

## Christina Kubisch and the epistemology of the ear

(Can you hear?)

Christina Kubisch' *Diapason*, a compact disc released in 2002, documents one portion of a site-specific sound-and-light installation. This installation, entitled *Dreiunddreisig Felder*, occupied three distinct spaces in Berlin's venerable Parochialkirche. The sounds that we hear on the disc were those heard in the old belfry, on whose floor were set three matrices of white pigmented speakers, these picked out by black-lighting that also subtly illuminated the architecture. The audio stream was constituted of an unprocessed recording of seemingly random soundings of a set of antique medical tuning forks, fifteen in all, ranging between 64 and 2048 Hz. This being said, I find this compact disc intriguingly problematic, disconcerting. The forks speak with reluctance, their resonance inconsistent: one can almost feel them in the hand. The sounds are not musical as such: notwithstanding, the intervals edge themselves just beyond transcription. Yet neither are these sounds "electronic" or "concrete." It is difficult to put my intuitions into words, but perhaps I might say that the whole comes across as the aural equivalent of a still photograph or series of such photographs rather than a thing sonically replete or immersive in itself. (As an aside, the materials accompanying the disc, interestingly enough, substitute still photographs of the forks for any substantive commentary.) To go further, this recording in very specific ways seems not to satisfy my expectations of a recording, yet in its failure paradoxically conjures up the visual and architectural entirety of the installation (one I did not see in person).

Such musings as this last, while valuable in themselves, do not get us far. But there *is* something specific that epitomizes for me what is problematic with this recording. In short, I cannot find a playback volume that seems comfortable for any length of time. This is a small annoyance, a matter of parapraxis. We almost automatically--even subconsciously--locate an acceptable volume at which to listen, find a sweetspot with a twist of the dial. Yet, to put this in more formal terms, what determines our choice? It seems obvious that this volume must in some way conform to the physical or acoustic space in which we listen. Less obviously, though, it must conform to some psychic or imagined space of listening: the physiological must map onto the psychological (as the teenager who lives next door well knows). Then again, it must correspond to some originary volume of the sound source, or at least some imagined originary volume. To this we might object that electronic sounds--artificial sounds as it were--unlike natural or acoustic sounds have no originary volume. Yet this only begs the question, as on the one hand, even the most abstract or electronic of sounds reads to the ear as natural or naturalized, and on the other hand, more importantly, even what we mark as a natural or acoustic source has already been manipulated in the studio--rendered artificial. All music, when reproduced, is electronic music. The notion of an originary volume to be reproduced with some demonstrable accuracy is a fiction. Yet that fiction must be plausible.

An earlier analogy is worth pursuing. We might think of setting the volume, in both recording and playback, as a way of bringing the aural substance "into focus," the microphone or speaker functioning as an analogue to the camera or the darkroom, even perhaps to the microscope. This analogy fails quickly--but fails in very telling ways. The focal field of the photograph is always read against the "out-of-focus" (a device foreshadowed by centuries in painting). The same situation does not hold true with audio recording, which seems compelled to bring *all* into focus, to rule out that which is

sonically indistinct. In fact, to push the comparison further, a photographic image supposes likewise an “out-of-field,” a domain the camera does not see. Cropping, in effect, is itself a sort of focusing. The audio recording admits no “out-of-field”.

Thus, perhaps, our intuitions of plausibility might be explicated by examining further the distinction between how we conceive visual and audio materials. The process of recording involves in some way an erasure of the original signal, what we might think of as a disembodiment of the sound source. This disembodiment, though, is more than an artifact of the process. Some of the most fascinating work on audio culture over the past several years has come to see it the ontological underpinning for recorded sound as a whole. Of this literature, I would cite three of the best-known examples. Thus, Friedrich Kittler locates the ideation of recording in nineteenth-century spiritualist fantasies of capturing the voices of the dead. Allen Weiss, speaking particularly to radio, ties the aesthetic ontology of sound reproduction and dissemination to turn-of-the-century preoccupations with the psychopathology of aural hallucination, of hearing voices. Emily Thompson, in a different vein, accounts for a fundamental reconception of architectural space in the opening decades of the twentieth century in terms of the attempt to bring sound under control, to in effect map the internalized space of sound onto the acoustic spaces of architecture. What is germane in these accounts is that they give reason for the erasure of the originary sound in its technological reproduction, demonstrate how the exteriority of sound is subsumed in a very peculiar sort of interiority which is itself then naturalized.

This last, of course, is anticipated in Romantic discussions of music in relation to the other arts--thus Hegel's definition of music as distinguished from the visual arts by its double negation of space and substance. The dialectic of sight and sound seems too to play into the foregoing accounts, each of which in its way chrystalizes the new

status of sound through an arresting visual image--Kittler bringing in an obscure text equating the tracings of the needle on the wax cylinder of the gramophone to the sutures of the skull, Weiss evoking Artaud's spectacular collapse onstage in his final public and first recorded appearance, Thompson the integration of the loudspeaker into the decor of Radio City Music Hall. Inescapably, the technologization of sound in the medium of recording cannot but reconceive or reproblematicize the relation of the aural to the visual.

