Sonic Practice as Research: The Problem of Aesthetics

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What might the work of art and the practice of art offer us in terms of a cognitive enterprise rather than merely aesthetic contemplation? One answer might be that works of art have the capacity to offer their audience a shift in perspective, and that certain practices of art enable the engagement in a kind of research that begins from a radically different point of departure than scientific methodologies. In this sense, certain practices of art and the philosophical discipline of phenomenology share a common function: they wish to shift sensate attention away from what phenomenology calls the *natural standpoint*, which, in a rather simplified sense, refers to a perspective that is caught up in the obvious, or taken-for-granted beliefs of 'common sense.'

Historically, the most developed crossover between art and phenomenology has arguably occurred in the realm of music and sound. As Don Ihde says: 'the examination of sound begins with a phenomenology' (17). Nowhere has the proximity between phenomenology and the investigation of sounds been greater than in the 'sonic research' of Pierre Schaeffer, beginning in the 1950s in France with his *musique concrète*. Essentially, the program of sonic research seeks to investigate the nature of sound from a perspective that is free from cultural prejudices, and free from the domination of epistemological schemas formulated along the lines of visual perception. Its aim is to discover the universal basis of musicality from an investigation into sonority. Similar to the methodology of the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, sonic research demands the uptake of a position that is free from all prejudices. Such prejudices include pre-existing assumptions (both formal and informal), systems of values (cultural, aesthetic, religious) and beliefs. An investigative starting point free of such prejudices is said to be *presuppositionless*.

Certainly Schaeffer's project has opened up radically new approaches to the composition of music. But perhaps more importantly, it provides us with an important model for *practice-as-research*, where a *practice*, involving experimentation with sounds, leads, through analysis, to

knowledge; and where *research* into sounds informs musical practice. What this paper takes issue with, however, is Schaeffer's objective to discover a universal musicality, and more specifically his claim that the investigation of sonic phenomena in sonic research constitutes a presuppositionless methodology (if indeed such a goal were at all possible).[i] This leads me to reject the approach of much recent 'sound theory'—which is often a blend of naïve phenomenology, empiricism, and aesthetics—in favour of the more sophisticated phenomenological directions typified by authors such as Ihde and Frances Dyson. At the same time, I find myself in agreement with criticisms of the phenomenological direction formulated by theorists such as Brandon LaBelle and Seth Kim-Cohen. However, I stop short of a complete rejection of the phenomenological approach (Cf. Kim-Cohen). The intent here is not to critically dismiss sonic research but to radicalise its phenomenological basis in order to open up its possibilities and point to avenues of further development. Thus, this paper concentrates on what has been largely absent from much of the theoretical work under discussion: the problem of aesthetic judgment—as constituting a presupposition—in both phenomenology and sonic research.

Sound and Vision

I will begin by examining one of the fundamental problems that sonic research seeks to address. Within the metaphysical tradition, since Plato, sound has often been regarded as a deficient mode of being. In contrast to the visual and tactile thing, sound has been historically cast as secondary and derivative, due to its invisible, ephemeral and non-enduring nature. Consequently, sound has traditionally been excluded from what counts as knowledge and from what are thought of as real objects of knowledge: those that can be seen and touched. As Frances Dyson observes, for Plato, 'immateriality, invisibility, and ephemerality become ontological orphans' and what develops is 'an epistemology where objects of knowledge are ideal, subsistent, immaterial forms that embody eternal order, intelligibility, and meaning' (*Sounding New Media* 21). With the development of this metaphysical ocularcentrism, sound comes to be understood as an attribute or quality of a thing, rather than as constituting a certain idea of thingness in itself. The exception, for Plato, is of course the voice, which, being closest to the living breath (*pneuma*) of the soul—because of its immediacy, directness, and plenitude—assumes primacy over the (more material) written word. Dyson proposes that the voice, however, also suffers a process of 'abstraction and desonorisation' (*Sounding New Media* 21). The 'grain' of the voice recedes to the background and the ideal content of a subject's meaning-intention, as a silent inner voice, occupies the central ground of metaphysical epistemology. Dyson's critique of visualism is heavily indebted to Don Ihde, who argues that the latent visualist tradition of philosophy consists of 'at least two interwoven factors' (6). According to Ihde, these are: reduction *to* vision, where knowing is identified with seeing and images and with the corresponding metaphorics of light and clarity; and reduction *of* vision, where the visual itself is

reduced, and what is regarded as 'real' is thought (for example, in the work of Descartes) in terms of an abstract extended object, as representation in the mind.

