In the Blink of an Ear

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TOWARD A NON-COCHLEAR SONIC ART

by
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Those unmindful when they hear,
for all they make of their intelligence,
may be regarded as the walking dead.

—Heraclitus (ca. 500 BCE)

Preface

In the Blink of an Ear is not a survey. Nor is it, properly speaking, a history of the sonic arts. Its primary concerns are not chronology, comprehensiveness, or the connecting of the dots. Those in search of such efforts can turn to any of a number of exceptional recent publications. Alan Licht's *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories* (Rizzoli, 2007) is a thorough and beautifully appointed compendium of works straddling the boundary between music and the gallery arts. It is, to date, the most exhaustive effort to survey the field of sound art. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner's *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (Continuum, 2004) is by far the most thoughtfully assembled collection of writings about vanguard sound and music. In the worn-out copy on my desk, well over half its pages are marked by sticky notes. Douglas Kahn's *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (MIT, 1999) is a deeply informed, idiosyncratic, and at times visionary account of the incursions of the aural into the visual- and literary arts from the turn of the twentieth century through the 1960s. Brandon LaBelle's *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (Continuum, 2006) draws unsuspected parallels among disparate instances of theory and practice in the sonic and gallery arts since the middle of the twentieth century. And Branden Joseph's *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage* (Zone Books, 2008) is that rarest of scholarly enterprises: a project both startlingly innovative and painstakingly detailed. I am indebted to each of these works and would be genuinely flattered to share shelf space with any of them.

Since this book asserts the intertextual nature of any text, I am obliged (in both the senses of *appreciative* and *beholden*) to

acknowledge my debt to those who have coaxed, cajoled, cooperated, collaborated, and comforted this book into being. The original impulse arose while I was teaching in the history of art department at Yale University in 2007 and 2008. My heartfelt thanks to David Joselit, Department Chair, and Sandy Isenstadt, Director of Undergraduate Studies, for their openness, warmth, and willingness to accept the bundle left on their doorstep.

As anyone who has done it will tell you, the activity of teaching puts you in more intimate contact with what you do not know than what you do know. My students delicately alerted me to the former while enthusiastically confirming the value of the latter.

Brian Kane of the music department at Yale is a fabulously smart cookie with a finely calibrated skew on his discipline. His insights and recommendations whether on the topic of music, phenomenology, deconstruction, or the best twenty-four-hour donut shop in New York, have been much valued.

Any evidence in these pages of intellectual invention is, in actuality, evidence of Steve Connor's influence. The London Consortium, of which he is the academic director, and of which I am a graduate, is cast in his image. The pioneering course of Steve's thinking seems constitutionally incapable of traveling the blazed trail, and yet it has laid the groundwork for many of us who follow in his footsteps.

Christoph Cox is, in my opinion, our most penetrating thinker of the sonic arts. Through his various writings and, even more profoundly, in personal conversation, Christoph has challenged me to pursue ideas further and to root out elusive implications. Whatever this book is, it would be diminished were it not for his example.

David Barker's enthusiasm for this project was a heartening buoy when the waters roiled. David has been a complete pleasure to work with, as has everyone else at Continuum.

With the exception of the putting-pen-to-paper part (I'm speaking metaphorically, of course), this book took form and flight in conversations with my friend and colleague Seth Brodsky, of the music

department at Yale. In saying so, it is not my intention to off-load any enmity this project might generate—that heat is entirely mine to warm by—but the spirit of this book is as much Brodsky's as it is mine. If a propitious return should accrue, a sizable share will be held in escrow in his name (specifically his surname, so as to avoid the confusion wrought by the nominal tastes of our equally unusual Jewish mothers). Brodsky's intellect is a torrent. To be caught in its enthusiastic spate is to surf the Kantian sublime, the whelming joy of encounter. I have caught that wave and am more ardent for it, probably even a little bit smarter.

I am grateful to Jarrod Fowler and Marina Rosenfeld, who were both extremely generous with their time and insights.

My family has battened down the hatches in more storms than any of us care to remember. To Matthew, Robin, Talia, Jack, and William, to Rebecca, Marc, Addy, Charlotte, and Annika, and to Arthur, I offer not just thanks, but love.

