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DAMS, WEIRS, AND
DAMN WEIRD EARS

Post-Ergonal Sound

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Sound, like water, has no border, no clear outline to distinguish *it* from *not it*. The only way to designate a specific sound: to say *this* sound or *that* sound, is to create a boundary for the sound as a dam does for water. Dams create bodies of water. One might be tempted to argue that the ear canal does the same for sound. Conveniently “canal” is also a water word, not unrelated to “dam.” Think of *Amsterdam*, a city of canals. But the ear canal is more like a weir, an obstruction placed in a river to control flow, usually pooling water behind it while still allowing the river to flow steadily over the top. The weir of the ear simply modulates sonic flow without delineating a corporeal fantasy.

What I want to suggest is that sonic bodies don’t exist. Pierre Schaeffer’s nomination of the *objet sonore* may have been a convenient notion for organizing pieces of magnetic tape, but the objects he was literally engaged with were plastic, not sonic. What a sound *is* is not intrinsic to the sound-in-itself. Instead, a sound requires a context in order to become a thing, a sonic body, a sonic object: a sound.

Dams and weirs decide where water goes. But they also determine what it does. In the ear canal, the happening of sound is pinched and compressed—it is given form—as it moves into and through the canal. It is formed, like clay in a pressuring hand, molded, into a shape that allows the waves traveling its length to do certain things, while disallowing others. (We do not hear what bats hear.) What human beings call “sound” is (and can only be) vibrations that pass through human ears to the cochlea to be transduced from mechanical to neural impulses. When we say “sound” we don’t mean vibrations that pass through bat ears or through tectonic plates. What we call “sound” are those vibrations between 20 and 20,000 Hz that enter our perceptual consciousness through the complex of anatomical apparatus we name with the simple word “ear.” Sound is inevitably anthropomorphic. Usually, when we describe something as “anthropomorphic,” we intend it as a kind of metaphor, meaning to attribute human form to non-human entities. My use of the term is not a metaphor. Sound is literally formed by the ear canal, as a brass sculpture is formed by its plaster cast. In the same way that the brass takes the form of the plaster, sound takes the form of the ear canal. What we designate when we use the word “sound” is a vibration of molecules that has been anthropomorphized by the ear canal.

Another way to think this through is by starting from the acceptance that media and formats necessarily effect the forms of the materials they carry. As Jonathan Sterne has aptly

demonstrated in *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*, the MP3 file format “codes the space within itself” (Sterne 2012: 194). Sterne shows how the syntax of the MP3 header includes bits to indicate whether the file is copyrighted and whether it is an original or a copy. The container imposes a set of conditions on the material it contains. In this case, the MP3 format defines its contents as commodity. As Sterne notes,

In coding and tasking the divisions within its void, the MP3 file shapes both the sound of the material within it and the form that material takes. It recognizes the music’s status as a commodity and tries to preserve it.

(Sterne 2012: 197–198)

In many ways, the human ear is a format too. It codes and tasks its interior void, shaping the sound and form of the material within it. To push the technological analogy a little further, the header syntax of the human ear designates vibrations within it as “sound,” an inevitably human category of experience. Again, this is not to suggest that bats and cats don’t experience vibrations in their ears. It is to suggest, rather, that they experience a different set of vibrations and that they don’t conceive of these vibrations as “sound,” in the way that we mean it. They have different header syntaxes. There’s no telling what your cat makes of Ornette Coleman, but you can be sure she doesn’t call it harmolodics. “Sound,” therefore, is the name of vibrations between 20 and 20,000 Hz, that have been anthropomorphized by the human ear canal.

We can think of dams and weirs not as borders that delineate a *thing*, but as components that contribute to the workings of a contraption. Dams and weirs, in this conception, have nothing to do with what water *is*, but only with what it *does*. The same is true of the various mechanisms we think of as framing or channeling sound. When a tree falls in the forest, air molecules are vibrated by the cracking of branches and the thud of the trunk as it impacts the forest floor. When William Fossett first asks, in 1754, if the falling tree makes a sound in the absence of a human ear, he is acknowledging that what we designate with the word “sound” is not merely the vibration of air molecules. Sound is the name of the anthropomorphification of vibrations as they pass over and through the weir of the ear.

