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Thoughts About the Sonic Arts

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David Grubbs, *Les Disques gâchent le paysage : John Cage, les années 1960 et l'enregistrement sonore*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2015, (Arts sonores)

L'Expérience de l'expérimentation, Dijon : Les Presses du réel ; Montreuil : Instants Chavirés, 2015, (Oh cet écho)

Benjamin Seror: Mime Radio, Berlin : Sternberg Press, 2015

City Sonic : les arts sonores dans la cité, Bruxelles : La Lettre volée, 2014, (Essais)

- 1 From New York (*Soundings: A Contemporary Score*, MoMA, 2013) to Luxembourg (*HLYSNAN: The Notion and Politics of Listening*, Casino, 2014), and, in 2015, from Hong Kong (*Beyond the Sound*, Hong Kong Arts Center) to Malakoff (*Vacarmes*, Maison des arts), emphatically and in the contemporary art field, exhibitions remind us of the importance of works made with sounds, or evoking them, produced by artists who, both specifically and with constancy, grasp an acoustic motif which has, with time, become a fully-fledged medium of present-day artwork. From the viewpoint of curatorial practices, such an experience of sound introduces new technical consequences, for both the exhibition and the museography (diffusion of works going beyond any notion of space; requirement of acoustic and listening conditions), by questioning the spectator. What is sound in contemporary art? *Historically and conceptually*, it is the fact that this area of activity still has to be grasped to *think about* the presence of sound in artistic creation. To be sure, the critical scope of the subject is wide open and, to begin to see a little more clearly *theoretically* in it, we should thus mention the liaisons between image and sound, like the ontological analogy between photography and phonography, the audio-visual relation to film, musical revolutions, obviously enough, and the generational contribution of post-rock, the acoustic share of language and fiction, and the radiophonic field... But also

notions of acoustic body, space and volume, the invention of machines, the figures of the vinyl record and loudspeakers, the poetic immateriality of sound, and lastly its politics. In a word, and quite literally, the sonic arts offer access to *another history of contemporary art*: research and discussion are underway, and the conceptual lines referred to are constantly being nurtured.

- 2 Acoustic matter, noise, silence, listening attitude. Defining the sonic world, when it is exercised *beyond* musical language and, *a fortiori*, in liaison with the visual arts, raises an overall question which produces all its charm and creates its utopia. So must we talk of “sonic art”? As Philippe Franck does in his book *City Sonic*, asking lots of artists, musicians and poets: “What is your definition of sonic art?” Or else, with Matthieu Saladin in *L'Expérience de l'expérimentation*, recalling the impossible definition of experimental music? In *City Sonic*, Dominique Petitgand replies that sonic art is “an art of time at the same time as an art of space. But above all an art of listening.” Before pursuing and softening his answer: “There is art, which is a large whole and within which all sorts of practices co-exist, some associated with the object, others with language, others again with reality, fiction, the body, and geography [...] I prefer these categories, inventing, and ceaselessly questioning, to those connected with the use of a tool or a technique.” When Matthieu Saladin implicitly defines the sonic arts with regard to experimental music which, from John Cage to Pierre Schaeffer, are at the heart of a “definitional *misunderstanding*”, and appear as “histories, with crossed or parallel lines, which are woven from one text to the next rendering null and void any essentialist endeavour to offer a definition of sonic experimentation.” From this angle, the notion of silence introduced in 1952 by John Cage’s work *4’ 33”* and what it includes by way of indeterminacy, chance, randomness, and listening attitude on which its status as a work is based, can be put in parallel with the notion of noise and *noise* music which, at the other end of the acoustic and phonic scale, is also part of the history of the sonic arts. In this respect, in an article in *L'Expérience de l'expérimentation* titled “Broken Mirror: Propos sur la musique japonaise dans ses marges de 1945 à aujourd’hui”, Michel Henritzi talks about the evolution of a radical music which, like the musicians of the 1980s (Merzbow, Hijokaïdan), develops a “mixing of flows of saturated musical information”, represented by extreme *noise*: paroxysmal, immersive and violent. From then on, in this kind of artistic and musical framework, the definitional question again raised, “When is there noise?”, is answered like the Cage silence (or the Duchampian readymade?), with the radicalness of *noise* music passing “through our way of hearing”.
- 3 In the course of the articles in *L'Expérience de l'expérimentation*, some shared approaches to the visual arts and the sonic arts, and certain historically founded and *structural* links are developed, such as the significance of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko or the New York School (John Cage, Morton Feldman...), American Minimalism, silence and monochrome, a critical listening to listening (Conceptual Art), acoustic installations and, needless to add, the *intermedia* actions of Fluxus. An artistic genealogy of the sonic arts which, by complementing a notional line of thinking, produces a history of them—as it happens, more American than European—, which is reasoned and erudite, and leads to performance art. It is precisely within a *performed* dynamic, and a hyper-contemporary reading, at once oral and improvised, of the world, that the artist Benjamin Seror has written the book *Mime Radio*. Written “orally”, *Mime Radio* is a narrative which was developed in the form of performances over a two year period, and then transcribed and published. The voice—or rather words, language, and their acoustic declensions—

