

# Noise is Not Volume Alone – Ambiences and Drony

## Experiments in Music and Sound Art

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**Abstract:** Noise is a complex category that has been used to describe instances of disturbance and disruption in technical vocabulary and in many artistic languages. In music, and more precisely, in sound art, noise has been imbued with specific significations that operate as aesthetical signifiers that convey meaning even beyond its intensity of volume. In this article, the theoretical aspects of noise are articulated through the analysis of concerning discourse around the transformations of the concept of sound, which ultimately resulted in the designation of a genre in itself – noise. Furthermore, it is through the enhancement of a ‘sonic turn’ that the notion of listening as a generative aesthetic practice has referred to the body as the main instance of meaning construction in relation to both time and space.

**Keywords:** sound art, noise, experimental music, ambience, drone.

**Resumo:** Ruído é uma categoria complexa que tem sido usada para descrever instâncias de perturbação e ruptura no vocabulário técnico e em muitas linguagens artísticas. Na música, e mais precisamente na arte sonora, o ruído tem sido impregnado por significações específicas que operam como significantes estéticos que transmitem sentidos além de sua intensidade de volume. Neste artigo, os aspectos teóricos do ruído são articulados através da análise de discursos relacionados às transformações do conceito de som, que acabaram por resultar na designação de um gênero em si – o noise. Além disso, é através do destaque a uma “virada sônica” que a noção de escuta como uma prática estética generativa se refere ao corpo como a principal instância de construção de significado em relação ao tempo e ao espaço.

**Palavras-chave:** arte sonora, noise, música experimental, ambiência, drone.

Contemporary music experimentation has articulated an increased understanding of the auditory phenomenon. In recent history, the concept of sound has gravitated from music towards sound art practices, operating a transition from an abstract conception – notes, melody, scales, harmony – in the direction of a materialistic approach that focuses on its concrete empirical aspects, becoming an object of theoretical investigation as much as an aesthetical endeavor. Within this context, it is the instance of listening that enables the articulation of sound as art, granting its significance as an element of epistemological imagination and meaning production. As a distinguished component of sound, noise operates as an experimental signifier that stands not only as poetic matter, but as a discursive allusion. A closer analysis will provide the circumstances in which noise permeates aesthetic meanings that expand its already significant loudness.

## 1. Sound as Art

Sound art is a relatively broad term that encompasses artworks which resignify the sound phenomenon within interdisciplinary investigations on auditory material and listening practices. These propositions tend to occur as poetic discourses around the expanded field of sound, under a *modus operandi* familiar to the processes and methodologies of the Visual Arts. Even though sound has been, apart from its use in musical ventures, largely implemented as a means within aesthetic practices of all sorts, sound art as a theoretical category was only created in the late twentieth century, and in this sense “the term ‘sound art’ is relatively new, it became commonplace only in the 1990s” (WORBY, 2006, para. 7).

The anthropologist Thomas Porcello has focused his research on art and technology, concerning the cultural approaches to perception/reception of music throughout western and beyond western traditions. He has argued that “since roughly the mid-1990s, scholars in a number of humanities and social science disciplines have turned their attention to ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological questions concerning sound” (PORCELLO, 2007, p. 153). With regards to contemporary critical thought, the author refers to an increasing emphasis on the sonic phenomenon, which concerns not only aesthetic aims, but also intellectual production in academia.

Within musicology broadly defined – including ethnomusicology, popular music studies, and historical musicology – scholarships concerning the sonic have exploded in recent years. For many, this ‘sonic turn’ has simultaneously been a turn to the technological: not only the technologies of music production, reproduction, and consumption, but also the technological practices of musicians, sound engineers, producers, and listeners (PORCELLO, 2007, p. 153).

In a similar route, Jim Drobnick, a critic, curator and professor of art theory at OCAD University, in Canada, writes about the status of sound in contemporary thought. His book “Aural Cultures”, published in 2004, establishes theoretical frameworks around the contextual environment in which the problematic of aurality is raised as an actual field of research alongside musical related institutions. The “sonic turn” (DROBNICK, 2004; PORCELLO, 2007; ENGSTRÖM & STJERNA, 2009) characterizes the aspirations of sound in terms of a broader cultural scholar scheme, encompassing both art and science, in similarity to the theoretical treatment image had once received in terms of a distinct discourse around visuality in reference to textuality at the end of the twentieth century. The term operates as a tripartite concept – a site, a medium, a model – addressing the relevant resonances of sonic theory and practice in contemporaneity.

Although an aural equivalent to ‘visual studies’ has yet to become firmly established in the academy, there is nevertheless a distinct and vibrant ‘sonic turn’ that can be discerned in the recent upsurge in sound-based scholarship and artistic work. A phrase such as ‘sonic turn’ – referring to the increasing significance of the acoustic as simultaneously a site for analysis, a medium for aesthetic engagement and a model for theorization – self-consciously echoes W.J.T Mitchell’s articulation of a ‘pictorial turn’ a decade ago [...]. As much as Mitchell asserts that *spectatorship* is as ‘deep a problem’ as *reading* and that pictures are not ‘fully explicable’ in the paradigm of textuality, it is equally valid to state that *listening* is as much of a problem and that sounds defy the explicatory powers of both image and text-based theories (DROBNICK, 2004, p. 10, emphasis of the author).

