



Negotiating Context

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MACFA Level 2

Intro.>>>

What is the central theme or area of research behind my work and what is the role of this research? / What is noise? / Can noise still be noise as art? / “Noise-music” = paradox?

The starting point for my current work has been an investigation into the concept of noise. I have been researching a broad range of sources including the work of other sound artist and musicians, various theories across both art and science, and most importantly through practical experimentation. The intention of this research has been to provoke questions about the nature of noise and its relationship to music rather than to create a theoretical justification for producing materials. My work is not illustrative of any particular idea and similarly this text is not meant as an explanation or a manifesto behind my practice. For this reason I will not be directly discussing artworks I have produced, though it is implicit in the nature of what I have chosen to investigate. I have attempted to explore the context that surrounds my work by asking question posed by it. At the heart of my practice is an intuitive playfulness, a fascination with sound as a material and the purpose of research is to provide focus and structure for this activity.

From the perspective of communication theory, sound as a carrier of information, noise is then a signal that transmits no semantic information; this is what differentiates it from music and speech. However is it possible for anything to exist in a state of pure obliterated meaning? Even a sound of such complexity it appears entirely form-less can attract significance through context. If I put 30 minutes of white-noise on a CD it could acquire the cultural context of music in a Duchampian manner. This re-contextualisation is something I cannot avoid if I choose to make art or music. To make noise as noise must it exist in state of un-wanted irritant or total ambivalence? Is the very act of purposefully creating noise to listen to conceptually flawed? Am I in essence just making music with a particular aesthetic criterion? There are, I believe, objective qualities of sound that we would describe as noise. There are biological factors in the way the body and brain reacts to certain sounds. Evolutionary responses that have developed in order to alert us to danger, avoid illness or communicate distress¹. Also, although noise has become accepted in the vocabulary of contemporary musical language it is still not the cultural norm. Music still predominantly defined as that which is not noise, sound ordered into rhythmical patterns and pleasing consonant divisions of pitch. Interestingly new scientific research into neurology and our auditory systems suggest that experience of consonance and dissonance maybe innate. However whether biological and/or cultural we all have I ideas of what is musical and what it is not, regardless of whether it is shared universal one. Despite my own exploration of noise and interest in the peripheries of sonic experimentation I cannot entirely unlearn this sense of musicality. If I amplified a food-processor for instance I might hear rhythmical qualities or variations of pitch that I could accept as a kind of music so I have to force an avoidance of these features. And it is this I feel is crucial in my work, in this sense maybe there can be no noise without a concept of music. Paul Haegarty describes this as a “function of *difference*”.

“Noise is no more original than music or meaning, and yet its position is to indicate the banished, overcome primordiality, and cannot lose this “meaning”. Noise, then, is neither the outside of language nor music, nor is it simply categorisable, at some point or other, as belonging exclusively to the world of meaning, understanding, truth and knowledge. Instead noise operates as a function of difference. – that difference is both one term in the binary, and that which is the operation of the binary. This is what noise is/does/is not.” [Hegarty, 2000, pg.1]

This positions my work in a conceptual paradox. On the one hand I am trying to achieve a state of noise, in other making aesthetic decisions that rely on the functions of its binary; by avoiding

¹ There is also some research conducted by Manchester University that suggests sound comes into play with our reproductive urges. Primitive parts of brains reacting to loud low frequency signals picked up by vestigial audio receptors that we retain from our aquatic biological antecedents [BBC Science News, 17 Feb, 2000]

recognisable musical syntax I elude it. This is what interests me, the tension between these different operations of sound². Maybe I want to see how close can I get to this point of total noise and still communicate some sort of beauty; to attract and repel simultaneously, a bungee jump into sonic nihilism? Or perhaps a process of reverse-engineering, trying to understand to the genesis of music by debasing it through the pursuit of its *other*.

In order to arrive at this point it has been useful for me to explore the art historical context implicit in my work and the possible significance of own background. The transition from visual artist to working with sound and the role my dyslexia might play. Also have I tried to examine what a theoretical discourse with noise may be about, notions of the negative, language and the psychoanalytical?

