

Sound Through Barriers

Listening in Continuous Space

Curator's Note on Listening Through Barriers.

Real and metaphorical spaces filter and frame off the world. This is very useful as the glut of information life provides can be overwhelming. Framing off a space to filter out the noise can make a piece of the world small enough for us to understand. The isolating aspects of these framed spaces, however, is troubling in that the act of disconnecting from the larger world comes to be positively reinforced. Making a re-connection can be fearful, but also allows for the experience of the sort of mental release from bondage that has been described variously as nirvana, satori or bliss. Sound's border-crossing nature is a useful connector for transcending isolating spaces.

Enclosed Space

At least partially, the Sound Through Barriers exhibition was conceived of as an exploration of space. Initially, I was specifically interested in the concepts of inside and outside, how does one delineate the location of the barrier between the inside and outside, how can you tell at what point you have changed from the state of being outside to inside? The fact of being enclosed, framed within a room conceptually removes the person from the surrounding environment of the outside world, even though one never physically "leaves" the world.

This concept of an enclosure safeguarding against the rest of the world is especially important within the context of museum studies. In a crucial critique of Modern museum and gallery practices, Brian O'Doherty's 1976 series of essays entitled "The Inside The White Cube: The Ideology Of The Gallery Space," deconstructed the Modernist gallery space. In the context of these Modernist spaces, art resides outside of time, removed from and dead to the world, a limbo-like place. "The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. ... The art is free, as the saying used to go, 'to take on its own life' ... untouched by time and its vicissitudes." In order to enter such a space and achieve the intended effect, the visitors must also remove themselves from time, become dead to the world.

O'Doherty notes the overtly religious implications of this kind of space by drawing comparisons with ancient places of worship, also being windowless sanctums, often adorned with symbols and art. These are timeless spaces for communion with other metaphysical worlds, an 'umbilicus' connecting heaven and earth. By entering a holy sanctum, a person is removed from the world, and within this rarified space one can experience a glimpse of eternity.

In the white cube a visitor is confronted with the beauty of art, and in contemplating it experiences what mythological scholar Joseph Campbell calls a state of 'aesthetic arrest' where a radiance bathes the spectator and they feel a connection to the eternal, the hidden power behind the world. Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer called the thought processes experienced in this state 'Platonic Ideas', which were disconnected from everyday life, the contemplation of which provide relief from the world of chaos, of desire and struggle causing the person to become a "pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge." The white cube's stark, pristine space is a filter, quieting the noise of the world to provide one an undistracted opportunity to find that sought-after feeling of connection to the eternal.



Connection

For me, the problem of the Modernist white cube is in the act of disconnecting in order to connect. In Post-Modern art practices (and sound art is of this milieu) works of art specifically refer to relations between real-world situations. The listener / spectator is required to bring their knowledge and experiences to the table to make the connections, and in doing so find the beauty within the context, context being the material and the subject matter that is being engaged. Through these contemporary relational art practices, it is shown that the experience of the 'bliss' described by Campbell, Schopenhauer and O'Doherty does not require a complete disengagement of the conscious mind, but rather that the context of the white cube falsely portrayed this experience as belonging outside of the world -- as being of culture and not of nature. Beauty is not some pure, rare, hard-to-reach 'other' disconnected from reality. The contemplative space of the white cube (silence) could be replaced with a provocative new space with undefined borders (noise).

Music, Noise, Silence

There are many reasons people listen to sound in its various forms. On the one hand, there is the information-gathering aspect of it, one learns about one's surroundings through dynamic spatial interactions as sound touches and reflects from or absorbs into every surface in a space. We collect information from the things people say and the way they say it, including the non-speech noises they make, or the accents that flavor the speech, or the 'tone' of their voice. People listen to music for diversion, for a reinforcement of their identity, for emotional release.

It would seem the reasons for listening to music and to other sounds one might encounter are not shared in most cultural contexts. This barrier between musical and 'non-musical' listening received a significant challenge in the experimental music and sound art that followed the mid-Twentieth Century innovations of Fluxus-aligned composer John Cage.

Sound might be divided in to four classifications: speech, music, silence and noise. The sounds I discuss here will focus mainly on the latter three.

Silence is not the absence of sound, there is no real absence of sound, at least not within the thin skin of Earth's atmosphere. Silence, as John Cage would have it, is the sound that occurs outside of the control of the composer or user. I would add to this composer-centric definition that it is also sound which falls outside of the attention of the potential listener.

Noise, on the other hand, usurps attention and cannot be ignored. Volume and noise are often conflated, but they're not the same thing. Noise is more accurately either defined according to taste ("I do not like that sound, so it is noise to me"), or intent, such as the unintended noises of recording technology, tape hiss, amp hum and digital compression artifacts. It's interesting that both silence and noise could share intent as a defining factor.

