

From Ear to Site: On Discreet Sound

Daniele Balit

RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

Sound has the ability to induce unsettling sensations such as disorientation, nausea or dizziness. Even so, it can be astonishing to see an entire audience driven into a violent rage, as I witnessed during Florian Hecker's concert at the Centre Pompidou in February 2012.

The empty stage and the illuminated auditorium made it clear from the beginning that Hecker was attempting to deny his listeners a conventional experience. However, his fast, cutting sounds triggered a rather unpredictable series of responses, bringing the room to a situation of total anarchy within a few minutes. At first, someone stood up flapping and screaming to have the volume lowered. This then sparked a further series of protests, some against a console controlled offstage by Hecker, while others were directed at the protesters themselves. A member of the audience burst onto the stage, firmly raising his middle finger at the artist. Another man soon followed—perhaps feeling the need for a more drastic action—and promptly tore down the PA system. The concert was finally brought to a standstill and the situation then reported to the police.

Among several possible readings of this episode, one could say that such revolt signified a powerful and abrupt moment of disobedience on the part of the listener. It can be read as a breaking point in the history of sonic experimentation, where the passive role often imposed on the audience by the composer had finally become subverted.

Hecker is known for manipulating sounds to act on a psychoacoustic level. Indeed, despite the fact that the Pompidou's audience impulsively demanded a decrease in volume, it would seem that their general intolerance was founded less on quantity (to the level of sound) than on quality (to the type of sounds). In my experience, these unsettling sensations were different from having the whole body exposed to high levels of sound, as for instance in the case of noise music. This was more about a breaching of intimacy. Hecker's piercing sounds provoked a violation of a particular space inside the head that is rather difficult to locate and thus to protect. The Pompidou riot was a revolt of the audience against such an intrusion of the composer, a way to deny access to their private, psychic space.

Sonic culture is a new yet very demanding area. It may require ear cleaning exercises (R. Murray Schafer), deep listening practice (Pauline Oliveros), sustained and active listening (Hecker) or "to adjust one's nervous system and vibrate with the frequencies of the environment" (La Monte Young) [1]. Such approaches somehow exert an authority on the audience; they claim to supervise the listening experience.

Yet surprisingly enough, no less a figure of reference than John Cage was quite critical of the idea of regulating the listener's attention: "It is like bringing the audience to school," commented Cage on Young's transcendental music. "But when you finish your studies and you enter in life you don't find in it the perfection you were trying to obtain" [2].

Dissociating himself from one of the most influential models on sonic practices, Cage rejected Young's essentialism as "dualistic." Such critique, even today, takes a novel position in the debate on sound, a debate that seems more often preoccupied with the hierarchies between the visual and the aural than with those that govern the internal processes of sound making. Undermining dualisms between subject and object, composer and listener, art and everyday life, was at the core of the Cagean project and should thus be recognized among the factors at the origin of a new sound aesthetics.

THE THIRD EAR

Psychoacoustics is one of the new distinctive areas surveyed by sonic practices. Since Young's minimalism opened up an unexplored microscopic dimension of sound, the "third ear," to borrow Maryanne Amacher's term, has been central for composers and sound artists. Hecker figures as someone who has recently expanded psychoacoustic research by making it a tool

ABSTRACT

The notion of discreet sound arises through the encounter of the sonic avant-garde with the post-studio methods of the field of sculpture: a distinctive, situational aesthetics that aspires to relocate, and sometimes to disperse, the listening experience within the varied spaces of everyday life. In sound art, however, there seems a predominant interest in the sounding object as an experience delivered to the audience through indoor modalities. By comparing these two tendencies, this article observes some of the implications for the ways in which we think about the site and modes specific to listening practices.

Fig. 1. Florian Hecker, *Chimerization*, installation view, exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ, London, 23 November 2012–19 January 2013. (© Florian Hecker. Courtesy of Sadie Coles HQ, London.)



