

EN THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS PURE SOUND. Some notes on the notion of transcendence in sonic practices

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In an interview from 1972, John Cage gives us an extended critique of the music of La Monte Young, highlighting the influence on his own work, while at the same time being concerned in distancing himself from Young's conception of the artistic experience. On the one hand, we then see Cage acknowledging the capacity of Young's music to transport the listener to the interior of sound, allowing the discovery of new microcosms. It is a music that deeply affects our way of listening, and not only in a musical sense. As Cage admits, Young's music changes the way you listen to things. However, the quest for constant improvement and the aspiration for musical perfection, could not be further from Cage's philosophy, as suggested by the following words: "[Young] wants, I think, to create some places where music will be played eternally [...] where people could go and enjoy the effect of this music, as if they go to quench their thirst at some fresh water. And in that he's the opposite of me: he wants to make a music so exact, so perfect... [...] I find this point of view dualistic. For me, the things that I'm more interested in are those that are the ugliest, so that one discovers that ugliness is not ugliness, but life in itself... And it's for that reason that I work almost all the time with noises rather than pure sounds."¹

Cage's interview offers a great historiographical contribution to the understanding of some of the major changes in the course of music. It depicts two distinct positions, if not two different ways of seeing the world; those of two of the key figures of the sound avant-garde. In the dialectic between these two positions, we can grasp some paradigmatic shifts towards a new aesthetics associated with sound – something that will later be called a “sonic turn” to designate a new and expanding culture. One of the striking aspects of the interview is related to the way in which it insists on the transcendental character of Young's aesthetics, and on his quest for an absolute purity of sound. As Cage highlights, it is precisely on this point that the distinction with his own research exists, which is more centred on the expansion of the musical field. In Cage's project, noise acts as a principle to open up music to the immanence of the world.

The search for pure sound, as one can notice, could not be different from a search for something that transcends ordinary reality. In fact, pure sound doesn't exist – a stance that brought in agreement several theoreticians from Paul Hegarty to Seth

Kim-Cohen, and to Steven Connor. “Let's be clear that, contrary to apparent understanding, only noise is capable of purity,” Kim-Cohen remarks. “Signal, a product of traces and *differance*, is always impure, always shot through with the impurity of the other”.²

If only noise can be pure, then the polarities designated by Cage are no longer viable, something that should not be taken simply as a theoretical concern: if we look at the way in which Young's model has influenced sound-based practices, we will find a function of noise that is quite different from the one described by Cage. Rather than being a catalyst for the aural heterogeneity of the world, noise is something to be produced, assembled, processed, or composed.

This is exemplified in an archetypal way by *2 Sounds* (1960), one the earliest composition by Young, in which objects made of wood, metal or glass are scraped in a repetitive way in order to produce, upon high amplification, a continuous sound. With *2 Sounds*, Young introduces a form of saturation of the signal that aims at transcending every possible codification – therefore obtaining pure noise – a method that will be brought to extreme consequences by electricity, with the increasing use of amplification and sound generators in music and sonic practices. If high amplitudes allow for more and more intensified ways of listening, in parallel we see the materialization of a truly immersive dimension of the sonic space. The temporality of music is being diluted in an eternal present. With the uninterrupted drones of the *Dream House*, the famous New York based sound and light installation by La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, the absolute dimension of sound finds one of its most utter realizations.

At the roots of the sonic turn, therefore, stands a transcendental essentialism that has to be traced back to the “eternal music” of Young, a figure that one can see as having had a much more effective impact on sonic practices than Cage's aesthetic programme, at least in its original theoretical aspirations to open up music to contingency³. Reaching from Ryoji Ikeda's ultra-modernist environments made of sine waves and white noise (neither of these two phenomena exist in nature), to the sonic fields of Alva Noto, or to the ecstatic and meditative

1 John Cage in: Jacqueline Caux and Daniel Caux, “John Cage: Une expérience qui a changé ma façon d'entendre”, *Chroniques de l'Art Vivant*, No. 30, May 1972, p. 26. My translation. The interview is mentioned by Branden W. Joseph in *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts After Cage - (A “Minor” History)*, New York, Zone Books, 2008.

2 Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art*, New York, Continuum, 2009, p. 100. The term “*differance*” comes from the philosopher Jacques Derrida.
3 On the failure of the critical instances of “4'33” by Cage, and on the contradictions of the narratives built around this work, cf. Seth Kim-Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 159-167.

states enacted by the extremely high volume noise riffs by Sunn O))), a plurality of researches – from sound art to doom metal – are reconnecting to Young’s prescription of transporting the listener’s senses beyond ordinary experience. Not only the ears, but the whole body is brought inside a kind of plenitude, a state of purity of the sonic matter. “If the audience is not transported to heaven, I have the feeling I have failed” – Young once said about the musical experience he proposes⁴.