Despite the old saw, we are all prone to judge a book by its cover. In this case, I would encourage potential critics not to resist such urges, to go right ahead and form their opinions based exclusively on Rebecca's impeccable jacket design. I only wish I could have written something *ugualmente senza macchia*.

Many years ago, in a piece of collegiate writing, I thanked my mother, calling her "an ideal reader." Now that my conception of reading has expanded to encompass every variety of experience, that epithet is all the more fitting. I repeat it here, in its expansive sense.

This book, and everything before and after it, is dedicated to Jules.

INTRODUCTION

AT, OUT, ABOUT

“Excuse me, do you say in English, ‘I look *at* the window,’ or do you say in English, ‘I look *out* the window’?” In Jim Jarmusch’s film *Down By Law*, the Italian drifter, Bob (played by Roberto Benigni), draws a window on the wall of his windowless jail cell. Bob, who speaks little English, asks his cellmate, Jack (played, incidentally, by the musician John Lurie), which preposition to use when speaking of his window. Jack replies, “In this case, Bob, I’m afraid you’ve got to say, ‘I look *at* the window.’ ”

One would be hard-pressed to find a better dramatization of the critical conflict of art history in the 1960s. On the one hand, the question asked by Bob poses the essential Greenbergian problem. It was the illusion of looking *out* the window—when looking, in fact, at a painting—to which Clement Greenberg, the preeminent postwar art critic, so vehemently objected. Instead, he suggested, we should be looking *at* the window. But there is another way to parse this problem. The post-Greenbergian art of the sixties—Minimalism, Conceptualism, performance, and so on—might accept that the illusion of the window on the jail cell wall is a problem, but its solution is entirely different from Greenberg’s. Rather than retreating into the sanctity of the window’s depictive flatness, sixties art ignores the prepositional problem of looking *at* or *out* the window and focuses instead on what a window *is*, the light it permits, its conduction of inside to outside and vice versa. It was Michael Fried, Greenberg’s disciple, who in 1967 would so accurately diagnose Minimalism as a case of what he called “literalism”: an encounter not with the window-as-illusion but with the window-as-window, with all that a literal window implies and allows.

Not surprisingly, if we peek around the figurative corner, into the adjacent cell, we find that artists working with sound have been

grappling with similar issues. In 1948, the same year as Willem de Kooning's first solo show—a watershed for Greenbergian abstraction—Pierre Schaeffer, an engineer at the Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française in Paris, invented the techniques that would come to be known as musique concrète. By manipulating, first, phonograph records, and, later, by cutting and splicing magnetic audio tape, Schaeffer isolated what he referred to as the *objet sonore*, the sonic object. He suggests that we should listen "acousmatically," without regard to the source of the sound. The experience of listening to recorded sound, removed in space and time from the circumstances of production, allows for the acousmatic reduction, ultimately an increased attention to the specificity of sound-in-itself. We should listen to the *objet sonore* blindly, ignoring who or what might have made it, with what materials, or for what purpose.

Just three years later, in 1951, John Cage spent some time in another cell—an anechoic chamber at Harvard. In the dead acoustic environment of the chamber, Cage experienced an epiphany. After a while, against the silence of the room, he became aware of two sounds, one high-pitched and the other low. Later, the technician on duty informed Cage that the sounds he heard were, respectively, his nervous and circulatory systems at work. Cage told the story repeatedly for the rest of his life. It is the creation myth of his aesthetics: an aesthetics summed up by his proclamation "let sounds be themselves."[1]

So, in one cell we have Greenberg insisting that painting zero in on its specific, immanent concerns and "eliminate from [its] effects . . . any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art."[2] In the adjacent cell we have Pierre Schaeffer insisting that musique concrète concern itself only with the immanent features of sound, and John Cage insisting

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

2. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Art in Theory: 1900–2000*, 775.

