PARSE

“[I]t Seizes [sic] To Be Heard”
Sound Art, Music, and Disability Aesthetics

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Abstract
Theories and historiographies of sound art make frequent reference to disability, from stuttering to deafness to Tourette Syndrome. In this essay, the author surveys the relationship between communication disability and the discourse of sound art, paying special attention to formulations of the difference between sound art and music. Arguing that discussions about sound art’s ontology mobilize a notion of disability that remains surprisingly unexamined, Warren-Crow proposes a new critical term: differentializing, a textual practice that endeavors to distinguish one artwork, form, style, or movement through recourse to the rhetoric of disability. The author then uses Alvin Lucier’s landmark *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1969) as an amplifier of the sonic field of differentializing, allowing sound art’s discursive investment in communicative difference to be heard.

I

In what is, for me, one of the most resonant moments in the history of sound art, Alvin Lucier gives an interview in Nam June Paik’s video *A Tribute to John Cage* (1973/76). Extolling Cage’s contribution to the arts, Lucier explains, “Cage’s great idea, which, while I guess was an extension of Schoenberg, you know, the 12-tone system, [is] that more than just all pitches being equal, all sounds can be equal.” He continues:

> The implication of that is that since all sounds are equal, all performers are equal and there’s no sound that’s any better than any other. Therefore, I could regard my speech, for example, the fact that I’m a stutterer, and that in my personal life has always been a source of anxiety, because stutters are thought of as distortions of normal speech, but you… I could now regard the stutters as sounds as good as any other sounds. [1]

Composer and sound artist Ronald Kuivila, who attended an early screening of the video as a teenager, describes Lucier’s stuttered address as a “text/sound composition” that “includes many minutes of a [sic] sibilants never quite moving on to their subsequent vowels.” “Legend has it,” Kuivila reports, “that, at the first screening, Cage turned to Alvin andinformed him that he had decided he was the only person who should ever be allowed to lecture on his music.” [2]

The linkages connecting Cage, Lucier, and Paik with communication disability, specifically in the form of speech irregularities, are multiple and extensive, drawing other sonic practitioners into a professional, material, and discursive network spanning space and time. For example, Lucier's "signature stutter" is featured in colleague Robert Ashley's *Fancy Free* (variously dated at 1969 or 1970). [3] Ashley wrote the piece for Lucier (although it can be performed by others) as well as four instrumentalists playing tape recorders. The speaker reads the words "I am fancy free/under a starry sky/grey greyer than a mother's cunt/and bitterer" slowly, over and over, while his voice is recorded. Every time he makes any kind of mistake, tape player 1 plays back the dysfluent syllable, player 2 the dysfluent word, player 3 the dysfluent line, and player 4 the entirety of the text. The brutal, painfully Freudian repetition ends when the speaker gets through all the words without hindrance. [4]

Ashley's own vocal difference is also well known. Nine or ten years after *Fancy Free*, Ashley completes the opera *Automatic Writing*, using his self-diagnosed Tourette Syndrome "as both a compositional strategy and a kind of political praxis," in the words of Gavin Steingo. [5] Ashley, a composer and performer with a communication disability, spends three years in the late 1950s researching the causes of stuttering at the University of Michigan's Speech Research Laboratory, where supervisor Gordon Peterson is working on, among other things, speech synthesis—a technological process that, once refined, is later integrated into augmentative and alternative communication devices for people with speech disorders. [6] Ashley, who chooses to study in Peterson's lab because "they had equipment, they had tape recorders," [7] who panics over a doctor's false diagnosis of impending deafness, [8] whose own father went deaf before Ashley was born, [9] is still studying stuttering and using tape recorders when Paik performs *Hommage à John Cage: Music for Tape Recorder and Piano* (1959). The first of Paik's tributes to Cage, composed fourteen years before the production of the video discussed earlier, includes quotations from playwright and theorist Antonin Artaud, who records his own screams for his radio play *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* (1947) and experiences debilitating fatigue in childhood from "*the effort of thinking*" and from fits of stuttering (tongue painfully bound up in his mouth). [10] Of course, Artaud's screams of madness are legendary. They are heard by continental philosophers, from Derrida to Deleuze, and more specific to this discussion, echo throughout Christof Migone's influential theory of sound art. A prolific sound artist himself, Migone writes that he is interested in not musicians but "*muticians*," and that John Cage's silent piece, *4'33*" (1952), is "an unsound." [11] Cage performs the unsound *4'33"* for Paik's video and Lucier gives us a text/sound composition of repeated sibilants four years after Lucier records his own piece *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1969), in which the composer attempts to erase the effect of his stutter using tape recorders (machines that catalyze both speech pathology research and experimental music in the 1950s and 1960s). *I Am Sitting in a Room*, preoccupied by speech dysfluency, is a composition that "has ascended to a position slightly below *4'33"* in the pantheon of postwar American sonic arts practice," according to Seth Kim-Cohen, a composition that is first performed live at the Guggenheim Museum, a composition purchased by New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2014 as an indicator of its value to [visual] art history. [12]

