

an archive ground down, beneath hearing: Sam Longmore's *Memorials to Active Listening* 2013-2014

“The places we have known do not belong solely to the world of space in which we situate them for our greater convenience. They were only a thin slice among contiguous impressions which formed our life at that time.” – Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, 1913.

“Everything we know is a local virtue – if we know it at all” - William Carlos Williams, in a letter to Kay Boyle, 1932.

1

Entering into the resolutely visual scene of display, at first, the formal elements of the site dominate. Any reference to time, to “the event” remains buried, inscrutable. Two sets of objects are lined up in the gallery space, in precise rows. The listener might think, at this point, that the object-relation of the thin, transparent acetate records on the wall to the rough grey cast-concrete blocks on the floor, despite their scrupulously minimalist confluence, is one of incompatible disparity – an imploring, yet inactive insubstantiality weighed up against an unanswerable mass. But, moving closer, the sets of white earbuds emerging from the topmost plane of each concrete block become visible, as does the fact that the proffered binary does not hold: the concrete itself contains space – namely, the space of listening. This is a sculptural minimalism which allows for yet another phenomenological view of the object: one without eyes. Inserting one pair of earbuds into each ear, the listener hears nothing – or, more accurately, what is heard is the room’s own sounds, slightly dampened by the apparatus. Within this silence, which is partially analogous to the dead weight of (historic) aestheticised attention when confronted with auratic presence, are embedded two additional, extra-dimensional spaces, which specifically complicate the seeming-stasis of the room, and the object. The first of these is the exhausted muteness of the dead sound-devices buried irrecoverably within the concrete cubes, a ‘theatrical’ pathos within which hangs the second layer of listening: the counter-entropic silence of the records not (yet) activated by any stylus, the unheard sounds embedded within the tight coil of each circular groove, as reified an air as Duchamp’s hermetic bottling, on an ordinary day, of Paris atmosphere for posterity in his 1919 readymade *50 cc air de Paris*.

2

“Aha, yet another work in the increasingly ubiquitous John Cage tradition!”, I hear you say. Well... yes, but not in that way. Such allegories of sound-media’s ‘being’, its exhaustion and latency, are a pointer to why this work is not some kind of elaborate sculptural activation of John Cage’s canonical silence work, *4’33”* (1952). *Memorials to Active Listening* (2013-14) is only incidentally a frame around a present moment that permits a heightened awareness of listening, and thus a redefinition of the role of sound in the active experiencing of music. Indeed, its title points toward a historicising of this very notion, within the bounds of early twenty first century sound culture. Longmore’s work can perhaps be more productively approached as a remedial footnote within the rapidly canonising histories of audio art, an intervention surreptitiously scribbled in pencil somewhere within the archives, maybe at the point

where the aura is lost in the coming of media reproducibility, perhaps a few decades later within the file that contains notes on the extended moment when sound was identified as entering the gallery space, by way of sculpture, as part of the latter medium's expansion in the 1960s. It joins such footnotes as are already there among the self-conscious sounding of spaces and sculptures, for those attentive to the 'minor': for instance, when Robert Morris invited John Cage to see his *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961), Cage reportedly sat and listened to the sculpture for its three and a half hour duration - what had been proposed as an exercise in de-romanticising the act of making by revealing it as handyman craft, as a tedious, even time-wasting activity, its sound an impossible-to-grasp infinity of boredom, was instead treated by the composer with rapt attention, as a kind of private concert. The 'canned' attention span of 4'33" aside, what seems most remarkable, from this distance, was that Morris was surprised Cage stayed the distance.

3

It is one of the ironies of recording media that they tend to diminish the ability to remember; by opening up vast potential, and increasingly actual, archival storehouses of what Proust called "voluntary memory", they render any epiphany of presence, via the experience of "involuntary memory" far less likely. Longmore signals toward such issues within his work via his mention of "active listening", and indeed the *Memorials* are pointers to the oft-discussed fact that the preservation-function of recording is in fact a form of embalming: if one doesn't have an effective way to re-frame, via active listening, a recording in its entirety within the living present, to capture a moment and archive it on a hard drive is effectively to render it lifeless. Depending on format, recording may drastically reduce the physical complexity of sonic space, a situation perhaps remedied, if one is inclined toward phenomenology, by the act of re-listening within a separate moment, with its own attendant sonic complexity, including the wider experience of embodied listening not included in the fantasies of perfect audio fidelity which still attends the advertising of expensive sound recorders and open-air microphones. But the triggers for a moment of recall which sound can provide will never perfectly account for the block of mnemonic 'dark space' around its audibility, the dense weight of lived experience both attending it, and part of it. This is a fact perhaps most noticeable when listening to the voice of a dead person, where the transmission is literally one sided; no matter how many recordings you have of that particular voice, you will never be able to activate the conversation again, to edit or add to its moment. And, sometimes, when listening to a recording, anything – even your own voice - can become a glimpse of that hauntological space of unanswerable deadness: even the smallest gap provided between the moment and its re-telling is enough to signal the distinctly disturbing fact that the recording may outlive you.

