Aristotle believed that flies could spontaneously generate from animal dung. Such is the persuasiveness of the apparent. The apparent would have it that sound is purer than vision; sound is not as susceptible to being persuasively or deceptively manipulated; sound is a direct encounter with waves created by the sounding objects, a physical phenomenon, an actual vibration of the body. Looking back to our beginning – not the beginning, of course, but the beginning posited at the start of this book – we can detect the trickles of what would become these streams of thought: in Schaeffer, in Cage, in Waters. It is disappointing to note of the lateness of significant theoretical approaches to sound and noise. Luigi Russolo’s Art of Noises of 1913 is more polemic and how-to manual than theoretical text. But his intonarumori, or noise makers, put his ideas of constructed noise into artistic practice. Walter Ruttmann’s Wochende (1930) is a soundtrack to a “blind film,” assembled on the audio track of visual film stock. The events of 1948 witness a coalescing of new modes of sonic practice. Why, then, do we not see significant theoretical engagements with this practice and its implications until decades later? Equally confounding is the fact that the earliest significant engagements come, not from musicologists or art historians, but from media theorists (Marshall McLuhan, Friedrich Kittler) and an economist (Jacques Attali). It was not until the 1990s – some forty-plus years after Schaeffer first spliced tape to fashion an art of concrete sounds – that a sonic aesthetics, distinct from a musical aesthetics, began to establish itself. Still, we find a dearth of serious thinking on the subject. That which does exist and which begins to express a consensus, bases its interpretive schemata and assessments of value on presumptions similar to those of art history’s misguided initial engagements with minimalism. Sonic theory circa 2009, is poised to chase (and/or lead) its quarry down the same dead-end avenues of thought. Why the theorization of sound took so long to develop is a question we will bypass, in
order to address a more pressing concern: Why does sonic theory insist on pursuing the essentialist, phenomenological route already tested and, largely, rejected by art historical accounts of minimalism?

To propose yet another non-beginning from which to start, Marshall McLuhan began to draw distinctions between visual and acoustic experience as early as 1962, in his book *The Guttenberg Galaxy*. Broadly, McLuhan attributes to the advent of moveable type and of widely-available printed matter, a reordering of human beings’ perceptual faculties. Print culture – in conjunction with the development of renaissance perspective – emphasizes the visual to the detriment of other senses, including the tactile and the aural. This perceptual reorganization catalyzes a cognitive reorganization along linear and perspectival lines: visually-centered cognition orders itself sequentially: horizontally like words on a page, or vertically like two-dimensional representations of space. Such reconditioning of perceptual and cognitive sensibilities necessarily relegates sound to a secondary position with little metaphoric or organizational influence over the ordering of thought and experience. McLuhan imagines the lifeworld prior to Guttenberg to have been organized by aural experience. What McLuhan refers to as “acoustic space” is holistic, immersive, non-linear. Against the “fragmentation of the human psyche by print culture,”¹ McLuhan sets the “sensuous complexity” of the auditory.² If print culture spurs humans toward individualization, auditory culture would have thrown (to repurpose Heidegger’s term) individuals into a collective space of implicated, imbricated shared experience.

McLuhan’s characterization of the acoustic conjures an essentialist primitivism. In 1989, he wrote:

> For the caveman, the mountain Greek, the Indian hunter (indeed, even for the latter-day Manchu Chinese), the world was

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multicentered and reverberating. … Acoustic imagination dwelt in
the ebb and flow, the logos.\textsuperscript{3}

To dwell in the acoustic, rather than the visual, is to be more closely connected to
nature; to God, or the gods. Visual space, which has been “for several thousand
years, at least, man’s sensorium, or his seat of perceptive balance, has been out
of plumb.”\textsuperscript{4} There is something wrong and we best get back to the essence which
is auditory experience. McLuhan’s experiential essentialism of the acoustic is
confirmed by recourse to a similarly suspect anthropological primitivism:
“Acoustic space structure is the natural space of nature-in-the-raw inhabited by
non-literate people.”\textsuperscript{5} In particular, McLuhan points to studies of the people of the
Trobriand Islands in the South Pacific, focusing on their conception of time.
“[Anthropologist, Edmund] Carpenter advises us that the Trobriander Islanders
only recognize now, the eternal present.”\textsuperscript{6} McLuhan also cites research by
Dorothy D. Lee, who reports that the Trobrianders have completely different
names for an indigenous yam as it matures from sprouting to ripeness to rotten.
The name of the object changes, rather than the adjectives appended to the
consistency of the name. The conclusion is that the Trobrianders see the yam as
a new object – a new construct of sense data – at every state of its maturation.
The yam’s degree of ripeness is the central attribute of its objecthood. So, what
we would describe as a different stage of ripeness of the selfsame yam, would,
for the Trobriander, constitute a new object altogether.

