

To Re-Educate The Ear is To See Reality:

An Attempt to Explain the Fundamentals of Experimental and Avant-Garde Audio

I have never been good with providing people simple definitions. This is because, paradoxically, the more deeply involved I am with something, the less capable I usually am of explaining it. If someone happens to, for example, ask me "*what do you do?*" at a party or public gathering, I generally find myself hopelessly tongue-tied or stalled for time, usually to the amusement or annoyance of my interrogators (for non-North American readers, "*what do you do?*" is an "icebreaking" inquiry meant to find out what your present employment is - so my loathing for defining myself by a "job" doesn't make these sorts of exchanges any less awkward.) Yet my spite towards individually unsatisfying and societally meaningless work cannot, on its own, explain the similar difficulty I have in defining "what I do" for personal edification. Even though I have done my best to be a passable practitioner and chronicler of sound art for many years now, each new iteration of this question temporarily stuns me, forcing me to mentally retrace my steps and once again re-evaluate how all of this material became almost instinctually understood. To call myself something like a "sound artist" or "experimental musician" will often take me further away from properly describing what it is that I "do," rather than getting me closer to that goal.

Of course, when mentioning that I make and write about music of an "avant-garde" or "experimental" inclination, this can invite a lot more hostility or suspicion than simply lying and telling people that I operate a forklift in a warehouse and play pond hockey on weekends. Terms such as "experimental music" and "sound art," to the general populace, can often seem like intellectual conceits. They often conjure images of artists as either comen "getting away with" something, or as neo-Dada caricatures for whom the elicitation of discomfort and sheer negativity is preferable to a genuine reciprocal relationship between performer and audience. Sadly, there are more than enough people performing under the banners of "experimentalism" or "avant-garde" who are happy to keep these lurid stereotypical images alive, and some of the skepticism that I am met with regarding taxonomical terms is not at all unjustified: isn't *all* music, after all, "experimental," in the sense that its creators can never predict exactly what changes it will effect, and to what degree? And isn't any organized sound that involves an objectively understood degree of craftsmanship capable of being called "sound art?"

In all honesty, I have no intention of changing people's minds if they are really content with taking this broad view of experimentalism. Yet, at the same time, I feel that many of the people taking this broad view would be more enriched if they knew at least some of the ways in which these terms are delineated by those who perform and record experimental music or sound art. Perhaps the first thing to do is to determine what, if any, overlap exists between the concepts of "experimentalism," "avant-garde," "sound art," and related concepts. While these divergent practices do have some common lineage, they are not 100% reconcilable with each other, and at various points throughout history have had their schisms and noisy quarrels.

'Experimental' music has been well defined by the semiotician Morag Josephine Grant as a form that is "distinguished by a change in the dominant mode of signification from the symbolic to the indexical...experimental music indicates, or draws attention to, the phenomena and relationships associated with the social practice known as music."¹ All of these myriad activities, as Grant suggests, are fused in an art that "presents rather than represents." Sound art, it would seem, is intimately tied in with this type of activity, and so it is no mistake that some individuals mentioned in Grant's litany of experimentalists (e.g. Alvin Lucier, James Tenney) are also regularly referred to as sound artists. Sound art, over the handful of decades that it has been known by that name, has been very much concerned with "re-educating the ear" in the same way that abstract filmmakers like Marcel Duchamp, Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter tasked themselves with "re-educating the eye."² Its techniques have run the gamut from deceptive simplicity - e.g. the propagation of simple "standing waves" whose physiological impact is enough to force new relationships with the listening space - to the utmost in complexity and theoretical opacity.

If there is a major difference between what is called sound art and what is called experimental music, it is *not* to be found in their respective assessments of what constitutes the 'raw material' of their work. Both practices, during their evolutionary phases, eventually came to view the totality of sound, rather than harmonic tones, as the fundamental compositional unit (a parallel development occurred in the field of sound poetry, *poesie sonore*, or "text-sound", in which phonemes were the fundamental units of recitation rather than recognizable words.) While this may not have always been the case, with experimental music forms once being more interested in simply altering our orientation towards musical harmony, the *musique concrète* of Pierre Schaeffer marked a common point of departure for future manifestations of either experimental music or sound art.