What we call “sound” is a product of a particular filtering of the spectrum of wavelengths traversing the universe. This filtering is produced by the sizes, shapes, and specific apparatus of our bodies. At the same time, it is produced by cultural, historical, categorical, and linguistic convention. Sound, therefore, is doubly anthropomorphized: by human anatomy and by human practices. There is no other way to carve “sound” out of the broader spectrum of universal vibration. To acknowledge this, however, is not necessarily to privilege the particular carving-out that humans do in order to arrive at “sounds.” In other words: anthropomorphism does not equal anthropocentrism.

Fossett understands that other entities will encounter these vibrations too. But, for them, the status of the vibrations will be different. That is to say, these vibrations will mean something different, they will register differently. Ultimately, these vibrations will *do* different things for and to different entities. They will not be “sound,” in any meaningful way, for another tree, or a crystal of quartz, or a nearby river, or, as Fossett points out, for a cat.

To say something is meaningful is to say that that is how we arrange it so; how we comprehend it to be, and what is comprehended by you or I may not be by a cat, for

example. If a tree falls in a park and there is no-one to hand, it is silent and invisible and nameless. And if we were to vanish, there would be no tree at all; any meaning would vanish along with us. Other than what the cats make of it all, of course.

(Fossett 1754)

What I want to assert is that sounds, as discrete entities, don't exist. What a sound *is* is not intrinsic to the sound-in-itself. Instead, a sound requires a context in order to become a thing, a sonic body, a sonic object: what we, after Fossett, call a "sound." For millennia, philosophers have tried to isolate a kind of thing that exists entirely by itself, in itself, and for itself, without need of context. Edmund Husserl's phenomenology has been an influential and relatively recent attempt at this kind of isolation. Husserl suggests that there is a mode or moment of perception that evades the necessity of representation or signification. This mode, which he calls "primordial," accepts the materiality of objects of perception without any filtering, categorizing, disassembling, or defining. Primordial perception happens in what Husserl calls the *Augenblick*, the blink of an eye. This is the absolute present, existing without recourse to, or reliance on, the past or the future.

But in attempting to engage such objects of primordial perception, we run into problems just as quickly as we perceive them. It would stand to reason that each such object of primordial perception would have to be the same as every other, because the only way to distinguish one object from another would be to compare them. But comparison cannot happen in the absolute present. Likewise, the only way to identify an object—even in the most rudimentary way (Is it dangerous?) requires comparison to other similar objects. Or the perceiver would need to identify the object's constituent aspects in order to evaluate the status of those aspects. (Does it have teeth? Fire? Is it moving toward me at high speed?) Comparison is a temporal act: Is it like something I've seen before? So, to say "that thing is a sound," is to classify, by comparison, the thing being identified. It is like a sound and not like an animal, a snowstorm, or a pork pie hat.

As Jacques Derrida notes, the kind of thing that has no need of context does not need signs to indicate itself to itself.

Since lived experience is immediately self-present in the mode of certitude and absolute necessity, the manifestation of the self to the self through the delegation or representation of an indicative sign is impossible because it is superfluous.

(Derrida 1973: 58)

The kind of object that has no need of context does not seek the "representation of an indicative sign." In other words, it does not speak. It remains mute, silent, confirming itself only to itself. As Derrida puts it,

[Husserl] will consider language in general, the element of logos, in its expressive form itself, as a secondary event, superadded to a primordial and pre-expressive stratum of sense. Expressive language itself would be something supervenient upon the absolute silence of self-relationship.

