

ABSTRACT

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This thesis discusses my use of sound as a sculptural object. I investigate the physical potential of sound as well as its use throughout art history. By exploring the distinction between sound, music, and noise I give context for my current body of work.

Modern Warfare

By

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Dedication

To the memories of

Thomas Hoffman

&

Howard Hoffman

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my family, professors, and fellow artists.

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Chapter 1: Hearing

"Our mouths emit sound that can be heard internally and at a distance and can fill its own space. Moreover, the voice is a good way to project perception into the world because it shares sound with hearing. The sound of the voice returns not in the voice itself then in the union of utterance and audition, and it creates the constitution and collapse of space required of a sentient *getting outside ourselves*" (Kahn 28).

My primary interest is the use of sound as a sculptural object. Sound functions as touch from a distance, making our ears a powerful receiver for perceiving the world around us. We can feel the vastness of a cavern or gauge the size of a dark room by projecting our voice into the space. Directional hearing is an evolutionary trait, which at its earliest origination, allowed animals to detect oncoming predators, track prey, and seek out a mate. Since then we have refined our hearing to decipher complex patterns such as music and languages (tonal and atonal). Both Sound and noise, a distinction I will discuss in subsequent chapters, has the power to repel us from or draw us into space.

Sound moves us both emotionally and physically. When watching a horror film directors will use the crescendos in film scores along with explosions of sound, such as screams and crashes, in order to get the audience to jump. Though the sound accompanies imagery it is the sound, which inspires the audience to move the same way one might jump at the crack of thunder or an unidentifiable noise. Douglas Kahn tells us, "Although light traverses the space between an object and observer just as readily as sound does between an action and listener the reflection of light is understood not as an action comparable to one that might create a sound" (Kahn 27). Light moves instantaneously, unlike sound, which moves slow enough for us to feel it

travel from afar. As Luigi Russolo states, "There is no movement or activity that is not revealed by noise" (Kahn 63).

We can feel sound move, for instance when at a fireworks display, you feel the force of the explosion as you hear it, though you see the vibrant colors long before you hear the display. In the most dramatic example, police will use sound cannons to disperse riots, "sound of adequate intensity can be felt on and within the body as a whole, thereby dislocating the frontal and conceptual associations of vision with an all around corporeality and spatiality" (Kahn 27). It is this corporeality and spatiality in which I work to utilize sound as a sculptural material.

Through my recent exploration of sound I have begun to amass and catalogue many hours of recordings. In the early part of my audio observations I would record everything indiscriminately. I wanted to capture as broad a variety of noises and sounds as was possible which lead me to an endless variety of locations, and of course to collect all the sounds of my daily routine. A project of such massive undertaking quickly became overwhelming. My search led me to the likes of Luigi Russolo and John Cage. They were two pioneers in using recorded sounds and noise to sculpt space and compose structure. As I went back through my recordings I began to reconsider what constituted noise, sound, and music.

Chapter 2: Noise

"There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot."
-John Cage

Noise is interference and disturbance; noise is unintended, undesirable, and extraneous. Walter Benjamin considered handwriting a form of noise, which gives us information in, "images that the unconscious of the writer conceals in it." (Benjamin 355). There can be meaning in noise and at that point noise does not exist. The moment one can find purpose in noise it is no longer noise because significance has been attached to the object of scrutiny.

John Cage's *Four Thirty-Three* is the culmination of noise as music. This was a concept also explored earlier by Futurists, in particular Luigi Russolo in the early 20th century. Russolo would incorporate mechanical noises into his compositions through the use of phonographs, fire sirens, steam whistles, and other mechanical noises. Russolo believed noise could be incorporated into music with intention, but that intentionality only served to take the mechanical noises out of their naturally occurring states. John Cage's *Four Thirty Three* created a bridge between noise, silence, and music. The piece called for a performer to step onto a stage, sit in front of the piano, and keep musical time for four minutes and thirty-three seconds without playing a single note. During that time it was the noises that occurred naturally in the audience and the auditorium during the performance, which became the music. *Four Thirty-Three* has a length that is comparable to the average song length of popular music throughout the 20th century, which differentiates it from other silent

compositions that occurred earlier in history. (4'33" is also equal to 273 seconds, 273 Kelvin being absolute zero temperature, but Cage did not realize this when he chose the length.)



