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# Field Recording, Sound Art and Objecthood

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**The commercially available field recordings of Francisco López and Toshiya Tsunoda are difficult to classify. These field recordings are not site specific in the conventional sense because they are not tied to a particular architectural or listening space. Nor can field recordings be categorised as just another subgenre of experimental electronic music. Whereas in *musique concrète* and acousmatic music, sounds are organised according to musical or thematic parameters, López's and Tsunoda's field recording sounds are subjected to minimal editing and processing, and are organised according to the innate traits of the sounds themselves.**

**It would be insufficient, however, to offer the usual conciliatory conclusion that López's and Tsunoda's recordings straddle the sound art/music divide by possessing qualities of both. This article argues that these field recordings can best be understood in relation to the visual arts concept of objecthood, Michael Fried's term for deciphering minimalist sculpture of the late 1960s. Objecthood explains how these field recordings use appropriated sounds that are nonetheless treated as non-referential, autonomous materials. This strategy posits its own type of site specificity that purports to be acultural and ahistorical, yet is nevertheless steeped in culture and history.**

In his recent monograph, Alan Licht complains that the term sound art has become a fashionable affectation for experimental musicians who want to 'play the art card' (Licht 2007: 210–11). For Licht, sound art and music cannot be regarded as interchangeable terms because of two critical distinctions: music is heard in performance venues while sound art is heard in exhibition spaces, and music is narrative while sound art is immersive.

At first blush, this sort of insistence on the boundaries between two art forms whose own definitions are murky might seem like quibbling. There is also the risk of overgeneralisation: not all music is narrative in the sense that Licht means of having materials that develop and transform through the course of a work. But Licht's desire to explain what makes sound art unique is nonetheless understandable. The prevalent definitions of sound installations and sound art (Cox and Warner 2004; Davis 2003; Licht 2007; LaBelle 2006) assert that this difference lies in 'site specificity', meaning that sounds are constructed to interact with the locations where they are heard. Through this emphasis on location, site-specific art works expose the artificial demarcation between themselves and the venues in which they

are encountered, venues that, according to the logic of autonomous art, are meant to be invisible and thus exempt from critical examination. This interaction with location could be acoustical, as in enlisting the particular spatial characteristics of an environment (see works by Max Neuhaus), or it could be thematic, as in incorporating aspects of a particular location's history, culture or ecology (see works by Hildegard Westerkamp). In both scenarios, site specificity critiques the boundaries that have traditionally separated the art work from the outside world. As such, sound art encompasses not only sounds but the architectural and acoustical properties that shape and nurture them, as well as the larger societies that generate them.

While it is certainly true that many works of sound art are site specific in the sense outlined above, not all are. In this article, I want to consider field recordings by two people frequently described as sound artists, Francisco López and Toshiya Tsunoda. Although López and Tsunoda have done extensive work with site-specific installations, the recordings I interrogate here (Tsunoda's *Scenery of Decalomania* (2003) and *Ridge of Undulation* (2005), and López's *La Selva* (1998), *Buildings [New York]* (2001), and *Wind [Patagonia]* (2007)) are commercially available, inherently mobile, and thus detached from any particular venue or aural architecture. They can be heard whenever and wherever the listener likes, and seem best suited to the interior experience of headphone listening. In other words, they are not site specific in the typical sense. Yet they seem equally ill-served by the moniker of music. Sparse and long-lasting, these field recordings display little of the editing or compositional intervention that categorise much *musique concrète* and acousmatic music. López's and Tsunoda's works are found objects of long duration and minute detail, studied explorations of natural phenomena whose status as aesthetic objects is nonetheless patent.

How, then, can these field recordings be considered site-specific sound art? One answer is to interrogate one of the primary criteria of site-specific art, that its materials foreground culture and history. I propose a more inclusive definition, namely that the boundaries that separate the work from the outside world are blurry. In other words, we can understand site-specific sound art as any art that *in some manner* (but not necessarily through the lens of culture) addresses the

topics of site and location. A great deal of site-specific art launches the work into the outside world, while also drawing the outside world into the art work through explicit appeals to social issues. In López's and Tsunoda's field recordings, however, these same boundaries are semi-permeable: the art work leaves the exhibit space to inhabit the world, but the world does not impinge on the art work's self-contained materials, which the artists treat as self-referential, autonomous and primary.

