

Against A Falling Fabric: Neoliberal Acousmatics

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The text is a fabric of citations, resulting
from the thousand sources of culture.
- Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”

And manhood is call'd foolery, when it stands
Against a falling fabric.
- William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*

The curtain separating Pythagoras from the akousmatakoi is often invoked as the master metaphor for our contemporary experience of music. In modern aurality, the fabric of the curtain is replaced by microphonic diaphragms, magnetic tape, vinyl, phonographic needles, binary code, lasers and algorithms; by vacuum tubes and solid state circuits, by wires, amplifiers, and speaker cones. The upshot of the curtain metaphor is that we are distanced from the sources of what we listen to and from the conditions of production. The curtain obscures the what, when, where, who, and why. Stick on skin or synthesized emulation? Yesterday or 1968? Here or Montevideo? Hoomii throat singers or Brooklyn hipsters? Accompaniment for ecstatic spiritual practices or for advertisements?

I open under the banners of two citations, two texts, two fabrics. But these fabrics function differently than the fabric of the Pythagorean curtain. These citations don't obscure, but announce my intentions. They also begin to shape your reception of what will follow, and they assert the idea that intention and reception are the product of a complex fabric – not simply that of the work itself – but a fabric that drapes itself over the work, while also enveloping, shrouding, tenting – stick with me here, I'm about to

invent a verb: enghosting – a vast expanse of other forces, entities, intentions, and receptions, not *properly* of the work.

We begin from the conviction that sonic fabric is always social fabric. Draped like a sheet over the elsewhere-ness of its production, sound can give form to the apparently empty space between conception and reception. The by-whom and the for-whom are revealed to be more deeply and meaningfully constitutive than anything measured in decibels or hertz. While the measurable seemingly confirms presence, the social fabric is neither easily measured nor confirmed. It is heterogenic, warped and woven by its countless strands. Each strand is, itself, heterovocal, fork-tongued, speaking multiply with and against itself, performing both call and response. Sound is never present but always elsewhere and elsewhen: faraway thunder forever late to lightning's party. Sound is always haunted by that-which-is-other-than-sound: else-sound.

Sound is routinely described as ephemeral, immersive, ineffable. More often than not – too often, to be honest – these adjectives are applied as mystifications, or worse yet, mythifications, of sound's capacities. Some would like to believe that sound offers freedom from the stultifying entrapments of language. Without syntax, without semantics, without grammar, sound can go where, and do what, language cannot. Sound, so the story goes, can access states of emotion, affect, perception, and spirit in ways that are denied to language, forever chained to the rigid grid of signification. Sound is, at once, more fluid and more gaseous than the solidity of linguistic reference. Sound is atmospheric, leaky, ambient, ghostlike. Sound escapes the grid, or as Barthes might have said, it outruns the paradigm. In theory and in practice, this conception of sound – Frances Dyson calls it the “rhetoric of immateriality” – is often meant as a celebration of sound's privileges.ⁱ

But many of these qualities can be invoked in less celebratory ways. If we think our contemporaneity along with Baudrillard or Debord, or David Harvey, then immateriality takes on a less benign hue. The hallmarks of our neoliberal times are similarly immaterial. Ghostliness invokes not Casper the friendly ghost, but Caspar Weinberger,

U.S. Secretary of Defense under Ronald Reagan. Disparate but not dispirited, sound behaves like all manner of contemporary phantasmagoria. Our relations to capital, to warfare, to debt, to identity and belonging, are immersive, even as the logic that administers these relations and the power that drives them is obscured and remote. Thus, the acousmaticity that grants sound so many of its privileges bears an unsettling resemblance to the features of our neoliberal condition, in which the sources and logics that determine our drives and aversions, that structure the nature of our relations to ourselves, each other, and the world, are enghosted by the perversely a-corporeal incorporation of both personhood and nationhood.

Bombs rain down on Beirut, on Gaza, on Kabul, on Mosul. A small video monitor replays the evidence. Silently, the night sky is illuminated by teams of scratchy green trails scuffling across the screen, or all at once by flashes that overpower the camera's sensors, leaving the screen momentarily blank. For six consecutive hours, day after day, Samson Young is the video's lonely witness, but also its interpreter, and ultimately, its collaborator. He provides the sound that is absent from the video, tapping the skin of an overturned bass drum, trickling sand onto a crumpled plastic wrapper, aiming canned air into the face of a microphone. As the footage on the screen loops, we are aware that the catastrophic violence of these missiles and bombs has already been done. Its victims are dead or contending with their injuries and losses. Yet the evidence replays again and again and again: a Nietzschean nightmare.