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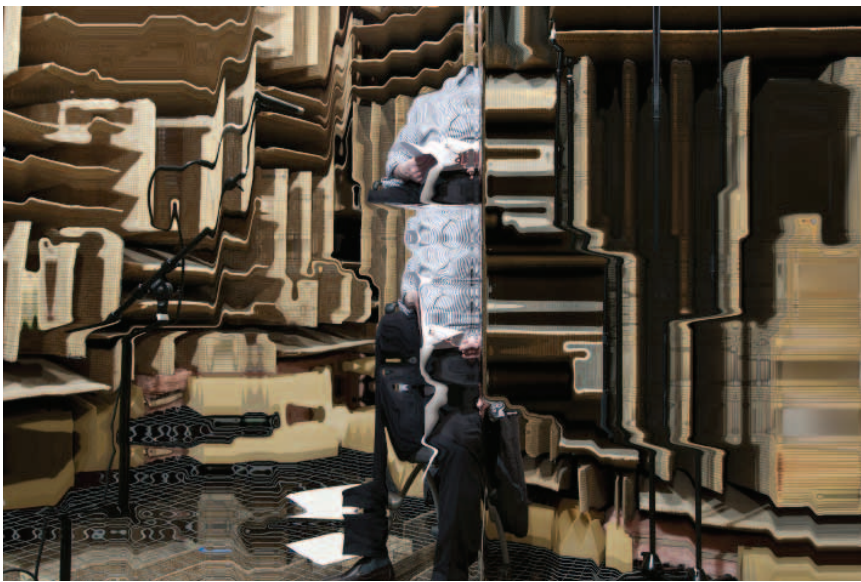


Fig. 2. Florian Hecker, *Chimerization*, processed production still, 2012. The image, processed with a SIFT flow algorithm, depicts the anechoic booth used for the vocal recordings for *Chimerization* during a residency of the artist at the MIT/List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA. (© Florian Hecker. Courtesy of Sadie Coles HQ, London.)

for conceptual investigation, as well as dissecting its perceptual scope through artificial processes often readapted from scientific fields.

For *Chimerization*, an immersive sound work premiered at DOCUMENTA 13 in Kassel, 2012, Hecker appropriated the notion of “auditory chimera” from medical research on cochlear implants (Fig. 1). The process of synthetically extracting and transferring properties between different perceived sounds served Hecker as a means to disrupt the way in which we detect voice. His “text sound

piece” therefore induces some continuous modulations in the way we recognize language, in an attempt to blur the differences between natural and synthetic vocal processes [3].

To emphasize the artificiality of these processes, Hecker recorded the voices that recite the textual material inside anechoic booths—an isolated and alienating situation that served as means to affect speech (Fig. 2). In this case, rather than the site for a contemplative Cagelan experience, the anechoic chamber becomes a laboratory for the alteration of

sound. By eradicating echoes through the sound-absorbent materials of the booth, Hecker is basically silencing the essential relation between sound and space, cutting all ties with nature.

It is interesting to compare *Chimerization* with a work that originated from a similar interest in the physiology of the ear, yet developed in a different, if not opposite, direction: *Organ of Corti*, a device conceived by the duo Liminal (formed by architect Frances Crow and sound artist David Prior) and awarded with the PRS for Music Foundation’s New Music Award in 2010 [4] (Fig. 3). As with the phenomenon of the auditory chimera that inspired Hecker, Liminal’s project similarly refers to the way in which sonic frequencies are distributed and remapped across the surface of the inner ear. Yet unlike Hecker’s installation, the emphasis moves to the relation that this process entertains with space, since *Organ of Corti* essentially reproduces the “tonotopic mapping” phenomena, which happen inside the ear, on an architectural scale.

Rather than producing and controlling a sonic environment, as in Hecker’s case, *Organ of Corti* acts through a “passive” process, as an acoustic filter of the noise of the environment, responding only to the alternating range in frequency across space. This effect is achieved through the use of metamaterials, in this instance “sonic crystals”—artificial materials structured on a microscopic level to manipulate sound or light waves in specific patterns. While Hecker’s work was about



Fig. 3. Liminal’s *Organ of Corti* outside St. Paul’s Cathedral, London, July 2011. (© Liminal. Photo © Chris Kennedy)



Fig. 4. Michael Asher, untitled installation for the Gladys K. Montgomery Art Center Gallery at Pomona College, Claremont, California, 13 February–8 March 1970. View out of the gallery toward the street from a small triangular area. Photo taken with daylight. (© the Asher Trust. Courtesy of the Asher Trust. Photo courtesy of the Frank J. Thomas Archives.)

artificially interrupting the relationship between sound and space, *Organ of Corti* is about reorganizing found sounds and “framing them in a new way” [5]. Liminal’s approach insists on the contextual nature of sound as mirroring the structure of things, rather than affirming its own structure.

