

The Gift of Silence [donner les bruits]

I'm wondering if silence itself is perhaps the mystery at the heart of music? And is silence the most perfect music of all? (Sting, in his speech on the occasion of his acceptance of an honorary doctorate from the Berklee College of Music on 15 May, 1994.)

[1] What is music? This question investigates the borderline between music and what can no longer be considered music. It is the question of the frame of music since the frame is what distinguishes it as music, what 'produces' music. Without it, music is not music. It can be asked whether the frame is central or marginal, essential or supplemental. The frame itself is not music. Once the frame encloses the music and makes music *music*, it is external to the music. But as a frame of music, it also belongs to the music. Can we say that the frame is (n)either simply inside (n)or outside music?

What is music? What is the frame of music? In order to answer these questions, music needs to be pushed to its boundaries. This then raises the question of what takes place on the borderline between music and non-music; it is a question of the most intimate and, at the same time, the other of music. It can be said that music is bordered by two distinct entities. On one hand, there are sounds that we no longer consider music: noise. On the other hand, there is the absence of sound: silence. (But exactly how different is this 'other' hand? An important question that will be elaborated upon extensively.) 'Music is inscribed between noise and silence', says Jacques Attali (Attali, p.19). Therefore, in order to gain insight into the musical phenomenon, we need to direct ourselves to those areas where music and noise, music and silence and even silence and noise intersect. (Another conceivable border will not be addressed here: the border between music and (spoken) language and the vague areas where these two meet: in *Sprechgesang*, ritual chants, proclamations, rap, in projects such as Dieter Schnebel's *Glossolalie 61* where the border between music and spoken language is explicitly questioned.)

[2] Music. Privileged over noise and silence. Opposed to noise and silence. Noise and silence seem to be on its outside, excluded in and by music. Through the deconstruction of (hierarchically ordered) [binary oppositions](#), Derrida demonstrates that one pole of such oppositions cannot exist without the other. Indeed, one part is always already part of (the definition of) the other as well. As applied to music, noise and silence have always already been part of music, noise and silence have always already been part of each other. It is this notion that I will develop further and investigate in this section of the site. In [Deconstruction In Music](#), I express my desire to indicate deconstruction in music by music(ians); can music 'read itself' in a deconstructive way? This implies that I am not solely interested in a verbal, theoretical and discursive deconstruction of the boundaries of music, noise, and silence. Primarily, my attention will focus on musicians and composers who, in and through their music, have explored the diffuse spaces between music, noise and silence, those who have questioned the frame of music out of the

musical (as opposed to the textual, another opposition that could be deconstructed), those who have rejected the traditional hierarchical relations of music - noise and music - silence. That is not to say that a musical deconstruction simply seeks to present the illusion of some pure and simple absence of a frame, or that it would re-frame music with some perfect, apt and truthful new frame. A deconstructive strategy will consist of examining whether it is at all possible to create a frame that would indeed lay down an unequivocal definition. Deconstruction exposes us to the inescapable situation of uncertainty and indeterminateness that we face when we want to distinguish music from noise, music from silence, noise from silence.

[3] The works of the American composer, John Cage, have increased our understanding of the problems involved in defining music, noise and silence. Therefore, his oeuvre will be prominently featured in this section.

As a way of introducing the outlined problems, I will give attention to the ways in which various thinkers of music have expressed themselves in relation to defining music. For the purpose of evaluating the deconstruction of the borders of music, noise and silence, I have outlined a number of definitions of music that can be found on the page entitled

[What is music?](#)

What is Music?

[1] What is music? During the course of the history of Western music, many have tried to formulate an answer to the question of the ontology of music. In order to distinguish between music and non-music, repeated attempts have been made to compile a list of essential properties of music along with the necessary and sufficient conditions. It is not my intention to represent any or all of the expressed views on this matter in a systematic or all-encompassing order. Rather, I prefer to paint a brief and approximate picture of some of the problems that these attempts to define, determine, or discern music have encountered.

[2] 'Musica ist eine Wissenschaft und Kunst, geschickte und angenehme Klänge klüglich zu stellen, richtig an einander zu fügen, und lieblich heraus zu bringen, damit durch ihren Wohl laut Gottes Ehre und alle Tugenden befördert werden [Music is a science and an art that produces dexterous and pleasant sounds, in order to combine them properly and present them charmingly so that their euphony may further God's honor and all virtues]', says composer and music theoretician Johann Mattheson. Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau describes music as an 'art de combiner les sons d'une manière agréable à l'oreille [the art of combining sounds in a way that is pleasing to the ear]'. Organist and composer Johann Gottfried Walther thinks of music as 'die Ton-Kunst, d.i. die Wissenschaft wohl zu singen, zu spielen und zu componiren [the art of sound, i.e., the ability to sing, to play, and to compose well]'.
Three 18th century definitions of music. They all share a normative quality that plays an essential role. 'Geschick'. 'Angenehm'. 'Klüglich'. 'Lieblich'. 'Agréable'. 'Wohl'. Terms that we would hesitate nowadays to include in a definition or description of a phenomenon (of music). Although speaking about music in such terms has not been completely banned (cf. Nattiez, p.42. cf. Durant, p.58), they are too indistinct and ambiguous to arrive at a clear and uniform definition.

In contemporary attempts to distinguish music from non-music, more phenomenological, structuralistic or formalistic descriptions are preferred. Music is harmony, melody, rhythm, meter, tone, instruments or voice. Music is organized sound. Music is giving form to noise (cf. Attali, p.10). Incidentally, here too, ambivalent or polyvalent qualifications turn up: what is 'organized'? What is 'giving form to'? And how normative are these formalistic qualifications? Can there be music without or outside these parameters (cf. some of Dieter Schnebel's compositions in [No \(-\) Music](#)).

The American analytical philosopher, Jerrold Levinson, defines music as sounds that are man-made or arranged for the purpose of enriching experience via active engagement (e.g., through performing, listening, dancing) where sounds are primarily attended to for their sonic qualities (cf. Levinson, p.273). On one hand, he stays true to formalism. The sounds in music are intended for 'listening to primarily *as sounds*, and not primarily as symbols of discursive thought' (Levinson, p.272). On the other hand, Levinson expressly insists on including the intention, aim or purpose in his definition: music is 'humanly organized sound *for the purpose* of aesthetic appreciation' (Levinson, p.271, my italics). Levinson points out that he conceives of music primarily as an artistic activity and not as

a sonic phenomenon to which intention would be irrelevant. Much remains unanswered in Levinson's definition. For example: what exactly is 'man-made'? According to Levinson, a birdsong or the rhythmic gurgling of a stream cannot be considered music. However, what is it if a composer incorporates them into a music piece? What if the entire composition consists of a birdsong or the rhythmic gurgling of a stream? Does the composer's intention alone suffice to categorize something as music? And is it possible to reconsider that view?

[3] Convinced of the difficulties that are involved in adequately defining music, music sociologists John Shepherd and Peter Wicke conclude that music itself is a discursively constituted category. That is, this term in itself can give rise to multiple, incommensurable and contested categories. 'The term 'music' is highly polysemous' (Shepherd and Wicke, p.208). (Musicologist Carl Dahlhaus no longer speaks of music (singular), but of 'musics'.)

Moreover, it only becomes more difficult to distinguish between music and non-music when the context reaches beyond the western world. 'More and more frequently, ethnomusicological literature stresses that other cultures do not in general have a term for music as a global phenomenon', musicologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez concludes (Nattiez, p.54). This epistemological category lies outside the cultural landscapes of such cultures and is not relevant to them: 'We [the Western world, MC] recognize the worldwide existence of music, but all of those things that we acknowledge as musical facts are not necessarily thus categorized by everybody' (Nattiez, p.61). Nattiez, Shepherd and Wicke seem to agree: there is no unambiguous and intercultural universal concept that defines music.

[4] Another problem needs to be addressed. Judging by John Cage's composition, *4'33"*, (among others) Levinson concludes: 'It should be apparent that there are no longer any intrinsic properties of sound that are required for something possibly to be music' (Levinson, p.271). According to Levinson, there are conditions essential to a piece being music that are not even directly audible. These observations, which are based on developments in musical language, can lead to a new definition of music inspired by the findings of the American philosopher, Arthur Danto. In his essay from 1964, 'The Artistic Enfranchisement of Real Objects: the Artworld', Danto acknowledges that the works of Marcel Duchamp and various Pop Art artists have made it impossible to separate art from non-art on the basis of formal qualities. Danto asks what will ultimately determine the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo box? Danto's question amounts to the following: when one of two identical objects is considered art while the other is not, a certain context is assumed within which these two formally indistinguishable objects still enjoy their respective status. Danto calls this context the *artworld*: 'To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry - an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld' (Danto in Dickie & Sclafani, p.29). In 1974, George Dickie adds a sociological and pragmatic definition of a work of art to this notion of artworld: a work of art is a series of aspects (not every aspect of a work of art makes it a work of art) to which one or more individuals who act on behalf of the social institution artworld (e.g., the artist himself, presidents of art institutions, critics, aestheticians, etc.) grant the status of 'art' (cf. Dickie,

p.35). Objects become works of art because (influential) people in the artworld have declared them to be works of art.

What is said here about art in general can be easily translated to music. Sounds become music when certain people from the music world (often, the composer at first) deem it music. This is not an inalterable fact: views on music can be questioned and reviewed at all times until a new, temporary consensus is reached. Music becomes a social convention, a 'total social fact' (Marcel Mauss), subject to change over time and by culture. In order to define music one should include not only sound, but the context in which sound is produced as well. Such notions as 'the institutional setting' (Shepherd and Wicke), 'the code' and 'the network' (Attali), 'social conventions' (Durant) and 'social contexts' (Nattiez), and 'kategorialer Formung' (Dahlhaus), to mention only a few equivalents, seem to at least temporarily ensure a certain delineation between music and non-music where formal qualities can no longer hold.