To elaborate this position, I want to compare Tsunoda's and López's field recordings with minimalist visual art that emerged during the 1960s. For both its supporters and detractors, minimalist works did not look or behave like either painting or sculpture, and assailed the boundaries separating the art work from the world around it. I argue in this article that López's and Tsunoda's field recordings exhibit a quality first applied to minimalist works – objecthood – whereby materials refuse to be encased within a frame and instead confront the observer as integral objects. Objecthood is important to larger reflections of site specificity because it provides a vocabulary for discussing works whose relationship to a particular location is not based on the usual concerns of social relevance. In particular, objecthood is pertinent because it clarifies some artists' efforts to appropriate outside elements as autonomous objects free of residual associations.

## 1. THE RECORDINGS

Since the late 1980s, Toshiya Tsunoda has made field recordings that capture the collisions and interactions of vibrations. He works mostly in and around his hometown of Yokohama, Japan, and has recorded sounds both large (ferries as they shuttle across harbours) and small (birdsongs as heard through the tailpipe of an automobile) in scale. During the 1990s, Tsunoda was affiliated with WrK, a collective of artists who focused on discovering latent materials within natural processes and cultural formalities. This tenure with WrK honed Tsunoda's talent for unearthing the aesthetic out of the mundane. His two recent releases, *Scenery of Decalomania* (2003) and *Ridge of Undulation* (2005), contain largely anonymous sounds: the wind as it blows through a metal railing; low resonances as heard through very large pipes; waves gently breaking on beaches covered with coarse sand and stones, and so on. His choices tend towards sounds that invite treatment as raw materials:

I don't have a decisive reason for choosing a location, but rather, it's simply that places I know well have a sense of familiarity. However, it must be a location without any sort of special characteristics, such as a fishing port, warehouse, etc. (Tsunoda 2007: 86)

Locations 'without any sort of special characteristics' yield sounds that are anonymous and become abstract after only a few moments. The track 'Wind Whistling' from *Scenery of Decalomania* is a seven-minute recording of the wind blowing through the rails of a metal footbridge. Changes in wind intensity produce what sounds like a wandering atonal melody with occasional dyads and triads. The duration of the track is long enough to lull any initial curiosity about the way in which these sounds are produced. The hermetic melody is offset at times by intrusions from the outside world: a ferry horn, a distant airplane engine. These brief incidents draw attention to the placement of the microphone (and, by extension, listener) in relation to the wind sounds: the microphone must be close to the railing, very close, as the outside world seems very far away.

Tsunoda's explanation of such moments is steeped in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, who argues that there is no perception separate of bodily perception: the body is thus 'our means of communication with [the world], to the world no longer conceived as a collection of determinate objects, but as the horizon latent in all our experience and itself ever-present and anterior to every determining thought' (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 106). According to Tsunoda, we perceive events with an awareness of how those events interact with our bodies:

The objects which lead my work are taken from my fieldwork and everyday life, and I treat them as abstract, artificial models. From an objective, scientific viewpoint, there is no individual perspective/point of view by the observer. (Tsunoda 2007: 86)

Tsunoda is forthcoming about the origins of his sounds; his titles describe them in general and sometimes even specific terms ('Filmy Feedback', 'Curved Pipe', 'At Stern, Tokyo Bay, 11 December 1997', etc.), and his liner notes provide even more information, notably the claim that Tsunoda does not edit or process any of his materials ('I do not process any of my recorded material', Haynes 2005), limiting his intervention to the choice and placement of microphones. It is unclear why Tsunoda makes this statement given that his recordings do, in fact, display some signs of processing (the two anonymous reviewers for this article both felt that Tsunoda had indeed subjected his materials to some sort of processing). What is clear is that these materials are ultimately treated as integral materials, and, for the most part, if editing or processing have taken place they are not manifest.