The acousmatics of the neoliberal condition play out in stark and devastating fashion in the time-based, immersive, and remote nature of contemporary warfare. For the victims of U.S.-led attacks in the middle east, from the Gulf War to bombings of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, time is experienced in myriad nesting frames: the instant of the explosion, the protracted duration of the siege, the casting anticipation of the next attack or, hopefully, of its end. The immersion is physical (smoke, shrapnel, rubble) and mental (fear, anxiety, anticipation). The terror is remote, delivered namelessly, facelessly, at a distance: by a fighter jet at 20,000 feet, by a ship in the Gulf, or by a drone operator in Nevada.

In *Nocturne* (2015), Samson Young engages the screen, the screen engages the camera, the camera engages the luminous traces of missiles, bombs, and artillery; indexes of the U.S.-led bombings of predominantly Muslim populations. And we engage this chain of engagement, mediated though it may be, with the actuality of these ghastly acts of violence. We are Young's audience. Some of us are there in the gallery with him, sharing time and space. Others engage Young's performance via additional screens and speakers, further removed from the chain of input and output, transmission and reception. At the risk of repeating an evacuated Situationist bromide, our experience of all manner of contemporary phenomena comes to us secondhand, flattened, photoshopped, and fantasized. From toothpaste to travel, from economic security to geopolitical conflict, we engage our desires and demons at a distance, separated from physical and emotional contact by the buffer of technology. Screens and speakers transmit distant realities while, at the same time, removing us from the pleasures and pains of contact. Contemporaneity is defined by an array of distancing effects, some of them spatial, some ideological, some technological.

Young is our avatar audience, literalizing the old metaphor "theater of war." The theater is now a televisual production. And Young, as its audience, sits at a kind of command center, equipped with vocational apparatus. Young's situation is the mirror image of the actor-directors of this theater's "stage." At a drone base in Nevada, the role of "pilot" is recreated with robotic verisimilitude. Like Young, the "pilots" are surrounded by a panoply of specialized gear. They carry out these pitiless attacks at the safe remove of virtuality. Necessarily, the language used to describe these scenes has frequent recourse to scare quotes as a way of maintaining the meaningful distinction between genuine and figurative identification. This constitutes – in the field of language – yet another distanced relationship. Their victims (no scare quotes) are thousands of miles away, inhabiting different times of day, living and working in different cultural contexts, eating different foods in the shelter of different architectures. As has always been the case, difference runs interference, allowing the actor to act without the ethical inconvenience of identifying with the human beings at the receiving end of the transmission.

But this is where Young's intervention starts to accrue substance. We, too, are the transmission's receivers. So familiar are the scenes of tracers lacerating a section of a distant night sky, framed at 16:9 aspect ratio by the hi-def screens mounted on the wall in front of our sectional sofas. Distance and difference inure us too. We are denied the radical identification that might inspire us to oppose the operative policies, technologies, and ideologies. Both identification and opposition evaporate.

Even as we stand in the real time and real space of the gallery, with Young and his apparatus, we are pushed away from the actual. The screen upon which Young watches the war footage is small. It is not intended for our viewing, but merely for Young's – a kind of televisual score for his sonic activities. The sounds of Young's Foley effects are quiet in the space; paltry in comparison to the vivid violence of the coalition bombings. But one may also tune into Young's activities, by picking up one of the portable FM radios in the gallery and dialing in to the indicated frequency. When we place the small receiver to the ear, a shift occurs in our relation to the awesome terror of mediatized/mediated aerial bombardment. Again, one is not there (or then) at the site (or time) of the bombings, nor at the precise site (or time) of Young's understated, percussive gestures. One is separated from the actual via the technological mediation of both space and time. But the employment of media techniques and technologies – the video playback, the Foley, the FM radios – doesn't merely reinforce the distancing effects of contemporaneity; or at least it doesn't have to. By making us so aware of the exaggerated mediation of the chain of events; by implicating us in the extenuation of culpability, Young subverts the distancing effects of media, not by lifting the curtain of mediality, but by exposing its mechanism; by putting us in more direct contact with the curtain itself, its logic and deceptions. We only perceive the ghost when, counterintuitively, it is concealed by its sheet.