² Conversely music in an orthodox sense uses noise, or harmonically deviant devices to create compositional tension. Music made entirely of consonant tones would be dull and limited.

Genealogy and Antecedents.>>>

What is the art historical context of my work? / What is the location of this context? / Music? / Art?

Is there a position between? / What is Sound Art ? Critiques of Music?

I have chosen to discuss the antecedents and genealogy behind my practice from the perspective of avant-garde art as opposed to music. Partly because this reflects my own background, starting as a visual artist, and also because I feel this nebulous area between visual art and music is important to me. I find strange that word “art” tends to imply the visual and divisions between art forms, beyond the fact of media, are perhaps only institutional ones. This has meant however for the purposes of maintaining a focus I have omitted developments in 19/20th century music. Such as the work of Debussy after the 1889 Exposition Universelle, where the composer came in contact with Javanese Gamelan, which sound artist David Toop describes as an important point in his history of experimental music³. There is also the work of Eric Sati with his notorious piece “vexations” (1893?) and the use of atonality or serialism by composers such as Schoenberg, Messiaen and Edgard Varèse, possibly the grandfather of noise-music.

In the first decades of the twentieth century synesthetic concerns emerged in the visual arts in the aftermath of photographic technologies and the rejection of mimetic faithfulness. “The Blue Rider” group, its name taken from title of a painting by Wassily Kandisky (a member) who was to begin creating abstract visual images of music, explored the notion of the Total Works of Art, *Gesamtkunstwerke*⁴. This was typified by collaborations between composers, painters, poets and dancers. In the early multimedia experiments of the Avant-garde reflection and reevaluation of the musical form took place. This activity appeared to distance itself from the institutions of Music in pursuit of the radical and was embraced by the fringes of visual art culture. The most drastic reappraisal of music in this period came from the Futurists. In their search for a total Futurist aesthetic what would be the Futurist music? In a credo that sort the abandonment of stifling, archaic bourgeois values that looked back to a pastoral idyll, Western European music meet its antithesis; noise. The Futurist’s Art of Noises took inspiration from the sound-scapes of the industrialised world. New instruments would be made for the new noise-music that celebrated the urban, a vocabulary of mechanised drones, whistles, screeches, sirens and percussive impacts. Interestingly the most iconic contributions, the “intonarumori” and Art of Noises came from Luigi Russolo, a painter.

“...musical sound is too limited in its qualitative variety of tones. The most complex orchestras boil down to four or five types of instrument, varying in timber: instruments played by bow or plucking, by blowing into metal or wood, and by percussion. And so modern music goes round in this small circle, struggling in vain to create new ranges of tones.

This limited circle of pure sounds must be broken, and the infinite variety of “noise-sound” conquered.

Every manifestation of our life is accompanied by noise. The noise, therefore, is familiar to our ear, and has the power to conjure up life itself. Sound, alien to our life, always musical and a thing unto itself, an occasional but unnecessary element, has become to our ears what an over familiar face is to our eyes. Noise, however, reaching us in a confused and irregular way from the irregular confusion of our life, never entirely reveals itself to us, and keeps innumerable surprises in reserve. We are therefore certain that by selecting, coordinating and dominating all noises we will enrich men with a new and unexpected sensual pleasure.”[Russolo, 1913]

³ Toop, D., (1996) *Ocean of Sound*. Serpents Tail

⁴ This is a Wagnerian term and it could be argued that Opera is essentially multi-media work and you could go back as far as Greek Theatre.

Although this approach was very radical it was diluted by this desire to “conquer” and “dominate” noise. In sense a Rusollo’s noise machines were too designed, retaining the musical trappings they sort to escape from, the tailed coated conductor had simply replaced his orchestra’s instruments with peculiar hand cranked boxes with protruding funnels. To contemporary ears what they produced sounds somewhat tame and slightly comical compared to the violent sonic nihilism of “industrial” music that would, decades on, take up again the lust for noise and adopt the Futurists as proto-punks. Bands (/performance artists) such as “Throbbing Gristle” and “Einstürzende Neubauten” owe much to Rusollo’s exploration of urban noise.

