



## Editorial: Ballast Reduction and the Audio Arts

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## Ballast Reduction and the Audio Arts

**T**wo circumstances contributed to the conceptualization and writing of this editorial. The first was my participation in San Francisco's recent SoundCulture '96 events, which offered a forum for artists, historians and theorists to demonstrate and discuss developments in the audio arts of numerous Pacific region locales. The second involves my ongoing research into the influence of sound recording, broadcast and textual theory on such arts since 1947. In what follows, I will aim to synthesize observations gleaned from my discussion of SoundCulture '96, technological influence and selected post-war practitioners into a recipe for making and thinking audio art as an extra-musical sonic practice.

### SOUND CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGICAL INFLUENCE

SoundCulture's assertion of the geographic divide between European and Pacific regions merits some detailing. The further west Europeans traveled into the "new world," the festival's organizers reasoned, the more likely it was that ships' ballasts were reduced to ensure safe travel. Thus the piano, despite its cherished symbolic position in the arsenal of *arcani imperii*, was often among the first items cast overboard—an early casualty of ballast reduction. In its wake, so to speak, two phenomena associated with the colonial enterprise shared in reconfiguring audible culture: (1) the musical arts took root over pre-existing traditions, radically altering and being altered by indigenous practices, and (2) technologies of sound reproduction and transmission began to immerse entire continents in a boisterous web of electronic mediation.

By choosing mediation as its subject matter, SoundCulture '96 examined how telephonic, phonographic and radiophonic communications shaped the contours of contemporary life in technologized societies. The perception of causal relationships between objects and sounds changed, for example, under the influence of radio's vocal ventriloquy; voices unhitched from bodies came to be heard as a *product* of spatial and temporal fragmentation. The resulting perceptual disruptions of technological subjects (now sometimes referred to as "split") coincided, not surprisingly, with the nearly simultaneous arrival of Bell's telephone, Edison's phonograph, Marconi's radio and another kind of invention—what Laurence Rickels refers to as "the owners manual to technologization" [1]: psychoanalysis.

Beyond examining the technical "ghosting" of voices detached and displaced from human bodies, SoundCulture underscored the fact that, as prior forms of "immersion," radiophony and phonography demand attention at the onset of the digital age, *especially* because they provide concrete historical examples of what happens when physical phenomena are converted into electronic signals. Those curious about the twists and turns "virtual reality" may take upon its intrusion into daily life should reconsider how musical performance, upon the emplacement of a commercial recording industry, was subjugated to new strictures of commodification during this Ur-form of "object" recording, storage and retrieval. By the 1930s, the effects of recording upon musical culture could be discerned: as musicians sought to replicate their records in so-called "live" performance, performance began to exist in an inverted relationship to recording, i.e. as an imitation of a recording. Not much later, in the 1950s, multitrack recording finally transformed musical performance into what, in most cases, it is today: a simulation of a simulation.

Technological transformation of musical culture did not end with its effects upon the concert hall. Its reach also extended into the private spaces of listening. Techno-subjects now "play" radios and recordings instead of traditional musical instruments, at least in part because these provide a semblance of connectivity to the "hit parade" and other cultural phenomena of mediated life conspicuously absent from more traditional instruments' parlor-bound acoustical solipsism. With the exception of the occasional air-guitar competition, traditional performative virtuosity—the kind of virtuosity commensurate with the power of radio to inculcate in listeners the need to buy certain records—slipped easily into the perfection of consuming habits on a mass scale. This, I am only suggesting, takes place in an instantaneously rendered social space familiar, in varying degrees, to devotees of weekly television situation-comedy broadcasts and denizens of the World Wide Web.

Nevertheless, it is no secret that whatever the effect of technology upon musical culture, very little effective theoretical writing treats the subject of sound reproduction and transmission. Such a

project would, after all, entail the hard work of “denaturalizing the media that have shaped consciousness” [2]. This is also one reason why it makes sense to reconsider—with all the reservations one should have about Martin Heidegger [3]—Heidegger’s theory of mechanical production in relation to a culture of digital reproduction. According to Heidegger, industrial processes of recording storage and retrieval transform raw materials into “standing reserve,” a quantum that “no longer stand(s) over against us as physical objects” [4] but instead comprises a calculated, deracinated and subjugated physical environment under the firm control of human subjects. Standing reserve, understood by Heidegger through the examples of coal mining and airplane production, easily expands as a category to include industrial *media* products—including the huge stockpile of newsprint, photographs, phonographic recordings and films amassed in this century. Heidegger’s analysis uncovered a potentially sinister dimension to environmental transformation effected through industrialization—that technological immersion into the “new nature” of standing reserve happens as the “first nature” becomes increasingly uninhabitable. Can the ubiquity of recording (CDs), broadcast (television and radio) and playback media (stereo, home theater, portable electronics) be understood by dint of this observation to repress a progressively inhospitable world? Further, what implications might this analysis hold for artists who engage mediation in their works?

