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Volume

of confinement and infinity

(a history of unsound art)

*A line of sound,
running down
the length of a
large open space.*

*Standing inside it
the sound exists,
outside it,
it does not.*

*Unmarked, it leaves
expanse intact,*

*Forming an invisible
place within it,*

Wholly separate.¹

Volume: measure of a space, and volume: amplitude of sound. Consider volume as the variability of that space in sound. Consider volume as something within but wholly separate. Consider volume as the invisible and unmarked presence of sound. Consider volume as the intertwine of the spatial and the sonic. Now consider sound art as lost in space, more intent to illimit than delimit. The volume of sound art is immeasurable, deafening. It can overwhelm with silence just as well as it can blast with noise. By playing with the volume dial here we shall consider the place of sound art.

Exhibiting sound art poses challenges to the white cube, sound epitomizes leakage, sound confirms the porosity of space. Even prior to an intentional sound entering the equation, every space has its own soundtrack, its room tone. Every space is sonorous, every space has a breath. Here we shall weigh the propensity for sound to displace, multiply, heterogenize the topos, place, site. We shall also pay attention to the volume of the unheard, the volume which activates the synaptic, the insidious volume of grey matter, the realm of the unsound.

*SPEECHWALLS, space inwards—
spooled in upon yourself,
you holler yourself through all the way to the lastwall.*²

Walled in, caged. Cage as cage. This conjuring of a cage, this artifice, is useful for it enables us to consider the history of sound art as a field which often wishes to claim a certain ahistoricity, to wit Morton Feldman: “We were concerned with sound itself. And sound does not know its history.”³ This *itself-ness* which *does-not-know-itself* is indicative of an epistemological and ontological noise which this text will attempt to make audible. To be heard theoretically, in other words, tracing an outline of sound and conjuring up an unsound art. Reexamining Cage’s experience of the anechoic chamber where, famously, expecting to hear absolute silence, he is able to discern two sounds: one his blood circulating and the other his nervous system operating, Douglas Kahn discerns a third sound source not reverberating in the anechoic cage: “the inner speech interrogating the two.”⁴ This heretofore inaudible sound is useful to consider as a reformulation of the *itself-ness* which *does-not-know-itself*; here it characterizes a solipsistic turn in Cage (to which I will return later). For now, we can turn to Alvin Lucier’s *I am Sitting in a Room* to explore an exteriorized form of inner speech; it is worth quoting in its entirety for it is simultaneously the concept, the script, and the material of the piece:

I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech. I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have.⁵

The architectures of a voice and a room here merge, they are superimposed as an aural palimpsest, the room is not only populated but also polluted, truly saturated with speech. While the words become inaudible, they are nonetheless intelligible. That is, they are comprehensible in an augmented way, they are the words uttered as the room has heard them, they are performing an expanded embodiment. The room becomes all ear, akin to Pliny the Elder’s Auriti or All-Ears, inhabitants of the Ear Islands, imaged in his *Inventorum Natura*.⁶ The Auriti are people whose ears covered their whole bodies; here of course, the room is even better equipped for it plays a dual role, it is also All-Speaker. By the end of the piece, Lucier’s room has reversed and augmented the phenomenology, it is sitting in him *and* in the room of the listener, and is speaking back its resonances.

The “smoothing out” sought by Lucier is illusory, it is no cure for his stutter. Yet, while the words with all their irregularities might linger they also succeed in “transforming the word into action by rendering it incapable of being decomposed and incapable of desintegrating: *language without articulation*.”⁷ Lucier’s *speech-room* would have interested Artaud, this kind of amplified return could serve as ammunition against

the dematerialized, disemboweled voice Artaud resisted with vehemence. The *speech-room* befits the criteria for *cruel* representation set in Derrida's reading of Artaud: a form of representation that does not face you but "invests you, one that deploys a volume, one that produces its own space, a spacing which no word could summarize or comprehend."⁸ The interiority that is being conceived here is corporeal, desublimated, producer of mass rather than meaning. In this context, language is unmoored from its syntactical pier and the temporal is unraveled, no longer the line of History, but mere lines traversing, intersecting, crossing, knotting space. Time here is volumed. A language without time is one that has incurred a paradigmatic assassination. It straggles aimless, barely able to put one word in front of another.

