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**SOUND-OUT-
OF-ITSELF**

It is never it, but almost nothing is something else. In 1967 Luc Ferrari placed a pair of microphones on the windowsill of his bedroom on the Dalmatian coast. Every day, for the same three hours in the very early morning, he recorded the first signs of daily life in the tiny fishing village. He then selected certain sounds and sequences and edited them into a twenty-one-minute composition entitled *Presque Rien, ou, Le lever du jour au bord de la mer (Almost Nothing, or, Daybreak at the Seashore)*. Nine years earlier, Pierre Schaeffer had invited Ferrari to join the Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM), a new research facility dedicated to the study of musique concrète. Schaeffer's methodology was well established: "Use sounds as instruments, as sounds on tape, without the causality. It was no longer a clarinet or a spring or a piano, but a sound with a form, a development, a life of its own."¹

Ferrari, meanwhile, pursued his own compositional ideas. Although he and Schaeffer shared an interest in recorded sounds and the freedom they offered from compositional orthodoxy, Ferrari was never as ideological as Schaeffer, viewing rules and systems as strictures to be resisted. Ferrari rejected Schaeffer's central tenet, the acousmatic reduction. Rather than detaching a sound from its source to arrive at the primordial *objet sonore*, Ferrari prized sounds for their connection to the world and to senses other than hearing:

From 1963 on I listened to all the sounds which I had recorded, I found that they were like images. Not only for me who could remember them, but also for innocent listeners. Provide

1. Luc Ferrari, as quoted in Dan Warburton, "Interview with Luc Ferrari," *ParisTransatlantic Magazine*, July 22, 1998, www.paristransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/ferrari.html (accessed February 2, 2009).

images, I told myself, contradictory images which catapult in the head with even more freedom than if one really saw them. Play with images like one plays with words in poetry.²

Presque Rien, No. 1 (as it has been known since 1977, when Ferrari began a subsequent series of numbered *Presque Riens*) is a marvel of its kind. Although now there are entire subgenres of its kind, at the time of its release, on Deutsche Grammophon in 1970, there really was nothing like it. It is a portrait, not just of sounds, but also of a community and the repetitive cycles of its daily life. By recording every day at the same time, over an extended period, Ferrari came to recognize the town's significant aural features:

I recorded those sounds which repeated every day: the first fisherman passing by same time every day with his bicycle, the first hen, the first donkey, and then the lorry which left at 6 am to the port to pick up people arriving on the boat. Events determined by society.³

Presque Rien, No. 1 bears some resemblance to Walter Ruttmann's *Wochende* from 1930. Ruttmann had also created his work of "blind cinema" by recording the sounds of everyday life: transportation, meals, music, and conversation. But the "world" he depicted was fictional, an impressionistic montage, created to represent an idealized vision of a working-class German weekend. Ferrari's world is not created by the composer. It is a work of documentary or reportage. But Ferrari is not so naive as to suggest that what he has captured is the "real." Contrary to Schaeffer's adherence to Husserlian essentialism, Ferrari's relationship to his material has far more in common with the cultural phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, accepting phenomena as "the permanent data of the problem which culture attempts

2. Luc Ferrari, "I Was Running in So Many Different Directions," trans. Alexandra Boyle, *Contemporary Music Review* 15, part 1 (1996): 100.

3. Ferrari, as quoted in Warburton, "Interview with Luc Ferrari."

to resolve.”⁴ Ferrari recognizes that his sonic portrayal of human ritual is prone to the same problems that plague any anthropological endeavor. The act of recording alters what it records. “The work is a series of sequences that represents a natural, given situation captured by a given manner of recording. This was the most radical composition I had ever composed.”⁵ The composition is radical for both what it does and what it does not do. As quickly as Ferrari posits a “natural, given situation,” he denaturalizes it via a “given manner of recording.” His conception of what constitutes the work agrees with Merleau-Ponty’s proposal that raw, phenomenological data is importantly, yet merely, the foundation from which thinking and doing proceed. Unlike with the Schaefferian acousmatic, sound is not stripped of its meaning, neutralized as sound-in-itself, to be reconstructed as a composition. Instead, its connection to a social reality is left intact. More than that, the social meaning of the sounds play a part in determining their placement and treatment in the composition. To do this, Ferrari must approach his sounds not just as a listener—separated from the sound source by the acousmatic curtain—he must approach sound as a reader: he must understand what these sounds represent, how they relate to one another, how and to whom they communicate.

Ferrari’s interest in cycles of societal interaction predates his involvement with Schaeffer. Throughout his career, in addition to his tape pieces, he has composed for conventional instruments, frequently employing repeating cells of musical material, overlapping cycles of different durations, to create newly evolving interactions. His interest in repetition is extramusical.

Repetition presented for me not so much a process as the observation of the social organisation of time. Thus observed,

4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences,” in *The Phenomenology Reader*, ed. Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney (London: Routledge, 2002), 446.