## AUDIO ART IN THEORY

SoundCulture’s panel discussions began the process of addressing these questions while seeking to outline a broad array of subjects, including the implications for audio art in the hotly debated issues of copyright legislation, fair use, noise pollution, architectural space, textual theory and even contemporary fiction. Despite the heterogeneity of these topics, one theme consistently emerged in panel discussions and casual conversations: The particularities and specificity of sounds—their inexorable relations to material, social and historical conditions of production, reproduction and transmission—are drastically underrepresented in the art and culture that is perceived through our ears.

This assertion surprises and evens shocks many people engaged with musical scholarship, mostly because its body of writing—so often aimed at enjoining “musicology” with “cultural studies,” “musical semiotics” or “ethnography”—appears inclusive and diverse, but does not adequately address the issues of “object” signification and reproduction so important to audio artists and theoreticians. Seeking to elide musical boundaries that contain sounds in what Umberto Eco has called “a grammatical code that has no semantic dimension” [5], audio artists and theorists often prefer to think about sound textuality, a strategy that often involves the study of historical developments in literature, science/technology and visual arts. This frequently leads these individuals to adopt a semiotic approach to making audio art that retains the suggestion of meaning associated with musical affect *and* the conventional planes of signification more familiar to poets and visual artists, such as naming and the kind of mimesis capable of communicating specific objects, events and ideas.

Let me offer an example of what is for some audio artists one of music’s greatest liabilities. Imagine three individuals, one with a camera, one with paper and charcoal, and one with a musical instrument; each is asked to produce a representation of the Eiffel tower. The musician may perform the entire canon of French music; but s/he will not in a hundred years communicate a specific object to any listener not schooled in the (frankly, class-specific) traditions of opera or Western art music history. Photographic reproduction and charcoal drafting, however, stand a much better chance of signifying objects in specific contexts. This was common knowledge to the historical avant-garde, especially among Surrealists such as Alberto Savinio and Paul Nougé, who distrusted music in part for its lack of political utility.

Speaking of the avant-garde, the historical division of its visual/literary from its musical manifestations, although well known, was not absolute. One famous point of contact between the visual arts and music involved John Cage’s catalytic influence on performance and conceptual art in the late 1950s; but continuing re-inscriptions of Cagean principals occur, I will argue, at the expense of other potentialities made available through sound recording and reproduction technologies’ ability to phonograph sound and word. Further, I will argue that Cage’s status as the outer fringe of Western art music composition relates directly to musical culture’s overarching conservatism—another example being the notorious reluctance of programmers to admit works by contemporary composers.

But the conservatism of musicologists and Cageans, however, is no less prominent in postmodern theoretical writing when sound is the subject. Despite a plenitude of poststructural theories concerning music and voice—including Jacques Derrida’s “phonocentrism” [6], which places the selfsame presence of one’s speaking voice (heard through cranial and mandibular resonance) at the crux of “centered” human subjects and fixed signifier/signified relationships, and Roland Barthes’ well-known exposé of musical signification and criticism, “The Grain of the Voice” [7]—only recently have bodily, historically and socially sited sounds come under scrutiny as material for theatrical examination and artistic practice [8].

This historical exclusion of textual sound (which privileges phonography and radiophony as modes of writing and broadcasting) from both practice and theory animates the best recent theories

of audio art. Douglas Kahn, for example, seeks to establish a series of conceptual instruments [9] based upon the sampler. Kahn's instruments—which turn out to be nothing less than furtive combinations of recording technology and conceptual thinking—maximize the artistic potential of referential sounds, i.e. those grounded in semantic, political and social contexts. This “new organology” poses several advantages over traditional instrumentation, including all existing musical automata. For starters, by exposing the anthropomorphic conceit of music's timbral, tonal and periodic modeling after the human voice, Kahn's instruments outline a post-human mode of art production. Thus, audio artists may augment periodic and tonal attributes with (dis)located and/or polyvalent meaning(s), whether conventionally semantic or punning, discovered in a “non-musical” or “worldly” material strata usually called “noise.” Second, by privileging recording over performance, Kahn situates audio art in an arena of mediation, networks and private spaces far afield from the concert hall's more romantic and formalized conventions: (1) *de rigueur* performer/audience segmentation maintained throughout Cagean composition, (2) its intimations of unmediated “full presence” and (3) its Taylorist evocations of physical dexterity, referred to as virtuosity.

