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**OBJECT-DISORIENTED
SOUND: LISTENING IN THE
POST-DIGITAL CONDITION**

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Prelude: the sonic explosion

For some time, I have been deeply concerned with the mindful potential of listening as the subjective ramification of auditory perception. The thoughts that envelop these concerns essentially stem from questions of perpetual mobility, flow, fluidity, flexibility, and nomadism that are perhaps symptomatic of the contemporary post-digital culture. A nomadic listener is affected by a fleeting sound, which appears and diminishes as it triggers an amorphous stream of subjective contemplation and thoughts bordering on the immediate known-ness of the sonic phenomenon yet simultaneously moving toward the realm of the unknown.

What is the “unknown” embedded in a sonic phenomenon? Does it operate outside of the reality of the sonic object-hood and epistemic structure of the sonic phenomenon? Even object-oriented philosophers like Graham Harman have argued that the reality of anything outside of the correlation between thought and being remains unknowable. Harman has further criticized early phenomenologists’ approaches to sonic phenomena as reductive, such as:

If I hear a door slam, then I hear a door slam, and this experience must be described in all its subtlety; to explain this experience with a scientific theory of sound waves and eardrum vibrations is derivative, since all we encounter directly is the experience of the door slamming (Harman quotes Husserl, in Kimbell 103-117).

If we explore such a sonic phenomenon, we may find that a specific sound leads to a specific listening state inside the listener, who may, in a nomadic condition, indulge in taking the phenomenon as a premise or

entryway into a world that he or she did not previously know. The listener may address the sound relating it to the imagining and remembrance of a number of amorphous moods triggered by the temporality of listening, instead of deciphering its objective meaning, location-specific identity, or other spatial information embedded in the characteristic texture and tonality of the sound. Today’s wind may not sound like mere wind, and the lonely screeching of the windowpane may not sound like mere friction between glass and wood—the wind and the windowpane may sound like something more abstract in the sense that they are generating memories and imagination of other realities that deviate and refract in response to the immediate materiality of the sonic event. These sounds, as impermanent as they might seem to the ears of a wandering listener, may open hidden doors and obscure entrances that invite further perceptual meanderings in the spiritual realm of contemplation and a myriad of thoughts transcending the merely epistemic knowledge-based identity that the sounds would otherwise embody. The epistemological problems and ontological questions posed by such object-disoriented sonic explosions are the primary areas of interrogation and praxis in this paper. Ancient Indian philosophers would define these sonic explosions in terms of *dhvani* (sound heard by the ear) and *sphōta* (sound grasped by the intellect) suggesting that: “A sound changes into language and acquires meaning only after a certain explosion of sounds” (Barlingay 27), emphasizing the subjective and perspectival resonances through which a sonic entity is perceived by the listener. These are the conceptual bases on which I posit my questions and hypothesis. Addressing a practice-based approach, I explore the basic tenets of my ongoing project *Doors of Nothingness* (2012–ongoing) and sound installation/interventions *Mind Your*

Own Dizziness (2014 –ongoing) — the first of a series of works emerging from the project — which incorporate the concept of “hyper-listening” emphasizing the “mindful” aspects of listening and the resultant perceptual unfolding of sound into the sonic explosion. Let me elaborate on these concepts in the light of the post-digital condition. But firstly, what does “post-digital” suggest?

Fugue: the post-digital milieu

In order to create the premise of interpreting the provocative term “post-digital,” I wish first to underscore the extensive and ever-growing nomadism of agents attuned to the psychogeographic evocation of physical locations and corporeal places in the post-globalized universe of intense mobility. In this universe, we encounter an immediate place and situate ourselves within it in ways that are intertwined; they are not only discreet physical experiences but sometimes appear as hybrid and syncretic environments. For example, my smartphone records sound from a place and sends it elsewhere to someone else via applications like *whatsapp*; one place becomes merged with another as I overhear it on a Skype chat from someone far away, thus I move, migrate and navigate from one place to another more mentally than I do physically. The sonic interactions with these multiple places through which I move and the superimposed locations upon which I trespass tend to be unfixed and evolving rather than having a concrete structure (Chattopadhyay).