5. Luc Ferrari, as quoted in Brigitte Robindoré, “Luc Ferrari: Interview with an Intimate Iconoclast,” *Computer Music Journal* 22, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 13.

time organises itself in layers and according to a certain number of points of view—social, political and sentimental. . . . It is in this sense that repetition fascinated me. For example, I remember having said, “Monday is a day like any other but the butchers are closed.”⁶

Unlike his researcher colleagues at the GRM, Ferrari has never approached his work clinically. Both his compositions and his commentaries are leavened with a mischievous sense of humor. Distinguishing his practice from orthodox *musique concrète*, he wrote, “I called that *musique anecdotique* without really believing it.”⁷ His sense of humor belies an incisive understanding of the issues at play in his practice, including an acute awareness of the listener-as-reader. His work is anecdotal rather than concrete because it maintains a connection to the situations in which it is recorded and to the narrative from which it is excised. He has also referred to his tape compositions as *son mémorisé* (stored, recorded, or memorized sound). It is not concretized but rather stored for future use in the technological memory of the recording medium. His recordings act as seed banks from which future plantings and harvestings might be derived. To push the metaphor further—but also closer to Ferrari’s own conception—his recordings are beings-in-the-world of his compositional microsocieties. Their interactions carry some of the complexity of the situations in which they were recorded, combining in unpredictable ways. They are anecdotal both because they are formed of anecdotes from the flow of the cultures in which the original recordings are made, yet also because they combine to form new anecdotes. The sounds of a piece of Ferrari’s *musique anecdotique* are open conduits in which meaning flows between the worlds from which they were taken and the world they create. This meaning is pointedly Derridean, a product of differential friction and the trace of alterity, a meaning constituted by what it is not.

6. Ferrari, “I Was Running,” 97.

7. *Ibid.*, 101.

Beginning at least as early as *Hétérozygote* (1963–64) Ferrari included recorded snippets of spoken language. “I believe that one cannot speak seriously without the persiflage which gives to seriousness its complicity, and to rightness the counterpoint of error to which it is irremediably attached.”⁸ This complicit seriousness, this error-laden rightness, is an inevitable product of narrative structure and linguistic content. In 1977 Ferrari created *Presque Rien, No. 2: Ainsi continue la nuit dans ma tête multiple* (*Almost Nothing, No. 2: Thus Continues the Night in My Multiple Head*). Ferrari goes beyond the inclusion of captured conversations, intervening in the most unconcrete way: “*Presque Rien, No. 2* was a derailment of *Presque Rien, No. 1*.”⁹ He recorded the traffic, birds, bells, crickets, and dogs of the tiny village of Tuchan, in Corbières, Switzerland, much as he had done in Dalmatia in *Presque Rien, No. 1*. But rather than recording from a fixed perspective, he strolls around the town, recording in multiple locations. More important, as he strolls and records, he speaks into the microphone, inserting an overt narrative perspective, where previous environmental recordings had posited an untenable objectivity.

There was also the idea of the walker/observer, who realises what he’s recording and adds his ideas. In fact there’s true and false involved—there are some things which were added for dramaturgical reasons, some commentaries which are completely bogus! In any case, playing with truth and lies is what makes up the concept, . . . putting the walker inside the recording process and recognising him as a person, led me to think: “There are these natural sounds, and I’m going to make sounds too, incorporate a symbolic transcription of what comes into my head and then intervene as composer.”

Ferrari’s concern goes well beyond sound-in-itself. Sound is merely the track upon which his train of thought runs, traveling from

8. *Ibid.*, 96.

9. Ferrari, as quoted in Warburton, “Interview with Luc Ferrari.”

Point A—the rhythms, cycles, interactions, and accidents of human life—to Point B—an aesthetic engagement with what Ferrari has called “a concrete attachment to social, political and sentimental life.”¹⁰ The subtitle *Thus Continues the Night in My Multiple Head* captures the metaphorically reverberant nature of the piece. The night as phenomenon exists “out there,” but it also exists “in here” for anyone who experiences it. The interior night echoes the exterior night, introducing the inevitable “counterpoint of error.” The exterior night also echoes the interior night, adapting to the experience of the witness. To further complicate matters, the “in here” of the head is multiple. The walker/observer is never of one mind. He realizes he’s recording. He mixes fact with fiction. As Jean-Luc Nancy has theorized it, sound is innately referential. Meaning and sound constitute each other and, in the process, identify both an origin and objective of reference:

One can say, then, at least, that meaning and sound share the space of referral, in which at the same time they refer to each other, and that, in a very general way, this space can be defined as the space of a *self*, a subject. A *self* is nothing other than a form or function of referral: a *self* is made of a relationship to self.¹¹

Ferrari’s “symbolic transcription” of his thoughts is the space of referral of the self, the symbolic grid that *is* the self, comparable to Peirce’s conception of the “man-sign.” This grid interacts with the symbolic grids of the recorded sounds, of his awareness of himself and his activities, of facts, of fiction. But it does not stop there. These symbolic grids, located roughly on the side of production, interact with the matrix of symbolic grids on the side of reception: the recorded sounds as received, the awareness of the process of recording, the

10. Ferrari, “I Was Running,” 99.

11. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 8.

recorder's interventionist presence in the recording, the listener's awareness of the walker/observer's awareness of himself, the listener's awareness of one's listening self engaged in the listening activity, and so on, ad infinitum.