Dyson recognises the possibility for a kind of sonic thinking that, based on a-specular, aural (rather than visual) metaphors, would have the potential to 'resist philosophical interrogation' and to rhetorically contribute to 'rendering the cracks in Western metaphysics more apparent' ('Transmitter Bodies' 14). Dyson suggests that the otherness of the body and the otherness of aurality 'both resist the categorical imperatives of Western epistemology, both refuse the boundaries and divisions, the subject-object dichotomies, the ontological identities *that* epistemology seeks to impose' (14). The phenomenon of sound, having no discreet identity, consisting of flows that have no edges, seems to promise a rather different phenomenological starting point than visually apprehended objects; one which would appear to resist the metaphysical conception of objectification.

ACOUSMATIC LISTENING

If Schaeffer's phenomenological sonic research constitutes a form of creative practice-as-research, what would be its potential for discovering, as Ihde puts it, 'material for a recovery of the richness of primary experience that is now forgotten or covered over in the too tightly interpreted visualist traditions' (13)? In other words, in what ways might it seek to displace an epistemology that is primarily based upon visual perception? The primary procedure for the elimination of visual bias in sonic research is Schaeffer's conception of 'acousmatic listening,' which has its origin in his insistence that to objectively evaluate a given sound, one must disregard the existence of its source, since identification with the source would carry visualist presuppositions. Schaeffer's term *acousmatic* derives from Pythagoras's pedagogical requirement that initiates receive his teachings through acoustic means only; their teacher visually obscured behind a screen or curtain. These pupils were termed *akousmatikoi*. The acousmatic tradition philosophically seeks to overturn the traditional ontological hierarchy in which the visual faculty is privileged over the aural faculty, and restore to listening a sense of the unique existence of sound as phenomena that is not governed by, and subsumed under, the legislation of visual objects. Since the visual-material object or phenomenon is most usually considered the originating source or cause of the sound event, Schaeffer insists on a listening (and compositional) practice that would actively obscure any cause-effect relation of the visual-material object and the produced sound. In *musique concrète*, a sound is thus isolated from its world, and with this transition becomes 'for itself'; in Schaeffer's terminology, a 'sound object.' Acousmatic listening is often referred to—following Husserl's methodology of the phenomenological reduction—as *reduced listening*. Whereas the phenomenological reduction puts out of play any concern with the question of the existence of the object or phenomenon under investigation, reduced listening suspends any concern with the material cause of the sonic object.

Brian Kane observes that Schaeffer's intrinsic investigations into sound and his theorisation of the sound object remain reasonably faithful to Husserl's phenomenology. Kane argues that two aspects of what he calls Schaeffer's 'hybrid discipline' cannot be satisfactorily accounted for without a consideration of Husserl's influence. These are: '(i) that a phenomenological investigation into listening will disclose the original ground of our musical practices; (ii) that the correlate of this investigation is the discovery of an objective, yet ideal, entity—i.e., the sound object' (1). Schaeffer's sonic research wishes to overcome both the scientifically dominated acoustic basis of music, and the subjective and cultural criterion of habitual musical practice. As Kane observes, this follows Husserl's idea of philosophy as a rigorous science that would overcome the naïve factuality of empiricism and the subjective problems of psychology.