Due to extensive mobility as an active listener within constantly changing places, locale and landscapes transcending the boundaries between global, local and discreet digital environments, my perception

and cognition of sounds cannot be posited within a specific place-based source, nor can a locative identity be extracted from the sound because of its transient nature. As my nomadic movements intensify, I cannot relate myself to one place at one time; my sense of “rootedness” dissolves into a perpetual nomadism by itinerant sonic interaction with semi-known and/or unknown places and pseudo-locales perceived in the mind. In this nebulous cosmos of rapid flow, the interpretation of sound contents contributes to the formation of speculative notions like “post-global,” “post-local,” or “post-digital” via the extensions of social networks, greater interactivity and/or interpenetration, and psychic personalization of (sound) media. These features result in an increase in flexibility and disembedding of sound contents from their sources as social acts beyond mere geographical limits and identities. But these phenomena are intensely engaged with economic and cultural shifts, as well. As early as 1995, David Morley was writing about this future in his work *Spaces of Identity*:

We emphasize two keys [...] on the one hand, technological and market shifts are leading to the emergence of global image industries and world markets; we are witnessing the ‘deterritorialisation’ of audiovisual productions and the elaboration of trans-national systems of delivery. On the other hand, however, there have been significant developments towards local production and local distribution networks. (Morley 1-2)

Within the merging local-global boundaries, one culture develops constant awareness of the existence of other. Cultural components like sound recordings travel through this dispersed space in mutual interaction, influencing and infusing each other,

although the aspects of travel prevail over these implied interactions. These “deterritorialized” wanderings substantially contribute to an emergent condition of primarily mobile and itinerant beings engaged in the liberated ebb and flow of events, phenomena, and ephemera, which operate arguably beyond digital essentialism. This essentialism in the digital revolution, which was the predominant theme of the late 1990s and early part of this millennium, starts to dissolve into an ever-growing field of intangible data and immoderate information, with Nicholas Negroponte aptly proclaiming: “Like air and drinking water, being digital will be noticed only in its absence, not by its presence. Face it—the digital revolution is over” (12). Alongside this comes a sense of saturation across the prevailing digital divide between rapidly digitized and already digital contents like samples, glitches, and digital-acoustic artifacts. During this process, digital media were turning our world into an augmented one. In this rapidly emerging environment, we found that different forms of older media, such as recorded sound, were constantly moving, being relocated, reinterpreted, and engaged in conflict with these already digital contents within an imminent convergent culture. The older sound contents could be as varied as archival sound recordings, clips of music and songs, spoken words, environmental field recordings, and older film soundtracks. We could observe a certain movement of these sound contents from a localized state (creative/productive end) to a globalized state (consumptive end) and vice versa. For example, a piece of field recording was digitally mediated so as to be considered a work of sound art, or a “traditional” song from one part of the world was transmitted via the internet to another part of the world as a “folk” song. The question was whether a “fluid-local” sound element was losing its characteristics or retaining its identity over

the course of a “hyper-global” shift. We could also ask how such location-specific sound elements were received and interpreted at the widest end of a rather volatile audience reception within the dissemination of digital media technology and the establishment of e-commerce. In this very context, Robert Pepperell and Michael Punt aptly decode the term “post-digital”:

The term ‘Postdigital’ is intended to acknowledge the current state of technology whilst rejecting the implied conceptual shift of the ‘digital revolution’ — a shift apparently as abrupt as the ‘on/off’, ‘zero/one’ logic of the machines now pervading our daily lives. New conceptual models are required to describe the continuity between art, computing, philosophy and science that avoid binarism, determinism or reductionism. (Pepperell and Punt 2)

The central question arising from interest in the sonic was the ongoing dialogue between older sound contents from primarily locative analogue sources and digitally generated ephemeral travelling sounds, while rapid digitization was rendering the interpretation of older/analogue sound contents as digitalized sonic artifacts beyond the mere binarism, determinism, or reductionism of the old vs. new or digital vs. non-digital or global vs. local discourse. These phenomena contributed to the formulation of the speculative concepts of the “post-digital” by regarding digitalized artifacts as displaced, relocated, and transformed, thereby dissolving the digital divide between already digital artifacts and rapidly digitized contents bringing them into interaction on the one hand, and their reinterpretation as an elusive field of data on the other.