Figure 1 Installation Shot, *Write Me Some Lines*, 30 speakers and 8 amplifiers, 6.5' x 6.5'

Write Me Some Lines further explores and blurs the lines of sound, music, and noise. Three audio tracks play simultaneously through a three channel audio system. These three tracks consist of: a catalogue of blues songs, the sound of a person crying, and the ambient sounds from inside of a car driving on the road. The piece is a never-ending loop, which is divided between 3-minute intervals where all three tracks are played. The first interval is solely the sound of the car driving on the road played through all three channels. The second interval includes the sound of the car driving while the blues are playing and a person cries, each through its own channel. As each

track plays they move randomly from speaker to speaker. The piece will never play the same way twice as it is randomly playing from a variety of different speakers at varying times. The journey will always have a different composition due to the variety of scratchy tones and character of the often blown out speakers though the audio tracks will always consist of the same recordings. The moving sound mimics the journey of a car traveling down the road, while at the same time further dissecting the audio clips to brief intervals between speakers. At one moment the car will sound as if it were far off in the distance, and then in an instance the sound is on top of the viewer as if they could feel the tires on the road. The tones shift from high to low creating a sense of depth.

The banal sound of the car driving on the road plays an equal length of time to the blues music giving the two an equal weight throughout the entirety of the piece. Similar to Cage's *Four Thirty-Three*, I equate the banality of the noise (the road noise) to that of a song. Even though the music cuts off the speakers violently rattle as the sounds of the tires on the ground, the wind blowing by, and cars passing shake each woofer and tweeter. The speakers take on the characteristics of the noise while adding their own unique voice to the piece.

Every so often the viewer is left with a strangers gurgled sobbing as the tires continue their voyage. The viewer can feel the road, and at the same time the sound of someone crying will fade in and out as the music stops, allowing them to feel the presence of a person beyond that of the blues music. Even in the absence of the music, and the crying, there is a harshness to the sound of the car driving down the road that still moves the viewer, "At a minimum, no matter where the artist may be,

wherever there is someone intent on telling, there is always a background dish and din and clatter of gregariousness, even when the other is formed from an estrangement of one's own voice" (Kahn 23). The woofers and tweeters are a technological embodiment of the voice.

The speakers represent a corporeal estrangement and give a glimmer of an out of body experience rooted in the noise of the banal,

"Noise is the Forrest of Everything. The existence of noise implies a mutable world through an unruly intrusion of an 'other', an 'other' that attracts difference, heterogeneity, and productive confusion; moreover it implies a genesis of mutability itself. In a predictable world noise offers something out of the ordinary, and in a world in frantic pursuit of the extraordinary noise can promise the banal and quotidian." (Kahn 22).

By selectively focusing on the sound of a car driving down the highway I give the viewer a moment to reflect on an experience they have grown numb to by driving for hours a day everyday of their life. Even in the protective shell of our cars the outside world is touching us.

Chapter 3: War

"Turning a deaf ear to violences will not silence them" (Kahn 67).