In the course of the previous paragraph, I slide from what Ashley and Paik consider to be music, to what Migone calls sound art, to Kim-Cohen's label of sonic arts practice, to visual art, or at least a subset thereof. Indeed, the discourse of "sound art"—a phrase not used until the early 1980s—is profoundly inconsistent in its terminology. Contenders include sound arts, sonic art, sonic arts, audio arts, sounding art, sound-based music, and sound in art. Many of these terms have different parameters, making the issue not only one of nomenclature, but also one of ontology. As Migone astutely observes, "sound art has a propensity to not know itself, in other words, its very constitution is up for debate and continual reconsideration." [13] And yet, despite the instability of sound art as a formal and material category, the discourse of sound art is remarkably predictable in its obsession with communication disability. Accompanying the continual reconsideration of sound art's name and essential nature is the reverberation of stammered syllables, ear-splitting screams, involuntary interjections, and tinnitic ringing.

Take, for example, the definition of sound art proposed by John Kieffer, former creative director of Sound and Music, the UK's "national charity for new music" [14]:

> But what actually is "sound art"? The answer is that it's hard to define narrowly. There are fruitful overlaps with contemporary classical composition, experimental rock music and improvisation… More importantly, perhaps, sound art can be as much to do with the act of listening as it is with making the work. Many of us now live in a world of visual and auditory overload. We happily make do with a pixelated version of music on our MP3 players, and end up hearing things we don't want to…We eat and shop in places where music and noise are calibrated just short of inducing hysteria. We stick our fingers in our ears when trains screech on dirty tracks… Clearly it would be daft to claim that sound art can be instrumental in resolving all, or any, of the above. But maybe it's a start. [15]

Kieffer ends up defining sound art not by what it is nor by what it does, but by what he thinks it has the *potential* to do: help reverse the disabling effects of late modernity. I hear echoes of the influential soundscape theories of R. Murray Schafer, who blames modernity for inducing what he calls "schizophonia"—a term borrowed for the title of a 2014 exhibition of artworks engaging with sound at Centre d'art contemporain—la synagogue de Delme in France. [16]

Theorist and artist Salomé Voegelin, on the other hand, hears the experience of listening to sound art as itself disabling, albeit productively. When confronted with the noise of sound art, she explains, "All I can do is stutter, swear, switch my own sound system on or at best dance. I won't be heard anyway through this racket." [17] Voegelin elsewhere offers a definition, of sorts, one that turns back on itself with repeated sibilants: "Sound arts that are an art of sound are deviant and insane in relation to existing language." [18] Sound art is either a response to disability (Kieffer), a cause of disability (Voegelin), or itself disabled (also Voegelin).

Likewise, Migone understands sound art to be disabled. The "fundamental characteristic" of sound art, he writes, "is *unsound*." [19] Migone's choice of "unsound" works the word's double meaning. First, sound art may not make sound; in other words, it may be silent, a claim that is central to his theorization of the practice. And second, more pertinent to my own thesis, sound art is not of sound mind or body, he suggests. It is not "free from injury or disease," "flaw, defect, or decay." [20] In Migone's formulation, the ontological instability of sound art ("an art form that is provisionally framed, and therefore resolutely open") marks it as (desirably) disabled. [21] And although Migone does not draw a clear line between sound art and music, his intention to theorize "*a sound art for the hard of hearing*" implicitly evokes the seeming incompatibility of music, at least conventional notions of music, with hearing impairment and puts the listener and the reader in the position of the deaf body. [22] If sound art, and theories of sound art, address an un-sound body, then music addresses a normative one.