But how can one explain such a radical reversal of the cagean programme, a turnabout in which noise, from being a gateway to alterity, a means of contamination by reality, becomes a material to build a transcendental experience? *O’OO*” (1962), one of the most radical compositions made by Cage, can give us some clues in that sense. The piece exemplifies the gaps between the intentions of the composer and the way the work acts on the musical discourses in a different, if not opposite way. The score of *O’OO*” is made of a short sentence simply inviting the performer to realize some unspecified actions, where these actions are captured in a “situation provided with maximum amplification.” We therefore see Cage trying to dismiss all musical structures. By turning music to its zero degree, he tries to let everyday life take over, in an extreme attempt to erase the barriers between art and life. But it is precisely this use of the amplification process that seems to be ambiguous and contradictory. Cage’s idea, as he explained himself, was to transform ordinary actions in music by using an innovative technique such as the contact microphones. However, the type of codification intrinsically related to the amplification process, represents an arbitrary intervention that seems to fail in giving a result other than that of subtracting the actions from the flux of life. The performer activities are submitted to a process of conversion, a change of scale intended to make audible what is normally inaudible, or to things to which we normally devote little attention. Even if radical in its effort to erase the traditional codes of music, Cage’s recourse to microphones and loud speakers, ultimately re-enacts a listening praxis that situates itself not very far from the conventional ones.

The model proposed by Cage with *O’OO*”, rather than disclosing music to the immanence of the world, paradoxically seems to end up in suggesting new dualisms and new forms of transcendence. Indeed, the use of a variety of recording techniques to sound out reality – one of the main areas explored by sound-oriented practitioners – can be related to a mode of listening that Roland Barthes has associated with a hermeneutical approach. “What is listened [...] is the secret. That which, concealed in reality, can reach human consciousness only through a code, which serves simultaneously to

encipher and to decipher that reality.”⁵. Thus, for Barthes such a mode of listening is essentially “religious and deciphering: it intentionalizes at once the sacred and the *secret* (to listen in order to decipher history, society, the body, is *still*, under various lay alibis, a religious attitude).”⁶

In keeping with this perspective, we can refer to a sound piece that exemplifies the way in which sound may be used to somehow decipher the mysteries of reality: the *Sudarium of St. Veronica* by Leif Elggren (2007). This piece has been realized by converting into sound an old etching from 1649 created by French engraver Claude Mellan, and whose characteristic is that of having been made out of one unique spiral line that depicts the Holy Face. By engraving this image onto a sort of copper record, and playing it on a special record player, Elggren obtained a kind of acoustic image of the Holy Face. « I was really excited by the thought of detecting what was hidden in that spiral line. To hear the image! » – stated Elggren in the liner notes.

Rather than trying to evaluate the spiritual agency of the work, I would like to highlight the way in which the piece confers a magical power to the act of listening: the capacity to unveil a hidden order, a secret dimension inaccessible to ordinary perception. Indeed, when Elggren includes Mellan as co-author of his work, putting on the same level the two forms of transcription, the graphical one and the musical one, somehow he has silenced the historical perspective, to state instead the universal power of art in giving access to a transcendental order.

As Barthes suggested in the above-mentioned words, even when the act of listening is closer to a genuine interest in science, this is not without hiding a religious inclination, an approach that ultimately seeks a revelatory experience. Through a variety of processes of “sonification” close to the one used by Elggren, sound art tries to decipher the secrets of nature, to unveil vibrational universes, subterranean energies, or unknown acoustic dimensions of the real.⁷

4 Young in : Daniel Caux, “La Monte Young”, *Chronique de l’Art Vivant*, “Spécial La Monte Young”, No.30, May 1972, p. 24. My translation.

5 The text “Ascolto” by Roland Barthes, was originally published in Italian as an article for the *Enciclopedia Einaudi* (Turin, 1976). An English version (“Listening”) can be found in: Daniel Kurjakovic and Sebastian Lohse (ed.), *Other Rooms, Other Voices : Audio Works by Artists*, Zurich, Memory/Cage Editions, 1999.

6 op. cit., p. 143.

7 On the notion of “sonification”, see: Steven Connor, “Photophonics”, A lecture given at the Audiovisuality conference, University of Aarhus, 27th May 2011. Transcription available at : <http://www.stevenconnor.com/>

Therefore, the dualism that Cage tried to dismantle seems to reappear: rather than deciphering nature through the artistic codes, Cage’s ambition was simply to let the laws of nature be themselves – as in the case of chance and indetermination. For him, this was the most effective way to finally replace humanly created structures: a position that it is important to read for its critical instances *vis-à-vis* the conventions of the musical system. Nevertheless, such a position seems doomed to remain unrealised. Some of the key concepts of the cagean aesthetic, such as the notions of silence or noise, have been inherited in the following years by the sonic practices more as a means of exploring an intensification of the act of listening, than for their critical implications suggesting a relocation of the artistic experience beyond the institutional perimeters and towards social space. Cage himself, as we have seen with *O’OO*”, arrived at a dead end. His utopian, “ecological” music – a music, in his own words, that is capable of inhabiting the world – probably remained just an idea. With few and marginal exceptions (like the artist Max Neuhaus), sound practices will explore some other type of territories: those in which the raw material of sound becomes the object of a process of purification. Re-settled in the enclosed and acoustically insulated spaces of galleries and concert halls, those sounds are offered to a more condensed mode of listening, allowing the distillation of its purest essence.

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