In a fierce juxtaposition with the terminologies of the visual arts, the “sonic turn” has considered sound as art, both in descriptive terms (such as texture, shape and color) and in its modes of display, within installations and performances that not rarely occur in settings similar to those of the “white cube” (O'DOHERTY, 2007), the preferred exhibiting space for fine arts pieces. In face of an ever more evident “sonic turn”, sound art – whose short history and incipient theoretical structures display increasing notability, both inside and outside academic scenarios –,

was consolidated as an object of investigation in the last decade of the twentieth century, an achievement that grants its importance as a poetic practice and an experimental research field.

In the book “Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts”, first published in 1999, Douglas Kahn reveals the discontinuities of the uses of “sound in the arts” – a term he prefers to “sound art”, referring to its ability to keep the discussion broad and inclusive – concurrently, in the History of Art and the History of Music, from the pre-modern times until the 1960s. The author refers to the “conditions of aurality” as the complex circumstances under which the phenomenon of listening arises in each social context (KAHN, 1999). The invention of devices and machines capable of recording and reproducing sound material – what the author refers to as “descriptive techniques” – enabled experiments that would converge music and “extra-musical” elements, producing amalgams between sound, music and noise (KAHN, 1999).

Kahn states that “we need to think about what we think we perceive”, indicating the multiplicity of reception experiences in which emotional, physical and cognitive elements coincide (KAHN, 1999). The role that consciousness plays in perception is emphasized due to a transformation of the concept of listening and the status of the audience that succeeded with the advent of new aural technologies. Theories of musical perception have situated the perceptive activity as a cognitive faculty related to attention, comparison, and categorization of hierarchies within sound phenomena, establishing a link between music, speech, and language. Tonal sensitivity, pitch variation and melodic structures are some of the types of cognitive abstraction enforced by the listeners in a perceptual setting. Furthermore, the role of expectation and previous training in music cannot be dismissed when considering perception, as the instances through which meaning is conveyed are intimately intertwined with idiosyncrasies and inferences that will configure the experience of reception.

In a more recent article, “Sound Art, Art, Music”, from 2006, Kahn traces the incursions of sound in the works of artists from the european avant-garde of the beginning of the twentieth century, including contributions from Marcel Duchamp and Futurism. Kahn cites the experiments advocated by Concrete Music (*Musique Concrète*) and electronic music (*elektronische Musik*) in the late 1940s, as well as the works of John Cage in the 1960s; as all parts of an intermittent movement which contributed to the development of what we now call sound art (KAHN, 2006).

With the development of experiments within the electroacoustic music scene, especially around the technologies surrounding the use of the tape – what the researcher Robert Worby refers to as “the art of recorded sound” (WORBY, 2006, para.21) – composition had gained a fresh new perspective. Pierre Schaeffer in France, Karlheinz Stockhausen in Germany, Toru Takemitsu in Japan, Halim El-Dabh in Cairo, Vladimir Ussachevsky and John Cage in the US and José Vicente Assuar in Chile, amongst many others, had all deliberately worked through inceptive techniques that helped articulate the “tape music” genre and instigate the use of filters and synthesizers in experimental music.

The usage of the tape in electroacoustic practices and early electronic music highlighted the analytical capabilities of the material processed through the machines, that suddenly could decontextualize sounds, accelerate them or create endless repetitions (loops). As the investigative intentions were strengthened, an empirical approach was more and more accentuated, similar to that of a scientific laboratory, creating routines that were departing from musical practices and coming closer to an experiential way of dealing with sounds as they were “determined never to separate hearing from making” (SCHAEFFER, 2017, p. 88).

Although these practices were not named as sound art then, they were effectively part of a movement that broadened musical discourse and the aesthetical concerns around the phenomenon of the auditory. Within an expansion of the notion of the musical instrument, with the usage of machines and electronic devices, those practices enhanced considerations around musical composition and authorship. Furthermore, they advanced the discussion about appropriate musical material, helping forge the concept of “soundscape” (SCHAFER, 1968) through the incorporation of field recordings of sounds from everyday life, urban scenarios, and so-called noise.

When separated from music as an institutional discourse, with its notation systems and structural partitions firmly established as canon, sound acquires a different aesthetical meaning. *Sound as art* is thus the sonic phenomenon dislodged from its place as a predominantly musical signifier, in an attempt to declare the potentialities of its material existence as a means to an expansion of notions around time, space and the body. In this realm, it is the theoretical articulation of the activity of listening that will enable a distinction between the perception of sound and its sensation as experience.

Although the auditory apparatus presents physiological functionalities that are activated through the bodily experience of sound as sensation; it is only through a complex mental process of perception that sound is made significant to a specific body, enriched by the contextual situations of its particular and constant reiteration of cultural and aesthetical concepts and traditions. As Robert Francès asserts, “if one adopts a biological definition of perception phrased in terms of its adaptive value, one ends by conferring on object perception a pragmatic and utilitarian stability, which, in contrast, relegates the contents of the perception of art to a disembodied state” (FRANCÈS, 2014, p.15).

## 2. Fervor of Listening

One needs to have gone through these moments, which any interested person can experience personally, when sound, the captive of the tape recorder, repeats itself indefinitely the same, cuts itself off from contexts, reveals itself in other perceptual perspectives, to rediscover that *fervor of listening*, that fever of discovering (SCHAEFFER, 2017, p. 87, emphasis added).