Despite the transparency with which he reveals his sources, Tsunoda treats the provenance of sounds as purely incidental:

Hearing an incident as music is a matter of cultural backgrounds. That's also interesting but I never expect on it [sic]. In my CD on SIRR, there's a moment where a

sound of trumpet practicing comes in at the warehouse, but that is not on purpose. It was recorded in an echoing environment like a cliff, and I think it gave good accent. My aim isn't to recreate the places exactly but if you put effects on, it would reduce the meanings of the interests in physical vibrations. (Plop 2007)

As for my field recording, I do not intend to recreate the atmosphere of a location; and I am not interested in recording special situations of historical incidents. [...] I do not record for the sake of making music or simply discovering interesting acoustics. I am also not interested in analysing these sounds scientifically. (Haynes 2005)

Among Francisco López's over two hundred releases are numerous works utilising field recordings. I focus here on the trilogy comprising three albums: *La Selva* (1998), containing sounds of a rain forest in Costa Rica; *Buildings [New York]* (2001), containing sounds of offices, apartments and studios in Manhattan and Brooklyn; and *Wind [Patagonia]* (2007), containing sounds of the wind blowing through open spaces in southern Argentina. Unlike many of López's works, which are referred to simply as 'Untitled' and a numeral, this trilogy provides explicit information concerning sound origins. All three works feature copious liner notes containing photographs of the locations as well as precise timings for each event within the recording. For example, *Buildings [New York]* (2001) captures the repetitive, mechanised sounds of air conditioners, computers and boilers. The recording features ten different building environments, each of which plays for a few minutes before fading into the next. By following along with the liner notes, the listener can know at any moment where and when a particular section was recorded. Despite this wealth of detail, however, López discourages attention to the sources of sound (i.e., causal listening). In his preface for *Buildings [New York]*, López writes:

You might want to know about the background philosophy behind this work and about its specific spatial-temporal 'reality'. I didn't want to omit these referential levels, because they irremediably exist and I have indeed dealt with them. But I also wanted to emphatically give you the opportunity to skip them, to have them in your hands and decide purposefully not to access them. My recommendation is – having the knowledge of their existence – to keep them closed. This is not a game or a trick; it is a confrontation with the relational frameworks that blur our experience of the essential. (López 2001)

## 2. OBJECTHOOD

In the following section, I introduce objecthood, a category describing what were perceived as non-referential materials in 1960s minimalist sculpture. This discussion is relevant to the field recordings studied here because minimalist artists also appropriated objects

from the outside world, and yet also asserted that these objects could be perceived as non-referential and viewed as inherent to the art work. Objecthood also provides an alternative framework for site specificity that can, in turn, explain how Tsunoda's and López's field recordings can also be considered site-specific sound art.

### 2.1. Reduced listening and objecthood

The approaches outlined by López and Tsunoda are clearly indebted to Pierre Schaeffer's reduced listening (*l'écoute réduite*) which has been discussed extensively elsewhere (Chion 1983; Emmerson 2007; Kane 2007), so I summarise only the most pertinent passages here. Schaeffer describes reduced listening as the intention to listen only to the sound object (*l'objet sonore*), Schaeffer's term for sounds divorced from their source, medium and notation.<sup>1</sup> Reduced listening does not come easily; listeners are naturally inclined to hear sounds either for their informational value (i.e., where they come from, how they are produced) or for their signification (i.e., what they mean). Reduced listening thus entails a phenomenological reduction, a bracketing out of information in order to arrive at an essential sound, or sound before associations have been ascribed to it. With practice, listeners can develop the discipline necessary to free themselves from the habits of acculturated listening.<sup>2</sup>

Of the works considered here, Tsunoda's encourage a modified form of reduced listening, not through hiding the origins of his sounds, but through acknowledging them in an understated manner. The titles of tracks on *Scenery of Decalomania* are indicative of this approach because they provide less information about the specifics of the recordings than do the titles of the later album *Ridge of Undulation*. 'Unstable Contact', the opening track on *Scenery*,

<sup>1</sup>Schaeffer 1966: 268: 'Cette intention de n'écouter que l'objet sonore, nous l'appelons, *l'écoute réduite*.'