This conception of time – in which one resides in the eternal present – sounds
eerily like Husserl’s phenomenological time, similarly reduced to the infinite and
infinitesimal “now.” Likewise, the Trobrianders’ focus on the object as it appears
to us in our perceptions is a doppelganger for Husserl’s phenomenological
reduction. And when McLuhan writes, “acoustic space requires neither proof nor

\textsuperscript{3} McLuhan, Marshall. “Visual and Acoustic Space” in Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music. Christoph Cox and Daniel
\textsuperscript{4} McLuhan, Marshall. “Visual and Acoustic Space” in Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music. Christoph Cox and Daniel
\textsuperscript{5} McLuhan, Marshall. “Visual and Acoustic Space” in Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music. Christoph Cox and Daniel
\textsuperscript{6} McLuhan, Marshall. “Visual and Acoustic Space” in Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music. Christoph Cox and Daniel
explanation,” it rings the same false tone as when Husserl says the subject has no need of signs to indicate himself to himself.\(^7\) Between Pierre Schaeffer’s overt Husserlianism and McLuhan’s inadvertent phenomenological affinities, engagements with sound remain rooted in a perceptual essentialism. This tack is likely motivated by the second-class citizenship of sound in the community of senses (the *sensus communis*). Always in vision’s shadow, sound must shout to be heard. Hyperbolic assertions draw attention, close the gap, stake claims. McLuhan and others see the visual as corrupted by its privileged position in alienated society. To turn to the aural is to turn away from power. …or so it would seem. In fact, to redress the imbalance of power, such a turn must covertly justify and assert itself as a turn to power. If one wants to argue for meekness, one argues that the meek shall inherit the earth, not that the meek shall quietly – if nobly – fade away.

For McLuhan, sound is more natural, closer to the origin or essence of being, than sight. The leading, next-generation media theorist, Friedrich Kittler, starts from McLuhanesque assumptions about media and message, integrating Foucauldian, Lacanian, Derridean, theoretical and historical models to build a more sophisticated media matrix. From Lacan, Kittler borrows the distinction between the symbolic and the real. In his *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986), technological reproduction is described as an encounter with the real.

> A reproduction authenticated by the object itself is one of physical precision. It refers to the bodily real, which of necessity escapes all symbolic grids.\(^8\)

Visual and sound recordings, as exemplary instances, are not obligated to resemble a pre-existent referent. Instead, they are products of an object: of light, in the case of photography; of sound waves, in the case of phonography. In this sense, they are purely indexical: the physical imprint of a material catalyst, not the

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iconographic likeness of an external referent. Sound recordings, then, are instances of encounters with real phenomena. For Kittler this makes them, in and of themselves, instances of the real.

The symbolic, conversely, has no material connection to the real. The symbolic is a translation, a transformation, a transubstantiation, of the real into a mediated grid of signs. Language is such a grid. The keys of the typewriter (of the computer keyboard) render this in remarkably literal fashion. The real, says Kittler, in order to reach us, must pass through “the bottleneck of the signifier.” In so doing, it is compressed, reduced, quite likely shorn of its most substantive fleece. In short, the sign fleeces the real. For Kittler, the real is matter and the symbolic is information. Thus the speaking voice is only signifying when forming recognizable words. The ums, ahems, coughs, swallows and hiccups before, between, and around words, are not the symbolic, but the real, as are accents, impediments, and tics. We ignore the real in everyday conversing, filtering out noise in favor of signal. The neutral ear and tongue of technology, on the other hand, has no such filters and conveys the feral real with the same fidelity as the domesticated symbolic.

Only the phonograph can record all the noise produced by the larynx prior to any semiotic order and linguistic meaning.

This techno-phenomenological attitude has implications for any artistic engagement with sound. Instead of significant sound – sound that functions according to one or another symbolic grid (speech, music, sound accompanying visual material) – the phonograph is a neutral technology, delivering “acoustic events as such.” Kittler detects a nascent interest in such acoustic events in the work of Richard Wagner, as early as 1854 – some twenty years before the

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Frenchman, Charles Cros, formulated the principles of phonography and Thomas Edison realized Cros’s “musical dream of the too short hour.” In Wagner, Kittler detected a “historical transition from intervals to frequencies, from a logic to a physics of sound.” Whether this transition had secured a toehold in 1854, who knows? As we’ve seen, beginnings are slippery slopes. Lacking Kittler’s alpine fortitude, I feel safer saying that the transition had gained more significant, identifiable traction 94 years later.

Kittler goes on to critique the development of Western music theory for its exclusion of the auditory real:

[F]irst, there was a notation system that enabled the transcription of clear sounds separated from the world’s noise; and second, a harmony of the spheres that established that the ratios between planetary orbits (later human souls) equaled those between sounds.

Kittler is staking out the frontline of a battle waged initially by Russolo, and later by Schaeffer, Cage, and Waters: the battle for the definition of music; the constitution of its materials, and the method of ascribing values to those materials. This battle derives from the same frictions I described in Chapter 2: Music has – since at least the advent of notation – existed as effects quantified as *values* (in both senses of the word). The institutions of Western music (including notation, instrumentation, concert protocol, the consolidation of music theoretical methods) have captured music in and as a numerical sign system; a system in which phenomena are signified as values of pitch (A 440), harmony (thirds, fifths, octaves), duration (whole-notes, half-note rests, dotted quarter-notes), and rhythmic organization (3/4, 4/4, 6/8). This valuation of musical effects represents an (e)valuation of certain effects, of certain musical elements, over others.

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For Kittler, this generative friction is a battle between the real and the symbolic. And there is no doubt that he grieves the reduction of music to sign system.

Kittler includes in his account an anecdote recorded by Ranier Maria Rilke in 1919 in which Rilke recalls an experience he had while attending anatomy lectures in Paris, studying the structure of the human skull. In particular, he found himself drawn to the lines in the bone caused by the fusing of the plates of the skull during infancy. These lines – the coronal suture – reminded Rilke of another line he had experienced as a much younger student, when his teacher had led the class in the construction of a rudimentary phonograph from a cardboard funnel, wax paper membrane, and clothes-brush bristle-stylus. Inscribed in a layer of candle wax by the bristle-stylus, the students’ funnel-amplified sound, appeared as a squiggly line: an inscription, conjured for Rilke by the fused fissure of the coronal suture. Pursuing a line of thought (the figure is nearly literal) with “incredulity, timidity, fear, awe,” Rilke imagines playing the groove of the coronal suture with a phonographic stylus: “What would happen? A sound would necessarily result, a series of sounds, music…”

Rilke imagines the resulting music as a “primal sound” and extends his thought experiment:

[What variety of lines, then, occurring anywhere, could one not put under the needle and try out? Is there any contour that one could not, in a sense, complete in this way and then experience it, as it makes itself felt, thus transformed, in another field of sense?]

