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Some noise on noise

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Negotiating Noise

Across Places, Spaces and Disciplines

SANNE KROGH GROTH AND JAMES G. MANSELL (EDS.)
SOUND ENVIRONMENT CENTRE | LUND UNIVERSITY



NEGOTIATING NOISE

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Across Places, Spaces and Disciplines

SANNE KROGH GROTH AND JAMES G. MANSELL (EDS.)



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Contents

Contributor Biographies	9
Introduction: Negotiating Noise Across Places, Spaces and Disciplines	15
Sanne Krogh Groth and James G. Mansell	
POSITION PAPERS	
Traffic Noise, Health and Urban Planning	37
Maria Albin	
It's Not Music, It's Noise: Negotiations and Challenges in the Explorations of the Boundaries of Noise	45
Sergio Camacho	
Deviant Media: Thinking Beyond Noise to Understand It	49
Elinor Carmi	
Noise: Five Challenges in Landscape Architecture	55
Gunnar Cerwén	
Sound Ethnography: Negotiating Noise in the Leisure Soundscape	65
Julia Chieng	
Some Noise on Noise	73
Marcel Cobussen	
Conversations on Noise	79
Sanne Krogh Groth	

Understanding Noise: A Composer's Reflection Patrick G. Hartono	85
Noise is Not Paul Hegarty	89
A Design Practice-Based Approach to Noise: Habitual Ways of Listening Marie Højlund	95
Urban Noise and the Politics of Sound Jacob Kreutzfeldt	101
Encouraging Resident-Grown Urban Sound Quality Trond Maag	107
Noise in History: Someone Else's Sound James G. Mansell	113
Understanding Noise Through Visually Impaired People Christina E. Mediastika	121
Noise in Vietnamese Cities: Urban Change and Community Awareness Thulan Nguyen	129
Noise is Matter Not in Place Sandra Lori Petersen	137
Noise in a Volcanic Breeze Gilang Damar Setiadi	143
Noise as a Musical Resource Marie Thompson	149

LISTENING ACTIVITIES

Listening in Malmö and Semenyih	153
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MANIFESTOS

Notes on Noise	171
Marie Thompson, Sandra Lori Petersen and Trond Maag	
Sounding Things Out: Sonic Parameters and Possibilities	179
Kelvin E. Y. Low, Sergio Camacho and Julia Chieng	
The Noise Spectrum	187
Maria Albin, Marie Højlund, Jacob Kreutzfeldt and James G. Mansell	
To Noise	193
Elinor Carmi, Gunnar Cerwén and Marcel Cobussen	
Future Guidelines on Noise	205
Patrick G. Hartono, Thulan Nguyen, Phyllis Toh Chze Woon and Sanne Krogh Groth	
Manifesto To Noise	217
Christina Mediatika, Paul Hegarty and Gilang Setiadi	
Bibliography	225

Some Noise on Noise

Marcel Cobussen

I am not fond of definitions; they *suggest* clarity, uniformity, generality and often even a kind of eternal value. Defining enhances and (implicitly) takes as its point of departure the idea that a clear separation is possible between inside and outside, between inclusion and exclusion: ‘noise is the other of music and silence’ is one such utterance. But what about noise music? What about so-called ‘non-harmonious sounds’, often equated with noise, that are always already a part of any music? What about ‘extra-musical sounds’, which have been integrated into musical compositions for more than a century already? And what about Cage’s remark that silence can be very loud, very noisy? Could we also reverse that idea and claim that noise can be very soft, as, for example, in the minimal sound world of the Japanese sound artist Sachiko M?¹ Of course, it is not my aim to claim that all noise is music (or silence); what I do claim, however, is that the borders between music, noise and silence are porous and that a clear separation cannot be made on the basis of the intrinsic characteristics of the ‘sounds themselves’.

In short, I am less interested in what noise *is* than in what it *does*, how it *works*. And, as such, I need to make a separation between thoughts about noise coming from sound studies, the music world, (music) philosophy, sound artists, and/or musicology on the one hand

¹ For a short impression of her work listen to her video posted at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-N2JpUSOGQw>.

and from people who are not active within these fields, on the other.²

In his famous book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* from 1977, Jacques Attali presents noise as productive force. According to Attali:

each network pushes its organization to the extreme, to the point where it creates the internal conditions for its own rupture, its own noises. What is noise to the old order, is harmony to the new: Monteverdi and Bach created noise for the polyphonic order. Webern for the tonal order. La Monte Young for the serial order. (Attali 2003, 35)