<sup>2</sup>Schaeffer 1966: 270: 'Avant qu'un nouvel entraînement me soit possible et que puisse s'élaborer un autre système de références, approprié à l'objet sonore cette fois, je devrai *me libérer du conditionnement* créé par mes habitudes antérieures, passer par l'épreuve de l'*epoché*. Il ne s'agit nullement d'un retour à la nature. Rien ne nous est plus naturel que d'obéir à un conditionnement. Il s'agit d'un effort *anti-naturel* pour apercevoir ce qui, précédemment, déterminait la conscience à son insu.', and 271: 'Si nous écartons vigoureusement tout cela – et quelle application il y faut, quels exercices répétés, quelle patience et quelle nouvelle rigueur! – pouvons-nous, nous délivrant du banal, «chassant le naturel» aussi bien que le culturel, trouver un autre niveau, un authentique *objet sonore*, fruit de l'*epoché*, qui serait si possible accessible à tout homme écoutant? Nous avons déjà esquissé cette discipline d'écoute, et le schéma auquel elle correspond, en concluant au § 8.9 le livre II. Disons aussitôt que nous ne pouvons pas vider si vite ni si complètement notre conscience de ses contenus habituels, de ses rejets automatiques à des indices ou des valeurs qui orienteront toujours les perceptions de chacun. Mais il est possible que peu à peu ces différences s'estompent, et que chacun entende l'objet sonore, sinon comme son voisin, du moins dans le même sens que lui, avec la même visée. [...] *L'objet sonore est à la rencontre d'une action acoustique et d'une intention d'écoute*.'

makes manifest that the sounds therein are of some sort of electrical signal. But with a duration of over seventeen minutes, the listener's curiosity about how that unstable contact is produced is gradually worn down. These repetitive sounds that do not evolve much over the course of the track instil a sort of semantic fatigue so that, eventually, they seem cut adrift from the source origins announced in their titles.

López's proposed reduced listening poses more challenges to the listener. He goes to great pains to document his sources, yet he then asks listeners to choose not to attend to this information, recalling Schaeffer's descriptions of reduced listening as a 'discipline' and an 'intention of listening' that must be practised in order to overcome our natural tendencies towards causal listening. As with Schaeffer's original formulation of reduced listening, López's ambivalent stance toward sound identification may require from the listener a certain indulgence in order to appreciate the intention behind López's directives, even though the execution of his premise actually elicits causal listening. And while López is also savvy enough to acknowledge the cultural character of the sounds he uses...

My music is loaded with a multitude of cultural references, from the soundtrack of 'Eraserhead' to some sound approaches in Buddhism. Whether or not these are apparent is more a question of perception than of explicit explanation. What is essential to it, though, is the fact that I don't attach myself to any specific system of aesthetic, conceptual or spiritual beliefs. I think its universal reach potential is dependent upon the individual – more than social or cultural – attitudes concerning listening and creation. (López 2000)

...he feels strongly that musical materials should not be reduced to their associative properties:

There can only be a documentary or communicative reason to keep the cause-object relationship in the work with soundscapes, never an artistic/musical one. Actually, I am convinced that the more this relationship is kept, the less musical the work will be (which is rooted in my belief that the idea of absolute music and that of *objet sonore* are among the most relevant and revolutionary in the history of music). [...] A musical composition (no matter whether based on soundscapes or not) must be a free action in the sense of not having to refuse any extraction of elements from reality and also in the sense of having the full right to be self-referential, not being subjected to a pragmatic goal such as a supposed, unjustified re-integration of the listener with the environment. (López 1997)

The universal qualities to which López refers are those qualities that remain *after* sounds' cultural references have been bracketed out, resembling what in Schaeffer's reduced listening is the repression of the information-gathering and meaning-gathering listening modes, *écouter* and *comprendre* (Kane 2007: 18).