This Rilkean fantasy is related by Kittler with significant intent. It announces the dream of unified sensory experience; of “completing,” to use Rilke’s verb, the experience of phenomena. The implication is that there is a completeness in nature, and that our sense of incomplete experience, insufficient understanding, is a product of our inadequate perceptual faculties. The unenlightened, it would seem, is merely the one who has not put together the pieces of the sensory

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puzzle; who has not discovered the organic wholeness that is the real. Rilke yearns to bridge “the abysses which divide the one order of sense experience from the other.” Kittler comes to the rescue: “In today’s media networks, algorithmically formalized data streams can traverse them all.” Sense perceptions are revealed as nothing more than neutral data flows. Equally neutral technology – the phonograph – can provide the bridge of Rilke’s dreams.

At first blush, Rilke’s neo-Romantic sensibility and Kittler’s post-medial, technological perspective could not be more different. Yet, it is not for nothing that Kittler balances much of his argument on Rilke’s fulcrum. Both ground their convictions, their desires, in a sense of experiential essentialism. For Rilke, poetry offers a passage through the thicket of disjunction and occlusion characteristic of the individual’s experience in the modern world. Beneath all that (at the foundation; deeper, purer), resides a metaphysical essence. Rilke’s view suggests that a unification of the five senses would enable a holistic, immersive consciousness, allowing “ever more active and more spiritual capacity.” Kittler’s essentialism cloaks itself in the neutrality of media. But that neutrality is, itself, an impossible position of transcendence. The friction upon which Kittler seizes: between intervals and frequencies; between a logic and a physics of sound, moves backward from the symbolic grid of music. The intervals and logic of Western music create a closed symbolic system. As discussed in Chapter 2, the extra-musical is denied entry. This is a process of bracketing out, which resembles the phenomenological reduction. And music’s fundamental understanding of its own meaning-making processes rests on similar premises of self-identity. Western music’s understanding of itself is in advertently Husserlian. While meaning is made in time and as a product of rhythmic and harmonic relations, music as a language, seeks to retain its absolute proximity to itself. Any process of differance is thought to occur only within the narrowly proscribed

boundaries of music-as-such. Like the triplet monkeys covering their eyes, ears, and mouth, music vainly resists semantic interaction with “outside” influences. This is music’s impossible dream. Batoned sentries stand down the barbarians at the gates.

Recoding sound as frequencies and physics does not significantly revise its semantic schemata. A deeply-rooted Husserlianism inheres. Although Kittler doesn’t want to call it that.

[L]iterary scholars, still believing in the omnipotence of philosophers, choose to relate Rilke’s inner world space to Husserl.21

If its omnipotence we’re indicting, we could find it in the claims Kittler makes for data streams: traversing the abysses between sight and sound, between touch and taste, between thinking and feeling. Data, by this account, can go anywhere, take anything/everything on its shoulders. I side with the literary scholars and philosophers. Rilke’s poetic intuitions are based on faith in a fundamental strata of experience; on some essential ontological state, a metaphysics. His aesthetic seeks to reset the cognitive machinery to that baseline state. Such convictions can be identified in Husserl’s inheritance to Heidegger, who looked to poets like Hölderlin and Rilke as thinkers beyond the common ken. Kittler shares these convictions, though they may be less overt, masked by recourse to media rather than metaphysics.

Kittler’s interest in Rilke’s anecdote of the coronal suture is an interest in authorless media streams. “It is no longer necessary to assign an author to every trace, not even God.”22 This is a kind of anti-metaphysics; a negative theology: positing a universality of data which precedes any communicative intent, any transmitter, any receiver. This would be the all-knowing, all-seeing; the

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omnipotent itself. But messages, if that’s what we’re after (and I would argue that Kittler certainly is – if only in the McLuhanesque sense of media-as-message), are context-dependent. Contextless data is gobbledygook (even at the level of media-as-message). The translation of the coronal suture into phonographic sound erases the contextual markers which make the initial signal readable. The suture may be authorless, but it is not readerless, that is to say, not contextless. The physiologists Kittler trusts could decipher its trace and reconstruct the story of this skull’s development. The coronal text might, in fact, extend beyond the palimpsest of the skull, relating information about the brain it once housed, the body of which it was part, the family from whom it descended. To drop a phonographic needle into the suture’s groove strips the suture of its meaning. As sound it is meaningless, pure contextless data; pure noise. And let’s be clear, contrary to apparent understanding, only noise is capable of purity. Signal, a product of traces and differance, is always impure, always shot through with the impurity of the other. Signal is never selfsame, never in absolute proximity to itself.

But am I being fair, contesting some of Kittler’s claims in the context of a discussion of art? Kittler makes an effort, on numerous occasions, to make a distinction between media and art. He is concerned, he says, with the former. But the discussion to which he is contributing is not exclusive to media – how could such exclusivity be enforced? – it has profound implications for art as well. And both media and art are, of course, implicated in the broader categories of culture and experience. Even the most abstract thought and the most radical conceptual art must be conveyed. Such conveyance is media. What Kittler has to say, must also be thought in terms of art. His own text testifies to the fact, citing examples from Goethe, Kafka, Pink Floyd, Jimi Hendrix, Mallarmé and Rilke. His arguments sometimes even shadow art history, as when he claims that the ease and faithfulness of phonographic reproduction made poetry obsolete. Poetry, as what Kittler calls a “mnemotechnological” form, could not compete with the
phonograph’s memory for names, places, verbal constructions, stories, lessons, philosophies, etc.