on the value of sound-in-itself. It is this adjacency to which this book is addressed. Because the practices, and the theories informing the practices, of the postwar arts are so inextricably entwined, we must attend to them in their multiplicity. The transition from Greenbergian modernism to what came next did not happen in painting alone nor, for that matter, in the visual arts alone. This transition can be seen as a symptom of a deeper epistemological and ontological shift from an Enlightenment worldview predicated on singular, essential values, to one predicated on plurality and contextuality. It should come as no surprise, then, to find the sonic arts dealing with the question of looking—or listening—*at* or *out* the window. What I want to suggest here is a sonic parallel to the solution suggested by the gallery art of the sixties, one that ignores the prepositional question, which is at its core a perceptual question—what to look at, or listen to—and focuses instead on the textual and inter-textual nature of sound. I suppose that, if we are fixated on prepositions, we could call it looking *about* the window, in both senses of *about*—*around* and *pertaining to*. This third way allows for sound's interactions with linguistic, ontological, epistemological, social, and political signification.

In the gallery arts, the conceptual turn after Marcel Duchamp adjusted the focus from an art of *at* or *out* to an art of *about.* This is what has been characterized as the turn from "'appearance' to 'conception'" (Joseph Kosuth),[3] from "the era of taste [to] the era of meaning" (Arthur Danto),[4] and from the "specific" to the "generic" (Thierry de Duve).[5] When Rosalind Krauss distinguishes the work of the seventies from its predecessors, employing the term "postmodern," she is indicating the same turn. Krauss characterizes the postmodern arts as organizing themselves around, and concerning themselves with,

3. Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," 1969, www.ubu.com/papers/kosuth_philosophy.html (accessed December 8, 2008).

4. Arthur C. Danto, "Marcel Duchamp and the End of Taste: A Defense of Contemporary Art," *Tout Fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal* 3, 200, www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_3/News/Danto/danto.html (accessed May 30, 2008).

5. Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), passim. See in particular chapter 3.

discourse rather than phenomena. The conceptual turn might be seen as coming to terms with a practice: an engagement with the vocabulary that defines and is defined by that practice's concern.

> It is obvious that the logic of the space of postmodernist practice is no longer organized around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material, or, for that matter, the perception of material. It is organized instead though the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation.[6]

The blink of an eye lasts three hundred milliseconds. The blink of an ear lasts considerably longer. From birth to death, the ear never closes. The ever-openness of the ear is what this book is about. What follows is a hearing (both a listening and an investigation) of the sonic arts since World War II. More precisely, we will be *re*hearing the case of postwar sound, because an initial verdict has already been rendered. We will reexamine the legacy of Cagean aesthetics, wondering aloud if the initial judgments overlooked important motives and modes of operation. The critical issues revolve around the notion of the blink. For centuries, philosophers have been enamored of the ineluctable, indivisible duration of the blink of an eye—that moment-that-is-less-than-a-moment. In Danish, Søren Kierkegaard wrote of the *Oieblik*; in German, Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger each wrote of the *Augenblick*. It seems inevitable that the ocularity of the metaphor would be taken up by art history and aesthetics, eventually finding what appeared to be its perfect application in the reception of minimalist sculpture's "specific objects" and "unitary forms." Thus, the blink of an eye—a central image in Husserl—points to phenomenology as the apposite theoretical rubric for decoding minimalism's apparent objectivity. By the time a second generation of interpreters

6. 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.

turned their attention to minimalism, they had the advantage of working in the wake of a significant critique of phenomenological essentialism, spearheaded by Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of Husserl. Rosalind Krauss in particular seized on Derrida's dissection of the *Augenblick*, developing a critical approach to minimalism based not on a raw perceptual premise, but on *reading* the object as an element in the expansive text of sculptural encounter.

Sound art, as a discrete category of artistic production, did not come into being until the 1980s. At that time, the critical reception of sound should have benefited from art history's hindsight. Instead, a preponderance of sound theory followed the first generation of minimalist criticism down the phenomenological cul-de-sac and now finds itself hitting a wall. What this book intends to accomplish is twofold: (1) to recuperate the history of the sonic arts since World War II by rehearing it for what it is: a practice irreducible to singularity or instantaneity; and (2) to propose a way forward, out of the dead end of essentialism, along a path blazed by the second-generation reception of minimalism, connecting the sonic arts to broader textual, conceptual, social, and political concerns.