So Young goes back to the playbook of the avant-garde, resuscitating Viktor Shklovsky's *ostranenie* (estrangement), in which the structure of the work is exposed as a construction. Shklovsky called it "baring the device." We might think of the scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, in which the curtain is pulled back to expose one Oscar Zoroaster Phadrig

Isaac Norman Henkle Emmanuel Ambroise Diggs, who thanks to the dual-devices of the loudspeaker and the curtain, is able to operate and rule as the powerful Wizard.

Capitalism distorts our understanding of material equivalence, it also reorders our understanding of the relations between materials and their qualities. Frederic Jameson, writing about George Simmel's essay "Metropolis and Mental Life," suggests that capital reduces the distinctions between vastly different objects, generating false equivalencies via the abstraction of money. Jameson writes,

if all these objects have become equivalent as commodities, if money has leveled their intrinsic differences as individual things, one may now purchase as it were their various, henceforth semiautonomous, qualities or perceptual features; and both color and shape free themselves from their former vehicles and come to live independent existences as fields of perception and as artistic raw materials.ⁱⁱ

Jameson detects in the vast 20th century expansion of capitalism, a paradigm shift that licenses the idea of abstraction in the visual arts. And while I'm wary of amplifying Jameson's hunch into anything like a causal claim, I do want to investigate the theme of abstraction as it is applied in both the thinking of what we might refer to as the "neoliberal condition" and the thinking of art.

As writers including Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Theodor Adorno have noted, the abstract equivalence upon which capitalism rests is a social phenomenon, granted validity only by its activation by human beings in their day-to-day interactions. As Sohn-Rethel says, abstraction "exists nowhere other than in the human mind but it does not spring from it . . . it is not people who originate these abstractions but their actions."ⁱⁱⁱ Adorno writes that abstraction "lies not in the thought of the sociologist, but in society itself."^{iv} Of course, the logic of neoliberalism and its various handmaidens have only expanded and accelerated the degree to which abstraction is constituted by, and is constitutive of, the fabric of our lives.

For want of a distilled formulation, capitalism could be characterized as “the purchase and sale of labor power.”^v Yet, labor is abstracted, and, thereby, obscured, as a determinant of value. In *Capital*, Marx diagnoses the abstraction of physical labor. Rather than meaningful movements – the purposeful lifting and bringing down of the hammer upon the head of the nail, directed with intention at the task of driving the nail into the board, capitalism conceptualizes an *abstracted labor*, in which this same movement is schematized into a sequence of gestures, meaningless in themselves. Such abstracted gestures can be pieced together as segments of a process, like the various turns, cranks, and pumps of a mechanical system. They can be rearranged for different outcomes. They can be separated and distributed to specialized workers responsible for one small part of the process. They can be refined to maximize efficiency. For Marx, the original sin of capital’s abstractions is the obfuscation of labor. This view of labor as a sequence of mechanical actions becomes the abiding conception under the scientific management techniques known as Taylorism.

Likewise, the status and value of the product of a labor process can be abstracted. The commodity acquires phantasmagorical qualities as it floats free of its conditions of production. As Brian Kane observes, in *Sound Unseen*, his indispensable study of acousmatic sound:

[Marx] invokes the term [phantasmagoric] to describe the commodity’s strange “metaphysical subtleties,” which cannot be derived from its use value or its exchange value, but only from the form of the commodity itself, Marx is keen to show how the commodity takes on a special form of appearance that obscures the labor involved in its production. In Marx’s analysis, the commodity, which is fundamentally a relation between people, assumes “the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things.”^{vi}

Kane notes that Schaeffer similarly omits the historical conditions that allow acousmatic listening – and its resulting phenomenon, the “sound object” – to be both conceptualized and produced. As with the capitalist commodity, the sound object cannot acknowledge the specific circumstances of its design, manufacture, or distribution. The sound object

must emerge whole and without precedent, a *sui generis* ghost.

