

# **The Chladni Ostrich**

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When Miha Ciglar originally invited me to give this talk, I declined. You see, my conception of a non-cochlear sonic art, is intended as a specific kind of corrective for sound art practices that are engaged with the history and aesthetics of the gallery arts. My hunch about the ICMC is that this gathering serves a different population and a different kind of practice. So I declined the invitation, mainly because I have no interest in telling people something they simply don't want to hear, something they probably don't need to hear. Miha tried to persuade me that the thesis of my book could be an important addition to the discourse here. Ultimately, the optimist in me prevailed. I accepted Miha's generous invitation, hoping that we might engage a productive conversation and – who knows – maybe even better ourselves in the process. I should've known better. Now the conference is upon us and, in the conference program, we read:

As it was anticipated prior to the call for works, there were actually not many submissions referring to the conference theme.

So I'm feeling justified now in assuming that what I'm about to say may fall upon deaf, or even worse, antagonistic ears. In any case, I am not a dogmatist or a preacher. I'm not here to save anyone's soul. I am an artist and I wrote my book, *In The Blink of an Ear*, to address a set of presumptions that seemed to be informing sonic practice and the theory attending it. I was interested in better understanding my own work as an artist and how I'd come to make the work I make. In short, the only soul I hoped to save was my own.

I feel strongly that art both affects the world and is affected by it. To put it another way, art exists in relation to the world; it is in a relationship with the world. As with any relationship, all interested parties have responsibilities to one another. If we, as artists,

turn our backs on the world, retreat to our bedrooms or studios and ignore the world – what it wants, what it needs, how it behaves – then we are bad partners in this relationship; the kind who say “not tonight honey, I have a headache” and then masturbate after honey falls asleep.

Just as importantly and just as verifiably, the practices and technologies with which we are engaged are not themselves free of the social, political, and historical, conditions that we refer to when we use the definite article and noun, “the world.” On the contrary, the categories of *artist*, *music*, *composer*, and *technology*, are historically contingent. What we understand these categories to mean and how they determine our actions and attitudes in relation to them are the products of a series of events, figures, works, and texts, that have persuaded us that these categories are meaningful. It is useful to remember, however, that a mere tweak here, a swerve there, a different response, a blizzard, a budget cut, a less tenacious publicist, and everything might have been different. Likewise, the gadgets we employ are the products of history and ideology. Where would the field of computer music be without the largesse of the United States Defense Advanced Research Products Agency and multi-national corporations like Bell Labs? Do we have the right to forget this, to ignore the other ends to which this research has been employed? And what of Apple’s labor practices? Microsoft’s monopolistic aspirations? Intellectual property issues? Net neutrality?

If we bury our heads in the sand, like the ostrich of my title, we abdicate the right to call ourselves good citizens, good partners. I wonder, then, if we retain any criterion by which we can declare ourselves good artists? And besides, the very sands in which we would bury our heads are constantly shifting under the influence of the giant Chladni plate that is history. Those who, for the time being, succeed in burying their heads, are eventually exposed.

I propose the title, “The Chladni Ostrich,” as an admonition, a cautionary metaphor, and finally, and most optimistically, as a red herring. It was Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History*, published in the first century of the Common Era, who wrote of the ostrich:

But the veriest fooles they be of all others. For as high as the rest of their bodie is, yet if they thrust their head and necke once into any shrub or bush, and get it hidden, they thinke then they are safe ynough, and that no man seeth them.

As it turns out, Pliny was wrong. Ostriches do not bury their heads in the sand or the bush or anywhere else. In fact, when threatened, ostriches can cause serious injury and death with kicks from their powerful legs. So, what follows is nothing more (and nothing less) than a vigorous, ostrich-like defense of the idea that we as artists have both the responsibility and the privilege of engaging the world in the spirit of a good partner.