FIELD SITUATIONS

If we take a step backward, this morphological association of sound and space can be historically identified as the catalyst for the encounter between visual and aural languages. Some of Michael Asher’s early works, for instance, focused on the relationship between acoustics and architecture. His installation at Pomona College in California (1970) is one example in which he radically modified the configuration of the gallery. Asher removed the entrance door, lowered the ceiling and built some extra walls, creating a corridor for the intensification of the sounds coming from outside the gallery (Figs 4 and 5).

By such contextual and structural action on the auditory space, Asher somehow caused the gallery to function as a metamaterial, but by acting on the macrostructures of the gallery rather than by employing the microscopic patterns of sonic crystals. The Pomona installation furthermore parallels the idea of a passive device, not dissimilar to *Organ of Corti*. Both devices process a soundscape,

recontextualizing, rather than generating, sound.

Yet the distinctive aspect of Asher’s project is the way in which the auditory experience constitutes a vehicle for a critique of institutional norms (a main preoccupation of his career). The Pomona installation is an attempt to dilute the hierarchies between the visitor and the art object into a decentralized, topographical aural experience. Moreover, by opening a sonic corridor connecting

the outside world to the inside of the gallery, the work dismisses the norms of the modernist institution that perpetuate the quarantine of the artistic experience and transforms the gallery into an instrument that resonates with the sounds of the everyday—a way for Asher to relocate the artistic agency within the extramural [6].

A NEW HOME FOR MUSIC

The course taken by Asher in Pomona is one that fully embraces Cagean aesthetics, even though there are no accounts of direct influence. Asher’s installation transposes into the gallery context several of the principles upon which Cage structured his opposition to the musical tradition, namely, the rejection of the composition as object; its expansion beyond the walls of the auditorium; the dispersal of the performance space across the “field situation”; and the aim to free the artistic experience from predetermination and authorial control.

If we look at the evolution of sound aesthetics, however, it seems that its main trajectories lead elsewhere. Exploded, imploded or chimerized, the sonic object remains ascribed to a framework that actually conserves the chain of hierarchies expressed by the subject-object relation (and the Pompidou riot demonstrates how this bond can be perceived as imprisoning).

From Young’s immersive environments to the neo-modernist and sensory-based approach to sound [7], from concrete to electroacoustic morphing, the act of listening seems to have been reconducted,

Fig. 5. Michael Asher, axonometric drawing of the installation for the Gladys K. Montgomery Art Center Gallery at Pomona College, Claremont, California, 13 February–8 March 1970. Thicker line indicates configuration of the space within the gallery. (Drawing by Lawrence Kenny. © the Asher Trust. Courtesy of the Asher Trust.)

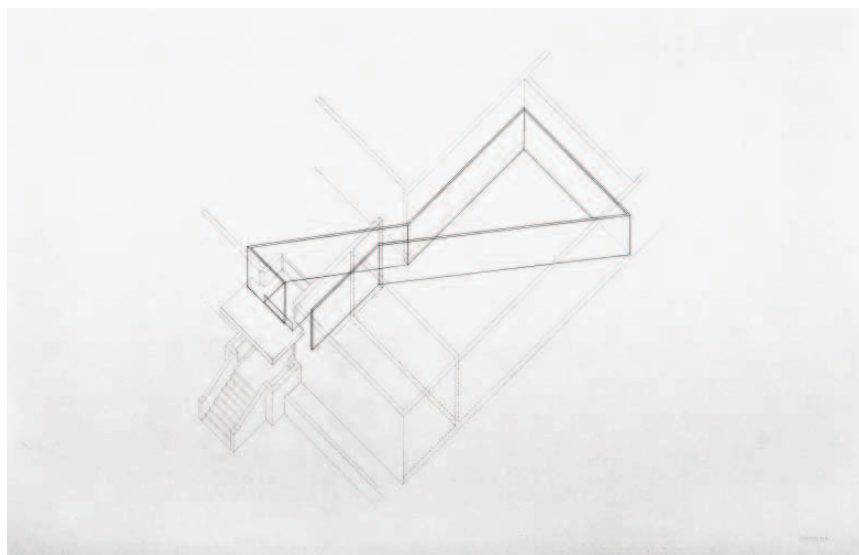




Fig. 6. Susan Philipsz, *Surround Me—A Song Cycle for the City of London*, Artangel commission, London, 9 October 2010–2 January 2011. (© Susan Philipsz. Photo: Nick Ash, Courtesy of Susan Philipsz, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin)