Phenomenology

Before examining the proximity of Schaeffer's sonic research to Husserl's phenomenology, it is essential to understand the primary motivation of phenomenological research, which is to provide, with all scientific rigour, a 'first philosophy' that would constitute the ground for both philosophy and the sciences. In order to discover the laws of such a primordial science, Husserl rejects both the empiricism of the natural sciences—where such a determination would be derived inductively from facts given in the external world—particularly realism (or physicalism) and the empiricism of psychologism. For Husserl, the problem with realism is that only something that can be attributed physical characteristics is recognised as real. Thus, something like consciousness is either simply denied any reality, or it is naturalised or physicalised. The problem with psychologism is that it is an empirical science based on induction from individual experiences, where the Real is posited in '*individual* form,' 'as having spatio-temporal existence,' in contingent 'matters of fact' (*Tatsächlichkeit*) (Husserl *Ideas I* 52-53; §2), whereas knowledge, for Husserl, demands an essential universality that transcends individual contingent situations. Husserl also distanced himself from neo-Kantian epistemology and its associated philosophies of value and culture, along with the idea of philosophy as a worldview that, from the phenomenological point of view, dogmatically relies upon unwarranted fundamental axioms. If phenomenology is to be an *a priori* science it cannot derive its truth from the theoretical, and must, as Husserl insists, be free from all untested philosophical ideas. As Husserl maintains: 'In these studies we stand bodily aloof from all theories, and by "theories" we here mean anticipatory ideas of every kind' (*Ideas I* 105; §30).

To engage in a more primordial or originary scientific approach to philosophy, phenomenology turns its attention to the self-giving evidence of 'the things themselves' as they appear to living consciousness. Husserl's 'principle of all principles' by which, he says, no theory can lead us astray, insists that:

> every primordial dator Intuition is a source of authority (Rechtsquelle) for knowledge, that whatever presents itself

> in "intuition" in primordial form (as it were in its bodily reality), is simply to be accepted as it gives itself to be, though only within the bounds in which it then presents itself. (*Ideas* I 92; §24)

Husserl is not concerned with the facts of the physical object but with *how* things appear to us in consciousness. Phenomenology is a science of the *eidetic*—from the Greek word *eidos*, meaning (in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy) the essential aspect of a thing, or how it presents itself as a form that is conceivable as an idea or mental image—that aims to establish knowledge, not of individual facts ('that-ness') but essential ideal universality ('what-ness'). It thus seeks to derive fundamental principles from a reduction that excludes matters of fact from the *eidos*. Husserl thus calls this reduction the 'eidetic reduction' (*Ideas I* 44, §Introduction). This requires a new method of philosophical inquiry; one which is characterised by '*a new way of looking at things*' (*Ideas I* 43, Husserl's emphasis). Thus, both sonic research and phenomenology call for patient, detailed and rigorous investigations into the matters themselves, often calling upon the combined efforts of a number of researchers. As is often noted, Husserl expressed his preference for beginning with the 'small change' of *minutiae*, rather than the 'big bills' of grand claims (Gadamer 132-3). Schaeffer was also quite aware that the discovery of the fundamental laws of musicality could only come after a long and patient research into sonority.

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION

Put simply, phenomenological reduction is the methodological readjustment of viewpoint. As Jacques Taminiaux observes, Husserl's 'reduction' undergoes a number of metamorphoses in his writings (7). Moreover, as Husserl proposes in *Ideas I*, when we speak of '*the* phenomenological reduction' we are speaking of a number of different methodological steps of '"disconnexion" or "bracketing",' taking the form of a 'graded reduction' (*Ideas I* 114; §33). As Taminiaux shows, the methodological procedure of the phenomenological reduction combines a 'negative move [which] consists in suspending what blocks the way to the phenomena…' and a positive return, 'a *reductio*—to the specific mode of appearing of the phenomena' (9). Husserl's negative move is the *epochē*—from the Greek term meaning 'a holding back,' or 'abstention.' With the *epochē,* the question of, or the belief in, the existence of the external world is put into suspension. That is not to say that the existence of the external world is simply denied or plunged into doubt. Rather, the *epochē* is an abstention from any position-taking in terms of being either *for* or *against* existence. However, the natural standpoint of empiricism and our 'normal' understanding, is never really disputed but rather carried along with the reduction, and merely put out of play. As Husserl says, '*we make "no use" of it*' (*Ideas I* 108; §31, Husserl's emphasis). Similarly, the methodology of acousmatic listening functions in Schaeffer's sonic research as a phenomenological *epochē*. First, by removing all reference to a sound's physical source, determinations about the sound