Phantasmagorically, Schaeffer masks the technical specificity and labor involved in the production of the sound object, in order to present an autonomous realm of sonic effects without causes.^{vii}

The logic of capital also grants the individual a discrete autonomy. As a consumer, the individual exercises purchase power, in essence steering the direction of the market with consumer choice. As a producer, the individual decides what to do with her or his labor: whether to exert labor power, and if so, how, where, and for what price. By this account, we are all entrepreneurs of our selves, acting with autonomy. Neoliberalism leans on this pretense of individual freedom to justify its own anti-liberatory, anti-equality machinations.

In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida is characteristically skeptical of the discrete individuality of entities. In this text about hauntings – a text that is itself haunted by Marx on the one hand, and by Shakespeare on the other – Derrida remains convinced of the possession of possession; that is to say, that claims of possession (of ownership, of self-sameness), are animated by mere specters, that all inhabitations are hauntings, that being is forever the absentee landlord of its self. This is what Derrida, provocatively, yet in passing, refers to as *ontopology* – a mating of ontology and topology. Derrida calls it “an axiomatics linking indissociably the ontological value of present-being to its situation.”^{viii} All being is both time-based and situational. Being is contingent. There is no “*simply is*.” Derrida has shown time and time again that absolute proximity is a metaphysical fiction. Each thing is distanced also from itself. The self is distanced from its own self-management, making the “entrepreneur of the self” an always already remote proposition. The self – whether a person, a physical or sound object, a nation-state, or an ethnic identity – is not a self-contained entity. Instead, all selves are quasi-selves; not entities, *tout court*, but very-nearly-entities.

Derrida has a handy name for the status of these very-nearly-entities. Rather than

speaking of their ontology, Derrida conjures the French homonym *hauntology* – describing with a kind of linguistic ghost, the ghostliness of all these possessions and their constitutive lack. This is the constitutive lack of capital; also of labor, of human resources. The laborer, the worker, the maker, the composer: each sells the content of her shell; a kind of sell-shell game. Labor is directed not at production, but at reduction; at the dissipation of materials and energy and consumer capital. Perversely, the repeated revelation that the shell is empty is the mechanism that generates value. The wares are *no-wares*; mere surrogates (ghosts) for the real product. Capital is inflated like a balloon by breath, like the nothing – the no-thing – that animates the ghost’s sheet.

Arguably, the single most deeply embedded feature of neoliberal capital is debt. Functioning at both microeconomic and macroeconomic levels, as well as at levels that we might call philosophical and moral, debt is both the *modus operandi* of contemporary capitalism and its baseline condition. Debt determines our ways of being subjects in the world. As Frances Dyson writes, “This new subjectivity, an outflow of what we might call the postmodern condition, is experienced on a subjective level as an overwhelming condition of debt.”^{ix}

Debt names a condition of being in which one is saddled with deferred obligations to another. In contemporary capitalism, this obligation is owed to persons and institutions whom the debtor has never met. We can refer to this aspect of debt as *immersive*, as *anonymous*, as *remote*. Or we can appropriate from the sonic, the word which, metaphorically, may best describe this aspect of debt. We can call this aspect of debt *acousmatic*. It occurs, as it were, behind a curtain. Just as with sound, the curtain is often metaphorical, a product of technological displacement. Sound and debt both pass through or around the curtain, saturating the environment. The acousmatics of debt obscures the source of the debt – both the original cause of the debt, and the identity of the creditor. Importantly, it also obscures the identity of the debtor so that creditors can deal with obligations in the remote and depersonalized manner that is the hallmark of the neoliberal condition.

As the Paris Stock Exchange closes each evening at 5:35, a timer activates an electric kettle stationed at the gallery's storefront window. As the economic machinations of the stock exchange come to a rest, this unassuming tableau in the gallery stirs. The timer clicks, the kettle simmers, bubbles, and finally boils. The resulting steam fogs the gallery's window and, in so doing, reveals the work's title, *Voir le lointain comme s'il était présent* (*Seeing what is remote as if it were present*), written on the window in soap. The title is taken from Nietzsche's second dissertation in the *Genealogy of Morals*, regarding the relationship of power – particularly the ability to govern the future – instrumentalized by the moral obligation of debt.