[5] I do not want to elaborate upon problems concerning all that, for convenience's sake, may be summed up as institutional or contextual theories. In [Context](#), I point out certain problems dealing with the notion of context. The problem of demarcation (the problem of inside vs.outside) will recur in the institutional theories, for example, in determining who can be rated in the artworld and which series of aspects belong to the work of art. I would like to briefly touch upon another problem. In *The Truth In Painting*, Derrida alerts the reader to a hermeneutic circle with the appearance of a vicious circle when speaking of art. The notion of an artworld already presupposes an idea of what constitutes art and of the essence of art and its original meaning. The concept of art is already predetermined or preconceived in the notion of an artworld. 'One makes of art in general an object in which one claims to distinguish an inner meaning, the invariant' (*The Truth In Painting*, p.22). 'What is art?', Derrida asks. 'As long as one refuses to give an answer in advance to this question, 'art' is only a word. And if one wants to interrogate art, one is indeed obliged to give oneself the guiding thread of a representation. And this thread is the work, that fact that there are works of art' (*The Truth In Painting*, p.32). In most aesthetic theories (Derrida refers to Hegel and Heidegger), the chosen point of departure is the fact that there are indeed works of art. Notwithstanding, how are they to be recognized? Here is where the vicious circle becomes evident: 'There are works which common opinion [see Dickie's definition, MC] designates as works of art and they are what one must interrogate in order to decipher in them the essence of art. But by what does one recognize, commonly, that these are works of art if one does not have in advance a sort of pre-comprehension of the essence of art?' (*The Truth In Painting*, p.32). Problems occur. Circular arguments. Unfounded presuppositions. However, with a certain approval Derrida quotes Heidegger who states that it is not about escaping this vicious circle, but on the contrary about 'engaging in it and going all around it' (cf. *The Truth In Painting*, p.32).

[6] What is music? Not quite knowing where to start in the hermeneutic circle (Is that still important?), I will return to the thinkers who have committed themselves to determining the boundary between music and non-music, the boundaries between music, noise and silence. Despite the attention for the (cultural and temporal) context of music, despite artworld theories that result from this attention, defining music remains 'infected' from

the inside by an intra-musical premise, a formalistic quality. All thinkers seem to concur that music, at any rate, has something to do with sound. (According to American composer Robert Ashley the 'most radical redefinition of music' would be one that defines music 'without reference to sound'.) Levinson: 'Perhaps the only thing that all theorists agree on is that music is necessarily sound' (Levinson, p.274). Nattiez: 'Sound is an irreducible given of music. Even in the marginal cases in which it is absent, it is nonetheless present by allusion ... The musical work manifests itself, in its material reality, in the form of sound waves' (Nattiez, p.67 and p.69). Although music is not limited to the acoustic dimension (There are other factors that determine whether or not something is music), we always speak of music in relation to sonority, according to Nattiez, even when it merely concerns a reference: sound is a minimal condition of music. To Shepherd and Wicke, it is the melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and timbral configurations that lead us to recognize music as 'music' (cf. Shepherd and Wicke, p.10). They continue: 'We identified sound in music as the material medium that would ultimately guarantee music an integrity and relative autonomy as a specific signifying system' (Shepherd and Wicke, p.56). Ultimately, they define music as 'sounds 'in conversation' with sounds' (Shepherd and Wicke, p.200). Dahlhaus considers the musical work as '*tönender Sinnzusammenhang*' [sounding coherence of meaning] (Dahlhaus, p.195, my italics). To musicologist Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, specific to music is 'dasjenige, was sie im Reich des Tönens und Hörens ganz allein für sich selber hat' [that which it disposes of entirely by itself in the realm of sounding and hearing] (Dahlhaus, p.189). To Eggebrecht, audibility is an obvious aspect of music in which a distinction can be made between noise, sound, and tone. We are back to the definition of music as quoted by Jacques Attali in [The Gift of Silence \[donner les bruits\]](#), the introduction to this section: 'Music is inscribed between noise and silence' (Attali, p.19).

[7] Beginning with the idea that the definitions of music, noise and silence have (at least also) to do with (the absence of) sound, I will dedicate a number of pages to the investigation of the relationship between music and noise ([Noise as Undifferentiated Sound](#) and [Noise as Undesirable Sound](#)), and of the relationship between music and silence ([Silence and/in Music](#)). A separate page addresses a deconstruction of the oppositional pair, music-noise, as it (unconsciously) takes place in Jacques Attali's book, *Noise* ([Music and/as \(Dis\)Order](#)). One composer who has devoted nearly his entire musical life to the borders among music, silence and noise is John Cage. A number of pages are dedicated to his works and his views ([Cage and Noise](#), and [Cage and Silence](#)). In the end, I intend to show how his compositions, *4'33"* and *Waiting*, deconstruct the opposition of silence and noise ([Music, Noise, Silence, and Sound](#)). On a separate page, thought is given to the ethics of a deconstruction of the borders between music, silence, and noise ([Silence, Noise and Ethics](#)). Finally, the pages on Cage may lead one to a page that connects silence to death ([Silence and Death](#)), and to a page on which Cage's use of silence is connected to French poet Stephane Mallarmé's interest in the color white ([Cage, White, Mallarmé, Silence](#)).

Cage, White, Mallarmé, Silence

[1] A synesthetic experiment. Which color most closely resembles silence? Speech is silver; silence is golden, as the saying goes. But meanings differ.

Composer R. Murray Schafer argues that if 'white noise' is the total of all audible frequencies at the same time, then silence could be called 'black noise'.

Conversely, John Cage associates silence with whiteness referring to the paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, in particular. In 1949, Cage viewed a new series of all-white paintings by Rauschenberg. ('White on white. The blank is colored by a supplementary white'.) What fascinated Cage was, as Rauschenberg said, that 'a canvas is never empty'. The canvasses are 'mirrors of the air', a landing-ground for dust, shadows, and reflections, not passive, but on the contrary, hypersensitive. The white paintings gave Cage the courage and 'authority' to compose his silent pieces.

French poet Stéphane Mallarmé makes a similar connection between whiteness and silence. In 'The Double Session' (*Dissemination*, p.173-286), Derrida refers to a sheet in Mallarmé's *Livre* that features the following lines (*Dissemination*, p.230):

The intellectual armature of the
poem, conceals itself and - takes place - holds in the space that
isolates the stanzas and
among the blankness of the white paper; a significant silence that it
is no less lovely to compose than
verse.

[2] In much greater detail, Derrida addresses Mallarmé's text *Mimique* in which silence is an important theme (*Dissemination*, p.175).

Mimique

Silence, sole luxury after rhymes, an orchestra only marking with its gold, its brushes with thought and dusk, the detail of its signification on a par with a stilled ode and which it is up to the poet, roused by a dare, to translate! the silence of an afternoon of music; I find it, with contentment, also, before the ever original reappearance of Pierrot or of the poignant and elegant mime Paul Marguerite.

Such is this PIERROT MURDERER OF HIS WIFE composed and set down by himself, a mute soliloquy that the phantom, white as a yet unwritten page, holds in both face and gesture at full length to his soul ...

... Surprise, accompanying the artifice of a notation of sentiments by unproffered sentences - that, in the sole case, perhaps, with authenticity, between the sheets and the eye there reigns a silence still, the condition and delight of reading.

[3] *Mimique*. A Pierrot story. The Pierrot character associates silence with whiteness. The two most remarkable and typical features of the Pierrot are that it tells its story in silence and that his face is white (neutrality or utter coldness?). Throughout the history of the Pierrot story, silence and whiteness are inextricably linked.

Mimique is also a text about silence, a text that often praises silence (cf. the fragments cited above). Elsewhere in *Mimique*, Mallarmé talks (in concealed terms) about the surplus value of mime, the groping in silence. In 'The Double Session', Derrida points out that *Mimique* resides between two silences 'that are breached or broached thereby' (cf. *Dissemination*, p.223). Derrida could mean this in a literal sense: *Mimique* begins and ends with the word 'silence'. But (of course) there is more to say. This text on silence contains a considerable number of silences indicated by its many commas. Derrida notes that Mallarmé regarded these commas as pause marks and intervals that interrupt the progression of the sentence. The commas create silences. Thus, silence is present in both content and form.

Like *Mimique*, Cage's *Waiting* can be read or heard as a 'text' that resides between two silences; the piece begins and ends with bars that contain only rests. Where silence is made explicit through the corporeality of the words in Mallarmé's text, the silences in *Waiting* are strongly emphasized by its subdivision in bars. However, we must think of *Waiting* from a traditional perspective, i.e., as starting from sounds, in order to understand the pauses as hindrances for the progression of the music. If the pauses in *Mimique* can be read as fragmentations of the story, Cage inverts what Mallarmé aims for in this text. The notated piano sounds in *Waiting* seem to preclude silence; they emerge from a world that is occupied by silence.

Analogously, a text could be seen as emerging from white space. Mallarmé clearly experiments with this idea in some other texts. In his poem, *Un coup de dés* [Throw of the Dice], the words are spread left and right across the page. (Incidentally, the title of the poem nicely coincides with Cage's method of composing through the throwing of dice.) The special typography, the irregular interspaces bring about fragmented word islands in a sea of white. (The typography of Cage's books greatly resembles this work by Mallarmé.) The white seems to function as a primeval sea from which the text originates. The words form small islands that emerge from this primeval sea. They interrupt the whiteness of the pages. The blank white dominates (cf. Van der Sijde, p.203).

