

Significant Noises

Flaws and imperfections are part of this total desired look.

*Display card on a shirt in a men's clothing store
window, on Sackstrasse, Graz, Austria, 1988.*

Wherever they might occur among the arts, noises—interchangeably soundful and figurative, loud, disruptive, confusing, inconsistent, turbulent, chaotic, unwanted, nauseous, injurious—and noises silenced, suppressed, sought after, and celebrated always pertain to a complex of sources, motives, strategies, gestures, grammars, contexts, and so on. As such, they become significant. I concentrate here on noises manifested in some way sonically among the arts, attempting to hear the intricacies of the sounds among the noises and to determine the significance of the sounds that amount to noise. I am interested also in significant noise abatement occurring at specific sites known for their noise; in other words, silencing can occur in the midst of a din. The trouble is that noises are never just sounds and the sounds they mask are never just sounds: they are also ideas of noise. Ideas of noise can be tetchy, abusive, transgressive, resistive, hyperbolic, scientific, generative, and cosmological. Indeed, the specter of noise—that is, the rhetoric of all those raucous associations and figurative expressions that arise once the idea of noise is invoked—can both mimic the complexes of meaning at the empirical roots of significant sounds and make an actual audible event called noise louder than it might already be. Of all the emphatic sounds of modernism, noise is the most common and the most productively counterproductive.

History does not give way to these storms of genesis and autodestruction; it is only what is made of noise, of the history of noise, that must

explain itself in the face of the possibility that there is no such thing as noise. Noise in the avant-garde was linked to the sounds of military combat, the specter and incursion of technology and industrialism, the forms of popular culture and public demonstrations, nature and the sounds of other species, religious and occult activities, psychosis and drug-induced experiences, the music and languages of cultures outside reigning cultures of European society, and the sounds of the domestic sphere gendered female in contrast to the male face of the noisy parts of the avant-garde. With so much attendant on noise it quickly becomes evident that noises are too significant to be noises. We know they are noises in the first place because they exist where they shouldn't or they don't make sense when they should. But here too in knowing this we already know too much for noise to exist. But noise does indeed exist, and trying to define it in a unifying manner across the range of contexts will only invite noise on itself. Suppressing noise only contributes to its tenacity and detracts from investigating the complex means through which noise itself is suppressed, while celebrating noise easily becomes a tactic within the suppression of something else.

True, noise has performed admirably. Where better to set the ear loose to hear and feel unexpected licks than on the complexity and unpredictability called noise? Where better to imagine ontological riches in the raw? What better way to test authoritarian tolerance than with a raucous rage or arresting ridicule, and how better to bring attention to things without bringing things to attention? Where better to lose wayward thoughts, attempt to lose thought altogether (if only to give it a rest), and find thoughts where none might have existed? Where better to find damn near anything?

Noise is the forest of everything. The existence of noise implies a mutable world through an unruly intrusion of an other, an other that attracts difference, heterogeneity, and productive confusion; moreover, it implies a genesis of mutability itself. Noise is a world where anything can happen, including and especially itself. In a predictable world noise promises something out of the ordinary, and in a world in frantic pursuit of the extraordinary noise can promise the banal and quotidian. In a predictable world it can generate possibility and then obligingly self-destruct. Yet noise has also been an occasion for hearing loss and loss of hearing, psychic malaise, and psychological warfare. It has been a rehearsal for intolerance, perpetuated adolescence where celebrated, provided rationale for paltry works, steered attention away from seamy acts of complicity, and in the course of dismantling a local relationship of power reinforced a larger one.

The following is not a survey of the use of noise in modernism and its surrounds, although many key moments are taken into account. It is restricted instead to selected instances of significant noises relative to three concerns: acts of interpolation and immersion, other people and other languages, and militarism. Chapter 1, "Immersed in Noise," examines techniques, dispositions, and places where significance has been or could be sought through or within noise; my main task here is to return these noises to sound or imagine them as if they existed aurally. The mimetic impulses in Walter Benjamin's idea of sentience and Surrealist techniques for interpolating noise are steered toward their aural implications, while Jack Kerouac's practice of an interpolation of voices already takes place on the noisy brink of water sound. Then the homophonic culling of voices from speech and writing is examined in Louis Zukovsky and Benjamin to end at the

To write badly is to plunge the graphic message into this noise which interferes with reading, which transforms the reader into an epigraphist.

*Michel Serres*¹

Sentient Sound

Noise can be understood in one sense to be that constant grating sound generated by the movement between the abstract and empirical. It need not be loud, for it can go unheard even in the most intense communication. Imperfections in script, verbal pauses, and poor phrasing are regularly passed over in the greater purpose of communication, yet they always threaten to break out into an impassable noise and cause real havoc. As a precautionary measure, such local impurities are subsumed under a communication presumed to be successful, even if many important details and larger associations are lost in the process. The process of abstraction itself, what is lost, is thereby involved in the elimination of noise. Noise in this way is the specific, the empirical, even while "at the extreme limits of empiricism, meaning is totally plunged into noise."² The interesting problem arises when noise itself is being communicated, since it no longer remains inextricably locked into empiricism but is transformed into an abstraction of another noise. With respect to sound, noise is an abstraction of sound, and if the "process of abstraction . . . is involved in the elimination of noise,"³ then noise is itself a form of noise reduction; it is something done to sound that most often goes unheard. In the following, therefore, the noise brought to bear on noise is the *specifics* of sound.

Mike
to
Adorno?