Under these circumstances, writers are left with few options. They can, like Mallarmé or Stefan George, exorcise the imaginary voices from between lines and inaugurate a cult of and for the letter fetishists, in which case poetry becomes a form of typographically optimized blackness on exorbitantly expensive white paper.\(^{23}\)

This formula reproduces the art historical notion that photography ushered in the obsolescence of painting, as a recorder of reality, forcing painters to turn to abstraction as a mode of practice both specific to painting and unlikely to be cannibalized by photographic technology. But this misses an important point of phonography’s success and an important distinction between it and photography. Audio recording, despite Edison’s best intentions and predictions, has prospered primarily as a conveyor of a pre-existent form of art and entertainment. Music didn’t come into being with recording. Instead, recording technology was trained upon music and used to disseminate and corporatize it. Photography, on the other hand, has not been used primarily as a medium of capture for a pre-existing artistic form. One might say, adopting Kittler’s terms, that phonography has been, nearly from the outset, a conveyor of an already symbolic form, while photography has been accepted culturally as a conveyor of the real. Although, I must immediately intervene and strike out my own equation. Even the photographic lens trained on the landscape or the subject of a portrait, inevitably engages the symbolic realm. We read photography as text. Photography has been training us in this reading procedure as we have been reinventing it to coincide with our understanding and desires. The photograph’s situation as text can only be understood via the symbolic, bringing Kittler’s understanding of the relation of phonography to poetry even closer to that of photography and painting.

Elsewhere, discussing Cocteau and the Beatles, Kittler equates the real with realism, and realism with hi-fidelity recording.\textsuperscript{24} It is curious that, in many cases, the higher the fi, the more uncanny the listening experience. As a result, it is not uncommon for listeners to find old, technologically primitive recordings, of Delta blues players, for example, more authentic than new studio productions or digitally re-mastered versions of the originals. A whole subgenre of indie rock sought to parlay the apparent veracity of rudimentary recording into an unpolished, aesthetic of the real. Incidentally, this movement, comprised largely of American bands like Sebadoh, Pavement, and Guided By Voices, went by the name “lo-fi.” These examples turn Kittler’s observations on their head. The “real” that passes through our speakers when listening to Robert Johnson’s 1937 recording of “Hell Hound on My Trail,” or the Silver Jews’ 1993 “Welcome To The House of the Bats,” is not a mute perception of phenomena in absolute proximity to themselves. In both recordings, the hiss, the reduced frequency range, the distortion, the wildly inconsistent dynamics, are neither neutral nor simply “real.” Instead, such sonic artifacts are understood by listeners as signs, as constituent elements in a complex symbolic grid of sound recording. They may, in each case, indicate different things. History, intention, and legend are also part of the symbolic grid. We hear the distortion of Johnson’s singing as the inadvertant product of inferior (and probably portable) equipment and of the lack of experience of a singer who had never before sung into a microphone. We hear the distortion of Silver Jews’ singer David Berman as the wholly intentional product of an aesthetic of rebellion and rejection within the established code (the word is not incidental) of rock and roll recording. But these readings are, of course, acts of willful ignorance on the parts of listeners. Can we definitively rule out intention in the case of Robert Johnson? Can we be sure that he didn’t hear an earlier take with distortion and decide he liked it enough to recreate the effect? Can we be sure there wasn’t an alternate take which was discarded in favor of the released take, due, perhaps, to the effect of the distorted vocal? On

the other hand, can we be sure that David Berman didn’t record his vocals as best he could given his knowledge and equipment? Can we be sure he recognized his performance as the product of a substandard recording? Maybe he just liked the way it sounded. Which, if so, still can’t prevent us from reading the text of the recording: not just the words, not just the music, not even the “grain” of the voice – Barthes’ valuable addition to the perceived content of audio recordings – but the expanded situation of the recording.

This is where we’ve been headed. The expanded situation of sound is the idea I’ve been trying to bring into play – thought by thought, example by example – since the start of this book. It might have been quicker simply to turn to thinkers who take this situation for granted. But to this point, what I’ve tried to do is prepare the ground for the arrival of their thoughts, overturning the soil of the apparent and the habitual, so that the implications of thinking sound-beyond-sound and/or sound-without-sound, might take root.

**It took an economist to establish music as a symbolic form.** Jacques Attali’s 1977 *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* takes a very different approach to recorded sound and how it functions. Attali is concerned with music, per se, and not with the broader categories of recorded sound or the sonic arts. *Contra* Kittler, he sees music as fundamentally symbolic. The change wrought by recording technology and by the commodification of recordings was to transform the ritualistic value of music into exchange value. In either case, music is, in its very ontology, symbolic.

> In fact, it [music] has no usage in itself, but rather a social meaning expressed in a code relating to the sound matter music fashions and the systems of power it serves.\(^{25}\)

Just as Attali’s conception of music is opposed to Kittler’s, it is also opposed to Western music’s idea of itself as a hermetic code. Attali sees music functioning,

not in the manner of linguistics as imagined in a vacuum by Saussure, but relationally and functionally. Musical meaning is thus produced in the mode of Derrida’s grammatology.

