This essay is based on a talk given at the symposium, "Static and Interference: The Cultural Politics of Alternative Music", at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 24 April 1988.

First publication - Art & Text (Sydney)

A Better Parasite

Douglas Kahn

In English there are two general meanings for the word parasite: biological parasites and social parasites. The French have a third: static. In a symposium named Static and Interference, in other words, there's something unspoken lurking in the title, a bug in the metaphors. Static, interference -- these words connote transgression; the parasite is a helpful reminder that transgression is fueld by sucking. Lately, however, transgression has become genteel, a parasite that grooms its host. Abrasion exists but it won't wear away your teeth; movement exists but it grows static. There's a better parasite to be had and a fat place for it to leech: the avant-garde. Although it isn't predominantly music this parasite promises rehabilitation if not rejuvenation for alternative music by working toward new arts of sound in general. Alternative music just has to learn how to exploit better.1

The favored transgressive elements within alternative music - noise, pastische and quotation, sampled and recorded sound - contain within them impulses for other arts of sound. The demise of blatant noise, the impasse in the use of recorded sound, and the currency of nostalgic pastiche, indicate the pervasive inability to usher these elements past the problematic of music. They rely on some sense of extra-musicality, a sign of worldly sound and of the incorporation of the world. Once posed, however, the extra-musical moment must be contained to a primacy of a sonic event, to music. Another retinue of significance is created but the complexes of any one sound's worldly associations are suppressed. This is the reflex of impasse that has been rehearsed since Luigi Russolo's 1913 introduction of noise and rejuvenated during the post-WWII years through John Cage's emancipatory endgame. How does one stifle this reflex in order to secure sounds against musical regulation? Maybe an art of sound that begins by quoting its own species like a quodlibet? To turn it

entirely around, from the perspective of an art of sound, music becomes merely a class of sounds among others. This tact would be fairly presumptuous and would in fact repeat the processes of demarcation and containment to which it has been historically subjected. The goal is proliferation. Parasite as virus.

In teasing out this parasitic relationship between sound/music and an appropriation of the avant-garde it's important not to get instrumental. Artistic provocation has historically thrived on misreading, failure and chaos. Accordingly, the following suggestions include impossible sounds and incredibly difficult sounds; the impossibilities are usually unannounced, seemingly facetious, but perhaps only difficult. This tact does not come out of any odd allegiance to fantasy but is itself an oblique appropriation of ideas from Roussel, Rilke, Duchamp, Artaud, Russolo and others.

* * * * * * *

Whether something is impossible is itself problematic. In the physical operations of sound among inanimate objects, what is impossible, or at least inconceivable, will most likely remain so. But once humans become involved the historical maleability of hearing is introduced and becomes exagerated by the specialized hearings demanded by the arts. In Note #183 Duchamp wrote:

> Develop: one could, after training
> the listener's ear, succeed in
> drawing a resembling and
> recognizable profile -- with more training
> make large sculptures in which
> the listener would be a center -- For ex.
> an immense Venus de Milo made of sounds
> around the listener -- This probably
> presupposes an aural training from
> childhood and for several generations.
> [<u>on the side</u>]
> ...after the Venus de Milo there would be an infinity of other
> transformations more inte--2

For Duchamp possibility is not constructed through a technological promise. Instead, he proposes a hearing to be constructed through the discipline of generations. This

generational reach echoes the classical past of the Venus de Milo. If it survived this long then it deserves a good look at a future when Western visuality has been superceded. However, Venus's familiarity acts tactically only as a crutch to hobble, as though down a staircase, into transformations belonging more to the age. The first transformation will be movement, cinematic perhaps, perhaps non-retinal. Or the sculptural size will be tailored down so the listener is fitted with a sonic body, a mask, perhaps only now and then perceivable as being different.

