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# SILENCE IS SEXY: THE OTHER 'EXTREME MUSIC'

"Burn flutes and lutes, and plug Blind Kuang's ears, and then they'll really be able to hear again."

- Chuang Tzu

## PARENTAL ADVISORY: EXPLICIT QUIET

In the summer of 2004, I found myself collaborating on a radio program with sound artist John Wanzel at Chicago's WLWU (on the University of Loyola campus.) I recall a discussion we had at the time about radio broadcasting laws, particularly how it was technically illegal to broadcast a small amount of silence, or dead air, during normal operating hours- less than 20 seconds, if I remember correctly. This bothered me, since, by that time, I had amassed a good number of sound recordings in which pieces contained stretches of silence longer than the FCC-allotted maximum amount. Could the intentional silences on these CD recordings an integral part of their compositional approach, really be classified 'dead air'? I figured that it would be difficult to make a case to an FCC agent if complaints were in fact lodged to the station, saying that the programmers were being negligent and were continually, mischievously dropping the volume levels down to zero. It seemed like it would be futile, and a little comical, to try and explain the difference between long, deliberate silences used as an aesthetic element within sound works, and the long silences which resulted from a programmer's personal failings- i.e. fumbling to cue up the correct tracks, or falling asleep on the job. To someone in charge of upholding broadcast standards and practices, what would be the difference between inaction on the behalf of a pre-recorded or in-studio artist, or inaction on behalf of a live disc jockey?

The more I thought about such things, the less I was able to come up with an answer that would satisfy someone unfamiliar with the phenomenon of extremely quiet music. At the same time, I realized how much antipathy there was, in our modern society at large, towards moments of quiet in general. It is too often taken as common knowledge that the quiet individual is counter-productive, aloof, nihilistic, incompetent, or some nasty cocktail of all this and

more. As the story goes, because it is "simple" to deploy silence as a compositional tool but "difficult" to actively listen to it, those who do the former are to be accused of charlatanry, and reminded in no uncertain terms that "I could write that as well as you." John Cage's reply to this question - "have I said anything that would lead you to think I thought you were stupid?"<sup>1</sup> - illustrates how the "anyone can do that" attitude tends to automatically assume bad intentions on the composer's part. In any society where silence is seen as tantamount to anti-communication, rather than as a shared moment of reflection between performer and audience (from which either or both can gain), it will be continually difficult to make proper use of it.

If silence could be viewed as a compositional element, then placing limitations on its use speak to some more insidious agenda that would, ironically, involve a bit of 'silencing' itself (for example, disallowing deep, reflective thought.) Yet even in a pop-cultural landscape where supposedly "anything goes" in music, getting people to view silence as a compositional element is no less of a challenge today than it was when Cage's landmark piece 4'33" dared to break the non-sound barrier. The caveat, of course, was that this piece revealed the impossibility of 'pure' silence in the sensory apparatus of the living (as an outgrowth of his rejection of pure silence, Cage also proclaimed that "there is no such thing as an empty space or empty time.")<sup>2</sup> In a way, it is more difficult since the number of sonic distractions in metropolitan and suburban life have become manifold in the 50+ years since Cage's breakthrough.

One thing about this particular subject seems certain: contemporary appreciation of silence is truly subjective, and those who do not appreciate it tend to absolutely, unequivocally abhor its presence, viewing it as an aggressive weapon or interrogative device when used in interpersonal or social situations. Tales abound of negotiations during the 1980s between Western business executives and their Japanese counterparts, the latter of which craftily used *Ma* (literally 'interval', meant here as an extended period of conversational silence) to fatigue their comparatively loquacious business partners. The latter, unfamiliar with anything but instantaneous response, would then be pressured into accepting proposals less beneficial to them, if this technique was deployed skillfully enough. The practice is apparently so ingrained in Japanese communications that sonic researcher Christophe Charles, on witnessing a 1992 performance of Merzbow's "magma of sound" notes how "one might say there is not much space for the *Ma* to be heard" within it.<sup>3</sup> The celebrated architect Arata Isozaki also assents to its centrality to all Japanese art forms, noting how it exists in both dimensions of time and space (though within Japan it is "perceived without distinction") and thus could be regarded as "the ultimate doctrine for artistic disciplines."<sup>4</sup>

Though I was not making any conscious attempts at cultivating *Ma*, I recall a handful of instances in which, during moments of protracted silence during telephone conversations, the speaker on the other end would become audibly uncomfortable and would begin dishing out intimate details about other people

within our immediate social circle. All it took, in some cases, was a pause of fewer than 10 seconds to spur on the disclosure of confidential, 'off-the-record' information relating to mutual friends' romantic lives, financial track records, and embarrassing quirks obscured from public sight. This was never actively sought out- yet I found this information was disclosed with disturbing regularity in situations where I was, owing to work-weariness or just brain-dead incoherence, unable to hold up my end of a conversation, yet was not allowed to hang up for other reasons of communication etiquette. It was surprising, to say the least, how a raw fear of apparently blank audio space could drive certain individuals to desperation, and to fill this sonic void with whatever was immediately at their disposal. This phenomenon became much more evident to me when, a few years down the road, the explosion in the popularity of mobile phones annihilated moments of private contemplation or internalized dialogue while phone users were roaming in public.

The seemingly primordial fear of silence is easier to understand if we compare its compositional qualities to that of other sounds: by Cage's reckoning, silence is only measured in terms of *duration* whereas all other sonic material is measurable by timbre, frequency and amplitude as well. Placing a large magnifying glass on time's passing, particularly in music performance situations where one must passively and politely observe "non-events," brings many too close to an acute awareness of their own mortality. The number of comforting situations in which any external noise serves to pierce the silence are manifold: when being jolted awake from sinister and portentous nightmares, it is a relief to have some utterly banal sound pierce the darkness that we lie in, and to jar us out of the hypnagogic terror that would convince us we are alone with the phantasms of our minds (though this does not explain why we approach brightly illuminated and decently populated spaces with the same primal fear of silence associated with excursions into isolated, cavernous darkness.) When the AIDS awareness group ACT UP chose "silence = death" as their rallying cry in 1987, "silence" referred to the mute indifference of communications media and the political class to the existence of a rapidly spreading, mortal disease- yet, twenty years later, this same rallying cry seems to apply to consumer culture's attitude towards all forms of silence. It is equated with all social evils from unproductivity to insolence; seen as a void only willfully inhabited by the anti-human.

## SILENCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Richard Chartier, when describing his own work as an investigation of "the relationship between silence, sound, and the act of listening"<sup>5</sup> speaks to the exploratory imperatives of an entire aesthetic: from the 1990s up to the present, there has been a gradual, curiosity-provoking influx of electronically aided

sound artists who make regular use of quietness as a compositional tool. Such work has served to partially confirm an earlier statement of Douglas Kahn's, i.e. "... the delectation of the underheard, whether they be small sounds or overtones, has been the stalwart tactic of experimental music in the second half of the century."<sup>6</sup> Like much of the other music discussed in this book, pockets of such expression arose simultaneously, within so many different lived environments, that drafting up a linear chronology of actions would be difficult (if not somewhat pointless.) The culture seeded by these musicians is, refreshingly, free of egotistical attempts to elbow one's way to the front of the 'public acceptance' line- and therefore no one is really brazen enough to claim they were "the first" to innovate or revolutionize any aspect of this music. Such claims would naturally be met with skepticism and would be viewed as bad form within a culture that de-emphasizes the need for celebrity. Besides, for every musician that we know of through recorded evidence, there may be another who came to the same conclusions years before, and yet was content to keep such discoveries private (or, though it seems an impossibility in the Facebook era, is equally content to see his or her ideas being adopted in other forums regardless of whether he or she receives proper attribution.)

The name of this sonic genre changes depending on where the form arises: in the metropolitan regions of Tokyo and Kansai it is referred to as *onkyou* [meaning loosely "sound reverberation" or just "sound"]: a term which was originally associated with a sort of *onkyou* "school"<sup>7</sup> and its tutelary performances at Tokyo's multi-purpose Off Site venue from 2000-2005 (Off Site functioned as a gallery and coffeehouse as well as a live space.) Though the essential elements of *onkyou* playing have been closely tied in with the aforementioned intricacies of the Japanese communicative style, one has to be careful of seeing Zen influence *everywhere* within this creative milieu. In Off Site and numerous other micro-spaces within urban Japan, the style's formation was modulated by modern societal restraints as much as it was inspired by an explication of philosophical 'roots': given that these live spaces were not situated within officially recognized entertainment districts, the players at *onkyou* nights had to craft a very restrained style in order to not disturb neighboring residents or businesses. Furthermore, other compatible styles exist in other countries: in Western Europe, a parallel set of sonic maneuvers was christened with the label of New Berlin Minimalism. Steven Roden, an American practitioner, has tried to foreground its tendency towards subtlety and near-imperceptibility by referring to it as 'lower case sound', going as far as to refuse the use of capital letters on the appropriately sparse artwork accompanying his recordings.

I myself would (for lack of anything more universally acceptable) use the term 'digital-age silence'. Unimaginative as it may be, it refers to a characteristic I find unique to this music: its genesis followed the rise of the CD as the dominant format for music storage, as well as all the formats like MiniDisc, MP3, and FLAC [Free Lossless Audio Codec] that followed on the CD's heels. In any of these formats, the introduction of silence or near-silence into the recording can be

sharply distinguished from doing the same on a cassette or a vinyl LP: the amount of 'system noise', or the sound being generated by the sound playback equipment itself, is infinitesimally small on a digital format. No form of interference or system noise, like tape hiss or vinyl crackle, is readily detectable, in many cases you would have to place your ear next to the playback device simply to be reminded that moving parts are at work, to hear the restless whirring of the disc, the liquid squelching sound of the laser navigating its way through the tiny indentations on its playable surface, or perhaps the dyspeptic noises being made by one's hard drive as it processes a new playlist of audio files.

Despite the central role that silence takes within this music, an impressive variety of voicing and tonal color is to be found underneath whatever umbrella term we use for it. Some artists use the feedback from audio and video devices as the *prima materia* from which to compose, some use electronically manipulated or wordless vocals (the idiosyncratic and occasionally frightening output of Ami Yoshida is a standout in this regard, even when not electronically treated), some use output devices devoid of any conventionally 'playable' transducer (e.g. Toshimaru Nakamura's no-input mixer and Taku Sugimoto's manipulation of guitar amplifier hiss.) Still others play a form of computer-based acousmatic music that sounds like the scattering of sonic dust particles or (to use Bernhard Günter's apt metaphor, still relevant since its 1993 introduction) "*un peu de neige salie*" ["a bit of dirty snow."]

Flourishes of conceptual humor often surface to combat the misperceptions of po-faced seriousness within this culture. Before the coming of the digital age, there was a rich history of "anti-records" containing little or no sound on them, but acting as comical enlighteners in other regards: it's hard to stifle a laugh when being confronted with, say, The Haters' silent 7" vinyl platter entitled *Complete This Record By Scratching It, Before You Listen To It On Your Stereo*, or another Haters contribution to participatory art, the *Wind Licked Dirt* LP. The latter features no grooves at all on the record's surface, but does compensate for this shortcoming by including a bag of dirt in the packaging, which the lucky owner can then use to recreate their very own Haters 'performance', rubbing the dirt across the vinyl. Seeing as how contemporaneous Haters performances involved band members watching mud dry and staring at blank TV screens, this activity may provide a decent substitute for their live appearances, for those whose hometowns are not included on the Haters' tour schedule. Another "anti"-album more relevant to the present era is the Argentinian band Reynolds' *Blank Tapes*: a compact disc release assembled solely from the noise produced by, yes, unused cassette tapes. One proud owner of *Blank Tapes* sees it as a multi-purpose object, at once a 'joke,' an honestly intriguing listen, and also