This is part of an ensemble of works organized around the theme of debt by the artist Matthieu Saladin. The press release for the exhibition, *La promesse de la dette*, presented at the Salle Principale in Paris, in the Spring of 2016, describes debt as,

a moral contract that has shaped our social relationships since the beginning of time... [an] unbalanced form of social interaction, a tool used by a creditor to exercise power over a debtor, which acts upon the latter's subjectivity by imposing a moral code, by colonizing his memory, and by mortgaging his future.^x

Saladin's *Voir le lointain comme s'il était présent* records the time of the market's daily closure with Nietzsche's reminder (which is also Sohn-Rethel's and Adorno's) that capital and debt are ephemeral, made real only by a tacit agreement between the involved parties. The tangible aspects of finance – the real world effects on the material conditions of people's lives – are by-products of this abstraction.

Ephemeral, ambient, remote, immaterial, phantasmagorical: acousmatic – debt is both nowhere and everywhere. It saturates our contemporary physical and psychic existence, immerses our present in the inescapability of our future. Maurizio Lazzarato, who is cited in Saladin's press release, has described debt as a metaphor for the ephemeral value of capital. Value is not inherent in the commodity but is the abstract product of agreements among human agents. Debt can be imagined as the distillation of this process. Lazzarato

discusses debt “an archetype of social relations.”^{xi} But Leigh Claire La Berge and Dehlia Hannah stress “the importance for critics in distinguishing when debt functions as a metaphor and when it functions as a substance.”^{xii} When we use debt as a metaphor, we run the risk of allowing it to double back. Remoteness and immateriality threaten to reduce debt itself to nothing other than a metaphor, ignoring debt’s very real material effects. And, while debt can be thought of as the basis of finance as a discrete modality of neoliberal capital, it is also a very real force in the lives of nearly every human being on Earth. As Dyson notes,

Debt encompasses and absorbs the parameters of what we might call the global financial and ecological crises. Its perceived moral force overrides other social, environmental, and ethical considerations, placing all expenditure under the priority of repaying the debt, despite the fact that it is not often clear to those who advocate repayment just who the debtor and creditor are.^{xiii}

In other words, even if you are neither a creditor nor a debtor, corporations and states are making decisions regarding debt that impact your life.

Steam is the product of a system pushing matter to its limit until it changes states. Its meaning emerges only at this after-the-fact stage. The whole system of the work is predicated on promises made, obligations generated. A flyer at the gallery promises that the timer will activate the kettle at the moment that the market closes. The kettle starts to heat, promising to boil. Even the text, written invisibly on the window, is a promissory note – a debt – that comes due only when exposed to the output of the agitated system. After much ado, we finally receive the payoff: the work’s title and its message.

Voir le lointain comme s'il était présent presents debt in terms that echo the conventional descriptions of acousmatic sound: its title’s reference to remoteness, its immaterial conceptualism, the ephemeral quality of its operative material (steam). This equation is not immediately apparent, but like the title emerging on the gallery window, the justifications for such a reading reveal themselves to the patiently attentive spectator. Familiarity with Saladin’s practice helps connect the dots. Working first in the

improvised and experimental music scenes in Paris, Saladin's work has become increasingly conceptual. His work as both an artist and as an academic revolves around theoretical issues of sound and music as they relate to conceptual histories in the visual arts. In addition to his artistic practice, Saladin led a three year funded research project, entitled "La fabrique des arts sonore" ("The manufacture of sound art") at the Arts and Human Mediation Laboratory at Université Paris 8. He is also the founder and editor of *Tacet*, an influential, bi-lingual journal of experimental music and sound art.

The sound produced by *Voir le lointain comme s'il était présent* is the by-product of other processes: the overheating of the system, its release at the moment of crisis, decreasing pressure and natural cooling. (The metaphors are ready-made.) *Voir le lointain comme s'il était présent* might be thought of as a machine which produces acousmatic sound (the tick of the timer, the click of the kettle, the bubbling water, the whistle of steam). But it is more deeply acousmatic if we understand it as a machine which is powered by unseen forces (knowledge of the Stock Exchange's closing time, the Nietzschean observation regarding the collapse of the distance of experience, the promise of debt that serves as the umbrella title for Saladin's ensemble of works). Would it be too far-fetched to claim *Voir le lointain comme s'il était présent* as a kind of acousmatic music? The source of the sound is enghosted, by the fabric of citations that constitutes the compositional chains which are rattled by the work. Saladin's link of cause and effect function as a kind of score. The closing of the market acts as a conductor whose downstroke (in the form of the timer's activation of the kettle) initiates the performance. The "source" of the sound doesn't easily divulge itself. Surely, the Stock Market is instrumental. And so is Nietzsche and his observation about the virtuality of distance which is actualized when the kettle steams the window. One thinks about the specter that once haunted Europe, and the specters currently haunting it. Listening through the fabric, we can think of *Voir le lointain comme s'il était présent* as sheet music. The music of the market. Balance sheet music.