Discussions about sound art's ontology mobilize a notion of disability that remains surprisingly unexamined. In response, I propose a new term for the activity that produces this peculiar sympathetic resonance between disability and the discourse of sound art: *differentializing*. Differentializing is a textual practice that endeavors to distinguish one artwork, form, style, or movement through recourse to the rhetoric of disability. In terms specific to ongoing efforts to name and define sound art, differentializing is an exercise of articulation through which conceptions of communicative difference can be heard. In this way, differentializing sound art is a way of doing "disability aesthetics" within arts criticism, to borrow a term from disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers. "Disability aesthetics refuses to recognize the representation of the healthy body and its definition of harmony, integrity, and beauty as the sole determination of the aesthetic. Rather, disability aesthetics embraces beauty

that seems by traditional standards to be broken…" [23]

Siebers's insights into the presence of disability within visual art have influenced my current study, as many sound artists embrace the "broken" voice and the "broken" ear. Like the sculptors and painters Siebers addresses, sound artists draw on disability as "a critical resource for thinking about what a human being is" (a statement to which I will later return). [24] That said, the purpose of my consideration of differentializing is to focus not on the role of artists and artworks in promoting disability aesthetics, as Siebers does, but on the role of *arts criticism*. I aim to promote a meta-disciplinary awareness of the rhetoric used by theorists of sound art (scholars and other writers) and the ways in which theory can collapse somatic and metaphorical difference.

I am particularly interested in the frequent references to disability in English-language debates about the ontological distinction between sound art and music. Indeed, theories of sound art often map their fascination with disability onto their engagement with music. For a subtle but nonetheless instructive example, take Voegelin's argument regarding the distinction between music and sound art, worth recounting at length. Music is primarily visual, she insists, due to its dependence on the score. "[S]onic experience," on the other hand, "which finds no acknowledgement in such a musical orientation, eludes its discussion, or under the name of noise, becomes its dialectical opposite. Either way it seizes to be heard." [25] Sound art is precisely that which activates audition, prioritizing the very sonic experience that is pushed out of notated music and marginalized by the ocularcentrism of Western cultures. While music, in Voegelin's argument, is associated with vision, structure, and "the rules of a (harmonic) system," sound art is associated with hearing, "non-sense," transgression, "the non-communicative isolation of sound," and, most important for my purposes, pathology. [26] After all, "to seize" means to grasp forcibly, to overwhelm, or *to have an epileptic seizure*. Voegelin is a theorist who plays with language and chooses her words wisely; the multiple meanings of the word are no doubt intentional.

Let's listen again to Voegelin's contention that sonic experience "seizes to be heard." When quoted in Brian Kane's article "Musicophobia, or Sound Art and the Demands of Art Theory," the author reproduces the statement as follows: "seizes [sic] to be heard." [27] He makes no attempt to consider why Voegelin uses "seizes" and not its near homonym "ceases," or why she doesn't add a direct object such as "seizes us." He simply labels the word as "[sic]" and proceeds with his own argument—an argument, not incidentally, given my focus, that accuses Voegelin and Kim-Cohen of a pathological response to music. The declaration that "sonic experience" "seizes to be heard" appears anomalous only when its context within Voegelin's book, and the discourse of sound art more generally, is ignored. Voegelin's, Migone's, and Brandon Labelle's evocations of the "stutter," which function like the reference to seizure [28] ; Migone's description of his method as a "teratology" [29]; the importance of Pierre Schaeffer's "blind listening" to sound art [30]; Douglas Kahn's story of the inauguration of a "modernist aurality" from which "Sound in the Arts" emerged (that is, a scene from Comte de Lautréamont's 1868 novel *The Songs of Maldoror*in which the formerly deaf narrator describes the sudden onset of his hearing when triggered by his own scream [31]) all are implicit theorizations of disability framed as theorizations of art.

The remainder of this essay discusses Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* as "a disability signpost," that is, "a work through which the influence of disability on the history of aesthetics" and, I would add, on the critical discourse of sound art "may be read." [32] I choose to focus on this particular piece not only because it "has ascended to a position slightly below *4'33"* in the pantheon of postwar American sonic arts practice," but also because its identity as what most would call an early work of sound art *as well as* what most would call experimental music is a compelling index of sound art's categorical ambivalence. Moreover, the piece's foregrounding of its creator's stutter, in combination with its formative role in historiographies of sound art, allows me to bring communication disability to bear on the ontology of sound art more generally. Crucial discongruities between descriptions of

Lucier's piece speak not only to the contested boundary between music and its other, but also to the function of differentializing in claiming non-normative modes of communication as proper to the articulation and reception of a true art of sound.

