

Disjunct Listening

Luke Martin

Abstract

The following is a score and a portion of its corresponding documentation (ongoing). Taking inspiration from Alain Badiou's description of the "disjunctive" mode of being in *Logic of Worlds*, the piece explores what a practice of "disjunct listening" might be. Its documentation includes short descriptions of everyday sonic situations (or worlds) of disjunction, scenes of disjunction; that is to say, descriptions open to the non-apparent, toward a kind of speculative silence. This aims to highlight and practice an affect of non-relationality without, on one hand, seeing it as a paralyzing endpoint and, on the other, resolving it as yet another redeployment of a "whole." Documentations may or may not contain perceptible "disjunctions," though the practice of this piece holds that these "inexistences" – which are kind of proliferating heterogeneities – run through any world, only contingently crossing into our perception.

Keywords: experimental music, listening, non-relation, Badiou, Meillassoux

Biography

Luke Martin is PhD student in the Department of Comparative Studies in Discourse and Society at the University of Minnesota. He is an experimental composer, performer, and writer. His research areas include speculative philosophy, race and theories of the state, and sound studies, with specific emphases on the work of Quentin Meillassoux and Alain Badiou as well as the relationship between music, politics, and ontology.

I: Score: Disjunct Listening

a practice for one.

the activity has two steps: listen in a particular way and, optionally, transcribe that listening.

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a world: when listening, you may begin to sense a sonic “world” assembling itself. because it is one among many possible worlds (other situations, places, times would reveal other worlds), its threshold will be imprecise, shifting. nonetheless, some sounds will accord to its malleable logic, others not. within each sound there is, also, a lack; a non-necessary or inexistent zone, a feeling it could have been anything at all.

a sonic world coheres, provisionally.

disjunction: when a sound appears in a world without any common relation to the constitution of that world. this means the part held in common by two (or more) disjunct sonic appearances inexists – the intensity of the common is nil.

(disjunctions are not necessarily sudden occurrences; they can also be slowly unfolding revelations.)

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three quotes from alain badiou may be helpful to better situate the idea of disjunction:

Two beings are situated in a single world, without the “common” of their appearance itself being identifiable within appearing. Or again: the intensity of appearance of what the beings-there of the two beings have in common is nil... Such is the case with the red leafage there before me in the setting light of day and suddenly—behind me, on the path—the deafening noise of a motorcycle skidding on the gravel. It is not that the autumnal world has been dislocated, or split in two. It is simply the case that in this world, and in accordance with the logic that assures its consistency, the part held in common by the apparent “red leafage” and the apparent “rumbling of the motorcycle” does not itself appear. This means the common part takes the minimal value of appearance; that, since its worldly value is that of inappearing, the transcendental measure of its intensity of appearance is zero [Badiou 2009, 126].

The question of a minimum of identity between two beings, or between a being and itself, is meaningless for a thinking that assumes the Whole, for if there is a Whole there is no non-apparent as such. [147]

In a world structured by exploitation and oppression masses of people have, strictly speaking, no existence [...] Let us call these people, who are present in the world but absent from its meaning and decisions about its future, the inexistent of the world. We shall then say that a change of world is real when an inexistent of the world starts to exist in this same world with maximum

intensity [...] We used not to exist, but now we exist, and we can determine...history [Badiou 2012, 56].

sonic disjunction marks ontological non-totality. it rejects the one, or as above “the Whole,” in favor of multiplicity: a metaphysics of presence (which we might call a *metaphysics of sound*) undermined by a metaphysics of the void (what badiou calls, regarding Pessoa, a “metaphysics without metaphysics;” or, what i would call a *metaphysics of silence*).

what is a sonic inappearance? the gap between the “red leafage” and the “rumbling of the motorcycle”? in terms of the “consistent” world, the gap is an “inconsistency.” more precisely, it is a minimal identity” between two beings articulated by an “inconsistency.” the experience of disjunction calls us toward such an inconsistency, an impossibility to totalize or make “one.” this has two immediate implications. first, this zone of disjunction – inconsistency in any world – marks the real possibility of change: “a change of the world is real when an inexistent of the world starts to exist.” second, it points to an absolute property (“minimal identity” between any two beings), that is, the inconsistency inexistent in all things, or what badiou calls the empty set.

in a *sonic* inappearance the empty set is articulated as a silence – silence as such – within and grounding any sound. this silence does not (is not made to) speak, but rather marks the manifest contingency of sound itself. moments of disjunction, always hesitant (the sound *might* consist), open us, paradoxically, to the musicality of the void.

note (1): this is not a practice of “hearing the unheard” in order to legitimize it as “heard.” it is, rather, aimed at listening in a mode that recognizes and preserves an absolute gap between things, maintaining a heterogeneity or multiplicity that can nonetheless be traversed.