In his writings, Pierre Schaeffer, the French foreperson of Concrete Music (*Musique Concrète*) establishes a typology of listening, realizing its conceptual centrality in the theorization of this “new music”. In his scheme, we encounter the concept of “reduced listening” (SCHAEFFER, 2017), a practice well known to acousmatic music, which follows the reductionist model of phenomenology, in an attempt to perceive the “sound object” (SCHAEFFER, 2017) detached from its real or supposed sources along with the meaning that those could imply. In “reduced listening” our perceptive intention targets the sound event, in an attempt to deal with its significance and value in “concrete” terms. Schaeffer refers to a distancing from strictly musical listening, which was organized in the system of solfege, presenting an interest in sound as an attribute of its own matter. “This work has no other purpose than to encourage listening to sounds” (SCHAEFFER, 2017, p. 88).

In these terms, listening becomes the main theoretical axis through which meaning is attributed to sounds, enabling an immediate path to sense the materiality of the sonic phenomenon, one which aims at an “objectivity” of judgement that, however innocent, still represents a means to the construction of a less prescribed perception. As such, concrete music’s

assertions condensed a framework that undoubtedly transformed the ways we think about sound and music. The emphasis on the collage of everyday sounds was a strong statement that sealed the aspirations of a creative community motivated to promote the encounter of technicity and aesthetics. Nonetheless, as the researcher Patrick Valiquet observes in his revision of Schaeffer's "Treatise on Musical Objects", a book first published in 1966, the concrete musician himself was not completely unaware of the limitations of his own investigations.

By 1958, however, and as he explains at length in the introductory chapter of the Treatise, Schaeffer had disowned *musique concrète* and announced his preference for a more holistic research practice under the banner of 'experimental music'. This was not a naive decision, and indeed it sheds an interesting light on the way the term 'experimental music' came into broader use. Today we associate experimentalism primarily with the Cagean tradition and, by extension, with a shifting network of Anglo-American improvised and indeterminate musics and conceptual practices (VALIQUET, 2019, p. 159).

In contemporary sound studies a historical distance from the legacy of the schaefferian method of "reduced listening" of the "sound object" has enabled its understanding as a suitable representation of its period, dependent as it was on the technological environment in which it was formulated. In the 1940s, the novelty of the sound machinery, and its access, relegated to large institutions and sound laboratories localized in universities and mainstream radio stations, testify for a much less ubiquitous listening than the one we experience nowadays. The avalanche of sonorous input and the accessibility of sound gadgets and acoustic equipment drastically transformed our "conditions of aurality" (KAHN, 1999) and advanced the ingress of artists and researchers into the realm of sound as art.

Due to a contemporary emphasis on the cultural aspects of the aural experience, with an increased comprehension of the subjective situated perception of every sound event and an interest in its semantic generative potentialities; strict schaefferian methods around listening seem to have been mitigated, at least in its theoretical aspects. Apart from a strongly eurocentric perspective, an epistemological quality has emerged as a feature of the act of listening, embracing the contingency of its processes of meaning construction. The debate around "sonic thought" (COX, 2017) and "sonic thinking" (SCHULZE, 2017) operates a shift towards an understanding of the acoustic phenomenon as not only an object of analysis, but as an actualization of thought itself.

Salomé Voegelin, in the book “Listening to noise and silence. Towards a philosophy of sound art”, published in 2010, addresses the aesthetic, social and political realities that are subsumed by a strong persuasion of the visual in our culture. The author argues in favor of the immersive complexity of the auditory experience against a perceived hegemonic static power exercised by the imperatives of visuality. Especially within art contexts, listening substantially contrasts with looking in relation to the isolating habit of cutting out the environment in which the aesthetic event occurs in the latter.

Sound, when it is not heard as sublimated into the service of furnishing a visual reality, but listened to generatively, does not describe a place or an object, nor is it a place or an object, it is neither adjective nor noun. It is to be in motion, to produce. It is an invisible act, a dynamic of production that is not interested to linger and hear its outcome. It is perpetually on the move, making time and tenses rather than following them (VOEGELIN, 2010, p. 14)

The phenomenon of sound seems to escape the intellectual strategies emblematic of the discursive apparatus of representation. In a way, the “sonic turn” insinuates not only a turn in the direction of sound, but a turnaround in aesthetic perception. Through sensation, the experience of sound generates meaning, operating less as illustration and more as invitation for imaginative propositions. Voegelin considers “listening as an activity, an interactivity, that produces and invents and demands of the listener a complicity and commitment that rethinks existing philosophies of perception” (VOEGELIN, 2010, p. 5). Whilst visuality operates as a function of identification of sorts, in attempts to recognize that which is presented as seen, the acoustic immerses one in a situation, through a materiality that is volatile, transparent, and uncontrollable.

Listening is not a scientific endeavour; it is an experiential fact full of playful illusions, purposeful errors and contingent idiosyncrasies. Listening is not about the physical constitution of sound; as little as seeing is about the physical constitution of the seen, it is the perception of those physical constitutions, fraught with the uncertainty of an erroneous, unreliable ear (VOEGELIN, 2010, p. 64).