Speaking in this state is at best provisional. David Merritt's work with twigs presents a vulnerable, fragile language that is less installed than stalled, its immobility is liminal, its arborescence fractured by the rhizomatic. Twigs barely held by pins, barely suggesting words, barely holding in place, or holding on to place (see *Moritat*). Merritt has found the ellipsis in the ellipse, and what better manner to concretize that acentered interior of language which refers to something outside of itself. Something unpinnable is evoked in this murmuring, something echoing Jean Lescure's remarkable formulation that "unknowing is not ignorance but the difficult act of going beyond knowledge."⁹ In Merritt's spatial depiction, language is tentative and frail, yet nonetheless persistent—it remains, it litters and lingers. Merritt's work performs a dismantlement. Tenuous form here flirts with formlessness, with *glot'l* words are gently thrust down the throat into the opening at the center of the larynx, the organ of the voice, where muscled air forms speech. This "interference with a moving body of air"¹⁰ which describes the somatic production of speech can be easily transposed to the kind of voicing we heard in Lucier's *speech-room* and to any space one enters in hearing, any space heard. This kind of lowercase implosion within a confined space is a recurring condition (of which I will be outlining just a few examples here), and could be said to be the condition of possibility of unsound art.

In order to explain this further, let us examine one recent installation by Samuel Roy-Bois. With Roy-Bois language is not *volumed* along the gallery walls but is housed. In *j'ai entendu un bruit et je me suis sauvé (I heard a noise and I ran)* the only sound we hear is in the title. While we are free to take the hint at a narrative and imagine an actual incident, let us consider this title as a description of one's self-hearing. In a critical reading of Husserl, José Gil refers to self-hearing as "an act of 'absolute reduction' of space [...] In the soliloquy of 'hearing oneself speak,' subjectivity, not coming out of itself, discovers the presence of the object."¹¹ Then he reflects that "the subject hears itself as mediated by the body, and it is in the infinitesimal interval separating the speaking and hearing subjects that this object places itself."¹² We can thus posit the volume Roy-Bois proposes in this installation as a manifestation of the objecthood which

emerges out of that separation. In other words, we are in our bodies as both subject and object. This is not a cartesian split, this is a transmission circuit, we are both transmitter and receiver, we are in the space of the relation. We are singular plural.¹³ We are not self contained, the foreign element is introduced by this very circuitry and expands infinitely outward. The installation is in affinity with Bachelard's notion that "vastness is an intimate dimension."¹⁴ It is a space we no longer just face, but one where we are thrust inside, inside the infinitesimal interval. In other words, it is a volume which *takes place*. Taking place, which in this instance is the running in place of the speaker upon hearing its own noise. In the installation you enter the room and every surface of the room is in conversation with the outside, the room is a sieve, its pores are breathing in light. Such a space performs, it performs "the placing in movement of the place" as discussed by Didi-Huberman regarding Parmeggiani's *Delocazione*.¹⁵ Thus the infinitesimal interval is the movement whereby place can no longer be accurately determined. And whereby movement in place becomes the mechanism by which hearing enables a self to come into presence.

J'ai entendu un bruit et je me suis sauvé (I heard a noise and I ran) does not tell us whether the escape was successful, or even possible. Concerning self-hearing, as Jean-Luc Nancy explicates "a self is nothing else than a form or function of a return: a self is constituted by a relation *to* self, or by a presence *to* self."¹⁶ So the subject can only place a claim on itself through this reflexive act. What might be at stake when self-hearing is undermined or malfunctioning? What is this running away from? In the following Yayoi Kusama's reflexive apparatus undergoes radical destabilization (along a visual register which is nevertheless useful in this discussion):

One day I was looking at the red flower patterns of the tablecloth on a table, and when I looked up I saw the same pattern covering the ceiling, the windows, and the walls, and finally all over the room, my body, and the universe. I felt as if I had begun to self-obliterate, to revolve in the infinity of endless time and the absoluteness of space, and be reduced to nothingness...¹⁷