My usage of the term “non-cochlear” is slightly different from that of the theme of this year’s International Computer Music Conference. The title of my book is *In The Blink Of An Ear: Toward A Non-Cochlear Sonic Art*. Nowhere do I speak about “non-cochlear sound.” My interest is in sonic art practice and not sound-as-such. The idea of a non-cochlear sonic art is, of course, a rather blatant piggybacking on Marcel Duchamp’s idea of a non-retinal visual art. When Duchamp coined this notion, he was thinking of a visual art practice that does not appeal primarily to the exigencies of the eye or to visual pleasure. Instead, he is indicating a practice that moves beyond the strict jurisdiction of the eye to a set of concerns that came to be known as “conceptual.” I am suggesting a parallel in the sonic arts; an approach that moves beyond the exigencies of the ear, that reduces the value of sonic pleasure in favor of a broader set of philosophical, social, political, and historical concerns.

The term, “non-cochlear,” attempts what I’m sure is a crude anatomical transposition, equating the cochlea with the retina. The point is not the biological equivalence of these apparatus of perception, but their metaphorical equivalence in the processes of reception. What I’m suggesting is not a sonic art without sound, but an art that reduces the importance of sound, in and of itself. To be more precise, I’m suggesting that there is no such thing as sound, in and of itself, and that sound is always both constituted by, and constitutive of, its cultural, historical, political, and economic context.

The past half-century has been the most productive and meaningful period in the history of the visual arts. I know that's a big claim. But the successive movements of Minimalism, Conceptualism, Institutional Critique, and social-based practices, have allowed art to transition from a source of pleasure to a source of critique and meaning-making. By encouraging a conceptual, non-cochlear sonic practice, I hope to allow sound and music to partake of these fecund tendencies in the visual arts; to acknowledge the mutually profound influence of sonic practice on culture and of culture on sonic practice. Sonic art should feel entitled to engage politics, economics, gender, the philosophies and institutions of the practice itself.

To that end, my book argues against the ineffability to which sound and music have always felt a privileged entitlement. The term "ineffable" is derived from the Latin *effari*, meaning "utterance." To be ineffable is to be unutterable, unspeakable, beyond the reach of mere words. As this ineffability would have it, music and sound escape what Frederic Jameson has called "the prison house of language." But if language is a kind of prison, this suggests that there is a freedom outside this prison; that if we were to bust out of the joint, we would discover a world unfettered by restriction, compromise, convention, or structure. This ineffable world would be uncorrupted, pure; uninvaded by the schismatic infection of language. So when sound and music stake a claim to ineffability, they also stake a claim to wholeness: either one that has somehow been preserved – Eden-like – against the incursive pollution of the real world; or one that has been reconstructed, after the Fall, as it once and always should have been.

The traditional defenders of music as bastion of the ineffable straddle a line that cannot, in fact, be straddled. This is the line that divides the transcendent from the sublime. The transcendent is mystical: its power comes from without – from a beyond to which we have no access and upon which we can exert no influence. The sublime, on the other hand – I'm updating Jean-François Lyotard here – is immanent, generated from within – by the psyche, by institutions, by history. I'm convinced that the power of the sonic arts is derived from the sublime, and not from the transcendent. This is not an argument of degrees – as if those who claim transcendence are experiencing something bigger, deeper,

better than me. It is an argument of typology, at its core, of ontology, or (a term I'm considerably more comfortable with), of epistemology: of how we know what we know – whether that knowing is intellectual, emotional, social, or more than likely, a combination of all three and more.

I reject the transcendent as a condition of possibility. I do not accept that there are forces – whether they be consciousnesses, energies, wills, or intentions – beyond those that are part of our material relationship with the world. Our understanding of these forces is a matter of use value – a Marxian term, used here in a Heideggerian fashion. We understand these forces to the extent that we can make some use of them: intellectually, emotionally, socially. There are no forces such that we do not know or use them. Again, this is not so much an ontological claim, as an epistemological one. Bottom line: what makes you feel the way you do about the best thing you ever heard is a complex network of social, economic, historical, psychological, and cultural forces, all of which can be examined and, in the appropriately sensitive hands, described.