It was at another nexus of art forms and the impact of electronic audio technologies that the notion of what music could be was further explored. Modernism’s truth to materials manifesto brought a reductive approach to bear on its form. Just the as modernist architects were stripping away facade to reveal clean lines of structure and material, modernist composers separated sounds from their object bodies. The sounds of the real world were extracted from the causal, dislocated in space and time by electromagnetic tape; the “Acousmatic”⁵. This art of Sounds, investigated by exponents of “Musique Concrète” such as Pierre Schaeffer, relied on the insistence of sound in its material self. Musical instruments were unnecessary; it was all there in complex tones of a creaking door or the rhythmical clatter of a passing train.

“Musique concrete spirals into, deviates and detours through an appropriation of sound, its recordings, its archives, and it’s technologies to arrive at what Schaeffer terms “reduced listening,” defined by Michel Chion as “listening for the purpose of focusing on the qualities of the sound itself (e.g., pitch, timbre) independent of its source or meaning.” Reduced listening repositions the listener away from an interpretive and culturally situated relation so as to direct attention to the phenomenal, essential features of sound and the musical work.”[LeBelle,2006]

Despite this sound was not truly liberated; there was an inherent conventionality of musical expression in the employment of these materials. In later works the real was manipulated, constructed and composed back into interpretive abstraction through more sophisticated post production effects. The most successful works of music concrete, I feel were the more obvious in source and have little processing. Schaeffer’s first completed tape piece “*Étude aux chemins de fer*” (1948) featuring recordings of trains contains an instantly recognizable sounds but something strange and transforming happens as you listen to it. This operation of listening, was key to the work John Cage who located the art outside the music and the act of observing sound would on longer be a passive one; an Art of Listening. John Cage’s seminal “silent” composition “4’33’” (1952) crystallizes this notion, a strategy that embraces the here and now. By employing chance systems like the “I-Ching” or disrupting function by de-tuning radios and augmenting pianos, Cage forces an acceptance of the sound event as a listening experience for aesthetic consideration. In this sense there is a Duchampian mischief at play, something that art the group “Fluxus” who attended Cage’s experimental composition classes in the late fifties, would bring into their performances and happenings. Fluxus’s contribution of a DIY approach and absurdist theatrical antics would leave the musical form completely exploded. Sound experimentalist Alvin Lucier recalls a performance by John Cage, David Tudor, Merce Cunningham and Carolyn Brown from 1960

“All of the protocols of the concert situation were violated. The concert began, as I remember, with David Tudor striding down the aisle of the theater and diving under the piano, hitting the underside to make the first sound of the concert. Cage made an appearance playing a piano that rose up into the pit hydraulically. Four performers had cards upon which were written instructions regarding sounds to make and where to make them. The entire theater was used – stage, aisles, balconies. During the concert a man walked down the aisle and struck the piano with an umbrella and announced: “now I am a composer!”. At the height of the pandemonium,

⁵ This refers to Pythagoras who is said to have given lectures to his students from behind a curtain in order to avoid the visual distraction of his presence.

Cage was tuning a radio as a sound source, and the Pope came on asking for peace on Earth. [Lucier, 2004, interview by Chris Buck]

I have attempted fleetingly to describe three key concepts, noise, acousmatic sound and listening in the development of what I we now describe as Sound Art. An activity overlapping concerns in both music and fine art practices, though again I would describe these divisions as being largely academic. All these concepts are a challenge to the notion of what music can be, to reconcile or reevaluate those experiences of sound that cultural conventions (Western) locate outside of music.

Thoughts on Personal History.>>>

Does my work have any biographical qualities? Identity? What is the influence of other areas of creative outside of my Fine Art practice? / How did I go from being a painter to working with sound? Is my Dyslexia significant? / What has been the impact of audio technologies on what I do?