4

Longmore, meanwhile, is cast as latter-day psychogeographer, wandering the city in search of sounds, spending far more – one suspects - than Morris's three and a half hours collecting and editing the field recordings used in this work, his recording device and hard drive become, in the mode of the contemporary sound-collector, 'boxes with the sound of their own listening'. But he also addresses the attendant issues around the archive's totality by taking the audacious step of erasing these

original recordings, ensuring their fiction of permanence is dissolved. The *Memorials* are not content to stay within the stasis of the hard-drive archive, to be analogous to the temporal concrete they are buried within; indeed they morph through their lifespan into a non-stasis of various iterations and formats. Their previously described 2013 appearance at the start of this essay, within the gallery space of the Otago Polytechnic School of Art, was in fact the second chapter of a three-tiered project that initially engaged with the public spaces of locations around the city of Dunedin, as a set of experiential moments, figures of listening, which, documented, became tangible material. Not the literal, historic, *musique concrete* of magnetic tape, but digital field recordings, these were initially positioned back in the spaces they were recorded in, inside the active mp3 players functional, within their limited life, in the cast concrete blocks which served as actual listening posts for the public, only later becoming the hollowed out weight of their historic representation.

5

The use of concrete perhaps points to the post-war distrust of figurative monumentality which attends sculptural modernism, one in which the public monument, like the polis itself, is rendered featureless, cubic, known only as presence by pure weight and volume, like statues melted down, compacted in compresses. These concrete blocks also become cognate to the rough-hewn tactilities of Longmore's sound, the "rawness" of what has come to be known in sound art discourse as 'unprocessed' field recording. A 'brut' mentality is discernable in such rhetorics which gestures back to the earliest sound experiments of the Italian Futurists. Their famous war-mongering admitted no memorials, with the historic avant-garde's call for the destruction of history, a rush toward the future at the highest speed possible, despite a majority of their number dying in the brutal horrors of the very war they'd campaigned so hard to come to cleanse the world of calcified traditions, arguments advanced in such tracts as Filippo T. Marinetti's "The War as the Catharsis of Italian Society" (1914), written, incidentally, exactly 100 years before the Auckland staging of Longmore's *Memorials*.

6

Histories of technology do not progress in linear fashion. Soviet filmmaker and second-generation avant-gardist Dziga Vertov learned much from the earlier example of the Futurists; he also wasn't interested in monumentality – but while the war was happening he was thinking about something else. Vertov's fantasy of the possibility of recorded sound happened when he was walking out of a Moscow train station in the spring of 1918, about ten years before it was technically possible in the pioneering mobile sound-film field unit used in the shoot for his first sound film *Enthusiasm or The Symphony of the Donbass* (1930), and over twenty years before Pierre Schaeffer would coin the phrase *musique concrete* to describe the same process. As Vertov later recalled: "returning from a train station there lingered in my ears the signs and rumble of the departing train ... someone swearing ... a kiss ... someone's exclamation ... laughter, a whistle, voices, the ringing of the station's bell, the puffing of the locomotive ... whispers, cries, farewells ... And I thought to myself whilst walking: I must get a piece of equipment that won't describe but will record, photograph these sounds. Otherwise it's impossible to organize, to edit them. They rush past, like time."

In the later creation of sound libraries as part of the practice of acoustic ecology, a discipline beginning in the 1970s, a field recording of a place comes full circle to achieve the reified nature of a public sculpture. The ‘sound marks’ of spaces are treated as analogous to landmarks. Such sounds, once collected, can in turn become stand-ins for the lived experience of place itself, becoming markers of that place’s authenticity. This process can also be applied to living beings, becoming aligned to a dominant discourse within ethnography and associated representations of otherness: the song of the endangered endemic species heard on cyclic loop on the radio, for example, becomes the refrain by which the living bird is judged. But Longmore’s field recordings are not engaged with the ‘classic hits of wild nature’, any more than they are with the anniversary of the beginning of World War One, or any associated search for a publically agreed upon cultural semiotics of space and significance. If each of his recordings is a memorial, it is not to permanence and stasis, but to an everyday moment which is no anniversary, which is erased almost before it is noticed.

7

The acetate, or “lathe cut” record was originally used in broadcasting for test-pressings. In the 1990s it also became a signifier of DIY art practices, within a specifically New Zealand context, its object-status being precisely connected to its lack of precision, as the medium of choice for experimental musicians cutting the sound waves of murkily-recorded improvisations direct into its material in highly collectable limited runs of 20-50 copies. As artists interested in the conceptual space of such underground cultural production have pointed out, this form of sonic object is also a particular form of sculptural space. In Julian Dashper’s series of records *Blue Circles #1-#8*, recorded in front of Jackson Pollock’s *Blue Poles: Number 11* (1952) at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra on January 7, 2002, the lathe-cut becomes the platform for the sounds of the everyday life of the art museum, unfolding the wider context of display attending Pollock’s painting. As the website for Christchurch Art Gallery puts it: “Dashper’s sequence of recordings captures time and life elapsing around the static painting; the sounds of echoing footsteps, children talking and laughing, hushed comments and conversation, continuous white noise from air conditioning ducts, and reverent silence fill the empty space surrounding the painting.”

