

We are full of voices, like all islands.
Hélène Cixous

Brandon LaBelle is an artist and writer from Los Angeles, and co-editor of *Writing Aloud*. His work with installation, performance and recording aims to draw attention to the phenomenal dynamics of found-sound and its place within a broader social environment. His work has been featured in the "Sound as Media" exhibition at I.C.C., Tokyo, and "Bitstreams" at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He is a writer of essays and creative fiction, addressing issues pertaining to sound-art, architecture, and the poetics of experience, and the co-editor of *Site of Sound: of architecture and the ear*, published by Errant Bodies Press.

PRIVATE CALL—PUBLIC SPEECH:
THE SITE OF LANGUAGE, THE LANGUAGE OF SITE

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Brandon LaBelle

NOT KNOWING WHAT TO SAY TODAY I realized was in itself a wonderful opportunity to talk about speech. And further, having to continue, to follow through with this talk, reveals the way in which one is always forced into speech. Not to say that speaking is undesirable, or completely awash in anxiety, though at times it is. But more so, this "not knowing what to say" and yet having to say it, that important something, uncovers speaking as a complicated thing. To call it a thing is to suggest that it has dimension, that speech is a kind of object, something separate from myself: I stare at language and it stares back at me. It is this, and yet it is intangible as well, floating somewhere inside the body, a difficult vapor in the mind.

This complexity of language, that it is both inside and out, graspable yet intangible, a fluid on the tongue and a hard mass, is given shape with each spoken word: syllables fall apart as one gets tongue-tied, the mouth loses flexibility in a sudden bout of laziness, or anxiety, one forgets the words in the flow of conversation, losing control in the midst of argument. Yet one must continue—I have to respond to this "having to say something;" I have to find

something to say even when the words escape me, I have to give a talk. This too is a complex moment, because even though I have nothing to say I want to say something, I want to find the words, to grab hold of that difficult vapor and speak up—to fulfill the promise of speech. Why do I speak even against this "not knowing what to say"? Why torture oneself? cause further anxiety? These difficulties of speech are overcome because one has to respond, as a social responsibility, in a public forum such as this, or in a private moment, between friends. In responding one speaks through the contradictions and anxieties, amplifying them through gestures that expand outward and beat against the lexicon of social behavior. In other words, one is always already participating in a broader context, speaking inside a space that is always public.

This excess of speech—that it is always more than expected (social)—is also a limit: against this sociality I recoil; I hide in silence, in a space of hesitation, reluctance, uncertainty—I drift from the symbolic, become apprehensive. This silence gets lodged in the folds of memory and desire; stirs under the pull of longing, of mania and nervousness, seeping into the eventual move toward interaction, toward answerability. Speech as an enactment of language necessarily shifts meaning from the page to the tongue; in doing so signification is raised to a greater power, because the body amplifies the complexities of interaction, making apparent how one is situated in the folds of social organization. With every word there is a shadow, an underside which is never fully revealed, yet which screams out as a throbbing pressure, in broken syllables, as a bruise upon language, an ache. It's this shadow that paradoxically speech causes to be discovered, to let slip in a wave of forgetfulness, panic, or daydreaming, in a move toward intimacy.

For music I would offer a similar suggestion. To produce sound (for music is a sonorous production) is in itself a kind of response. As a form of articulation, of enunciation, with its own slippages and improvisations, its own fevers and inflections, music too overcomes the contradictory moment of saying something when not knowing what to say. Because music is always already responding. What it responds to is both its social responsibility as a cultural

practice with specific parameters, however flexible—and further, to the desire to engage with sound—to sonorously produce.

To suggest that music responds to the presence of sound itself is to emphasize music as a production in relation to occurrences seemingly outside itself, at least the cultural parameters that often determine its formation (conventions of performance and reception, of audio reproduction, listening habits, etc). Against the backdrop of the greater medium of sound itself, music unfolds, inhabiting the same sonic space as those sounds beyond musical parameters, outside the expected sonicity. In other words, music enacts the medium of sound, speaks through its physical laws, transcends them in metaphysical speculations, adopts the noise of the everyday; in doing so, music enters conversations that in turn undermine and influence its conventions—it must contend with the intervention of sound's own peregrinations.

In expanding outward in reverberations, the auditory beats up against other ears, other bodies and architectures. Sound overwhelms its own limits, refracting across social space—it seeps through the cracks and disturbs another's sleep, violates demographic borders, spills over. In other words, sound interferes. There is no where to hide, no safety zone of pure, unlimited silence. In this way, sound is never a private affair, rather it invades public space, occurs within a multiplicity, as a multiplicity. This greater medium of sound is what one always hears, unframed, unproduced, within ordinary moments, and which nonetheless converses with music as a production, overlapping with its flow and beat, impelled and impelling.