The musical message has no meaning, even if one artificially assigns a (necessarily rudimentary) signification to certain sounds … In fact, the signification is far more complex. Although the value of a sound, like that of a phoneme, is determined by its relations with other sounds, it is, more that that, a relation embedded in a specific culture; the “meaning” of the musical message is expressed in a global fashion, in its operationality, and not in the juxtaposed signification of each sound element.26

Attali characterizes efforts to constitute a theory of music as language as “no more than camouflages for the lamest kind of naturalism.”27 A similar conclusion could be drawn regarding Kittler’s professed loyalty to the “real.”

This is not to suggest that Attali’s schema is not without its faults. His perspective is, at heart, that of a Marxist economist (from 1981 to 1991, he served as an advisor to French president, François Mitterand). As such, he is focused on assessing music’s value in terms of categories, such as use and exchange, that may in truth have only a little to do with its function, ontology, or effects. What’s more, his thought is influenced by the anthro-sociological perspectives of thinkers such as George Bataille, Michel Leiris and Claude Levi-Strauss. From Bataille, in particular, he adopts a hyperbolic sensitivity to symbolic social violence. Attali describes, for instance, music as a metaphoric enactment of ritual murder, of sacrifice. Still, unlike Kittler, Attali understands music as a social activity embedded in a code and as a social code embedded in activity. Music is constituent of and constituted by the relations included in its expanded situation: sociality, gender, class, race, politics, and power. To understand music, one must understand much more than music.

What must be constructed, then, is more like a map, a structure of interferences and dependencies between society and its music.\textsuperscript{28}

One of Attali’s recurring formulations is that music, in the best examples, is a message being composed at one and the same time as the language in which the message is being conveyed. The commodified product of the music business, on the other hand, seeks to repeat already received, digested, and therefore comfortable/comforting, messages. In the case of pop music this creates a difficult tension between the repeatability of the forms of pop and the innovation of the “pop artist”.

Thus they [author-performers like the Beatles or Bowie] continue to play the eternal role of music: creating a form of sociality. But in repetition that passes for identity, and no longer for difference.\textsuperscript{29}

The resulting tension threatens not just music, but the sociality pop engenders. Coded, then, as commodity, this sociality falls under the influence of capital and its brokers, creating a power relation Attali fears.

The alternative, in which Derridean differance is retained, offers its own difficulties. Attali finds this drama played out in the compositional move away from the repetitious comfort of tonality during the middle decades of the twentieth century.

Since the abandonment of tonality, there has been no criterion for truth or common reference for those who compose and those who hear. Explicitly wishing to create a style at the same time as the individual work, music today is led to elaborate the criterion of truth at the same time as the discovery, the language (\textit{langue}) at the same time as speech (\textit{parole}). Like science, music then moves within an increasingly abstract field that is less and less accessible.

to empiricism, where meaning disappears in abstraction, where the
dizzying absence of rules is permanent.\(^\text{30}\)

The better analogy, as I have suggested, is with Derridean models of language
and meaning. Indeed, the dizzying absence of rules is permanent. But that is not
the same as believing that “meaning disappears in abstraction.” Attali mentions
Derrida only once and in passing. So, to read him through Derrida is something
of an imposition. It is, nevertheless, justified, making available a method for
thinking sound’s expanded situation.

An expanded sonic practice would include the spectator, who always carries, as
constituent parts of her or his subjectivity, a perspective shaped by social,
political, gender, class, and racial experience. It would necessarily include
consideration of the relationships to and between process and product; the space
of production versus the space of reception; the time of making relative to the
time of beholding. Then there’s history and tradition, the conventions of the site
of encounter, the context of performance and audition, the mode of presentation,
amplification, recording, reproduction. Nothing is out of bounds. To paraphrase
Derrida, there is no extra-music.\(^\text{31}\)

And this goes equally for other forms of sonic practice. One could easily argue
that sound art, as a discrete practice, is merely the remainder created by music
closing off its borders to the extra-musical, to any instance of parole that could
not be comfortably expressed in the langue of the Western notational system.
Instances of non-Western music would not be sound art. Although they may
employ specific features, such as microtonalities not represented in the Western
octave, these features can still be understood and, to some extent, represented,
in a way that is legible to Western musical methods. Sound art is that which
posits meaning or value in registers not accounted for by Western musical


\(^{31}\) Derrida’s famous proclamation is “il n’y a pas de hors-texte,” translated as both “there is nothing outside the text” and “there is no outside-text”. Derrida, Jacques. Of Grammatology. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (trans.) Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, p. 158.
systems. Unlike sculpture, and to a lesser extent, cinema, music failed to recognize itself in its expanded situation. Instead it judged the territory adopted by the expansion as alien and excluded it *tout de suite*. The term sound art suggests the route of escape, the path of least resistance, available to this errant practice. The gallery art world, having already learned the trick of expansion and the assimilation of once-excluded modes, proved a more hospitable homeland for much of the sound practice of the late-80s, 90s, and 00s.

I trust I don’t need to draw too much attention to the political analogies suggested by this account. Let me simply say that, just as the expanded situation of a given practice includes and is created by social, political, gender, class, and racial exigencies, so too are the responses of institutions; the attitude of a field of cultural activity; the acceptance by critics, academics and practitioners of a version of a discipline’s history. The expulsion from music of sound art is both analogous to politics and *is* a politics. Likewise, the acceptance of sound art into the spaces and discourse of the gallery arts is politics in theory and in practice. As such, the history I am detailing here and the revision I am suggesting have implications beyond the apparently limited scope of which tag we append to a practice, which institutions host it, which critics have a territorial stake in examining it. There is no outside the text, nor is there a safe haven inside the text.