The tenuous distinction between experimental music and sound art is more a matter of when and where this raw material is deployed. Yet understanding this fact serves to illustrate how much closer experimental music and sound art are becoming, rather than the opposite: while sound art, in Bill Fontana's estimation, intends to find a kind of musical form within presumably "open" spaces (e.g. urban plazas and parks, or exhibition spaces in which one can freely come and go) experimental music forms like acousmatic music attempt an illusion whereby the boundaries of traditional "closed" listening spaces (e.g. concert halls) are dissolved. Artists such as Michael Gendreau, who have applied their technical knowledge to both the realms of performance and art installation, come closest to questioning what distinctions remain between these two activities - Gendreau's particular emphasis, concerned with how movement in a space creates a "dialogue" between the space and the listener, is emblematic of a running theme within the shared lineage of sound art and experimental music. That is to say, it represents the active participation of both listener and sound performer / sound mediator in a dramatic "event," rather than a performance.

Within these sonic "event environments", the possibilities for "presenting rather than representing" can often be dramatically expanded by virtue of disrupting the customary relationships with audio data (see, for example, Fontana's realization that "the relocation of an ambient sound source within a new context would alter radically the acoustic meaning of the ambient sound source.")³ With that in mind, the distinction between "site-specific" sound art and experimental music becomes further blurred if we look to common effects that they hope to achieve instead of the spaces that they typically inhabit. I would - following

Jürgen Becker's estimation of the *hörspiel* or radio play - propose that both sound art and experimental music aim at a situation in which the creator is "no longer merely a director in the conventional sense, but a co-author."⁴ When taking a non-narrative, non-illustrative approach, in which all acoustic phenomena are seen as more or less equivalent in value, both "sound artists" and "experimental musicians" find themselves inhabiting strikingly similar terrain: theirs is a world where a greater than usual amount of control and interpretive ability has been relinquished to the listenership. This is a natural consequence of any art that presents rather than represents: giving an audience a sensory re-education as such also extends to them the offer of participation in shaping these forms anew.

Experimentalism and avant-gardism in music are also very similar tendencies, with sub-genres of avant-garde music often being named by the technical approach used to carry out their experimentation (e.g. microtonal music, twelve-tone music or, yes, electronic music.) It is clear that a single composer or entire movement can easily be both "avant-garde" and "experimental" in the same way that they could be simultaneously a "sound artist" and an "experimental musician," though there is always the question of conceptual subordination to deal with here: in many cases, technical experimentation in music is forwarded by artists as being the epiphenomenon of a radical ideology that, presumably, can find its way into all areas of human endeavor.

Avant-garde, in the language of military strategy, traditionally referred to the detachment of troops leading the charge ahead of the remainder of the standing army. As is easy to guess, this implied a greater willingness on behalf of that detachment to sacrifice itself; at the very least this implied a greater sense of risk. While this sense of voluntary endangerment - of one's career, social status, etc. - is certainly important to the definition of the avant-garde, there is another important reason to take note of military terminology being re-purposed for creative activity. Given that "war is politics by other means," there is some truth to the assumption that avant-gardism equals experimentalism in the service of political ideals.

To be certain, many of the 20th century artistic avant-gardes were polemical in nature, to the point where their manifestoes are more widely discussed than their other creative output: this could certainly be said of the Italian Futurists, and, if we limit the discussion to music, of Surrealism (there were very few examples of 'Surrealist music' during its heyday, but obviously many rousing manifestoes.) Perhaps owing to the comical audacity of their communicative style, and to their association with the development of fascism, the Italian Futurists are put forth as the textbook example of avant-garde polemic, though sensational examples of this can be found just as easily on the opposite side of the Left-Right political divide: the Russian brand of Futurism, powered by the brawling style of its poet laureate Mayakovsky, was no less prone to intense polemics. These would come to be fleshed out in the 1920s via the journal *LEF*, an eponymous organ given over to the theories of the *Levyi Front Iskusstv* ['Left Front of the Arts'] and promising a new "social-aesthetic tendency." The dialectic pairing of these two concepts would manifest in numerous sonic movements to follow, which would represent a full spectrum of attitudes, from friendliness to antagonism, to the Left-utopian ideals of their originators. In their own time, though, they manifested in fabulously overblown musical works like Meyerhold's 1922 *Concerto for Factory Sirens and Steam Whistles*, a kind of Ur-Industrial music that featured 'instruments' such as artillery and foghorns alongside human choirs.