In this way music and speaking share common ground as being sonorous. As actions they come to confront similar frustrations, symbolic limits and potential openings; they participate in a move toward a space of interaction. What propels speech then is connected to a physicality that, being a part of a sociality, is continually apprehended by limits: speech, in its articulation, its enunciation, is always more than it imagines it will be, or less—one speaks and in doing so brushes against the codes that determine what can and cannot be said.

SPEAKING = HEARING = SPEAKING

...words are manifestations of persons...voice is the amplification of an interior...

Walter Ong

Walter Ong emphasizes language as an aural occurrence carrying within it a residue of individual desire. According to Ong, words retain a part of our interior and hold within them an echo of our innermost thoughts. They are what we call upon to articulate the spectrum of emotion, from the ordinary to the sublime. Yet words fall short, apprehended on a threshold of meaning, at that point of giving a talk. Language operates as this contradiction: it is what provides us with an interiority and through which we become self-realized; at the same time, language makes this interiority impossible to fully know: it stands in the way as a kind of symbolic curtain and frustrates our ability to understand the multiplicity of thought and feeling, the simultaneity of being.

Like a food language fills the mouth, a material we feed on and yet which makes us gag. In other words, language pushes us back, keeps us at a distance, and at the same time it allows access to knowledge; through self-reflection we live consciously, share experiences. What I'd like to emphasize is that this process is greater than ourselves: the amplification of the interior which Ong theorizes is always reverberating across social space, across an exterior whose surfaces deflect sound and speech, carrying it beyond its own limit. In other words, the message of speech is always interfered with because it is always articulated inside of and against a public. Through this the very notion of an interior is problematized—my words as a reflection of myself are made up of syllables that are not completely my own. In other words, speech makes language site-specific because it participates in the ecology of a time and a place—it exists as a material lodged in the collective strata of an environment. It is also a highly active material, functioning as an architecture through which we move, however difficult, and which makes these movements possible.

Following Walter Ong, language is never devoid of the hearing sense. It operates as a dual mechanism in which speaking and listening are inseparable. In speaking, one is always already in an act of listening—to oneself, to the thoughts which precede their articulation. An interior dialogue occurs just before actual verbalization. This is true for listening as well: to listen to another's speaking is to speak these words to oneself, to comprehend them through a mental imagining in which words and their meaning take shape.

Through hearing ourself speak we gauge ourselves, an echoing back and forth that enables a kind of emotional grounding, bringing into relief an awareness of who we are at this moment. This fulfills a certain moral obligation toward a sense of self—that we continually draw out the interior life into the open, thus achieving enlightenment. One speaks in order to know, and expression is at the center of knowledge. Yet in this echoing the signal gets disrupted—in the private dialogue other noises interfere, washing out the clarity of the message, shifting the sonic wave, confusing its trajectory. In contrast to the dichotomy of an interiority probed by language and externally made manifest through the expressing self, here the interior life is broken open by the continual influx of external stimuli—by a kind of feedback that in its loop collects additional input, feeding an unexpected and uncertain material into the source, and which, through this process of "contamination," lessens as an originary beginning. In this way the external environment contributes to the interior sense of self, determining the articulations through which being is made manifest and experienced. Through this, life in essence becomes a public affair as opposed to a private experience, and identity a surface marked by one's surroundings, abrasions that tease one into relief.

CONTACT MUSIC: WETTING THE MEMBRANE

This process of interaction in essence brings life into animation—the push and pull of living—through a dynamic of contact: one is always impressed by one's surroundings and in turn, one makes an impression. All those internal conver-

sations are continually disrupted and set in motion by an external pressure. In other words, we are always in contact—our bodies reverberate with the immediate noise of one's surroundings, our voices convey an interior which is constituted by a myriad of other voices, memories and dreams, longings and repressions, by that which we hope to say.

Musically, this interaction is mirrored in the contact microphone. The contact microphone differs from other microphones in that it is sensitive to the surface vibration of objects and materials as opposed to the undulation of sound waves through air. The contact microphone is placed in direct contact with the source of what it amplifies as opposed to "at a distance." Two surfaces brush, overlap, wear away at the other—this material agitation is brought into focus, amplifying the meeting point where the body collides with the world; the contact microphone reveals this point of contact not as representation but as a performative confrontation, an impression (literally, pressed upon) by the force of an external body.

