

From Music to Sound: Being as Time in the Sonic Arts

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In the summer of 1979, The Kitchen, New York's center for the experimental arts, mounted a festival titled "New Music, New York."¹ The week-long program presented performances by Philip Glass, Meredith Monk, Tony Conrad, George Lewis, Michael Nyman and others, and marked the coming-of-age of minimalist and experimental music.² In the Spring of 2004, The Kitchen and a host of other New York arts institutions celebrated the 25th anniversary of that event with a festival titled "New Sound, New York," billed as "a citywide festival of performances, installations and public dialogues featuring new works by sound artists who are exploring fresh connections among music, architecture and the visual arts."³ The shift in title—from *music* to *sound*—is emblematic. For, over the past quarter century, "sound" has gradually displaced "music" as an object of cultural fascination. Not only has "sound art" become a prominent field of practice and exhibition, embraced by museums and galleries across the globe. The academy has also witnessed an explosion of interest in auditory history and anthropology led by social scientists who have turned their attention to sound as a marker of temporal and cultural difference.⁴ Within the field of music itself, composers, producers, and improvisers have become increasingly attracted to the broader sonic domains against which music has always defined itself: noise, silence, and non-musical sound.

It is common to think of *music* as a subcategory of *sound*. According to this view, *sound* encompasses the entire domain of auditory phenomena, while *music* is a narrower domain delimited by some selection and organization of sounds. However compelling this ordinary view may be, I want to propose that we conceive of this relationship differently, that, instead of a mere *difference of degree* we think of music and sound as *differences of kind* marked by their different relationships to

¹ A few sentences in this essay are drawn from previous publications: the introduction to *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. xiii–xvii, the original English version of "Wie wird Musik zu einem organlosen Körper? Gilles Deleuze und experimentale Elektronika," *Soundcultures: Über digitale und elektronische Musik*, ed. Marcus S. Kleiner and Achim Szepanski (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag), 162–93, and "Nietzsche, Dionysus, and the Ontology of Music," *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

² Highlights from the festival have recently been released on CD: *From the Kitchen Archives: New Music New York 1979* (Orange Mountain Music, 2004).

³ http://www.thekitchen.org/04S_april.html

⁴ A sampling of such work can be found in *Hearing History: A Reader*, ed. Mark M. Smith (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004) and *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Back (Oxford: Berg, 2003).

being and time. Taking my terms from Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson, I want to argue that the shift from “music” to “sound” marks an ontological shift from *being* to *becoming* and a temporal shift from *time* (*le temps*) to *duration* (*la durée*).

My argument here will be both conceptual and historical. Drawing on two key moments in the history of sonic experimentation over the past half-century, I want to show how *music* has given way to *sound*, and to offer some philosophical speculations on sound, time, and being.

The Reality of Time: Becoming, Duration, and The Virtual

In the opening pages of his recent book *Architectures of Time*, cultural theorist Sanford Kwinter asks: “What would it change in our arts, our sciences, and our technics if time were conceived as something *real*?”⁵ Here, I want to make a start at answering this question with regard to music and sound art. No one has contributed more to the philosophical reconsideration of time than Nietzsche and Bergson. And it is no coincidence that, after periods of neglect, these two philosophers have come to exercise an enormous influence on the thought of the past few decades.

Nietzsche’s ontological project consists in the deconstruction of “being.” Ever since Parmenides and Plato, Nietzsche argues, the West has been obsessed with “being,” that is, with stable and durable entities that are said underlie change, substances that govern change but are transcendent in relationship to it. The very paradigm of this conception of being is the Judeo-Christian God. Hence, Nietzsche’s most famous claim, “God is dead,” ought to be seen not as a religious statement but as an ontological one. The death of God means the rejection of being and an affirmation of the alternative position that there is only nature, that is, ceaseless becoming and change. Being is not transcendent but immanent; and immanent being is becoming. Throughout his corpus, Nietzsche insists that there is only becoming, and that being is a fiction, a pragmatic invention that, for millennia, was misconstrued as a metaphysical reality. “There is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming,” Nietzsche writes, “‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.”⁶

Bergson makes a similar move. He insists that there is only becoming and that, if it is anything, being is simply a modality of becoming. “*There are changes,*” Bergson insists, “*but there are*

⁵ Sanford Kwinter, *Architectures of Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p. 4.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, III: 13, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1992), p. 481. For other texts along these lines, see *The Gay Science* §§108–109 and “‘Reason’ in Philosophy” and “How the ‘True’ World Finally Became a Fable” in *Twilight of the Idols*. For a development of this argument, see my *Nietzsche: Naturalism and Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

*underneath the change no things which change: change has no need of a support.”*⁷ This claim forms part of Bergson’s larger project: to restore the reality of time. He notes repeatedly that, particularly since the rise of classical physics in the 17th century, European culture has asserted the hegemony of space over time. For classical physics, time was essentially unreal or conceived solely in spatial terms as the passage from one state to another. The nature of time was exemplified by the figure of the clock, on which moments—discrete, present entities—are laid out side-by-side in spatial succession.