How can this auditive spatiality be achieved? First of all, spatiality is not singular, several notions operant in the arts come to mind which can be called upon. There is the one you'd expect, a relatively stable acoustic space, sound producing objects, and sound producers. With few exceptions listeners are able to perceive a causal relationship between the sounds and what and who may be producing them, how these objects and sounds are positioned and move in concert with each other. Another is the electro-acoustic capacity to move live or recorded sounds around a space. Look forward to virtuosi performing death defying aerial acrobatics above concert hall seats. There are the phonographic, telephonic, or radiophonic displacements where a pre-existent or imaginary acoustic spaces are represented in part through the replication of phenomena, replicated in part through the representation of phenomena or other creative means of persuasion. This is not necessarily reliant upon electronic elaboration for it can be conveyed through truly crude technologies. Another spatiality has to do with cognitive and communicative modes, all the spatial tropes, whether visual or acoustic, for it is the cognitive which tilts universal perception over to culturally specific apperception. Visual space connotes place, acoustic space connotes place-to-place and, despite the short dermatological distance between eye and ear, there is plenty of room to move on the inside. Finally, there's the spatiality arising from the physical interaction of sound with itself. Alvin Lucier has been its most important investigator. Closely tuned sounds, from musical instruments and/or sine wave generators, produce nuanced beating patterns and throw the sound spinning out, traversing across or settling into unlikely locations. In other Lucier pieces standing waves, sonic beams and shadows are sensed aurally and kinaesthetically.

It will be an orchestration of the environmental and rhetorical elements from all these types of spatiality that will

tease out a future for Duchampian listening. An orchestration will be necessary if only because the constitution of the Venus de Milo cannot be limited to one type of sound but may be experienced with the surface of an acoustic quilt, diorama, family tree, calico and other transformations more inte--.

Duchamp proposed an intermediary stage before Venus. Acoustic sculptural "literacy" is to be trained by the line of a sonic silhouette. Writing, linearity, representation is to precede spatiality, immersion, experience. This has company in other proposals for a graphic inscription of sound. Moholy-Nagy's lost film The Sound of ABC of the early-1930s, played graphic figures -- letters, lines and profiles -- scratched onto the optical sound track. He asked at least one person, "I wonder how your nose will sound?" "Solo for voice 65" of John Cage's Song Books uses Duchamp's profile as a score, following Villa-Lobos and others (there are examples in Ives) where horizons, skylines, profiles and other formations (e.g., Nicholas Slonimsky and family at the breakfast table) were used to produce musical notation, and following the tradition of drawn sound films.

The problem with these links between line and sound, much like the 19th century synaesthetic correspondences of sound linked to damn near everything else, was that the representational conditions locked into technique and technology were left unacknowledged. All the noses of Moholy-Nagy's friends will sound like tones that don't need noses. Duchamp instead mused over appearance. The soncially discernable profile, a palpable end in mid-air, kept its technical means understated. This lapse of Duchamp's hermeticism was afforded by the project's improbability or its improbability was its hermetic.

* * * * * * *

Another correspondence between line and sound was made by Rainer Maria Rilke in his essay "The Primal Sound."[3] When he was a school boy, a science teacher led the class through the building of a crude phonograph. Voices were inscribed in jagged lines on the revolving wax then reiterated, as the students huddled around the cone, by retracing the same lines. Years later, being a good poet he had an alas-poor-Yorick skull stationed in his study. One day he saw out of the corner of his eye a familiar jagged line. It was the skull's coronal suture, a line emblazoned by forces beyond control

but nevertheless susceptible to phonographic decoding. The sound uttered from this signature would no doubt resonate its primalcy within the cranial chambers of other members of the species, perhaps after reflecting it tendrils off the heavens.

Rilke was to phrenology what Edouard Léon-Scott was to technology. Léon-Scott's phonautograph, invented in 1857, inscribed sound but couldn't decode or de-scribe it. For Rilke, the world was pre-recorded. Because of the din of marks, pervasive subliminal aurality simply awaited proper phonographic aid to utterance; the coronal suture begged for a compact disc as its yarmulke. Whatever primal story in sound the suture would tell, it wouldn't be very long, not as long as the song of the catacombs sung by skulls arranged in a huge, tight spiral. What other lines would resound with is open for speculation. Palms might produce a voice-over narration, the shifting legs of herrons in the reeds, the ribbon edges of phantasmagorical smoke, abdominal ripples on the forehead, dole queues and other transformations.