...a subtle attack on the medium of excess, the CD. How many albums need to be trimmed of their fat because the artist felt compelled to fill every millimetre of silver? Now, we're moving

into the age of the Deluxe Edition! Not this one, sir. This is a wonderful tribute to the many minutes of negative space that haven't yet been violated by forgettable b-sides and studio flotsam.<sup>8</sup>

When it comes to instrumentation, the incorporation of silence into the music can be accomplished in a number of ways, as well: it could either be done through literal inaction, such as not touching a hand to an instrument, or through an action which is borderline imperceptible, like playing constant electronic signals at such high frequencies that they teeter on the threshold of audibility and eventually vanish in the upper atmosphere...only to re-appear later in phantom form through the effects of mild tinnitus; a belated 'encore'. An artist like the Sydney-born guitarist and electronics manipulator Oren Ambarchi – also organizer of Australia's "What is Music" festival, host to many of this book's surveyed artists - reverses the polarity by using bass and sub-bass tones which can be felt but not always heard. Trente Oiseaux [lit. "Thirty Birds"] label boss Bernhard Günter shapes electro-acoustic sound clusters of satisfying variance, then mixes the results down so low that ferreting them out becomes more of a personal quest on the behalf of the listener than a mere receipt of audio information. Günter's more intriguing creations could also be an audio herald of nano-technology to come- the sound of impossibly tiny machines at work, as they float through the bloodstream.

To further complicate (or merely diversify) matters, some artists operating within this silence-enhanced realm will refer to their music as 'improvisation', while others consider it a form of 'composition'. Such partitions can be dismantled very easily, though. Taku Sugimoto, whose work since the dawn of the new millennium has relied more and more on intensified emptiness, suggests that it can be seen as both: "[music] means neither 'theme and variations'...nor 'chained and dancing'...listen to the sound as it is...there is almost no distinction between improvisation and composition...to accept all the space."<sup>9</sup>

## RETURNING TO THE WORLD

Whatever we choose to call this variety of sound that relies on low volume / perceptibility, intense concentration, and reflective pauses on behalf of both performer and audience, it has to be admitted that it is followed by a loyal coterie as limited as that which enjoys other ill-defined pursuits like "noise". Those who oppose it often assume that its motives are purely intellectual ones, and perhaps they are relying a little too much on the trite image of the verbally nullified, introverted "bookworm" buried in library stacks. Like certain minimalist forms of visual artwork, it is assumed to be a cynical gesture of opposition from an incomprehensible, hermetic clique: a small cadre of people with such a distaste for the shared human experience that they deliberately cocoon themselves in

alienating expressive forms. Others will insist that such sound should be reserved as the plaything of ascetic religious brotherhoods, or for those who live deeply internalized lives, wishing for no place in a vibrant social universe and preparing themselves for the ultimate silence of biological death by maintaining strict regimens of wordlessness. Some brave souls, like the Berlin-based guitarist Annette Krebs, have in fact submitted to severe ascetic routines as the inspiration for recording, but such cases are still the exception rather than the norm.

Within popular culture, silence has been used just as much in scenarios of seduction as in occasions where one intended to alienate, to repel, or to make others cower before a display of dominant intellect or spiritual awareness. Although Hollywood films, with their habit of cueing up swells of lush romantic music to heighten cinematic representations of love-making, have increased the appetite for having a musical backdrop to these moments of intimacy, silence still wields an incredible power as a seducer and consequently as an amplifier of emotions. Its ability to create an illusion of time's cessation for everyone but the perceiver makes for some of the most intoxicating, intimate moments in the romantic ritual, as does its ability to yank certain bodily processes (e.g. the beating of the heart, and the rhythm of exhalation and inhalation) to the forefront of consciousness. Even the titles of many hit pop songs - see "Don't Talk (Put Your Head On My Shoulder)," "Enjoy The Silence" and "Hush", for starters - seem to acknowledge the fact that silence carries as much of an erotic force with it as do poetic wordplay and baroque, gushing verbal confessions. You could always propose maudlin, introspective titles like Simon & Garfunkel's classic "The Sounds of Silence," written in the wake of America's grief over the Kennedy assassination, to rain on this particular parade- but even a song such as this confirms the role of silence in deeply stirring, communal experiences, rather than its role as a denier of such experiences.

Interestingly, silence does not begin or end with the *music* produced by these artists: a certain silence is also evident in the artists' self-promotion (or lack thereof), and in the advanced degree of self-restraint or inaction that accompanies CD releases, concerts, and other supplemental activities. Secondary literature and biographical information becomes an inessential adjunct to the act of recording and performing, especially when there is no stated goal beyond merely transmitting sound and observing as it assumes its place in the daily flux of energy and sensation. Photographs of artists are rarely used in promotional materials (when such materials even exist at all.) Magazine features on the artists and interviews with the artists, when they appear, tend to ignore quirky anecdotes, gossip, and "shop talk," instead going straight for the jugular: the ideas driving the music. There is, within this milieu, a greater-than-average desire to not see the performer as the center of the music, as Steve Roden illustrates with these comments:

The whole thing is not about me as the artist, as the focus. It's about making these things that don't necessarily point back to me as

being more important than the work. The art and sound culture right now is so much about the artist, the persona of the artist. I talked to someone recently who said he wanted to be 'the first superstar of noise', without thinking that Kenny G is the first superstar of jazz! I mean, it's not a good place to be!<sup>10</sup>

With such limited attempts at promotion and outward projection of personae, music of this genre survives mainly thanks to a famished niche audience willing to discover it on their own, and to make old-fashioned, unadorned word-of-mouth or Internet bulletin board notification act as the most effective means of information dispersal. This situation is encouraged by some artists, such as the Tokyo duo Astro Twin (Ami Yoshida and Utah Kawasaki) who humbly and humorously describe their music as "...boring sounds / un-evolving sounds / unproductive sounds / lazy sounds / garbage-like sounds,"<sup>11</sup> adding the caveat "each sound is junk, but some may be important. They are for you to seek. We want you to find them...that is Astro Twin's request."<sup>12</sup> When they are found, the surprises are plentiful, and present plenty of challenges to those who expect relatively "quieter" music to be a serene shortcut into easy narcosis: Ami Yoshida's vocal repertoire is a pastiche of drawn-out wheezes, glottal aberrations, keening bird-of-prey shrieks, reptilian slurps and occasional sung notes, all of which are then combined with smooth washes of electronic tone (her other partners in electronic sound have included Christoff Kurzman, Günter Müller and Sachiko M.) for devastating effect. With many of these sonic elements regularly employed within the same short audio piece, the unique 'push-pull' effect of the music -a continuous alternating between erotic attraction and outright alienation- is achieved with a greater degree of success than in most other creative genres.