A much later avant-garde, the internationalist Fluxus movement, claimed some spiritual descent from the same *LEF* group that had solidified the gains made by the Russian Futurists, although its frequent spokesman George Maciunas took the "social-aesthetic tendency" of *LEF* one step further away from the valuation of "art": "Fluxus objectives are social, *not* aesthetic,"⁵ he wrote. Though it is often associated in the public mind with a kind of Zen anarchism, Fluxus had its moments of outright Stalin-esque authoritarianism courtesy of Maciunas, who called for it to be "constantly purged of saboteurs and 'deviationists,' just like the Communist party...Communists would have long split into 1,000 parts if they did not carry out the strict purges."⁶ Maciunas' intense conviction in this regard not only did not speak for the whole of Fluxus, but his overtures to Khrushchev's Russia were received as indifferently as the *LEF* group's appeals were in the time of Lenin - much as the work of the Italian Futurists was eventually disavowed by Mussolini, the Soviet premiers exhibited multiple generations' worth of antipathy towards the experimental impulse in the arts.

Still other avant-gardes have seen the "revolution of the spirit" as the main struggle to undertake, and one that would need to precede (or at the very least accompany) any sweeping social revolution. This was the view of Romantic composers like Wagner and the mystically-minded Symbolist composer Scriabin, both of whom seemed to believe that any "social-aesthetic" tendency would need to be instilled after the senses themselves had been unified - for Wagner the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or 'total artwork' was the means towards accomplishing this, while Scriabin made some of the more notable forays into the creation of 'color music' (and lest the 20th century Futurists be given sole credit for fusing that tendency to avant-gardism, two of Wagner's most famous pamphlets were indeed titled "The Music of the Future" [1860] and "The Art of the Future" [1849].) In a time closer to the present, the sacrifices made by esoteric musicians such as Coil exemplify both the avant-garde "revolution of the spirit" and the battle damage that can result from volunteering in it. With their famous (often self-induced) psychic breakdowns, and their bold attempts at bringing magic and theriomorphic transformation back into post-industrial society, they took on a kind of neo-shamanic role and none-too-subtly suggested that the personal sacrifices of the avant-garde artist should be a successor to the world-creating self-sacrifices of the shaman. Of course, their early acknowledgement that "*the price of existence is eternal warfare*" prepared them for a journey down such a perilously twisting path.

Having said all this, one does not have to have a distinct goal in mind, particularly a utopian vision, in order to sacrifice themselves for it, and in fact the proposal of the "non-goal" has been one of the major evolutions from the principles of the earlier 20th century avant-gardes to those appearing at the mid-point of the 20th century and beyond. Largely associated with John Cage - who would eventually be questioned by fellow composer Wim Mertens as to whether encouraging non-purposiveness was a "goal" in itself - the dissolution of the ego that this process entailed was a more a-political continuation of the much more politicized ideals that *LEF* espoused. Ironically, given the significantly more utilitarian nature of the *LEF* group and Russian Constructivism, *LEF* theorist Tret'iakov wrote of the Futurist (read: avant-garde) artist in terms that might now be applicable to Cage's work: "it does not matter that people will forget his name...what matters is that his inventions will enter into living circulation, where they will give birth to new improvements and new training."⁷

Whatever the case, if we take select statements from composers like Cage and Kagel, we can assume that there is also a version of the avant-garde that bases itself upon an

indeterminacy of purpose or (for composer Iannis Xenakis) stochastic nature - this translates into an enthusiasm for the production of creative work that is very different from what might originally be introduced to the public by this type of avant-garde. Avant-gardism of this type acknowledges that their work may 'escape' from them at any time, and that the potential of their creations to manipulate listeners may be limited to the simple encouragement or stimulation of further creation. Most importantly, the shift away from determinism towards a more organic approach has enabled a perpetually transitional form unconcerned with completion or finality.