Arguing against the inadequacies of the perceptual structures erected by the framework of vision as an appropriate conceptual apparatus to deal with listening, Voegelin proposes a philosophy of sound art that praises the intricacies of the (in)visibility, characteristic of the sound

phenomenon. For the author, the attribute of suggestion operates alongside an epistemological atmosphere that does not escape doubt, on the contrary, is invigorated by its state of indeterminacy. “I cannot freeze the sound, there is no space for contemplation, narration of the meta-position, there is only the small slice of now that is a powerful influence, but difficult to trace” (VOEGELIN, 2010, p. 31).

In an assertion of the sensational experience of the listening event, it is the body that stands as the channel for the stimulus. Instead of analytical separations, sound as art solicits a participative construction of what is experienced, exempt from guarantees of an indefectible result. “(the sound) drips into my ears and engages me without taking certain shape; it remains a roving complexity that grasps me” (VOEGELIN, 2010, p. 9). The impalpable aspect of the peculiar materiality of the sound phenomenon acquires movement through its own production. It is space and time in a simultaneous and complex intertwining, whose layers overlap in folds of aesthetic significance.

A philosophy of sound art must have at its core the principle of sharing time and space with the object or event under consideration. It is a philosophical project that necessitates an involved participation, rather than enables a detached viewing position; and the object or event under consideration is by necessity considered not as an artefact but in its dynamic production (VOEGELIN, 2010, p. xii).

In the midst of the sonic experience resides a constitutive element that provides listening with an inventive character, bringing a kind of attendance to the sonorous. “To hear the work/the sound is to invent it” (VOEGELIN, 2010 p. 4). Sound will grant itself more as a presence than as a specific form, but its elemental nature acquires a configuration, at least imaginary, as factual and manipulable substance. Within sound art propositions there is a simultaneity of listening as verb and predicate, from which realities can be, at the same time, sensed and enacted.

This interweaving of perceptual events characterises the experience of sound as a function of its constructive faculty. There is thus a *fervor of listening* that operates under a certain kind of engagement whose potential for opening up perception resides in its quality of being eminently productive, inclusive of contexts. “Sound involves me closely in what I see; it pulls the seen towards me as it grasps me by my ears” (VOEGELIN, 2010, p. 11). The intensity of body situated perception, ingrained in the experiential faculty of the localized moment, regards the sonic as a

favorable procedure for liminal aesthetic propositions. In this respect, noise, as an evocative component of sound, stands as an exemplary poetic element of its ravishing effects.

### 3. Sound as Ruin

The sound ecologist and researcher Murray Schafer, imbued with the task of providing evidence around the increasing noise pollution in urban settings, published, in 1970, “The Book of Noise”, which served, internationally, as an empirical basis for anti-noise public policy projects. In his later book “The Thinking Ear” from 1986, he states that “noise is any sound that interferes. It is the destroyer of what we want to hear” (SCHAFER, 2011, p. 57, free translation)<sup>1</sup>, a perspective more inclined to consider the social and environmental effects noise can exert in a given community.

Although there is a current understanding of noise as undesirable or unrequited sound, a statement that usually emphasizes the dangers of exposing the ears to excessively loud frequencies, there's also a poetic claim towards noise as eminently aesthetic, especially when used in a dynamic interaction with silence. When comprised into a contained, structured frame, noise and silence can establish relations of tension and release, accentuating their discursive potentialities and creating experiential aesthetic meaning. As the artist Max Neuhaus states: “No sound is inherently bad. The way we hear it depends a lot on how we have been conditioned to hear it” (NEUHAUS, 1974, p. 39).

Neuhaus's trajectory as an artist, since the first sound walk series in 1966, articulated a concept of inclusive listening, whose understanding of the sonic phenomenon comprises noisy sounds as vital signs of a society. In the base of this claim for noise as a medium, lies a refusal to limit the whole spectrum of the aural realities of contemporary environments, especially in urban settings, where different categories of the so-called noise abound. It is important to state though, that even outside the city's soundscapes one is prone to encounter sounds that pertain in the noise category of the sonic range. Historian Tom Kohut inquires about the separation between urban or

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<sup>1</sup> From the portuguese edition: “Ruído é qualquer som que interfere. É o destruidor do que queremos ouvir” (SCHAFER, 2011, p. 57).

modern sounds and rural or provincial ones, pointing to the use of the concept of nature as a rhetorical trope. For the author, when the discourse of ecological thought on noise pollution postulates noise as a toxin produced by industrial societies, contrasting it with an idyllic nature, it ends up suggesting that nature is, in fact, unnatural (KOHUT, 2015).

Neuhaus' artworks, which encompass radio-art pieces and experimental sound installations, usually occur as site-specific interventions that invite the audience to experience places through the noise they generate<sup>2</sup>. Noise then, operates as an obnoxious sirene that wakes us up from a lethargic state or else, as a sutil insistent hum that interrupts our familiar quotidian. There is a common characteristic appeal to his poetics that resides in a challenge proposed to the listeners to expand their conception of music and sound, as he himself had done in the beginning of his career as a percussionist. Neuhaus had worked for a brief period with Karlheinz Stockhausen, the composer involved in the early propositions of German Electronic Music (*elektronische Musik*) and wished to reverse the thought processes of grandiose musical composition, deciding instead, to explore the possibilities of sound in open areas, subjected to all sorts of interference.

