

Don't Think About It

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THIS TEXT WAS ORIGINALLY WRITTEN FOR A LIQUID ARCHITECTURE EVENT HELD IN Sydney in 2014, and then published in an issue of locally-distributed art paper *Das Superpaper* (2014) guest edited by Caleb Kelly. Its performance, unannounced, by Harry Werlemann-Godfrey instead of the author, was meant to add one more bear to the text, one more thing not to think about. I was supposed to have presented a short piece, also written for Liquid Architecture, called 'The Ear is a Brain', but chose instead to create something new based on an academic essay I was writing at the time (Kahn, 'Sound Leads Elsewhere'). The essay proposed one more route, detouring through Denise Riley's discourse on inner speech where 'no air is agitated ... no larynx swells', for locating the third sound at work with the two sounds John Cage isolated in his anechoic chamber tale (Riley). I promised myself that both essay and performance text would be the last thing I would say about Cage, not only because my commentary peaked in the late-1990s with 'John Cage: Silence and Silencing' (Kahn, 'John Cage'), but also because the industrial scale of Cage scholarship seemed out of proportion given the inattention to many key composers, musicians, and others intermediating the arts acoustically who came of age in the 1960s. More importantly, I had already changed direction from studying sound to energies to develop a different heuristic given the arts in the last dozen decades and the present climate catastrophe. My apologies to Gertrude Stein.

It is hard for me not to think of Leo Tolstoy when asked not to think. It happens more than you might imagine. Not long ago I was asked to write about sound art theory. It had been a while since I took a good look and was surprised to find that a certain school of thought asks you not to think. Not entirely, just at certain moments. It is not that moments of not thinking don't happen all the time; it is just hard to know when they might happen. Thinking that 'now I am not thinking' is self-defeating and thinking 'I was just not thinking' takes off the lustre. Looking more closely it looked like the problem was what was thought to be thought, meaning, representation and the like was simply too simple. It would never bring to mind what would go through the mind of someone freely associating or anyone at the edges who sensed they were making sense. Are not thinking and not thinking inextricably bound up with one another in even where thinking is most resolute?

Being urged not to think echoes older ideas about how non-musical sounds relate or don't relate to music, whatever music was at a particular time and place. Non-musical sounds were thought to urge people to think too much about meanings out in the world. These meanings were like an open door letting sounds in from outside the concert hall but, again, too simply. It was usually just one door open and the street it was opened onto was not a particularly interesting street. Open several doors on a couple of really good streets and it might be more interesting than what is going on inside. The hall might empty out onto the streets to join in.

So, this old-school proscription against non-musical sounds was self-fulfilling. Constricted meanings coming through this one door were not interesting enough to compete with the sanctity of the hall or the music inside and, by extension, inside the inner sanctum of a person listening to the innermost sanctum of the music itself, like Russian dolls or an onion, perhaps an artichoke. There was something in the inner sanctum of music that had nothing to do with meaning and there was no use thinking otherwise. I saw a brain scan of Tim Minchin listening to F-sharp that proves it.

When it comes to music we are often asked not to think about it. Thinking is associated with words and words can never do justice to music, it is said, or so the lyrics go. Music journalism: that has got to be one tough profession. So many words squandered doing what they can never do, succeed in doing justice to music, tucked away as it is in inner sanctums with its own inner sanctum tucked away in itself. Music journalists can never succeed and their unavoidable lack of success in doing justice to the music does nothing but spread injustice in the world. The only success that music journalists have is in wrapping failure and cruelty up into one.

And they cannot be trusted. You see them listening to music and they appear to be feeling the music. Other people listening have an unsung courage to really feel the

feeling of feeling the music, but music journalists are instead thinking about what to write. You think they might be feeling but they are plotting about how to violently inflict injustice upon the music in which everyone else finds pleasure. Are they ignorant of the sensitivity of sensitive sensitives? Yes, they are. So, failure, cruelty, deceit and ignorance wrapped up into one. And what for? Simply to get between you and the music, right where pleasure should be. Music journalists steal your pleasure: lascivious thieves.

People may have been too busy listening to music to hear that there are debates about sound art. There are a few schools of thought. By schools I don't mean anything the size of a public high school or a collection of university departments. Something much smaller. Too much smaller and a school becomes a club. By thought in a school of thought I mean that people actually think about these things. One school of thought by students of sound art theory, by student I mean someone who studies sound art theory and thinks about it, not just the students who are assigned to read the theory, by theory I mean I would like to explain but it would become too theoretical.