II

The score for Lucier's piece begins as follows:

> Necessary Equipment: one microphone, two tape recorders, amplifier and one loudspeaker.
>
> Choose a room the musical qualities of which you would like to evoke. Attach the microphone to the input of tape recorder #l. To the output of tape recorder #2 attach the amplifier and loudspeaker. Use the following text or any other text of any length: "I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech. I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have. [33]

As the piece accumulates with successive playbacks and recordings, playbacks and recordings, Lucier's speech moves from intelligible, though somewhat stammered (irregular), to an unsettling choir of resonant frequencies, as if his words were overcome by the metallic reverberations of a spiritualist séance. The piece has been presented as a recording, as a tape piece played as part of a concert program, and as a live performance.

The labels that have been attached to Lucier's piece are instructive of sound art's energetic and unstable relationship with music. *I Am Sitting in a Room* has been identified as simultaneously "sound art" and an "experimental music performance" [34]; as "a canonical work in modern experimental sound art" [35]; as "electroacoustic music" [36]; as "emblematic" of certain tendencies in "the sonic arts" [37]; and, in a review of the Whitney [visual art] Museum exhibition to which it lent its name, *I Am Sitting in a Room: Sound Works by American Artists*, as both "experimental music" and "a classic of sound art if anything is." [38] However, one of the most remarkable categorizations is from Alan Licht, whose writing on sound art is widely quoted. "While formally a process music work like Steve Reich's early phase pieces," Licht explains, "its culmination is an example of sound art, as Lucier shifts the focus from the voice (the 'music' as it were) to the performance space itself." [39]

At first listen, Licht rehearses a definition of sound art similar to that of Stephen Vitiello, curator of the Whitney Museum exhibition, who recounts what he calls the "classic definition," that "sound art is sound in space." [40] Curious, though, is Licht's suggestion that *I Am Sitting in a Room* initiates a movement from music to sound art *in the course of its own development*, that is, that the piece starts off as music and then, by relinquishing the voice in favor of space, culminates as sound art. Rephrasing this claim, we might hear the piece as performing a line of criticism that understands sound art as the vibrations of experimental music transformed into something else. The piece might embody that argument *avant la lettre*.

What interests me most of all is the parenthetical Licht offers: "Lucier shifts the focus from the voice (the 'music' as it were)." Is the voice music, or only "music"? Although Licht's brief description of the piece does not mention

Lucier's speech irregularity at all (a rare move in literature on *I Am Sitting in a Room*), we might wonder, is the voice's stutter also "musical" (or even simply musical)? Perhaps not, if "a stutter turns the so-called music of speech into a mechanical grind," as Kim-Cohen writes. [41] Perhaps, instead, Lucier's technique of recording and rerecording in a resonant room *restores* the lost musicality of his voice as the piece proceeds. Or maybe the music of speech is always only "so-called" that is, maybe all speech is always already "irregular," as Kim-Cohen would have it. [42]

Scholars and critics disagree as to whether *I Am Sitting in a Room* performs a movement away from or toward music. Nicolas Collins's liner notes for the 1990 CD release of *I Am Sitting in a Room* offer one position on this issue: "What was once a familiar word has become a whistled three-note motif; what was once a simple declarative sentence has become a curiously tonal melodic fragment; what was once a paragraph of unaffected prose has become music." [43] However, Collins does not map the movement from prose to music onto a movement from speech irregularity to normative regularity. He actually challenges the composer's claim to "smooth out any irregularities [his] speech might have," insisting that the dysfluency does not disappear, but "becomes the rhythmic signature of the piece." [44] Craig Dworkin agrees, explaining that as the piece progresses, "Speech passes into music," but the stutter is "reduplicate[d] and amplifie[d]." [45] Lucier's speech irregularity is thus exaggerated and transferred to the room ("the room mimics the mouth"), ultimately, as Dworkin hears it, performing an operation on language writ large. [46] Summarizing this part of his argument, Dworkin quotes Gilles Deleuze: "language itself will begin to vibrate and stutter." [47] The stutter endures in order to make language irregular.