A DICE THROW

WILL NEVER

EVEN WHEN CAST IN ETERNAL
CIRCUMSTANCES

UP FROM A SHIPWRECK

WHETHER
the
Abyss

whitened
slack
raging
at a tilt
flaps a hopeless
wing
its own
too
early falling back in the struggle to trim its flight
and covering the spurts
cutting down the leaps

[4] According to Mallarmé, meaning always is the effect of a play *between* the words. The white of the page is thus charged with meaning; moreover, it is the precondition for any meaning to emerge. Furthermore, the open spaces in *Un coup de dés* indicate that the text cannot coagulate into any definitive meaning; the words refer to one another, but together they do not form a closed structure. Mallarmé calls his typographical play 'espacement' [spacing], a term Derrida adopted in his text, 'Différance' (*Margins of Philosophy*, p.3-27). 'The movement of signification is possible only if each so-called 'present' element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself' (*Margins*, p.13). A sign refers to something other than itself; therefore, it stands in relation to what it is not. 'An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself ... this interval is what might be called *spacing*, the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space' (*Margins*, p.13). Both Mallarmé and Derrida emphasize the role of space, of whiteness, in the determination of meaning. In *Dissemination*, Derrida addresses this issue in different words: 'Languages, as we now know, are diacritical realities; each element within them is in itself less important than the gap that distinguishes it from other elements' (*Dissemination*, p.250).

The space between words, the gap, the white, becomes the precondition for a text to appear as text. From the diacritical, Derrida will later draw another consequence, namely, 'a certain inexhaustibility [of meaning] that cannot be classed in the categories of richness, intentionality, or a horizon'. The dissemination, the infinite dispersion of meanings, escapes the author's intentions similar to the way that (composed) silence escapes the composer's compulsion to control the world of sounds. *Un coup de dés* 'reveals' this dissemination in the abundant white, the spaces between the words. The text joins the white and complies with the blank in the same way the prescribed musical sounds join the already existing silence in *Waiting*. Silence. Not an unarticulated

nothingness. No meaningless absence of sounds. Silence must be re-thought. Through whiteness.

[5] Many of Mallarmé's poems feature a polysemous play on the concept of white. Words such as 'snow', 'swan', 'virginity', 'foam', 'frigidity', 'glacier', and 'paper' are all associated with whiteness. Two possible entrances towards the white seem to unfold. First, the white seems to become a set theme in the associative chain (just as silence becomes thematic in *Mimique*), a semantic concept. 'The 'blank' appears first of all, to a phenomenological or thematic reading, as the *inexhaustible totality* of the semantic valences that have any tropic affinity with it', says Derrida (*Dissemination*, p.252, my italics). An inexhaustible totality. Although inexhaustible, Derrida seems to assume a totality with regard to the semantic valences. Polysemy. Second, in *Un coup de dés*, Mallarmé does not write about whiteness. Rather, he shows it making it visible through the typography. A non-thematic position. *Un coup de dés* attempts to make something visible that cannot be expressed in words, something that escapes wording. Derrida calls this 'the blank as a blank *between* the valences, a [hymen](#) that unites and differentiates them in the series' (*Dissemination*, p.252). Thus, Mallarmé's whiteness relates to both the totality, however infinite, of the polysemous series, and to the spaced splitting of the whole, the writing site where such a totality is produced. However, the latter is not just one extra valence, a meaning that enriches the polysemous series, an extra signified or signifier. Neither is the blank the transcendental origin of the series. Derrida calls this whiteness the 'non-theme of the spacing that relates the different meanings to each other' (*Dissemination*, p.252). The blank comes neither before, nor after the series; it intervenes between the semantic series in general; it liberates the effect that a series exists. Whiteness as/is *différance*.

[6] Derrida criticizes the limited idea of 'thematicism' to interpret Mallarmé's work. 'If we can begin to see that the 'blank' and the 'fold' cannot in fact be mastered as themes or as meanings ... then we will precisely have determined the limits of thematic criticism itself' (*Dissemination*, p.245-6). This may immediately refer to the non-thematic white of a page (a 'falling outside of the text'). But Derrida also points out something else. He attempts to show that Mallarmé's word associations do not only refer to meanings; therefore, they can only unjustly be called thematic. Derrida addresses (as does Mallarmé) the material aspects of a word, something a thematic approach does not usually do. 'Thematicism necessarily leaves out of account the formal, phonic, or graphic 'affinities' that do not have the shape of a word' (*Dissemination*, p.255). Phonic or graphic affinities. Mallarmé plays with connections such as 'cygne' [swan] and 'signe' [sign], or 'vol' [flight] and 'voile' [veil or sail]. This is where the words hesitate between sound and meaning, and where the musical character of Mallarmé's poetry becomes apparent. A [non-discursive sonority](#). At times, this creates a paradoxical situation. For example, blankness or whiteness can connote both virginity (the virginal white of a page) and sexuality (the naked skin of a white woman). It differs from itself in the same way as silence differs from itself (the other) in Cage's music (cf. [Music, Noise, Silence, and Sound](#)).

Mallarmé's poetry is a play of articulations, a re-inscription within sequences that can no longer be controlled. An example. 'White' does not comprise the essence of 'swan', because 'swan' equally determines the value of 'white'. 'White' and 'swan' have different

connotations. The inexhaustible expressiveness of these words is caused by their mutual interaction (that only increases when other words are added to the chain). Each word is the trope of the other (cf. Van der Sijde, p.227). There is no center 'hors-texte', no transcendental signified that can keep this endless dissemination under control. (A change from polysemy to [dissemination](#).) 'If there is no such thing as a total or proper meaning, it is because the blank *folds over*' (*Dissemination*, p.258). But this folding over is not a chance event that happens to the blank from the outside. It is within the blank as well as outside of it.

[7] Can we make an analogy with [Waiting](#)? A first reading might suggest that the opening and closing bars of [Waiting](#) coagulates into a thematized silence. The silent bars take up an equally important part of the rhythmic structure of [Waiting](#) as the bars that contain notes indicating that Cage treats both in an equal fashion. The theme is silent, i.e., the composer cannot determine the theme. The theme is infinitely open because every performance fills it with the random sounds of the environment. This silent theme will not be limited or controlled. However, it is alternated in a horizontal movement with a theme from the composer's hand. Silence and sounds take turns, relieving each other in time. Therefore, they are juxtaposed to each other in more than one way: 'non-sounds' vs. sounds, non-intention vs. intention, open theme vs. closed theme, nature vs. culture, life vs. art, etc.

Cage, however, not only composes *with* silence, he also composes *in* silence. The silent parts and the written notes of [Waiting](#) both join an always already present silence, always already resounding sounds. Silence and (musical) sound are no longer each others antagonists. They are no longer engaged in a sequential play. Silence does not only harbor an infinite abundance of sounds. Important in this second reading is that silence has nestled itself in the musical sounds. Silence does not stop when Cage's premeditated sounds resound. 'Silence has invaded everything, and there is still music', says Cage in *For the Birds*. Silence was always already present and it remains present. This is the non-theme of the duration. In the silent parts of [Waiting](#), a silence on silence opens. Silence is colored by a supplementary silence; it differs from itself. ('White on white. The blank is colored by a supplementary white'.)

I call this silence of the second reading *arche-silence*. [Waiting](#) is situated between silence, a thematization of silence (the general rests), and arche-silence, the rising and dissolving of differences and meanings (between silence and silence, silence and sound, sound and sound, etc.), the folds in the musical syntax. Arche-silence is the possibility of conceptuality, of a system within which every concept refers to other concepts. However, this arche-silence is not the origin (in the traditional sense of the word) of these differences. It is not an in-different presence because it is itself always pervaded by differentiation. The arche-silence does not precede these differences. Everything 'starts' with the differentiation. Différance. Thus, there can no longer be a matter of origin. Arche-silence is silence as differentiation: 'The blank [silence, MC] refers to the non-sense of spacing, the place where nothing takes place but the place. But that place is everywhere; it is not a site fixed and predetermined' (*Dissemination*, p.257).

Cage and Noise

[1] Music. Noise. Cage. Noise and music. Noise *in* music. Music *in* noise. Noise *about* music. Cage about noise. Cage about music as a cage.

John Cage was not the first, nor the last composer to critically question and transgress the borders between music and noise (in addition to the borders between [music and silence](#) and between [silence and noise](#)). Time and conventions will tell whether or not he is to be regarded as the most important composer in this area. As it stands, however, it is not yet possible to write about this topic without paying proper attention to Cage's endeavors. At the onset of the 21st century, he is still an undisputed reference point.

[2] In accordance with traditional music history, Cage's views on music and noise can be positioned at the end of a long line of developments in the history of music. I confine myself to mentioning two names that have influenced Cage's ideas. Futurist Luigi Russolo (1855-1947) was one of the first composers of the 20th century that attempted to emancipate noise, for which reason he may be regarded as a precursor of Cage (cf. [Noise as Undifferentiated Sound](#)). Cage himself, however, has referred more often to French-American composer Edgard Varèse (1885-1965). 'Years ago, for instance, after I decided to devote my life to music, I noticed that people distinguished between noises and sounds. I decided to follow Varèse and fight for noises, to be on the side of the underdog', Cage remembers in 'The Future of Music' (Gena and Brent, p.38). Although Varèse still defined music as 'organized sound' - a view Cage highly contests - Cage did consider him a kindred spirit since Varèse, more than anyone else in his generation, was clearly and actively concerned with accepting all audible phenomena as material proper to music. 'While others were still discriminating musical tones from noises, Varèse moved into the field of sound itself, not splitting it in two by introducing into the perception of it a mental prejudice' (Cage, 1961, p.83-4). Following Varèse and exceeding Russolo's undermining moves, Cage crusades against the superior position of 'the concept of music' in the world of sound. According to Cage, it is this very concept that makes it extremely difficult to develop an uninhibited and unprejudiced ear for sounds that one does not (yet) count among music. Instead, one often tries to avoid, banish, or ignore these sounds precisely because they do not belong to the musical domain. 'There is so much in so-called classical music that is bound up not with sound, but with theory', says Cage (Gena and Brent, p.182).