The more well known record labels dealing with digital-age silence and the musical micro-gesture, like Trente Oiseaux, rely on a simple design template that is applied to all of their releases: in the case of this label, each new release up until a point in the early 2000's featured no more than the artist's name and title on a textured paper background (the color of which changed with each successive release.) The CD *Warszawa Restaurant* by Francisco López (who relies on a similarly reduced graphic design template for his releases on other labels), bears only minor dissimilarities when placed alongside Marc Behrens' *Advanced Environmental Control* or Hervé Castellani's *Flamme*. The end effect of this common design scheme effectively mirrors the aesthetics of the sound contained within. In a desperate panic to find some 'hidden' substance within this sparse packaging, the listener's tactile sense is instead engaged by the coarse paper of the CD booklets, an intriguing situation in which the impressions "found" are not necessarily the ones that were originally sought out. As is the case with the music, the lack of a familiar framing device, and the refusal on the artists' behalf to lead the listener by the nose into a world where all is explained, uncovers

those phenomena and epiphenomena which were 'always there'. This extends to how a listener perceives the compact disc itself: in such a context, the bold spectra of color dancing about on the reflective surface of the aluminum-coated polycarbonate plastic disc become all the more vibrant, and even the transparent center hole by the larger ring of clear plastic seems to take on greater significance. These mundane little items become as close as they will get to being perceived as living organisms, rebelling against their status as mere static objects.

This brings us to the other half of the Chuang Tzu quote which opened this chapter: *destroy decorations, mix the Five Colors, paste Li Chu's eyes shut, and in All-Under-Heaven, they'll begin to see the light again*. My seemingly careless play with Taoist ideals here may upset some readers who wonder how a state-of-the-art, technological form of expression can mesh with this largely organic way of life, but closer inspection reveals that the use of digital-age expressive tools is not an automatic disqualification from such a lifestyle. On this subject, I can only defer to Taoist and Zen scholar Alan Watts, who reminds us that

...the Taoist attitude is not opposed to technology per se. Indeed, the Chuang Tzu writings are full of references to crafts and skills perfected by this very principle of 'going with the grain.' The point is therefore that technology is only destructive in the hands of people who do not realize that they are one and the same process as the universe. Our over-specialization in conscious attention and linear thinking has led to neglect, or ignorance, of the basic principles and rhythms of this process, of which the foremost is polarity.<sup>13</sup>

Watts goes on to relate the concept of electricity itself - without which very little of the music mentioned herein could be reproduced - to the Tao, noting that neither force can be explained on their own; both are fundamentals only comprehensible in terms of the phenomena which manifest them.

The concept of 'emptiness' in Taoism also takes on a special meaning far from a concept of 'the void' as purgatory or hell, a fact that is worth considering when confronting the fear of silence. Chuang Tzu refers to the "Tao of Heaven" as "empty and formless," a sentiment Fritjof Capra expands upon in his book *The Tao of Physics*: "[Lao Tzu] often compares the Tao to a hollow valley, or to a vessel which is forever empty and thus has the potential of containing an infinity of things."<sup>14</sup> Put this way, we can see "emptiness" not as a terminus point into which all irretrievably sinks, but as a starting point: we can see silence not as a capitulation on the behalf of the artist, but as an invitation to go beyond sound itself and to experience all available aspects of the phenomenal world. "Empty audio space" has the potential to severely irritate those who expect sound to "explain" something, but for those who go beyond this, the apparent absurdity of making "music" from nothingness takes on the same role as a Zen riddle:

illustrating that nature is a unitary phenomenon, a deeply intertwined organism in which every part contains every other part within itself.

## MUTUAL SACRIFICE

Like the more violent, droning, high-decibel creations that occupy another wing of the same sonic mansion, this form has not met with blanket critical acceptance. It has its obvious champions in music scribes like *Oceans of Sound / Haunted Weather* author David Toop, but it has also generated a host of skeptics who wonder how, if at all, this music differs from the kind of ersatz 'easy listening' experiences meant to be played in the bath by such stereotypical characters as the 'bored suburban housewife' or 'self-conscious yuppie'. Take, for example, this review by Stefan Jaworzyn (formerly of Skullflower, Whitehouse live, etc.) of Steve Roden's first 1993 outing as in *be tween noise, so delicate and strangely made*:

...hardcore Art it most definitely is -with all the trimmings- the title being a dead give-away, perfectly encapsulating Roden's prissy self-image and tedious *modus operandi*- fussy, neo-minimalist puffing, blowing, scraping, tweaking and tinkling...ugh...'experimental' pabulum for New Age sissies. In fact, the more I think about it and the more I listen to it, the more I hate it.<sup>15</sup>

Jaworzyn's impatience with Roden is indicative of a larger public view that digital-age silence is something created by, and for, meek souls: a pandering form of 'relaxation music' camouflaged in the Emperor's New Clothes of inscrutable, 'difficult' avant-garde experimentation. It is sometimes difficult to build a case against such naysayers, when positive reviews of this music make constant allegorical reference to the delicate, transient seasonal phenomena of nature, likening the character of the sounds to that of falling snowflakes, autumn leaves and wisps of summer breeze. Such reviews, unfortunately, do the makers of *onkyou*, 'Berlin Minimalism' et. Al. no favors when they fail to mention the intense *concentration* of energy necessary for making convincing exemplars of this music. This is something that easily equals the intense *release* of energy inherent in louder musical genres, and cannot be said, on a whole, to be the collective mewling of effete "pussies". It should also be mentioned that some performers' re-envisioning of silence as musical material has brought them to the brink of legitimate personal risk- as Paul Hood relates in an interview with David Novak,