that are uncontaminated by visual and contextual relations can be made. Thus, as Schaeffer argues, it 'gives back to the ear alone the entire responsibility of a perception that ordinarily rests on other sensible witnesses' ('Acousmatics' 77). Further, the acousmatic condition performs what Husserl calls an 'eidetic reduction,' where any spatio-temporal factual information, or in Schaeffer's terms, 'any relation with what is visible, touchable, measureable' ('Acousmatics' 78) about the sound is disregarded in favour of concentration on the essence of the sound in itself. What we arrive at in this eidetic reduction is what Schaeffer calls the *sound object*. Second, the acousmatic *epochē* is enforced by means of the technological intervention of recording technology. By reproducing the sound disconnected from its source, the tape recorder functions in a similar way to Pythagoras' curtain. But further, like Husserl's phenomenological *epochē*, the acousmatic abstention suspends any question regarding the existence of the phenomena. By disregarding any questions of spatio-temporal existence, the original sound event and the sound recording played back through loudspeakers are regarded as more or less ontologically equivalent (see Dyson, *Sounding New Media* 54). Thus, in the acousmatic situation, as Schaeffer argues, 'the differences separating direct listening (through a curtain) and indirect listening (through a speaker) in the end become negligible' ('Acousmatics' 78). What becomes the object of observation is not the actual thing itself, but rather how things appear to us in consciousness. Husserl calls this 'ideation,' or, in visualist terms, the 'essential seeing' (*Wesensschau*) of the eidetic reduction.

Reduced Listening and the Eidetic Reduction

The aim of reduced listening—aided by the acousmatic abstention—is to locate the essential (and universal) form—the sound object—within arbitrary sound material. What it seeks to observe, through such listening, is the act of listening itself. Moreover, it seeks to isolate something essential in the sound object as it occurs in consciousness in order to be led to pure 'musicality.' The method that Schaeffer uses in his music theory or '*solfège*' corresponds to Husserl's method of 'essential seeing' by way of 'free variation' (as Kane points out) in which the phenomenological investigator is able to run through the multiplicity of variants—multiple viewpoints or adumbrations (*Abschattungen*) (2)[ii]—of an object in direct givenness, or in the imagination—in order to establish the essential form or *eidos*: the 'what' that remains the same throughout the variations. Rather than performing the free variation of a sound in the imagination, Schaeffer utilised sound reproduction technology—first phonograph recordings, then later tape recordings—to isolate and replay sounds in order to run through the variants. The recorded sound thus takes the place of the fantasised sound in the imagination. But, one can sense an objection here: if the sound is captured on tape, does it not remain much the same on each subsequent playback? How does one run through the variations that would be the aural equivalent of viewing an object from different angles—in front, behind, etcetera? Schaeffer had two ways of performing free variation. The first method occurs entirely within the consciousness of the listener.

Although the sound signal (its physical phenomena as movement of air) does not vary—to any significant degree—in each repeated playback, the listener is able to direct herself toward different aspects of the sound. Although the sound is acoustically the same, it is heard differently in consciousness each time. As Schaeffer explains: '...since these repetitions are brought about in physically identical conditions, we become aware of the variations in our listening and better understand what is in general termed its "subjectivity"' ('Acousmatics' 78). The second method relies on external modification of the sound signal. The sound event can be recorded from different positions resulting in multiple recordings of a single event listened to alternatively, or a single recording can be submitted to transformations such as variations in playback speed, direction, volume, filtering or editing. By comparing the unaltered version with the altered version, the listener is able to progressively identify the essential sonority that remains the same in each version. Like Husserl's method of eidetic variation, the original sound—the sound as it was first perceived—is taken as a model or guide, which gives direction, and acts as the point of departure for the production of variants. The variants overlap at different points, and within this region of coincidence the general essence can be found. But one runs into boundaries where the variation is taken too far, and the general form loses its identity, thus, at some stage, the attempt at comparison has to be abandoned and a new sonic object is found in the altered version. For Schaeffer, this is the point at which a new sonorous object is given.