It is impossible to say precisely when and where the expansion of music began. Satie’s *furniture music*? Russolo’s *intonarumori*? Cage’s *4’33”*? Have we not by now abandoned the dream of beginnings? Max Neuhaus’s *Listen*, first presented in 1966, is certainly an expansion of Cage’s already-expanded notion that all sounds can be music. Neuhaus’s expansion, however, moves beyond elasticizing existent musical categories and, instead, expands the master list of categories. Cage’s *4’33”* takes place in a concert hall, at a piano, with a score. Neuhaus’s *Listen* consists of leading a group of spectators out of the concert hall and into the streets of lower Manhattan, pausing at certain fruitfully noisy
locations to engage in the activity of the piece’s title. The trope of the walk figures prominently in the history of sound art. Neuhaus’s literal march out of the concert hall echoes figuratively in sound art’s ramble away from music. The psycho-geographic activity of the “sound walk,” now a recognized subgenre of sonic practice, conjures the tradition of the flâneur, who strolls the city simply to experience it, and to the Situationist practice of the dérive, or purposeless walk through the city.

"What we can't say we can't say, and we can't whistle it either." This was the response of philosopher Frank Ramsey to Wittgenstein’s dictum: “That of which we cannot speak we must pass over in silence.” As with Rilke’s coronal suture phonography, Christina Kubisch’s Electrical Walks propose that it is possible to encounter a phenomenon – in this case electromagnetism – and to “complete … and then experience it, as it makes itself felt, thus transformed, in another field of sense.” Kubisch is among the first generation of practitioners whose work didn’t have to make the categorical transition from another medium to sound art. Kubisch’s career coincides almost exactly with the formation and recognition – in Germany, at least – of sound art as a distinct category of art making. She participated in what is widely-held to be the first dedicated sound art exhibition, “Für Augen und Ohren,” at the Akademie der Künste, in Berlin, in 1980. In 2003, she initiated a series of works under the title Electrical Walks. These walks, presented in Germany, England, France, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland, Slovakia, Spain, Japan, and the United States, guide the spectator through the streets of cities and towns, equipped with a pair of specially-designed headphones which amplify the hums, buzzes and gurgles of electromagnetic fields. The piece is enacted by the spectator who has the option of following a route prescribed by Kubisch or of exploring the city according to his or her own whims. By altering one’s proximity and position relative to lighting, wireless

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networks, radar systems, anti-theft security devices, surveillance cameras, cell phones, computers, streetcar cables, automated teller machines, neon advertising, public transportation networks, and the like, the spectator engages a range of timbres, intensities, and rhythms. Kubish and others have discussed this work in terms of revealing a hitherto hidden aspect of the city. The suggestion is that these sounds constitute a kind of secret about – or secret life of – the city. The service provided by Kubisch is not the one typically assigned to composers, painters, and poets, but that of scientists, educators, and whistle-blowers: to alert us to the presence of previously undisclosed facts.

But, again, just as with Rilke, this longed-for completeness is a fantasy. Not only can it not be achieved with Kittler’s “algorithmically formalized data streams,” but the aspiration of reattaching the limbs of experience is based on a faulty, unsupportable, presumption of the wholeness of a body (spiritual, natural, epistemological, or phenomenal). Contrary to a phenomenological conception in which these systems and their Kubisch-revealed sounds are adumbrated perspectives of a single entity with a consistent essence, I cannot imagine or name the body to which both would belong. From Aristotle’s *praedicamenta* to Deleuze’s “wasp-orchid,” philosophers have looked to parse experience and phenomena according to categories that give meaning to groupings, constituencies, and bodies. The suggestion that the city-as-body is revealed by Kubisch’s headphones ignores disparities in register, function, and intention. (While we could conceivably ascribe an intention to the machines and systems, it is hard to imagine how the same could be claimed for the specific sounds “discovered” by Kubisch’s headphones.) What we have, at some fundamental level, is an encoding problem: the key that encodes these messages, first turning electrical/mechanical processes into voltage signals, is not the same as the key used to decode them as sound. The output of the process is in a different language, indeed a different informational paradigm, than the input. To “read” the work as if it is conveying a message – as if it the product of any legible intention – seems misguided. I recognize that this critique is based on the presumption
that art functions linguistically and that this presumption is far from universal. Nevertheless, it seems only fair to declare the position from which my survey and assessments originate. It seems equally incumbent upon me to make my case for the linguistic presumption (acknowledging that it has been made elsewhere with greater energy and acuity).

If, as some would have it, there are experiences which could be characterized as pre-linguistic, then the minute we think or speak them, we rip them from this “pure” state, corrupting them with language. This is problematic on two fronts. Firstly, this idea of inevitable linguistic corruption – analogous to the Christian notion of original sin – would locate most of human experience in falsity or impurity. The concretization of ideas, perceptions, or experience would be tragically contaminated. This is not to argue that language is pure or transparent, but to make a more practical argument. The anthropologist, Mary Douglas, has defined dirt as matter out of place. As we are discussing sound, it seems equally plausible to say that noise is sound-matter out of place. The implication is that an order – natural or otherwise – pervades human conceptions of material (visual, sonic, physical, etc.) When a bit of matter falls outside that order or in the wrong state or place within that order, it is regarded as alien, incorrect: dirt or noise. Given that being human is a state inexorably tied to language – some would say a state in or of language – then, presumably, linguisticity is the order which obtains. To call the baseline state of human experience impure – dirty or noisy – is simply nonsensical. The impure can only be identified relative to an established norm of purity. That purity, as I see it, could only exist as a metaphysics. The suggestion an unadulterated, untainted, purity of experience prior to linguistic capture – seeks a return to a never-present, rustically bucolic, pre-Enlightenment darkness. Secondly, if, in fact, some stimuli convey an experiential effect that precedes linguistic processing, what are we to do with such experience? My sympathies lie along the axis of Peirce’s pragmatism and Wittgenstein’s dictum: “That of which we cannot speak, we must pass over in silence.” If there is such a strata of experience, we must accept it mutely. It finds
no voice in thought or discourse. Since there is nothing we can do with it, it seems wise to put it aside and concern ourselves with that of which we can speak.

