_m_t_ m_t____) h_t_____ _
 th _____t_ _y_r_m_t_r_____rt_. _r_ _
 rh_y_____m_y_ _t_tr_____r_ _t_ _h____
 _r_m th_ _t_____r_ry_____ M_r_ _t_ th_ _r_ _-
 _____t_ _t_ t_ _y_r M_tr_ 2.

Jarrod Fowler, *Depredation as Rhythm, Text 2* (2007), www.jarrodowler.com/OswaldToFowler2.htm (accessed November 3, 2008;), excerpt.

This raises the question of how and why such a work qualifies as sonic practice and not as conceptual poetics or even a form of visual word art. I am not overly interested in saying what does or does not qualify under a particular banner of practice. Rather than seek a determinant judgment that proceeds from a general principle in order to identify particular instances of it, I find it more fruitful to pursue the type of reflective judgment designated as "aesthetic" by Kant in the third *Critique*: to extrapolate out from particulars to general concerns. In Fowler's work there are a number of aspects that justify locating the sonic as the umbrella issue of his practice. *Depredation as Rhythm*, despite its operation *on* and as text, is a precise intervention into a sonic circuit. It engages one of the most important and influential

bodies of work dealing explicitly with the extramusical aspects of music: Oswald's plunderphonics. It isolates a single musical phenomenon (rhythm) in the text. Metaphorically it organizes the text rhythmically. But it also creates a rhythmic-semiotic code, creating a pattern of periodicity according to the rests of the underscores—representing absent letters—and the beats of the present letters. It is possible to read the texts of *Depredation as Rhythm* as a percussion score in three movements.

Additionally, Fowler's plunder acts upon the text in ways that are specifically associated with musical or sonic intervention. His text is a *remix* of the original, a cover version of sorts. It is edited in much the same manner that Pierre Schaeffer or Luc Ferrari edited audio, cutting and splicing individual lines of horizontal text like strands of reel-to-reel tape. There is even more to this simile: Oswald's text is treated as concrete material, its specific semantic content ignored in favor of its blunt materiality. Fowler, however, is no *akousmatikoi*. Although he works with the concrete neutrality of material, he always chooses this material and his mode of intervention in a most un-Schaefferian way, according to the potential interaction of the expanded situation of the content and his practice. Fowler's choice of material and mode of manipulation takes into account its semantic, cultural, political, and philosophical implications. Fowler's work is *about* sound, not sound-in-itself.

In his early CD work *70'00"/17* (2003), one can already identify Fowler's interest in the expanded situation of sound. The CD comes in a slipcase, blank except for the title and Fowler's Web address. Inside, in a wax-paper envelope, is a short note describing the work as "a methodical exploration of an island."³⁰ "An island is defined as an area established by a border. This border can be geographical (e.g.: a body of water), man-made (e.g.: a partition), or imaginary (e.g.: a municipality)." The notes then present a numerical grid, starting with

30. Jarrod Fowler, Notes for *70'00"/17*, JMF002, 2003.

the number 1 at the center and radiating clockwise outward in a concentric pattern, ending in the upper left corner with the number 17:

17		10		11
	9	2	3	
16	8	1	4	12
	7	6	5	
15		14		13

The notes refer to “the participant,” who is instructed to designate an island and then to navigate from each numbered grid coordinate to the next. Each segment of movement takes four minutes, as measured by the enclosed CD, consisting of seventeen four-minute tracks of silence. “I like the idea of the CD being a timer; of being a blank CD, but not being blank as far as time is concerned.”³¹

The enclosed notes also allow that the participant may not want to designate an island and follow the prescribed movements. In that case, “the CD assumes its role as a timer.”³² Fowler imagines that the CD can be used to accompany other quotidian activities:

This CD could also be used to frame a seventy-minute chunk of time. You do your dishes, you start your laundry, you make some breakfast, you read the paper, you clean yourself: that aspect of ambient music. It’s ambient but there’s no music.³³

31. Fowler, conversation with the author.

32. Fowler, *Notes for 70'00"/17*.

33. Fowler, conversation with the author.

Again, Fowler explicitly tests the tolerance of a category of practice, challenging the checklist of parameters that must be engaged in order for something to be called music. The provocation of *70'00"/17*, and much of Fowler's work is that it unproblematically accepts itself as music, while turning a faux-naive, deaf ear to the objections others might raise.