In Northern England during the "Japan-o-Rama" tour in 2002, for example, an audience reacted to the extended silences and high-pitched sounds of a performance by Sachiko M by shouting and throwing objects at the stage in what the London promoter described to me as a "near riot." During an Italian tour the same year, the vehicle transporting a group of *onkyou* musicians from a festival was reportedly surrounded by angry fans who blocked the passage of the car and beat their fists on the roof.<sup>16</sup>

It's amusing to consider an earlier set of events in which audiences were agitated to a similar degree - namely, the 'live aktions' of Whitehouse throughout the 1980s and 1990s - since they seem to confirm that audiences may have identical reactions to any given set of unfamiliar extreme phenomena, not solely those that are seen as having a violent or aggressive tincture to them. It is precisely this sense of risk that is proposed by the Basque "computer actor" Mattin as the redeeming feature of "going fragile," or improvising in the "ultra-quiet and sparse" mode of his collaborator Radu Malfatti (and Mattin is himself no stranger to audience confrontations, both self-initiated and uninvited.) Among Mattin's demands to sound improvisors: "you must engage in questioning your security, see it as a constriction. You are aware and scared, as if you were in a dark corridor. Now you are starting to realise that what you thought of as walls existed only in your imagination."<sup>17</sup>

Mattin's enthusiastic pep talk does come with disclaimers, e.g. "when one uses music, not as a tool for achieving something else (recognition, status) but in a more aggressively creative way, it is going to produce alienation."<sup>18</sup> Yet this is all to reinforce the idea that improvisation (again, implied here as the silence-enhanced form that Mattin has produced alongside Malfatti) requires a determined embrace of uncertainty and fear. When, to this end, Mattin quotes Walter Benjamin's essay *The Destructive Character* ("because [the destructive character] sees a way everywhere, he has to clear things from it everywhere"),<sup>19</sup> the similarity between his own attitudes and that of the noise-loving Italian Futurists is remarkable. As such, it is fascinating to see the far-Leftist Mattin agreeing on at least tactical matters with otherwise ideological foes.

Yet the important message implied within this statement is not that extreme ideologies can find common ground in methodology, but that 'voluntary vulnerability' and lack of self-censorship is an essential prerequisite of real 'experimental' music. Naturally, opposing viewpoints do arise from other artists working within the more cutting-edge areas of 21<sup>st</sup> century electronic sound-Terre Thaemlitz has suggested that this 'no backup' approach is a hindrance rather than a help, preferring "the documentational aspect of studio recordings to live performance" because "...in terms of discourse, I equate it with a person's deliberate writings versus their drunk ramblings (presuming, of course, they have anything interesting to say in the first place)."<sup>20</sup> Here the question has to be

asked, though- is the drunkard's 'rambling,' by its unguarded / unscripted nature, the *true* personality of the inebriated person? If we step outside the bounds of music performance and survey human activity as a whole, it seems that greater societal value is placed upon those individuals who can withstand either self-inflicted bouts of unpredictability (like the 'drunkards' mentioned here) or sudden changes in external circumstances, and that the responses to these challenges indicate authentic personality. It would not be unfair, I submit, to attribute some considerable strength of character to those musicians who mine the silence with no guarantees that it will be perceived as anything but a contrarian annoyance.

With all this in mind, Jaworzyn's earlier dismissals also do little to explain away the fact that some of this book's noisiest players also have close ties with the ever-expanding constellation of 'quiet' artists. John Duncan, though much of his catalog comprises sound of the white-hot, speaker-destroying variety, can still find time to share a collaborative CD with Bernhard Günter. The oft -demonic Portland noise artist Daniel Menche can also boast of a kinship with Günter by way of a Trente Oiseaux release. The late Koji Tano, who recorded teeth-grinding tectonic noise under the name MSBR, helped to co-organize improvisational performances of an intensely quiet character, when not organizing noise concerts, and penned reviews of such artists for his encyclopedic *Denshi Zatsuon* ['Electronic Noise'] magazine. Individuals like Sachiko M, Otomo Yoshihide (whom David Novak recognizes as the *de facto* leader of [the] group that put Off Site and *onkyou* on the map"), Annette Krebs, Ralf Wehowsky, Kevin Drumm and even Keiji Haino<sup>21</sup> easily bridge the gap between trumpeting loudness and apparent stillness, giving them a special status as sonic omnivores. Even Taku Sugimoto and Steve Roden began their respective musical journeys in punk rock bands, the latter after chancing upon a performance by notorious L.A. synth-punks The Screamers.

Like it or not, the number of such people is increasing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in accordance with the expansion of the globe's overall population; and those who would criticize them as being 'confused' for playing in more than one mode are sounding increasingly reactionary when they mistake resilience for weakness. In discussion with the cellist and record store owner Mark Wastell, David Toop reveals a valid counterpoint to the 'silence is weak' argument:

Wastell once favoured Reductionism as a way to describe [his music], although now rejects that. He also rejects terms such as sparse, barely audible, quiet, and fragile, all of which suggest a weakness belied by the powerful impact the music can have on those that hear it. [...] 'A musician is defenceless in this genre,' says Wastell. 'He or she has nowhere to hide. His / her material is delivered with such care and diligence that it cannot be destroyed in ill-conceived collaborations. As Morton Feldman said, 'now that things are so simple, there's so much to do.'<sup>22</sup>

Terms like 'reductionism' are still a thorn in the side of the new breed of musicians who dare to commune with quiet, since they imply the creators are cantankerous sorts with a hatred of 'busy' music rather than people who merely have a love of building something out of nothing: Taku Sugimoto faces this conundrum by stating that he is an "additionist" rather than a reductionist, starting with a white canvas every time he sits down to play. In his case, this music *is* being set up as an alternative to something - namely superficiality and 'cool' transience - but not for reasons of mere cynicism:

