

EAR | WAVE | EVENT

Issue One
Spring 2014
earwaveevent.org

Introducing *Ear | Wave | Event* BY BILL DIETZ & WOODY SULLENDER

In the distant 1990s, that dinosaur of the late twentieth century Jean Baudrillard once challenged us to “be meteorologically sensitive to stupidity.”¹ A bit more recently, Jonathan Sterne offered a much cited moniker for a particular meteorological phenomenon which to this day insists on clinging to so much thinking of the sonic - what he calls, “the audiovisual litany”:

[A]n appeal to the “phenomenological” truth about sound sets up experience as somehow outside the purview of historical analysis. This need not be so – phenomenology and the study of experience are not by definition opposed to historicism. [...] The audiovisual litany...idealizes hearing (and, by extension, speech). It alternately denigrates and elevates vision. [...] Instead of offering us an entry into the history of the senses, the audiovisual litany posits history as something that happens between the senses.²

Ear | Wave | Event is tired of hearing that music or sound is beyond language or outside meaning. *Ear | Wave | Event* can't deal with another hymn to the ethicality of hearing. *Ear | Wave | Event* will scream if another art historian reports “discovering” sound. *Ear | Wave | Event* does not consider the descriptive cataloguing of audio recordings as criticism. *Ear | Wave | Event* was founded because there is a growing community of artistic practitioners and theorists who are eager to come together and address those strains of sonic intelligence (material, intellectual, other) that are too often drowned out by the perpetually rediscovered euphoria of sound's “mystery.”

Our premiere issue might be read as a collection of attempts to theoretically frame problems of sonic thinking and articulation (Ablinger, Cimini/Sullender, Griffin, Feldman, Barrett/Lodhie) along with a battery of alternative

¹ *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (translated by Paul Patton, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 67

² *The Audible Past* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 14-16

genealogies for musical practice and thought offering ways out of what feels more and more like the dead-lock of the “sound” scene (Marble, Rosenfeld, Strakovsky, Griffin, Hennix, Ablinger). As these brackets show, both moves (critical and historical) often occur within the same texts, and are at times indistinguishable.

The reversal of sonic causality implicit in the name *Ear | Wave | Event* seeks to position the listening subject in all her affective, perceptual, conceptual, social, cognitive, and embodied psychological complexity at the center of the discussion. Our title and subtitle are also intended as an intervention into the growing debates around “the status of sound” – in particular, the problematic polarity declared between “conceptualism” and “materialism” as often associated with the work and thought of authors Seth Kim-Cohen and Christoph Cox, respectively. Though this division has recently come under increasing scrutiny³, it remains symptomatically relevant insofar as it describes the self-identifications of a great many sound practitioners. Our own proposition for countering what Amy Cimini diagnoses as the latent neo-Cartesianism surrounding such discussions is for the actualization of Roland Barthes’ concept of “sensuous intelligibility”⁴: an entanglement of “mind” and “body” in the wake of the twentieth century avant-garde that is at once specific to sound (respecting the physiological particularity of audition as a sensory modality), but without any claim to that specificity’s *intrinsic* value.

New York City’s “phenomenological” summer of 2013 (James Turrell at the Guggenheim, Robert Irwin at the Whitney, “Sound Art” at MoMA, “sound-based works” at Lisa Cooley) is an instructive example here. Robert Irwin’s *Scrim veil—Black rectangle—Natural light*, *Whitney Museum of American*

³ See, for example, Brian Kane’s excellent, “Musicophobia, Sound Art and the Demands of Art Theory” (nonsite.org, Issue #8, <http://nonsite.org/article/musicophobia-or-sound-art-and-the-demands-of-art-theory>)

⁴ “Beethoven’s deafness designates the *lack* where all signification is lodged: it appeals to a music not abstract or interior, but endowed, one might say, with sensuous intelligibility, with an intelligibility somehow perceptible to the senses. This category is specifically revolutionary, inconceivable in terms of the old aesthetics, the oeuvre which accepts it cannot be received according to pure sensuality, which is always cultural, nor according to an intelligible order which would be that of (rhetorical or thematic) development; without it, neither the modern text nor contemporary music can be accepted.” From “Musica Practica,” in *The Responsibility of Forms* (translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), p. 264-265.

Art, New York (1977) offers a prime example of the hallucinatory “self-perception” that Peter Ablinger insists upon in his contribution, “Cézanne and Music.” Ablinger’s goes on, however, to make a critical distinction: “It became obvious that ‘immediacy’ coincides entirely with mediation – [...] that immediacy is a cultural product, [...] an illusion!” Ablinger’s recognition of sensorial mediation (cultural, historical, mechanical) very precisely “offer[s] us an entry into the history of the senses” in the sense which Sterne opposes to his “litany.” This move in contradistinction to what Hal Foster calls the “techno-aesthetic sublime”⁵ is further in keeping with Foster as the remedy to spectacular phenomenology is *not* polar reversal ‘back’ to a form of disembodied conceptualism, but toward an account of artistic work which insists on historical and corporeal contingency – work which transgresses distinctions between the intellectual, experiential, and perceptual. Two accounts of how this problem might be mapped onto last year’s parallel New York sound offerings appear in the contributions by Jessica Feldman and Doug Barrett/Lindsey Lodhie.

More broadly, we might present the sonic problem thus: what if Western music history (and *sine qua non* the concept of the musical work as it also lingers in the sonic arts at large) has always already been “non-cochlear?” Or put another way: if the artistic work in the history of Western visual art was tied to (and then variously divorced from) arrangements of physical substance (objecthood), in historical music, work status was conferred via constellations of instituting practices – which for the listener were largely cognitive (aural cues for beginnings and ends, recognition of structures of repetition, reference to mnemonic conventions for affective response, patterns of enforcement). The implications of this articulation are as far-reaching as they seem undigested.⁶ Understood thus, wouldn’t sound discourse be poised to offer a unique contribution to debates on immaterial economies in both the art world and beyond? Might not historical varieties of asignifying institutionalization specific to the sonic be of critical interest to thinking affect and the semiotic? These are precisely the kind of questions we mean when we assert our non-prejudicial commitment to the particularity of a sensory modality.

⁵ In *The Art-Architecture Complex* (New York: Verso Press, 2011), p. 286.

⁶ E.g.: the naïve gesture characterizing a recent self-proclaimed “conceptual turn” among certain sonic artists consists in large part of the literalist importation of tropes from historical visual Conceptual Art into the sonic realm, as though this might somehow produce an equivalent, belated effect.

Ear | Wave | Event is pleased to welcome submissions from all sonic walks of life, but says FUCK YOU to “experimental” as stylistic genre or niche.

We dedicate this first issue to the memory of Robert Ashley.

But around 1970 there was a palpable turn toward conservatism in every aspect of American life and, predictably, the artist led the way... Composers renounced the 'theater' of music of the nineteen-sixties. Steve Reich wrote a book saying as much, 'We have to get back to reality.' That meant getting back to the five-line staff and what it meant. And it meant getting back to 'recitals.'

So, we still have recital halls. More, in fact. The postwar boom in higher education produced hundreds, maybe thousands, of all-purpose recital halls in new colleges and universities.

The Law is expressed in the architecture of the culture.
It could be different.⁷

⁷ “We need more *music*: Opera versus Recital,” in *Outside of Time: Ideas about Music* (Cologne: MusikTexte, 2009), p. 146-148