One school of thought of sound art theory says that there is nothing to think about, not entirely of course because they are thinking about the theory, just at certain moments of the sound art are they not thinking about the theory and not thinking about other things, especially not the sound art. And that is their way to think and not think about sound art. So this school of thought is a matter of scheduling, not unlike schools where people study. Schedules happen within school sessions and the sessions still happen on schedule, and these timings happen between minute oscillations and the oscillations of minutes counted off from one second to the next to the next. And more recently: geological time frames. But it is hard to get the timing right when you don't think the piece is any good. Not thinking it is good even before you are supposed to start to not think about it is not good. This school of thought doesn't think you can think it is no good until you have not thought about it for quite some time.

You never know when a school of thought is still in session. It is also difficult to determine enrolment figures of this school or that, but it doesn't matter because there is no testing regime, only self-examination. Since you never know when school is in session self-examination may already be too late. One question on the make-up test: name how 'self' finds its way as a species of thought? Do certain species travel in schools like fish? By species I mean creations or creatures that seem to move around by themselves and may in fact move around by themselves in an ecology that may or may not be within an ecology of other ecologies. Please refer to self-annihilation and annihilation of the self. For a self-improvement that is never too late, see self-annihilation once session is over. Apply yourself to not

applying yourself. Get between you and all your means of a feeling for meanings. Any pressure will not pass the pressure test.

Luckily, there is a way to pass but then the school would be a club. That is what Leo Tolstoy did. You have been sitting in a room thinking silently about Tolstoy, have you not? Tolstoy belonged to a club as a boy where members were admitted only after sitting quietly in a corner while not thinking of a bear. An actual bear in the sanctity of the club would be unthinkable so it was best not to think about it. Think about Tolstoy sitting in the club not thinking about a bear that was not there, or Tolstoy thinking about others not thinking as they too were initiated. This was before he wrote *War and Peace* and long before he wrote the novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889). Imagine how difficult it would be to sit in a concert hall listening to the 'Kreutzer' sonata (Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 9, 1803) and not think of Beethoven. You may not always think of Beethoven; you may think of Tolstoy. When is a concert a club? Everyone there so busy not thinking about Beethoven that they will not know whether or not you were thinking of a bear. No smoking may be a condition of admission to the concert hall but no bear? I don't think so. There are so many things in a concert not to think about, you would be allowed to remain. You can still belong.

So many things to think about even when there is no music. No music is different than silence. There are silences between movements in certain types of music that are part of the music, the parts where people clap by mistake. What were they thinking? They were thinking that the music was over when it was still music, when the music was still in session. By clapping they admitted they had not been initiated. If they thought about clapping no one would have noticed that they did not belong. Who let them through the door? Did they just walk off the street? There are certain types of music where you are supposed to clap during the music but not the 'Kreutzer' sonata. Didn't you know? You have to know when the end is, what the silence sounds like that means silence is not the music anymore. There are times to know when silence is music and when silence is not music. Knowing means knowing the right time to begin to schedule when to think and when not to think.

When silence is not thinking about sound that is music then you are at a concert of 4'33", John Cage's silent piece, in three movements. It is hard to sit in a concert hall for nearly five minutes of silence and not think of Cage. Even three minutes. Maybe less. Are the silences between movements of Beethoven's 'Kreutzer' sonata long enough? For Cage sounds must first become sounds-in-themselves and only then by being themselves become music. With all sound being music there is so much more not to think about, many more ways to not do justice to the music. It is hard enough not to think about music but not thinking about sounds so they can then be music is adding pressure to not think twice. Once is not enough. Cage's

music is even more musical than music because it has a double-layered failure mode. Not bear. Bears.

You know it is a certain type of music because you are not supposed to clap between movements and because it is not the type of music you can clap all the way through. Just as all sounds can be music all silences can be music except for the silence starting at 4'34" when the movements have stopped moving. But it is hard to know when that is without watching your stopwatch when you should be listening to music because the silences between the movements sound like the movements of silence. For Cage, it is not so much that there is no such thing as silence as that there is no such thing as a silence-in-itself.

You know it hasn't ended because no one is clapping and you don't want to clap until the end because you have been initiated. It is like a club. It is only like one type of a club and not other types of a club because there are clubs where music is played and you can clap whenever you like. A certain type of a club is a special place where you can clap when you feel like it. The music makes you feel like clapping and if you are not clapping then people know you are a music journalist. And if all sounds can be music and the silences that are not silences of 4'33" do not end at 4'34" then it doesn't end there, 4'35", and that would be unbearable, 4'36".

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Works Cited

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