Once this saturation is reached, Kim Cascone argues that, in the domain of sound

art and experimental music, “the medium of digital technology holds less fascination for composers in and of itself” (Cascone). In deciphering the term “post-digital aesthetics” in relation to experimental music, he speaks of the “failure” of digital technology and the way in which it triggers subversive practices with glitches, clippings, aliasing, distortion, etc. His formulation of the “post-digital” thus accommodates the breaking down of “digital essentialism” into fragments of digital sonic artifacts that can be reused and repurposed in new sound-works in a fluid, flexible, and inclusive manner.

I further expand this conceived “failure” into the inability of digital media technology to identify, structure, and archive the transient and elusive sounds from the nameless, placeless, and faceless background world of data as the derivative of the ebb and flow of digital artifacts. In this world of “big data” (Rasmus Helles and Klaus Bruhn Jensen), “data abundance,” and “data flood” (Steve Lohr), itinerant sound content (the digitized file or artifact) essentially eludes its locative character, spatial identity, normative structure (such as digital, analogue, or hybrid), ontological source identity, and epistemic knowledge-based objecthood. But how do I link this to the post-digital?

Coda: Sounding the post-digital

Such behaviors of sound are accentuated in the post-digital universe of “big data,” contributing to the elusive identity of the “digital (sound) object” (compared to “non-digital” objects, devices, and systems) and posing problems of authentication and/or preservation, thereby proliferating a sense

of “absence” in a digital sound object’s recognition, identification, and negotiation of the corresponding knowledge-structure upon a network of listening. In their work *A Theory of Digital Objects*, Jannis Kallinikos, Aleksi Aaltonen, and Attila Marton claim that “digital objects are marked by a limited set of variable yet generic attributes such as editability, interactivity, openness and distributedness that confer them a distinct functional profile”. This leads to a profound sense of “instability” as evasive and fleeting artifacts that contrast with the solid and self-evident nature of already-old sound media, such as sound recordings on tape, CD, file systems, or other types of storage. The fluid and mutating nature of that universe of digital objects and their diffusion across the social fabric makes them difficult to authenticate, preserve, or archive in the social memory and knowledge base. The elusive flow of digital objects, carrying a multitude of sound contents, problematize their (sound’s) objecthood, rendering them more as ephemera than even discreet artifacts.

On the other hand, sound does indeed seem “less esoteric” in this post-digital milieu because of our “newfound comfort with the immaterial world of pure data and information flowing through the cyberspace” (Gopnik qtd. in Dayal). The contemporary media environment allows the separation of sounds from their locations and facilitates their travel across hyper-dispersed networks as “background” of data flow. A sound that is disembodied from its locational specificity causes multiple layers of mediation across its multiple receptions and interpretations outside of place, time, and context — but in the mind of the listener — whether in an audio streaming network on the internet, a digital sound composition published on a net label, or exhibited within the augmented space of an interactive installation work. In an interactive art piece, identification of a

sound event can be understood through its subjective interpretation as an augmented auditory situation. The post-digital discourse essentially relates to the perpetual transience of these amorphous but fertile auditory situations (Chattopadhyay) spatially as well as temporally. It is evident that, in this milieu of sound's explosion of substance into subjective interpretations, the production and reception of sounds over greater mobility and interactivity leads to the transformation of the epistemic structure of the sounds beyond their objecthood in the post-digital condition. Admittedly, at this stage, my motivation lies in delving into the question of sound's object-disoriented behavior upon the mindful listening.

Variation I: Object Disorientation of Sound

Let me elaborate on what I mean by the "object-disoriented behavior" of sound. To do this, we need to go back in time and excavate the term "sound object." Pierre Schaeffer, arguably the founder of *musique concrète*, coined the term "sound object" (*objet sonore*), which paved the way for a new kind of perception — "acousmatic listening." To Schaeffer, the "sound object" was an intentional representation of sound (Demers) to its listener. With the rise of new audio technologies, the "sound objects" recorded on magnetic tape or other media were no longer referred to a sound source, hence the musical exploration of the "acousmatic experience" of sounds that one hears without seeing the causality behind them. The emphasis here was on the reduced listening state instead of causal listening, if we borrow Michel Chion's terminology. The problem here is the imposition of the word "object"

over "sound." The intrinsic flaw in reduced listening as Schaeffer conceptualized it in *The Theory of Sound* Object is that it assumes that sound has an "a priori ontological foundation" (Kane qtd. in Demers 43) that is separate and distinct from any cultural or historical (or even personal) associations it might have subsequently acquired. According to scholars such as Joanna Demers, this assertion is problematic on both practical and theoretical counts. Listeners have difficulty hearing sounds divorced from their associations; at the same time, it is nearly impossible for the human listening faculty not to ascribe a multiplicity of causes to a sonic phenomenon. Furthermore, in practice, the listener is almost certain to simultaneously create imagined gestures or link a sound to its illusory myriad of sources, evoking some kind of contemplative and thoughtful imagery in this process of mental resonance and mindful personalization of sounds into various listening states.