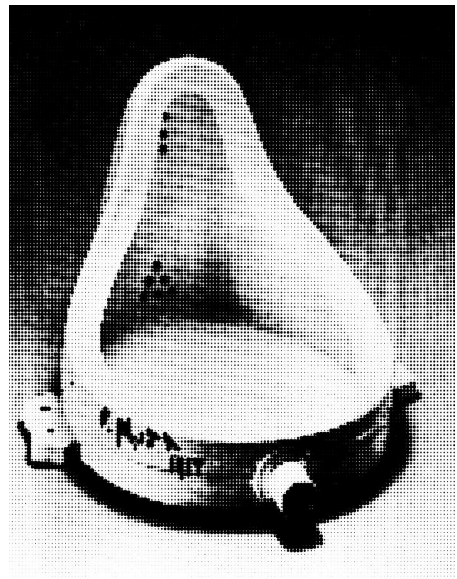
These contemporary definitions of noise and silence, suggest that the cultural codes that define music, silence and noise can be rewritten in the individual. Thus, noise that can be ignored is silence. Silence that cannot be ignored is noise. It all comes down to the attention paid. Music might be found in silence or in noise once one makes the choice to listen.

Art / 'Not-Art'

A massive paradigm shift was brought about within Western musical tradition by these new ideas on silence and noise. This shift is an echo of a similar wrenching period of change in the art world brought about by Marcel Duchamp's 'readymades'. Duchamp's works brazenly challenged the basis of what was considered to be within the boundaries of art and what lay outside the barrier. The most famous of his readymades was the 1917 piece "Fountain", a urinal pseudonymously entered into an exhibition by the Society of Independent Artists.

Up until the crucial works of Duchamp and Cage, there had been an art and a 'not-art', a music and a 'not-music'. Afterward, definitively stating what is and isn't one or the other became a trickier operation – the purity of these concepts was forever muddled. The connecting bridge between these once hard and separate spheres was, for Cage, awareness. "Music," he said "is continuous. Only listening is intermittent." Here, it is suggested that silence and noise could be perceived as music with the application of attentive, aesthetic listening, a shift in the listener, not in the sound.

The kind of listening advocated by Cage is still rare, and even for a practiced listener, traditional musical forms with repetitive melodies and rhythms can eradicate the kind of holistic listening he favored. The attention is drawn toward these types of rhythmical and melodic noises we call "music" like a magnet. Despite Cage's example, naturally occurring and man-made sounds do not co-exist harmoniously in our cultural awareness of them. Our ears have been trained to immediately

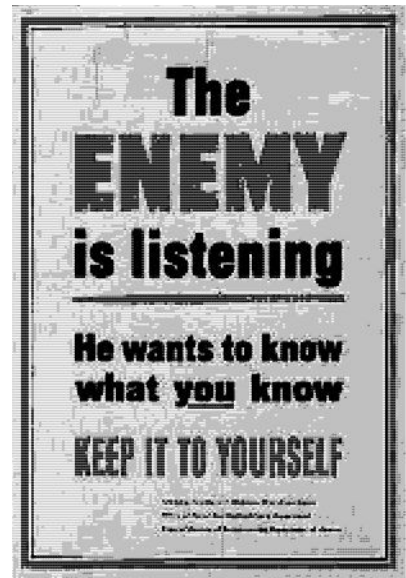


filter out the background noise when we hear voices, words and music. Sound artist Michael Brewster acknowledged this when speaking of choosing material for his own work, saying "the brain, I realized rather quickly, is immediately distracted if musical parameters are present. It was important to me that these sounds not be musical. It seems to me that once the brain recognizes a melody or rhythm, a repetitive structure, it is less curious about space."

Life in a Bubble

I think there are analogues between the white cube space and the attention bubble encapsulating people as they navigate through the cityscape with earbuds on -- a zombie-like stare spilling itself into a smartphone. Within the attention bubble exists another space where noise is filtered out, but to very different purpose. Inside it, one can navigate through the perceived fearful chaos physically as a body without "being there" consciously -- disconnected, on physical "auto-pilot". It may be wrong to say of someone within the attention bubble that "there is no 'there' there", the 'there' just appears to be elsewhere, you just can't see it, it's behind a barrier. Technology continues to provide us with ways to strengthen the outer attention wall, someone passing me listening to their favored music through earbuds connected to a smart device may as well not be on the same planet.

It's ironic that music is used in such an isolating way. As with other forms of art, the musical experience gives just as much opportunity to beautifully find that same nirvana of aesthetic arrest found with art in the white cube, but devoted attention is required. In the example above, however, just beyond the physical ramparts of the earbuds, lies a second wall: the music itself. Given that distraction that Brewster noted when music was present, it is no wonder that music itself is used to particular effectiveness to form a barrier against the world. One places sound between the inner sanctum and the 'auditory real' of the world and relies on cultural training to filter all of that unpredictable silence and noise through the acquired gravitation toward rhythm and melody. Another irony is that this use of music echoes one of the defining elements of noise, that it usurps attention -- author Salome Voegelin wrote "Sound is noisy when it deafens my ears to anything but itself." If music is purposefully used to deafen ones ears to the rest of the world, what does that say about definitions of music and noise?