Against this conception, Bergson argues for the priority of time over space. He reveals that the spatialized, quantified conception of time (*le temps*) conceals another, more primordial experience of time as a qualitative process, a flow in which past, present, and future permeate one another to form a genuine continuum. If abstract time (*le temps*) is conceived as a container separate from, and transcendent with regard to the sequence of states and events it measures, this alternative conception of time (which Bergson calls “duration” or *la durée*) is the very flow that produces beings and events and by which they constantly become-other.

Bergson’s contrasts between space and time, *le temps* and *la durée* are often construed as contrasts between the objective and the subjective, the physical and the psychological. Yet, as Gilles Deleuze and others have shown, duration, for Bergson, is not a subjective experience of time but a general ontology, a theory of being. Though Bergson began his career by offering an analysis of duration in “the immediate data of consciousness,” he gradually moved toward a notion of *being as duration*, a becoming differentiated by various temporal “rhythms,” “vibrations,” “tensions,” “dilations,” and “contractions.”⁸ We can read Bergson, then, as offering an extension of Nietzsche’s conception of becoming that develops its temporal character and that helps us to see how the notion of becoming reconceives both being and time.

I will round off this philosophical *précis* by introducing a final theoretical notion that, inspired by Nietzsche and Bergson, is developed by Gilles Deleuze: the notion of the virtual. Deleuze asks us to conceive of “the real” as consisting of two registers, “the actual” and “the virtual.” For Deleuze, “the virtual” is the repository of potentiality. But this potentiality is not mere futural possibility. Unlike possibility, virtuality is fully existent and real (quoting Marcel Proust, Deleuze calls the

⁷ Henri Bergson, “The Perception of Change,” *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Greenwood, 1968), p. 173.

⁸ This is most explicit in Bergson’s “Introduction to Metaphysics,” *The Creative Mind*, pp. 218–20. See also *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone, 1988), pp. 205ff. See Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1988), pp. 34, 76ff.

virtual “real without being actual, ideal without being abstract”).⁹ Rather, the virtual contains the non-actualized tendencies of real existents. It coexists with the actual, which contracts, expresses, or actualizes the virtual whole. For Bergson, the paradigm for the virtual is the past—not *this* or *that* past event but the “pure past,” the entire field of the past, regions of which are now and then illuminated by memory.¹⁰ In Deleuze, this virtual field goes by a various names, most notably the “Body without Organs” and “the plane of consistency.”¹¹

John Cage: Toward Becoming, Duration, and the Virtual

With this philosophical framework in place, I now want to return to my initial suggestion about the shift from music to sound in contemporary culture. I do not have the space here to tell this story in full. So I will simply draw attention to two key turning points. The first of these occurs in the 1950s with John Cage and his circle. Cage, I think, inaugurates a shift in music akin to the philosophical shift prompted by Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze. For Cage inaugurates a “deconstruction of music”; and he does so precisely with reference to becoming, duration, and the virtual.

In a lecture delivered at Darmstadt in 1958, Cage lays out what he takes to be the essential formal aspect of European art music, the production of “time-objects”: “the presentation of a whole as an object in time having a beginning, a middle, and an ending, progressive rather than static in character, which is to say possessed of a climax or climaxes and in contrast a point or points of rest.”¹² Such musical “time-objects” are cut by the composer from the flux of becoming and duration. In contrast with this open flux, these musical works are bounded and fixed in the form of a score that insures the identity of the work over time and that determinately regulates the behavior of performers whose role is to carry out the instructions of the composer and score.

One can imagine a number of criticisms of this notion of music, for example that it places the performer in the role of a mere copyist or that, for audiences, such works could soon become predictable and dull. Yet Cage’s objections are of another sort. They are, precisely, ontological. Cage objects to the notion of music as a *being* and insists that it become a *becoming*—“a process essentially purposeless,” “a process the beginning and ending of which are irrelevant to its nature.”¹³ That is, Cage argues that music should come into accord with the post-theological world

⁹ See Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, p. 96, and *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 208.