Once a space is in movement can it remain absolute? "What is expressed when one says not space, but a space: a disturbing expression that defines something that is at the same time empty and well circumscribed."¹⁸ In the same passage Caillois describes a desire which echoes with Kusama's reduction: "I wanted to cross the border of my skin, live on the other side of my senses; I practiced watching myself from a given point in space."¹⁹ Of confinement and infinity, edging towards a self without self, a distancing which blurs one's cognitive hold. What is the place of sound in this? What stakes does sound amplify? Keeping in mind Nancy's caveat that "nothing can be said about sound that is not also valid for the other registers and against them, [... they are] in an inextricable complementarity and incompatibility one from the other."²⁰ A discussion on space and place in particular demands a certain synesthetic sensibility; furthermore ,the movement that we have focused on is at play on many levels, and the tensions between

the senses Nancy aptly describes is certainly one of these instances. But to return to the questions posed, we can posit that sound, in its specificity, crowds the place, it saturates, “[it] invades us, impels us, drags us, transpierces us.”²¹ Deleuze and Guattari continue their outline of the power of sound with “It takes leave of the earth, as much in order to drop us into a black hole as to open us to the cosmos. It makes us want to die.”²² This dramatic contrast between a black hole and the open cosmos further echo with Caillois, Roy-Bois and Kusama and present a kind of thanatopia, a place of death within the living that renders the latter incapable of stability or inertia. Here is death, literally. No longer relegated temporally to a future, it is present and occupies a place.

Philip Monk in his discussion of Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* points to the appearances of the two inert objects, the bookcase and the corpse, in the film not as comments on narrativity in film but as observations on the place events take. The seemingly self-evident statement that “events *take place*” is pertinent to our discussion for these “representational” events are contrasted by Monk with the “‘abstract’ sine-wave glissando” which becomes the other soundtrack at this point in *Wavelength*.²³ That the representational and the abstract are not as disparate as one might think is a recurring strategy for Snow. He places these opposite in play, Snow’s game is depth. Of field, of interpretation, of signification. By *Wavelength*’s end the flat screen regains its flatness, but only for a moment, soon we internalize the zoom we have just experienced and find ourselves deep in the waves of the photograph on the wall. In *Two Sides to Every Story* Snow juxtaposes the flatness with the voluminosity of the screen in the very installation of the piece. The same scene is shot from opposite ends of a room and is then projected on a double sided screen in the middle of the room. Simultaneously projected, we see the front of a person on one side and the other side shows us the back. The arrangement according to Bruce Elder, “re-enchants a dead metaphor by literalising it,”²⁴ it also obligates the viewer to pick a side. In its recent exhibitions in New York and Montreal, I found viewers eventually drifting to a place beside the screen where one can witness the thinness of the story and its flirtation with virtuality. Interestingly, from that position, with a back and forth motion, one is also able to see both the back and front of the protagonist. With this to and fro motion we enter a paradoxical space where materiality is located in the nowhere of the inbetween. Indeed, by being on the side and moving side to side, we are literally *in* the action. By thwarting conventional viewing, spatial movement is enhanced. It takes this relocation to the screen’s side to remind ourselves simultaneously of the work’s fiction (meta) and of its liveness (physics).

A space in movement is an amplified topography, one that inscribes notions of utopia and heterotopia to the heretofore singular space. In this plural context, sound could be conceived as the jukebox of place. As Robert Altman points out in his appropriately titled essay “The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded

Sound", in a recording we hear double, both the sound of the site it was recorded and the site where the recording is being played.²⁵ In this double hearing we are presented with an elsewhere dissonant with other stimuli, and we have already seen how the everyday act of self-hearing (the space of the relation) can be destabilized once philosophically amplified. Xenakis is pertinent at this juncture, Louis Marin writing on the composer/architect provides us with a generative definition of utopia: "U-topia, no-place, the nowhere does not mean the unreal or the imaginary, but the indetermination of place, the neutral space of difference and the force of differentiation. Place which is neither here nor there, utopia presents an absence in the here and now of space."²⁶ The multiplicity implied in the work of difference is the theoretical underpinning of this image of the jukebox of place. Sound negotiates (both activates and enables) the various levels of heightened hearing that a space can generate. Xenakis worked with densities of space, from the 400 speaker array at the Philips Pavilion for the 1958 Brussels World Fair to his *Polytopes*. The multiplication of sites here is again along the arrangement suggested by the idea of the *singular plural*, that is to say that we have a single topos which is then polymorphed (understanding morphing here as not necessarily pertaining only to physical form). In his concluding statement in his study on *Les Polytopes*, Olivier Revault d'Allonnes makes this paradoxical statement "the Xenakian polytopia is the right to be a self, that is to say the right to be other."²⁷ The movement of space under the sign of sound, as we see here and have seen earlier, causes ontological questions to resonate. Foucault's discussion in "Of Other Spaces" on the conjoined utopic and heterotopic aspects of the mirror with the regards to the self provides a useful analogue.²⁸ We are both in the mirror and reflected back, with the mirror we are performing in image the act of self-hearing. We are returned to ourselves, as other. We are in a dialogue of one.

Amplifications of these various kinds all echo the space. The volume of air is thickened. This is the resultant ambiance of Emile Morin and Jocelyn Robert's *La Salle des Noeuds III [The Hall of Knots]* (2001), an installation working in an interesting parallel to Xenakis, using hyperbolic mathematics and speaker array, but using remote links on various continents and systems of "orderly disorder" to manage the inputs of images and sounds.²⁹ Another room where we are enveloped by a volume, by layers of inputs and outputs, is *The Room of Fears* by Michael Fernandes.³⁰ In this performance/installation, Fernandes wrote and filled the walls in longhand with the fears contribute to him by the visitors to the gallery. Here are selections:

I am afraid of losing my wallet/ I am afraid of beautiful women/ I am afraid that the sky is falling/ I am afraid of never having another idea/ I am afraid of my art coming between me and my partner/ I am afraid of clever people/ I am afraid of sitting on my uncle's lap/ I am afraid of craving the quick fix/ I am afraid of bedtime/ I am afraid of cops with bad tempers/ I am afraid of large open spaces/ I am afraid of insanity/ I am afraid I don't speak properly/ I am afraid of choking in my sleep/ I am afraid there is no place for me/ I am afraid of Mike Tyson/ I am afraid of visa bills/ I am afraid of Old Man

River/ I am afraid of stupidity/ I am afraid of tall people who look important/ I am afraid that squeaky wheels get the oil/ I am afraid of ways and things that have nothing to do with me/ I am afraid of doing something that is out of control that haunts me for the rest of my life/ I am afraid of eros/ I am afraid of cornering a rat/ I am afraid I'll do all this work and then die/ I am afraid of anyone who tells me that I don't know what I'm missing/ I am afraid to date boys from other cultures/ I am afraid of Edmund the bully at our school/ I am afraid of my ego/ I am afraid of performing/ ...

While here the volume is unsound, the performative element of the work makes the room vibrate, it is not static, it is a becoming-afraid. Presumably, this becoming is also a shedding, an unbecoming, a fading of fear. But the room also opens your every pore and injects fear inside. It is a backfiring catharsis, a purging full of leaks, an undertow. The anaphora of every phrase, the sameness of the handwriting -all in Fernandes' hand, the arrangement of each phrase into neat lines, all these heighten the amplification. It is an enumeration, a taxonomy, a systematized graffiti. *Wavelength* offers a comparable performance, it is a focused study of "how our communication creates a membrane over chaos: laughter so easily becomes slaughter, but only in writing."³¹ Arguably *Wavelength's* principal aim might not be to make a statement on communication, but given its metaphysical aspirations, we must pay attention the possible slippages between various lengths of wave. Variability of wave has immediate effect on our apperceptions of the room. The room wavers. The viewer's uncertainty is not merely with regards to the occurrence of the events but to their placing. This spatial tampering occurs, paradoxically, because the zoom and glissandi assert their inexorable certainty throughout. The waves are both measured and lengthless.