or rather maintained, in the intramural context. The notion of the soundscape itself has turned into an objectified experience, captured and transcoded into indoor formulas, despite R. Murray Schafer's claim for the recontextualization of our listening practice beyond the walls of the auditorium [8].

Yet Cage's project concerns itself more with an "ecological music" rather than with an acoustic ecology—a notion he adopted privileging the original meaning of the Greek term *oikos* (home), as he sought to enable music to inhabit the world.

Considering how the sonic field has generally dismissed the extramural hypothesis, the individual trajectories of artists such as Asher or, to cite another significant example, Max Neuhaus, are distinctive in the way they have located the tools to pursue a post-Cagean musical project within a post-minimalist sculptural practice—Asher fairly intermittently, as mentioned above, whereas Neuhaus did so with a more dedicated and extended engagement.

Both of these artists moved away from minimalism's purely phenomenological, gallery-focused approach towards a situational aesthetics (where the term "situation" stands for an expanded notion of site)—a shift in the field of aural practices that I propose as "discreet sound": namely, attempts to expand the artistic

territory through critical *in situ* interventions, contextual works, infiltrations and other forms of intrusion within the social fabric, often resulting in less visible and non-object-based outcomes. Rather than affirming the artistic presence, the primary focus of these strategies is to generate new forms of interrogation within "ordinary" reality, as an aural practice subsumed within a context-oriented, aesthetic program [9].

Fig. 7. Max Neuhaus installing *Times Square*, 1977. (© Estate of Max Neuhaus. Courtesy Butler Library, Columbia University.)



FROM SPACE TO PLACE

"A place has a character; a space doesn't have a character," said Neuhaus, in relation to his "place works," which were mainly devised for outdoor situations. "So calling them 'sound spaces' didn't make sense. They are about building a place, a new place from my imagination, out of a specific place" [10]. The passage from space to place seems also to be a significant concern in more recent sound-based practices, notably those of Susan Philipsz (Fig. 6) and Janet Cardiff. By remodeling places through aural tools, both Philipsz and Cardiff create some experiential misreadings: confounding inner and outer worlds, producing shifts between what is perceived and what is imagined; between the visible and the invisible. Although these artists often operate outside the gallery space, it is interesting to register how they have both received firm institutional backing [11].

An ecological system within art is inherently affected by contradictions. When speaking about the risks in the cohabitation of art with life, philosopher Jacques Rancière warns of a loss of autonomy, of diluting art's *difference* in the everyday [12]. However, just as Erik Satie defended the nonmusicality of his furniture music, the discreet practice acts on the possibility of integrating this paradox into its format. This perhaps explains why Neuhaus decided to locate his famous *Times Square* sound installation (1977–1992, 2002–present) in one of the noisiest places in the world (Figs 7 and 8).