For Husserl, running through the multiplicity of variations takes place in a purely passive way that results in a 'synthetic unity' (*Experience and Judgment* 343). Thus, as Klaus Held observes, the limits or edges, where unity can no longer be found in the variations, are not invented by consciousness. Rather, consciousness 'bumps into them' in a passive way (17). However, Held claims that Husserl never really answers the question of how these limits are set. Thus, Husserl finds it necessary to specify a second stage to the reduction that consists of an active identification of the *eidos* as ideally identical. Only by 'retaining-in-grasp' all the variations can the invariant general essence be seen 'purely for itself' (Husserl *Experience and Judgment* 343). The purely identical can be seen for itself because it is, as Husserl claims, 'passively preconstituted' (343). Without 'retaining-in-grasp,' we are only left with the last variation imagined. It is around this idea of the passively preconstituted sound object that Schaeffer's *solfège* experiences difficulty.

FROM SOUND OBJECT TO MUSICAL OBJECT

Schaeffer's sound object is, in Husserl's terms, an 'intentional object.' By using the term 'intentionality,' Husserl stresses that every perception is a perception of something. The intentional object is thus the correlation in consciousness of the perception of something as a 'what.' The sound object is not a material object and it is certainly not, as Schaeffer stresses, the magnetic tape on which the sound is recorded. Rather, it is only an object relative

to our listening. The sonic object is, as Schaeffer says, 'a function of an intention of listening' (qtd. in Palombini 2). Within Schaeffer's research methodology, the sound object occupies the lowest stage of investigation. Through the system of *solfège,* sound objects are to be further reduced to become musical objects that are infused with meaning.

Carlos Palombini observes that the aim of *musique concrète* was to discover 'musicality' from research into sonority (8). In other words, Schaeffer's research into the nature of sound had the aim of developing a new theory of music out of sonic material. Traditionally, composition proceeds from the abstract (a musical idea in the composer's mind) towards the concrete (the complex reality of sounds in space). Schaeffer's great insight was to reverse this process, moving from the contingent and particular of found sounds, or noise, towards the abstraction of form. This compositional process is broadly referred to in contemporary music theory as 'exploratory.' Yet, can such an approach 'discover' musicality without first presupposing a concept of musicality? Schaeffer's *musique concrète* begins with the act of listening rather than notation of imagined tones (which only comes at the final stage). Moreover, Schaeffer wishes to replace the traditional 'theory of music' that he sees as based on the science of acoustics, with a method that finds new musical structures in the perceptual structures of listening. In order to achieve this, Schaeffer formulates five stages of musical research that make up his program for a generalised music theory: typology, morphology, characterology, analysis and synthesis. The levels of typology (the sorting of sound objects into types) and morphology (describing the sound objects in terms of form) belong to the lower order of the sonorous. The levels of analysis—the estimation of the possibilities for the emergence of musical values (according to new criteria) in the sound material—and synthesis—the bringing together of criteria and the formation of rules for musical objects—belong to the higher order of the transition to that which is musical. Through what Schaeffer calls 'musical invention,' morphology leads to analysis; and through 'musicianly invention,' typology leads toward synthesis. Underlying these terms is the foundational concept in Schaeffer's music theory, which he calls, by way of a neologism, 'aucology.' As Michel Chion defines it:

> The subject of aucology is the study of mechanisms of listening, properties of sound objects and their musical potential in the natural perceptual field of the ear. Concentrating on the problem of the musical functions of sound characteristics, aucology relates to acoustics in more or less the same way as phonology *relates* to *phonetics*. (102)