The contact microphone can provide a point of entry into surrounding space, into the audibility of interiors, and the inter-amplification of sonic bodies: architectural spaces become resonate vessels full of surface vibrations, the body itself is brought into audibility through a microphonic invasion—the guttural, the gastronomic, the phlegmatic, etc., all a sonicity of the body—and objects take on sonic significance as potential musical instruments. Through this relay of contact, of physical vibration, amplification and reception—of living, speaking, and hearing—the integrity of music as a fixed form becomes complicated because it is always receiving and transmitting more than itself, it is always already bound up within a complexity of relations that intervene and infiltrate its own interior. Like the multiplicity of voices that resound within the interior life, music is constituted by disruption, by multiple signals that it represses and amplifies.

Music has its own fevers: it slips in the fold of a sensual moment, drifts into reverie, recalls a melody from some other time; it dreams of a possible form, spits out its guts in freak accident, improvisations that fail to go the dis-

tance. Haunted by something more, extending through psycho-acoustical traumas that in turn become productive ticks and quirks, obsessive structures, music is always in contact with its own exterior, and in turn it is constituted by that which is outside—the noise of the street, the buzzing of bees, the silence in the middle of the night. Like speech it amplifies this exterior as it feeds through the conduits of musical consciousness, materializing as sonic stuff that situates itself within the world as part of culture.

HERE AND NOW: NOISE'S QUARREL WITH MUSIC

In considering the relationship between sound and language, and the complex relationships that determine their meeting—music, speaking, being—one necessarily confronts the complexities and intermingling of private desire and public obligation, the imagination and law. In essence, one hits the wall of the symbolic. What interests me is the process behind which one resolves this confrontation, how one finds a way around, lives through the exhaustion of being deflected, shut out, and finds resolve. I would propose that music as a cultural form negotiates this confrontation by amplifying the collision between the "pulsional" and the limits of possibility, between what is given and what is imagined. In other words, music makes audible the processes of digging deeper.

These processes lead to the peripheries of Music, and into a sonicity often at odds with musicality itself. Noise ("tonus peregrinus") comes to bear down on the conventional parameters of musicality because by nature it appears along the lines of confrontation, in a no-man's land between the interior and the exterior, imagination and law, and where the two overlap and converse and interpenetrate. This conversation is necessarily a traumatic one, sonically mixing up the vocabulary of conventional musicality, yet catching the beat just before it drops off into silence.

Noise-Music takes pleasure in this confrontation, this mixing of imagination and law, of convention and interference, of clarity and disruption.

As a genre of music, Noise-Music disrupts the semiological safety zone of signifier and signified through a cannibalistic obsession with its own terms: Noise-Music functions according to a tautological loop of electrical input-output, of cause and effect conflated to a point of implosion, yet an implosion which aims to sustain itself, to implode indefinitely. Here, language struggles to find an opening, a reference point from which to tell the story, describe the terms of decibel and electricity, because Noise-Music inflates itself to monstrous proportions. Monstrosity functions as a model for Noise-Music's excesses—it fills every crevice of space with volume, stifles the air with sonic agitation: it is a bloated Music. It disrupts the signifying chain—instead, the self-generating economy of electrical feed-back sucks itself to a point of intensity, a TOTAL TAUTOLOGY—or, a maximizing output of the grotesque. This self-generating intensity, this imploding and maximizing loop, violates the typographic coherency of symbolic space, blotching out formal legibility with excessive volume, with a multiplicity of input and referent.

Noise-Music is electrical—not electronic, but electricity amplified and then doubled over, brought to the power of X in an equation that only refers back to itself ad infinitum. Noise-Music here is only interested in itself, in a pure technological disorder, and techniques of disorder: instruments become apparatus for uncontrollable sound, analog circuits tools for breakdown, and electrical current pure voltage. This underside of music never dreams of institutional support, or of a discursive space of description—in contrast, it literally shocks narrative into distortion, fuzzing out the edges of the script, of the signifying scale. In other words, Noise-Music turns up the volume and amplifies the shit as it hits the fan. This shit of Noise-Music is what art history packages within containable forms in order to contemplate—here, Piero Manzoni's can of artist's shit (from 1961) placed on a pedestal enters language as a symbolic act, a conceptual gesture: it begs to be recognized inside a space of discourse. In contrast, for Noise-Music, this amplification of shit hitting the fan, there is no room for language: it aims for an outside, or an inside, spinning on a different axis of reason, one which is pure machinery, monstrosity and electrical

output—brut amplification. It aims to remain inside the very mechanics and circuits, to remain, as Attali theorizes, a "simulacrum of murder."

Noise-Music pries back the tin of Manzoni's can to reveal the stuff inside, the carnal matter. In doing so it also opens up the tin of language, not to provide a glimpse into its workings, but to bask in the stench. Like Jean Genet farting in bed, holding the odor under the blanket in order to better intoxicate himself when finally pulling it over his head—a rapture of stench that offers escape from his prison cell—Noise-Music looks for a way out. This physicality of sound, like Genet's farts—his desire to rupture the granite of his cell with a carnal glory—sound's elusiveness and abrasiveness, its softness and penetration, are properties which lead one into the cracks—the hidden cavities, the haunted memories, the drift towards the dysfunctional.