Figure 2 Installation Shot, *Cinders Blew In Our Faces*, 80 speakers and 16 amplifiers, 7' x 15'

Early in the Futurist movement Luigi Russolo began writing, *L'arte dei rumori* (The Art of Noises) in which he defined 6 families of noise. Within the six families the sound of the human voice was only hinted at in the third and last families of noises he listed,

1	2	3	4	5	6
Rumbles	Whistles	Whispers	Screeches	Noises obtained by	Shouts
Roars	Hisses	Murmurs	Creaks	percussion on metal,	Screams
Explosions	Snorts	Mumbles	Rumbles	wood, skin, stone,	Groans
Crashes		Grumbles	Buzzes	terracotta, etc.	Shrieks
Splashes		Gurgles	Crackles		Howls
Booms			Scrapes		Laughs
					Wheezes
					Sobs

Russolo saw this list as the "most characteristic of fundamental noises" and wished to start a futurist orchestra that would reproduce the sounds mechanically, relying heavily on the recently developed technology of the phonograph.

The Art of Noises manifesto was finished during the middle of World War I, when Russolo had a break in his military service, and his categories of noises were clearly influenced by his wartime experiences. Richard Huelsenbeck, an art noise maker and dada artist working parallel to Russolo wrote, "War was the highest expression of the conflict of things, as spontaneous eruption of possibilities, as movement, as a simultaneous poem as a symphony of cries, shots, commands, embodying an attempted solution of the problem of life in motion...Every moment naturally produces noise" (Kahn 46). It is in this writing that I drew inspiration for *Cinders Blew in our Faces*. The recorded sounds are not war sounds but relate to war sounds. Whispers reference the unknown aspects of war that are secretive and at times can be used to spread propaganda, while the violent banging of fists can be construed as gunfire; the intention is to push and pull the viewer around the space.

The whispers invite the viewer into the space; there is a sense of mystery to what is being said. The inaudible nature of the whispers denies the viewer of information. Whispering has a seductive quality that is in direct conflict with the banging of a fist, which represents an aggressive act, but in both these actions there is no sense of authorship. The viewer is left with only a technological embodiment of faceless authors. The pounding fist is a warning that pushes the viewer away and makes audible a frustration of disinformation and lack of information. Phillip Tommaso Marinetti a prominent Futurist artist of the time wrote, "the ear will

become more attentive because in modern warfare, mechanical and metallic, the element of sight is almost zero. The sense, the significance, and the expressiveness of noises, however, are infinite" (Kahn 67). This led me to create *Modern Warfare* an installation consisting of a modest wood veneer desk set with a lone microphone,



Figure 4 installation shot, *Modern Warfare*. Desk, microphone, and radio.

which is directly wired to a radio across the gallery. The aesthetic of these objects reference that of a middle level bureaucrat. The open-ended nature of the installation allows the viewer to be both author and audience in the experience. They can take the role of the faceless author contributing their own noise to the process, "Noise, however, reaching us in a confused and irregular way from the irregular confusion of our life, never entirely reveals itself to us, and keeps innumerable surprises in reserve" (Russolo).

Chapter 4: CONCLUSION

"Both sound and listening have been and continue to be transformed through the cultural elaboration of technology" (Kahn 15).

While technology constantly increases the possibilities of noise the basic 6 families of noise proposed by Luigi Russolo still endure throughout the technological changes. Russolo's initial proposal of these categories of sound do not limit the future but give a framework for organizing and deciphering new noises. We now have digital noise, which presents potential problems in coding, pixilation, and reticulation. But these problems are not new. We are still faced with the basic issues of access to information, and our ability to keep up with new technologies will exponentially lag behind as they develop. Within the digital age Marinetti's statement about war rings true today, "the element of sight is still almost zero. The sense, the significance, and the expressiveness of noises, however, are infinite" (Kahn 67). Endless access to information on the World Wide Web in the form of pod casts, twitter, and the like bring with them an even broader range of noises, which end up creating an arduous task in deciphering information.

The noise of pop-ups, spam, misinformation, and volume of information flood the technological market. With endless access to information comes an endless potential for noise. As Walter Benjamin wrote, "Now and then one hears of something 'reassuring' such as the invention of a sensitive listening device that registers the whirl of propellers at great distances, and a few months later a soundless airplane is invented" (Kahn 66). The cycle of noises is endless and once we decipher and define them as sounds, new noises will take their place.

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