Artists who resist the supposed constraints of their chosen media abound. Cross-pollination of influence is not novel, and in keeping with the legacy of the avant-garde and the synesthetic aspirations of romanticism, the intermixing of materials is now commonplace. Less paradoxically than he thinks, sound artist Christian Marclay can easily state, "it may seem like a contradiction, but I'm interested in sound, not just for how it sounds, but also for how it looks."³² However, the manner by which sound art unsounds itself performs another kind of blurring—or perhaps, *buzzing*: "... what?.. the buzzing? ..yes...all the time the buzzing...so-called...in the ears...though of course actually...not in the ears at all... in the skull...dull roar in the skull..."³³ Instance of an unsound in Beckett's *Not I*; listening to an unsoundtrack. Corollary questions at this stage would be: what is a sound like when it isn't heard? what is the sound of a thought about sound? Raymond Gervais's work has often delved into similar questions; regarding a recent piece he writes: "It is the listening not the sound that is rendered in space. It is the gaze which plays the music, in silence."³⁴ In the mutism of his work, Gervais makes sound resonate at a level which addresses the question and referentiality of listening. Gervais scores sound, he reads it and places that literalization in space. The work provides a "space in quotation marks,"³⁵ and enters a back and forth where site rhythms with cite, and citation with situation.

Returning, finally, to our cage. In *Silence*, John Cage follows one of his comments about the anechoic chamber by his infamous quip, "I have nothing to say and I am saying it."³⁶ This Zen-inspired sentence is a kind of short-circuited instance of self-hearing. This enactment by Cage as both a caged and cager with respect to his own thinking-speaking circuitry is emblematic of the solipsistic paradigm sound art revels in. This is an *itself-ness* which *does-not-know-itself* and yet insists on talking, on emitting, on transmitting. As Pascal Quignard states, "sound is the country which one does not contemplate. It is the country with no countryside."³⁷ We are not at its side but inside, in the midst of an unknowing that is beyond knowledge, in a vistaless vista onto ourselves, speaking unwords.

Next time you enter a gallery or museum, close your eyes. You'll enter the space of the relation. You'll hear Vito Acconci in *Seedbed* saying, "I've done this for you, I've done this with you, I've done this to you..."³⁸ You'll realize that there is an embodiment ever present in this unsound art, this thinking art. You'll have a work that might be concealed and confined, but with undeniable materiality, corporeality. You'll face the plethora of spaces conjured here which all merit further study: the speech room, the Cage cage, space volumed by sound, thanatopia, the jukebox of place, the infinitesimal interval, polytopia, the unsountrack. You'll then open your eyes, and see the volume of your listening.

Notes

1. Max Neuhaus, *Place: Sound Works vol. III*. Cantz Verlag, 1994, 48.
2. Paul Celan, *Threaduns*, trans. Pierre Joris, Los Angeles, Sun & Moon Press, 2000, 227.
3. Morton Feldman, "The Anxiety of Art" in Thomas DeLio, *The Music of Morton Feldman*, London: Greenwood Press, 1996, 206. Reprinted in Morton Feldman, *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, Cambridge: Exact Change, 2000, 22.
4. Douglas Kahn, *Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*, MIT Press, 1999, 236.
5. Alvin Lucier, *I am sitting in a room*, CD New York: Lovely Records, 1990 [1970].
6. entry in *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, Alberto Manguel & Gianni Guadalupi (eds.), New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1980, 105.
7. Gilles Deleuze in Mikhail Yampolsky, "Voice Devoured: Artaud and Borges on Dubbing" in *October 64*, Spring 1993, 59.
8. Jacques Derrida, "La clôture de la représentation" in *L'écriture et la différence*, Éditions du Seuil, 1967, 348. [our translation]
9. Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace*, Quadrige/PUF, 1957, 15. [our translation]
10. A paraphrase in an unpublished paper by David Merritt, of Francis Katamba from *An Introduction to Phonology*.
11. José Gil, *Metamorphoses of the Body*, trans. Stephen Muecke, Theory Out of Bounds Vol. 12, University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 190.
12. Gil, 191.
13. 'singular plural' is a formulation borrowed from Jean-Luc Nancy.
14. Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace*, 177. [our translation]
15. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Génie du non-lieu*, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2001, 34. [our translation]
16. Nancy, *À l'écoute*, Gallée, 2002, 24. [our translation]

