

The Weightless Object

Taking a look at the table before us, our eyes skim quickly over form and shape, perhaps registering first the telltale neon paint on a safety beacon, then filtering quickly through a myriad of objects: the glossy sheen on plastic containers, a recognized logo on a soft-drink bottle, the sudden reflection of a tinfoil medication packet, eventually arriving at the less visually significant: a few rough stones, some bottle-caps, a plastic bag lost in the background of our scan. We search for the unusual or beautiful - perhaps a combination of both - and find none. We search for the dangerous or the exotic, and come up short. Yet vision here is a strict ruler, a critical gatekeeper.

By nature the visual overrides, not just phenomenologically, as a barrage of images flooding our senses, but also discursively, in the way we assign significance and meaning to the events and objects around us. We apprehend always from a distance, and this physical separation is easily transmuted to an objective separation, carrying us all-too-quickly to an easy hierarchy, a swift categorisation, an assumed resonance between signifier and signified.

Sound, in contrast, is messy and difficult - "hearing is full of doubt: phenomenological doubt of the listener about the heard and himself hearing it."¹ We are offered no analytical distance, no cushion of space; instead of a visual given, we must operate continually in a process of construction, an inherently subjective territory of perceiving. Additionally this sonic landscape is constantly shifting. While the stasis of the seen allows the leisure of the 'double take', the stare, or the careful survey, the rolling waves of acoustic phenomena trail all too quickly into the distance of time, leaving only ghosts or sonic traces in our equally subjective memories.

But while this doubt creates difficulty in communication - as any quick Google for "indescribable sound" will attest - it equally affords us a promising new space, a more confusing but equally more open framework, where the slippages in our definitions give way to new definitions, and ambiguity wedges liminal zones of potentiality between our often immovable, denotative 'realities'. These everyday objects invite us into this space precisely for their banality - because there is 'nothing to them', we are left only with the activated sound, something familiar yet re-contextualized, a chance to transmute the physical, static object into a transient, weightless phenomenon - a chance to transmute the heavy, solid signified into bouncing waves of deferred potentials - and a chance to transmute ourselves from Labeler to Listener.

*Luke Munn, on the occasion of '100 Objekte'
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¹xii, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art*, Salome Voegelin