Aucology thus corresponds to a phenomenological eidetic listening in the Husserlian sense. It seeks to find a pathway between the lower sonorous level of the sound object and the higher level of the musical object. But it must do so without any recourse to the referential musical codes that, in traditional music, occupy a place between the two levels. The question, then, is how to proceed from the lower levels of the sound object to the higher levels of musicality; to develop a 'natural' musical language, without imposing any

presuppositions from cultural conventions, but rather finding musicality in the natural structures of perception. In proceeding from the sonorous level directly to the higher level of musicality, bypassing the intermediate level of cultural codes, the role of aucology, as Chion observes, is to 'prepare the ground for the reclaiming of musical meaning' (105). This transition must occur, as Schaeffer insists, 'in accordance with the logic of the material' (qtd. in Chion 105). As Chion notes, Schaeffer's experimental music theory would seem to present a 'difficult situation.'

> A severe discipline, then, this aucology which examines the object for its musical potential, but must always remain at the outer limits of music. For it starts out from below, from the sonorous, and no preconceived musical organization from above can in accordance with its own rules hold out a hand to help it haul itself up to the heights where meaning is enthroned. (105)

In order to circumvent these difficulties, Schaeffer introduces what might be described as a compromise. He designates by the term 'suitable object,' sound objects that seem more appropriate than others for the development of musicality. As Chion observes, Schaeffer's suitable objects are 'objects which are judged "good enough," without being thought of as "musical" beforehand' (106). Yet, is not the very distinction between suitable and non-suitable objects in some way subject to the imposition of presupposed musical values?

PHENOMENOLOGY'S LATENT AESTHETICS

Although Schaeffer's sonic research was never meant to fit perfectly with Husserl's phenomenology, does not the quest to find musicality in itself function as a goal that, in a certain way, brings theoretical pre-suppositions into the primary realm of immediate lived-experience—assuming such a realm of raw given-ness were possible in the first place? Though cultural (or at least monocultural) ideas of musical language are put out of action, does not a certain conception of music—what it is to be 'musical' in the first place—operate from the beginning, and enter into the investigation at the lowest level? Does not Schaeffer's preconception of the musical object bring into every investigation a musical aestheticising *will* that orders sound according to an aesthetic privilege of form, rather than letting the phenomena give itself from itself?

At this point, we might take note of Jacques Derrida's observation in his 1967 essay 'Form and Meaning: A Note on the Phenomenology of Language' (107-128), that although Husserl attempts to free his concept of form from Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy, his work remains caught within metaphysics because it ultimately presents *form* as presence itself. Moreover, in marginal remarks in the essay, Derrida alludes to a latent aesthetics that runs through Husserl's phenomenology. The metaphysical imposition of form, Derrida insists, 'cannot fail to effectuate a certain subjection to the look' and 'this putting-on-view' could be shown to 'permit a movement between the project of formal ontology' and 'the latent theory of the work of art' (108-9; 115, note 8). If Husserl's

phenomenology limits or reduces Being to form in the process of ideation, by isolating the *eidos* that underlies lived-experience, can it be likened to aesthetics?