As far as the experience of art is concerned, the revelation of phenomena is not enough. Kubisch’s walks may introduce us to a normally inaudible byproduct of the city’s activities. But what can we do with those sounds? What kind of aesthetic value do they deliver? A provisional answer to this question might be based on a distinction between epistemological versus aesthetic values. But this would imply that epistemology is outside the concerns of art and I do not believe that. The value of conceptual art, defined by Peter Osborne as an art which questions definitions, is essentially epistemological. Instead, a more productive distinction might be that between textual engagements with works of art versus engagements focused on material or perception. Scanning the history of twentieth century aesthetics, this distinction makes itself manifest in artists’ authorial disposition. On the one hand, we have artists who approach production as an act of creating or inventing; on the other, artists more interested in acts of revealing or discovering. This contestation is present, if implicitly, in Duchamp’s legacy, especially as received, interpreted, and re-transmitted by Cage. But we mustn’t misread Duchamp’s claim that his choice of the readymades was based on a “visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste ... in fact a complete anaesthesia.”35 This does not mean that there is no intention, no act of creation or invention. Despite the fact that the bottlerack or the urinal was merely “discovered,” the intention of the work is embodied in the act of nominating the object as art, not in the object itself. The aesthetic value is derived, not from the visual qualities of the nominated object as it relates to the tradition of art objects, but from the artistic act as it relates to the tradition of artistic acts. This does not mean that everything or anything is art. It means that

35 Duchamp, Marcel. “Apropos of ‘Readymades’.” Check ref.
the artistic act is an act of engagement with a tradition and a category of practice, rather than with a medium or material.

Cage’s loyalties are divided. *Silent Prayer* and *4’ 33”* have an undeniable conceptual content. Much of his work is overtly theatrical, foregrounding the activity of music making and the absurdity of performative categories. But Cage still demands that we “let sounds be themselves, rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments.” Cage’s devotion to sound is a kind of faith in phenomena. In *For The Birds*, Cage proposes listening microphonically to the atomic vibrations of objects.

Object would become process; we would discover, thanks to a procedure borrowed from science, the meaning of nature through the music of objects.  

It is not entirely clear what meaning is discovered here, unless vibration and sound where stillness and silence were assumed, could be declared a meaning. This attention to sound, rather than to theories or expressions, takes Duchampian an-aesthetics more literally than it was intended and to an extreme that contradicts its most important implications. Product can be downplayed in favor of process, rendering output – the content and form of the artistic object (including objects such as performances, compositions, texts) – incidental. Yet, this doesn’t erase the artist from the work. As aleatory and systems-generated works make apparent, one must always make a decision on how to begin (or whether to begin at all). Steve Reich’s famous piece *Pendulum Music*, from his “Music As a Gradual Process”-period, runs into the additional problem of the author’s role in the ending of a process piece. Though Reich writes that “once the process is set up and loaded it runs by itself,” *Pendulum Music* requires a final authorial intervention.  

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The piece is ended sometime shortly after all mikes have come to rest and are feeding back a continuous tone by performers pulling out the power cords of the amplifiers.⁹⁹

The piece’s penultimate-state is systematically determined: it ends “shortly after the mikes have come to rest and are feeding back a continuous tone.” The piece’s final conclusion, however, the cessation of the continuous tone, is supplied not by the system, but by performer choice.

No matter how hard one tries to avoid expression, theories, ideas, or intention, there they are. If, on the other hand, one accepts Barthes’ declaration of the death of the author, replaced by Foucault’s notion of the “author-function,” then the problem is converted into a non-problem. If the author/artist/composer is never the actual or sole source of the text, then why must she intervene to absent herself from the process? Is that not an authorial intrusion in its own right? Kubisch is part of a tendency in the sonic arts that takes Cage at his word. These artists, performers, and composers attempt to get out of the way, to “let sounds be themselves.” The Electrical Walks do not compose sonic experiences, they reveal them. The author’s hand is virtually staid. The sounds are simply present. These sounds, and the way they are presented, decline to engage the rich cultural, technical, social, ontological implications of their origins. The work does not investigate its own premises, including the status of the artistic encounter, institutionality, and the social-performative aspects of the spectator’s activity. And the work fails to interrogate the power relations instantiated by the various players in the network of its presentation and reception. There is a tendency, especially strong among sound artists: art is the medium of conveyance for that of which we cannot speak. Words, are too specific; language, more broadly imagined, is too bound to its symbolic grid. So the wordless aspects of art allow contact with pre-linguistic experience. This is especially true of media and approaches that promise an encounter with the

“real.” This neglects the reality that art, as a cultural activity with a tradition and conventions – an activity that does not perform in a vacuum, but which necessarily interacts with culture, politics, commerce, and sociality – constitutes and is constituted by a vast meaning-making structure functioning very much in the manner of a language.