[3] Cage is aware of the problems that these views bring about. 'Musicians will not admit that we are making music; they will say that we are interested in superficial effects, or, at most, are imitating Oriental or primitive music. New and original sounds will be labeled as 'noise'. But our common answer to every criticism must be to continue working and listening, making music with its materials, sound and rhythm, *disregarding the cumbersome, top-heavy structure of musical prohibitions*' (Cage, 1961, p.87, my italics). Cage composes (and argues in favor of a) music open to the sounds that are outside of it. A non-obstruction of sounds. The sounds of automobile parts, pipe lengths, and sheets of metal, for example. Familiar sounds, but sounds that were never before heard as music.

He asks us to free our minds from the old concepts of music and to explore ways to 'let sounds be themselves'. He opposes the said 'intellectuality' of music, since it stands in the way of an acceptance of noise. According to Cage, noises are sounds that have not yet been intellectualized. The ear can hear them directly; it cannot fit them into abstract preconceptions. (It is the failure of the intention to make these sounds fit that constitute them as noise.) Sounds should appear without positions of superiority or subordination. Cage and noise. Cage and music. Resistance and transgression. Challenging dominant forms of power (musical conventions, definitions). Refusing mastery and being mastered. Disrupting the exercise of power (of the music world).

[4] Music. Noise. Cage. Noise and music. Noise *in* music. The concept of music does not interest Cage. 'If one feels protective about the word 'music' (if this word is sacred), protect it and find another word for all the rest that enters through the ears. It's a waste of time to trouble oneself with words' (Cage, 1961, p.190). However, can Cage withdraw from this concept, this word? Can he - cagey, perhaps dressed up in a caftan - escape from this cage? Doesn't the problem of closure remain at the heart of Cage's project? The very gesture that carries his compositions, his ideas, beyond the conceptual closure of music, the cage called music, re-inscribes them within the limits of closure; they are bound in a double gesture, one of transgression and restoration. The transgression of the closure can only proceed by employing the musical language and conceptuality that restores music to itself. It is music that turns noise into (musical) experience. But Cage's work is also the mark of an alterity that music is unable to reduce. The deconstructive working of Cage's compositions leaves music as a fissured concept that is unable to tell its inside from its outside. Cage's thinking and composing can not only be thought of as an effort to push the concept of music towards a new border; it comprises the infinite deferral of its enclosing power.

Music. Cage. Cage: an open framework of various kinds (cf. *OED*). The concept of music as an open framework. Impossible to close off. Impossible because an exteriority (noise) comes to play, brush against, rub, press against the limit itself and intervene in the inside (music) only to the extent that the inside is lacking. It is lacking *in* something and it is lacking *from itself* (cf. *The Truth in Painting*, p.56). Impossible because the outside (noise) is always already on the inside (music).

[5] In spite of the emancipative work of such people as Russolo and Varèse, Cage finds himself confronted with a musical world that still defines noise as 'sounds of indefinite pitch'. There is a clear hierarchy in the world of sounds: 'musical sounds' rise above 'noise sounds'. Cage is viewed with suspicion because he explores this forbidden 'non-musical' field of sounds. His first move (strategically speaking, though not chronologically) is to undermine this hierarchical order by introducing noise into the musical world, suggesting they are equal to musical sounds. However, this first move still leaves music with the upper hand. Departing from 'musical' sounds, a shift takes place where noise may now also be listened to as musical sounds. Cage's second move is to no longer take musical sounds, but rather noise, as his starting point.

[6] 'When Cage opens the door to the concert hall to let the noise of the street in, he is regenerating all of music: he is taking it to its culmination. He is blaspheming, criticizing

the code and the network' (Attali, p.136). According to Jacques Attali, Cage does question some of the old codes (the process of musical creation, music as an autonomous activity), but he does not yet suggest any new substitutions. However, it is my belief that many of Cage's compositions do initiate a rather radical shift in our attitude towards music. It is a shift that could be called a deconstruction in music: this strategy of deconstruction can be identified in the inversion of the initial hierarchy between music and noise (cf. [hierarchical oppositions](#)).

In what Cage calls 'a mental prejudice', music is always the privileged, positive term while noise represents what should be avoided, excluded, and silenced. Perhaps, one will never be able to completely banish noise - in the sense of unwanted sounds - however, one can still strive to do so with all possible (technical) means since it would do more justice to what it is all about: music. Musical tones are taken to be the principal aspects of a composition; noise is disrupting, subordinate, a meaningless factor.

Cage shifts the accent from the composing of music to the composing of/with/in noise, thereby questioning the traditional hierarchy between the two. The point of departure shifts from 'musical' sounds to 'noise' sounds. In an interview, Cage refers to a workshop he conducted for composers: 'I had the lights turned out and the windows open. I advised everybody to put on their overcoats and listen for half an hour to the sounds that came in through the window, and then to add to them - in the spirit of the sounds that are already there, rather than in their individual spirits. That is actually how I compose. I try to act in accord with the absence of my music' (Gena and Brent, p.176). Cage does not depart from music; his starting point is noise. He wants to create a music that belongs to the noises of the environment, a music that will take them into consideration. He starts from the simple fact that we are always already surrounded by sounds. What is important is how we relate to those sounds. Cage formulates a clear proposition: if we try to ignore them, they disturb us; if we listen to them, if we accept them, they are fascinating. Agreeing with this idea requires us to reconsider and adjust our views on music. 'It becomes evident that music itself is an ideal situation, not a real one. The mind may be used either to ignore ambient sounds, pitches other than the eighty-eight, durations which are not counted, timbres which are unmusical or distasteful, and in general to control and understand an available experience. Or the mind may give up its desire to improve on creation and function as a faithful receiver of experience' (Cage, 1961, p.32). Two points of special interest. First, Cage makes clear that all the music we hear is constantly and inevitably pervaded by noise, by undesirable and/or undifferentiated sounds. Second, the emancipation of noise is not the exclusive responsibility of the composer or the musician, but requires an active and transformable attitude on the listener's part as well. When the listener includes the sounds of the environment in the composition, he in fact becomes co-composer. Cage demands an open mind from the listener, a susceptible ear for all that sounds, better yet, for all that sounds and that is excluded from music in the traditional sense. If we can relate to these 'noise' sounds - sounds that are always already there, sounds that are always already part of the music, part of the inside - in a 'musical' sense, then the distinction between music and noise becomes very diffuse, uncertain, arbitrary.

[7] Ambient sounds. Unpredictable by nature. Variable. (Musically) non-intentional. As such, they raise the question of non-intention, of non-doing, of doing-without-doing. All these sounds share in the absence of intention, which implies that they do not follow or

pursue a predetermined direction, meaning, or destination. It is important to Cage that the act of composing does not disrupt this state of relative non-activity. His compositions must be in harmony with the events of the outside world.

Waiting, a 1952 composition for solo piano, is one of many examples in which Cage uses noise as his starting point. *Waiting* starts with 16 bars of rests, which implies that this work of music also consists of all the accidental noises in the room, whether humanly produced or not. Within this continuous stream of (non-intended) sounds, Cage's prescribed tones join in, hesitantly, softly, interrupted, as if they feel diffident to disrupt the 'music' that is already sounding. Towards the end, the piano sounds have long faded before the piece reaches its close. (In *Dissemination*, Derrida writes about the beginning of Philippe Sollers' novel *Numbers*: 'The initial capital letter is suspended by the three dots that precede it; the origin is suspended by this multiple punctuation and you are immediately plunged into the consumption of another text that had already, out of its double bottom, set this text in motion' (*Dissemination*, p.334). Sollers makes us realize that a text is always preceded by other texts. This idea carries one off to a labyrinth-like place. There is no origin. Likewise, the origin of *Waiting* seems to be suspended by the 16 bars of rests. The ambient sounds that are always already present in *Waiting*, in all music, are a preceding text in which another text inserts itself. But, of course, these sounds are preceded by other ones for their part. Any origin is suspended.)

Music no longer drowns out the noise in Cage's works, nor should it; 'musical' sounds and 'noise' sounds relate accordingly to each other. Symbiosis. Each acts as both guest and host: music is a guest in the domain of the noise and noise is welcomed in the house of music. Cage makes one aware that every house, every home, has an opening (doors, windows). The house of music is open; it gives entrance to the stranger, to the guest, to noise. Cage brings us to accept the other of music, the other that is usually repudiated, that really should not exist. But conversely, the guest invites the host into his house. The guest becomes host of the host. Noise becomes the host of music. Cage denounces the hierarchy that privileges 'musical' sounds over 'noise' sounds. By starting from noise rather than from 'musical' sounds, he turns the hierarchy upside down. The music appears in the margins of ambient sounds and becomes an integral and special part of noise; music is grafted onto noise. Musical sounds become part of a composition that already contains ambient sounds (on the condition that it does so in a responsible and non-disruptive manner). But all this happens within the domain of music. *Waiting* is music. It is a composition. It is a part of music history, part of an institution. There is no pure and simple absence of the frame. So, in fact, musical sounds enter the domain of music. They enter their own home *as if* they were coming from the outside, *as if* they were guests, strangers, noise. They enter their own domain thanks to the guest that is at the same time the host. What happens? A simultaneous appearance of two irreconcilable hypotheses. It happens. Not once, but again and again.