The somewhat radical position taken up by Neuhaus indeed fully accepted the

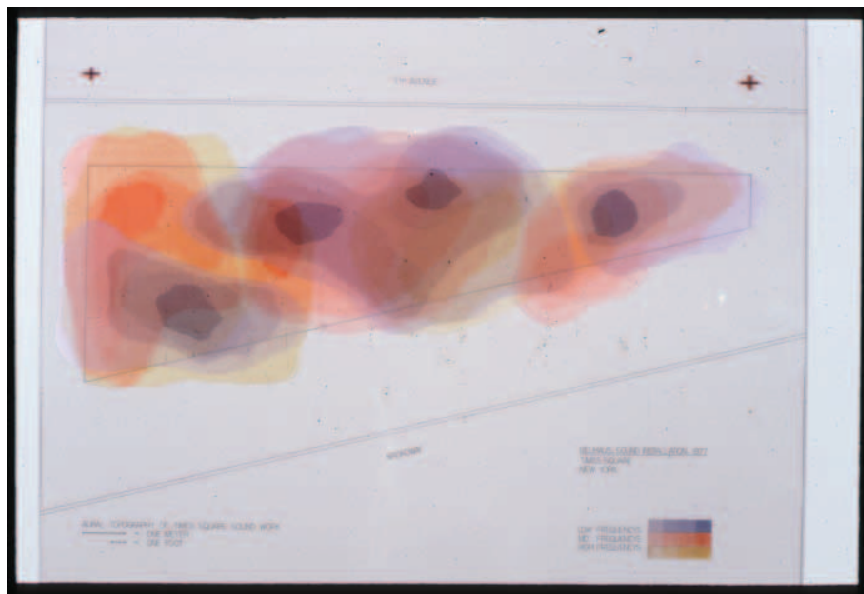


Fig. 8. Max Neuhaus, *Aural Topography of Times Square Sound Work*, drawing on paper, 1977. (© Estate of Max Neuhaus. Courtesy Butler Library, Columbia University.)

possibility of the nonexistence of music. His works in public space were not necessarily required to be experienced and identified as art. Likewise, in his *Sirens* project (1978–1989), he was at ease in dismissing the artistic context, devoting himself to patenting an improved signal for emergency vehicles (Fig. 9). Here Neuhaus trespassed into the field of urban sound design, mirroring the hybridization of disciplines that in later years would become characteristic to Liminal's research.

And yet just as *Organ of Corti* won an

award in the category of music, Neuhaus's work fundamentally remains rooted in artistic discourse. If this were not the case, then it would have been unlikely for *Times Square* to have gathered the financial and institutional support necessary to reactivate such a complex public artwork and then to maintain it as a permanent installation. It is precisely this ambiguity, the impossibility of setting a fixed definition for this form of artistic agency, that marks discreet aesthetics. Referring again to Rancière, it is the unstable condition between art and

Fig. 9. Max Neuhaus testing for his *Sirens* project, 1978–1989. (© Estate of Max Neuhaus. Courtesy Butler Library, Columbia University.)



non-art that allows an "aesthetic regime" to occur, causing the reconfiguration of the real.

Unlike the sensory plenitude and sonic *continuum* often pledged by sound art, the project for discreet sound acts in a fragmented fashion. While remaining distinct from ordinary life, it interferes with and syncopates the rhythm of natural occurrences.

References and Notes

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3. Audio file of the work accessible at <chimerization.documenta.de>.
4. David Prior, "Organ of Corti: A Listening Device," *Leonardo Music Journal* 22 (2012) p. 55.
5. See <http://www.liminal.org.uk>.
6. On sound and the "extramural" see Steven Connor, "Ears Have Walls: On Hearing Art," in Caleb Kelly, ed., *Sound* (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2011) pp. 129–139.
7. Christoph Cox, "Return to Form: On Neo-Modernist Sound Art," *Artforum* 42 (November 2003) p. 67.
8. See on these issues: Michael Fowler, "On Listening in a Future City," *Grey Room*, No. 42 (Winter 2011) pp. 22–45.
9. As highlighted by Leszek Brogowski, "discreet" is the capacity of "maintaining the silence," of "not being remarked," of "leaving traces of its own passage, barely visible." Discreet is more an "attitude" and "a way of practicing art" than an aesthetic category. Adverse to the spectacular and to subjectivism, "discreet practices" eventually take their place in ordinary reality. Rather than "When is it art?", the central question is "Where is art?" See Brogowski, "L'ardeur de l'art même," *Pratiques*, No. 21 (Autumn 2010): *L'ardeur de l'art même. Pratiques discrètes de l'art et leurs non-lieux*, pp. 2–18 (author's translation).
10. Max Neuhaus, "Evocare—Excerpts from a Conversation between Max Neuhaus and Gregorydes Jardins, Ischia, Summer 1995" (edited 2005), in <www.max-neuhaus.info/soundworks/vectors/place/evocare/>.
11. Philipsz for example won the 2010 Turner Prize with *Lowlands*, a site-based sound work installed beneath bridges in Glasgow.
12. See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Gabriel Rockhill, trans. (New York: Continuum, 2006).

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