I don't have space here to survey the rest of Saladin's exhibition, all of it concerned with debt. But I will briefly mention one other component of the show. During the duration of

the exhibition, Saladin has imposed what he calls a “protocol” upon the gallery. These protocols are a recurring feature of Saladin’s practice. In this case, the protocol, entitled “Indexation,” (2016), requires the gallery to tie all financial transactions that occur during the exhibition to the interest rate of the world’s most unstable national, sovereign debt (in this case: Venezuelan 5-year bonds). The sale of any of the works in Saladin’s exhibition, but also the entrance fees for events and the sale of any of the gallery’s other artists during Saladin’s exhibition, are indexed to Venezuela’s debt. As a result, the gallery, all of its artists, and Saladin himself are forced to share the ramifications of the failure of Venezuela’s economy and more generally, the ramifications of a global economic system predicated on the security and productivity of debt. Such a protocol is an abstract financial instrument, in which use value and exchange value are both supplanted by an arbitrary rule, a kind of bet on the value of something else. Via this instrument – known in finance as a “derivative” – Saladin ties the microcosm of his gallery’s economics to the macrocosmic abstractions of global finance under the sign of the neoliberal condition.

We can now go back and retrieve Jameson’s claims for abstraction. The issue isn’t the liberation of color and shape, metaphorically free of use value and reassigned as tokens of aesthetic exchange. No, the abstraction in question has nothing to do with Clement Greenberg. It is more productive to think in terms of the abstraction of acousmatic sound. The abstraction of the acousmatic obeys the same logic as the abstraction of capital: abstract not because it does not represent, but because its representations are withheld, obscured by the curtain. Sound is always the product of contact between two or more things. The curtain may obscure the identity of those things, but the resulting sound is innately relational – the product of interaction; social. Similarly, capital is always hidden, present only in signs of its social function: symbolic scraps of paper and minted metal. Capital itself is nowhere and nothing. It represents value that no longer attaches to any material thing-in-the-world. The convertibility of the U.S. dollar to gold was cancelled by President Richard Nixon in 1971 (the closing of the so-called “gold window”). The U.S. dollar no longer functions as the official international reserve currency. Instead, governments and central banks are forced to peg their currencies to global markets in order to maintain healthy exchange values and sustainable import-export ratios. But

nothing solid underwrites the value of a national currency. It's turtles all the way down. It is in this sense that we must refer to capital as an abstraction. When "abstract" comes to suggest something like "obfuscated," it becomes a little less comfortable – and a lot less celebratory – to refer to sound as abstract.

Neoliberal logic has increasingly consolidated around calls for globalism and free trade. As with so much of the language of neoliberalism, these words don't mean exactly what they seem to mean. Globalism, for instance, refers specifically to the free passage of goods and capital across national borders. Human beings, on the other hand are severely restricted in their freedom of movement. It is far easier (i.e., more profitable) to move capital to where tax and labor laws are favorable than it is to change the tax and labor laws at home. So, corporations routinely outsource resources, infrastructure, and labor (but not laborers) to developing countries with laxer regulations. What's free in neoliberal globalism is the flow of capital, not people.

This freedom is facilitated by the rapidly accelerating sophistication of computer-based systems. The temporal and spatial logics of the neoliberal market have been dramatically expanded by information and transportation technologies. Supply chains are now global and close to instantaneous. "Just-in-time" models of production and distribution allow wares to reach us from distant elsewhere; wearables from who-knows-where. Even Francis Fukuyama, the target of Derrida's critique in *Specters of Marx*, observes that, "The bargaining advantages of unions are quickly undermined by employers who can threaten to relocate ... to a completely different country."^{xiv} Capital is further abstracted in the realm of the digital. Simulacral representations of value stand in for the representations of national currency. Neoliberalism realizes that the trenches of class warfare are no longer dug in the fields of labor, but are now cut through the razor thin space between the ones and zeroes of the doubled virtuality of contemporary technocapitalism: electronic currency transfers and algorithmic trading. Capital migrates with the stealth and ease of a specter. As Fukuyama points out, "Capital has always had collective-action advantages over labor, because it is more concentrated and easier to coordinate. ... And capital's advantages only increase with the high degree of capital

mobility that has arisen in today's globalized world."^{xv} The movement of people needn't be a significant concern, so long as capital is temporally and spatially fluid.