The big design problem is that the phonographic decoding technology must be coextensive with the encoding technology. Sounds will otherwise be nothing but the products of representational systems designed into the technologies. This is the problem for the geneticist Susumu Ohno who, as reported recently, believes he is decoding genes to produce Western art music, e.g., passages of mouse RNA resemble a Chopin Nocturne.[4] Why didn't the mouse RNA produce Katzenmusik? Phra Charoen, the Buddhist monk from Wat Tham Krabok, Thailand, had a similar problem.[5] He directs a group which traces patterns from nature and then aligns the tracings over melodies from classical Thai music. His group has now moved on to song, tracing the inflections and phrasings of the evening newspeak. The problem informs William Burroughs' confidence that circuitry runs so efficiently between audiotape recorders and genetic recording, that psychoactive DNA alloys with chromium oxide to forge conspiracies and resistances, and informs those who have grasped in Burroughs his latent avant-garde AI eugenics.

Another way to think through Rilke's idea of a pre-recorded world is to forego designing an appropriate decoding technology, to dismiss the idea of elevated aural origins and to wonder what banalities actually get written. For this we can take recourse to what Alfred Jarry's pataphysics denies, i.e., "that the vibration of a fly's wing 'makes a bump in the back of the world.'"[6] With a

microscope you will find bumps like these in the grooves of phonograph records. If you could find and play the bumps on the back of the world, there would be more than the sound of fly wings beating. It's possible the back of the world may be right in front of you, that the ether is waxen, that all appearance is acoustically inscribed from elsewhere or a complex of other places. The street repair noises in front of Boston's Christian Science mecca warp puddles of wet snow in Sarajevo or swirl the bark of a tree in Wat Tham Krabok. The vibrations of vocal chords are aided by sympathetic vibrations from the mouths of babes, as are the movements of the nascent larynx of inner speech. A Thai news broadcast sparks a cowlick at the Royal Sonesta Hotel. If the cowlick was sensitively miked it could spawn a new world information order. These considerations reside in chaology's butterfly effect, i.e., that the air disturbed by a butterfly can determine weather on the other side of the globe, or in Edgar Allan Poe's concern that disturbing a speck of dust on his finger might snuff the sun.

The problem of encoding technologies is a problem with Surrealist automatism, a practice which, as Breton said in the 1924 Manifesto, placed individuals into a role of "modest recording instruments,"[7] a term derived from the operators who recorded telegraphic code -- enregistreurs. Inner speech and sounds have resisted phonographic recording: it's the most common unrecordable sound (exception: ictal?). Here is a sound Cage suppresses. In his famous story of the anechoic chamber, the two sounds he hears are the low-pitch of his blood circulating and the high-pitch of his nervous system. The third sound of his body necessarily interferes with the other two unless, of course, it can be silenced or can replicate perfectly the other sounds. Burroughs says this about silence:

> The word may have once been a healthy neural cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system. Modern man has lost the option of silence. Try halting your sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that forces you to talk .[8]

The third sound not only interferes with body sounds but with the entire apperception of the aural world, unless it has replicated perfectly the other sounds. The slightest departure from replication and semes bust out into a moiré.

* * * * * * *

Perhaps the best thing to do now would be to set loose a battery of poets to interfere with the aural world. There are digital sound editing machines that could help. Samplers have been designed according to the industrial imperatives for formulaic music and consequently need nothing else but to repeat very short pieces of recorded material. One may respond by misusing samplers but, then again, one is always responding. Digital sound workstations are, instead, products of the conflicting technical needs of two industries, music and cinema. Sound is represented graphically on a personal computer monitor and can be edited and processed from the subperceptual level, say 1/10,000 of a second, to durations of whatever length. As such, these machines traffic an activity familiar to most poets today: word processing. Instead of writing with words poets could write with actual speech, their own or the speech of others. Writing-with-speech is a literalization of the relationship of orality and literacy. This literalization must be extended to an orality and aurality, i.e., to include the world outside human utterance and to a subject who also listens, to writing with all sound.