However, certain features of audio art as a media practice could benefit from further unpacking. Would-be practitioners of sound art, for example, almost certainly experience disappointment at the results of “following the materials” of sound toward a modernist extrapolation of their intrinsic qualities, including referential ones. Any postmodern realizes that *objets sonores*, like any object or technology, lack essential, intrinsic or absolute qualities, including “referents” as understood since Saussure. In other words, outside of representing—i.e., inventing—social and historical determinations, sound objects are themselves indeed as *empty* of referential capacity as music itself. This is where arguments that privilege the “materiality” of sound over music falter, and it is also precisely why sophisticated, interesting audio art depends upon producing an economy of difference through a tactic of textual *positioning* that is only capable of being effected by including recorded speech (in the case of radio art) or by locating “sound/noise” in a proximity to objects/images (in the case of installation work and film produced [with]in sound).

*Positionings* of disparate materials that include recorded speech make it possible to emphasize particularity in the sphere of a constructed semiotics. This mode of producing and thinking calls attention to relational articulations of sound and to the artist's re-presentational role in making choices and staging configurations, which are tactically submerged in Kahn's adumbration of a material difference between music and sound. Thus, by encouraging textual positionings of sound and recorded speech with the goal of highlighting difference and particularity, artists may proceed to expose and work around the discourses, material inadequacies and practices (musical and otherwise) that deny a semantics of reference entry into the realm and practice of audio art.

Let me give a counter-example. The representation of social and historical particularities in sound is *not* accomplished by imposing a unifying conceptual order that flattens difference, à la David Tudor's exhibition of resonant objects in the installation *Rainforest*. *Rainforest's* underlying modernist musical strategy dissolved association lines between car culture and electronically resonated automobile parts displayed in the installation. In place of such associations, Tudor posited the mystical, anthroposophical and monovalent figure of “universal vibration”—a transcendental imposition upon objects that denies referential features entwining with consumption, planned obsolescence and environmental degradation, to name just a few examples. If everything vibrates, then at what pitch does the social awareness of lead intoxication proliferate? What instrument might play that tune?

One way to answer this question hinges, again, on whether or not a line of demarcation stands between music and sound. I will reiterate that it is exceedingly difficult to hear “sounds” as something clearly distinct from “music,” that is, in connection to specific objects and larger socio-historical narrative contexts. Sounds are extremely poor signifiers and need a crutch—provided by the devices of recorded speech and objects/images, as I have suggested—for making textual connections between far-flung positionings. This is the primary reason that audio art designed to circumvent the modeling of sound upon voice or the conventions of musical performance depends so paradoxically upon the admittance of recorded speech, most effectively when deployed in intertextual, phraseologically complete quotations. Why imitate the voice when, true to Edison's original stenographic notion of the phonograph's best uses, one can now write with it? Similarly, this is why installation art realized in sound depends upon a proximity to physical objects to produce the specificity desired to undermine universalizing, essentializing musical conceits. Under these pre-conditions for artistic practice, which privilege arrangements and textual positionings over intrinsic properties, all “sounds” open out onto a full-fledged interdisciplinary textual practice, and to the world, even.

## POST-WAR AUDIO ARTS

In the post-war era alone, Antonin Artaud, Guy Debord and William S. Burroughs had long since addressed the musical schism alluded to by contemporary audio art theory. Further, each took up the instruments of recording to address subjects outside the grasp of Cagean composition, namely,

the accelerating pace of commodity culture, immersion in electronic media and systems of information storage and retrieval.

Returning to post-war Paris after 9 years of confinement in psychiatric hospitals, having undergone electroshock and insulin therapy and suffering from terminal cancer, Antonin Artaud was commissioned in 1947 by French radio to create a work for national broadcast. Artaud wrote a text, recorded it to magnetic tape and overdubbed it with sound effects, glossolalia and percussive noises. A work “that would make contact with certain organic points of life . . . in an atmosphere *so outside life*” (Artaud’s emphasis) [10], this exploratory venture into radiophonic art turned Artaud’s theologically oriented persona toward earthly phenomena of life in the post-Auschwitz, post-Hiroshima world. Advancing the claim that “nobody in Europe knows how to scream anymore,” Artaud’s polemic equates genetic engineering, militarism and commodity culture, eerily calling to mind contemporary events such as the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, the G-7 accords and the Human Genome project.