It had a rhythmic structure and there was a percussive aspect to it, . . . the rhythmic aspect of moving around to different spaces, the rhythmic aspect of moving from track to track, the rhythmic aspect of the fact that a CD is in your hand and the percussive act of putting it into a player, the rhythm and percussion of focusing on knowing that there's an abstract musical context happening and of positioning oneself relative to that awareness, the basic fact that it's on a CD that you place in your stereo. That's enough for me. It has that very simple music-context value.³⁴

So *70'00"/17* creates an empty space where the work ought to be, recalling Fowler's audio translation of Kosuth's *Text/Context*: "What you expect to hear has been removed, to be replaced by a kind of absence, which attempts to make audible what is unheard." The work constitutes itself purely from its *parerga*, its supplements. The enclosed notes, laser-printed on simple paper, provide the instructions and schematic through which the participant may animate the work. The CD player, normally nothing more than a vehicle in which the content of the work is transported, becomes central to the work. Usually the timer function of the CD player (or MP3 player, for that matter) is purely peripheral. It fulfills no central, functional role in the production or reception of the works of art and entertainment the player facilitates. The timer is a feature, an accessory, an add-on. A

34. Ibid.

CD player without a timer function would not cease to be a CD player. The experience of listening to music on a timerless CD player would not cease to be an experience of music. Clearly the timer and the information it provides are secondary to the experience of the content that the player makes available. But in *70'00"/17*, there is no work at the center of the work. The *parerga* must constitute the *ergon*. The frame creates the picture. "To me, that's how it's music: you put it into your CD player."³⁵

Like Cage's *4' 33"*, Fowler's *70'00"/17* depends upon certain markers, certain framing devices, to designate itself as music. The picture is indicated by its frame. Derrida argues that beauty depends on the *parerga* to frame the form of the *ergon*. Without the frame, the work leaks out indiscernibly into the world. Without the frame, the picture's form is undetectable. If one cannot say where the work begins or ends, how can one define—not to mention *judge*—its form? The beautiful requires the frame to distinguish (in both senses of the word) itself. This, according to Derrida, points to a central deficiency in the body of the beautiful object:

The beautiful, . . . in the finitude of its formal contours, requires the parergonal edging all the more because its limitation is not only external: the *parergon*, you will remember, is called in by the hollowing of a certain lacunary quality within the work.³⁶

The beautiful lacks the components required to define itself purely from within itself. If it could speak its identity completely, then its contours would be established by what it simply is. But as we have seen, *it* is never simply it. *It* is always a product of differance, of the trace of the other in every instance of apparent self-sameness. Does this not, then, suggest that all aesthetics is actually an aesthetics of the

35. Ibid.

36. Jacques Derrida, "Parergon," in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 128.

sublime? At the center of any beautiful object is a lack, an abyss, an empty space. Emptiness, by definition, is not finite but amorphous (formless). By the same token, the process of differance is a process without identifiable beginning or end; it is infinite. Any judgment of beauty has necessary recourse to formlessness and infinitude and must therefore be based on an experience of the sublime. Even sound-in-itself abandons itself to its lacunae and to the constitutive interplay of the other.



Jarrod Fowler, performing *Drumming, Beating, Striking (Transportation As Rhythm)* at Axiom Gallery, Boston, MA, November 2008. Photo: Susanna Bolle. Courtesy Jarrod Fowler.