A few years after Schaeffer theorised reduced listening, another form of perceptual reduction began to take root in minimalist visual arts, among whose participants included Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Tony Smith. A classic example of minimalist art is Smith's sculpture *Die* (1962), a massive, unadorned six-foot metal cube. What characterises minimalist sculpture is the inclusion of voluminous, solid objects such as cubes, steel girders and two-by-fours, as well as the dissolving of the traditional frames and boundaries separating art works from the outside world. Minimalism was met with a trenchant critique in Michael Fried's 1967 essay 'Art and Objecthood', which condemns minimalist (or what Fried calls 'literalist') sculpture. For Fried, minimalist sculpture functions as theatre, an experience that simultaneously confronts and isolates the viewer. Minimalist sculpture is not art because it lacks a frame that separates the art work from the viewer. Its incorporation of everyday objects creates the sense of a living presence that occupies the same space as the viewer. At stake in minimalist sculpture is a shift in ontology, away from art that identifies itself explicitly as art and towards an objecthood that at times makes serious claims for its status as non-art. What galls Fried is the presence of objects that 'extort [...] a special complicity [...] from the beholder' (Fried 1967: 155). Such objects demand 'that the beholder take [them] into account' *as* objects rather than as art works, which for Fried is an unforgivable lapse in a work of art because it demands inordinate self-reflection on the part of the beholder.

Objecthood and reduced listening bear striking similarities to one another. Fried's concept of objecthood entails a bracketing out of the external associations of materials found in minimalist art. As Fried asserts, when objecthood is at play, materials 'do not represent, signify, or allude to anything; they are what they are and nothing more' (Fried 1967: 165). This suppression of the provenance of materials constituted a rebellion against the use of illusion in Western visual arts, the use of frames and boundaries to keep the art work separate from the space of the viewer (Foster, Krauss, Bois and Buchloh 2004: 493). Minimalism was the first attack on illusion because it brought elements of the outside world back into the art work, yet it still operated with the faith that the resulting art work could still maintain its autonomy and abstraction (Foster *et al.* 2004: 495). The site-specific art movements that followed minimalism (such as land art and environmental art) took the dismantling of illusion one step further by integrating the art work in the very sites and spaces where it was displayed. Unconventional spaces and places, from city sidewalks and open fields to the body of the artist, replaced the gallery and museum as the locations for art consumption. These sites empowered artists to address social issues, from



environmental deterioration and poverty to HIV/AIDS, that were previously shunned in art (Kwon 2002). Later forms of site-specific art can thus be understood as acknowledgements of the historical and cultural character of appropriated materials. Minimalism emerges in retrospect as an intermediary step in which it was thought possible to appropriate outside objects while bracketing out their associations in a phenomenological reduction similar to that in reduced listening.

The intrinsic flaw of reduced listening as Schaeffer conceptualised it is that it assumes that sound has an *a priori* content that is separate and distinct from any cultural or historical associations it might have subsequently acquired. This assertion is problematic on both practical and theoretical counts. Even with the concerted effort that Schaeffer called for, listeners have difficulty hearing sounds divorced from their associations and, to the contrary, acousmatic situations discourage rather than foster reduced listening (Chion 1990: 32). Reduced listening also focuses so much attention on minute details of sound that it can foster perceptual distortions (Smalley 1997). More fundamentally, reduced listening perpetuates the fallacy that there is one universal listening experience untouched by culture. As Kane and Windsor have shown, Adorno forcibly attacked this position, arguing that sound is always a socially inscribed phenomenon (Kane 2007: 21; Windsor 1996: 143–4). Likewise, the conditions that gave rise to objecthood in minimalist sculpture presupposed an untenable disregard for culture. Robert Fink calls out minimalist apologetics for insisting on the movement's detachment from worldly concerns (Fink 2005). Reduced listening and objecthood both call on the observer to accept materials uncritically, to reflect only on their role within the art work rather than within the world at large. As Kane points out, this uncritical acceptance is inherent to the phenomenological method itself, which secures 'an *a priori* ontological foundation, but the supposed benefits of such a foundation are attained at the expense of historically sedimented "residual significance"' (Kane 2007: 22).

