Reversed Anechoics

The works are built of wood and sound, cloth and glass, paper and technology. These are layered in space and layered in time demanding an unpacking and lingering effort on the part of the audience. They are not works that can be summed up in the time it takes to smoke a cigarette.[[1]](#footnote-1) The relationality of their elements do not present a formal ambiguity speedily decoded from a lexicon of conceptual meanings, and fitting into the expected unexpected. Instead they are awkward, baffling even, an affront to aesthetic *and* communicative expectancies.

The materials used in their construction are obstacles to their own understanding and placement within art *and* within the everyday. Their pretence of functionality at once refusing the expectation of the work to be as artwork outside the circle of use value, while also not fulfilling the value of that scheme: not allowing for the wood, the glass, and the sound to be functional and useful in another way. They pretend a desire for communicability, and work to create material frameworks to this end, but obstruct and diffuse what they profess to seek clarity of at the same time and through the very same processes of production that promise the clarity thus unattained. The apparatus of communication: listening booths, directional sound beams, language, display shelves, and so on, are subverted by the installation, the construction and the duration of the works. What we start to hear are not the words, voices and environmental sounds but their echoes, rushing round the space and rushing from the space that was built to make them directed, audible, echoless and intelligible.

In this sense the works produce mirrors and reflections on the crises of echo as identified by Frances Dyson, when in her book on *the Tone of our Time* she presents the anechoic, the space without echo, without resonance with the subject nor the object of listening, as displaying the current ideology of a controlled and controlling system that defies incommensurability and cancels out the noise of dissent. Referring to Michel Serres she discusses the anechoic as the state of our time when the social sounds of opposition are enclosed in an echoless chamber of media production that purports communication but in reality obliterates the multiple dimensions of meaning in its monotony.

What is lost in the process, is, according to Serres, “quite precisely- our common sense” and by this he is referring to both the sensible (as all that can be sensed) and the idea of a common wisdom formed from the union between the sensible and the “generalized eardrum of our skin”. (Dyson, 2015, p109)

And thus while the anechoic, the echoless chamber, grants perfect articulation, without the obstruction of interference, refraction, distraction and resonance, it avoids contingent eardrums and possible hearings. By contrast, the obstacles to communication engineered by these works allow different possibilities to emerge from the incommensurable and the lack of restrictions.

This possible is generated in the works’ reversed infrastructure. There are turns and twists: turning inside out boxes, earlier made by Robert Morris, to be not a box of its own making but the sound of the making of the listening booth that impedes my listening therein. And as much as Morris’ box is turned inside out and upscaled for me to inhabit, as a listening space whose making I hear above all else, in another work the acousmatic curtain is reversed and upscaled too. The cloth stretched over an 8 foot high octagonal frame hides the source of already disembodied voices. The disembodiment is technological, prearranged, and the real curtain hides not the body but the loudspeaker, emitting invisible voices layered as in a chorus but without accord or synchronisation, producing a chorus of pluralities rather than of the monochord. Thus the acousmatic curtain does not hide the absolute and unassailable seat of knowledge, its teaching and articulation, but the source of a physical song, whose bodies emerge in my contingent imagination and invite not meaning but an inhabited experience: producing a common sense through the eardrum of my skin.

There are fragments and fragmentations, beams of sound that direct diffusion and remain uncontrollable, defying physics and leading to errors, lingering misconstructions of cuts and cutting paper bouncing off the walls. The physics no doubt is thorough, glass panes precisely installed, audio-spotlight systems rigorously positioned, walls, screws, measuring tapes. But the sound refuses to turn solid. Its materiality does not obey the command of its calling. It is supposed to sit on a shelf, producing a certain object and performing the impossible, instead it produces other possibilities.

Duly bathed and cooled his mind,

 Ardourless, will utter

Liquid song, his forming hand

 Lend a shape to water.

(Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, The Plastic and the Poetic Form)

The technology of precision, the anechoic separation of unwanted sonic material, seems purposefully at odds with the sound itself: the dripping water, maybe of melting ice, accompanied by a blustering wind? - precision becomes an illusion leading to diffuse reverberations rather than a single point of perception, producing a refracted room of residual errors and an opening of the gallery walls; the abandonment of the enclosure of meaning and expectations within its monochrome white, towards a broader resonance, reflecting back to us a sensibility of all that can be sensed.

To touch the doll people, the length of your arm

Folding right into its hot, red belly. Finally you slept

Your head in the kitchen window, a doll in your teeth.

(Sarah Jackson, What Daddy Built)

And this is where we rejoin the cigarette, the duration of smoking or whatever time we are willing to take to reach such thoughts and sensibilities. The anechoic, as acoustic fact and as ideology, produces not only the spatial reduction of sounds to a tone, but creates also the thinness of their time. It shrinks sounds to their signification, caught in the sign of articulation and the sign of things through the error of a timeless spatiality. By contrast, obstructions, resistances and echoes thicken time and so expand its space.

Time is one of the most obstinate materials in the whole construction. What makes the wood, glass, paper, cloth and technology awkward is how time brings them together and takes them apart to make rickety shapes that defy the functionality of their building blocks and demand a durational engagement. There is no easy grasping of individual elements to add up meaning and source its concept in their shape and relationships: the shape is not really defined however much wood and cloth has been used in its built; the relationships are forceful in their apparent functionality, but dissolve into illusions through the contradictions of what they sound. And thus the construct is one of diffuse time, of temporality itself, producing experiences without an intelligible certainty.

This reverses the anechoic; it makes noise and refractions the principle element of communication, producing plural and invisible senses achieved through the bodies of the listening viewers performing as extended eardrums. The demand of the “echoic” is the work’s aesthetic and political radicality: it remains contradictory and forces on you a re-evaluation of the communicative infrastructure of language, headphones, shelves and white walls.

Perhaps, nonetheless, it was the imagery of Leibniz’s folds that alerted him to the way a world devoid of transcendental mysteries is still nonetheless rippled with hidden recesses, shadows and shade, secrets and anonymity; with an obstinate resistance to the *lumen naturale* whose obscurity or veiling is inseparable from forming and disclosing but which is confused with transcendent forces or certainty at our peril. (Diane Coole, 2010, p113)

Maybe it is best then not even to think of the works as visible material but as sound, to get us to what they do invisibly and thus to show us what the visual material pretends not to do. Temporal and spatial echoes resonate objects and subjects. They defy the value of intelligibility and question how we think we can judge and know, without “obstinate resistance”, in a fake bright light. But this light creates only the semblance of illumination. It is the preconception of the material, created by the purpose that precedes its encounter and obscures its refracted experience.

We expect screw holes, dimer switches, headphones, and glass panes to carry us from the retina, without obstruction, to an understanding. The visual artwork negotiates this preconception in ambiguity, but only produces a secondary certainty, that of the work, that of discourse, within which it is the expected unexpected, spotted within the time it takes to smoke a cigarette. Work that omits the invisible shelters in the anechoic. The invisible, that which is obscured by the light, by contrast, brings us to that which renders the work visible in the first place, that which sustains it and lets it appear, over time and in plural shapes; lingering, diffuse, echoing dissent and resistant to consistency.

On this rickety park-bench

an old man can be seen

who sometimes tells the truth

He did not show up to day.

But the smoke. Do you see the smoke

(Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Sightseeing Tour)

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1. The time it takes to smoke a cigarette is, according to M. H Miller writing in the New York Observer’s Gallerist blog, and quoted in David Balzer’s book Curationism, the time it takes Swiss über-curator Hans Ulrich Obrist to take in a whole art fair, decide what impresses him and move on to the next event. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)