[8] 'Nothing was lost when everything was given away. In fact, everything is gained. In musical terms, any sounds may occur in any combination and in any continuity' (Cage, 1961, p.8). *Waiting*. Disclosure. Transgression. No longer are noise and music opposing poles of a contra-distinction. There is no contra-distinction anymore; 'noise' sounds and 'musical' sounds become subspecies of an *arche-noise* (or, perhaps, we can still just call it sound), an arche-noise that opens the play of differences. First made conscious, then

subverted, the opposition now dissolves in a play of non-stable meanings, in which ground and figure easily change places. An endless displacement. An abyss.

[9] Noise and music. Noise *in* music. Music *in* noise. For Cage, deconstructing the border between noise and music is not an isolated endeavor, but a critical questioning of the border between art and life as well. After a concert, someone from the audience approached him with the following complaint: 'That kind of music if you call it music should not be played in a public hall, because many people do not understand it and they start talking or tittering and the result is that you can't hear the music because of all these extraneous sounds ... The music could be played and possibly appreciated, in a home, where, not having paid to be entertained, those listening might listen and not have the impulse to titter or having it out of decorum squelch it and besides in a home it is more comfortable and quiet: there would be a better chance to hear it' (Cage, 1961, p.135). Cage's response makes clear that the opposition of noise-music cannot be perceived without taking the opposition of life-art into consideration, and that his attention to noise also serves to transgress that opposition. 'Now what that someone said describes the desire for special cut-off-from-life conditions: an ivory tower. But no ivory tower exists, for there is no possibility of keeping the Prince forever within the Palace Walls. He will, nilly-willy, one day get out and seeing that there are sickness and death (tittering and talking) become the Buddha. Besides at my house, you hear the boat sounds, the traffic sounds, the neighbors quarreling, the children playing and screaming in the hall, and on top of it all the pedals of the piano squeak. There is no getting away from life' (Cage, 1961, p.135). At the root of the desire to appreciate a piece of music 'as such', to hear it without the unavoidable extraneous sounds, is the idea that a musical work is separated from the rest of life. Cage objects (cf. [Silence and Death](#)). He points out in various ways that non-intended sounds, sounds that need to be excluded because they are disruptive and reside outside of the music, are always already part of the music, part of the inside. The rests at the start and the end of [Waiting](#) refer to the problematic difference between living with all the sounds from everyday life and the intended sounds of music. This composition does not begin with the first piano sounds, nor does it end with the fading of the final sounds. Before the piano is first heard, [Waiting](#) is already 98 seconds on its way; after the piano sounds disappear again, the piece still has another 18 seconds to go. The beginning and the ending of [Waiting](#) (that is, the beginning and ending of this piece of *music*) is at the heart a play with the demarcation of musical sounds from sounds that do not (yet) belong to music. Is it already music? Is it still music? A play. A play with music. A play by music. A play in music.

[10] Noise vs. music, non-intended sounds vs. intended sounds, life vs. art; the oppositional pairs resonating along with the first opposition form an ever-extending thread. However, the differences are not cancelled out. Noise and music, art and life do not really merge in Cage's work. His 'anti-art' still operates within an aesthetic abstraction similar to art. But the aesthetic isolation and abstraction are questioned. The borders are permeable, shifting, insecure (cf. Dahlhaus, 1984, p.49).

Cage and Silence

I am trying to describe it ... It was a tone in which all tones resounded while at the same time it contained all the silence. (Psychologist Silvia Ostertag during a masterclass of cellist Pablo Casals).

[1] In [Cage and Noise](#), I investigate the way in which John Cage deconstructs the borders between music and noise. More familiar, perhaps, is the way in which Cage has concerned himself with the relation between music and silence. 'We should listen to the silence with the same attention that we give to the sounds', writes Cage. His point of departure is the simple, but crucial observation that the materials of music consist of sounds and silence; that to compose is to articulate these two. The only parameter of sound that is shared by silence is *duration*. 'If you consider that sound is characterized by its pitch, its loudness, its timbre, and its duration, and that silence that is the opposite and, therefore, the necessary partner of sound, is characterized only by its duration, you will be drawn to the conclusion that, of the four characteristics of the material of music, duration, that is, time length, is the most fundamental. Silence cannot be heard in terms of pitch or harmony: it is heard in terms of time length', Cage states in a lecture on Satie (Kostelanetz, p.81). From this, Cage finds that the underlying structure of music can no longer be based on harmony and tonality (Beethoven), or on the twelve-tone system (Schönberg). The underlying structure of music is rhythmic. 'There can be no right making of music that does not structure itself from the very roots of sound and silence - lengths of time' (Cage in Kostelanetz, p.81-2).

[2] A central role of duration. A central role of the concept of silence. During the course of Cage's life, his thoughts on silence have undergone some changes, including the way it appears throughout his compositions. In his article, 'So etwas wie Stille gibt es nicht' ['There is no such thing as silence'], Eric de Visscher distinguishes three stages that may serve to mark out Cage's developing thoughts on silence. The stages are a structural notion of silence, a spatial notion, and silence as the absence of any intention or purposiveness (cf. Visscher, p.48-54). These three notions will be elaborated upon below. (One comment: Unlike De Visscher, I do not regard these stages as a chronological development, but as an analytical tool. In any given time period, Cage may work in various ways. For example, he may drop some of his ideas while reactivating others from the past. There is no linear progression; it is more like layers overlapping one another.)

[3] A structural notion of silence.

At first, Cage conceives of silence in a traditional way, as the absence of sound, or as minimal sound activity. Already, however, silence is not just a negativity to Cage. The attention to silence aids in uncovering musical structure since this can only be determined by duration (see above). By assigning the primacy of the musical parameters to duration, Cage not only opens music to silence, but to all sounds of any quality or pitch. Music becomes an empty (silent?) concept from which any type of sound may emerge. Silence acquires an important role: only through silence can the musical material adopt many

types of sounds.

A reversal takes place. A reversal in (thinking on) music. A reversal in the traditional hierarchy in music where silence is secondary and subordinate to sound (cf. Visscher in Nauck, p.8). Silence becomes an absolute prerequisite for the introduction of all sounds to the musical domain. This new (concept of) music originates from silence. A reversal for sure. However, this structural notion of silence still leaves Cage bound to a relatively classical attitude as it rests on the definition of silence as the absence of sound. The relation between sound and silence is *horizontal*, that is to say, they take turns in succession, thereby excluding each other. The musical structure rests on their order and mutual exclusion (cf. Visscher, p.49).

[4] A spatial notion of silence.

Cage's 'Lecture on Nothing', a reading from 1950, signals a shift in his thinking on silence. He realizes that the important role of silence regarding musical structure does not yet establish a full recognition of its positive qualities. Cage wants to avoid approaching silence from a negative point of view, i.e., as absence of sound. At the beginning of 'Lecture on Nothing', he attempts to arrive at a different relationship towards silence. 'What we require is silence; but what silence requires is that I go on talking ... But now there are silences and the words make help make the silences ... We need not fear the silences, we may love them' (Cage, 1961, p.109-10). Silence is no longer the absence of sounds; silence itself consists of sounds. Silence begets sounds. Chiasm. Reversibility. Through the intertwining of silence and sound, their mutual penetrability now becomes appreciated. Each retains a part of its antipode; each requires the other as its frame. The necessary interdependency between sound and silence relates to two principal aspects: silence is not only the precondition for sound - this means that silence contains sound - every sound in turn harbors silence as well. (According to Martin Zenck, the 'Lecture on Nothing' points out that the words of spoken language by which the silence is demarcated are in fact the precondition for silence.) The latter principle manifests itself especially in compositions that are on the outer limits of audibility, such as [Waiting](#) (cf. [Cage and Noise](#)). In this 'silent piece', silence does not disappear when a tone resounds, rather, it continuously resonates along with the tones. Here, a *vertical* conception of silence comes into play. Sound and silence develop in a parallel way without mutual exclusion; the one is always already present in the other (cf. Visscher, p.49-50).

[5] A spatial concept of silence. Silence as a space that is always already pregnant with sounds. And vice-versa! The relation between silence and sound becomes more complex. To Cage, it no longer suffices to state that silence and sound are mutually dependent in order to exist, or that sound emerges from silence. Cage reverses this idea: silence resounds in sounds. Silence becomes more prominent when traces of silence in sounds are detected. 'Music already enjoys inaudibility (silence)', Cage writes (Kostenaletz, p.116). After his 'Lecture on Nothing', Cage's thoughts on silence and sound go through a shift that is embodied in his 'Lecture on Something'. (The opposition of silence-sound, together with oppositions such as nothing-something, death-life, law-freedom, etc., form an entire chain of apparent oppositions in Cage's universe that can no longer be thought as oppositions. As such, they are objects of a strategy of deconstruction in music.) It is nothing that goes on and on without beginning middle or meaning or ending.

Something is always starting and stopping, rising and falling. The nothing that goes on is what Feldman speaks of when he speaks of being submerged in silence. The acceptance of death is the source of all life. So that listening to this music one takes as a springboard the first sound that comes along; the first something springs into nothing and out of that nothing arises the next something; etc. like an alternating current. Not one sound fears the silence that extinguishes it. And no silence exists that is not pregnant with sound' (Cage, 1961, p.135). Silence is (not) nothing; it is no longer the absence of sound. It consists of all the ambient sounds that make up a musical space, a space of which the borders cannot always be clearly defined. Silence is the space in which sounds occur. Sound and silence are simultaneously present with one constantly carrying traces of the other. Cage now no longer reverses the hierarchical opposition (where sound or music is primary and silence is secondary). Instead, he undermines the opposition as a whole. Sound and silence become two versions of a generalized *arche-silence* with the result that they both acquire a different status.