X AS SURPLUS

Here, Noise in general can be used to open up a potential grammar, one determined by the excesses which are integral to thinking and feeling, writing and walking, being and performing, socializing and reflecting, because its complexity never loses the full weight of presence, of unstable referents, a reverberance which suggests something more, something uncontainable, an excess, a sensuality. In turn Noise is ambiguous in that it rests between bodies, flows between identifiable objects and figures, hovers as an intangible materiality forcing back the mass of language, and bringing it into its wave, its static. This static holds all frequencies at once—a white noise in whose hum speaking is made distorted, washed out. Yet Noise also amplifies language, disseminating it across the sonic spectrum, raising it to the power of X, X equaling that which is always beyond ourselves, inside ourselves, as a rush of blood, a flickering of eyelids, an abusive word, a flow of caresses.

From here it is easy to understand why Roland Barthes is led to an acoustic metaphor at the very end of his book *The Pleasure of the Text*. His description of a form of language which he calls "writing aloud" enables him to follow through

the pleasure of the text as a periphery of meaning to arrive at an imagined point of blissful connection—here, the granularity of text trickles along the fine hairs of the ear canal, sending shivers along Roland's back: "...writing aloud is not phonological but phonetic; its aim is not the clarity of messages, the theater of emotions; what it searches for (in a perspective of bliss) are the pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh...the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language." The acoustic for Barthes reveals itself as a necessary end, and a beginning by giving definition to the connotative nuance of speech—this eccentricity of language finding form through acoustic subtlety.

ON THE STREET: THE MUD OF LANGUAGE

Barthes' idea of "writing aloud" is for him a sensual articulation. He suggests that this "writing aloud" in all its voluptuousness can be detected in cinema, as a kind of "close-up" of speech. Here, language retains the full blown bliss of a textual erotics by "shifting the signified a great distance and in throwing, so to speak, the anonymous body of the actor into my ear: it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss." Yet what I would like to propose is that "writing aloud" is also social because in its audibility it necessarily extends beyond the tiny pleasure zone of private reading (or listening), reverberating outside the walls of the cinema-house. If the comfortability of Barthes' bliss—his private theater—were to truly write aloud it would no longer be purely blissful because it would confront its own limits, limits determined by social space, by the subtle violence of interaction, the anxiety and complications of orality and audition.

So here we have reached writing, yet a writing which has as its vocabulary the surge of interaction, the pulsional, and whose page is a public surface. Graffiti functions as a possible model of a "loud writing," of an aesthetics which exceeds itself and in doing so, bumps into the Law. As a writing of agitated marks, flushed bodies and smeared gestures, graffiti arises out of the collision between private desire and public necessity, inside the symbolic yet on the

threshold of its disruption, a periphery. Whether individual recklessness or collective assertion, graffiti views public space as a domain of "articulation," a typographic potential; and in doing so, it aims to confront this space, to subvert the clean surface to the benefit of a greater cause, the cause of being recognized. Graffiti calls attention to itself by its sudden presence, one that is not in the plan but which nonetheless makes its mark. It follows the contours of architectural space, across walls and under stairs, over billboards and along alleyways. It seeps into the corners and spreads itself across seemingly unreachable locations—it surprises the eye, and in turn it surprises the laws of public space. This writing aloud is an urgent writing for it must articulate itself before being caught—it must spell out before being arrested, and ultimately, washed over—covered up. This arresting is both judicial—the cop on his neighborhood beat—and social, for in writing aloud one mars the surface of public space—one vandalizes, rather than comes.

Yet graffiti also extends Barthes' "pleasure of the text" by articulating its own pleasure ever more loudly than in the cinema. In writing aloud graffiti must take its pleasure within public view—here, the possibility of being caught only makes its vandalistic gestures more thrilling, and more urgent, more vulnerable. And its "beautification" of social space an aesthetic high that excites language into a simultaneity of meaning, as shared property.

In this vandalization, this loud writing, one can trace a productive word: the writing that articulates itself loudly, that has as part of its syntax the potential to make apparent the limits of writing and the relationships that govern these limits, that arrests the hand just as it attempts to make a mark, brings into view an "enactment" of language. For graffiti is a kind of speech—in its excesses of color and shape, its scrawl, it digs deep into language, into grammar and code. In other words, it uses language for its own ends, its own equation. It uses social space as well, making graffiti a site specific writing, teasing the edges of what can and can not be said, of how interior and exterior spaces are always speaking through each other.

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