Of the various ways in which music and sonic art attach themselves to the transcendent, two, in particular, strike me as being so deeply entrenched that they have become much more than tendencies. They have become fundamental principles, articles of faith. I refer to these two tendencies as “Sound-in-Itselfism” and “The Transposition Fantasy.” Together they underwrite the supposed value of an alarming percentage of contemporary sonic art. But these two attachments to the transcendent are symptoms of a false sonic consciousness. Each projects a vision of imaginary wholeness, in which identity and meaning are self-evident, avoiding the unavoidable fact that identity and meaning are always endless processes; that nothing is self-evident. Identity and meaning are always a product of specific relations, under specific circumstances, at a particular place and time. If we can dissuade ourselves of notions of self-evidence and self-sufficiency, then the sonic arts will no longer have a justification for disavowing their partnership with the world.

### **Sound-in-Itselfism**

As we all know, John Cage famously asked us to let sounds be themselves. Cage wanted us to listen in a state of pure reception, our analytic and judgmental apparatus suspended. His aim was to undermine the faculties of taste and subjectivity that had underwritten Western aesthetics since the late 18th century and Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. But, there are two problems with Cage's prescription. First, sounds can not be themselves. A sound is always, by definition, the result of an interaction between at least two materials: bow and string, air and membrane, stick and skin, water pitcher and tile floor, fist and face. Sound, to a greater extent than sight, is a coming together. Sound always includes an implicit versus; contact, communion, conflict. There is no in-itself. There is *always* an in-relation. Second, what Cage really wanted to change wasn't the status of sounds, but the behaviors of human listeners. Under the influence of D.T. Suzuki, Meister Eckhart, Joseph Campbell, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and a host of mystics from both Eastern and Western traditions, Cage championed a kind of disinterestedness. This was not disinterestedness in the strictly Kantian sense, but a letting go of pre-sentiments or predilections in order to lose oneself in phenomena, artistic or otherwise. Sound-in-itself then is not a definition of any given sound, but of the way one *ought* to hear it. That is, without preconception and without judgment. The danger of this – given that sound is always the result of an interaction between at least two materials – is that the listener becomes willfully ignorant of the contextual meaning of whatever he or she is hearing. What is lost is the very real and very meaningful social and political differences between the sound of bow on string and the sound of fist on face.

Francisco López likely needs no introduction here. He is a remarkably prolific maker of recordings and performances. Today I'll focus on his 2008 performance of a piece called *Buildings (New York)* at the Judson Church in New York. When he performs live, Francisco López is very particular about how the performance space is organized. To avoid the inevitable difference between the sound of stage monitors and the main-room PA system, and not wanting to cede control of the final sonic result to a sound engineer in charge of the live mix, he locates himself and his gear in the midst of the audience. He objects to making the performer the visual focal point of an electronic music performance. The audience is arranged around him in concentric circles, their backs turned to him,

facing an array of speakers arranged along the perimeter of the space. He darkens the room and, to truly minimize the visual, obscures his panoply of gear under a dark fabric cloak. At a 2008 performance of his *Buildings (New York)*, at the Judson Church in New York, López “strongly suggests” that each member of his audience wear a blindfold—supplied by López—for each performance. In the program notes, López states, “Every listener has to face his/her own freedom and thus create.” The freedom López wants us to face is curiously compromised by his setup. Though situating himself in the center of the audience may alleviate the two-mix problem, this arrangement also insures that only López is entitled to hear the complete surround-sound mix. Every audience member is forced to occupy a compromised position in the sonic field, closer to one or two speakers than the rest.

More importantly, turning their backs on the performer puts the audience in an implicitly vulnerable position, akin to Jeremy Bentham’s panoptic prison design, in which prisoners may be observed by a central warden while the warden himself is invisible to the prisoners. Michel Foucault famously saw the panopticon as a metaphor for the diverse institutions of modern disciplinary society, bent on observation and control. Donning blindfolds only exacerbates the instantiated power relation, creating a kind of *pansonicon*. At a performance just two miles from the site of the World Trade Center, in the midst of the U.S. War on Terror, in the wake of revelations of abuses at Abu Ghraib and at Guantanamo Bay—the whole scenario takes on sinister overtones. This is not to suggest that López intends to lord menacingly over his audience, but that he seems blissfully (if problematically) naive regarding the connotations of his extended text. López intends his sounds to be devoid of semiotic attachments to identifiable referents. As he states,

I have a completely passional and transcendental conception of music. Of course, I have lots of ideas about the world and politics and whatever, but I think these things shouldn’t contaminate, shouldn’t pollute, the music. I’m very purist.