Movement is a key concern of Samson Young's *Canon* (2016). Presented at Art Basel Switzerland, this work inserts itself into one of the hubs of the frequent flier art world. Presented for an audience who, due to their status as agents of a global market, enjoy the unfettered migration of capital, the piece questions the meaning of the word "freedom" when used as a modifier of either "markets" or "movement." The politics of migration are, of course, anything but simple. *Canon* meets the issue on its own terms, weaving together multiple references in the form of text, technology, object, and image, asking us to consider the principle of freedom of movement as it pertains to migratory birds, capital, sound, and human beings.

Perched upon an industrial scissor lift above the vast expanse of Art Basel, Young stands at attention, dressed in the uniform of the Hong Kong colonial police, circa 1979, and issues an incessant flutter of imitation bird calls. As with *Nocturne*, if you are near enough, you can hear his soundmaking in the realness of shared time and space. But again, there is an elsewhere to which his activities are directed. The birdcalls are delivered across the hall by a Long Range Acoustic Device (or LRAD), to the ears of those gathered in a space designated by Young. The LRAD is designed to project a concentrated beam of sound across long distances. Typically, it is used as an implement of control. Police use LRADs to issue warnings to crowds. At sites such as airports and nuclear power plants, they are employed to disperse flocks of birds which can create public safety hazards. LRADs have also been used as weapons, capable of causing permanent hearing damage by directing sounds up to 2,000 meters at a volume of 150 decibels. The LRAD is commonly known as a sound cannon. This homonym provides one of the multiple meanings conjured by the work's title. *Canon* might also refer, for instance, to a musical work in which a single theme is repeated, but offset, allowing the melody to generate new, unexpectedly complex structures. Alternately, a canon is a criterion of judgment, as well as the set of examples that meet this criterion. Ecclesiastical canon law is the exclusive set of principles that regulate the church within,

and apart from, the broader laws of the state. The canon of Western art designates the select subset of works that define an accepted narrative and hierarchy of values from within a larger set of practices. Canons establish zones of inclusion and, as a result, zones of exclusion. But as we know – as Edward Said has so convincingly shown – the qualities that define the included are produced as the antithesis of the qualities ascribed to the excluded.^{xvi} The canon as criterion is nothing more than the self-regulatory rejection of the anti-canon. We assume that the Japanese Nightingale responds to the call of other Japanese Nightingales, positively identifying its own call amidst the cacophony of other species' calls. But perhaps the Japanese Nightingale recognizes its own call as the call that is not that of any other bird. The call of the Japanese Nightingale might be more accurately described as the *not-call* of the Cape May Warbler, the Ruby-Crowned Kinglet, and the Bank Swallow.

When, in 1979, the cargo ship, Skyluck, arrived in Hong Kong carrying 3,000 Vietnamese refugees, the Hong Kong colonial authorities refused to grant the ship permission to land. For twenty-three weeks, the ship operated as a floating prison, its passengers quarantined offshore, until its anchor chains were severed and the vessel beached at nearby Lamma Island. Young's LRAD birdcalls are directed across the exhibition space to a small receiving room, furnished with a metal bench bearing the name of the Skyluck, and a small, red, plastic basin, identical to those provided to the shipbound refugees, for bathing, eating, and storing personal items. Atop the scissor lift, Young's uniform establishes him as the symbolic embodiment of the Hong Kong colonial officer. He manifests the directionality of power: positioned on the lift as if upon a guard tower, training his cannon on the spectator who temporarily occupies the space of the Skyluck and the red, plastic basin.

Bird calls facilitate an evolutionarily programmed migration from one location to another. The birds move like capital under neoliberalism, fluidly and unhindered. Their calls move with them and freely beyond them, mixing with other calls, distinct yet unafflicted by sharing space with other calls, other sounds, other species. *Canon* appropriates their calls and makes of them an apparatus of control. The Vietnamese

refugees are not as free as birds; not as free as their calls; not as free as capital under neoliberalism. Young, in his uniform, stands in for the State, that entity which wields the monopolistic control of two powers: the authority to create money, and the legal employment of violence. The force of the canon authorizes the force of the cannon, and vice versa.

