Dead Silence: Ecological Silencing and Environmentally Engaged Sound Art

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Silence in sound art assumes multiple roles and forms, which are not true acoustic silences but rather sonic liminalities in both the perceptual and acoustic senses; sounds that we can barely hear or of which we are not aware until alerted to them. Heard this way, silence corresponds to the best known of all silences in the arts, that of John Cage, which of course is not silent at all. As Cage put it, “There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot” [1]. Cage’s repurposing of the intentional listening of musical experience opened up the sonic environment to the same aesthetic appreciation that had until then been associated most strongly with music. Cage’s silence was a provocative foray into the heterogeneity of the sonic environment, extending from the Futurist fascination with urban-industrial sound (as Cage commented late in his life, “The experience of silence . . . almost anywhere in the world today, is traffic” [2]), and his work established the ground for the emergence of soundscape composition and acoustic ecology, evident in the influence of Cage upon R. Murray Schafer [3].

Cage’s silence is predicated on acoustic presence, however marginal it may be. To experience Cagean silence (“ambient noise”) is to give attention to what is already there to be heard—all sound [4]—and which is most often ignored or, in a long obsolete sense of the word, overheard (as in overlooked), by attention to what is supposed to be heard (music and speech). Douglas Kahn critiques Cage’s silence for its silencing of the polymorphosity of sound, reducing it—in a move kindred to Pierre Schaeffer’s écouteréduite—to sound alone, which he argues makes it also a process of musicalization. According to Kahn, Cage’s attention to all sound is little different in intent from Schaeffer’s fixation on l’objet sonore, as musicalizing the everyday world of sound is also an act of silencing social, political, ecological and other dimensions of sound, just as Schaeffer’s need to create formally malleable sonic materials required the stripping away of causal and semantic properties of sound [5]. More recently, Seth Kim-Cohen [6] has extended Kahn’s critique through his agitation for noncochlear sound art, which attends to the nonsounding dimensions of the sonic, chiefly the conceptual, and the use of these in sound art. Yet while it is apparent that Cage wanted sound to be nothing more than itself (“I love sounds, just as they are, and I have no need for them to be anything more” [7]), his calling attention to the sonically liminal reconceived the act of listening, and through the musicalization of all sound, the aestheticization of the sonus mundus, he established a means by which silence could be heard.

Cage’s contribution to the emergence of soundscape composition and acoustic ecology is apparent in the formal definition of the soundscape as “the sonic environment” [8], suggesting that all sound constitutes the soundscape. Silence is of course a component of the soundscape and is understood pragmatically within acoustic ecology and soundscape composition. In Barry Truax’s definition, a hi-fi soundscape is one in which the sonic environment is acoustically transparent. It is one that is comparatively silent, in that there is a relative absence of ambient, or unwanted, sound in comparison to lo-fi soundscapes, which are acoustically opaque, or noisy [9]. Given the green tone of acoustic ecology and soundscape composition, hi-fi soundscapes in that context connote the prized natural environment while lo-fi soundscapes are associated with the (debased) built environment. The sounds of the natural world, or pre-urban-industrial soundscape, are valued, while sounds associated with the built environment, such as Cage’s beloved traffic, are not. This binary valuation has often been challenged in recent times, not least of all by Francisco López, who points out that soundscape composition, an outline of ecological silencing is developed and applied through the examination of environmentally engaged sound works by Sally Ann McIntyre of New Zealand and Katie Paterson of Great Britain.