Luc Ferrari, making a recording for *Far West News, Episodes 2 and 3*, Colorado, 1998. Photo: Brunhild Meyer-Ferrari. Courtesy Brunhild Meyer-Ferrari.

Far-West News, Episodes 2 and 3 (2006) is comprised of recordings made during a trip to the American Southwest in 1998; in many ways it is Ferrari's fullest exploration of *musique anecdotique*. Instead of the snippets of captured conversation of *Hétérozygote*, or the hushed, interior monologue of *Presque Rien, No. 2*, the interaction of voices in *Far-West News* constitutes a record of interaction. Ferrari isn't simply an objective recordist or a detached observer/narrator; he and his wife, Brunhild Meyer-Ferrari, are active participants in their environment. Ferrari's long-standing concern with the social, political, and sentimental are foregrounded, along with the resulting problematic relation of his work to the category of music. The piece starts in familiar Ferrarian territory, with the sounds of birds and crickets.

Forty-five seconds into “Episode 2,” a passing car is manipulated, post-recording, to resonate like the otherworldly harmonies of Ligeti’s *Atmosphères* (used to great cinematic [i.e., narrative] effect by Stanley Kubrick in *2001: A Space Odyssey*). Throughout the piece, Ferrari overdubs musical passages, ranging from cartoonishly manic interventions to faux-symphonic soundtrack accompaniments, using these passages as both connective tissue between episodes and as a kind of aural punctuation.

Later in “Episode 2,” Meyer-Ferrari’s pitched-down voice announces, “At Springdale, there was an appointment with the American composer Phillip Bimstein.” The encounter that follows condenses all of Ferrari’s concerns into a single interaction. After a knock on the door, we hear the squeak of the door hinges as Bimstein welcomes the couple to Springdale, Utah. Bimstein checks his pronunciation of Ferrari’s first name, Luc, which is then spoken more than ten times by the three new acquaintances, stretching the single syllable to confirm the vowel sound. It is unclear if they actually spoke the name so many times or if Ferrari looped “Luc.” But in either case, he takes a palpable, sonic glee in the absurd repetition of his name. The piece expresses its self-awareness when Ferrari explains why he is recording their conversation: “I make sound-land-art.” Again the three voices repeat the one-syllable words, this time reshuffling them to create new constructions, each equally applicable to Ferrari’s enterprise: “sound-land-art,” “land-sound-art,” “art-land-sound,” “art-sound-land.” Ferrari’s practice couldn’t be more distant from phenomenological essentialism, from sound-in-itself. *Far-West News* engages sense, not sound. Sense can never be *in-itself*. Sense cannot partake of the absolute proximity of self-presence. As Nancy points out, sense is an awareness of being aware; a conception that finds its most comfortable expression in the reverberant, expanded situation of sound:

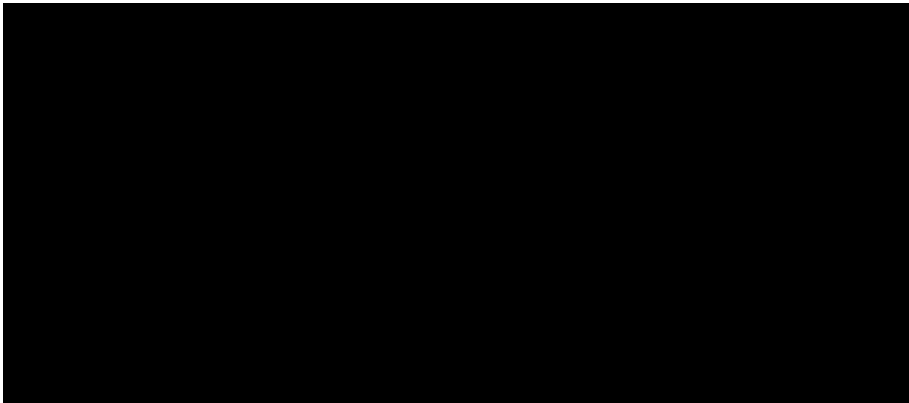
Indeed, as we have known since Aristotle, sensing (*aesthesis*) is always a perception, that is, a feeling-oneself-feel: or, if

you prefer, sensing is a subject, or it does not sense. But it is perhaps in the sonorous register that this reflected structure is most obviously manifest.¹²

In *Far-West News* the subsequent conversation turns to Bimstein's dual role as composer of experimental music and mayor of Springdale. He explains how his musical training qualifies him for his political responsibilities:

We know how different sounds can be combined, different voices; . . . those can be blended together in a way that works. Same thing in politics. You've got all these people in town with different voices, different feelings, different opinions. So I know, as someone who has orchestrated pieces, that they can all work together. And there can be counterpoint.¹³

When Meyer-Ferrari suggests that all politicians should be musicians, Bimstein responds, "Except that we know that some musicians are too, too, you know . . ."¹⁴



12. Ibid.

13. Luc Ferrari, *Far-West News, Episodes 2 and 3* (Blue Chopsticks, 2006).

14. Ibid.