“Conceptualism . . . is the shifting terra infirma on which nearly all contemporary art is built.”³⁷ Yet the conceptual turn may have been fundamentally, if subtly, misunderstood. It is often considered synonymous with—or at least parallel to—the “dematerialization of the art

37. Roberta Smith, “Conceptual Art: Over, and Yet Everywhere,” *New York Times*, April 25, 1999, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9402EEDB173AF936A15757C0A96F958260&sec=&spon=&scp=5&sq=roberta%20smith%20april%2025%201999&st=cse> (accessed February 2, 2009); Smith’s declaration is also quoted by Jon Bird and Michael Newman in their introduction to *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 3.

object,” a transformation that, according to Lucy Lippard’s eponymous book, took place between 1966 and 1972.³⁸ The conceptual turn has also been understood as attempts to “demolish the distinctions between art practice, theory and criticism,” and to transform art and art history, “through its rigorous self-reflexivity, its engagement with the issue of how language frames practice, and, in particular, the influence of feminist approaches to questions of history, gender, and the body.”³⁹

As noted previously, Peter Osborne defines conceptual art as “art *about* the cultural act of definition—paradigmatically, but by no means exclusively, the definition of ‘art.’”⁴⁰ Surely none of this is wrong. But each of these claims is more appropriately and more productively accurate if seen as a symptom of an underlying condition. As this book nears its end, I want to nominate the condition at the core of the conceptual turn. Squaring Lyotard’s discussion of the sublime with Derrida’s reassessment of the centrality of *parerga*, the conceptual turn presents itself as a kind of exodus, from the central concerns of the artwork as conventionally conceived, to its outskirts. Especially if we allow ourselves to think conceptually not just about the visual and plastic arts, but also about the immaterial practices of the sonic arts—as well as dance, literature, even criticism and philosophy—then the crucial movement cannot simply be a move away from material. It is more specifically, and more incisively, a move away from the elements that conventionally establish the *ergon* of the work—the issues, questions, and considerations that had historically been taken for granted as the heart of the artistic matter. The conceptual turn is not just a reaction against Greenberg’s focus on materiality as the central issue of painting; it is a reaction against the very notion of a central issue of painting.

38. Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

39. Bird and Newman, “Introduction,” *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, 3.

40. Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, 14.

Understood this way, each of the symptoms of the conceptual turn—dematerialization, the demolition of distinctions between fields of practice, self-reflexivity, focus on language and discourse, feminist challenges to traditional definitions—all can be seen as different modes of emigration from the center to the frame, from *ergon* to *parerga*. This is absolutely not to suggest that these *symptoms* are less important for being symptoms, nor for being on the outer edges of the artwork's territory. It is, rather, to suggest that conceptualism is a *coming to terms* with the dispersed, diasporic, disseminated character of any act of identification. This is the cascading, propagating, inexhaustible movement Lyotard calls to arms with the final sentence of *The Postmodern Condition*: "Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name."⁴¹

The name, no matter what is being named, is a product of activated differences. The named thing is not inviolate, not freestanding, not always already named. Any act of naming (defining, categorizing, distinguishing) is a movement to the periphery; to the terms that delineate what the name designates from what it does not. It is an exodus from inside to outside. But it is an exodus that can never reach its destination because once it arrives at any location, that location becomes pertinent and, therefore, part of the designated territory. This is the meaning of Derrida's dictum, "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (There is nothing outside the text). To make something with a name—*art*, for example—is immediately and irrevocably to summon *parerga*, to activate difference. The conceptual turn was a recognition of this implicit fact. The condition at conceptualism's core is the postmodern condition. This condition has no use for an aesthetics of the beautiful, nor even for an aesthetics of the Kantian-modern sublime, which locates something unrepresentable at the center of the *it*. The aesthetic of this condition is the postmodern sublime, which "puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself."⁴²

41. Lyotard, "Answering the Question," 82.

42. *Ibid.*, 81.

One nearly literal conceptual strategy navigated the movement from the center to the outskirts by expanding the spatial territory of the encounter with the work of art. Artists from Mel Bochner to Daniel Buren to Michael Asher diffused the artistic focal point from a singular object in a space to the space itself. Whether constituted physically or categorically, the gallery space, as activating, facilitating medium, was transformed from frame to work. Asher's late 1960s and early '70s reconfigurations of exhibition spaces suck the object out of the experience, leaving an experiential void. Unlike Yves Klein, who in 1958 simply emptied the gallery to reveal the "pictorial climate,"⁴³ Asher's interventions are architectural. His installation in the *Spaces* exhibition, which opened in late 1969 at the Museum of Modern Art, modified the size, shape, and materials of an existing gallery space to minimize acoustic reverberation. As Brandon LaBelle points out, Asher's practice of this period problematizes both the site of artistic encounter and its discursive framework:

Questioning the operations of art production as predicated on the fabrication and presentation of objects, Asher attempted to navigate between the prevailing aesthetics of Minimalism and the then emerging field of Conceptual art.⁴⁴

By creating "continuity with no single point of perceptual objectification," Asher aimed to present an alternative to "phenomenologically determined works that attempted to fabricate a highly controlled area of visual perception."⁴⁵ While such a work may not fully escape the phenomenological emphasis on perception, it does succeed in expanding the field of artistic encounter, dispersing the act of reception, and

43. Yves Klein, "Le Vide Performance (The Void)" (1958), in *Yves Klein, 1928–1962: A Retrospective* (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1982).

44. Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 89.

45. Michael Asher with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, ed. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), 30; as quoted in LaBelle, *Background Noise*, 88.

transporting the *ergon* away from a central focal point in the room to the decentralized parameters/perimeter of the room itself.

In the early 1990s Marina Rosenfeld enrolled in the MFA program at the California Institute of the Arts, where Michael Asher has taught since the 1970s. After a childhood of classical piano training and an undergraduate education in music composition, Rosenfeld has pursued a broadly conceived hybrid of music and gallery arts. Asher's poststudio course proved pivotal in the development of her practice. Her concerns can be seen as evolving from Asher's and his generation of conceptualists, who pushed out from the center to the outer edges of their disciplinary territories. In Rosenfeld's most influential work, *Sheer Frost Orchestra* (1994), the territory includes the conventions of orchestral music. "The orchestra is such an interesting set of prejudices and beliefs—it's completely ideological—so to play with the idea of the orchestra was a natural for me."⁴⁶

Unlike Asher's *Spaces* installation, the expansion initiated by *Sheer Frost Orchestra* is not literal. Instead of focusing on the physical space of encounter, Rosenfeld interrogates the conditions of musical production and reception, of music's symbolic and social space. Since its original performance during Rosenfeld's final year at CalArts, the piece has gained a significant reputation and has been presented at galleries and museums in the United States and Europe, including the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Tate Modern in London, and the Kunstraum in Innsbruck, Austria. In each instance, Rosenfeld gathers a group of seventeen female volunteers from the area where the performance is to take place. In keeping with what she describes as "a basic punk rock idea,"⁴⁷ there are no performer prerequisites. Some of the women have musical and performance experience; many do not. Rosenfeld then convenes rehearsals in which she introduces her performers to the work's score, which asks them to play

46. Marina Rosenfeld, conversation with the author, New York, November 1, 2008.

47. *Ibid.*

electric guitars, laid flat on the floor, with nail polish bottles (“Sheer Frost” refers to the naming conventions of nail polish shades).



Marina Rosenfeld, *Sheer Frost Orchestra*. July 9, 1997, Greene Naftali Gallery, New York. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Marina Rosenfeld.

Many stable points of reference within the traditional space and practice of music are called into question by *Sheer Frost Orchestra* and by related later Rosenfeld works, such as *Emotional Orchestra* (2003), *White Lines* (2005), and *Teenage Lontano* (2008). The primacy of performance over rehearsal is destabilized by the importance of the social aspects of the rehearsal sessions, while virtuosity is disarmed by the unconventional playing technique that privileges spontaneity and idiosyncrasy over practiced craft. The qualities that recommend any given member of a Sheer Frost Orchestra could have as much to do with social skills as music skills. In recuperating the history of a movement toward a non-cochlear sonic art, it becomes evident that the shift away from the traditional territory of music often begins with rethinking the role and usage of musical instruments: Cage’s early prepared piano works, his debilitation of the piano in 4’ 33”, Muddy Waters’s electrification of the Delta blues guitar, Nam June Paik’s *One*

for *Violin Solo* (1962), in which the performer raises the violin slowly to a vertical position over his or her head and then smashes it on a tabletop. A rethinking of the ontology of music rises up from within the history and tradition of its most accessible and legible symbols: the musical instrument. *Sheer Frost Orchestra* undercuts the matrix of significations inscribed in the body of the electric guitar from Muddy Waters onward, in the same way that the treatment of the “piano situation” is disassembled in George Brecht’s *Incidental Music*. About her choice of instrument, Rosenfeld says:

I realized musical instruments are these very unique hybrid forms between sculpture and tools. I have thought about musical instruments that way ever since. The truth is the piano also has these properties, but it was invisible to me at that moment and more available for me to perceive with the electric guitar.⁴⁸

The symbolic grid of the guitar is subverted by its mode of deployment—placed flat on the floor and struck with nail polish bottles. The literal grid of the fret board, a schematic of dots and lines for the location of pitches and the placement of fingers, is destabilized by the inexact nature of the nail polish bottle as a performance tool and by the openness of Rosenfeld’s score. The guitar-as-phallus is emasculated, deconstructing “the overdetermined, almost comic masculinity of the guitar,”⁴⁹ and undermining its latent male-gendered virtuosity. In performance, the horizontal array of performers, stretching across the floor directly in front of the audience, create a confrontational performance environment, a line of entrenchment that seems to dare incursion: “The wall of women with electric guitars spoke to people in ways that I hadn’t anticipated. It was a spectacle that was hard to argue with.”⁵⁰

48. Ibid.

49. Marina Rosenfeld, “Interview with Anne Hilde Neset,” in *Her Noise* catalog (London: South London Gallery and Elektra, 2005), 27.

50. Rosenfeld, conversation with the author.

Sheer Frost Orchestra creates what Rosenfeld refers to as “the music-social space” of the rehearsal sessions. These rehearsals, normally *parerga* to the *ergon* of the performance, constitute the work as much—or possibly even more—than the performance itself. It is here in this setting, both workaday and exceptional, that Rosenfeld’s practice distinguishes itself. Rosenfeld takes as much inspiration from Michael Asher’s approach to teaching as she does from his art, citing what she describes as his “aspirational relationship to conversation, [his] belief in the power of conversation to create new spaces or new realities.”⁵¹ In rehearsal, the women of the orchestra not only learn to play the piece; they are also transformed into the Sheer Frost Orchestra, complete with social, musical, and emotional bonds. Rosenfeld encourages them to socialize, to get to know one another, and to “laugh their asses off”:

The process turns into an attempt to create a social space of self-conscious improvisation. I ask them to adopt my outlook, which is that they themselves are already fine: sensitive human beings aware of being in a room with other human beings. It’s very process-oriented and not so much results-oriented. There is something party-like or festive about it.⁵²

One of the shortcomings of Nicolas Bourriaud’s contested category, “Relational Aesthetics,” has been its strict application to only the group of artists discussed in his book, who have tended, since the mid-1990s, to show and socialize together, including Rirkrit Tiravanija, Christine Hill, Douglas Gordon, Pierre Huyghe, Vanessa Beecroft, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Angela Bulloch, and Jens Haaning. The term relational aesthetics has unfortunately become the name of a clique, rather than what, by all rights, it should be: a useful description of tendencies in contemporary practice. Like

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

the relational artists, the most radical aspects of the work of artists such as Tino Sehgal, Dexter Sinister, and Christof Migone are those that take place in the figurative space between people, rather than in the literal space of the gallery. Rosenfeld's work is exemplary of not only the social aspects of contemporary work, which might be termed "relational," but also of the latent musical model for relational aesthetics. How should one define the social collective often gathered by this type of work if not with the term "ensemble"? What category of activity describes the loosely coordinated expression of subjectivity if not "improvisation"? Does it not seem appropriate to characterize the intersection of various forms of interaction as polyrhythmic and contrapuntal? As Bourriaud has pointed out, this type of work and its effects are not strictly formal. The composition of the work as both experience and environment requires a calculus involving time, subjectivity, and convention, cross-referencing an array of intermittent, ephemeral, interdependent, semiotic matrices:

I want to insist on the instability and the diversity of the concept of "form." . . . Gordon Matta-Clark or Dan Graham's work can not be reduced to the "things" those two artists "produce"; it is not the simple secondary effects of a composition, as the formalistic aesthetic would like to advance, but the principle acting as a trajectory evolving through signs, objects, forms, gestures. . . . The contemporary artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination. An artwork is a dot on a line. . . . In observing contemporary art practices, we ought to talk of "formations" rather than "forms." Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise.⁵³

53. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 20–21.