The most important thing for me is to make something really vertical, something spiritual, like a tower. The whole of the culture is very horizontal, it's surface. We don't really need it, it's just for amusement. Art has become like TV, there's nothing to believe in. We need something spiritual, real culture.<sup>23</sup>

At any rate, you don't need to have achieved the Tao mindset to understand the veracity of Sugimoto's or Wastell's statements: all you have to do is attend a performance of such music to witness the strength this music possesses when done correctly. In Japan I was lucky enough to have access to venues like Off Site and the Uplink Factory, where international showcases of such music were irregularly held. Presentation of this music almost requires an unspoken compact between performer and audience, a mutual willingness to let the long periods of silence unfold and ring in the ears without losing nerve or patience- the audience's struggle to impose restraint on their mouths, bodies and portable electronic devices becomes an appendage to the 'main' performance, and in many cases the feeling of sacrifice is also reciprocated between performer and audience: both parties must give up some freedom of movement or communication in order to more effectively immerse themselves in the silences.

While the filling in of blank spaces by feisty audience disruption may have been the intended effect of the famous endurance-testing Warhol films, it does not seem to be the case with this music. Bodily processes that would be completely ignored while grooving to the 120-decibel sounds of a modern rock combo suddenly re-assert themselves in a most intrusive way: a full complement of coughs, sneezes, wheezes, sniffles and general shifting of body parts can arise from the audience and wreck the sonic construction process- and heaven help you if any involuntary digestive noises assert themselves in such a scenario. In such a setting, it is almost refreshing to see the 'extensions of man' being checked at the door as well, since the audacious nagging of a mobile phone ringtone will most certainly get you escorted from the performance venue and / or personally lambasted by the performers.

One such scenario is as follows: it is a hushed yet "full house" evening at Tokyo's Uplink Factory, where the Dutch label Staalplaat is hosting a characteristically eclectic evening of electronic music, split evenly between the

visiting Netherlanders and locals like the young psychoacoustic maestro Kozo Inada. A wall-to-wall crowd of inquisitive listeners sits cross-legged on the floor of the space, which resembles a well-tended artist's loft: white track lighting shining down onto naked white walls and parquet floorboards. A couple of lanky Goths in leather accoutrements and bullet belts stand pinned against a far wall, looking on with healthy curiosity, and the one-time Staalplaat employee Frans de Waard (also part of the Freiband trio playing that night) is sunk into a leather armchair in the same far corner of the room, trying not to look incongruous as he puffs on a wooden pipe in this venue loaded to the gills with consumer electronic devices. Smoke from the more conventional cigarettes rises from the floor-sitters' lips and nostrils like a thick swamp fog.

For the current performance, Roel Meelkop's calm, lean presence graces one of the many tables strewn with electronic equipment, the now all-too-familiar silver laptop and portable mixing unit perched in front of him. Formerly of the electro-acoustic trio THU20 and also in the group GOEM, Meelkop has an above-average talent for warping naturally occurring sound phenomena into electronic particle streams of varying density and vibrance. Like most artists on the bill tonight, there's a dearth of literature available to explain his exact sound construction methods, and this is presumably intentional. The "schizophonic" feel of this material's obscured origins, and the apparent lack of any desire to clarify such things, make it all the more seductive. Meelkop's performance, while not nearly as challenging to the distraction-starved consumer as Taku Sugimoto's music, is loaded with indefinable and ephemeral sound events; distant breezes and clean hovering tones acting as the shaky bridges between those portions with a greater 'presence' to them.

Just as interesting as Meelkop's computer-generated sounds, though, are the choreographed and humorously self-conscious actions of the audience (which can be seen more easily than usual since the house lights remain only slightly dimmed.) People tiptoe across the room and maneuver with exaggerated caution around the patrons still sitting on the floor, while the Uplink bartender delivers drinks to his thirsty customers in hesitant, slow motions, wincing while placing glasses down on the countertop and hoping that this action does not disrupt the show by coinciding with another dive into the depths of silence. Sign language is improvised on the spot, with some people even going so far as to draw Chinese characters in the air with their fingertips in order to get a point across. Not every extraneous sound can be suppressed for the good of the performance, though: the air conditioning unit abruptly lurches and rattles to life, and even the recurring sound of cigarette smoke being exhaled through pursed lips is highly audible. Given the nature of the sounds Meelkop produces himself, though, these intrusions are actually complementary to the performance- this time, at least, the balance seems to be right.

## WALKING INTO MIDNIGHT

If the audience for the Meelkop show seems appreciative – and they are, as their sincere, beaming faces attest – it is because this is the kind of thing that can be experienced very rarely in one of the world’s commercial epicenters, whether as performance or as the mundane material of everyday, unconsciously enacted routines. Just a few blocks away from the hermetically sealed environment of the Uplink Factory,<sup>24</sup> the incessant burbling of voices rising from the ‘Hachiko’ exit of Shibuya Station melts into a cacophony of looped advertisements emanating from loudspeakers. The rhythmic growls and pukings of assorted motor vehicles add a kind of percussive undercurrent to the whole sonic drama. The noise itself is too blurred to be instantaneously irritating at a sensory level, unless we consider the unspoken message behind much of it: a fusillade of incoming commands and directives urging lockstep uniformity and punctuality, or at the very least a ceaseless transit from one point of consumption to the next. Tokyo and its Japanese metropolitan cousins, unlike those cities built upon the European model (i.e. an administrative center nested within a gradually less active series of inner and outer rings), is a de-centralized aggregate of "functional clusters" designed to each accommodate its own type of activity – rarely, even in the cities' impressive subterranean developments, are there "clusters" that exist for a kind of "constructive *inaction*." Even the larger parks or "green spaces" are colonized for coordinated dance routines, acoustic guitar sing-alongs and other leisure time activities – doubtlessly lots of fun for those involved, but intrusive upon those who wish for a space of reflection that is not a specifically monastic setting.