¹⁰ See Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, chapter 3.

¹¹ On the relationship of this notion to contemporary music, see my “Wie wird Musik zu einem organlosen Körper?”

¹² John Cage, “Composition as Process II: Indeterminacy,” *Silence* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), pp. 36 (*Audio Culture*, p. 178).

¹³ Cage, “Composition as Process II: Indeterminacy,” p. 38 (*Audio Culture*, pp. 182–3).

in which we live, a world that is fundamentally *open*, without origin, end, or purpose. This is the meaning of Cage's famous imperative: "art must imitate nature in her manner of operation."¹⁴ That is, art—music—must be a becoming not a being, duration not time.

This, of course, is the genius of Cage's *4'33"* (1952), which he consistently deemed his most important and successful piece.¹⁵ At issue in *4'33"* is a confrontation between *le temps* and *la durée*. The title of the piece explicitly refers to the spatialized time of the clock—a fact Cage underscores by noting that the title could also be read "four feet, thirty-three inches."¹⁶ And, of course, the performance of the piece is regulated by a stopwatch. Yet the arbitrariness of this temporal scope (determined through chance procedures) and the sonic experience it discloses indicates that *4'33"* is after another experience of time: the time of duration and the virtual, into which it opens an aural window. Beyond music, it opens up the infinite and continuously unfolding domain of worldly sound.

The sequel to this work, *0'00"* (1962) further radicalizes this argument about temporality. The piece calls for "nothing but the continuation of one's daily work, whatever it is, [. . .] done with contact microphones, without any notion of concert or theater or the public." "What the piece tries to say," continues Cage, "is that everything we do is music, or can become music through the use of microphones; so that everything I'm doing, apart from what I'm saying, produces sound." Again, Cage includes the temporal marker. But, at the same time, he reduces it to zero, puts it under erasure. "I'm trying to find a way to make music that does not depend on time," he said of the piece. "[I]t is precisely this capacity for measurement that I want to be free of."¹⁷

The aim of *4'33"* and *0'00"*, then, is to open time to the experience of duration and to open musical experience to the domain of sound. It is also to open human experience to something beyond it: the non-human, impersonal flow that precedes and exceeds it. "I think music should be free of the feelings and ideas of the composer," Cage remarks. "I have felt and hoped to have led other people to feel that the sounds of their environment constitute a music which is more interesting than the music which they would hear if they went into a concert hall."¹⁸ Cage urges the composer "to give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let

¹⁴ See, for example, Cage's "Introduction to *Themes & Variations*," *Audio Culture*, p. 221.

¹⁵ See, for example, *Conversing with Cage*, 2nd edition, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 70–1, 86.

¹⁶ Cage, *Conversing with Cage*, p. 70.

¹⁷ Cage, *Conversing with Cage*, p. 74.

¹⁸ Cage, *Conversing with Cage*, p. 70.

sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments.”¹⁹ “Music is permanent,” he writes, “only listening is intermittent.”²⁰

“Chance” and “silence” are Cage’s transports into this transcendental or virtual domain.²¹ These two strategies allow the composer to bypass his subjective preferences and habits in order to make way for sonic conjunctions and assemblages that are not his own—that, to quote Deleuze, are “preindividual” and “impersonal.” And “silence,” for Cage, names not the absence of sound (an impossibility, he points out), but the absence of *intentional* sound, an attention to the sonic life of the world or nature. *4’33”* remains the Cage’s most elegant attempt along these lines. But so much of Cage’s work—his work with radios in the 1950s, for example—reveals that he conceived of sound (natural and cultural alike) as a ceaseless flow, and composition as the act of drawing attention to or accessing it.

Sound Art and the Experience of Duration

Beginning from Cage, one could go on to show how the post-Cagean legacy furthered this reconception of being, time, music and sound. Episodes in this historical story might include Morton Feldman’s efforts to reclaim “Time in its unstructured existence”²²; musical minimalism’s interest in the “pure sound-event” (Glass) and in what Deleuze calls “non-pulsed time”²³; experimental music’s rejection of a closed, physical model of music in favor of an open, biological model; the eradication of the time-object and the embrace of ephemerality in Free Jazz and Improvised Music; and DJ Culture’s dissolution of the record-object into a continuous and anonymous sonic flux. Such a story would show how, within the domain of “music” itself, the past half-century has witnessed a general shift from *music* to *sound*, from the activity of

¹⁹ Cage, “Experimental Music,” *Silence*, p. 10.

²⁰ Cage, “Introduction to *Themes & Variations*,” *Audio Culture*, p. 224. Compare Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: “music is not the privilege of human beings: the universe, the cosmos, is made of refrains.” *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 309.