Husserl says very little about art and aesthetics but in his letter to Hofmannsthal he admits to an analogy between the phenomenological attitude and aesthetic consciousness ('Letter to Hofmannsthal' 2). And in his discussion of phantasy and the neutrality modification (the more scientific term for the abstention of the *epochē*), in § 111 of *Ideas I*, Dürer's engraving *Knight, Death and the Devil* is employed as an example. According to Husserl, both aesthetic experience and the phenomenological reduction put the belief in the existence of the external world into suspension. Husserl describes the natural standpoint where one is immersed in the world as being naïvely '"*interested*" *in the world*' (*Cartesian Meditations* 35). In contrast, he describes both aesthetic consciousness and the phenomenological attitude as disinterested. Danielle Lories observes that Husserl's description of aesthetic consciousness 'leans on' Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, translating it into phenomenological terms (38). Husserl, however, clearly distinguishes between the aim of aesthetics—as the seeking of disinterested pleasure in appearances—and the aim of phenomenology—as a concern with the constitution of objects in relation to the founding of philosophical knowledge. Aesthetics and phenomenological research would appear to be parallel disciplines in Husserl's view. But whereas for Husserl, the phenomenological attitude is directed towards the variations of appearance with the aim of synthesising these into a unity, aesthetic consciousness is directed 'toward what appears in its respective "manner of appearing" (*Erscheinungsweise*)' (*Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory* 463). By this Husserl means that while the phenomenologist directs attention *through* the appearance *to* the object, the aesthetic contemplator merely directs attention to appearance itself. Husserl certainly differentiates between the objective position-taking of phenomenological research and aesthetic position-taking. However, in line with Derrida's critique we might ask: is not the concept of form in some way fundamentally aesthetic? Although Husserl's characterisation of aesthetic consciousness is undeniably complex, he seems to overlook one of Kant's most important observations. For Kant, judgments of taste are not subjective but quasi-objective. For example, I can say that I do not like the taste of a certain dish, but this does not mean that I think that others should not like it. On the other hand, if say that something is beautiful, I am essentially saying that others must find it beautiful too. However, by relegating aesthetic judgments to non-universal subjective feeling, Husserl manages to reclaim the concept of form for the methodical procedure of supposedly aesthetically neutral phenomenological seeing. Although Husserl is certainly aware of aesthetic value judgments acting as position-takings, he excludes them from the eidetic reduction essentially because he sees aesthetic contemplation and phenomenological investigation as distinct activities. But does this mean that aesthetic position-taking can be absolutely put out of action in the eidetic reduction that is supposed to abstain from every position-taking?

Where phenomenological research crosses over with creative practice, the problem of aesthetic pre-suppositions becomes more pronounced. Although Schaeffer's ultimate goals may be musical, he stresses the importance of avoiding aesthetic position-taking: 'If music is a unique bridge between nature and culture, let us avoid the double stumbling block of aestheticism and scientism, and trust in our hearing, which is an "inner sight"'(*Solfège De L'objet Sonore* 17). Although the procedures of sonic research would seem to resist subjection to vision, I would contend that a certain notion of form imposes itself on the investigation. The act of falling back on judgments of taste in the prescription of the 'suitable object' constitutes a position-taking that would seem to upset the ideal of a presupposition-free methodology. Sonic research surely constitutes a species of phenomenology in that it is concerned with the material aspect of sound as it is given to consciousness, but it does so according to a *telos* of musical aesthetics. It is an approach that aims to be scientifically objective. But is it guided by values that are, if not subjective, at least grounded by the quasi-objective criterion of taste? My argument is that this particular way of thinking, derived from Schaeffer's theories—which have tended to dominate the discourse of 'sound theory' in recent years—radically misconstrues the nature of sound and listening. This approach, which rigidly insists on the independent status of the sound object, as sound-in-itself, ultimately objectifies the aural event into an ideal unity, and isolates sound from its world. Moreover, it results in a consideration of the sonic merely in terms of material for aesthetic contemplation. Such a direction, in my opinion, ultimately fails as a form of sonic-practice-as-research because it leads the investigation to essentially privilege one aspect of a sound over all others.

FROM 'FIRST' TO 'SECOND' PHENOMENOLOGY

In terms of sound art, Seth Kim-Cohen has recently argued against what he sees as a certain adjacency between the modernist art critic Clement Greenberg's medium-specific concerns for painting, and Schaeffer's exclusive concern with the immanent features of sound (xvi-xvii). Against what he calls the 'sound-in itself' tendency of recent phenomenological approaches to sound theory and sound art, Kim-Cohen calls for a 'non-cochlear' sonic art that would be the equivalent to Marcel Duchamp's notion of 'non-retinal' painting (xxi). This would signify a turn to an intellectual encounter rather than visceral plastic celebration. Just as non-retinal painting does not occur at the site of the look, a non-cochlear sound art, for Kim-Cohen, transcends the immediate space of listening. But this does not mean that sound and vision are disqualified from the work of art, as he makes clear: 'A conceptual sonic art would necessarily engage both the non-cochlear and the cochlear, and the constituting trace of each in the other' (xxi).