note (2): when listening, there very well may not be any noticeable disjunction. the “aim” of the practice is not, at base, to hear disjunctions, but rather simply to listen to a world. disjunctions, if they happen and/or are perceived, are to be noted, not sought out

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the second part of this activity is *transcription*. surely, this does not need to happen. listening somehow resists being accounted for (the act of field recording, for instance, makes this clear). transcription, then, is another, separate, activity—a palimpsest, a kind of second-order disjunction which may or may not record a first-order sonic disjunction (via listening), which itself may or may not happen.

there is, too, the latent activity of a reader. an indeterminate other peering toward this world as you squint back. this seems to be still another disjunction potentialized by transcription. reader and listener both inexistent in each other’s worlds. i suspect this has something to do with listening to the dead.

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three questions have come up for me while doing this activity:

can i pause in a cut, break, disjunction, my isolation? can i reject the duality of reconciliation / renunciation & locate a zone of reconciliation in renunciation? could

non-relation not be an endpoint, but a mode of beginning without knowing how to proceed?

– saint paul, mn, us / november 2020 (revised, january 2022)

Documentation: Scenes of Disjunction (Ongoing)

it is late afternoon. the bathroom fan is humming upstairs, a delimited white noise with a low hum, maybe around 50 hz. a voice upstairs: nina speaking with patients. a steady flow of information, mostly unintelligible, with a particular intonation slightly different from how she speaks with me. tully, our saint bernard, raises his head to growl out the window, guttural, immediately swallowed as he sighs back onto the couch. the house is creaky and old. any movement upstairs can be distinctly heard from my position downstairs. the heater, a radiator to my right, clanks. a car swooshes by outside, right to left, fading quickly. cell phone buzz (twice). a clock quietly ticks. it is a small clock, out of the way. each tick seems to disperse in the space, renouncing its location and becoming part of the general atmosphere, as if merging randomly with bits of dust and dog dander floating throughout the house. our other dog, benny, sighs from his resting spot near the front door. the heat turns on. it is cold today. a click and i am enveloped by the sound of air filling the radiators with hot water. it churns through old metal, almost harmonizing with the bathroom fan upstairs. nina's voice rises for a moment, then dips below the noise of the house. there is not much wind today. things are rather still outside. there is a quiet but insistent high-pitched ringing in my ears (or my head?). the dogs breathe quietly, asleep. another car passes, and another. the last with a peelingly high engine. the heat seems to come with more force now, its noise condensed to a higher frequency band. a clunking from upstairs. the heat, or at least the sound of the heat, is now directly in my right ear. at once soft and piercing. the patter of (possibly) a squirrel crossing the roof appears and then subsides. benny sighs. a rustle of something in front of me, carpet or fur or clothing. a bird flies silently by, high and far away, caught just briefly in the reflection of a glass candleholder above and to my right. the heaters clank again and tully stands up to look out of the window. the bed creaks. he loses a loud, low bark. the sunlight sweetens on the blue wall to my left as twilight approaches. benny sighs again. the fridge, behind me in the kitchen, turns on, a mid-range frequency hum. i think i can hear a small bird outside, but it is faint and hard to distinguish from the shifting of the house.

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it is a stormy day. dark clouds roll by, obscuring the cold midday sun, and wind whips through the trees and river to my right. separated inside a house, i hear only the wind, and faintly at that. white-caps swallow the water below and seagulls ride air currents with abandon. i cannot hear them. watching through a sliding door window my aural imagination rises and falls in shapes uncannily corresponding to that world. it is spurred only by half-heard things. inside, a conversation about lunch proceeds slowly upstairs. there is a low and loud hum from the basement, likely the furnace. discussions of lunch from upstairs cede to the sound of video games (car racing, a chorus of revving engines). footsteps echo up from the basement.

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a soft wind rises and falls to my right. it is low tide. the river – nearly imperceptibly – laps the shore. a flock of seagulls and ducks quietly splash for fish, ducking under for several moments before reappearing further downstream, again, again. the wind swirls far above where i sit, feet propped on a large rock, and disappears. a crow calls in the distance. things are calm here, surrounded by rocks, broken shells, dead seagrass, and the smell of salt mixed with sulfur. a car's engine hums by in the distance but does not impose anything. the river, slow and wintery, extends to embrace it. even the sounds of the assembled birds are sparse today. two crows momentarily fight over a crab, dropping it onto the sand as the flapping of wings pulses above me. quiet resumes. things seem at once impenetrable and utterly exposed. a seagull lands loudly in the water near the shore. time is slow, bobbing with the birds on the waves in front of me. a chainsaw comes to life behind me, moderately loud, present. the metallic rip is different than the fading car engine, more of a whine, thin, wavering, wheezing even. its teeth, somehow visceral. an eagle careens high above the other birds. i have just noticed it. two or three of them have long had a nest across the river.