See <https://www.katiepaterson.org/silenceradio/for supplementary files associated with this issue>.
in which they are enmeshed. This raises a question: To what extent is acoustic ecology, and also Cage, concerned with silencing in an ecological sense? It could be alleged that the silencing engaged in by both acoustic ecologists and Cage contributes to sonic species loss, in terms of reducing awareness of and openness to the diversity of the soundscape and the heterogeneous nature of sounds themselves. Certainly this resonates with the positions that Kahn and Kim-Cohen advance concerning the soundscape post-Cage; yet Kahn does not elaborate on ecological silencing in his discussion of Cage [12], and Kim-Cohen is too busy with the conceptual potential of sound to attend its ecological fate. The acoustic ecology community, on the other hand, would be affronted by the notion that the sounds of things matter more than the things that make sounds. Yet it is the case that the loss or degradation of sounds and soundscapes themselves is often emphasized in this community, this in itself a matter of concern to acoustic ecologists: “Do we care about sound primarily, or ecology?” [13]

Ecological silencing is properly understood as an ecological event. Indeed, there’s very little discussion of silence per se in Rachel Carson’s epoch-making environmentalist text *Silent Spring*. Carson’s concern was not for silence itself, but silence as a symptom of dangerous human interventions into the natural world: silence as an outcome of the effects of synthetic pesticides, DDT in particular, on the biosphere. In the book’s opening chapter, Carson describes a fictitious but typical mid-20th-century American town blighted by the effects of “a white granular powder [that] some weeks before had fallen upon the roofs and the lawns, the fields and streams.” The outcome of this dusting of pesticide is a “spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus . . . there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh” [14]. In this context, aesthetic concern for silence itself sounds inappropriate. Silence, as a signal that all is not well in the biosphere, is to be filled with the sonic abundance—noisiness—that signals a healthy ecosystem. The sonic image of a silent spring is a powerful one, and as a pioneering environmental activist Carson successfully deployed this image to mobilize public opinion against synthetic pesticides in the United States. The aestheticized, which is to say musicalized, sound-image of a silent spring, itself inspired by a line from Keats’s poem *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (“The sedge has withered from the lake, / And no birds sing.”), is a means to sound out the real-world problem signaled by silence.

For contemporary sound artists engaged with environmental matters in which silence plays a role, the question is: How to make dead silence speak? How to represent and deploy it meaningfully and in ways that do not cloak it in the habits of silence associated with Cage and acoustic ecology? One of the most problematic silences for both Cage and acoustic ecology is the substitution of recorded for live sound [15]. The fear here, following Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation, is that the recording silences the living, sounding thing. This perennial concern, encapsulated in Schafer’s concept of schizophonia as an aberrant technological phenomenon, is as old as recording technology itself. In contrast to this perspective, however, recording...
The musicalization of acoustic silence is made possible by the intentional act of recording that functions as a framing device for acoustic silence. This is a Cagean move: the giving of duration to something that is without duration, just as 4’33” gives form to the silence of the place of listening, thereby calling attention to what is acoustically present there.

If nothing is acoustically present, or if the thing being recorded cannot be acoustically present, then recording—and listening—draws attention to the acoustic silence of that thing. Such a move can be conceptual, as in Yoko Ono’s Tape Piece III [17] or artist Julian Dashper’s recordings of canonic artworks of the 20th century [18]. When the intention of the work is ecological, however, acoustic silence takes political form; the gap between the acoustic absence of silenced thing and the Cagean silence we hear around it calls attention to the irrevocable loss inherent in that heterogeneous silence. This is achieved in Sally Ann McIntyre’s transmission arts piece, Collected Silences for Lord Rothschild (2012) (Fig. 1), which replicates Dashper’s move but with an ethical-environmental dimension:

Recordings of the mounted specimens of two species of endemic New Zealand birds, the Huia (Heteralocha acutirostris), and the Laughing Owl or Whekau (Scelo-glauca albifacies) held in the collection of The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Both these species were driven to extinction, partially through the actions of European collectors, in the early 1900s. They were both still recorded as alive during the twentieth century’s first blossoming, after the invention of recording technology, but neither of their songs are on record [19].