Fifty years earlier, the Italian painter Luigi Russolo, associated with the futurist movement, wrote a manifesto entitled "*L'Arte dei rumori*" – The art of noises –, that was published in 1913. Having initially been written as a letter to the composer Francesco Balilla Pratella, it later became one of the most relevant texts on avant-garde musical aesthetics of the twentieth century. The text is an invitation to the use of noise in Pratella's compositional practice, as a means to bring a discontinuity in relation to the past, represented by traditional western concert music. As the author Cristoph Cox observes, the futurists believed that "modern life demanded an expanded conception of sonic art that would exceed music, encompassing all sound and requiring new instruments and new forms of notation" (COX, 2012, p. 145).

It was not without a tint of aggression and brutality that futurism inscribed its claims of a renewal of the musical discourse at the core of the then aesthetic paradigm. The noises described by Russolo in his manifesto included warfare machinery and mechanical sounds, but also animals and

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<sup>2</sup> Max Neuhaus' "Times Square" is a permanent sound installation still open for visitation that was first exhibited in 1977. Neuhaus constructed homemade electronic sound generators which amplify the noise coming out of a steam escape vent shaft underneath the north end of the triangular pedestrian island located at Broadway, between 45th and 46th streets in New York City.

sounds of nature, having their effective musicalization revealed new and disturbing qualities for the current modernity. “In place of the purity of musical tones, Russolo celebrated the sonic messiness of the real, its cacophony, simultaneity, and multiplicity” (COX, 2012, p. 145). There is a relationship between noise and ruin that refers to the central point of the futuristic proposition, which was that it represented an intended demolition of a listening mode shaped by the western classical tradition. Instead of a postulated preference for harmonic congruity, futurism’s plead presented a violent discourse that attributed noise as an eminent signifier. Freed from the limitations of the use of the same usual sounds, noise as music would bring about an opening to the promising future of sound.

Russolo’s experiments would later be developed by Pierre Schaeffer, who made montages of field recordings that he called “*musique concrète*” to mark their connection with life and nature, and to contrast them with the detached abstraction of traditional musical composition. Schaeffer’s terminology notwithstanding, both Russolo and Varèse pursued an *abstract* art – an abstraction not of purity and transcendence but of immanence, an art in intimate contact with the world (COX, 2012, p. 146, emphasis of the author).

In the scientific discourse of physics, noise is defined as a complex and non-periodic sound, that is, it is composed by the combination of several sound waves, at all different frequencies, which are not in harmonic relation to each other. In electronics, noise is associated with interferences in the current of an electrical signal and is classified based on its characteristic hisses. Whereas for societies at large noise is primarily associated with unwanted, unhealthy sounds, in the different fields of sound art, noise is considered as a fluid and multifaceted category, widely used in experimental settings. “Wherever we are, what we hear is mainly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen, we find it fascinating” (CAGE, 2012, p. 3).

Historically, as a discontinued element, noise has been pointed out as an emergent signifier of this sort of shatter, this turmoil that fractures the structural basis of what is established as integral, whole and pure. That is valid not only in music, but in communication via telephone or radio due to loss in audio signal, and even in aesthetic discourses of other media, such as references to the granulation of a photographic image, or the obstruction of sight due to exorbitant architectural forms.

In “Failed Histories of Electronic Music”, an article from 2017, Daniel Wilson writes about how the use of electricity and electrical machinery in musical performances operated as the historical predecessor of the context in which futurism presents noise as an aesthetical element associated with interruption. The author states that the futurist’s manifesto “rather than being the birth of experimental music, actually represented the logical conclusion to a trend for music hall-based descriptive music that Schalkenbach’s electromusical entertainments instigated” (WILSON, 2017, p. 151), an observation that illustrates similar assumptions amongst innovative musicians at the time. Wilson goes on to argue that “when Marinetti, Luigi Russolo and Ugo Piatti presented the Art of Noises in 1913 and in London in 1914, they did so in a manner as to startle the audience in the spirit so familiar to music hall habitués” (WILSON, 2017, p. 151).

The spectacle brought about by the perception of the machines as somewhat untamed, in a way, was the element that sparked attention to the public, unveiling an interest in the unpredictable characteristics of plugged sound. “The electrically variable ‘quality of sound’ reminds us that electronic music entailed a then-insurmountable paradigm shift in musical consciousness; partaking in its creation demanded an advanced sense of tonal awareness” (WILSON, 2017, p. 158).

Another important composer, Edgar Varèse, was, by the beginning of the twentieth century, also working with electronic media for sound production, which led to his being known as the “Father of Electronic Music”. Varèse’s focus on timbre and rhythm revealed his appreciation for the texture of sounds, an operation that was imbued by his pledge to an art science of “sound masses”. In his writings, Varèse had a strong receptivity to noise and reflected upon the novelty of this new sound he and his contemporaries were creating, with a vision of music composition that extended to the entire range of the sonic phenomena, both real and imaginary.

I decided to call my music ‘organized sound’ and myself, not a musician, but ‘a worker in rhythms, frequencies, and intensities’. Indeed, to stubbornly conditioned ears, anything new in music has always been called noise. But after all *what is music but organized noises?* And a composer, like all artists, is an organizer of disparate elements (VARÈSE, 1966, p. 18, emphasis added).