constantly underpins it at the same time as being its subject. In fact, if *Mime Radio* seems like a minimal and baroque story, a poetic proliferation evoking the collective experiences of post-Surrealist narratives (such as *L'Homme qui a perdu son squelette* by Hans Arp, Leonora Carrington, Marcel Duchamp...), or a more recent novel, but one that is just as *plastic* in the depiction of its characters, Jean-Yves Jouannais's *Jésus Hermès Congrès*, *Mime Radio* is above all the tale of Marsyas who, *hailing from* Greek mythology, is voiceless ever since Apollo dispossessed him of it. The community of the Tiki Coco Bar in Los Angeles, which gathers at evenings "Challenging Reality Open Mic", where what is in particular involved is dream, music, and the transformation and augmentation of reality, makes sure that it rediscovers this voice, which touches the sublime. By way of a narrative procedure which often endlessly duplicates the name of the author himself (a subtle reminder of the performer that Benjamin Seror is: and of the performances which have preceded this text), a set of motifs which makes sound and voice a rhetorical and diegetic element, is organized. In this way, the description of the musical effect, of concerts, of music in acts, of graphic transcriptions of sounds, of examples of onomatopoeia, but also of considerations about acoustic space and silence, all organize a narrative whose primary presence was *oral*. Incorporated within a history of the literature of sounds (such as Victor Segalen's *Dans un monde sonore*, or sonic poetry and performance), *Mime Radio* nevertheless appears, already, like a transfer of signs (from the sounds of a voice to those of the narrative), a translation, and a transcoding which the book—more than the vinyl record, the tape, the CD or the digital file!—in this instance records.

- 4 As an object, medium and reproduction, from László Moholy-Nagy to Christian Marclay, the vinyl record arouses a constant plastic interest among artists by offering a body of works, from Milan Knizac to Georgina Starr, which is altogether arresting. However, David Grubbs's book, *Les Disques gâchent le paysage*, refers to an ironical and pithy formula expressed by John Cage. For John Cage, in fact, but also for the composer Cornelius Cardew and the experimental and avant-garde musicians of the 1960s, there developed, in that period, a rejection of the notions of records and recording—which would make music simply a "conserve" or "artificiality"—which is to be pitched against another radically different and positive notion, made up of organic, *live* and *filterless* perception of the acoustic world. *Les Disques gâchent le paysage* is nevertheless a title in the form of antiphrasis, because if David Grubbs's book conveys John Cage's negative appreciation, it also pinpoints the paradoxes and discusses them (Cage, for example, made many recordings!), and above all it is preceded by a *manifesto-like* and autobiographical forward by Grubbs, a post-Punk musician, performer and composer (experimentation, improvisation, electronics), who develops a constant, *generational* empathy, not to say a *fetish-like love* for the vinyl record. In fact, David Grubbs often here describes the multidisciplinary and artistic interest of a *vinyl record* made of imagery, design and text, affect, memory, and anamnesis. The fact remains that this book shows a somewhat forgotten aspect of avant-garde music—and one well removed from today's practices—the scorn shown by certain composers of experimental music for a recording whose result and form were *ill-adapted* to improvised creation, and to compositions whose length was "indeterminate". This disdain on the part of John Cage, the author specifies, nevertheless focused "on the 'disk', which is to say the published, commercialized and distributed object, and not on the recording in general", which could find an artistic and even poetic interest; and David Grubbs thus nuances its position by, in his turn, issuing a formula which evokes the paradoxes of the composer of *Silence*: "Cage's whole oeuvre is a