Guy Debord’s 1952 film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (Howls for de Sade) contained no imagery whatsoever, just long, alternating stretches of black and white screens. In place of images, a very remarkable soundtrack carried the film’s entire content: recitations from the French constitution, quotations attributed to the thirteenth-century mystic Saint-Just, theories of the *Letterist International*, newspaper stories, excerpts from John Houston’s *Rio Bravo* and a recollection of film highlights from Meliès to Isou. *Hurlements*’ sound montage set in motion an allegorical referentiality—an oscillation between historical and contemporary events, between documentary and fictional artistic strategies—that undermined the anesthetizing features of encroaching media culture. In particular, *Hurlements* illustrated the nascent Situationist International’s diagnosis of spectacular society, “that everything directly lived has moved away into a representation” [11]. As such, it contained the first intertextual, politicized response to commodity life realized in, and about, electronic media.

William S. Burroughs’s audiotape experiments of the early 1960s circumvented the musicalization of word and sound by maintaining the phraseology of cut-up texts carefully rejoined to produce aggregated meanings. Rhythmically set to a backdrop of radio static, popular music and the clicking of tape-machine buttons, Burroughs’s cut-ups used tape machines as weaponry for combating burgeoning “viral” cultures of print, recording and broadcast media at a time when the arts were curiously mute about the intrusion of such media into everyday life. Exposing their contribution to a culture of technological psychiatry administered through bureaucratic information systems “that have reduced whole segments of the population to a condition bordering on the far side of idiocy” while echoing the germinating deconstructionist theories of the 1960s, Burroughs pointed out the potential of “intermedia writing” as an antidote to the mass media’s influence in contemporary life. This writing “can perhaps be indicated by mosaic of juxtaposition like articles abandoned in a hotel drawer, defined by negatives and absence” [12]. Its resistive capacity is expressed directly in *The Soft Machine*. “We fold together writers of all time and record radio programs, movie soundtracks, TV and jukebox songs all the words of the world stirring around in a cement mixer and pour in the resistance message” [13].

Innovative, interdisciplinary responses to recording media could perhaps be expected from Artaud, Debord or Burroughs, but examples of referential sound were all over the place in the post-war era. Spike Jones, the novelty records of Buchannan and Goodman, cartoon sound effects, the early stereophonic productions of studio impresarios Enoch Light and John Culshaw, Ken Nordine and rap producers have all exploited the tools of sound recording in the creation of spatial, mimetic and metonymic sonic effects. Engineers of Mercury’s 1956 recording of the *1812 Overture* taped the firing of an actual seventeenth-century cannon and traveled to New Jersey to capture on tape the tinnabulation of a 40,000-pound bell thought to resemble those housed in the Kremlin. Blandly woven into the *Overture*, these devices increased the record’s mimetic relationship to worldly sounds screened, as they were, through a filter of musical nationalism.

But if recording media could be deployed in the service of a reactionary politic, then surely they could serve other ends. Thus, shorn of Tchaikovsky’s patriotism and militarism, Nigel Helyer’s SoundCulture installation *Silent Forest* mustered the capabilities of recording media in a similar fashion, albeit toward quite different ends. Helyer’s strategy for locating sounds in cultural context resulted from conducting research into the historical relationship between Hanoi’s embrace of European opera during French occupation and the United States’s high-technology defoliation and carpet bombing of the Vietnamese countryside. Projecting scratchy 78-RPM operatic records through air raid sirens like those placed on the roof of Hanoi’s opera house to warn of impending U.S. attacks, *Silent Forest* could thus claim for itself a “particularized” utilization of “sound as material,” realized through mediated displacements of space, time and physical objects.

## EXTRA-COCHLEAL SOUND

This crude overview of artistic responses to post-war media and commodity culture suggests the existence of two antipodal cultures of recording. By reproducing existing cultural forms such as music, the first culture confirms pre-electronic media discourses of performance, authorship and virtu-

osity over the potentialities contained in reproductive technology. The tremendously marginalized second culture, characterized by furtive disruptions of codes undergirding the spatial, temporal and disciplinary boundaries maintained by the first culture, realizes certain intertextual and allegorical potentialities suggested but then squelched by the bland products of musical, radiophonic and televisual conventions.

Because these conventions are so firmly inculcated in technological subjects, and because they already contain impoverished versions of a potentially sophisticated artistic practice, I remain optimistic about establishing a less marginal status for more broadly defined and practiced audio arts. In fact, indications are that a phonographically engaged compositional practice is in the air or at least capable of being *thought* through recording instruments. It is no accident that contemporary artists such as Don Joyce, Sheila Davies and Laetitia de Compiegne Sonami use radio broadcasts as media to engage semiotics, intertextuality and allegory in their works. Joyce's weekly KPFA radio program *Over the Edge* organizes materials culled from commercial radio, television programming, pirated out-take recordings and advertising culture. Davies's radio production *What is the Matter in Amy Glennon?* pulls together metaphors of Newtonian science, the North American West, postmodern tropologies, a backdrop of recorded sound and music into a Lautréamont-style intertextual mélange. Sonami's adaptations of texts, samples and electronics in works such as *What Happened* and *Story Road* problematize the traditional materials—pitch, harmony, rhythm—of musical composition and performance in the light of mechanization and simulation.