It is a convenient coincidence (some might say too convenient) that the three events informing the structure of this book—Pierre Schaeffer's initial experiments with musique concrète, John Cage's first silent composition, and Muddy Waters's pioneering electric recordings—all occurred in the same year: 1948. These are not proposed as hard, fast channels, strictly marshaling all the tendencies of the post-war sonic arts. Instead, they are nominated as provisional property lines, boundaries that ask, "What if we draw this line here?" with the expectation that they will be moved, modified, erased, redrawn. The hope is that thinking about these nearly simultaneous innovations might make apparent otherwise overlooked lines of inquiry.

Though the conjunction of these three events is certainly convenient, it is probably not entirely coincidental. In the estimation of Greenberg, 1948 also represents a turning point in the development of the distinctly modernist, distinctly American form of painting

known as abstract expressionism. Whether or not we point specifically at Schaeffer, Cage, Waters, and Greenberg, or precisely at the year 1948, it is evident that, in the period following World War II the established relationships between artists, materials, traditions, and audiences underwent a major revision. To track these changes, we need to attend to the history of the gallery and the sonic arts, while also maintaining contact with philosophical ideas employed by contemporaneous critical discourse.

What should have been obvious from the start is inherent in the metaphor itself: the ear is oblivious to the notion of the blink. There is no such thing as an earlid. The ear is always open, always supplementing its primary materiality, always multiplying the singularity of perception into the plurality of experience. It is easy to see how the blink might have made sense as a metaphor for reception in the visual arts (even if it was eventually shown to be lacking). For the sonic arts, however, it is utterly inapplicable. Yet the history of the sonic arts appears to start from the presumption of the *Ohrenblick*, the blink of an ear. This history suggests that, intentionally or not, sound missed the conceptual turn. When the gallery arts branched off in the direction of Duchamp, so the story goes, the sonic arts stayed the course. In music, and in what later came to be known as sound art, there is an evident resistance to questioning established morphology, materials, and media. There is a sense among practitioners and theorists alike that sound knows what it is: sound is sound. I will try to reduce this resistance by returning attention to works and ideas stubbornly received in the untenable space of the blinking ear. The aim is to rehear them, rethink them, reexperience them starting from a nonessentialist perspective in which the thought of *sound-in-itself* is literally unthinkable. Against sound's self-confidence—the confidence in the constitution of the sonic self—I propose a rethinking of definitions, a reinscription of boundaries, a reimagination of ontology: a conceptual turn toward a non-cochlear sonic art.

Duchamp famously championed a “non-retinal” visual art that rejected judgments of taste and beauty. In the decades since, Duchamp’s example has been widely embraced and liberally interpreted. This is not to suggest that art was devoid of conceptual concerns before Duchamp, nor that art was struck blind in front of the urinal. But since the 1960s, art has foregrounded the conceptual, concerning itself with questions that the eye alone cannot answer, questions regarding the conditions of art's own possibility. The conceptual turn is not intrinsically an inward turn from gaze to navel gaze. Instead, conceptualism allows art to volunteer its own corpus, its own ontology, as a test case for the definition of categories. To question the conditions under which art can and should constitute itself is, by association, to question the existential sanctity of all categories and phenomena. To question the use of art is to question the use of any activity. As a result, what once could be comfortably referred to as "visual" art now overflows its retaining walls. What, then, to call it? The defining features of such practice no longer have to do with morphology, nor with material, nor specifically with medium. The only consistent indicator that binds these disparate practices is an indication, bestowed by some authority (artist, critic, or institution), that a given experience is meant to be received—primarily, if not exclusively—as art, and not as something else. In what follows, such practices will be referred to as the "gallery" arts. This is not meant to designate the gallery as the final arbiter of questions of art, but to suggest the gallery as a metonymic indication of the universe of terms and institutions that sanction artistic practices distinct from literature, dance, architecture, and, most crucially for our purposes, music.

If a non-retinal visual art is liberated to ask questions that the eye alone cannot answer, then a non-cochlear sonic art appeals to exigencies out of earshot. But the eye and the ear are not denied or discarded. A conceptual sonic art would necessarily engage both the non-cochlear and the cochlear, and the constituting trace of each in the other.

