

Bedroom Music:

Ventriloquism, Voyeurism, and Recorded Space
in Robert Ashley's *Automatic Writing*.

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Robert Ashley's *Automatic Writing* is an opera for *your* bedroom in which you are a central character. Music is always intended for specific space--it *cannot* resonate in the mind alone. In his book, *Echo and Reverb: Fabricating Space in Popular Music Recording, 1900-1960*, Peter Doyle explains developments western music as responses to changes of architectural that the music was being performed in. Plain-chant and polyphony were by-products of the long reverberant Medieval cathedral, the less reverberant sacred spaces of the Reformation gave rise to the cantata, the rules of etiquette reinforced by the Enlightenment era music halls drove towards the Romantic symphony. (Doyle, 44-46) *Automatic Writing* is of an era of privatizing technologies for privatized space. A personal sound system is more architectural than it is musical, and Robert Ashley is writing for this architectural space--making the recording speak in a performative sense. He is also writing *about* this architectural space. The piece uses established cultural relationships to this space to make it twist, to slice it, and turn it inside out. Whereas medieval composers used the *listeners'* cultural relationship to a sacred space to create the comforting blanket of a singular God, Ashley uses the *listener's* relationship to their private space to create an uncomfortable blanket with holes where identity is unstable and suspect. For 46 minutes the listener must navigate a uniquely manipulative music that reverses his/her traditional listening roles from receiver to voyeur.

It would be inappropriate to call *Automatic Writing* a tape piece because it does not belong in a concert hall. Rather it is a record piece, or a CD piece, or whatever you want to call it as long as the name has to do with a played-back material that you singularly own and can play back in solitude. It is a piece that has an uncomfortable diarchal tone, as Ashley explains in the liner notes:

Automatic Writing was composed in the recorded form over a period of five years, during which time I was fascinated with "involuntary speech." I had come to recognize that I might have a mild form of Tourette's syndrome (characterized in my case only by purely involuntary speech) and I wondered, naturally, because the syndrome has to do with sound-making and because the manifestation of the syndrome seemed so much like a primitive form of composing--an urgency

connected to the sound-making and the unavoidable feeling that I was trying to "get something right"--whether the syndrome was connected in some way to my obvious tendencies as a composer. (Ashley, liner notes)

Nearly the entire piece contains these hesitant shutters of involuntary speech. These vocal utterances are layered on top of each other and ran through delays that accentuate the ambiguous hesitance of their entrances. Only through recording could this involuntary be given a diarchal voice, to be able to speak back to the composer.

Along with this desire to release an oppressed act of composition came that for an impolite performance:

I spent years tinkering with my consciousness trying to reconcile the performer--legal and highly paid--with the person you cross the street to avoid. The best I could do was a recording, done in secret, but still a performance. (ibid)

And hence these sounds take on a performative/dramatic role:

Since I was the person you would cross the street to avoid, I adopted that person as a character who deserved sympathy, and so Automatic Writing became a kind of opera in my imagination and I began looking for the other characters in the opera. (ibid)

The other characters being: a woman whispering French through a high pass filter that accentuates its breathy quality; moog synthesizer articulations that sound reminiscent of lightly struck clay (your coffee mug softly clinking your breakfast plate in the morning as you read the paper); background organ harmonies; music that sounds as if it's coming through the wall from the room next door; and the hisss of each microphone. However, for most of the piece, there is no obvious dramatic action that brings about change in these characters. The character subjected to development and change is the inaudible one: the listener.

The first time I listened to the piece I was duped. I wondered, for a moment, who was listening to the music that was coming from the room next door, unaware that the sound was actually emanating within the room I occupied--the filtering is that effective. Being made aware of the phenomenon of music coming through a wall in general while in this critical listening mode made me realize that the wall is more than just a low-pass filter. By traveling through a wall the other-room-music is stripped of its surface.