Varèse’s statement of music as the organization of noises stands as a controversial but emphatic definition of the work that is being produced under the sound art umbrella in the last

decades. This celebration of noise by avant-garde modernists conveyed nonetheless a sort of exposure of the failures of the social structures then in place, which in turn, informed a radical transformation of aesthetical expectancies and aims. The researcher Diane Glazer, writing about the longtime friendship between Varèse and the abstract painter Frank Stella, points that futurism was a target of criticism by Varèse, which “while vehemently denying adherence to Futurism, understood Futurism’s primary aims”. According to Glazer, both “Varèse and Stella demonstrated an American expression of Futurism – in itself a denial of ‘being a Futurist’” in as much as “for them, the city with its machines and new sights and sounds was a glorious source of information and inspiration. But war, violence and misogyny were not necessary ingredients for the achievement of their artistic projects” (GLAZER, 2009, p. 71).

The aesthetic value of failure seems to reside in a desire for the experience of the unknown, of the distortion of expectations, which insinuates an open ground of exploration and novelty. This interest conveys part of the contemporary experimentation in the expanded field of sound, which encompasses both musical and non-musical propositions, once again operating a transformation on the “conditions of aurality” (KAHN, 1999) of at least a certain group of artists, composers and enthusiasts. In a sense, the process of constitution of sound art as an aesthetical practice was, in itself, ‘noise’ in relation to music as a stablished, solid artistic institution. It resignified the scope of sounds to be perceived as art, distorted music’s outskirts and frustrated many accredited people along the way.

#### **4. Noise as Euphoria**

There is a twofold theoretical aspect about noise that is poetically significant: the noise decreases the precision of the processes and, still, several forms of noise are intrinsic, originating from the very existence of the devices. More generally, all types of systems, including natural and human, feature some sort of ‘noise’ in their processes, a circumstance that informs many aesthetic programs and has forged a sort of poetics of failure. Like in Glitch Art, the theoretical space of flaw, of impurity, of mistake; operates in accordance with a sense of desired error, whose example in sound is found in noise.

Noise, not as a temporary abandonment of taste and good form, decadent, asocial or simply silly, imminently redeemed in a new (visual) referential framework, but radically and always just simply noise, upsets not only a universal homogeneous (modernist) meaning and the possibility to produce shared heterogeneous meanings (post-modernism), but also unsettles, the infrastructure of the game plan per se: the plateau on which postmodernist meanings slide and melt (VOEGELIN, 2010, p. 65).

The fascination around the warp materiality of noise unveils a sense of urgency to the experience of sound, enhancing its potentiality as an agent of sensation. “Noise forces the listening subject into the critical ring and turns the work into moments of experience. And that is the true criticality of noise” (VOEGELIN, 2010, p. 65). Noise stands then, as an element of criticism, rattling the stability of what is given, imposing its rawness as a presence, not to be ignored.

This critical power is grounded in the ascension of a specific music genre, known as noise music, which in contemporaneity has prompted the creation of numerous techniques implemented by artists and composers in order for it to appear as a chosen element. Noise generation technologies like distortion, circuit bending, effects and frequency randomization, are all processes largely applied. The researcher Lilian Campesato observes that it is around the manipulation of this amorphous material that the aesthetical component surfaces. “In general, the use of noise in art means, in fact, a filtering of noise to let something significant emerge from it” (CAMPESATO, 2013, p. 9, free translation)<sup>3</sup>.

In the book “Listening through the Noise: The aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music”, from 2010, Joanna Demers writes about some of the diverse musical subcategories present in the contemporary scenario of sound experimentation. The author emphasizes unconventional practices whose main attribute relies on techniques that enhance sensory expansion, implying exaggeration of volume and a sort of reiterative nonsense. Demers refers to these practices as “maximizing” (DEMERS, 2010), in an attempt to grasp their odd aesthetics.

Pieces that seem to change their surrounding environments and, especially, our own bodies. They are powerful, exerting their will to alter the way we listen. Their long durations and loud volumes test our limits of concentration and, in some cases, our

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<sup>3</sup> From the original: “Em geral, o uso do ruído em arte significa, na verdade, uma filtragem do ruído para deixar que, a partir dele, emerge algo significante” (CAMPESATO, 2013, p. 9).

tolerance for pain. These pieces connect their materials to drones, noises, and repetitive rhythmic patterns and often studiously avoid any other types of sounds that might distract from these elements (DEMERS, 2010, p. 92).

Note that this extrapolation of ideal conditions for sound fruition is directly related to an intention towards the excitement of the body. The corporeal effects of this sonic immersion, as is usually the case with “maximizing” practices, corroborates the desired impact in the construction of an extreme aesthetic experience. The tensions between noise and its absence are created in order to activate specific sensations, recurring to trajectories that are relatively uncertain and unrepeatable – especially in live performances – thus appealing to the aesthetic body.

The critical complexity of noise is instigated by its “euphoric or utopian excess” (DEMERS, 2010, p. 92), that seems to operate as an intensifier of the sonic sensorial engagement with a collective claim towards the subliminal. Rather than edified in a straightforward negative call towards destruction, for Demers, the strategies used by the “maximizing” practices of contemporary experimental electronic music assume an ambiguous relation to the traditional parameters of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline.