Kubisch’s *Electrical Walks* are a signal example of a pervasive tendency in contemporary sonic practice. Let’s call it the *sound-in-itself* tendency. The inheritance from Cage is obvious; rather too obvious, one might say, since much of the work that follows this path takes only partial account of Cage’s *oeuvre*. The failure of this reading of Cage is that, instead of seeing Cage as a remedy for much of music’s traditional insularity, its veritable *a-xenophonia*, it sucks Cage back into the conventional concerns and attitudes of Western music. The most fecund reading of Cage is one which rejects a simple dialectic of noise and silence, but accepts that “Cage’s artistic practice involves a set of paradoxes: the intention of non-intention, the choice of indeterminate means, the artist against artists.” ⁴⁰ The sound-in-itself tendency ignores this reading and accepts Cage one-dimensionally and unproblematically.

The sound-in-itself tendency is especially pervasive in Germany, where sound art is an established practice. Helga de la Motte-Haber, a musicologist with an interest in the expanded field of sonic arts, identifies this tendency, grouping it with a broader movement toward “new ideas of esthetics.” ⁴¹ She identifies a group of sound artists as emblematic of this movement. First on the list is Christina Kubish, followed by Rolf Julius, Robin Minard (the one non-German in the group), Ulrich Eller, and Hans Peter Kuhn. She identifies perception as a common concern of these artists, writing that “The concept of perception is undergoing a boom. The term [esthetic] thereby relates to the original Greek

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meaning: sense perception.” In the same publication – timed to coincide with a sound art exhibition at the Stadtgalerie Saarbücken from June to August of 2006 – curator and publication editor, Bernd Schulz, writes:

We may consider the ear to be closer to the world of the dream and the unconscious than the eye. Yet as the most sensitive organ for the exploration of reality, it connects our inner experience with the world around us. It is precisely this double perspective which is investigated to its very limits and with constantly new approaches in the Sound Artists’ installations.

Schulz’s conception of reality, available in dreams and the unconscious, can be traced back to Cage’s faith in discovering “the meaning of nature” in amplification or recording of the atomic sounds of objects. It’s the same impulse which leads to Rilke’s coronal suture phonography and, finally, to Kubisch’s Electrical Walks. The “real” implicit in all these imaginings is to be found inside, at the core, hidden from view and from hearing, at the heart of (the) matter.

The verb to record, is a curious composition. The prefix re- means again (as in to retell) or suggests a backward movement (as in to recall). The root cor comes from the Latin for heart, still evident in the French le Coeur. To record, then, is to encounter the heart again or to move back to the heart. The implication, of course, is that a recording captures and replays the heart of its source. The heart of the thing might be its life-giving component (as in a biological heart), but more commonly it indicates an essential, fundamental disposition. When we remember something verbatim, without recourse to clues or aids, we remember it “by heart”, as if it is now inextricably inside us, part of us. To record carries in its own linguistic body, both the sense of essential physiology and of the non-physiological essence; something akin to the soul.

This dual character of recording is to blame for the uncanniness that marked early encounters with sound recordings. Edison, himself, was spooked by the phonograph:

This tongueless, toothless instrument without larynx or pharynx, dumb, voiceless matter, nevertheless utters your words, and centuries after you have crumbled to dust will repeat again and again to a generation that will never know you, every idle thought, every fond fancy, every vain word that you choose to whisper against this thin iron diaphragm.44

Edison’s unsettledness in the face of this mouthless voice seems to be as much about what lies at the heart of being human – idle thoughts, fond fancies, vain words – as about reproductive capacities of the technology. Nevertheless, it is the apparently faithful capture and redistribution of this heart which troubles him.

Douglas Kahn notes how, prior to the advent of sound recording, a person could only experience his or her own voice “in large degree through bone conduction; it is generated in the throat and carried via the bones in the head to the inner ear.” The experience of one’s own recorded voice is, however, boneless. “…the phonographed voice returns to its parent through air conduction, that is, without the bones. The phonographed selfsame voice is deboned.”45 This deboning underscores the possibility (if not, indeed, the necessity) of a Derridean critique of the centrality, veracity and authenticity of the relation of sound to the body. As Kahn puts it,

Phonographic deboning is, therefore, a machine-critique of Western metaphysics a century before Derrida’s critique of Husserl, for it uproots an experiential centerpiece for sustaining notions of the presence of the voice – hearing oneself speak – and moves the selfsame voice from its sacrosanct location into the contaminating realms of writing, society, and afterlife.46

We are not obliged to engage one of Kubisch’s Electrical Walks as a backstage pass granting sonic access to the “real.” The walks send people (bodies) out into

the city, highlighting the private/public nature of urban life. The oversized, industrial headphones Kubisch employs, draw the attention of both the spectator/participant and uninvolved pedestrians. The immersive isolation of headphone culture is made evident. The wearer of the headphones becomes self-conscious, aware that the activity demanded by the Electrical Walk does not fulfill any of the typical roles for people moving through the city. Considered along these lines, the Electrical Walks engage a slew of concerns having little or nothing to do with the sonic. The “real” in play is sociality; the formation of identity in the metropolis according to predefined actions, functions, and occupations. What is real is the encounter with other people, other bodies; each preoccupied with her or his own set of goals, predispositions, and capacities. The relation of self to other in the aberrant context of the Electrical Walks, is determined by the interconnected grids of social, gender, economic, and political positions. This is the Electrical Walks’ aesthetic value. The crucial encounter is not with sound-in-itself, but with categories of experience and identity; with questions of the naturalness or normality of a class of activities; and with other selves engaged in their own categories, experiences, questions, and activities. Instead of the paradoxical muteness of sound-in-itself, we have the loquaciousness of multiple symbolic grids, their overlapping matrices cascading into infinity.