²¹ Note that, following Kant, Deleuze distinguishes between the “transcendental” and “the transcendent.” The former names the conditions for the possibility of actual sensual experience, while the latter names what transcends sensual experience altogether. The description of a “transcendental” or “virtual” field that precedes the subject occupied Deleuze throughout his career, from *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 100–17 to “Immanence: A Life,” in *Pure Immanence*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone, 2001), pp. 25–33. In the latter text, Deleuze elaborates on the distinction between “the transcendental” and “the transcendent.”

²² Feldman, “Between Categories,” *Give My Regards to Eighth Street*, pp. 87.

²³ See Philip Glass quoted in Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, trans. J. Hautekiet (London: Kahn and Averill, 1983), p. 90. Deleuze himself associates “non-pulsed time” with Cage and minimalism. See *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 267 and my “Wie wird Musik zu einem organlosen Körper?” pp. 173–7.

composition and the fixing of sound in space and time to a notion of *sound as time*, as flow, duration, becoming.

Yet, however rich and important were the reconceptions of sonic being and time undertaken by Feldman, minimalism, experimental music, improvised music, and DJ Culture, they remained somehow bound to the discourse and practice of music. The emergence of sound art²⁴ in the early 1970s—and its proliferation over the past decade or so—signals a more profound break with this discourse and practice. Withdrawing from the space of the concert hall and renouncing the rituals of musical performance and musical listening, sound art affirms the idea of sound of an impersonal flow. As such, it constitutes the most thoroughgoing acceptance of the challenge presented by Cage’s *4’33”* and *0’00”*.

The discourse and practice of sound art has tended to focus on issues of space, site, and architecture. From Alvin Lucier’s *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1971) and Max Neuhaus’ “Place Works” to Achim Wollscheid’s projects for public buildings and Toshiya Tsunoda’s exploration of environmental vibrations, sound art practice has concerned itself with the resonances of sound in space. And, as attested by recent volumes such as *Site of Sound: Of Architecture and the Ear* and *Surface Tension: Problematics of Site*, sound art discourse has followed suit.²⁵ As such, it has ignored the profound reconception of time fostered by sound art.

For decades now, one of sound art’s founding fathers, Max Neuhaus, has contrasted his early career as a musician with his later sound art practice by drawing a distinction between time and space. In a program note from 1974, Neuhaus writes:

Traditionally composers have located the elements of a composition in time. One idea which I am interested in is locating them, instead, in space, and letting the listener place them in his own time. I am not interested in making music exclusively for musicians or musically initiated audiences. I am interested in making music for people.²⁶

²⁴ “Sound art” is a notoriously slippery and contested term. By this term, I mean, first and foremost, works of art that focus attention on the materiality and transmission of sound, and that are presented in galleries, museums, and public spaces. This definition is not intended to be exhaustive or rigorously precise, but merely heuristic.

²⁵ *Site of Sound: Of Architecture and the Ear*, ed. Steve Roden and Brandon LaBelle (Los Angeles: Errant Bodies Press, 1999). *Surface Tension: Problematics of Site*, ed. Ken Ehrlich and Brandon LaBelle (Los Angeles: Errant Bodies Press, 2003).

²⁶ Max Neuhaus, “Program Notes,” *Sound Works, Volume I: Inscription* (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1994), p. 34.

This idea is echoed in Neuhaus' introduction to his collection of "Place Works":

Communion with sound has always been bound by time. Meaning in speech and music appears only as their sound events unfold word by word, phrase by phrase, from moment to moment. The works collected in this volume share a different fundamental idea—that of removing sound from time, and setting it, instead, in place.²⁷

Finally, reflecting on his permanent sound installations, Neuhaus recently told an interviewer: "The important idea about this kind of work is that it's not music. It doesn't exist in time. I've taken sound out of time and made it into an entity."²⁸

Neuhaus casts the music/sound art dichotomy in terms of time/space—a distinction reiterated by younger sound artists such as Stephen Vitiello.²⁹ Yet the time/space distinction is a red herring. The real distinction is between two kinds of time: *pulsed time* (the time of music and meaning) and *non-pulsed time* or *duration* (the time of sound matter itself). The 1974 passage suggests just this distinction, contrasting the time of musical composition with the listener's "own time," and distinguishing the time of "musicians or musically initiated audiences" from the time of ordinary "people." Here Neuhaus' discourse converges with that of Morton Feldman, who dedicated himself to liberating duration from clock time. Alluding to Bergson, Feldman remarked: "I am not a clockmaker. I am interested in getting to Time in its unstructured existence." "I feel that the idea is more to let Time be, than to treat it as a compositional element. No—even to construct with Time won't do. Time simply has to be left alone." Recalling Cage, he concluded: "not how to make an object, not how this object exists by way of Time, *in* Time, or *about* Time, but how this object exists *as* Time. Time regained, as Proust referred to his work."³⁰