(Quoted, in Christoph Cox, “Abstract Concrete: Francisco López and the Ontology of Sound.” <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/2/abstractconcrete.php>)

Only López's transcendental purity allows him to think he can keep the world and politics out of his work. But try as he might, he will fail. If one listener connects his choices to conditions in the world, then others will too. And even if they don't, López's work is irrefutably the product of social, historical, and economic situations that are particular to his time and place.

Take, Johannes Kreidler's *Product Placements* (2008), a 33 second composition, created from 70,200 samples. When Kreidler composed the piece, he telephoned GEMA, the German performance rights society, and requested the forms that are required to register the samples he employed. He then completed the forms – all 70,200 of them – and delivered them, with a truck and two assistants, to the GEMA office. Needless to say this is not sound-in-itself or sound-for-itself. There's very little itselfness at work here. There is no transcendent appeal to the mystical properties of music, no effort to transport the listener to a rarified place beyond the reach of worldly, quotidian concerns. The 33 seconds of sonic material act primarily to expose a set of practices, institutions, conventions, and regulations, plus the cultural and intellectual structures which make them possible. As Kreidler says,

For me, music never exists alone; a composer must always deal with interrelationships. Music deals with technology and the politics of technology, with consumption behavior, and the cultural and economic value of art. These things play a role in my creative work; I use them as artistic material.

(Johannes Kreidler, "Gema-Aktion, Product Placements" (2008), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAptRZlwziA&feature=relmfu>, 1:53. Accessed 23 July 2012.)

After composing the piece and filling out the required 70,200 GEMA forms, Kreidler alerted the press about when he would deliver the forms to GEMA. Kreidler challenged GEMA, who had been inundated with inquiries about how they would handle the piece, to hold a press conference to debate issues of intellectual property and bureaucratic control of copyright. The day before the delivery/performance, trying to stave off a public showdown, GEMA issued a statement, saying that not every little sample would need to be registered. This contradicts GEMA's own policy and the language of their registration



forms. On the 12th of September 2008, Kreidler delivered the forms. You can watch the video on YouTube. It's an amazing piece of absurdist theater worthy of Beckett. Under pressure, GEMA finally arranged an eleventh hour press conference at their Berlin headquarters. In the end, GEMA and Kreidler reached an agreement that spared GEMA the difficulty of processing the 70,200 forms. Kreidler now uses the stacks of forms as a pedestal for a video installation documenting the delivery/performance.

Surely, *Product Placements* is an example of what Kant called the "mathematical sublime," something either so large or so small that we cannot properly comprehend it. In this case, it is both too large (the number of samples) and too small (the size of each sample). But, one could argue, it is also sublime in the Lyotardian sense, exposing the vastness and apparent immutability of the mindset that underwrites Modern, Western, capitalist notions of ownership, property, and authorship. These values seem natural to us, and not the products of historical events and evolution. But the only thing natural is that, as this very same history proceeds into the future, these values, as written into copyright law and our collective sense of personal property, will no longer make sense. The evolution of technology and aesthetics requires new conceptions of ownership and authorship. This is what *Product Placements* makes so plain. Institutions like GEMA come into being to maintain current societal values. One of the great services that art can provide is to destabilize these values, to expose them as constructed, and therefore as deconstructable and reconstructable.

### **The Transposition Fantasy**

The second symptom of sonic false consciousness, the transposition fantasy, is based on the belief that phenomena in one modality of sensory experience can be transposed to another. The fantasy insists that the transposition can reveal something true and real about the phenomenon in question, thereby enhancing our understanding of it. The most often cited example of this tendency is poet, Rainer Maria Rilke's fantasy of playing the coronal suture of the human skull with a phonograph needle. Rilke writes:

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?

(Rainer Maria Rilke, “Primal Sound,” as quoted in Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 41.)