The author observes that “noise music seemingly does everything it can to avoid conventional notions of beauty, which can be interpreted as resisting the idea of music altogether” (DEMERS, 2010, p. 102), but she goes on to argue that this assumption lacks an understanding of noise's complexity as an aesthetic material. “This resistance is an ambivalent gesture, for the very act of thwarting beauty by creating ugliness in fact reinforces the idea of beauty” (DEMERS, 2010, p. 102). It seems then, that noise acts on this feeling of frustration of habitual expectations, while affirming, by other means, notions of virtue and sonic delight.

## **5. In-The-Momentness**

Noise needs me, but demands of me more than any other sound my undivided attention and my abandonment to its materiality. This incorporation of myself into the sensorial material is what makes noise complex in relation to aesthetic discourse. It makes it abundantly clear that distance is not an option, and that joint time is demanded as the circumstance of experience. Noise takes time to unfold and to take a hold of our body and it is meant to do that (VOEGELIN, 2010, p. 48).

The listening experience of noise exerts its power in the body, fragmenting assumptions made on sound and bringing a concentration on the phenomenon. As such, it operates under the immediacy of the aesthetic event, being perceived as an attribute of attention. As Voegelin puts it: “Noise pulls my listening down to my feet. It is vertical rather than horizontal, rooting me in the location of my own hearing” (VOEGELIN, 2010, p. 43). There is a will to experience just the sensations, a pause in the mind that is similar to a meditative state, when the listening body reinvents its reality. “Sound is noisy when it deafens my ears to anything but itself” (VOEGELIN, 2010, p. 44). Here, the ability to perceive sound as an analytical structure to be comprehended is subsumed by the immediate response of the body to an experienced situation.

The production of some kind of presentness by noise is revealed through an ephemerality that brings about an alteration of the sense of time. Through techniques developed during the experiments on magnetic tape at the height of the unfolding of electroacoustic music, several ways to circumvent the temporal chronological progress marked an aim to transfigure the listening experience of time elapsed.

This sense of expanded time can be induced by sound through manipulations of its velocity or its pitch, speeding it up or slowing it down to the point in which what one listens to is a mass of sound, a blurry indicator of what once was a recognizable unit. Also numerous ‘cut and paste’ techniques – intensified in contemporary digital sound experimentation – achieve analogous results, breaking the pace of a sequence and imbuing it with peculiar rhythms. In this sense, the minutiae of specific sounds is magnified, enabling the exploration of their materiality.

According to Kramer (1981) and Rowell (1987), traditional Western music treats time as a linear phenomenon. Musical works possess clear beginnings and endings and employ tonality and rhythm to create the expectation for organic development, climax, and denouement. As tonality’s importance began to wane during the twentieth century, alternative approaches toward the organization of time began to appear, especially those claiming some affinity with non-Western musical traditions (DEMERS, 2010, p. 99).

A significant case of such experiments is found in the use of drones, which are repeated and sustained sounds – primordially sine waves – or groupings of tones (clusters). The conceptual insignia of the drone resides in long periods of a minimalistic sound undergoing slight variations,

usually calculated with mathematical rigor<sup>4</sup>. Its occurrence encompasses bodily effects that are reflected in the surrounding surfaces, felt as circumstances of some sort of resounding circularity. “Drones eventually sharpen other modes of perception by refocusing the listener’s attention on the subtle fluctuations in timbre or pitch that accrue greater importance against an otherwise static background” (DEMERS, 2010, p. 93).

Whether its volume scale, the linearity of time is thus neutralized in drone experiments, with an insistent hypnotic atmosphere that operates as a kind of background noise. This constant stream of sound “engenders a condition that is unmusical: the absence of development, of growth, of organicism. Because there are no expectations regarding the ways in which materials will interact with one another, the duration of these works is arbitrary” (DEMERS, 2010, p. 102). The overall sensation of the listening experience of the drone resembles that of the tape loop, whose timelessness is suggested by a sound that endures indefinitely, to a point in which there’s no beginning nor end, and whose aesthetical potentiality is endorsed through a continuous presence.

## 6. Quiet Noises

As background noise, drones can be an example of quiet noise, one that usurps the sense of time, installing a rupture of established expectations without an increase on its amplitude. “Noise does not only demand my attention but grasps it literally to the exclusion of all other sensorial possibilities. It works as an anaesthetic in its loud or quiet intensity. However, this is not a desensitized position, but the position of an acute sonic-ness” (VOEGELIN, 2010, p. 47). Drone sounds not only alter time perception, they also draw significant aesthetical meaning from their relation to the environment in which they are exhibited, warping the perception of space in a way similar to the effects noise produces in the listening body. In this sense “noise does not have to be loud” (VOEGELIN, 2010, p. 43), quiet noises create an ambience that is emphasized by spatial

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<sup>4</sup> An important example is the “Dream House”, a sound and light permanent installation by the composer La Monte Young and multimedia artist Marian Zazeela, first exhibited in 1964 and still open for visitation in the city of New York. The current iteration of the work consists of 32 sine wave tones produced on a Rayna synthesizer with precise microtonal capabilities, which creates an ambience that interacts with magenta lighting produced by filtered amber and blue light emissions.

projections of the sound, and these can be achieved by the number of speakers used, their position, height and direction in a specific room. These strategies are deliberately calculated to enhance specific sonic characteristics in the designated sounding area.