Sheer Frost Orchestra is an example of a Bourriaudian formation: an encounter of dynamic relationships presented as an artistic proposition. Rosenfeld recognizes the dynamism of her materials. The electric guitar is more than a bluntly male-gendered device; it is also a network of connotative significations that weave through the history of rock and roll, starting with Muddy Waters. The electric guitar embodies a semiotic of masculinized performance tropes: the low-slung horizontality of the strapped-on instrument; the axe-wielding violence running from Jimi Hendrix and Pete Townshend to Sonic Youth and . . . And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead; the stylized sexualized prosthetics of Prince. It also carries the implicit and prohibitive content of technical machinery: its exploitation of electricity, its industrial fabrication of metal and wood in an apparatus of precision-honed parts and purposeful design. The electric guitar rivals the automobile in its masculine symbolism. Significantly, Rosenfeld's orchestra starts by setting the guitar on its back. It is then played, not with fingers, as usual, but with Western culture's most salient marker of gender difference in fingers: nail polish.

In contravention of the proscriptions of orchestral tradition, Rosenfeld's intervention explicitly summons the extramusical. As palimpsest, *Sheer Frost Orchestra* bears the marks of multiple signifying systems. In addition to all the extramusical connotations of its musical materials, *Sheer Frost Orchestra* avails itself of a host of gallery-arts associations: Asher's conceptual influence, the connection to relational practices, the fact that her work is generally presented in art venues. Its aspirational relationship to conversation allows it to speak back to and against those systems. Its materials—the electric guitar and the nail polish bottles—communicate in a Duchampian mode. “They're both readymades with gendered connotations.”⁵⁴ And in the context of the museum or gallery, the work implicates the tools and obsessions of the history of modern art. “There's this tiny brush in pigment and the whole thing adds up to a conversation about painting or,

54. Rosenfeld, conversation with the author.

if not painting, a borrowing of the much more developed conversation about the performativity of painting.”⁵⁵ In *Sheer Frost Orchestra* it is not the artist’s hand that is stayed but the tools of the Greenbergian trade: brush and pigment. This is action painting sans painting, a neutered form of painting or—if we are prone to play by the Duchampian implications of this book’s subtitle—a nontactile engagement with the materials and medium of painting: the brush and pigment stay inside the bottle, untouched but not unengaged.

Tapping into the value of her materials in their real-world, nonart, readymade existences, Rosenfeld raises questions about the performers themselves: “Wouldn’t it be interesting if people acknowledged that musicians on stage were also objects or material? Their individuality is both suppressed and essential.”⁵⁶ *Sheer Frost Orchestra* reveals that the implicit status of the musical performance, as a Bourriaudian formation, is always also a Freudian reaction formation, in which the artificiality of the performance is defensively portrayed as natural. Rosenfeld’s performers are not absolute; the performance is not uncontestable. They are performers and performance only by dint of the *parergonal* structures that authorize them as such.

One of the important ideas in the work is the temporariness of all of the transformations that take place. The ephemeral character of the music-social space is always acknowledged. And there’s no argument that the transformations are permanent. You don’t become a guitar player, you become a Sheer Frost guitar player.⁵⁷

Sheer Frost Orchestra initiates a shift from the indisputability of the musical text to the contestation of the ordering of musical practice. The external is brought to the center, preparation becomes realization,

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

nonperformer-performers bare the device of performance. And if the rehearsals are, as I have suggested, more central to the work than the performance, one must ask: Who is the audience for this work? Is it the performers themselves, witnessing their own actions and transformations, as if in a mirror? Is it Rosenfeld, who becomes the observer to the process she has initiated? Is it those of us not present but introduced to the work through apocrypha, hearsay, and documentation? To answer “yes, yes, and yes” is to accept *Sheer Frost Orchestra*, and Rosenfeld’s related works, as engaged in the conceptual effort of pushing music away from the “proper” territory of the ear and toward the “improper” nonterritory of the frame; the nether reaches of the expanded sonic situation; the peripheral edges of the text, beyond which there is no outside.