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the fridge is on. two buzzing sawtooth tones in a high register underwritten by a low beating hum. the metal surrounding the fireplace snaps as it adjusts to the cooler temperature of the house. a fan slowly rotates above, making that drone-like wobble that has always reminded me of falling asleep midday, unintentionally, as a child. the muted sounds of the home i grew up in bubble within it, but have only a hazy existence: waking up, groggy after a nap, muffled voices discussing something in another room, a TV sounding through the walls (baseball maybe), incessant clock ticks. the fan calls forth, as well, a line from benjamin's one-way street i had recently been thinking about, something like, "exhausted, i fell asleep in a brightly-lit room," or "through excessive fatigue, i fell asleep for a few moments in a brightly-lit room." there is a clock tick here, too, i am just noticing. the house creaks under the weight of the wind. the fireplace continues its small metallic snapping. the clock sounds like a metronome, a duller clunk every four clicks. a dog whines in his sleep and then vigorously snores. the sound of a radio floats toward me. maybe? i have no idea where it could be coming from. a car arriving?

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things are quiet. electricity hums to my left. a muffled voice at work above. slight air pressure to my right. a dog, benny, runs up to me, sniffs my arm, and then runs away (it is dinner time). after a few moments all three hungry dogs surround me and, being ignored, again walk away. a fire burns to my right. a high-pitched airplane veers above. the wind whistles through the chimney, sustaining a tremulous high-pitch before diving downward and away. a lamp clicks nearby. the house creaks. so, too, does the metal of the fireplace, a rattling percussive sound, thin, uncertain. more wind. i can feel its coolness even through the fire – perhaps. the wind's whistle beckons to me from outside. i doubt i can really feel the cold implied by its tendril-like sounds, even though it is the most active thing in my perception. a dog rhythmically laps up water from his bowl; another sits beside me. there is some beeping, or dinging, or maybe actually windchimes, to my left. it is hard to tell what or where it is coming from. one of the dogs perks up, so i suspect it is actually there, but still—it is hard to tell. gone now. like a soft bell from outside. around

400 hz, very faint. now i think it could have come from inside the house. everything gravitates, or relates, to that faint uncertain, now absent, tone, forming interval after interval, a chorale. something squeaks above me—a quiet insistent squeaking like what happens when trying to loosen metal from something, to jiggle something off—and then stops. almost like a bird or seagull stuck in the chimney, but a very, very small bird, the size of my pinky. the wind streams through the chimney again, its lower noise spectrum vying with the high-pitched whistle. i can hear it surrounding the house, insistently exerting pressure before funneling past.

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water falls in a small stream on metal, then pauses. and again. something is being cleaned. my attention drifts. the microwave hums. two beeps, three, door closes, a fourth beep, five, six, seven, door open (or close?), eight. the oven lets out a long beep to indicate it reached temperature. some quiet conversation in the kitchen, followed by cabinets opening and closing, clinking of glass, the oven door creaking open, metal banging against metal. a phone call starts upstairs, something about a doctor's appointment. the crinkle of tinfoil. a drawer opens and closes. jangle of metal, teaspoons probably, rubbing against plastic. a ding strikes and slowly fades. it is pleasant. two more, high and then mid-range. another long ding, this one a bit lower. two odd plastic sounding taps come from somewhere else, maybe the basement. footsteps in the kitchen, a drawer opens, another, metal jangles, spoon stirs in a ceramic bowl, around, around, around, around – the phone call ends upstairs – stirring still, around, around, quicker now, and then a pause. skin rubs wood, sounding like two pieces of thick paper. plastic unwraps from something followed by the quiet sounds of handling it carefully. whispering: seven, eight, nine, ten... a drawer opens, closes. plastic. drawer. hands rubbing together. a footstep. small thud of a rolling pin followed by the pressure of rolling. another thud, roll; thud roll, roll; thud, roll, roll, roll; thud, roll, roll – another phone call upstairs: hi, can you hear me? – thud, roll, roll; thud, roll – phone again: hi, can you hear me? hello? i'll try later. oh, hello? can you hear me? – thud, roll, roll, roll; thud, roll; thud, roll, roll. the rolling is sticky, but also dry, scraping. the conversation upstairs is quickly spoken, almost nervous, as if trying to get in more information than each word can hold. a voice comes through from somewhere. it doesn't seem to be from the phone conversation upstairs, a bit too clear, an unfamiliar timbre. i can only make out a word or two. it is not from anyone in the house. maybe a video? it is difficult to get wifi for videos. it hasn't stopped yet, a consistent drone of speaking but extremely difficult to locate. it fades in and out, here and there, just out of my ear's reach and obscured for periods by the kitchen sounds and phone conversation.

References

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