This appreciation for the ambient on which a sound is reverberating has been further developed by a music genre that arose around the 1970s. Ambient music is deeply related to the work of producer and performer Brian Eno, whose main interest was “in the use of music as ambience” (ENO, 1978). With low volume and minimal harmonizations, his instrumental pieces relied on unrelenting repetitions and derivative progressions, which aimed at a sense of neutrality in relation to the overall stimulus of the encompassing space. A music that “must be as ignorable as it is interesting” (ENO, 1978). In a similar vein as Salome Voegelin’s philosophy of sound art, Eno states that “whereas conventional background music is produced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music, Ambient Music retains these qualities” (ENO, 1978).

Following the route paced by Erik Satie in the early twentieth century european avant-garde movement, and 1950s productions of Muzak Inc., Eno’s ambient music was designed as a background feature, operating in the environment as a climatic element. He states that “an ambience is defined as an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint” (ENO, 1978). With a series of albums in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Eno was experimenting with sound installations while “building up a small but versatile catalogue of environmental music suited to a wide variety of moods and atmospheres” (ENO, 1978). As his activity gained more traction, his concepts started spreading and “by the early 1990s Aphex Twin and other electronic artists had developed Eno’s ideas into a niche market, with dance clubs creating ‘ambient chill-out rooms’ in which club-goers could just sit and listen to drifting electronic soundscapes” (LICHT, 2009, p. 6).

The researcher Alan Licht refrains from embracing ambient music as a strictly aesthetical pursuit and observes that the correspondence between sound art practices and Brian Eno’s compositions are limited. He writes that “much of the alignment [...] between sound art and electronica stems from this period, where it would be admittedly easy, on first glance, to draw parallels between the ambient chill-out room and the sound installation in a gallery” (LICHT, 2009, p. 6). To the author, even though these projects seem to present a common empirical output,

their theoretical and aspirational basis differ on a core level. “Ambient music’s emphasis on environment (is) opposed to melody, harmony or conservative musical structure of any kind. Yet ambient was meant to decorate a room, not redefine it; it was perhaps a commercialisation of some of sound art’s concerns, not an extension or a mirror of them” (LICHT, 2009, p. 6).

Licht’s critique shows the contrast presented by the multiple facets of the relationship between art and entertainment. Contemporary ambient music has continued to be created and presented in various kinds of electronic music scenes, whose activities differ significantly in regards to their relation to music production and distribution. In more underground practices, there usually is an attunement with the standards of art creation in a strict sense, in which the value of commercialization is secondary.

Quiet noises attest that the qualities of noise as an aesthetic claim remain significant due to their ability to drive attention to the present moment, to the environment where they are experienced and to the sensations felt by the body, in sum: they become significant in as much as they carry the semantics attributed to noise, beyond their perceived volume in amplitude. As instances of a larger signifier – noise – that encompasses diverse media and artistic languages, quiet noises operate as agents of an allegory, one that asserts for itself the potentialities of a materialized disruption. Not always a vociferous nor strident disruption, yet some sort of shift in expectancy. As such, they belong to the metaphor applied throughout its cultural usage, which resides in the idea that noise is a transmutation of a previous stable state, reminding us that there’s more to be experienced in any given aesthetic spectrum.

## **7. Last Thoughts**

Sound as art best articulates the paramount assertion of the theorization around listening and the sonic phenomena in regards to its aesthetical practice. This process happens within the postulations of a “sonic turn” (DROBNICK, 2004; PORCELLO, 2007; ENGSTRÖM & STJERNA, 2009), this tripartite concept that recognizes the increasing importance of sound as a site, a medium and a model throughout cultural institutions. This framework enables theoretical constructions that disclose the effects that the deep transformations on our “aural cultures”

(DROBNICK, 2004) have enforced over experimental music practices and sound art propositions, one that can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century and beyond.

These ever changing “conditions of aurality” (KHAN, 1999) endorse the continuous aesthetic experimentation that informed the predications of noise as ruin, noise as euphoria, noise as quiet, noise as music. These postulations bring the activity of listening to a central role in a materialistic approach towards sound that dislocates its association with an exclusively musical realm and expands its aesthetical meaning through the attributes of its invisible sensational presence. This operation potentializes our ability to think about what we think we perceive – as Douglas Kahn puts it – bringing in singular, empirical, affective aspects to the perceptive act.

There are moments when contemporary experimental practices on sound art and music explore noise not in its literal form as sound signal, but in its metaphorical meaning, as a symptom of the undomesticated. As such, it is not necessarily the amplification of the signal, nor the dissonance that are emphasized. Noise then refers to a stance, an utopian statement that addresses the imponderable of sound, bringing forth its function as an auspice of the wild. In this sense, **noise is not volume alone**, it provokes the body to perceive the in-the-momentness of the experience of listening and in doing so, expands its faculties towards an inventive mode of perception.

On some occasions it is the familiar that becomes suddenly strange, or the small details of the same sonorities that are accentuated in order to affirm their undervalued aesthetic praise. Works that are based in repetition seem to rely on this strategy, when fragments of a discourse iterate a distension of their meaning. The strain of speech accentuates the limits of communication, delivering an experience of openness to significance. As an element of a poetic practice that chooses sound as its main site of activity, noise attends as an unruly participator. It is then, the affirmation of the potentialities of listening.

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