Similarly, Brandon Labelle chooses not to take Lucier at his word: the composer's stutter is not smoothed out. Or, not exactly. Labelle actually holds two seemingly incompatible understandings at once: the piece exaggerates *and* erases the stutter. In Labelle's analysis, *I Am Sitting in a Room* functions as "a platform from which music and stuttering coalesce and, in doing so, invade the other: music is made to stutter (as a kind of experimental extreme) and the stutter is given its own musicality through which the composer overcomes anxiety…" [48] Thus, the piece does not move unidirectionally from music to sound art, as Licht would have it, or from stutter to no stutter (as Lucier claims), but in both directions at once.

Labelle's assertion that "music is made to stutter (as a kind of experimental extreme)" can be put in conversation with Joseph N. Straus's musicological response to disability aesthetics. "The modern in music," Straus writes, "manifests itself as disability." [49] In direct response to Siebers's book, Straus identifies several attributes of modernist music—by composers such as Milton Babbitt, Alban Berg, Erik Satie, Arnold Schoenberg, and Igor Stravinsky—that suggest an embrace of bodily difference and deviation. Although not modernist, *I Am Sitting in a Room* can be heard as taking modernist music's "fractured forms, static harmonies, layered textures, radical simplification, ritualized repetition, and complex contextuality" to "a kind of experimental extreme," by this logic, out-disabling modernism's disability aesthetics. [50]

III

My argument uses Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* as a kind of amplifier of the sonic field of differentializing. And what do I hear? Sound art makes music stutter; sound art stutters, but not music; sound art is music that stutters; and, in sound art, language stutters. More generally, disability takes music to an experimental extreme. Such evocations of disability can be heard everywhere in theories of sound art, but few commentators seem to be listening critically. My process as a researcher has been to listen, closely and with care. This article is the resulting sound map.

My strategy of close listening is admittedly inadequate in addressing the *ethics* of differentializing. Specifically, a legitimate concern could be raised regarding the use of communication disability as a figure of speech in theories of sound art—for example, the anthropomorphism of music or language as a living being with the ability to stutter. This issue is of great concern to the discipline of disability studies. Indeed, the use of disability as a metaphor has been roundly censured by scholars such as Siebers although, surprisingly, not in his book *Disability Aesthetics*. According to this line of critique, the point is not only whether the metaphor attaches a positive or negative valence to disability. More importantly, metaphor's act of substitution replaces disability as a material and social reality with something else, always something else, while the person with a disability "is politely asked to step offstage once the metaphoric exchange is made." [51] One could claim that disability aesthetics is largely a kind of metaphor in which the disabled body comes to stand for the fraught and unstable condition of the subject in modernity/late modernity.

Importantly, disability studies' rigidly "iconoclastic" attitude toward metaphor has been critiqued by some scholars within the discipline. [52] James Berger, for example, accuses iconoclasts of misunderstanding the nature of metaphor—"Metaphor… does not work by means of simple substitutions"—and Amy Vidali advocates for new metaphors attuned to the experiences of people with disabilities. [53] The real problems, Berger maintains, are "who is to define and speak for the community of disabled people" and the predominance of ableist stereotypes. [54] Nonetheless, from a common disability studies perspective—one that Siebers has been instrumental in developing—Siebers's own statement that "disability… represents for makers of [modernist visual] art a critical resource for thinking about what a human being is," sounds less like an espousal of disability aesthetics and more like the lead-in of a critique of artists' instrumentalization of disability and disregard for the specificity of disabled subjects. [55]

Migone is explicit in identifying and claiming the metaphorical dimension of sound art's communication disability: "The somatic stutter reveals the metaphoric one," he writes. [56] In other words, we all stutter. Our communication with others is always already disrupted. Our coherence as subjects is always already compromised. Sound art, by this logic, is an art of sound that exposes this fundamental disability at the heart of subjectivity. This is a profound and, in many ways, appealing argument. But how does this kind of stutter compare to the somatic stutter of a person with a speech impairment? Are metaphors of disability different from other metaphors in arts criticism and critical theory? And is Migone's argument only appealing to an able-bodied theorist and sound artist such as myself, who has theprivilege of experiencing disability as a poststructuralist destabilization of meaning and eruption of the non-sensical body?

This text is really a sounding, that is, a preliminary essay/assay. I hope it functions as a call to theorists of sound art to be newly accountable to the insights of disability studies.

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Audio and video links:

Nam June Paik, *A Tribute to John Cage* (1973/1976), http://ubu.com/film/paik_cage.html (accessed 2018-09-26.)

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