Rilke’s fantasy announces the dream of a unified field of the senses, bridging “the abysses which divide the one order of sense experience from the other” and “completing,” to use Rilke’s verb, our experience of the world.

Steven Connor compares this urge for sonification to intelligent design: the erroneous belief that complex phenomena – such as sounds, human beings, volcanoes, forsythia – must be the manifestation of some “pre-existing blueprint.” The implication is that both the intelligence, and the design, of the original phenomenon is not available – or at least not fully available – to us. By transposing it to the sonic realm, somehow we can encounter and understand it more fully.

A more recent example of the transposition fantasy is a musical transcription of the Higgs Boson data collected at the Large Hadron Collider near Geneva.

### Higgs Boson (ATLAS Preliminary data)



The three circled notes represent the bump in the data that indicates the presence of the Higgs. Now that we all understand what the Higgs Boson is and why it's important, let's move on.

As Connor points out, the transposition fantasy

... lies in a mysticism of the primal, a set of beliefs that sees translation into sound as a kind of making manifest of the latent truths, of a set of absolute but hidden primal conditions.

(Steven Connor, "Photophonics," a lecture given at the Audiovisuality conference, University of Aarhus, 2011. <http://www.stevenconnor.com/photophonics/>)

The transposition fantasy imagines itself as a kind of unlocking of secrets, a liberation of meaning. It emerges from the false belief in a primordial stratum of experience; a wholeness, a great "it" from which all other, quotidian *its* derive.

Let's consider a recent example culled from the art world: Doug Aitken's 2009 piece, *Sonic Pavilion*, installed at Inhotim near Brumadinho, Brazil. The piece consists of a hole, twelve inches in diameter, and a mile deep, drilled into the earth. At the top of the hole, sits the eponymous pavilion, a circular glass structure. Visitors enter via a spiral ramp that ascends from the ground below the pavilion, emerging into the unfurnished space. The glass is covered with a lenticular film so that as you approach the glass, the periphery of your visual field is blurred out as in a cinematic depiction of a dream or a memory. A phalanx of microphones have been lowered into the hole at various heights. The signals captured by these mics are then transposed into the range of human hearing and amplified in the pavilion. Aitken, however, has declined to specify what computer-based transformations are employed. For instance, he will not say if the pitch transpositions are uniformly consistent, maintaining the frequency ratios of the sources, or if he has played with pitch relations in the manner of a composer.

The situation and design of the pavilion insist that there is something sacrosanct beneath the superficial stratum we occupy. The sound emanating from the hole and amplified in the pavilion is the cipher that will unlock the coded mystery of the deep. The Rilkean implication is that a phenomenal entity like the earth possesses essential properties that

are consistently expressed across different sensory manifestations. It might be comforting to think that phenomena can be “solved” and that experience can be “completed” by filling in the blanks in our senses. But confronting the existential burden of knowing that experience inevitably evades completion would surely be more honest. Sonic Pavilion denies the visitor the privilege of assuming this burden, offering blissful ignorance – transcendence – in its place. In his promotional description of the project, Aitken writes that,

The work offers an opportunity to engage the inner workings of the earth in an unprecedented way... revealing the earth’s mysterious and living dialogue.

But it does nothing of the sort. The pavilion obscures both the sources of its sounds and the specifics of their manipulation. It brings us no closer to understanding the earth, knowing what it really is. The problem lies in the implicit suggestion that *Sonic Pavilion* will “solve” the earth and “complete” our understanding of it. This is a classic case of the transposition fantasy which, in Steven Connor’s words:

prolongs a transcendent sound-obscurantism that gives sound studies much of its impetus while yet also enfeebling it intellectually.