(Derrida 1973: 69)

Sound that needs no context is silent. Sound that sounds, that speaks to selves beyond itself, is not self-identical or self-confirming. In order to speak, to sound—to communicate, to

represent, to signify—at a very basic level, to *register*, as the fallen tree does in the human ear, a sound requires context.

In order to constitute the *ergon* of the sonic work, Rey Chow and James A. Steintrager suggest that the listener is a *bricoleur*, who assembles the work from a dispersed field.

Objects as sonic phenomena are points of diffusion that in listening we attempt to gather. This *work* of gathering—an effort to unify and make cohere—implies that subjectivity is involved whenever we try to draw some boundary in the sonic domain.

(Chow and Steintrager 2011: 2)

Chow and Steintrager recognize that the danger of this ontological conception is that it licenses the listening subject to disregard the specific features of a given sonic experience in favor of a radically subjective version of phenomenology in which the object is but a phantasmal product of the subject. “This is perhaps why sound has traditionally been conceptualized—or perhaps idealized—in terms of plenitude and as a continuum—that is, as something not obviously divisible” (Chow and Steintrager 2011: 2).

In fact, sound is “not obviously divisible.” But not because the body of sound is indivisible. Such a body, imagined as contained and containable, is distinct from that which is not it; a fiction. There is no hard division between sound’s inside and outside. The imprecision of the figure of the sonic body occurs not at the level of the sonic, but in the metaphor of sound idealized as a body. This implies that a sound is contained by a skin or a membrane. Once this idealization is in place, then sound’s “not obvious divisibility” emerges as a symptom of the initial idealization.

In actuality, what we recognize as a sound or a work is constructed as a nexus of *parergonal* forces that generate the illusion of a self. Sound does not occupy a stable, identifiable position but exists in and as a flexible, movable timeplace.¹ If we begin from the assumption that sound lacks such stability, that it has no body, no integral self, the “not obviously divisible” problem goes away. Still, it is crucial that we not fall back on subjective *bricolage*. The listening subject has neither the privilege nor the power to determine which aspects of a sound work’s context are constitutive. Contexts impose themselves: past experiences, future expectations, adjacent sounds, other works, institutional settings, curatorial framing. All these influences, and other *parerga* besides, are essential components of our experience of what we call “the work.” As a result, the sonic work is always otherwise; wise in regards to the other.

In this sense, the sonic work is similar to Michel Foucault’s conception of the author and must be replaced by something like his “author function.” The work cannot be ascribed as, or to, a specific entity. Rather, it designates a sort of spatial conceit, a location where various influences converge to suggest a singularity. In “What Is An Author?” Foucault writes,

A theory of the work does not exist, and the empirical task of those who naively undertake the editing of works often suffers in the absence of such a theory. . . . The word *work* and the unity that it designates are probably as problematic as the status of the author’s individuality.

(Foucault 1984: 104)

We must take this problem seriously. A work of sonic art cannot be a work. A work can’t found (or find) its own borders and stay strictly within them, speaking only silently, internally, to itself. Where and what a work is is constantly in dispute. What I’m demanding

here is not so different from the demands issued by Lucy Lippard when she announces the dematerialization of the art object; by Rosalind Krauss when she speaks of a post-medial condition; by Craig Dworkin, whose book *No Medium* takes Krauss' claims to their logical, if radical, conclusions; or by Derrida in his dismantling of the Kantian distinction between the work, the *ergon*, in Greek, and its supporting accessories, its *parerga*: the frame, the title, the wall text, and so on. So I'll take the opportunity to say a little about each of these positions and about the ways in which the demand I'm making both relies upon these thinkers' positions and, in places, differs from them.

In an essay that helped to loosen Clement Greenberg's grip on the definition of post-war art, Lippard, and co-author John Chandler, propose that the work of conceptual art functions as a meeting place in which disparate components might coalesce, implying a necessarily temporary and contingent substance, founded and formed according to the exigencies of something I refer to above as a timeplace. "When works of art, like words, are signs that convey ideas, they are not things in themselves but symbols or representatives of things. Such a work is a medium rather than an end in itself or 'art-as-art'" (Lippard and Chandler 1968: 49).