Haunting the canonized space of Art Basel, Young's *Canon* complicates the simple tune of free markets and freedom of movement. The work forces us to realize that a term like "globalization" describes the shrouded motive of neoliberalism: to set capital free, while demobilizing human beings both geographically and politically. The art world is asked to sing with and against its own melody, simultaneously canonizing and decanonizing; including by means of exclusion. At global art gatherings, the space of the gallery has swelled, taking on the dimensions and ambience of American-style retailers like Wal-Mart or Costco. The white cube aspires to the condition of the big box. Ghosts stroll its aisles, perusing objects purported to be the most sophisticated products that the culture has to offer. Beneath their sheets lurks the vacant, symbolic space of capital. As ghosts they move freely through walls and across borders – not because they are a different class of being, somehow onto-genetically distinct from the laboring rabble entrapped by the shackles of employment, tribal loyalties, or national borders. Their freedom is granted by the freedom of capital itself. As agents of the global art market, they cross borders in the manner of drug mules, licensed not by their personal sovereignty, but by dint of the value stored upon their person.

By the time you read this, you will know things that I, as I write it, do not. But Matthieu Saladin's and Samson Young's work can be instructive for us both. I began this essay in March of 2017 in Chicago, near the geographical center of what we must now skeptically call the *United States* of America. At the time, many of us were struck by the fact that works of art, discourse, history, and our interactions with each other, were all subject to new and intense pressures. Questions of who we are and what we do had to respond to urgent, unreasonable demands. As I prepare this essay for publication, we are three years into a U.S. administration that has delivered on many of its monstrous promises.

Marauding deregulation of finance and industry has further distanced the working class from the Davos class – the superrich who dictate the rules of the global economy from behind the curtain of the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. While the .01% accelerate their accumulation of the world’s resources, the rest of us bear their burden in the form of increasing debt. Meanwhile, what first announced itself with Trump’s patently racist ban on refugees from predominantly Muslim countries, has metastasized into further gestures of paranoiac exclusion. Our very ability to resist such heinous lack of compassion and such utter disregard for justice and rule of law depends on our ability to confront the history of our own exclusions; personal, familial, economic, communal, ethnic, racial, national. We can no longer blithely accept the bestowal of privileges upon certain peoples or practices. Everything is fair game for critical reevaluation, for deconstruction, and for reconstruction. Our canons must be reimagined as anti-canons: apparatus of contravention. The canon’s exclusionary power must be directed at its own authority. The times demand that we rend the curtains that separate us from the ideologies and mechanisms of power. The curtain must be replaced with a different sort of fabric: a tablecloth, a blanket, a bandage (communion, comfort, cure). The curtain doesn’t simply fall, it falls away.

NOTES

ⁱ Frances Dyson, *The Tone of Our Times*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014, 127.

ⁱⁱ Frederic Jameson, “Culture and Finance Capital,” *The Cultural Turn*, Verso, 2009, 151.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Leigh Claire la Berge, “The Rules of Abstraction,” *Radical History Review*, Volume 2014, Number 118. Duke University Press, 2014, 99 -100.

^{iv} Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, Stanford University Press, 1999, 31-32.

^v Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998 (1974), 35.)

^{vi} Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound In Theory And Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 97.

^{vii} Ibid, 39.

^{viii} Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning and the New International*. London: Routledge, 2006 (1993), 102-103.

^{ix} Frances Dyson, *The Tone of Our Times*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014, 16.

^x Matthieu Saladin, *La promesse de la dette*, Salle Principale press release, 2016.

^{xi} Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of Indebted Man*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011, 33.

^{xii} Leigh Claire La Berge and Dehlia Hannah, “Debt Aesthetics: Medium Specificity and Social Practice in the Work of Cassie Thornton,” *Postmodern Culture*, Volume 25, Number 2, January 2015, 5.

^{xiii} Frances Dyson, *The Tone of Our Times*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014, 129.

^{xiv} Francis Fukuyama, American Political Decay or Renewal?: The Meaning of the 2016 Election, *Foreign Affairs*, Monday, June 13, 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/american-political-decay-or-renewal>

^{xv} Ibid.

^{xvi} See Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books, 1978, *passim*.