So, as with Francisco López and his “restless pursuit of nothingness,” there is a sense among the Asian ‘quiet music’ audiences of searching after something that will function as a pause button for their hectic lives and give them more time to discover the multitudinous, exquisite details which normally glide right by them. With life screaming by at Shibuya speed, there really is no time to put it into context, to determine where one fits into the larger scheme of things (or even if ‘fitting in to the larger scheme of things’ is necessary at all.) It is a quest that expands beyond the world of the audible, as can be discovered in an offbeat travel guide entitled *Yami ni Aruku* [Walking in Darkness]. The author of this 2001 volume, “night hiker” Jun Nakano, dedicates chapters to listening for the ‘voice of stones’ while on his solitary mountain treks, as well as penning a chapter entitled “The Pleasure of Being Buried in Darkness”, and even one dedicated to finding web pages which are no more than darkened screens. The last item is especially interesting in light of Noriyuki Tajima's assertion that the Internet represents the "emerging virtual agora" in those Japanese mega-cities where the physical public space serving similar functions is shrinking.<sup>25</sup>

A resurgence of archaic values is slowly, but surely, sneaking into the subculture of the hyper-modern citadels of Asia, and I can attest personally that Taku Sugimoto is not alone as he wearies of “horizontal” culture. Despite its being at, or near, the forefront of global commerce and having a pronounced desire for the transient and gimmicky, Japan still has the world’s largest population of citizens aged 60 and over (it also has the world’s highest median age), those who might be more inclined towards a less turbulent way of life. There are many others, and not just in the musical realm, who seek a reprieve from modern relentlessness: a reprieve from being nearly blinded by the banks of halogen lights installed in Japanese electronics stores and supermarkets, and from other staples of an “always on” society.

Quieting the mind has been the goal of Eastern mystical traditions for thousands of years, but only recently has ‘congestion culture’ –Asian or otherwise- provided the impetus for non-mystical rationalists to attempt this. While massage parlors and public baths provide adequate stress release for the average work-a-day businessman, other more radical forms of escape are part of the urban landscape, for those who look hard enough: hermetically sealed flotation tanks (or “isolation tanks”) filled with warm water and Epsom salts can be found in Manhattan, Chicago, and elsewhere (a website named “Float Finder” lists a scattered number in the U.S. and along the Eastern coastline of Australia, but no Japanese entries as of yet.) Such methods, largely associated with the hallucinogen-based experimentation of John C. Lilly, have not exactly become popular after decades of public availability- but the time may yet come where congestion culture leads to a resurgence in demand for these and other extreme forms of willful noise-cancellation (one caveat here: Lilly himself saw sensory deprivation method of the flotation tank as a means of generating “white noise energy,” a hitherto filtered-out data which he understood as allow[ing] quick and random access to memory and lower[ing] the threshold to unconscious memories [expansion of consciousness.]”<sup>26</sup>)

As could be guessed for a musical culture which is so diversified in terms of its tools, approaches, and geographic bases, not everyone is “of one mind” about how to clear the mind of , or even if the aim of “playing” silence is to internalize that silence. Different treatments of time (which, again, is the only real compositional metric for silence) provide the most dramatic differences in the quest for some meaningful self-realization: like Taku Sugimoto, one could choose to simply not play or act where an action is normally expected. On the other hand, you could fill the space around you with some simplistic, yet constant sound element, in order to prevent the mind from wandering off on its endless digressions. *Touching Extremes* editor Massimo Ricci has preferred the effects of the latter method, saying

I used to play Klaus Wiese’s Tibetan bowl loops day in, day out at high volume to fight the extreme noise that my neighbors made. It was like living in an aquarium, yet those external noises were

somehow silenced and I managed to reach some moment of calmness amidst total mayhem. Now that my surroundings are definitely more tranquil, if I hear birds and wind, or my overall favorite sound – the distant moan of airplanes, which I often quote while writing about certain kinds of music – I can imagine walking a path that could hypothetically lead to a sort of inner quietness, but silence? No way.<sup>27</sup>

Ricci elaborates on his distinction between ‘quiet’ vs. ‘silence’ as follows, while explaining his fondness for the drone as an ideal vessel of the former concept:

What I can say is that static music – the really deep one, not the shit coming from the ‘dark ambient’ market – is the best symbol of silence. It represents it better than music that includes ‘silent’ segments, as long as they could be. When I listen to Phill Niblock, god bless his soul, or to something like Mirror’s *Front Row Centre* – dozen of tracks, a single majestic drone – that sounds like REAL silence to me. The silence of the mind. When the mind isn’t wandering around looking for popcorn reflections about evolution, netherworld, big doors and presumed meditations, but is only blessed by the essential purity of sound, then you’ve reached what’s the nearest thing to silence. All the rest is bullshit – including 4’33”.<sup>28</sup>

## **SENSORY OVERLOAD, OR INFORMATION DEPRIVATION?**

It might seem odd to be profiling this style of music in a book that also lauds the abrasive, engulfing, sensory overload of Industrial culture- but after scratching the surface, we can come to realize that one animating spark behind both sonic subcultures – a zeal for ‘awakening’ dormant perceptual faculties in the listener – is quite similar, although the production processes and ideological subtexts may differ wildly. Proper, concentrated use of both noise and silence takes music beyond the realm of mere sound, making it a total awakener of the senses: ‘active’ rather than ‘passive’ listening occasionally forces us to fill the moments of vague perceptibility with other kinds of information, be it visual, olfactory, or tactile. Naturally, ‘vague’ perceptibility could apply to high-volume showers of white noise in which – like white light – all audible frequencies are contained, but could apply as well as to the musical nano-technology of someone like Bernhard Günter; rhapsodies of tiny mechanical anomalies that require close attention to discover or, if one finds no excitement in the discovery process alone, to be invested with meaningfulness.