Although I do not consider my work to have any major biographical qualities or a specific cultural/geographical identity there are maybe significance personal factors that have shaped the approach to my practice. Along side my work I would describe as my sound-art, I also make music that has perhaps less experimental concerns. Musically it is difficult to describe exactly what I do with work that spans a wide range of genres and methods of production. That in its self maybe suggests an attitude toward making music that is more concerned with the sounds than a technical mastery a particular instrument or way of playing. Although music has always been very important to me initially my creative concerns were visual and ending up being so involved with sound in my artistic and working career has been a bit of a surprise.

I began as a painter and during the course of my art education I was encouraged to experiment with different media. This led to working in an increasingly multi-disciplined way, including the use video as a medium. It was through experimenting with moving image that sound became a component of my practice. I started making pieces with appropriated materials sourced from television and films. I was collaging the footage together responding to the sounds effects in the clips creating rhythmical loops and assemblages. One piece entitled "Violence is Golden" (now sadly lost to time) comprised of violent scenes from action and horror films edited to create a rhythmical sound-scape of screams, gun fire, explosions and general splatter⁶. Concurrently with these, in hindsight, music concrete like experiments with VHS tape I was starting to make my own music, which I would later use in my video work. I think it interesting that my first experiments with sound were accessed through the visual.

My path toward becoming a musician of sorts is perhaps unorthodox and I would still describe myself as some sort of "non-musician musician". I have no formal training and my experience of learning music at school seemed unnatural to me. I have little in interest in learning parrot style by playing other peoples music and the lexicon of notes, chords and time signatures I find hard to grasp. I think this has something to do with my dyslexia and the problems I have in learning and retaining sequences which affects my writing skills. I had a special needs teacher who was aware of my visual artistic ability and I asked me to think of my writing as drawing, taking as much care and concentration. This does not work; drawing and writing are very different. Writing although it shares a similar triangle of mind – hand – eye, it is entirely abstract. The relationship between the marks you make and the sounds as language are arbitrary, there is nothing innate about it, it is something you just have to be taught and remember. Music is conventionally taught in the same way. You a shown a series of visual symbols that correspond to sounds then shown the operations of an instrument that will produce them. *Hitting the third bar on the right on with the mallet is "X", the second "Y" and so on. Now play "X,X,X,Y,Y,W,X"*. The language of music is abstract; an agreed codex for commutating the operation of instruments rather the sound itself. The marks made by drawing however can be exactly that, marks, they are of themselves. I needed to find a way into music that was like drawing, to deal directly with the sound itself. Amusingly my issues with short term sequential memory also make me accidentally predisposed to improvisation, having difficulty remembering a pre-ordained structure and no real idea of what I am doing.

Around 1996 I discovered a piece of public domain music software on the Amiga 500 computer called "Pro-NoiseTracker". Unlike other music software I had seen there was no graphic representation of written music and it employed a vertical scrolling grid system like the

⁶ At this point (1996/7) I was unaware of the work of Christian Marclay, I was mainly influenced by "scratch video" cut-ups by early 90's multi-media artists like "Emergency Broadcast Network".

punch cards on a barrel organ. You could import any recorded sound into the programme and by inputting codes into the cells of the grid, play the sounds back in a sequence. Sounds could be played slower or faster giving you different pitches, reversed, or cut up and reordered. It came with very little instructions but I found this process of making music with this system very intuitive for some reason; maybe this also had something to do with my dyslexia? Typical of dyslexics I am apparently, through tests I had to take, good at visual/spatial problem solving. The interface for Pro-NoiseTracker was densely visual and very much about patterns. As it played back you could see the commands pass through a play head denoting the current position in the sequence and it had writhing oscilloscopes on screen that I found fascinating. Also you edited the sounds visually; you could see the waveforms, miniature mountain ranges of data reflected in a lake. It was through playing around with this software in a process of trial and error that I had an epiphany. It was all just oscillating waveforms, any sound could become musical, and you didn't need to be restricted to musical instruments or language. Before I was aware of John Cage I was starting to realise it could be simply be about organising sounds. One thing I began doing was loading non-sound data into the programme, picture files and pure code that produced amazing random electronic noises. You could also draw directly into the sound buffer with the mouse and create sounds from scratch. I started producing electronic dance music that used raw, abstract digital sounds with emphasis on rhythm and short repetitive melodies. The more "music" I made the more my visual art seemed static and life-less, I realised that I enjoyed the process of creation more than the finished product and sound was always in a perpetual now. I did not want to abandon my art in favour of music and wondered if there was a way of combining the two, then discovered something called sound-art.