[6] As long as Cage holds onto the structural notion of silence he has no need to give up the idea of silence as emptiness. However, his merging of silence and life brings about a dispersion of the difference between silence and (ambient) sounds. This was not just a theoretical thought construct. Evidence of this can be found in Cage's recollection of an experience in a soundproof chamber at Harvard University. 'For, when, after convincing oneself ignorantly that sound has, as its clearly defined opposite, silence, that since duration is the only characteristic of sound that is measurable in terms of silence, therefore any valid structure involving sounds and silences should be based, not as occidentally traditional, on frequency, but rightly on duration, one enters an anechoic chamber, as silent as technologically possible in 1951, to discover that one hears two sounds of one's own unintentional making (nerve's systematic operation, blood's circulation), the situation one is clearly in is not objective (sound-silence), but rather subjective (sounds only), those intended and those others (so-called silence) not intended' (Cage, 1961, p.13-4). Silence cannot be the absence of sound: 'There is no such thing as silence', Cage concludes (Cage, 1961, p.191). Silence consists of all existing sounds (silence as life) that surround us (silence as spatial dimension) (cf. [Music, Noise, Silence and Sound](#)). This ultimately opens the musical world to the entire world of sounds, including non-musical sounds (cf. Visscher, p.51). By doing so, Cage also undermines the distinction between central and peripheral tone properties that were natural for centuries in European music. Intensity and timbre are no longer subordinate to the pitch and duration of the tone. They no longer add 'color' or 'spice' to these so-called central properties; rather, they are to be regarded as independent and equal parameters. The traditional hierarchy between the secondary tone properties (expression and coloratura) and the primary, structural parameters (tone duration and pitch) is now implicitly subject to reconsideration.

[7] Silent music. Like [Waiting](#). This composition does not contradict the properties of silence. The sounds retain the 'reverberation of nothingness' from which they originate. Obviously, this silence is not to be understood as ordinary silence. Silence can be full, all encompassing, indeed, it may even be loud. During the first sixteen bars of [Waiting](#), a world of sounds unfolds that was excluded from the world of music for the longest time.

Since Cage cannot and will not manipulate these sounds, it is always unclear what these sounds will be. The tenuous piano sounds that join these ambient sounds from bar 17 on will not drown them out. The 'silence' remains audible throughout the piano part and is inextricably integrated in the composition. Silence and (musical) sound are both present at the same time. One is not reduced to the other. There is no hierarchical relation either. The sounds of the piano engage into a dialogue with their environment; they join the already present sounds respectfully, that is, without too much disturbance, and modestly retreat before the piece reaches its close. A double silence. A first silence frames the musical piece (a silence framed by the concept of music in turn). A silence *around* music, but only experienced through music. A second silence is not a background silence, but converges with the musical piece. Silence on silence. Silence *in* music.

[8] Silence as the absence of any intention.

After describing his experience at Harvard, Cage writes that the difference between sound and silence cannot be a property of an object or a situation since sound is ubiquitous at all times. Therefore, a division between the two rests on a distinction between intended and non-intended sounds. In his 1958 reading, 'Composition as Process', a summary of his ideas on silence, Cage returns to this matter. 'Formerly, silence was the time lapse between sounds, useful towards a variety of ends, among them that of tasteful arrangement, where by separating two sounds or two groups of sounds their differences or relationships might receive emphasis; or that of expressivity, where silences in a musical discourse might provide pause or punctuation; or again, that of architecture, where the introduction or interruption of silence might give definition either to a predetermined structure or to an organically developing one. Where none of these or other goals are present, *silence becomes something else - not silence at all, but sounds, the ambient sounds*. The nature of these is unpredictable and changing. *These sounds (which are called silence only because they do not form part of a musical intention)* may be depended upon to exist. The world teems with them, and is, in fact, at no point free of them' (Cage, 1961, p.22-3, my italics). Silence no longer coincides with itself, but transforms into unpredictable and changing ambient sounds from which one cannot escape. These sounds are called 'silence' because they are non-intentional. It is the presence or absence of an intention, meaning, or purpose that distinguishes musical sounds from silence. Silence is not merely the absence of sounds; something is called silence when there is no apparent connection to the intentions that produce these sounds. (This means that there is no essential distinction between silent silence and loud silence according to Cage. They both lack intention.)

Out of respect for these sounds, Cage takes care that his compositions do not disrupt this state of non-intentionality or silence. He argues in favor of 'a composing of sounds within a universe predicated upon the sounds themselves rather than upon the mind that can envisage their becoming into being' (Cage, 1961, p.27-8). Musical sounds should be in harmony with the sounds of the outside world. Silence becomes a perceivable presence (i.e., the sounds that surround us) and composing is about finding sounds that respect this silence. 'When I write a piece, I try to write it in such a way that it won't interrupt this other piece which is already going on' (Cage in Duckworth, p.15). Cage writes his music on the sounds that always already surround it. *Arche-silence*. Not a word, not a concept

that can be defined. Arche-silence is the play of differences (among music, silence, and sound). Arche-silence makes possible this play of differences.

Music and/as (Dis)Order

[1] Point of departure: music and noise. Music vs. noise. Music constitutes the positive term, noise comprises the negative term. The negative of musical sound is noise. Noise is an undesirable sound, the static on a telephone, the unwrapping of cellophane candies during Mahler. Noise is any sound that interferes; it contaminates what we want to hear. Music is often defined as a pattern of organized sounds, deliberately created in order to produce certain effects, while noise is thought of as sounds that occur naturally or randomly. The steady periodical, stable vibrations of music are in clear contrast to the non-regular and fragmentary vibrations of noise (cf. Nattiez, p.45. cf Murray Schafer, p.5).

[2] In *Noise*, French thinker Jacques Attali apparently develops a similar outlook. According to Attali, the history of music can be seen as the history of the ordering of noise in codes. However, the impact of music goes beyond this. Attali regards the ability of music to bring about discipline among its major functions. Music can be regarded as an affirmation of the possibility of establishing order in the social. Music is used and produced in an attempt to make people *forget* the general violence, to make people *believe* in the harmony of the world, and to *silence* and censor all other human noises (Attali, p.19). When music banishes noise, it (symbolically) proscribes violence in a more general sense. Thus, music simulates the accepted rules of society. An example. To Attali, the entire history of tonal music amounts to an attempt at making people believe there is harmony in order. '[Tonal] music made harmony audible. It made people believe in the legitimacy of the existing order' (Attali, p.61). Dissonances (conflicts and struggles) are forbidden, unless they are merely marginal and resolved in a higher order and ultimate harmony.

Make people forget, make them believe, silence them. In all three cases, music is an instrument of power. Attali especially sees supporters of totalitarianism as being very appreciative of music as a politically and socially regulative tool: 'They have all explained, indistinctly, that it is necessary to ban subversive noise because it betokens demands for cultural autonomy, support for differences or marginality' (Attali, p.7). They advocate a concern for maintaining tonalism, the primacy of the melody; they distrust new languages, codes, instruments, and refuse the abnormal. Even so, Attali further expresses, in democracies, music is no less used as a 'bulwark against difference', as an instrument for controlling noise, as an institutionalization of the silencing of others. The disciplining capacity merely takes on a less violent, subtler form in these societies. In both cases, however, the normalization and disciplining of and by music means the exclusion of noise, of disorder.

[3] The other of music is noise. In an historical overview, Attali observes that noise is long regarded as a 'threat of death'. Noise is considered a symptom of destruction and pollution and, on a physical level, a source of pain. Beyond a certain limit, it can become a deadly weapon: 'Noise is violence: it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder' (Attali, p.26). If noise is the auditory

devil, then music is the ministering angel: 'The whole of traditional musicology analyzes music as the organization of controlled panic, the transformation of anxiety into joy, and of dissonance in harmony' (Attali, p.27). Tonal music in particular absorbs noises and restores order by repressing the tragic dimension of lasting dissonances. Repeated dissonances are prohibited and a tonal piece can certainly not have a dissonant ending. Dissonant music would be the expression of a deficiency and the failure of the channeling of violence. The term, dissonances, in Attali's argument should be viewed, however, in the broad sense of all unwanted sounds and any serious infringement on the existing order. And when Attali addresses music's standardizing and disciplining function, he not only refers to (tonal) music: it includes the educative role of conservatories, the hierarchical organization of orchestras, the passive stand of audiences, the rise of all kinds of organized interest groups, the standardization of production processes, etc. All of these help to banish dissonances. Consequently, a *music world* develops, one that has no use for disorder or noise. It might even be better to say that certain noises are neutralized immediately after they are introduced into the institutionalized music world, where they are deprived of any harmful impact and adapted into a comforting and reassuring order.

[4] Attali conceives of music as a form of sublimation. Music can be regarded as an echo of the sacrificial channeling of violence. Dissonances are removed from it in order to keep noise from spreading. In this way, it mimics the ritualization of murder in the space of sound (cf. Attali, p.28). However, it is precisely in this 'channeling of violence' and in this 'ritualization of murder' that music can no longer maintain itself as the other of noise, as the exclusively positive term opposed to noise as negativity, as order vs. chaos, as culture vs. nature. (A wide range of oppositions could be added to these.) Gradually, an orderly analysis becomes disrupted. Several signals interfere with the reception of Attali's message. And he is aware of it. Early in his book, Attali already refines his argument on the disciplining function of music. 'A subversive strain of music has always managed to survive, subterranean and pursued, the inverse image of this political channelization: popular music, an instrument of the ecstatic cult, an outburst of uncensored violence ... Here music is a locus of subversion at odds with the official religions and centers of power ... Music ... is simultaneously a threat and a necessary source of legitimacy' (Attali, p.13-4). The subversive element is no less a characteristic of music. An aspect of music that Attali still tries to displace to the margins of music history (he mentions certain pop music or music played at Dionysian feasts) seems to reveal itself precisely through the ritual aspect that music carries with it as a phenomenon that permeates *all* music. Music's ambiguous role as integrator and subverter leads to Attali's somewhat casual, but important remark 'the rupture music contains within itself'. Music affirms society and disciplines quality. But at the same time it is imbued with subversive elements, always already carrying the other (noise) with it. Every association that was connected to noise - destruction, disorder, aggression against code-structuring messages - turns out to be inseparably connected to what seemed to be diametrically opposed to noise, i.e., music. (Incidentally, this is not a new or remarkable phenomenon. In *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, Lawrence Kramer writes that especially in the 18th and 19th century, music was almost exclusively thought to be representing the subversive, the disorder, the other.)