In his seminal writings, for instance in the article "Aural Object," film-sound scholar and early phenomenologist Christian Metz expresses serious doubts about the object specificity of sonic phenomena in scholarly thinking following Schaeffer. Metz instead focuses on the "characteristics" of sound and emphasizes the problematic aspects of locating sound's object-oriented or location-specific source. He states that "Spatial anchoring of aural events is much more vague and uncertain than that of visual events" (Metz 29). In classical sound studies (Rick Altman et al.), scholars have already underpinned the issue of sound's problematic relation to its object or source and emphasized its interpretative nature following its production: "Sound is not actualized until it reaches the ear of the hearer, which translates molecular movement into the sensation of sound" (Altman 19). Altman speaks here of a sound event as defining the trajectory

of the essential production and subsequent reception of sound content. Its narrative, as Altman terms it, is hypothetically bound to the source that produces it. These spatial sources of sound, or the sounding object when producing sound, are spatially defined or connected to a place, but are not rendered until and unless they are carried by a medium (such as a tape recording) to reach the point of reception and subsequent interpretation. By the same token, a sound is remediated whenever it is digitally converted from its analogue recording source into the digital format. Digitization further dislocates sounds from their sources, turning them into discreet data in the nebulous post-digital environment as discussed above. Sound contents enter the domain of constant travel, flexibility, and flow at different stages of digitalization toward reaching a saturation state of an assumed “post-digital” economy/ecology, in the process they are freed from the object or source. Sounds thus, in the post-digital condition, imply mobility and subsequent object disorientation. However, the process of interpretation is more complex than it appears at its perceptual level. Contributing to this discourse, New Media scholar and theorist Frances Dyson argues concerning the “sound object” that “first — find a way of discussing and representing sound unhinged from the visual object, second, find a device (the tape recorder) that will somehow enable such a representation, and finally, mask the mediation of that device by arguing for an ontological equivalence between the reproduced sound and the original sonic source” (Dyson 54). This ontological equivalence might be difficult for a listener to establish in a nomadic condition in which a specific sound presents a multitude of amorphous listening states inside the listener’s mind, leading to a sonic explosion of object-disoriented but mood-based streams of thoughts within the nomadic listener’s consciousness.

Variation II: The nomadic listener

At this juncture, a nomadic listener floating across the post-digital milieu may interact with the background noise or the unknowable sounds of nameless, placeless, and faceless flow of sound data, which inculcates a sort of “semantic fatigue” so that, eventually, they seem cut adrift from the sources or origins (Demers 42) in the mind of the listener. Listeners in this process may sensitize their ears to the pseudo-object of the sounds and are thus able to deconstruct them into their listening selves through an evocative capacity toward a sonic explosion as streams of timeless sonic states of interconnected reveries, ruminations, and musings. The “unknown” embedded in the wandering shadows of sounds is explored and given a context by the nomadic listeners’ intervention into their appearing and diminishing, leaving object-disoriented states of feelings or moods.

Variation III: Hyper-listening

Let us indulge in further philosophical musings triggered by listening in the post-digital milieu and attend to what John Cage claims: “Silence is not acoustic. It is a change of mind” (Cage qtd. in Popova). This indulgence will require us to set aside “epistemic” issues of recognizing the source or “object” of sound and instead focus on the subjective and inward perception of sound within the “self” or the “mindfulness” of the nomadic listener. Following this methodology, we can examine the way in which the memory, imagination, and personal experience of the itinerant listener alter the character of