17. Yayoi Kusama, "Fortress of Shooting Stars" in *Grand Street 53 Fetishes*, Summer 1995, Vol. 14 No. 1, 32.
18. Roger Caillois, *The Necessity of the Mind: An Analytic Study of the Mechanisms of Overdetermination in Automatic and Lyrical Thinking and of the Development of Affective Themes in the Individual Consciousness*, trans. Michael Syrotinski, Venice, California: The Lapis Press, 1990, 105.
19. Caillois, 104.
20. Nancy, 24. [our translation]
21. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia, vol.2*, trans. Brian Massumi, 1983, 348.
22. Deleuze and Guattari, 348.
23. Philip Monk, "Around Wavelength" in *Michael Snow Visual Art*. Art Gallery of Ontario/The Power Plant, 1994, 327.
24. Bruce Elder, "On Sound, Sound Recording, Making Music of Recorded Sound, The Duality of Consciousness and its Alienation from Language, Paradoxes Arising from These and Related Matters" in *Michael Snow Music/Sound*, Art Gallery of Ontario/The Power Plant, 1994, p. 244.
25. Rick Altman "The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound" in *Sound Theory Sound Practice*. Ed. Rick Altman, Routledge, 1992, 27. Also cited in Sean Cubbitt's worthwhile essay "Sound: The Distances" in *Definition of Visual Culture II: Modernist Utopias—Postformalism and Pure Visuality*, Ed. Chantal Charbonneau, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 1996, 98-111.
26. Louis Marin, "L'utopie de la verticalité" in *L'Arc* No. 51 on Xenakis, 1972, 74.
27. Olivier Revault d'Allonnes, *Xenakis : Les polytopes*, Balland, 1975, 129
28. Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres" in *Michel Foucault, Dits et écrits 1954 - 1988, vol. IV 1980 - 1988*, Gallimard 1994, 752-762. In English in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, trans. Jay Miskowiec, Routledge, 1998, 237-244.
29. Émile Morin and Jocelyn Robert, "La Salle Des Noeuds in *Computer Voices/Speaking Machines*. Curator Sara Diamond, Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 2001.
30. Stephen Horne, "Michael Fernandes: The Everyday Escapes" in *Parachute 87* (Montréal), 1997, 22-
31. Michael Snow in "On Sound, Sound Recording, Making Music of Recorded Sound, The Duality of Consciousness and its Alienation from Language, Paradoxes Arising from These and Related Matters", *Music/Sound*. Art Gallery of Ontario/The Power Plant, 1994, 235. This statement was not made in reference to *Wavelength*, I take the responsibility of this inference.
32. Christian Marclay in Rahma Khazam, "Jumpcut Jockey", *The Wire* No. 195, May 2000, 28.
33. Samuel Beckett, "Not I" in *The Collected Shorter Plays*, New York: Grove, 1984, 218.
34. Raymond Gervais, *Via Charles Ives : La Symphonie Universe [via la question sans réponse]*, Centre d'arts Orford, Québec June 27 - September 30 2001, 14.
35. Louise Déry, *Are You Talking to Me? Conversations(s)*, Galerie de l'UQAM, 2003, 44. While the exhibition contains work by Gervais, this phrase was used in reference to the exhibition as a whole.
36. John Cage, *Silence*, Wesleyan, 1961, 51.
37. Pascal Quignard, *La Haine de la musique*, Gallimard, 1996, 110.
38. Vito Acconci, *Seedbed*, Sonnabend Gallery, New York 1972. In *Seedbed*, Acconci masturbated for some six hours a day, twice a week, while concealed under a low wooden ramp built into the gallery.