And this reconceptualization cuts deeper than we might at first think. Martin Jay has carefully explicated the way in which Continental philosophy of the last century consistently demotes the visual in favor of the aural as a foundational metaphor. In other words, the governing image of Enlightenment philosophy--the panopticon, wherein all is brought under surveillance--becomes something to be mistrusted *as image*, mutates into the gaze that is by nature deceptive if not oppressive. Jay deals certainly with a restricted body of work. Yet I think that we can generalize a sense whereby the reproduced sound comes, in our modern world, to have an authority we no longer grant to sight, that the panoptic give way to the pan-aural, the epistemology of the eye to what we might call the epistemology of the ear. Truth, in modernity, is vested in that heard rather than seen.

To find a familiar example of this, we can turn to the cinema, which we might from the first describe as a sequence of images almost too rapidly crumbling away under the relentless pressure of sound. The eye accepts all sorts of limitations, obscurities, discontinuities, cuts--montage, after all, is the principal technique of film, against which all other techniques are gauged. The sense that the visual in film can convey some sort of truth is dependent on the partial vision of the camera., on its capacity of mis-seeing. In fact, as was long ago noted, the camera surpasses the eye

only in so much as it is continually testing the images before it. The sound of film, by contrast, admits but one mishearing--the situation in which phenomenal sound is confused for noumenal or the reverse(a trick that has almost become a mannerism of mainstream cinema). Even here the effect depends on an assumption of the veracity of sound, and on its capacity to map interior on exterior, its capacity to conflate the two. Certainly one can think of analogous visual situations, moments where the camera pulls back, and where we are given to realize that what we have been seeing on the screen is something itself staged or filmed. The difference, though, is that the movement from phenomenal to noumenal and its reverse in the sound of film is never the product of physical movement (the microphone pulling back). Moreover, it is always a transformation that can be reversed. At some epistemological level we cannot locate a difference between noumenal and phenomenal.

We might look further to the visual to gauge the epistemological authority of the ear. Some of the commonplaces of visual history suggest a new spin. Perhaps to speak of modern art as a reaction to the veracity of photography is to miss the point, that it is the way in which photography relinquishes the authority of the panoptic construction that liberates the visual arts from the burden of truth-telling, allows them even to become non-visual, conceptual. Or again, it is a commonplace of post-modern discourse to speak of an inundation of images, none of which by itself can claim any veracity. Could this be the case were the ear not to supply a sense of truth lacking in the post-modern spectacle? Could this further be the case of the eye striving through a sort of combinatorics to recover for sight the authority of the ear?

I stray too far and too quickly into my own fantasies. I would assert, however, that these are exactly the sorts of themes that give Kubisch's work its conceptual depth. Let us return to the belfry of the Parochialkirche. The thematics at one level seem

trivial. The tuning forks stand in for the now absent bells. This mimesis, though, is problematic in any number of ways. To substitute tuning forks for bells is to substitute something intimate for something public. It is even to substitute one acoustic space for another. What we would have heard, what we may hear, is some translation of those long vanished bells, one made possible by the mediation of electronic reproduction. This translation maps a sort of psychic interiority onto the architectural space: a belfry with bells sounding is in fact the most interior of spaces, the sound being heard always *outside*, and thus the sound of the forks takes us within. This could not but have been reinforced by the visual part of the installation, the soft luminosity of the blacklights giving a strong sense of this as *within*, the belfry itself metaphorizing a human skull. Yet we would also have seen the fields of speakers: at the very moment that we would have discovered ourselves inside ourselves, the means of this translation itself would have become visible. This has a correlary in the sound. Were one to have heard the original bells within the belfry the sound would have been unbearable tangible. The tangibility mutates perhaps into the *feel* of the forks. But this *feel*, this inherent inefficiency of the forks in their creation of sound, does, I think, in some uncanny way make us conscious of what we are hearing as recording in all of its psychic efficiency.

Kubish, though, takes us further. These are, again, *medical* tuning forks, instruments whose original purpose was to *test* the ear. The electronic reproduction of this sound, I would venture, calls up some intuition of their original purpose. Though at a conceptual rather than a physiological level they retest our hearing. Again, the tangibility of their sound, the sense that one can feel them in the hand, functions to reawaken some notion of an ordinary sound. I think, in fact, that this accounts in some part for my inability to find a correct playback volume. We are given a sense--an uncanny sense--of what an ordinary sound would be, against which we gauge the disembodied fiction of the recording. When I attempt without success to find that

playback volume, what is reproduced is the situation of the test, my playback equipment in effect standing in for the tuning forks. Hence Kubisch forces into question the epistemology of the ear, its assumed veracity. More so, she sensitizes us to the way in which the authority of the aural prosthesis rests in the occult, in the hallucinatory, in the projection of interior onto exterior, and thus that the epistemology of the technologized ear is no more or less than a metaphysics. Yet it is with the true affection of an agnostic that she diagnoses this gnosis. With an elegant sense of the ironic she herself asks of us:

Can you hear?