sound. Taking my point of departure in the epistemological basis of the sound object, I now introduce an alternative methodology of listening in the post-digital condition, which I term “hyper-listening,” meaning that I intend to relate to the higher-level/psychic pre/post-cognitive processes triggered by listening to the object-disoriented sounds in terms of creating thought-provoking auditory situations. This method perhaps operates on the fringe of what artist Yolande Harris explains in her doctoral thesis as creating “situations where sound can affect and activate people’s experiences in a personal way” (Harris 4-7) but at the same time expands the idea of “experience” to include conscious contemplation. Much of this argument resonates with Roy Ascott’s recent writings in which he speaks of “interconnectedness, nonlocality and the inclusion of consciousness” (Ascott) embedded in new media art that includes process-based artistic practices with sound and listening. According to Ascott, “Process-based art implies field awareness, in contrast to the object dependency of much art practice.” This leads to what he claims to be “the shamanic path to immersion in the spiritual domain, where interaction with psychic entities is the means, transformation of consciousness is the goal and the emergence of new knowledge the outcome” (Ascott). Much of this line of thinking may be arguable, but what is essential is the potential of inclusivity in listening. In his seminal work *Listening*, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that a philosopher is one who hears but cannot listen “or who, more precisely, neutralizes listening within himself, so that he can philosophize.” (Nancy 1). Operating on the premise of philosophizing the sound, the methodology of “hyper-listening” challenges sound’s epistemic discourse that equates “listening” with “understanding,” “audibility” with “intelligibility,” and the “sonic” with the “logical.” “Hyper-listening” explores the contemplative

and mindful potential of sonic phenomenon at the nomadic listener’s end, emphasizing the indolent mood of elevated thoughtfulness ingrained in sound and listening.

Finale: Doors of nothingness

Once we get past the structurally and technologically over-deterministic realm of the digital into a more flexible and fluid world of flow and inclusivity, sound’s spatial source or temporal object lose their corporeal identities by means of increased interaction and interpenetration. Sound transcends its objecthood to dissolve into the mindful potential of listening at the mental and personal realm of interpretation, contemplation and thoughts at the listener’s end. The increased nomadism of agents attuned to listening contributes to these expanded sonic exercises beyond the epistemic objecthood. This is the condition that I relate to the “post-digital.” Instead of defining the post-digital, I speculate on the contours of the term and try to locate and measure its relation to the sonic in my own artistic practice and its articulation.

Taking my point of departure in the phenomenological premises of sound, I make the subjective interpretation and personal contemplation as the basis of my sound artworks, such as the ongoing project *Doors of Nothingness*, which frame spatial sound phenomena in their entirety, including the mental, contemplative, and spiritual contexts of the listener’s auditory situation. In these works, the thought processes activated by the sonic phenomena transcend the epistemic comprehension of the source identity of sound toward outlining the auditory situation in a context that delineates the sound events beyond immediately accessible meanings,

expanding on and transcending the object or source-specific knowledge structure. *Listening and its Discontents* (2013) and *The Room within a View* (2013) — two of the previously shown works from the project—frame and (con)textualize a myriad of thoughts within the mindfulness of a nomadic listener, triggered by pervasive interaction with various immersive but evanescent auditory situations. The virtual prototype of *The Room within a View* has been exhibited on The Widget Art Gallery on iPhone, iPod touch, iPad and other MAC OS platforms, while the sited sound installation *Listening and its Discontents* has been exhibited at a group show during *Dirty Ear Forum* (sound, multiplicity and radical listening) at *Errant Bodies*, as part of reSource 003, P2P Vorspiel presented by transmediale 2013. Essentially experiential, subject-oriented and contemplative in its development, both the works explore the itinerant sonic interactions occurring between the listener and the emerging environment as associative processes of hyper-listening and thinking. The forthcoming work *Mind Your Own Dizziness* (2014–ongoing), expected to be realized during *Art Hack Day* in transmediale 2014, will work as a set of fertile auditory situations or settings for active audience intervention/ participation/ involvement. In its projection of sound and text, the work will investigate the cognitive processes of thinking within the mindfulness of a potential exhibition viewer/ audience/ participant as a wandering listener interacting with the specific site's various immersive but evanescent auditory situations such as inside a bathroom, in the basement, behind the cloakroom, in the café, or around the auditorium. The work will locate and contemplate how these situations trigger streams of thoughts within the mind of the audience. These works rely on intuitiveness of the listener rather than the reasoning involved in deciphering the

meaning of sound in listening. The strong belief in inward contemplation, subjectivity, and enhanced 'selfhood' available to a nomadic listener (because of his or her ability to free the ears of object specificity, whether spatial, temporal, or locative) mean that the project on one hand explores the personal or private nature of listening while on the other hand engaging with the emergent sonic practices in the implicit post-digital condition.

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