The impact of audio technologies on my work have been very important so why have I now chosen to move away from electronic sound and towards a simpler more acoustic physical approach. Partly because I want to do something fresh but also it has to do with my current interest in noise. Having worked predominantly with electronic methods I have degree of familiar with the technologies that I feel I have too much control. I want to harness in my work elements of chaos and processes I don't fully understand, for me this lack of control brings the work closer to an idea of noise. Even the most sophisticated generative software is only pseudo-random and the physical objects I am producing now are so infinitely variable no two identical devices would create the same results. I have extended this further into my Fluxus inspired instructional pieces, trying to make the sound event as uncomplicated as possible whilst allowing the maximum outside influence. This has become a design manifesto in a way, not in the pursuit of a minimalism, but by deliberately making things crude and primitive I consequently inhibit the possibilities of control, forcing me to accept unintentional noise, dysfunction or even accidental musicality.

Noise and Theory.>>>

What is the difference/relationship between noise, music, sound? Listening? If music is language then is noise anti-language? What could be a theoretical discourse with the negative? Notions of the “Other”? Psychology? Noise affects us physically – the body?...

I will describe the term *sound* as inscrutable, it simply “is”, an intangible and invisible consequence of a sound event. In this state it has yet acquire meaning, it lies beyond language. I would locate it, with reference to an interpretation of Lacan, in “...*the real. The reality which we can never know.*”[Sarups, 1998]. When we listen to sound do we change it?

Through experience we build a vocabulary of sounds associated with the events or objects that cause it to occur. “Causal” listening as describe by Michael Chion [1994] happens when we retrieve information from a sound and attempt to match it up with a corresponding cause. By extracting this information I will suggest that is it no longer just sound but becomes conjoined to event that made it. This becomes apparent when trying to describe sounds through language; generally we refer to them through their cause rather than the actual auditory experience. What sound does a piano actually make? Do Onomatopoeia is the exception to this however, but interestingly different languages have different sounding words for the same event. Through a Causal listening mode sound become *representational*.

Aural language requires a Semantic Mode [Chion, 1994] of listening; the sound contains codified information to be understood. This is inherently abstract; the code has no or little relation to representational sound, speech without its cipher is just a series of meaningless vocal emanations. Music functions in the same way; culturally we acquire a cipher that designates certain sequences of sounds or pitches as musical. Music is sound *abstracted*. There are however current scientific theories that suggest that our sense of music maybe innate and a phenomenon of how the brain translates information received by our auditory receptors⁷. The frequencies in sounds that we describe as dissonant are close together and are brains have difficulty processing that information, the sound becomes distorted. An example of this phenomenon is Binaural Beating where two frequencies 1hz apart are played in each ear. We seem unable to process these tones separately and they react together to create one tone with a rhythmical pulsing. The frequencies in consonant tones are more uniformly spread out and are easier to separate by our brains. This suggests a biological predisposition to harmony. Although this implies an objective universality to music and maybe it is not as abstract as I suggest, the way we communicate with music is cultural, music is more than just consonance and dissonance. Perhaps our biology gives us the building the blocks for music and culture modifies or determines how we use them?

So where does Noise fit into this schema? I would define noise as that which is the counter-point to music, unwanted, impure or unpleasant sound. Music and Noise are different sides of the same coin; they define each other just as the attractive defines the repulsive, as chaos defines order. Does this mean that noise is beyond language, devoid of meaning? Brandon LaBelle [2006] suggests that noise sidesteps the systems of code and becomes a “*parasite on the field of language*”. It operates within the cipher of music but with an entirely different purpose to “*communicate the uncommunicable*” [LaBelle, 2006], exploiting and transforming syntax. So if noise has any meaning, is it of difference, dependant upon that which it is opposed to? In this sense is one person’s noise is another’s music, something entirely subjective? I also would separate noise from sound as we ascribe it with subjective negative qualities. The sound of a dentists drill is not innately unpleasant; it is perhaps more through associated experiences of fear and pain that give it this value.