## 2.2. Objecthood and site specificity

Objecthood provides a way of circumventing a potential stumbling block in the reception of field recordings, their mobility and detachment from any particular site of listening. Anticipating Licht's insistence on the site specificity of sound art, Hegarty writes that sound art

either has to be an installation where the sound occupies a certain space (or exceeds it) or a performance. Transportable works can be sound art (particularly if we take self-description as a useful marker), if they are headphone pieces that 'guide' you around a town aurally (Hildegard Westerkamp, Janet Cardiff) or maybe set up

an environment, through site-specific sound recordings, other than the one you are in (Richard Long, Chris Watson), even if only listening on headphones in the gallery. A CD of sound art that gets played at home seems less fully part of sound art – despite the growth of field recordings, ambiances, and recordings of installations. (Hegarty 2007: 171)

One might quip that, under Hegarty's criteria, all that is necessary for a work to be counted as sound art is a stereo set up in an exhibition space; playing a recording in a gallery of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, something otherwise universally agreed to be music, could therefore be considered sound art. This is a flippant joke, but Hegarty in fact discusses a very similar installation by Janet Cardiff, her 'Forty-Part Motet' in which sixteenth-century composer Thomas Tallis' 'Spem in alium numquam habui' is played back with forty speakers, each transmitting the voice of an individual singer. As observers walk through the installation, their perception of the piece changes according to which speaker they hear most closely. The resulting effect is of both the totality of the Tallis work and the ways in which a single singer contributes to the whole of the listening experience.

Cardiff is one of the most prominent sound installation artists active today, and there is (to my knowledge) no debate as to whether 'Forty-Part Motet' counts as sound art.<sup>3</sup> This is fine, and I agree with Licht and Hegarty that the category of sound art is more meaningful if it is distinct from the category of music. But if works like Cardiff's 'Forty-Part Motet' are accepted as sound art on the basis of their literal anchoring in a physical location (since the material of this work is unoriginal and firmly established as music), would it not be fair to take into account works that exist conversely as being sound art entirely on account of material, in the absence of such anchoring? Is site specificity only determined by physical placement, or can it also be invoked through materials?

To answer these questions, consider that in Fried's formulation of objecthood (a formulation that, to recall, appeared a few years before the rise of site-specific art), he seizes upon another undesirable trait of minimalist sculpture, its cultivation of *presence* at the expense of *presentness*. Presence coincides with theatricality, which Fried says:

confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of *time*; or as though the sense which, at bottom, theatre addresses is a sense of temporality, of time both passing and to come,

<sup>3</sup>Cardiff refers to her work as sound 'installations' rather than sound 'art', a designation that underscores her interest in the relationship of the perceiver's body to the work. This specification notwithstanding, Cardiff's output is routinely mentioned in inventories of sound art.

*simultaneously approaching and receding*, as if apprehended in an infinite perspective [...]. (Fried 1967: 167; his emphasis)

That is, minimalist art asserts itself physically such that the observer is forced to contend with it as a corporeal presence rather than as simply an art work removed from the sphere of the observer (Davis 2003: 208–10). In other words, the boundaries between the art work and the outside world are breached. Fried contrasts minimalism's presence with modernism's 'presentness', which for him is inherently better because '*at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest*' (Fried 1967: 167; his emphasis). A work that exhibits presentness is instantaneously manifest, while a work that lacks presentness requires that the observer absorb it from different perspectives over time. Presentness takes the beholder out of the work, while presence necessitates the physical presence of the beholder.