Making dead silences speak may also be predicated not on acoustic silence but, taking a conceptual turn, by evoking the ecological silence of an extinct thing through sound. Another work by McIntyre, Huia Transcriptions (2012), uses “transcriptions to music box of one of the few extant accounts of the calls of Huia (Heteralocha acutirostris), as notated by a Mr. H. T. Caver in the late 1800s,” which are “played back in the early morning chorus into forest areas of Kapiti [Island, NZ], amplified non-electronically on the trunks of species of trees Huia would likely have climbed” [20]. What this allows us to hear, negatively magnified through the audible presence of living birds, is the silence of the extinct Huia, as the simple transcriptions and music box realization of these fall, poetically and affectingly, to do anything more than gracelessly approximate a call known only through musical and textual descriptions [21].

The musicalization of acoustic silence as the horizon of the audible [16], bringing it into dialogue with Cagean silence and, as we will shortly hear, creating a powerful affective tool through which to address ecological silencing.

The schismogenesis of recording, a more productive conceptual cousin to Schafer’s schizophonia, also plays a vital role in environmentally engaged sound art such as McIntyre’s. Schismogenesis, in Stephen Feld’s use of the term (itself borrowed from Gregory Bateson), brings a new kind of sonic entity into being, which reveals aspects of its live source but is not the same as this source [22]. This is a useful word for a familiar idea, much beloved by phonographists of all kinds: Schismogenesis is what made possible the soundscape analyses of the World Soundscape Project as well as the sonic discourse of Schaefferian musique concrète. Yet the recording does not and cannot substitute for the absent source, despite the presence of its acoustic trace. In this way sonic schismogenesis has a melancholy ontology, a cousin to the melancholy of the photograph as conceptualized by Roland Barthes [23], which always points to the loss or lack.
inherent in the photograph’s highly delimitated capture of the past in the form of chemical traces of light. As with photography, recording is a time-binding technology [24] that, unlike photography, has protensity (continuation in time), but like photography can only point to a past reality. Following Heidegger [25], it can be said that recording reveals, but an inescapable aspect of this revealing is to expose the limits of recording technology: The recording (or better, photograph), like the photograph, points as much to what it cannot do as to what it can do. Sounds can be captured and restored but their sources and makers cannot be. Protensity can only be simulated in the recording. Sonic schismogenesis therefore always has the grain of sadness, of loss, in its timbre. In the context of ecological silencing, and the presencing of the acoustic silence that signals it, the recording affectively heightens the profundity of the ecological loss of sounds and their makers: “All recordings are historical documents that will hold relevance for future generations, especially as environments continue to change and species become rare or extinct” [26].

The melancholy of ecological silencing is played out eerily in Katie Paterson’s Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull (2007) (Fig. 2), in which “sound recordings from three glaciers in Iceland . . . [are] pressed into three records, cast, and frozen with the meltwater from each of these glaciers, and played on three turntables until they completely melt” [27]. The ice recording, as a deliberately evanescent reproduction of an “endless” geological feature, imposes a humanly perceptible duration upon a process that is difficult but crucial to conceptualize as global warming accelerates the ice melt. In Paterson’s work, ecological silencing becomes an event that is witnessed through the pushing of sonic schismogenesis to an extreme: The silencing of the sources, the glaciers, is played out before our ears and eyes, as their immensity and protensity are condensed into finite size and duration that is brought to an end in the present, alerting the listener-viewer to the ominous future silence of the melting glacier. The immutable is muted. Dead silence.

References and Notes
7. Cage [2].
12. Kahn [4].
17. “Take a tape of the sound of snow falling, / This should be done in the evening. / Do not listen to the tape. / Cut it and use it as strings to tie gifts with. / Make a gift wrapper, if you wish, / using the same process with a phonosheet.” Yoko Ono, Tape Piece III (1965), in Ono, Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings by Yoko Ono (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1964/2000).
18. Julian Dashper, Outside Rothko Chapel (2001–2003); “Side 1, recorded from 5.30 pm 23rd September 2001 Houston, Texas; Side 2, recorded from 5.30 pm 24th September 2001 Houston, Texas.”
21. See McIntyre [20].

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