In a culture of recording designed to take full advantage of spatial and temporal mediation, the production and reception of musical affect recedes in importance, although it is by no means dispensed with entirely. Joyce, Davies and Sonami admit into their work modalities of production and listening akin to Marcel Duchamp's prescription for a "non-retinal" conceptual art—most famously expressed in the readymade—reliant upon neither affective blendings of line and color nor a classifying impulse to imitate nature. Responding to photography (just as audio artists respond to phonography) and the emergence of mass production, the readymades sought to denaturalize the formal boundaries between worldly and art objects. Thus, Duchamp's synthesis of practice and theory should be instructive for audio artists and may take its place alongside Artaud's radiophonics, Debord's *détournements*, Burroughs's textual experiments, novelty music and Kahn's conceptual instruments as an important precursor to sophisticated audio arts.

Thus, given the contemporary ballasts of recording, broadcast and whatever morphology of these takes hold in the so-called emerging technologies, it is certainly incumbent upon artists to approach the material of sound (and image) with a rich array of conceptual and historical knowledge in mind. Please consider this entreaty a provocation to develop non-cochlear—make that extra-cochlear—audio art that not only admits any and all sound into compositional practice, but expands upon the readymade, applies grammatical and textual theory and takes as its subject(s) the manufacture of smart bombs, access to abortion clinics, and even (or especially) banal talk-show programs. The hermetic seal partitioning music from worldly sounds, including recorded speech rich in narrative and textual experimentation, is simply fit to be broken. Conversation, books, the airwaves, copper and fiber optic wires are positively heavy with material appropriate for audio art. Their "objects" are far more ubiquitous than the bicycle wheels or bottle racks of an earlier moment in the twentieth century.

GERALD HARTNETT  
Leonardo Music Journal *Editorial Advisor*

## References and Notes

1. "Spooky Electricity," an interview with Friedrich Kittler in *Artforum* 31 (Dec. 1992) p. 66. Freud's diagnosis of the superego's phantom voices, Rickels notes elsewhere, "coincides with the advent of phonographic or radio recording, whereby the voice became reproducible and, hence, posthumized." Laurence A. Rickels, *Aberrations of Mourning: Writing on German Crypts* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1988) p. 66. If so, then Freud himself had far less to do with infecting the new world than he boasted upon his first visit to the Americas: "They don't know it, but we are bringing them the plague," Freud is said to have remarked to Jung upon their reception in New York City. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, Alan Sheridan, trans. (New York: Norton, 1977) p. 116. Certain technological displacements of voices, bodies and space within recording and broadcast media dramatically preceded, and perhaps initiated, Freud's psychoanalytical gifts to the new world.
2. Cited in Simon Penny, "Consumer Culture and the Technological Imperative," *Critical Issues in Electronic Media* (Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 1995).
3. See the burgeoning literature on Heidegger's involvement with the Nazi party. The crucial text is perhaps Victor Farias's *Heidegger and Nazism*, Joseph Margolis and Tom Rockmore, eds., trans. Paul Burrell and Gabriel R. Ricci (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1989).
4. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings*, William Lovitt, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) p. 298.
5. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, Anna Cancogni, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989) p. 271.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, David B. Allison, trans. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973).
7. Roland Barthes, *Music, Image, Text*, Stephen Heath, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) pp. 179–189.
8. For an introduction to the audio arts, see Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, eds., *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio and*

*the Avant-garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992) and Dan Lander and Daina Augaitis, eds., *Radio Rethink: Art Sound and Transmission* (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery and Banff Centre for the Arts, 1994).

9. Douglas Kahn, "An Unheard-of Organology," *Leonardo Music Journal* 5 (1995) pp. 1–3.

10. Antonin Artaud, "To Wladimir Porche," in *Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings*, Helen Weaver, trans. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1976) pp. 578–580. Artaud refers here to the sanitized environs of post-war Western culture, including perhaps the inherently "dead" space of radio broadcasting.

11. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, MI: Black and Red, 1970) Section 1.

12. William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove Press, 1959) p. 116.

13. William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* (New York: Grove Press, 1966) p. 149.

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