If we take seriously this conception of the art object, then we must ask whether it is the materiality of the art object that is undermined, or if, more accurately, it is the object status of artistic materiality that is called into question. With the clarity of hindsight, it is apparent that materiality never went away. Even Robert Barry's inert gas series possesses material form vis-à-vis the gases themselves. But more importantly, the work relies on textual and photographic documentation. Were it not for its material manifestations, the series would remain unknown to us. John Cage's *4'33"* has not just one, but three scores. Fluxus word events consist of ink on paper, often packaged quite handsomely as cards in boxes or as books by George Maciunas, but also as photographic documentation of performances. Like Barry's gas, sound (vibrating molecules) is a strictly material phenomenon. To think of sound as the perfect example of the dematerialization of the art object is to misunderstand sound and, maybe also, to overlook the more lasting, and recently prevalent, legacy of conceptualism. It is more accurate to say that sound is an example of the de-objectification of artistic material.

In *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Rosalind Krauss describes a shift in the conception of the artistic medium. She detects this shift in Richard Serra's reception of Jackson Pollock's attempt to move beyond the easel picture,

out of the dimension of the pictorial object altogether and, by placing his canvases on the floor, to transform the whole project of art from making objects, in their increasingly reified form, to articulating the vectors that connect objects to subjects. In understanding this vector as the horizontal field of an event, Serra's problem was to try to find in the inner logic of events themselves the expressive possibilities or conventions that would articulate this field as a medium.

(Krauss 1999: 26)

But what if the medium of the work (or the work of a medium) is not aligned or motivated by a vector: the vertical field or the horizontal, or the connection of object to subject? What if, instead, medium operates as a different kind of spatial metaphor?

Taking the word more literally in its etymological sense, as a middle ground, a medium functions as a timeplace in which a disparate collection of ideas, relations, and materials come together, held together by their own weak gravitational forces. The location that we

designate as medium has no distinct identity prior to the event of these components coming together. Its borders are not fixed or identifiable. These components may constitute a field of practice, such as “Painting,” or “Cinema”; they may initiate a tendency: “Minimalism,” or “Relational Aesthetics,” or they may form a single work which, when queried, invents a medium to which it then professes allegiance. What frames the medium as medium, or work as work, is not any element specifically, but the collective gravitational attractions of the various components. Remove one component and the work disappears, or at least changes into a different work. The point is that the work isn’t something like an object, or a mapped territory, or a body. It is instead the generative friction of things rubbing against each other; the result of the productivity of that friction. Like a machine or a society, the *it* of it, isn’t to be found in what it is, but in what it does.

Krauss claims for Serra, “a set of conventions, some of which, in assuming the medium itself as their subject, will be wholly ‘specific’ to it, thus producing an experience of their own necessity” (Krauss 1999: 26). Today’s innovations reject any such notion of specificity. Krauss’ view is still overly wedded to an ideal of medium, even if the definition of medium is being disputed. Nowadays we look for the work of our work to be more profligate, maybe downright “theatrical,” in the sense that Michael Fried so famously used the term to disparage minimalist sculpture. For Fried, minimalism and the movements that followed: conceptualism, institutional critique, site-specificity, and so on, were an affront to the transcendent experience of what he called “presentness.” But sometime between then and now, history shrugged off Fried’s umbrage. We now expect what we call, as a matter of convenience, “works” to work with and for and against, other work-like collections of ideas, relations, and materials: politics and economics, psychologies and history, cultural norms and aesthetic expectations, institutional baggage and a self-awareness of the practices and industries we are all necessarily part of.