Adorno's glamour is filtered out, and all that is left is a bass-line following the roots of a could-be-allota-things chord progression. While the sounding wall implicates the performer and listener the sounded music is explicated to a point of losing its identity. Steven Conner, in his *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, draws distinctions between world-views dominated by seeing and hearing:

A world apprehended primarily through hearing, or in which hearing predominates, is much more dynamic, intermittent, complex, and indeterminate. Where the eye works in governed and explicated space, the ear imparts an implicated space. (Conner, 18)

In the case of *Automatic Writing*, the act of recording is inscribing information on/into the sound gives it referential qualities closely allied with the visually dominated world-view. The sonic quality of the other-room-music dissects space, and distorts its own fluidity. But if the other-room-music is being explicated, it's not really doing it to itself--it doesn't have an agency in this sense. Neither is it the listener that doing the explicating.

As Mladen Dolar explains in *A Voice and Nothing More*, the listener naturally must obey:

Listening is “always-already” incipient obedience; the moment one listens one has already started to obey, in an embryonic way one always listens to one's masters voice, no matter how much one opposes it afterward. (Dolar, 76)

Rather, it is the recording device that explicates. Microphone placement becoming a purposive act, fragmenting space as vision does:

We never merely see the world: we look at it, picking out particular objects for our attention, focusing on one object in preference to another, segmenting the totality of the visual field into figure and ground, foreground and background. (Conner, 16)

The interesting distinction being that the other-room-music comes into focus as an object at the point that it becomes blurred by the wall—becoming figure at the moment its figure is erased. The medium of recording is allowed to perform, and is no longer a supplement for performance. This recording is a musical performance assembled from the remains of supplements for performance disintegrated down to spatial markers. But this is more than a perceptual trick, it turns fundamental elements of the nature of listening on their head.

The other-room-music is a paradoxical privatization of space. The sound creates a wall. When the speakers that you are playing the CD through have their backs right up against a physical wall, the sound still creates a wall that is not that wall. Even if you listen to the piece on headphones you still get the sense of being separated from some one else. You share culture with this other person, in that you are both listening to music on your own sound systems in your own space, and yet, you do not know who they are. It could be your neighbor, but, then again, it could be anyone. You are in Michel Chion's mode of causal listening where "we do not recognize an individual, or unique and particular item, but rather a category of human, mechanical, or animal cause." (Chion, 27) By association you also realize that they do not know who you are. They may be aware of you causing sounds, but nothing more specific. You are to them what they are to you: an other's space that defines and reinforces one's private space. In order to establish a purely sonic private space it must be invaded, as Mladen Dolar explains:

The ears have no lids, as Lacan never tires of repeating; they cannot be closed, one is constantly exposed, no distance from sound can be maintained. There is a stark opposition between the visible and the audible: the visible world presents relative stability, permanence, distinctiveness, and a location at a distance; the audible presents fluidity, passing, a certain inchoate, amorphous character, and a lack of distance. (Dolar, 78-79)

Sound resists privatization, and Ashley's perceptual trick is so powerful because it works to complicate this axiom. The other-room-music is the sound of sound distancing its own "cause." However, this music cannot distance itself for in proclaiming the extended distance of its cause it has already arrived. This exaggeration of the separation between sound and cause works to solidify privacy by giving it boundaries in a visual/geometrical sense while it is naggingly invasive in an aural sense. Through hearing you are reassured that you cannot be seen, at least by the person in the other room.

After all there are at least two people in the room: the performer (Ashley), and the listener (you). The moment that the perceptual trick of the other-room-music works you have entered that virtual space. But like the sound coming from the other room, this is not your space. The feeling that you are not supposed to *be* there begins to creep over you as

the role of the invader is forced upon you. However, unlike the sound coming from next-door, you are not proclaiming your presence. Jean Luc Nancy has pointed out the etymological connections between listening and secrecy:

After it had designated a person who listens (who spies), the word *écoute* came to designate a place where one could listen in secret. *Être aux écoutes*, "to listen in, to eavesdrop," consisted first in being in a concealed place where you could surprise a conversation or a confession. *Être à l'écoute*, "to be tuned in, to be listening," was in the vocabulary of military espionage before it returned, through broadcasting, to the public space, while still remaining, in the context of the telephone, an affair of confidences or stolen secrets. (Nancy, 4)

Technology has allowed us to secretly listen in new ways, but, in the case of *Automatic Writing*, technology forces you to listen in secret. The "wall" through which you pass renders you silent, and no matter how loud you scream this space will remain unchanged. You become a silent eavesdropper whether you like it or not: a resonating chamber for the guilt and pleasure of voyeurism.

The other technology involved, the microphone, has a very different effect on secrecy within the piece. Each recorded layer has a slight electronic hiss to it, calling attention to the presence of technology. Obviously, this is not typical in recorded music. The sign of quality in recording technology is self-transparency, and the sonic trace of the device haunts this piece. Ashley never lets the hisss fade into the periphery, in both a metaphorical and literal sense: the entrances and exits of each layer are never faded in or out, rather incisively on or off. Each microphone announces its presence and its departure. This hisss is the microphone singing its secrecy--not until the recording is played back at another time and in another place does it speak. A duet between the two secret characters--the microphone and the listener--begins to emerge, and their romance is set in motion.

Not only does the microphone announce its presence, it claims space. The microphones placed near Ashley amplify the intimate and obscene sounds of a quivering mouth. The peripheral saliva sounds that are the by-products of opening of any mouth become soaking wet slaps, and take on the same function as the un-faded microphone

layers by announcing an entrance. This leads to breathless seat-of-your-pants moments where his voice "announces" its entrance but never enters--you hear the clicking saliva as a mouth opens that never resonates. But anticipation can be traced even further back in the chain of bodily events the lead to the sound of vocal projection. The high, whistling chord that speaks with each of Ashley's nasal inhales announces an arriving output, and again this physical eventuality is often denied. It is very much an acousmatic effect in that the listener cannot *see* whether Ashley's chest has collapsed in exhale or not, left in the dark you anxiously await some result.

When the mouth does resonate it sings in fragile and unsure spurts. These shivering vocal sputters are embarrassing: They are ungraceful, inefficient, vulgar, and evoke pity. In short they do not belong in public. You think at first that their hesitant exposure is some kind of confession. But then you think "confession to who?...by who?" It is through this combination of hesitancy and ambiguous subjectivity that this sound challenges conceptions of what listening is. Steven Conner argues:

More even than my gaze my voice establishes me in front of things and things in front of me. It is not just that I aim my voice at the world ranged in front of me, typically in an arc of about 30 degrees; for my voice also pulls the world into frontality, and disposes it spatially in relation to this frontality. When I speak my voice shows me up as a being with a perspective, for whom orientation has significance, who has an unprotected rear, who has two sides. (Conner, 5)

This idea of "frontality" requires two things in order to function: that the mouth is in the front, and that it projects. In the case of *Automatic Writing*, however, each vocal utterance sounds half swallowed before it even comes out--they seem just as much directed inward as they do outward. In the context of Conner this vocal sound starts to take on more than hesitant shame over an inability to be polite and becomes more of an existential ontology. These sputters aren't hiding from the public, they are rather pausing to puzzle over their mysterious origin. This is no confessional but rather a bedroom meditation, and in this way the piece keeps the listener confined to his/her secrecy.

The meditation does begin to materialize into revelation expressed in language. At 30:56, out of the hesitant vocal sputters and the sputtering mechanically delayed

entrances, the phrase “sound of the real thing” emerges in a whisper and crumbles back inward. At 32:15 “very funny” arrives slightly more confidently, and then repeats several times becoming exceedingly quiet and relinquishing with each repetition. Then, at 35:38, a barely recognizable whisper says “censoring my own mind.” It’s ambiguous whether this fragment is part of a revelation (“I am censoring my own mind”) or part of a question (“am I censoring my own mind?”). These fragments appear and disappear like private thoughts wandering through an open-ended bedroom meditation.