(Steven Connor, “Photophonics,” a lecture given at the Audiovisuality conference, University of Aarhus, 2011. <http://www.stevenconnor.com/photophonics/>)

At first, one might mistakenly think that Alvin Lucier’s *Music for Solo Performer* from 1965 is falling down the same Rilkean rabbit hole as Aitken’s pavilion. EEG electrodes attached to the performer’s scalp detect bursts of alpha waves, in the range of 8 – 12 Hz, which are generated when the performer achieves a meditative, non-visual brain state. These alpha waves are amplified and the resulting electrical signal is used to vibrate percussion instruments distributed around the performance space. Lucier’s piece does not transpose the brain’s alpha waves into the range of human hearing. Rather, he uses the waves to stimulate percussion instruments. We’re not listening to the performer’s brain, we’re listening to the performer’s brain doing something, the same way we listen to a percussionist’s hands and arms doing something in more traditional performance. The

piece does not in any way suggest that it can bring us any closer to understanding the performer's brain. What's more – and this is indicative of what's so great about the best of Lucier's work – in order for the performer's brain to generate the alpha waves, the performer has to do nothing. Alpha waves are generated only when the brain's visual cortex is idle. So, the performer must engage in an extremely unperformative kind of performance in order to perform *Music for Solo Performer*. The piece appeals to nothing transcendent. Brilliantly, it merely constructs a material chain from the brain's neural activity to vibrating membranes. In the process, however, Lucier generates an immanent critique of musical convention in the form of this absurdist performance.

Kreidler's, "Music for a Solo Western Man" from 2010, is a kind of remix of Lucier's "Music for Solo Performer." Kreidler asks a performer to execute Lucier's instructions, but to do so while listening to selected audio on a pair of headphones. First the performer listens to the music being performed at that very moment across town at the Berlin Philharmonic. Predictably it's Beethoven.

What we hear is not the performer's brain, but, as Kreidler notes, only the sonic equivalent of the shadow cast upon the cave wall in Plato's Republic, a faint, misleading, simulacra, that grants us no genuine access to its source. Next, the performer listens to the soundtrack of an X-rated film. Lastly and tragically, the performer listens to statistics related to the global financial crisis and the ensuing suicides of laid-off General Motors workers.

Kreidler's intervention inserts overt socio-economic material into Lucier's sly performative critique. In both pieces there is no taint of the transposition fantasy, nor of the underlying appeal to transcendence. While Aitken's *Pavilion* vaguely indicates an earthly realm that is mysterious and inaccessible, both Lucier's and Kreidler's works engage the worldly concerns of how we live and interact on the earth. Their music is part of the world and the world is part of it.

I wrote *In The Blink of an Ear* out of a sense of deep disappointment over the fact that music's mysticism could not be jettisoned, even in the wake of John Cage's 4' 33" – the event that, by all rights, should have placed worldly conceptualism at the center of sonic practice. If it had done so, music's turn would have concurred with similar moves in the visual arts, literature, film, and dance. Music and sound art could have dropped their sacrosanct separatism. The sonic arts could have joined the other arts, discarding media-specificity in favor of a cooperative embrace of all the sensory modalities and media tools available in the late 20th century. Like the other arts, sound art and music could have come to terms with their codependence on the forces of culture, history, economics, and politics.

Cage famously linked the inspiration for 4' 33" to seeing Robert Rauschenberg's all-white canvases in 1951. Cage said,

when I saw those, I said, 'Oh yes, I must. Otherwise I'm lagging, otherwise music is lagging'.

John Cage, Roger Shattuck, and Alan Gillmor, "Erik Satie: A Conversation," *Contact: A Journal of Contemporary Music*, no. 25, Autumn 1982, 22.)

So to conclude, let me move from what the sonic arts *could* have done to what we *should* have done and what we still ought to do. Just as Cage's mentor and friend Marcel Duchamp initiated a turn toward non-retinal visual art that has informed the most important art of the ensuing century, Cage's 4' 33" should have initiated a turn toward a non-cochlear sonic art. The sonic arts have steadfastly resisted this turn.

Yes, there are a few artists, a few composers, who have embraced conceptualism, engaged with issues of politics, economics, gender, history, philosophy, culture; who have interrogated their own practices and presumptions; who have subverted the conventions of sonic aesthetics. These practitioners are trying to be good partners to the world in which they and their works live. They are resisting the musical urge to turn their backs on their better halves. Yet, overall, the sonic arts still have a lot of catching up to

do. 4' 33" did not do the trick. It is 2012, ninety-nine years since Duchamp's first readymade, and still, music is lagging.