In *No Medium*, Craig Dworkin shows how the meaning and materiality of material itself is dependent on context. He cites Marcel Broodthaers’s 1964, *Pense-bête*, which “consists of copies of his eponymous book of poetry, held upright in a plaster casing” (Dworkin 2013: 31). Dworkin observes that the materiality of the book undergoes a transformation (a translation, one might say) from its flexible identity as a collection of materials (language) and materiality (paper, ink, glue), into a mute, static, rigid object. To read the books, Dworkin says, “would destroy the work *as a sculpture*” (Dworkin 2013: 31). At the same time, “under the sign of poetry, the plaster is no longer recognized as a sculptural medium, but rather as a poorly chosen and inconvenient binding” (Dworkin 2013: 31). For Dworkin, the very ontology of a medium or material is contingent upon its context and employment.

The examination of Marcel Broodthaers and the translation (the transubstantiation, one might say) of material and medium allow us to return to Krauss’ *A Voyage on the North Sea*, which takes its title from a Broodthaers film. Krauss investigates how Broodthaers moves cavalierly across medial divides. In 1969, Broodthaers redacts, under an opaque black rectangle, each line of Stéphane Mallarmé’s 1897 poem, *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*. Broodthaers retains Mallarmé’s title for this visual composition, but appends the subtitle “image.” Mallarmé’s poem, which Broodthaers claims “unwittingly invented modern space” (Krauss 1999: 51) is converted into a pure play with and of spatiality.

This line of mutation allows us to pursue a further adaptation of Mallarmé’s poem (and Broodthaers’ image) by the Berlin-based artist, Michalis Pichler. In 2008, Pichler initiates his turn by laser cutting each of Broodthaers’ redactions, leaving rectangular holes scattered across the pages. This, he subtitles “sculpture.” Next, he turns the pages sideways,

and attaches each page to the one before it, creating a long scroll with vertical, rectangular, cut-outs. This scroll is then fed to a player piano which performs the sideways redactions as a form of aleatoric serial composition. This performance receives the subtitle “*musique*.”²

What is the medium of this work? Poetry, image, sculpture, music? Who is its author? Or should I say artist? Or composer? What is the material of this work: language? paper? ink? laser cutter? redaction? omission? player piano? sound? And what is the work? Where are its boundaries? What can be said to be part of it, inside? And what is out of bounds?

With sound works, unlike with paintings or texts, there is no apparently clear event horizon, a point at which the thing in question could be said to end. (And I say *apparently* because this horizon is always a convenient fiction.) If we move away from the source of a sound, it dissipates. But can we say with certainty where it ends? When we have reached its perimeter and can no longer hear it? But what if someone at the source increases the volume, and we, beyond what we’d identified as its perimeter, can hear it again? Has *it* grown or changed shape. Is *it* the same thing it was a moment ago?

Sound, like water, has no border, no clear outline to distinguish *it* from *not it*. The only way to designate a specific sound: to say *this* sound or *that* sound, is to *create* a boundary for the sound as a dam does for water. Dams create *bodies* of water. But what is it that creates bodies of sound? Each of these, quote-unquote “outside” influences on our listening is a kind of dam, shaping the a-morphousness of sound. But truly, each of these *parerga*, outside the “proper” body of the *ergon*, the work, acts more like a weir, pooling sound behind it while still allowing waves to flow steadily over the top. No consistent body forms at their behest.

In moving beyond medium specificity and medium distinctions, toward dematerialization or de-objectification; in calling the body of the work into question, what we are doing, in effect, is erasing lines of separation, borders, boundaries. We are discarding the age-old division between inside and outside, between self and other. For Krauss, Derrida’s thinking is pivotal in this regard, showing that,

the idea of an interior set apart from, or uncontaminated by, an exterior was a chimera, a metaphysical fiction. Whether it be the interior of the work of art as opposed to its context, or the interiority of a lived moment of experience as opposed to its repetition in memory or via written signs, what deconstruction was engaged in dismantling was the idea of the *proper*, both in the sense of the self-identical . . . and in the sense of the clean or pure.