To illustrate this concept, consider an anecdote from Samuel R. DeLany's titanic "city book" *Dhalgren*. In this extended prose poem of oneiric strangeness, characters inhabit a city, Bellona, which seems to be a living entity owing to its mysterious spatial and temporal distortions: twin moons and other celestial anomalies appear in the sky, never to be seen again, or major landmarks shift location from day to day. Against this idiosyncratic backdrop, the story's main protagonist, Kid, encounters a former astronaut named Kamp, who relays to him the following about a 'sensory overload' experiment he once encountered:

They had spherical rear-projection rooms, practically as big as this place here. They could cover it with colors and shapes and flashes. They put earphones on me and blasted in beeps and clicks and oscillating frequencies [...] After two hours of fillips and curlicues of light and noise, when I went outside into the real world, I was astounded at how...*rich* and complicated everything suddenly looked and sounded: the textures of concrete, tree bark, grass, the shadings from sky to cloud. But rich in comparison to the sensory overload chamber...*rich*...and I suddenly realized what the kids had been calling a sensory overload was really information deprivation.<sup>29</sup>

Within this story, those who have undergone the same experiment as Kamp are instructed to sift out specific pre-set patterns from the barrage of incoming sights and sounds, although there is a catch: the test group that Kamp belongs to is the 'control group' in the experiment, which did not receive any such patterns, even though they were told this would be the case. Any patterns that Kamp creates are the result of imposing his own will onto this heavily random mass of sensory information. In Kamp's case, it was over-saturation of noise and light that led him to once again see the external world in all its fullness, but this same 'experiment' could be carried out very easily with music of incredible quiet or austerity. Straining our minds to seek out information with which to 'fill the gap,' we are re-introduced to the textures and elements which had long been dismissed as extraneous or transitory information, or merely as tools to help with proprioceptive orientation. Kamp seems to confirm the possibility of this by using a visual example: "Take any view in front of you, and cut off the top and bottom till you've only got an inch-wide strip, and you'll still be amazed at all the information you can get from just running your eye along that."<sup>30</sup>

It is, in the end, just a matter of willfully deciding to do this "cutting" in the first place: we can rise to a newer and more exciting level of contact with the most quotidian occurrences and the most menial objects, but only as active participants, and not as people who expect all incoming information to be presented to us with the naked simplicity of an instruction manual. It will take definite work to overcome years of being inundated with of pop culture trivia,

the loud-yet-insubstantial blather of talk show pundits, and other modern media detritus. Thankfully, though, there is music that makes this process seem not so much like 'work' at all. Once the hostile attitude towards silence is shed, it moves from being a yawning void to being a voluptuous substance. Silence, as employed by the artists mentioned here - and many more like them - is not death, but an essential component in the process of revitalization.

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<sup>1</sup> John Cage, *Silence*, p. 16. Wesleyan University Press, Middleton CT, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Christophe Charles, "Megalopolis Aborigines: The Tokyo-Osaka Action Art Ensemble's 1992 Tour." *Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol. 4 (1994), pp. 99-102 (p. 101.)

<sup>4</sup> Arata Isozaki, "As Witness To Postwar Japanese Art" (trans. Kohso Sabu.) *Scream Against The Sky: Japanese Art After 1945*, ed. Alexandra Munroe, p. 28. Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Chartier quoted in Philip Sherburne, "12K: Between Two Points." *Organized Sound*, Vol. 6 No. 3 (December 2001), pp 171 176 (p. 173.)

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.well.com/~demarini/kahn.html>. Retrieved October 25, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> From all available evidence, this is one genre term that seems to have been decided upon by the artists themselves rather than the critical community. David Novak offers an interesting argument as to why the coining of a new genre term for this type of practice was more liberating than burdensome: " Seeking to avoid the detrimental effects of canon formation, many musicians rename their music in order to maintain authorial control over their own history. For example, part of what led the Chicago-based collective Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) to choose the term 'creative music' in the late 1960s was to 'challenge the use of jazz-related images to police and limit the scope of black cultural expression and economic advancement.'" David Novak, "Playing Off Site: The Untranslation of Onkyo." *Asian Music*, 41:1 (Winter/Spring 2010), pp. 36-59 (p. 42.)

<sup>8</sup> User "Namakemono," review of *Blank Tapes* by Reynolds, June 16, 2008. Available online at <http://www.discogs.com/release/325745>.

<sup>9</sup> Taku Sugimoto, liner notes, *Off Site Composed Music Series In 2001*. A Bruit Secret, Paris, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Steve Roden quoted in "Case Sensitive" by Christoph Cox, *The Wire*, # 229 March 2003, p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> Astro Twin quoted at <http://www.japanimprov.com/astrotwin/profile.html>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Alan Watts, *Tao: The Watercourse Way* p. 21. Pantheon Books, New York, 1975.

<sup>14</sup> Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, p. 212. Shambala, Boston, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> Stefan Jaworzyn, review of "so delicate and strangely made" by in be tween noise. *Music From The Empty Quarter*, August/September 1995, p. 90.

<sup>16</sup> Novak, p. 55.

<sup>17</sup> Mattin, "Going Fragile." *Noise And Capitalism*, p. 21. Arteleku, Madrid, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Terre Thaemlitz quoted in Timothy Jaeger, "The (Anti)-Laptop Aesthetic." *Contemporary Music Review*, 22:4, 53-57 (p. 55.)

<sup>21</sup> See Haino's see *Black Blues: Soft Version*, one of his penultimate expressions of strange evanescence, for a striking example of this.

<sup>22</sup> David Toop, *Haunted Weather: Music, Silence, and Memory*, p. 253. Serpents' Tail, London, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Taku Sugimoto quoted in "Understatement of Intent" by Clive Bell. *The Wire*, # 237 November 2003, p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> Uplink Factory has relocated since the original draft of this article, though the new environs are only slightly removed from the ones already mentioned.

<sup>25</sup> Noriyuki Tajima, "Tokyo Catalyst: Shifting Situations of Urban Space." *Perspecta*, Vol. 38 (2006), pp. 79-90 (p. 89.)

<sup>26</sup> John C. Lilly, *Programming and Metaprogramming in the Human Biocomputer*, p. 76. The Julian Press, New York, 1972.

<sup>27</sup> Personal correspondence with the author, April 2008.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Samuel R. DeLany, *Dhalgren*, p. 610. Vintage Books, New York, 2001.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*