Writing with sound is most comfortable with the textuality of composition. Here, Luigi Russolo's notion of language is of compositional interest. In his 1916 book The Art of Noises, the chapter "The Noises of Language (Consonants)", he makes the point that environmental noise not only exerts an influence on speech, voice and language but that noise is "an element of language itself."

> Vowels represent sound in language, while consonants clearly represent noise .
>
> Try to imitate any noise whatever, and you will see that with a consonance or with a combination of several consonances you can produce any noise you want -- with less intensity, but with a perfect likeness of timbre.9

For Russolo, phonologically, a vowel's periodic waveform represents tones, the sounds of music, whereas a consonant's aperiodicity represents noise, extra-musical worldly sound. Although his thinking was shackled by music, he can be misread. He

says that within speech there exists three ever present domains of sound: worldly sound, musical sound and speech itself. If the two latent domains of worldly sound and music were brought to the fore each time a corresponding vowel or consonant occurred in speech, then any speech act, from a verbal pause to an epic novel, could generate the basis for either horizontal or vertical aspects of composition, with special attention paid to systems of similarity and transformation among the areas.

When ideas of writing-with-sound are brought to performance a new idea of instrument is required. Not a new instrument, a new idea of what an instrument is and does, spurred on by critiques originating in response to the close association Rousseau placed upon speech and music. Very simply, the displacement of sound that phonography entails should be considered directly instead of thinking through the terms of musical instruments. Musical instruments are noted not for displacement but for a sense of presence related to Western values of speech. The sound of an instrument is contained by the instrument, is easily traceable to its material and mechanics, and mastery of the sound thereupon contains the subject. This locates and limits the sound, gives it the gift of utterance, the virtues of causality and causes the virtuoso.

The sound of a phonographic instrument lies elsewhere. The sound is not fully generated at the site of the instrument's physical location but instead plays itself out along a materiality of signification relating ultimately to its phenomenal or imaginary source. The new idea of instrument simply starts at the source which, of course, can be a complex of sources, false and almost sources. The causal presumptions of the object doing the invoking, and the subjectivity which throws its anchor there, are reduced to an easily forgetable moment of candor. The instrument would instead be taken over, named from one moment to the next, by what was invoked. Since the field of what can be invoked, how it can be constructed and combined, is theoretically infinite, there's no end to new instruments. Instruments could also fold over upon both compostion and performance, in other words, the practical components of an art could themselves be conceived as instruments and orchestrated (composed, performed, etc.).

We can also notice examples of displacement already practiced by some musical instruments; new instruments would simply follow up

on the momentum of this type of displacement. Note the distended lungs and larynxes in a trumpet where the lungs move into the cheeks and the larynx moves into the conjoined lips/mouthpiece. In reed instruments like bagpipes and accordians the muscular dominion over the lungs and larynx shifts from the diaphragm to the limbs. These and other organs become mobile and attach themselves outside the skin to form pre-industrial cyborgs whose contemporary models incorporates software, fleshy-ware, commonly considered written instruments.

In some cultures the voice is placed above other instruments because it is god-made while all other instruments are made by humans. In "The Grain of the Voice", Barthes places the larynx over the lungs in a hierarchy of organs because the lung, "a stupid organ ...swells but gets no erection; it is in the throat, place where the phonic metal hardens and is segmented."[10] Every rake and rub of the wind across the taut folds of the larynx engorges the voice with body, the body, launching it phallocretinously over and above culture and society. Barthes' voice is nothing if not resourceful; it must be, with only two organs it's a phylogenetic throwback which only mates with itself.

When speaking of the larynx listening cannot be that easily dissociated. We hear other people speak in our ears but we hear ourselves speak in the throat. (Malraux) When we speak, therefore, our listening is kinaesthetic. This is a cognitive kinaesthesia, like poetry made in the mouth and unlike hearing rock's bass tones in the ear-like wings of the pelvis. Helen Keller takes a bow with hands clapping in her feet. When you hear with other parts of the body the ear is set afloat, like Victorian uteruses, to wander. Neither is utterance easily located; just as the throat turns into an ear, so too inner speech and its vestigal larynx floats about the head and shoulders, unless its from the gut. One only has to refer to the represention of thought, voice and speech among the Dogon[11] to realize that Barthes' body, no matter how cultured, is nearly pre-gutteral. The way his body utters comes close to matching the way the psycho-acoustic ear hears. The psycho-acoustic ear is a laboratory ear which has been ripped off the head and body to stand as a biological target for the jagged lines of physical sound. Van Gogh did not give his art ear to a prostitute in the late-19th century, he gave it to a psycho-acoustician.