> One probably does not have to choose between two lines of thought. Rather, one has to meditate upon the circularity which makes them pass into one another indefinitely. And also, by rigorously repeating this *circle* in its proper historical possibility, perhaps to let some *elliptical* displacement be produced in the difference of repetition: a deficient displacement, doubtless, but deficient in a way which is not yet—or is no longer—absence, negativity, non-Being, lack, silence.[7]

The "non" in non-cochlear is not a negation, not an erasure, not, as Derrida puts it, "absence, negativity, non-Being, lack." It is most definitely not silence. The non-cochlear and the cochlear "pass into one another indefinitely." In what follows there is no suggestion of an eradication of phenomena. Just as with the conceptual turn in the gallery arts, a non-cochlear sonic art would not—indeed could not—turn a deaf ear to the world. Conceptual art has been dealing with the problems of materiality and documentation for forty years. They are still in play, in part because any suggestion that we can move thoroughly beyond material, beyond phenomena, has been shown to be folly.

In the visual vernacular, concepts need to be brought to light. Thinking in terms of sound, in order to be recognized, ideas must be voiced, thoughts composed, strategies orchestrated. Images, objects, and sounds are indispensable. A non-cochlear sonic art responds to demands, conventions, forms, and content not restricted to the realm of the sonic. A non-cochlear sonic art maintains a healthy skepticism toward the notion of *sound-in-itself*. When *it*—whatever *it* is—is identified without question and without remainder, we have landed on a metaphysics, a belief system, a blind (and deaf) faith. The greatest defense against such complacency is the act of questioning. Conceptual art, "art *about* the cultural act of definition—paradigmatically, but

7. Jacques Derrida, "Form and Meaning: A Note on the Phenomenology of Language," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 173.

by no means exclusively, the definition of 'art,' "[8] is the aesthetic mode of such questioning. In questioning how and why the sonic arts might constitute themselves, I hope to lead the ear away from the solipsism of the internal voice and into a conversation with the cross talk of the world.

Everything is a conversation. We just start talking, unsure where we are going. Our starting points are altered by the process, and a final destination is not forthcoming and is hardly the point. What matters is the process of negotiation. Everything is a conversation, or as Heraclitus would have it, everything flows. In the flow that follows, I will say more than once that there is no definitive source of the conversation this book records. Even individual strands, if they could be unwoven from the overarching plaid, would not lead us back to a first cause. Meanings are always the product of the patterns and shadings of the crosshatch. The intertwining tangle of cross talk sends statements hurtling into one another's paths. Where lines intersect, meaning emerges. But even this is a simplification. The game of meaning is not played in two dimensions, but in the layer-upon-layer overlap of semantic fabrics. Lines intersect horizontally, vertically, diagonally, up, down, and across. Individual intersections rub with or against other intersections, creating additional lines of vibration: like colliding ripples in a lake, like pulsing sound waves, moving in and out of phase. Since I do not believe in the concept of "the final word" on a subject, this book is not one. It is a comment on a blog, a single locution in an ongoing conversation.

The language of a sonic practice distinct from music is only now emerging. Its vocabulary and syntax, its rhetorical tropes, slang, and regional dialects are still in the process of formation and standardization. The language of a nascent non-cochlear sonic practice is, needless to say, even less developed. But if the work of art can be conceived of as the simultaneous creation of a message and the

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8. Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 14.

language of the message's transmission, then work in an as-yet-unestablished category of practice, such as sound art, presents significant challenges and opportunities. By engaging this conversation in its incipience, I hope to influence both the general conditions of its existence and the specific understanding of its aesthetic, cultural, and historical present.

This book was written amid the escalating reverb of the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign and finished just a few days after Barack Obama's miraculous victory. As I now engage in the strange circularity of the introduction, returning to the beginning to introduce what I have already written and what you have not yet read, I mention this turn of political events not incidentally. Although this book is ostensibly a book about the art and music worlds, it is by association a book about the whole wide world and how we live in it. A number of societal and political certainties have, at this moment in history, been thankfully exposed as *un*certain and subject to abrupt and sweeping change. This book similarly takes meanings and values as temporary constructs, the seemingly singular as always multiple, apparent inevitability as only apparent. It seems to me that, in the wake of this once-inconceivable upheaval of history, this perspective might now be more in play, more tangible. We'll see.