From here, we can deal a little more easily with some of the other misconceptions that are common to the practices of experimentalism, sound art, and avant-garde music. In particular, these creative practices are dogged by the critical or popular accusations that they value newness of any kind - along with rigorous inquisition of self and society - over aesthetic refinement and the simple propagation of pleasure and happiness. Such accusations propose a false state of total incommensurability around all of these actions - as if there was never any such thing as finding beauty in the unfamiliar, having fun while perplexed, or experiencing a kind of ecstasy when one's psychic faculties are pushed to their limits.

The breathtaking speed of transmission and processing power that we now experience in the 'digital age' has made for audio works that are richer than ever in terms of timbre, and more complex and 'high-definition' than ever in terms of the information they impart. However, this generally does not point to a novelty of compositional technique, and nor do a good number of composers and musicians, in my opinion and experience, really care whether they are seen to be making something dramatically different than what has preceded them. On those recent occasions where musicians of an avant-garde or experimental bent *did* consciously attempt to bring attention to their newness, it was seemingly done out of frustration with contemporary critics' misinterpretations of their intent, rather than being a "chronological snobbery" in which their music was proclaimed as the "best" since it was also the "newest." For example, when the "free jazz" musicians of the 1960s and 1970s decided on "the new thing" as a more fitting name for their craft than what the music press was suggesting for them⁸, surely they must have known that this term came with a shelf-life that might not outlive the artists themselves. It was, perhaps, a necessary move at the time in order to clarify between artistic intent and critics' over-simplifications of it - yet it is unfortunately a prime example of how these proclamations of novelty can backfire, resulting in critical misperceptions every bit as bad as what had existed previously (namely, the perception that artists proclaiming themselves as "new" have no other ideals besides restless striving for novelty.)

Though it may appear, to the unfamiliar, that experimental sound has completely surrendered to the technological imperative that accompanies the restless striving for novelty, this is far from the truth. It is almost becoming commonplace, in fact, to note those instances where the most truly innovative achievements in sound are coming from those individuals who are either re-assessing and re-configuring "older" technologies, or creatively misusing the more state-of-the-art technologies. Everything from the CD player manipulations of Nicolas Collins and Yasunao Tone to the circuit-bent equipment of Q.R. Ghazala testify to this incredulity towards the "best" new technology (and, as far as these technologies' sometimes aleatory operation is considered, a further nod to Cage's chance operation.) Meanwhile, from the 1990s up to the present, a considerable number of

musicians have used high-powered processors to sculpt an aesthetic not of technical perfection, but of computational error and overload - processes which were discovered to have their own unique vocabulary of sounds and noises.

Walther Ruttmann, who is said to have created the first of the "absolute" or abstract films in 1921 (*Lichtspiel: Opus I*), dismissed the idea that he was creating a "new style": rather, he was creating "a new method of expression, one different from all the other arts, a medium of time [...] one differing from painting in that it has a temporal dimension," whose "artistic foci" were to be found "precisely in the temporal unfolding of its form."⁹ Put this way, time is not necessarily the enemy of challenging sound, and different circumstances may allow for a completely new "unfolding" of a work that was the pinnacle of radical expression in its own time. This *unintended* re-contextualization of works almost as a complement to the *intentional* re-contextualization of them - a habit that has been associated with the 'avant-garde' since at least the time of Marcel Duchamp - and it would seem that such welcoming of unintended consequences over time is a natural extension of the original re-contextualizing of prosaic objects, texts etc.

Renato Poggioli, theorist of the avant-garde, has made an important distinction between the "letter" and the "spirit" of the avant-garde, a distinction that echoes the concerns outlined by Ruttmann. The "letter" stands for the forms that are created by an avant-garde in its heroic stages - and, by extension, for the obstinate attachment to these forms as the ultimate manifestation of the avant-garde ideal. By contrast, the avant-garde spirit, like Ruttmann's method, does not see time as the enemy, because music intentionally designed to transcend social eras cannot "decay" over time.