In symbolic opposition, the auricular ear of Chinese acupuncture charts the positions of the body and its organs around the figure of an upside-down foetus. Points along the phantom foetus's body correspond to the parts of the actual body. The ear is thereby reattached to the body. Representations of sound in this symbloic system lose their inert physicality and take on an embodied existence. Sounds enter the ear channel after being deflected, absorbed and directed by the earlobe. A sound might bounce off the pancreas, be absorbed by an elbow and directed by the cheeks; a sound of so many hertz will be a fevered pitch, or hair strained through the teeth like a harp or through a lobe. This system also connects the ear to the social body. The social character of all listening is thus better served. If two is company and three a crowd (and a crowd is more society than some can stomach) then the two upside-down phantom foetuses sported by everyone with a pair of ears means that even the most isolated commune with nature is not contemplated in solitude.

I'll end with an early sound by Raymond Roussel. Sound abounds in his writings. One memorable scene among others in Impressions of Africa involves the incredible vocal performance of Stephen Alcott and his six sons. The father places his back to the setting sun and then the eldest son distances himself along the line of his father's gaze, carefully measuring out 117 paces. The second eldest son marches off 62 paces in a southwesterly direction from the first son, and so on down a zig-zag path to the youngest son. After the distances are marked off in a parody of Pythagorean precisionism and everyone is in position, the sons each make a closed circle with their arms close to their chests to tighten their thoracic cavities which, because the sons are all kept emaciated due to a strict diet, form a bone-hard acoustically reflective surface.12

The father who, unlike his sons, is robust then begins pronouncing sharply the four syllables of his own name, Ste-phen Al-cott, in the direction of his eldest son. Each syllable is faithfully repeated six times as it ricochets from one chest to the next, the father's shout ending with a whisper off the chest of the youngest son. The sons reposition themselves slightly, as though they were tuning a very large instrument, to better receive and reflect upon the trajectory of their father's voice. Then the full vocal display gets underway.

> Stephen, at the top of his voice, called out all sorts of names, interjections and common words with an infinite variety of pitch and intonation.
>
> Stephen, wishing to give the experiment the broadest possible application, quickly pronounced some short sentences which were slavishly repeated by the six voices of the echo; some lines of verse, pentameters recited one at a time, were distinctly heard without any overlapping or confusion; different types of laughter, a deep 'Ah', a shrill 'Oh', and a piercing 'Ee' produced a wonderful impression of empty heart - less derision. Cries of pain or alarm, sobbing, exlcamations of pity, loud coughing and comical sneezes were all recorded in turn with the same perfection.
>
> Proceeding from the spoken word to song, Stephen produced a few loud baritone notes which reverberated perfectly at the different angles in the line and were followed by fragments of recitative, trills and snatches of tunes, and a gay popular ballad, relayed in sections.
>
> To end with, the soloist, taking a deep breath, sang the arpeggios of the common chord repeatedly up and down the scale, making full use of his voice and producing the effect of a choir, faultlessly in harmony, by means of the rich, sustained polyphony produced by the combined echoes.13

This call-and-response scene, apart from its intrinsic compositional interest, parodies the idea of the voice of god-the-farther whose first word, his own name, regiments those who recieve it, those who, moreover, have already sacrificed their bodies through emaciation to receive the word. They are starved for the word. That the word follows from oldest to youngest, from shout to whisper, parodies patrilineal kinship and generational memory.

If this parody were radically democratized, dispersing the singular source, negating the self-abnegation and hierarchy, the group would be engaged in an intense hocketing. The collectivity that the quick alternation of hocketing can produce often proved too threatening for the sacred singing of the medieval church. Perhaps it was also the erotic dialogic of two (or more) people concentrated from breath to breath in the same precise abandon that was threatening; the threat then is a source of pleasure today.