⁷ This references a radio 4 program presented by Trevor Cox [The Sounds of Science, (24/10/2007) BBC Radio 4]

But there are also objective qualities to noise. Extremes of volume that become unpleasant are connected to a physical human scale of sound. The “threshold of pain” is scientific term for sound pressure levels beyond which, it becomes unbearable for a human to listen. Through evolution we have conditioned, biological *fight or flight* responses to certain sounds as well, noises resembling animal distress calls or sounds associated with danger or illness. Noise-bands who associate their work with dark and deviant themes employ this quality of noise to disturb the listener. Vomiting was voted the most unpleasant sound in a global internet survey conducted by Professor Trevor Cox (Acoustics, Salford University), who is interested in whether there are universal emotional reactions to sound can be objectively measured [2007].

The relationship between noise, the negative and body, suggests Julia Kisteva’s [1941] notion of the “Abject”. The repulsive aspect of noise makes us aware of our material bodies, its weakness and viscera. Noise can also be said to be that which music rejects, in this sense noise becomes music’s sonic excreta. Torben Sangild describes this metaphor of the *abject* in his essay on “The Aesthetic of Noise” [2002].

“Noises are sounds that are discarded as being impure, unmusical. Music traditionally expurgates the dirty noise and fosters the pure tones. But noise belongs to the same pool of sounds from which music stems. [...] Taking noise back, music confronts itself with its abject, plays with it, like a child playing with its stool...”

This confrontation with the abject, the negative and the horrific has been a preoccupation of artists from religious depictions of Hell to the shock tactics of Chapman brothers. However *“When horror is subject to the transfiguration of authentic art, it becomes a pleasure, an intense pleasure, but a pleasure all the same”*[Bataille, 1949, translation by Superver 32C inc, 1993]. So what lies behind this pleasure in the negative and the abject? In more conventional cultural activities the same to could asked of why we watch horror films, play violent video games or in more extreme cases, throw ourselves off cranes with only a rubber cord to prevent our brains been dashed out. Is it a pleasure in being out of control, a way of sublimating our base desires and stimulating our primitive selves? Sangild describes a pleasure from noise relating to a Dionysian ecstasy of shedding the ego and the notion of the sublime.

“[...] ;the Dionysian aesthetic is a direct confrontation with the terrible foundation of being, an absurd will driving us all in our meaningless lives. In the Dionysian ecstasy individuality is transgressed in favour of identification with the universal will – a frightening yet blissful experience.[...] In music, the ecstasy of noise is undoubtedly Dionysian...”[Sangild, 2002]

By saturating the sensorium with noise we approach the sublime, a desire to be swept away and fuse with the void (death). Noise-bands like “Wolf eyes” and “White House” take this approach of bombastic obliteration and in the case of a legendary “Hanatarashi” performance literally by destroying the venue and their instruments with a bulldozer! But this notion of being out of control is an illusionary one, like the bungee jumper who is snatched from the brink of destruction by the elastic cord there are controls in places to keep us from real danger. In noise-music it is the context of music that binds the experience of sound to the notion of something for aesthetic consideration or maybe even pleasure. So if the unwanted becomes desirable and the unpleasant pleasurable does this negate the *negative*? This is a paradox? Whether noise can or cannot truly exist as art, I feel is not important. What maybe significant is this paradox or some unknowable state between states, something that is in flux and cannot be resolved. This is my obsession with creating and listening to noise.

I have only discussed one particular discourse with noise that deals mainly with the notion of the negative and have not gone into any of the socio-political dimensions of this. There are other methodologies that have quite different motives and effects, noise directed more inward, subtle and meditative. There are discourses with systems and processes that have a structuralist approach to achieving the alien. What I have concentrated on here is what I feel is the most relevant to my current practice.

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