Several remarks can be made on the basis of this quote, for example that Attali introduces noise as a metaphor for disruption in general, not necessarily or directly connected to sound. Another observation could be that, for Attali, noise is a motor of progress or development. Noise is needed to break or to overcome a certain status quo; it is necessary, positive and even (historically) inevitable. A third remark could be that Attali presents noise as relative to a situation; noise has no absolute qualities, but as a transformative force it is dependent upon already existing circumstances. This last remark is echoed by Douglas Kahn, who writes: ‘we know they are noises in the first place because they exist where they shouldn’t or they don’t make sense where they should’ (Kahn 1999, 21). Both Attali and Kahn are emphasising the contextual nature of noise: noise, one could say, is sound out of place. A logical consequence of this way of thinking is that sounds do not have to be noisy, that is loud, in themselves; they can simply become qualified as noise if they occur in places where they are not supposed to be. This ‘being-out-of-place’ refers, then, to the occurrence of certain amounts of disorder, instability, the undermining of dominant organisations, disharmony, and so on.

However, when confronted or working with people who are suffering from noise pollution, often on a daily basis, I become aware that this

² Needless to say, this short text will not give a comprehensive overview of thoughts on noise from any of these fields. That would not only by far exceed the objective of this essay, but it would also do injustice to the many scholars and artists who have dealt with the issue of noise on a much deeper level than I can do here.

rather liberal view of noise as a positive force of transformation needs some nuance and modification or has to be abandoned altogether. These people live in the vicinity of an airport, busy highways, rail yards or long-term construction works; or they find themselves confronted with noisy neighbors or commercial activities in residential areas which produce irritating sounds, because of the time of day (early morning, late evening, night), the days themselves (weekends, holidays), loudness, frequencies (high, shrill sounds but also ultra-low frequencies), the regularity or irregularity of the sounds, and so on. In these cases, sounds are qualified as noise because they cause physical and/or mental problems and, in general, have a negative influence on one's health and well-being; timbre, frequency and decibels are certainly directly incurred to name and frame specific sounds as noisy. However, as Hillel Schwarz (2004) and Eveline Maris (2008) make clear, besides the mere volume or tone quality of sounds, other factors play an important role in perceiving or subsuming certain sounds under the denominator of noise: social temperaments, class background, cultural desire – all historically conditioned – play an important role in one's judgement on being exposed to sound (Schwarz 2004, 52). Maris investigated to what extent the social process between the person(s) operating the sound source and those being exposed to the sound influences the latter's evaluation of the sound, and concluded that their annoyance increases once they feel that their exposure to sound is somehow unfair and cannot be controlled (Maris 2008, 9 and 108).

Although the scholarly and artistic approach to noise seems quite far removed from the way noise is perceived and valued by people who are unwantedly exposed to it, what seems to unite the two (very heterogeneous) groups is that in both cases noise is experienced and described as that which deviates from the norm, from standards, from certain regulations, from normality. Nevertheless, one of the major challenges I face in my work is how to bring these two rather different ideas on noise together. How can I use artistic, aesthetic, philosophical and even ethical approaches to noise in my work to improve concrete problems with the perception of sounds in, for example, urban spaces, to improve people's sonic environment, to ask from policy-makers,

urban planners, city governments, architects and many others to pay attention to the sonic design of a space, indoors or outdoors, urban or rural, public or private?

So far, two strategies have proven to be helpful for me and might also illustrate in which direction my work on noise can develop. First, what I think that many people can learn from sound artists is to listen: to listen to their sonic environment, to listen to everyday sounds, to listen to sounds which are sometimes all too easily disqualified as noise – to listen attentively and without prejudices. Through sound art, people might be able to open themselves to the unfamiliar in the familiar; through soundwalks or by making recordings themselves, people might relate to their sonic environment differently, more consciously and more cautiously. As Brandon LaBelle claims, listening ‘moves beyond the surface appearance of things; to listen into the architectures, the social experiences, the ecologies, and the often quiet or non-human soundings found therein’ (LaBelle 2019, 520).

Second, although it might not immediately help people who are burdened by unbearable sounds, be they loud or otherwise intolerable, we should remember that, compared with the soundscapes of a century or more ago, we do live in relative quiet, and this is most likely to increase in the decades to come, due to, for example, silent asphalt, electric vehicles and sound insulation as well as new norms, regulations and laws such as the international soundscape standard ISO 12913-1 (<https://www.iso.org/standard/52161.html>). Although many researchers have found evidence that working in a more tranquil environment might certainly help to increase our overall health and well-being, the social aspect should not be forgotten here as well.

Perhaps we can learn something from the successful policies against smoking: in a way, they have made us less tolerant of the few smokers who are left – a development which has positive as well as negative sides to it. Some deviating, even loud, sounds every now and then cannot be avoided and can perhaps even contribute to a more heterogeneous – and therefore interesting – sonic environment.

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