In our private places of solace, of healing, free from the gaze of the other we open ourselves to this reflection. The absence of the gaze of the other both empowers us to listen to ourselves and makes seeing ourselves more difficult. There is no projection from outside forcing defined boundaries leaving us in a state of confused liberation and profound anxiety. It is a time when our subject feels indeterminate, fluid, dynamic, and change seems possible.

Bedroom listening is a space of fantasy. It is in the safety of privacy where we experiment with identity, and pop music is made to resonate in this space, as Ian Penman explains:

The recording studio and the analyst's room and our own new gramophonic hearth: simultaneously at home and beyond the homely, at once a room and an escape route where we can play hide and seek with our fears. The advent of the stylus/gramophone makes of our home a new spatio-temporal realm where we can shape our own deeply subjective timeframe in track-by-track increments. Where we can repeat the singers experience, along a full range of Freudian response. [...] We sing the body electric, suddenly inhabited by forgotten ancestors, speak with their voices, repeat their compulsions, do their bidding. (Penman, 31)

Through the gramophone’s ability to channel spirit possession pop music provides spaces of fantasy--purchasable experiments with identity. Much of the ecstasy that results from this listening experience stems from this sense of loss of identity, and in order for this transcendence and inhabitation to occur the perception of the recording and playback technology must fade beyond the periphery. In *Automatic Writing* however, the hisses of the different microphones, the other-room-music, and filtered female voice all keep the technology front and center. You are not allowed to "repeat the singers experience"

because the technology, the trusty dimensional doorway, has turned on you and reversed the standard contract. Rather than resonate with exotic identities entering you from a timeless collectivity, you yourself inhabit someone else's space. And in its reversal the contract is suddenly unbalanced/unfair: you put the record on, not him. Putting on the record is standardly an invitation, suddenly it has become a breaking-and-entering.

In this sense, as listener, you are quite literally singing along with the body electric. The shared virtual space, the reversed contract, the technology that sings to you alone all funnel you to sympathize with the microphones. You situate your unseen/unheard listening subject right in front of Ashley's mouth, four feet from the wall that resonates with the other-room-music, etc. But this is not the automatization of listening that it seems to be. Throughout the piece a strange force seems to lead you from microphone to microphone, tracing a grid throughout the invaded space. Microphone placement becomes a gravitized arc in which your listening resonates.

Near the end of the piece (42:40) you hear the organ naked for the first time when the other characters' layers are turned off staggeredly. This simple gesture of foregrounding by subtracting layers is incredibly startling because it radically changes your aural sense of space. Suddenly you realize that the organ is not being played quietly in a corner of the room, but rather in an empty church recorded from the rear pews (it really does have that quality of reverberation that a chapel has when there's no congregation to absorb some of the sound). It's another one of Ashley's perceptual tricks--effectively the ambiance of the organ sound has changed, but technically it's exactly the same as it always has been. What hasn't changed is the listener's voyeuristic roll. You have finally been freed from the room that is not your own and sent to the back of a church, silently listening to someone wander on the organ unaware of your presence. When Ashley's voice returns at 43:33 it is almost violent. For the first time you feel as though maybe your space is being violated. You feel dizzyingly stretched, straddling two very different aural spaces (that were simultaneously there the whole time, just not

perceived as such), until 44:26 when the hisss of the last microphone exits, finally allowing you to settle into the back of the empty church to eavesdrop on someone's late-night musical musings.

This CD has a ventriloquial power that makes technology sing, sound sources fabricate themselves, and space appear and disappear in a moment. Once the piece is over you wonder whether you were really experiencing the sensation of being spatially transported or not. Was “oh, now the music just sent me to the back of a church” just a cheap way to explain something more mysterious, to familiarize the uncanny? The realization that the church space of the organ was always there, in the sound, makes you wonder if you, as listener, were always everywhere in the space without knowing it.

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