To record the ‘silences’ of such monumental paintings is a distinctly de-monumentalising gesture, which is rendered ambiguous by the subsequent collecting of the lathes by institutions, with their audibility represented not by the object itself but by digital copies. The third (and final?) part of Longmore’s *Memorials* project, exhibited at the Audio Foundation in Auckland in June 2014, directly addresses this conundrum, by activating the muteness of the formally wall-based lathes’ grooves, and emphasising their contingency as a form of deliberate burnout. Here the fragile art object is an index of mutability. As Longmore says in his notes, “By about 200 plays, the sounds on the records will no longer be distinguishable from the noise. To audibly experience sounds preserved using the lathe-cut method is to experience their fading from existence.”

In Edgar Allen Poe's short story *Ms. Found in a Bottle* (1833) the complex relationship of recording media to memorialisation is set out via a narrator who is already dead: the story being presented through the diary entries of a passenger on the nightmare voyage of a doomed ship who resolves to cast his writings in a bottle into the sea, as the ship goes down, spiralling into a whirlpool. If the digital file in the concrete block, represents a dead letter which contains an infinity of digital space – a kind of message in a bottle, or blank time capsule - then the unrepresented experience of shipwreck is analogous to the experience of listening to the lathe-cut record, which has replaced the two layers of listening prior to it – it is a third order of listening, this spiralling down into sub-referentiality which itself induces a kind of hermeneutic panic. On one of the lathes, this reaches a kind of representative poetics in the intensely beautiful distillation of unearthly evangelisms. The voices of a choir, caught serendipitously in Dunedin's train station, are, on the opposite side, mixed by Longmore and fellow sound artist John Glasgow into a composition, the voices becoming locked in a loop which becomes a forced epiphany, a memorial to their own erasure, perhaps the momentary speculation around how many angels of history can dance on the head of a digital pin, before they are blended into a blurred centrifugal compression.

Where, then, is the event which this memorial memorializes located? Is it in the simple, yet essentially hubristic, act of walking through a train station – as Dziga Vertov never could – engaged in the act of field recording? is it in the prior, unmediated act of “listening” itself? Longmore's removal of the first order of recorded listening from the infinite capacity of digital storage in the erasure of the original file is also a denial of its ongoing reproducibility. This comes through in his notes, which denote the neo-auratic nature of his conception of the listening experience in the run-down of the lathes: “each experience of the sounds on the records is unique – that play #50 will be fundamentally different from play #51.” A certain organicity of media is discernable here, connected, however self-consciously, even parodically, to the mythic idea of the record, as sound historian Jonathan Sterne puts it, being a format in sonic terms “closer to nature” than other forms of audio, itself an indicator of object-fetishisation from the perspective of a digital culture that increasingly equates analogue stasis and collector-status.

What, then, is the materiality of the digital, so recently imagined as de-materialised, as the pure forward-momentum of futurity? The answer, for Longmore as for many other contemporary artists working with time-based media, seems to lie in the folding back of the illusive linearity of media history, the stitching of such teleology to itself, to form a kind of Möbius strip, the cross-referencing of the digital to analogue media, counterweighting dreams of deathlessness with an awareness of the ‘mortality’ of media. Always, in his work, there is evidence of the dethroning of potency – the “limp” white earbuds, emptied of signal, like pallid roots of ferns growing on stone walls like natural bonsai, trailing ghost-flesh in the sunlight; the lathes' lack of audio fidelity or fixity, each recording a moment's slippage back into the undifferentiated noise from which it emerged. The fantasy of high fidelity audio recording, just one more dead monument to the inaccessible moment of presence.

If all three of the subsequent transcriptions of the (inaccessible) 'original' event of such listening are indeed all messages from the dead, then it is a particular kind of death, akin to the uploaded avatar which will outlive each of us in the digital domain. If the potentially infinite storage space of the digital domain is our new immortality, then it is an immortality of infinite surveillance: are these works then memorials for privacy, for the very idea of concealing information, hiding it away, erasing it, for the very notion of an unmediated life? Such totalities of voluntary memory are avoided in this instance by the rubbing-down of the moment on each lathe, the collected sound library becoming an archive ground down to designification. Here lies the buried significance of the format – itself literally concreted as a materiality, with near-parodic weight. To stop its racing into history, the mp3 has been provided with a kind of anchor. This concrete gumboot for the digitally archived "moment" gives it much more substance than the insubstantial cloud-space of its customary existence, but it also exposes it as earthly, and its dreams of flight as a Platonic fantasy: such monumentality is also akin to the drag, the dead weight, of the consumer apparatus which attends our digital lives, the piles of debris that are the inevitable result of in-built obsolescence, the hidden environmental ball and chain to the endlessly progressive growth of our technological dreams.