We can see that time is comparatively crueler to styles of music that choose to, *contra* Ruttmann, invest in forging a new style rather than a new method, thus making an only temporary commitment to experimental creativity. One of the most salient differences between truly avant-garde music, and formerly avant-garde music that has been downgraded, can be noted in the way that the latter clings to forms rather than ideas. Modern spectacles like "retro New Wave" dance club evenings are poignant affairs not just because they betray nostalgia for future worlds that never quite materialized, but, more importantly, because their "retro-futurism" is focused squarely upon the frozen artifacts of their chosen avant-garde (fashion items, recordings etc.) and not its mutable, resilient attitudes. This misplaced focus is tragic not because it sighs for "simpler times", but because it admits that its chosen cultural weapons were inadequate to eradicate the problems of those "simpler times," while simultaneously summoning them to do battle against an even more complex set of problems. This was the case when the "electroclash" style of retro New Wave had its brief moment in the sun earlier in the new millenium: though its creators made a strong case that the socio-political landscape of the 2000s looked very much like that of the 1980s in which New Wave originally thrived (thus necessitating a more self-conscious reprise of that cultural form), their argument was never really developed beyond this. As a critical tool, "electroclash" did little more than to acknowledge the failure of its parent musical form to change society, with its aesthetic mimicry of that parent genre confirming this.

So, merely entertaining futuristic tendencies, or harboring some inclinations towards progressivism (be that technological, social, or otherwise) are not enough to make an artistic endeavor an "avant-garde" one anymore: these tendencies ultimately have to separate

themselves from self-referentiality and to embrace what Ray Brassier called a "mind-independent reality, which, despite the presumptions of human narcissism, is indifferent to our existence."¹⁰ It is what Brassier calls the "speculative opportunity" arising from this realization that can fuel further experimentation. And one could say that the apparent nihilism of avant-garde musical anti-genres like "noise" provides this speculative opening - their incomprehensibility and indifference to meaning is in fact their invitation for listeners to create and propagate new meanings.

With this in mind, perhaps the true value of what has been called 'avant-garde' music is no longer its ability to accompany or herald progress, but its ability to act as a corrective measure or counter-balancing agent in an age otherwise concerned with acceleration and intensification for its own sake, an age where modernization is little more than the ontological state of "being-towards-movement": a state that devours natural resources and mental energy when the alternative - finding new ways of *seeing* rather than new ways of intensifying movement - can easily be as beneficial for all involved.

In the final estimation, avant-garde or experimental music is not so much a matter of bypassing or outright annihilating petrified traditions as it is a matter of salvaging those traditions that really matter, namely the paradoxical "traditions" of cultural regeneration, bifurcation and so on. Along these lines, what Renato Poggioli claimed in the early 1960s still holds true: "the transition now under way lies in the working of a mutation, not a negation."¹¹ When this mutation is realized as the work to be done by the avant-garde - we may finally have an answer to the nagging question "*what do you do?*" However, this may still lead to another inquiry - what is all of this good for? To this question, I can only answer using Xenakis' words: "to see reality with new eyes, that *is* reality, that is life itself."

- Thomas Bey William Bailey
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¹ Morag Josephine Grant, "Experimental Music Semiotics." *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Dec., 2003), pp. 173-191.

² "...after centuries of naturalistic paintings, people had lost the gift of perceiving pure plastic forms and colors and of appreciating light and line relationships that did not represent or symbolize anything. Creators of abstract films, like Marcel Duchamp, Viking Eggeling, and Hans Richter, were engaged in reeducating the eye." Esther Levenger, "Czech Avant-Garde Art: Poetry for the Five Senses." *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 81, No. 3 (Sep., 1999), pp. 513-532.

³ Bill Fontana, "The Relocation of Ambient Sound: Urban Sound Sculpture." *Leonardo*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1987), pp. 143-147.

⁴ Jürgen Becker quoted in Klaus Schöning and Mark E. Cory, "The Contours of Acoustic Art." *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Oct., 1991), pp. 307-324.

⁵ George Maciunas quoted in Michael Oren, "Anti-Art as the End of Cultural History." *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (May, 1993), pp. 1-30.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Christina Kaier, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects Of Soviet Constructivism*, p. 66. MIT Press, Cambridge / London, 2005.

⁸ Eric Drott, "Free Jazz and the French Critic." *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (Fall 2008), pp. 541-581.

⁹ Michael Betancourt, *The History of Motion Graphics*, p. 53. Wildside Press, no place of publication listed, 2013.

¹⁰ Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*, p. xi. Palgrave, New York, 2007.

¹¹ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 223. Trans. Gerald Fitzgerald. Belknap Press, Cambridge / London, 1968.