'With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world. With music is born power and its

opposite: subversion' (Attali, p.6). This should not be understood as the positive term that nonetheless brings about its own negative with the negative remaining outside of it. Rather, the negative is always already a part of this positive term; it is not situated next to, but right in the middle of it.

[5] Ultimately, Attali observes a new music emerging towards the end of the 20th century, a *subversive* music. Music turns against itself. As yet subject to the power of the economy that music itself helped to create, 'the seeds of a new noise', a new music, loom up. The entry of noise into music (Attali mentions Luigi Russolo, John Cage, and Jimi Hendrix as examples) represents only a first stage of this development, the liquidation of the old codes. Attali points to another practice: making music on one's own without having a preconceived goal, without holding on to already existing codes and rules. It is a practice that is concerned more with the process of making music and mutual communication than with results (cf. [Teaching a Supplement](#)). He calls this practice 'composition': 'Composition ... plugs music into the noises of life and the body, whose movement it fuels. It is thus laden with risk, disquieting, an unstable challenging, an anarchic and ominous festival, like a Carnival with an unpredictable outcome. This new mode of production entertains a very different relation with violence: in composition, noise is still a metaphor for murder. To compose is simultaneously to commit a murder and to perform a sacrifice. It is to become both the sacrificer and the victim, to make an ever-possible suicide the only possible form of death and the production of life' (Attali, p.142-3). Music and noise, order and disorder, stability and instability. They have become one here, inseparably connected to one another. An order is established in the act of making music, but this order is once-only, unique, singular, non-compelling, variable. In 'composition', stability is perpetually called into question. 'Composition' is inscribed in the permanent fragility of meaning. This music is at the same time, noise. It is at once a setting of rules and a questioning and undermining thereof. The same and the other simultaneously. The other within the same.

In her afterword, Susan McClary calls Attali's book 'noise'; it is a noise (non-sense, disruption) against the neat ordering of institutionalized music scholarship and traditional (formalistic) musicology (cf. Attali, p.149). To make a slight distinction from McClary's view, however, it should be noted that this disorder also contains a clear order. Following linear musical historiography, Attali distinguishes four stages in the development of music from the ancient Greeks to the 20th century. The disadvantage of such a model, such categorizing thoughts, is that it excludes exceptions, it has to exclude music that does not fit in these stages. Does Attali leave out the noise? In complete accordance with the imperative logic of belief in progress and a certain unifying pursuit that disallows any subversive or deviant elements, Attali sketches a series of changes in music and in the music world that leaves little room for alternatives. Ultimately, however, Attali's order becomes permeated by a disorder. He describes the final stage of the musical development, 'composition', as 'the permanent affirmation of the right to be different ... the right to make noise, in other words, to create one's own code' (Attali, p.132). If this can be understood as doing justice to the other, the particular, the singular, then there can be no conceivable coordinating order that would encompass this. 'Composition' has become an ambiguous term, an *undecidable* in which order and disorder intermingle and merge.

[6] Music vs. noise. Order vs. disorder. It is not that simple. Order and disorder are both present within music. Music is order and disorder.

What about the negativity of noise? Despite its connection to 'a threat of death' and 'a simulacrum for murder', to Attali noise is not an exclusively pejorative term. Noise is the source of mutations in structuring codes. 'A network can be destroyed by noises that attack and transform it, if the codes in place are unable to normalize and repress them'. And he continues: 'Despite the death it contains, *noise carries order within itself*' (Attali, p.33, my italics). Noise is not meaningless; it creates (new) meanings. First, noise signifies the interdiction of the transmitted meaning; it signifies censorship and rarity. Second, noise, by unchanneling auditory sensations, frees the listener's imagination. The presence of noise makes meaning. It makes possible the creation of a new order, of a new code, another network (cf. Attali, p.33). Noise is no longer pure disorder, but is itself always already permeated by its opposite, order. While music in its quality of channeling violence always already carries the violent with it, noise always already contains a certain order. A constant crossover takes place on the border between music and noise that was once well defined and aptly controlled. 'Catastrophe is inscribed in order, just as crisis is inscribed in development. There is no order that does not contain disorder within itself, and undoubtedly there is no disorder incapable of creating order' (Attali, p.34). Noise clearly does not lead towards anarchy, but to new order recreating a *system of differences* on a different level (Attali, p.34). A profound identity between noise and differences. Remarkable. Earlier in his book he describes music in the exact same way as he sets music and noise alongside each other: 'Music responds to the terror of noise, *recreating differences* between sounds' (Attali, p.28). This last comment already seems to indicate a reversal of the earlier statement that music is a 'bulwark *against* differences' (see above). Does music function as an opposition against indifference (noise) or rather, against a radical difference (noise)? Or, is noise an opposition against the indifference of an existing code that has already become weak through use? Moreover, there is this statement: 'First, music - a channelizer of violence, a creator of differences, a sublimation of noise, an attribute of power - creates in festival and ritual an ordering of the noises of the world. Then - heard, repeated, regimented, framed, and sold - it announces the installation of a new totalizing social order' (Attali, p.23). Here, music is first presented as the instigator of differences (Between noise and music? It remains unclear here.) only to subsequently suppress each and every difference (noise?) with brute force. Attali regards music 'as a succession of orders (in other words, differences) done violence by noises (in other words, the calling into question of differences)' (Attali, p.19). Music should perhaps be associated with a stable maintenance of differences, whereas noise would represent the development of a new system of differences. However, when this is about an internal liquidation of codes where music creates the internal conditions for its own rupture, the distinction between noise and music becomes very unclear again.

[7] Attali proves to have varying thoughts in several passages about music, noise, and how they relate to each other. Could it therefore be appropriate to think of Attali's book as a 20th century composition in which the transmission of a message is disrupted (willfully or unwillfully) by a subversive noise? The noise of deconstruction? In a most general sense, the first notion that presents itself to the reader of *Noise* is the idea of

putting music in opposition to noise. Noise is the radical other of music. The statement, 'Music is inscribed between noise and silence' (Attali, p.19), reads as though the borders of music, noise and silence are clearly marked or can be clearly marked. Three coexisting entities. Above, I outlined the ways in which the borders between noise and music dissolve in his argument. While noise is characterized by the adjective 'subversive', music, too, turns out to have a subversive side. Where initially noise is equated to disorder, it also brings on order from within its own core. In yet another passage, Attali seems to want to label noise as a secondary category that merely exists by the grace of an antipodal positivity: 'A noise is a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission. A resonance is a set of simultaneous, pure sounds of determined frequency and differing intensity. *Noise, then, does not exist in itself*, only in relation to the system within which it is inscribed: emitter, transmitter, receiver' (Attali, p.26-7, my italics). Here, much more emphatically than in the preceding remarks, noise seems to merge as negativity into a general category of music, a hierarchical relation in which noise is designated a less prominent place constituting a negative part of music. In the same paragraph, however, Attali writes, 'All music can be defined as noise given form according to a code' (Attali, p.25). Here, Attali defines noise as the general category of which music is a subspecies. Music seems to require noise in order to define itself. *The fundamental status of music must be deciphered through that of noise*: Noise is a weapon and music, primordially, is the formation, domestication, and ritualization of that weapon as a simulacrum of ritual murder ... In the *space of noise* it symbolically signifies the channeling of violence and the imaginary, the ritualization of a murder substituted for the general violence, the affirmation that a society is possible if the imaginary of individuals is sublimated' (Attali, p.24 and p.26-7, my italics). And in the same part of the text, he calls music 'a channelization of noise'. In these citations, noise precedes music. Or, noise seems to reveal itself here as a kind of *arche-noise* in which music, noise, (and silence) become manifest as (hardly) distinguishable categories. Arche-noise. This also legitimizes Attali's pronouncement that 'the theory of noise ... should thus precede the study of the artifact that is the musical work ... The political economy of music should take as its point of departure the study of the material it highlights - noise' (Attali, p.26). The road to music runs through noise; better yet, noise is the road that leads us to the music since the codes for music rest in noise (cf. [hierarchical oppositions](#)).

[8] What characterizes noise and music - both contain order as well as disorder - also applies to the musician. Especially the social position of the musician reveals a certain ambivalence, an equivocality that is not an oppositional pair, but rather, a mutual pervasiveness.

In many pre-Socratic cultures, musician, priest and officiate was often a single function. The distinction between musician and non-musician, clergy and laity represents one of the first social differentiations and divisions of labor. Shaman. Musician. He holds a special social function, an exceptional position, a unique status. He is a part of society as much as he is outside or above it: 'The musician is at the same time within society, which protects, purchases, and finances him, and outside it, when he threatens it with his visions. Courtier and revolutionary' (Attali, p.11). On one hand, the musician affirms the existing order through his alliance with political power, while on the other hand, his music, in its quality of transcending the everyday, remains dangerous, disturbing, and

subversive. 'The musician, like music, is ambiguous ... If an outcast, he sees society in a political light. If accepted, he is its historian, the reflection of its deepest values. He speaks of society and he speaks against it' (Attali, p.12).