Hocketing may also be embodied in an individual expression. West African hocketing may have been diffused through the American South as yodeling, itself influencing the patter of tobacco auction - eering. Yodeling is nothing more than the quick alternation between two parts of the body, e.g., from a deep chest sound to a nasal falsetto, a stutter without tacit. The transition from hocketing to yodeling involves replacing individuals within a collective for parts of the body within an individual (its comparative intermediary is Inuit throat singing). The traversing of the voice across a social space parallels the traversing of the voice across a body: two voices imbricated to form a body and two imbricated voices in the body, one and the other.

This interaction of social interaction and bodily interaction can be fleshed out. If the body was very large and acoustic like the Venus de Milo people could stand inside it and listen to a voice as it traversed the body, listen to other bodies and their voices as they traverse the body and their bodies, or listen to the traversal of entire soundscapes with their populations. The body could be fit to individuals with voices traversing their own sonically-doubled bodies. There could be lip-synch from lips all over the body. Lips would be set loose, loose lips with ships sinking and lips-synching. A body prone with ocean waves crashing as the sun lip-synchs slowly in the West. Embouchure.

---

[1] Alternative music has a record of exploiting the avant-garde, not so much to mine artistic or musical provocation as for the benefits of association. Take for example Brian Eno's use of the recording of Kurt Schwitters reciting Die Ursonate. This sound poem, originally written during the 1920s, was reduced to an upper register embellishment in the song "Kurt's Rejoinder", a Sousa march for the 1970s. Eno, the Maxfield Parrish of contemporary composition, was more concerned in how the Schwitters pedigree might influence perceptions of his authorship and historical lineage than in any attempt to respond to the artistic provocations of the poem.

[2] Marcel Duchmap, Notes. Boston: G.K. Hall & Company, 1983. The idea for a palpability of sound in space captivated Antonin Artaud

as well. Instructions for There Is No More Firmament read: "Sounds fall as if from a great height, stop short and spread out in arcs, forming vaults and parasols. Tiered sounds." Antonin Artaud, "There Is No More Firmament" in Collected Works, Vol. 2. London: Calder & Boyars, 1971. His ideas were occasioned by Varèse's request to assist with the unrealized Espace. The piece was to explore 'sound projection' - "...or the feeling given us by certain blocks of sound. Probably I should call them beams of sound, since the feeling is akin to that aroused by beams of light sent forth by a powerful searchlight." "Varèse Envisions 'Space' Symphonies", New York Times, 6 December 1936, Section 2, page 7.

[3] Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Primal Sound" in Rodin and Other Prose Pieces. New York: Quartet Books, 1986.

[4] Edward Humes, "Musical Genes: Blueprint for Songs of Life" in San Francisco Chronicle, 13 January 1988.

[5] Barbara Crossette, "Recording the Music of the Sphere" in San Francisco Chronicle, 10 January 1988.

[6] Alfred Jarry, "Pataphysics" in Selected Works of Alfred Jarry. New York, 1965.

[7] André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)" in Manifestoes of Surrealism. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974.

[8] William S. Burroughs, The Ticket That Exploded. New York: Grove Press, 1967, page 49. Emphasis in original.

[9] Luigi Russolo, "The Noises of Language (Consonants)" in The Art of Noises (1916). New York: Pendragon Press, 1986.

[10] Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice" in Image, Music, Text. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

[11] Geneviève Calame-Griaule, "Voice and the Dogon World" in Notebooks in Cultural Analysis, Vol. 3. Durham: Duke University Press, 1986.

[12] In this respect, the sons resemble Surrealists. Breton in his 1924 Manifesto spoke for the sons when, after describing a pantheon

of proto-Surrealists, he stresses that they "had not heard the Surrealist voice" to the extent they "were instruments too full of pride, and this is why they have not always produced a harmonious sound. But we, who have made no effort whatsoever to filter, who in our works have made ourselves into simple receptacles of so many echoes, modest recording instruments ...." André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)."

[13] Raymond Roussel, Impressions of Africa . London: John Calder, 1983.