A silent figure of significant noise exists in handwriting. There exists a basic form of letters intended to be read without any problem whatsoever. It is a form similar to the one in front of you at this very moment, lodged long ago in the institution of printing. Between pure legibility and an entirely illegible scrawl there lies a great deal of variability. Significant noise cannot be disentangled from the specifics of such variability; it is a legibility of an apparent illegibility. What in some cases might be considered either undesirable or extraneous—that is, noise—might also be read as a person's style, the result of physiological (sickness) or environmental forces (writing on a bus), and the like. What one considers to be a scrawl depends on who is doing the considering, when, where, and in what capacity. Where a teacher would be intolerant of scrawl, a graphologist would be excited by its wealth of information, and this would not preclude the teacher who moonlights as a graphologist. Instead of inhibiting communication, where noise exists so too does a greater communication. For those with a large investment in noise, this situation poses difficulties because it means that noise is always subject to operations that render it nonexistent.

Walter Benjamin, a well-known student and teacher of graphology, once wrote legibly enough, "Graphology has taught us to recognize in handwriting images that the unconscious of the writer conceals in it."⁴ He found in graphology a propensity for greater communication through pre-semiotic *nonsensuous similarities* and *nonsensuous correspondences* pertaining to what he called the *mimetic faculty* and the *doctrine of the similar*, contemporary manifestations of the ancient task "to read what was never written."⁵ As such it provides a basis from which to understand Benjamin's own idea of noise and not merely because it provides a general impetus for reading. It may be no accident that a short statement entitled "Noises" is strikingly similar to a statement in "One Way Street," which is key to the understanding of the mimetic faculty. Because they exist in different perceptual registers, before comparing the two I need to set the stage by proposing how sound might provide an appropriate figure to Benjamin's empathetic idea of mimetic functioning.

The mimetic faculty entails the disintegration of the gulf separating observer and object, a separation usually held in check through representation. In "One Way Street" Benjamin writes, "we sentiently experience a window, a cloud, a tree not in our brains but, rather, in the place where we see it; there we are, in looking at our beloved, too, outside ourselves."⁶

below arose from war, he became rhetorically associated with it. The new art favored noise made from actual things; war simply did it better.

Like other aspects of the avant-garde and modernist arts, the Dadaists found a source for bruitism in primitivism. Prior to coming to Zurich, Huelsenbeck had recited some "Negro poems" at an expressionist evening in Berlin. The first evening he entered the Cabaret Voltaire, he met the owner of the building, the former seaman Jan Ephraim, and recited for him "some Negro poems that I had made up myself":⁷

"They sound very good," he said, "but unfortunately they're not Negro poems. I spent a good part of my life among Negroes, and the songs they sing are very different from the ones you just recited." He was one of those people who take things literally, and retain them verbatim. My Negro poems all ended with the refrain "Umba, umba," which I roared and spouted over and over again into the audience.⁸

Ephraim later brought him poems ostensibly written in a "Negro language" from either Africa or the South Seas, which Huelsenbeck went on to recite in front of an audience—that is, with the addition of *umba umba*, which "no force on earth could have gotten me to leave out."⁹ Perhaps this was the germ of an enduring interest for Huelsenbeck for he would set sail to Africa during the mid-1920s, similar to Tristan Tzara's own study of African languages and culture, but during the days of the Cabaret Voltaire his Negro poems were clearly part of the trivializing appropriation of other cultures that Europeans found necessary to vitalize their own.

Thus, the grinding sound of power relations are heard here in the way noises *contain* the other, in both senses of the word. Noises are informed by the sounds, languages, and social position of others. It is only because certain types of people are outside any representation of social harmony that their speech and other sounds associated with them are considered to be noise. In the process of appropriation these others are subjected to forms of containment they have already known in other less semiotic exercises. Because they were bohemian or antimilitarist, the male artists making most of the noise were themselves on the margins of society. When they sought the source of noise from others even further outside the main, it was not because they experienced any sense of camaraderie of mutual

exclusion but because they still had a base in the norms of their culture from which these others signified noise. This admixture meant that when they marshaled the noise of others to transgress or attack aspects of different dominant cultures, they reinforced other aspects of domination. Avant-garde noise, in other words, both marshals and mutes the noise of the other: power is attacked at the expense of the less powerful, and society itself is both attacked and reinforced.

Polyglot was yet another tactic of linguistic noise at the Cabaret Voltaire. In speculating on the genesis of Hugo Ball's famous set of six sound poems, Rudolf Kuenzli offers the following explanation: "Ball's experiments with sound poems might even be taken as an attempt to overcome the language barrier in the Cabaret Voltaire, since the audience consisted of Russians, French, Poles, Italians, Germans, etc., who were all living in Zurich in order to escape the First World War."¹⁰ Given the economic motivation for the Cabaret to stay open, Ball's sound poems were an attempt to break down the segregation of nights held for special language- and nation-based audiences. As Marcel Janco recounts, "We held Russian events where anyone could go up on the podium and sing popular Russian music, Romanian evenings with Romanian dancers and music, and so on."¹¹ Ball's move toward predominantly phonic content was therefore an attempt to generate a transcultural appeal within language, similar to the one already rehearsed within ideas of music as a universal communicator.

Kuenzli supports his claim by pointing out that the six sound poems were atypical of all of Ball's other writings and thus seemed to be pitched to the local concerns of the Cabaret Voltaire. Driven into the refuge of Swiss neutrality, Ball's *Verse ohne Worte* (poetry without words) was, additionally and perhaps more precisely, a verse without German language, with its militarist associations amid the other languages of the exile community. It could therefore serve Ball as the *vox humana* to express the disgust he had for his homeland. Neutrality meant meaninglessness. To this can be added Ball's vigorous support of the poetic codification of polyglot practice: the poem "L'amiral cherche une maison à louer" (The Admiral is looking for a house to rent). It was simultaneously recited in German, English, and French (as well as in nonsense words, vocables, singing, and whistling), moving in and out of relations of translation, by Richard Huel-