(Krauss 1999: 32)

In his essay, “Parergon,” Derrida adopts Kant’s distinction between the work, the *ergon*, and its supplements, its *parerga*. He takes Kant’s terms and distinctions as seriously as Kant himself means them. Derrida then asks them to hold the ground Kant claims for them, to respect the dam that separates it from not-it. Among the examples of *parerga* proposed by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*, the most straightforward is the painting’s frame (he also cites as *parerga*, garments on statues and columns on buildings). For Kant, one must disregard the frame when judging the painting. The painting, alone, is the *ergon*, the object of contemplation. Isolated in its interiority, kept separate from the contaminations of other bodies, the painting must be judged purely on its own merits.

But Derrida points out that the frame, as *parergon*, cannot be simply “outside” the painting. Instead, it must function as the very border that distinguishes the inside from the outside and then, by some metaphysical sleight of hand, must place itself outside the line it, itself, is.

For Derrida, this paradox is decisive, not just in deconstructing Kant's terminology, but in effacing the very distinctions that license a few centuries' worth of critical methodologies.

Parerga have a thickness, a surface which separates them not only (as Kant would have it) from the integral inside, from the body proper of the *ergon*, but also from the outside, from the wall on which the painting is hung, from the space in which statue or column is erected, then, step by step, from the whole field of historical, economic, political inscription in which the drive to signature is produced . . . No "theory," no "practice," no "theoretical practice" can intervene effectively in this field if it does not weigh up and bear on the frame, which is the decisive structure of what is at stake, at the invisible limit to (between) the interiority of meaning (put under shelter by the whole hermeneuticist, semioticist, phenomenologist, and formalist tradition) and (to) all the empiricisms of the extrinsic which, incapable of either seeing or reading, miss the question completely.

(Derrida 1987: 60–61)

When the chasm between *ergon* and *parergon* collapses, so too do the standard presumptions and techniques of critical analysis. More decisively, this collapse signals the need for an ontological revision of the status of anything we're likely to call a work. As Derrida points out, the frame is intrinsic to the painting in delineating the "proper" border of the painting-as-*ergon*. But in accomplishing this delineation, it makes itself indispensable to the painting and, therefore, a component of its "proper" self. The painting could only claim to be "properly" *ergonal*, that is, self-sufficient and self-identical, if it could establish itself fully without the need of its supplements, its *parerga*. But it can't. The painting needs the frame to tell us where it begins and ends. The corporeal fantasy of the *ergon* is a product of its own irredeemable inability to constitute itself as itself by itself. The *ergon* produces its *parerga*, and, at the same time, it is produced by them.

What constitutes them as *parerga* is not simply their exteriority as a surplus, it is the internal structural link which rivets them to the lack in the interior of the *ergon*. And this lack would be constitutive of the very unity of the *ergon*. Without this lack, the *ergon* would have no need of a *parergon*.

(Derrida 1987: 59–60)

A work of sonic art cannot be a work in any traditional sense. A work can't found (or find) its own borders and stay strictly within them. What and where a work is is constantly in dispute. That dispute *is* the work. Neither the sound, nor the work, is self-contained or self-identical. Instead, the work of sound requires a context, it depends on its *parerga*, in order to become a thing, a sonic body, a sonic object, a sound, or a work. The work *is* its *parerga*. There is nothing—no thing—at the center of the work, proper to it, identical with it, essential to it.

Sounds and works, like falling trees, but also like languages, like history, like societies, cultures, and individual subjects, are products of the temporary intersections of entities and energies in a particular time and place. When we name a sound a "sound," or a work a "work," we are naming something temporary and contingent. Neither a sound nor a work is simply what it is. If we were to vanish, there would be no sound, no work, at all; the meaning of these designations would vanish along with us. Other than what the cats make of it all, of course.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Marcel Cobussen for suggesting the term “timeplace” to designate the nexus of temporal and material forces I’m describing here.
2. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkG_qAk7zxQ

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