Admittedly, both presentness and presence would be elusive for any recorded work, the former because recordings unfold over time and thus cannot be apprehended in a single moment, the latter because the listener is aware that he or she can never truly be in the presence of the event because it has already happened in the past. Nonetheless, Tsunoda's and López's explanations of their field recordings resonate with this idea of presence, and thus suggest an alternative mode of site specificity. As stated above, Tsunoda distinguishes between the ideal of objective perception (an ideal because it is, unrealistically, the same for everyone) and the lived experience of perception, which entails an awareness of the listener's body in relation to sounds. Because Tsunoda's recordings capture sounds that are often so unusual and that require unusual microphone placement, they draw heightened attention to the placement of the listener's body in relation to the sounds. 'Curved Pipe' (*Scenery of Decalcomania*), for instance, contains drones captured near the opening of a pipe. The track encourages the listener to imagine hearing these same sounds directly, even if this would require the impossible situation of fitting into a pipe. López's appeals for reduced listening also downplay the importance of objective knowledge about sounds in favour of an undetermined, individual engagement with sounds as standalone objects. The textures of his sounds in *La Selva*, for instance, are so rich and multilevelled, from close-by frogs to distant birds, that the listener has a strong sense of the breadth of the sonic environment. So even when the listener can successfully disregard the origins of sounds, their placement within the stereophonic field conveys the sense of a large, voluminous space into which the listener's body has been placed. Thus while these recordings are in reality mobile and untethered, they intimate that the listener is in a specific location in close proximity to the sounds.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have emphasised the intended effects of reduced listening and objecthood. Tsunoda and López may strive for non-referential art, but this certainly does not mean that they succeed in that effort. Reduced listening and objecthood are embedded in culture and history, particularly the discourses concerning phenomenology, so any claims that these practices stand outside of history or signification are themselves socially significant and thus warrant critical reflection. This having been said, one justification for adopting objecthood as an analytic tool is that objecthood is also discernable in other strains of contemporary electronic music. Many electronica artists feel that the sounds they employ do not (or should not) convey meaning as conventional musical materials do. For example, the statements of some microsound artists suggest that they regard their sounds more as basic materials than as musically significant units. Richard Chartier, a sound artist and co-founder of the LINE subsidiary of the label 12k, says:

The advent of digital audio has greatly increased what composers can do in terms of using the aspect of silence as a compositional element. Where it really is silent, not an analog silence that has that hiss. With digital silence, there's nothing. An absolute zero – no code. My work is really a process of removal. [...] That's what I like about working with sound as opposed to paint and canvas: especially working on a computer, you can take away sound until there's really nothing left. (Boon 2002)

Kim Cascone writes:

Many glitch pieces reflect a stripped-down, anechoic, atomic use of sound, and they typically last from one to three minutes. [...] This is a clear indication that contemporary computer music has become fragmented, it is composed of stratified layers that intermingle and defer meaning until the listener takes an active role in the production of meaning. (Cascone 2000: 17)

Electronic musician and music critic Philip Sherburne writes of the glitch sounds in 12k releases:

notes, pulses, and textures bear no immediate relation to the world around them, to a language of melody or tonal narrative, but in their careful melding of pulse and grain [...]. (Sherburne 2002: 171)

The common thread in these statements is an attention to the material qualities of sound and silence. Chartier's silence is not the same as the pregnant silences in Cage's music, full of ambient, neglected sound, but is rather completely blank, empty space. Cascone views microsound processes as methods of 'deferring' or deflecting meaning. Sherburne most clearly resonates with objecthood with his statement that sounds bear 'no immediate relation' to the outside world. For these three writers, sounds function less as placeholders for meaning than as blank objects

that can be added to or removed from the texture of a work.

Conceptualisations of sound as blank, meaningless objects are deserving of continued study, especially since so much of the scholarship devoted to electronic and electroacoustic music theorises the communicative abilities of music and sound (Emmerson 2007; Smalley 1996; Wishart 1986). While many electronic works clearly do work with the perceived associations and significance of sound, there is a growing body of electronic works that assume an antithetical approach towards sound. Whether we agree or not that sound can defer or evade meaning, objecthood thus emerges as a means of articulating this desire to discard the accrued associations of sounds, no matter how impossible this desire might prove to be.

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