In the usage of music as a barrier, listening is secondary. The music instead provides a background soundtrack to the dramas of one's life, and an affirmation of identity. Is it especially important to remember who one is and dwell on the drama of life while performing some mundane task such as walking down a sidewalk?

The metaphorical space of the attention bubble reinforces culture's idea of itself as elevated above and apart from nature. One equates nature with mundanity and with a loss of drama and identity, (silence)

or with chaos and fear of the unknown (noise). In this, it is forgotten that one can only get to the ideal of aesthetic arrest by placing aside the drama and letting go into the fearful unknown. Perhaps the bliss of the aesthetic arrest itself is what this kind of enclosure is protecting against. This bliss is dangerous, it exposes the space to the real, to the mundane and the chaotic. You can't concentrate on "stuff" when letting go into the unknown of unenclosed space.

Context

Although it's a little off from my main topic of the importance of intense aesthetic listening, I feel it's important here to make a small detour and discuss context.

Around the same time as John Cage's innovative works there was a second important idea championed by the composer Pierre Schaeffer. His compositions featured a kind of sound collage technique, which he called 'musique-concrete'. This use of sound presented the problem that if the sounds were recognizable as coming from a source, they carried a set of cultural referents -- contexts which the composer did not intend to be brought to mind when listening to his work. Schaeffer insisted that his work required a different kind of listening, a kind of listening which considered the sound as a pure thing, sound itself. The word he used to describe the listening he envisioned was 'acousmatic', a word derived from the philosopher / mathematician Pythagoras' practice of teaching his students (whom he called 'akousmatikoi') from behind a curtain, so that the 'pure' concepts of the teachings would be related, untainted by the context of facial expressions, hand movements or whatever Pythagoras happened to have worn that day.

Perhaps acknowledging the difficulty of achieving this kind of listening, Schaeffer consciously began choosing sounds that were difficult to pin to their sources, more so after the completion of his first major work "Cinq Études de Bruits" from 1948 in which the first section "Étude aux chemins de fer" featured the recognizable sounds of steam trains.

Acousmatic composition enjoys a wide popularity today among some experimental composers and sound artists, perhaps the best known contemporary champion of acousmatic practice is Francisco Lopez.

I find this field of work beautiful and intriguing, but I do not subscribe to it. I am drawn to it because of the importance acousmatic artists place on listening, which I feel ought to be the first order of any artist working in sound, but I am doubtful of the concept of 'purity' of sound. I consider this purity to be analogous to the segregation of Modernism's white cube from the rest of the world. Sound art's undefined and porous borders overlapping the visual arts and music suggest to me a space within the sonic arts where purity is hard to find.

As with the white cube, my problem is in the disconnection (in this case from context) in order to connect with sound-in-itself. This strikes me as another manifestation of the intellectual separation of culture from nature, a false division in my view. Listening in this way is possible, and has interesting implications, but is not actually necessary for an intense awareness based listening.

Continuous Space

Sound, as York University Associate Professor of Arts & Cultural History Leslie Korrick explains, has an "ability to fill and expand space, but also to border-cross and transcend space". A sound from the real world is particularly suited to penetrating the attention-space, especially that of someone not using musical 'armor'. A connection to the real world through sound can undermine and dissipate the personal drama. Sound defiles the metaphorical sanctum with evidence of the outside world, a loud enough noise can pass through walls, can even topple the wall altogether (think of an earthquake or the shock wave of an explosive blast).

Accessing the connection I'm describing requires devoted awareness, not a mental or physical removal from the real, not a filtering of the noise, nor a filtering of the context. The reverie of aesthetic arrest doesn't require the noise filtration of the removed-from-nature white cube. It is there, embedded in the noise, within nature. The ideal is within the real. Find it there in the sounds of waves at the beach or birds in the forest or (to consciously pull away from the idyllic cliché) within the mechanical clunk and whirr of the copy machine, the encompassing drone of refrigeration, the cry and groan of a passing freight train, the crowd-yammer of a crowded sidewalk, the clink of fork against plate, the swirling white noise (how ironic that it's called "static") of a radio tuned away from any station, within the wide soundscape that includes every sound you can hear right now at this exact moment... within the continuous space that Cage called the 'entire field of sound'. Let down your guard.

"Nirvana is a psychological state of mind. It is not a place like heaven. It's not something that's not here. It is here in the middle of the turmoil, the whirlpool of life's conditions." -- Joseph Campbell

Are you listening?

-- Chris Reider, March, 2012

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