Another charge against Schaeffer's sonic research (eluded to above) is that, in its acousmatic *epochē* and ideational eidetic reduction, it isolates sound from its world and thus carries out a suppression of context. As Brandon LaBelle observes, Schaeffer's position occupies one side of what is called the 'contextual debate' in

sound and music studies (32). LaBelle notes how the suppression of a sound's reference or context marks the difference between *musique concrète* and John Cage's musical practices where 'materiality and context form the basis for an exploded musical object, and aurality…' (31). For LaBelle, Cage democratically opens up musical listening to reveal 'the material presence of the musical moment' (32). Citing Cage's silent piece, *4′ 33″*, LaBelle writes:

> Context insists because Cage's musical object relies upon it, addressing the very space and time of its experience in all its actuality; further, listening is predicated on the formation of and belief in democratic organization, for each sound is perceived equal to another, as opposed to Schaeffer who proposes that "sound phenomena are instinctively perceived by the ear with greater or lesser importance as in an aristocratic hierarchy, and not with the equalities of a democracy." (33) [iii]

One might surmise that for Schaeffer, sounds are objects, while Cage thinks of them more as processes. But this is perhaps too much of a simplification. Rather, Schaeffer thinks of the sound object as an eidetic unity that forms the raw material for music and, as such, is already on the way to being further reduced to a repeatable ideal musical object. In contrast, Cage emphasises the actuality of unique unrepeated sound. Moreover, the utilisation of chance operations—in order to (according to Cage's well known maxims) 'bypass taste and memory,' and 'let sounds be themselves'—constitutes an aesthetic abstention that plays the part of a rather different kind of phenomenological *epochē*: one that opens the way to what Ihde calls the 'second phenomenology' of Martin Heidegger.

Unlike Kim-Cohen, I would not argue for the abandonment of all phenomenological approaches to sonic art, but rather for a shift from 'first' to 'second' phenomenology. For Ihde, *first* (descriptive) phenomenology is characterised by Husserl's prototypical research 'addressed to the nearness of experience as a philosophy of presence' (20). *Second* (existential) phenomenology begins in the wake of the first, as Heidegger's deepening of Husserl's project, which 'extends outward towards limits and horizons' and 'discerns in the sedimentation of our traditions of thought an essential embedment in *history* and *time* of experience itself' (20, Ihde's emphasis). But, extending Ihde's prescription, I would argue for a direction exemplified by Cage's radical abstention from taste and learned habits, that *lets* phenomena be, 'radically altering geometries of attention,' as Joan Retallack puts it (1). Further, in considering sonic practices as forms of research, I would recommend an approach that considers John Caputo's notion of a radical hermeneutical phenomenology, that takes as its starting point Husserl's and Heidegger's investigations into the horizon-structure of experience and, rather than insisting on a presuppositonless starting point, regards the very concept of experience itself as being dependent upon a network of retentional and protentional traces.[iv] In other words, this would be an interdisciplinary approach that encompasses situation and place, history and memory, culture and language, where perception is never really immediate but is

constituted, not only by spatial and temporal horizon structures, but by language and signification as well as by spatial and temporal horizon-structures.

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NOTES

[i] John Caputo argues that Husserl's own proto-hermeneutical notions of horizonal fore-structures work to prevent us from taking his project in its entirety (despite Husserl's own rhetoric) as a 'presuppositionless' inquiry (52-55).

[ii] *Abschattungen* is regularly translated as 'adumbrations' or profiles, but it also carries the meaning 'shadowing off,' or 'gradation in shades' (See *Ideas* §41 and §44).

[iii] The quote from Schaeffer is from the liner notes to *Pierre Schaeffer: L'Oeuvre Musicale* (72).

[iv] 'Retention' and 'protention' are terms that Husserl uses to describe the perception of temporal Objects (such as hearing a melody). Retention describes the succession of remembered (just-past) impressions of the immediate now-point. Protention describes the anticipations or expectations of perceptions yet to come. Retention 'shades off' into the past and protention 'shades off' into the future. Thus, Husserl says that 'every perception has its retentional and protentional halo' (*The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* 139).

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