Dispensing with the protocols of performance and composition, sound art is better equipped than music to foster this relationship to time. Take, for example, Neuhaus' most famous permanent installation, *Times Square* (1977–92, 2002–), a stream of rich metallic drones broadcast from deep inside a ground vent in New York City's busiest district. Audible but unobtrusive, the piece blends

²⁷ <http://www.max-neuhaus.info/soundworks/vectors/place/>

²⁸ Max Neuhaus quoted in Alicia Zuckerman, "Max Neuhaus' 'Times Square,'" *Arts Electric* (2002): <http://www.arts-electric.org/articles0203/020530.neuhaus.html>.

²⁹ See the conversation between Vitiello and Marina Rosenfeld in *NewMusicBox* (March 1, 2004): <http://www.newmusicbox.org/article.nmbx?id=2414> and "Audio Files: Sound Art Now: An Online Symposium" www.artforum.com (April–May 2004).

with and subtly alters the sonic environment; and in so far as that environment is ever-shifting (dawn, the morning commute, rush hour, midnight), the installation is new each moment. Though continuous, *Times Square* is experienced in temporal slices that serve as openings onto a flow of duration of which we are a part but that also surpasses us. In this way, *Times Square* (which we might read as “time’s square”) presents an indefinite extension of 4’33” and, even more fully than that piece, affirms Cage’s dictum: “music [or sound] is permanent; only listening is intermittent.”

This relationship between sound and duration is equally disclosed in recent projects such as Christina Kubisch’s *Electrical Walks* (2003–), which invite listeners to wander a territory wearing headphones designed to receive electromagnetic signals. Where Janet Cardiff’s audio walks unfold in the pulsed time of narrative and composition, directing the movements of listeners via a pre-recorded sound track, Kubisch’s walks operate very differently and bear a very different relationship to time and space. Open-ended and uncomposed, the *Electrical Walks* simply provide listeners the means by which to tap into the invisible currents of electromagnetic sound that flow through the spaces of modern life. Such an experience not only provides a *figure* for duration, the continuous, open-ended, and qualitatively heterogeneous flow of time. It places us within duration itself.

Conclusion: Toward A Sonic Materialism

I have tried to show that, over the course of the last half-century—and, particularly in the past decade—we have witnessed an important shift from the traditional conception of *music* to a notion of *sound-itself*. I suggested that we think this shift not only as the movement from a narrower domain of music to a broader domain of sound, but as marking a shift in our relationships to being and time. Music, I argued, constitutes a domain of beings, time-objects that spatialize sound and that mark a pulsed time, the tempo of narrative and the subject, forms with beginnings, middles, and ends. I argued that sound reveals to us something different: not being *in* time but being *as* time, what Nietzsche calls “becoming” and Bergson “duration.” And I tried to show that “sound” constitutes a kind of virtual or transcendental dimension, a vast field of sonic forces and fluxes in relation to which any particular sonic environment or piece of music is a mobile section. Music, it seems to me, tends to foreclose this domain and this experience, offering the illusion of being, autonomy, boundedness, fixity, and human invention. Sound art, on the other hand, opens up this domain giving us a glimpse of the virtual whole.

Extending the analyses of Gilles Deleuze and Manuel De Landa, I want to urge that we think of sound as an anonymous, non-human, and impersonal flux, a flow or becoming akin to geological

³⁰ Feldman, “Between Categories,” *Give My Regards to Eighth Street*, pp. 85–88.

flows, flows of genetic material, flows of language—natural fluxes with different rhythms and speeds.³¹ To be sure, music forms a part of this flow. But it is only a part of a more general sonic becoming. On this model, the analysis of sound and music would not concern itself with the examination of *forms* (the organization of pre-given, pre-individuated entities: pitches, scales, meters, works, etc.) but with the investigation of fluid matter distinguished by different speeds, forces, and intensities. Cage's *4'33"*, Neuhaus' *Times Square*, Kubisch's *Electrical Walks* and so much of contemporary sound art invite us to think of sound in these materialist terms—sound as a continuous and heterogeneous fluid material that makes audible the immanence of being and time.

³¹ See Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).