lesson about the deconstruction of syntax.” This audacious and rare subject (the current trend tends rather to promote the disk as object in acoustic and plastic creation) offers David Grubbs a forward looking conclusion about the conservation media in the digital age, and in the time of putting experimental music openly and freely online (with, in particular, the UbuWeb site), bearing in mind, for this and beforehand, the ontological foundations of the image-sound relation.

- 5 Henceforth, the links between the photographic and phonographic recording for Michael Snow (*L'Expérience de l'expérimentation*), or between the music of Jean-Paul Dessy and the photographic and plastic oeuvre of Alain Fleischer in *Mémoires projetées* in 2003 (*City Sonic*) ring out with the eulogy of chance, randomness and indeterminacy, of the shot as musical creation in the Cage conception (*Les Disques gâchent le paysage*). To be sure, from indiciality to the perceptive, from effects of time frames to matters of capturing and conserving image and sound, the analogies between the photographic and the phonographic have been regular and fertile since the 19th century (and Nadar!), but David Grubbs's book proposes a subtle and appropriate illumination which quotes the works of Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag to carry on exploring, by way of photographic ontology, the indeterminacy of John Cage's oeuvre, and the sonic images of Luc Ferrari in *Presque rien n°1* (1967-1970).
- 6 R. Murray Schafer's sonic landscape, John Cage's *Imaginary Landscape*, and Luc Ferrari's work *Presque rien n°1*, also titled *Le Lever du jour au bord de la mer*, have ecological and decidedly spatial themes, which are nowadays echoed by *in situ* environmental acoustic works, sonic geo-localizations, and the practices of *field recording* and *Soundwalks* (which are what they sound like), and their perforce landscape listening. Gilles Malatray proposes an inventory of this in his article “Ballades et autres parcours sonores urbains” in the book *City Sonic, les arts sonores dans la cité*, which lists the 12 years of art programming of the eponymous festival which, at Mons in Belgium, has been defined since its creation as a sonic circuit in the city. Malatray presents a selection of works and, in particular, the 2006 pieces by Julien Poidevin, *Géosonic Mix* (this “immersive, geo-localized sound walk [where] the sounds are automatically triggered by the position of the listeners”) and the collective MU (the “aquatic audio odyssey” of *Sound Drop, European Sound Delta* in 2008). Criss-crossing a city through sounds, just like the importance of walking and roaming in contemporary art, thus brings in a proposition where, writes Philippe Franck, “architectures are metamorphosed to create other topographies, ‘audiographies’ where the imagination and the sensibility intermingle.” Here are declined figures and notions of place, space and volume, translated into socialized, contemplative, ecological and urban sounds: that *other* history of modern, contemporary, and present-day art which the sonic arts suggest.
- 7 Experimental musical scores, telephone-object, voices, metal music and digital acoustic works conceived, to use the expression given in *City Sonic*, as “concrete utopias”, round off this publishing set of four books which contribute not only to the variety of approaches to a theoretical and critical literature of the sonic arts, but also to demonstrating that this *other* history of art is nothing less than a Borgesian projection: miniature cosmogony, endless poetic duplication of signs, and mapping of a utopia.