Ancient cultures produced a caste of musician-priests who were endowed with supernatural or civilizing powers; reputed medicinal effects of music allowed musicians to function as therapists. In other ancient civilizations (Islamic societies, Persia), musicians were often slaves or prostitutes who were not allowed to sit and have dinner with common people at the same table. But even in these societies the musician's status was dual, simultaneously excluded (relegated to a place near the lower end of social hierarchy) and superhuman (the genius, the adored and deified star) (cf. Attali, p.12). The musician. Part of society and outside it, often at the same time. In many respects, the musician resembles the *pharmakos* that Derrida speaks of in 'Plato's Pharmacy' (*Dissemination*, p.128-134). Therefore, it is not remarkable that Attali also refers to this figure: 'The musician: the sacrificed sacrificer; the worshipped and excluded Pharmakos; Oedipus and Dionysos' (Attali, p.30). Like the pharmakos, the musician, too, is on the borderline between saint and cursed, benefactor and criminal. He assuages people and grants them a temporary escape from everyday life, but at the same time he remains an outcast prone to scorn and humiliation. In medieval times, the Church adopted an ambivalent stand with respect to his magical practices, recognizing him as beneficial insofar as he healed, harmful insofar as he incarnated the powers of evil. In the Dionysian rites of ancient Greece, the musician was a subversive, at odds with the official religions and centers of power. Sometimes, however, society tolerated these rites, or attempted to integrate them into the official religion (cf. Attali, p.13). Musician and pharmakos: both are on the borderline of being tolerated, even appreciated, and expelled.

Throughout the 18th century as well, the musician found himself in the dual position between order and subversion. On one hand, he still maintained a certain loyalty towards his patrons. Linked to courtly powers, 'his music is a reminder that, in the personal relation of the musician to power, there subsists a simulacrum of ... an order imposed on noise' (Attali, p.48). On the other hand, he becomes aware of the fact that he could associate himself with economic powers other than just the courts. A burgeoning autonomy allows the musician to relate to the existing powers in a far more critical manner than before (cf. Attali, p.50).

Although Attali recognizes and situates the duality of the musician's position primarily in the pre-industrial era, the same characterization holds true for many contemporary musicians. Many pop stars, for example, function as idols or even gods in our secularized society. Adored and worshipped. Many fans want nothing better than to take on the role of pop star. As they develop from small time musicians to star celebrities, these pop stars represent the idea of 'the American Dream'. By doing so, they confirm an existing hierarchical order that allows anyone to reach the top if they adhere to the rules of the political and social game. Still, the same musicians relate to subversive elements that remain inseparably attached to music, a rebellion against the existing order (free sexual morality, use of drugs, obscene or blasphemous lyrics, etc.). The musician is the symbol of the marginal, of disorder, and of subversion as well. Often, this is precisely why he is envied. Protector and criticizer of the existing order and at the same time neither one, nor the other. At once music and noise.

Music, Noise, Silence, and Sound

[1] Cage says there is no such thing as silence. If so, what is silence? Is silence sound? Noise? Music?

In 'Weltenlärm, Schweigen, Stille', Thomas Macho asserts that the modern world has become much louder (acoustical pollution). This would be partly due to the extensive industrialization of our society. On the other hand, our world has become more musical as well: the omnipresence of music suppresses and neutralizes noise (as undesirable sound). Macho believes that the musical avant-garde of the 20th century responds in three different ways to this twofold acoustical expansion, two of which are relevant here. First, the dismantling of tonal relations by the Second Viennese School has prepared and enabled an invasion of noise on the musical world. In other words, the battle against tonality has also been a battle against the suppression of noise by and in music. (A strange situation occurs. Noise is suppressed by noise. Noise outside the domain of music is suppressed by noise - that can contain the same sounds - within music.) Second, the composers from the Second Viennese School set out to explore the effect and the functioning of silence. According to Macho, the focus on silence constituted a new music. He (understandably) mentions Cage's composition *4'33"* as an example par excellence. *4'33"*. A composition in three parts where each movement is to be played according to the simple instruction 'tacet' (be silent).

[2] In complete accord with tradition, Macho puts these two concepts (noise and silence) in near diametrical opposition to each other. However, it is precisely Macho's example - *4'33"* - that can be understood as undermining this seeming opposition. After his experiment in the anechoic room, Cage concludes that both the sounding and the silent parts in a piece of music are filled with sound. (Inside a soundproof room, Cage still heard two sounds - his blood flow and his heartbeat, and this brought him to the realization that silence does not exist.) He believes it is ignorant to think that sound has silence as a clearly defined opposite. According to Cage, silence is all the sounds that we do not intend. Silence means the entire range of sound. 'There is no such thing as absolute silence. Therefore silence may very well include loud sounds and more and more in the twentieth century does. The sound of jet planes, of sirens, et cetera. For instance now, if we heard sounds coming from the house next door, and we weren't saying anything for the moment, we would say that was part of the silence, wouldn't we?' says Cage in an interview (Kostelanetz, p.166).

I don't know if I would answer Cage's rhetorical question in the affirmative. Perhaps I would say that sounds were intertwining here with silence. But that is besides the point. The important idea Cage brings forth is that silence always contains sounds. Sounds as part of silence. Silence includes loud sounds. Silence becomes something other than itself. It becomes sound, the ambient sounds that the world is never without. Absolute silence does not exist; there are always sounds as long as we live and are able to hear

them (cf. [Silence and Death](#)). And music? Music itself is just an ideal situation because it would require us to ignore ambient sounds including undifferentiated or undesirable pitches and timbres (cf. Cage, 1961, p.32).

[3] Cage's music is made up of sounds, that is to say, both those that are written down and those that are not. The ones that are not written down appear as silences in the score, and open the doors of the music to sounds that are present in the actual setting.

Hospitality. Cage's music as a host, inviting the stranger, the other, to enter its home. Cage compares his music to the glass houses by Mies van der Rohe and the wire sculptures of Richard Lippold. The glass houses reflect their environment. And through Lippold's network of wires one can see other things or people. These works revealed to Cage that there is no empty space, similar to the way he experiences the impossibility of empty time in his own works. There is always something to see; there is always something to hear. Even if we would so desire, we still would not be able to establish silence. Until we die there will be sounds (cf. Cage, 1961, p.7-8).

This idea, this silence, 'drones on' in Cage's most silent piece, 4'33". First, this composition implies that 'music' consists of all the accidental sounds in the room regardless of whether or not humans produce them. Second, what is written as a silent passage is actually filled with extraneous sounds (noise) because pure silence is physically impossible. Thus, all the music we hear consists of sounds that are both intentional and unintentional - not only what is written in the score, but also what is inadvertently produced in the auditorium during a performance of the piece. As such, the 'silent' piece, 4'33", refers to its alleged opposite: the 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence exist because it cannot exist.

[4] The omnipresence of music in the modern world (cf. Macho) dis-ables silence, i.e., the time to think, reflect, and dream, the time to recuperate and to analyze. It makes silence suspect. In actual fact, the omnipresence of music results in a silencing of people through music: they are not allowed and are (therefore) unable to hear silence (noise). Cage's silent music returns the listener to this silence, these sounds, this noise. Listening begins with being quiet. After awhile, one notices that nothing is as loud as silence. (There exists something like droning silence.) In other words, music leads to silence, and silent music allows for loud sounds. Whenever we are engaged in silence we will encounter sound time and again. Silence is not other than sound, not separate from sound; it is not the opposite of noise. Silence *is* (a kind of) sound.

4'33" forces us to rethink the concepts and our experience of music, silence, noise and sound. Could we then say that 4'33" puts the terms silence and sound under erasure, *sous rature*? Could we say that we should put this binary opposition under erasure meaning that both silence and sound are inadequate to describe a more general play, a *différance* in/through which they function? (But can we speak here of a binary opposition at all? Maybe it would be more appropriate to speak of a *quaternary* opposition. Four terms can be considered here: silence, sound, music, and noise.) Or do we have to say that silence and sound are just the silent and sounding forms of the play of *arche-silence*? Arche-silence. Not a thing, not a presence, but the movement that produces the differences between music, sound, noise, and silence. A non-originary origin. For Cage, (the concept of) silence in music refers to all those sounds that are not intended, that appear as rests or

general pauses in a score. What remains is the idea that no sound can be excluded from the domain of silence anymore. That is why we have to rethink silence. 4'33" makes us rethink silence. As a piece of music, 4'33" frames the silence, supplying it with a context, giving silence something to say. Music, 4'33", gives silence sens. (I deliberately use the French term 'sens' here, referring to both meaning and direction.) Without music, without 4'33", silence is perhaps lost, without meaning or direction and therefore un(re)presentable*. 4'33" makes us hear the silence, makes us hear the noise within silence ('sens' also refers to the senses). 4'33". A deconstruction in music, a deconstruction of the binary oppositions between music and noise, music and silence, silence and sound. A deconstruction of music by/in music. Music is most often opposed to silence or noise, and defined in terms of sound. Once the oppositions are deconstructed as 4'33" does, it is no longer possible to define music either in terms of sound or in opposition to silence or noise. Not so much an act on Cage's part; deconstruction takes place in the piece itself. Cage's essays, lectures and interviews are (merely) verbal elucidations of this. Deconstruction takes place in the music. The music deconstructs. The music is deconstructed. Silence is deconstructed. And it took 4 minutes and 33 seconds.

* I thank professor Finn for putting my thoughts in this direction.

Noise as Undesirable Sound

[1] In [Noise as Undifferentiated Sound](#), I discuss the idea that there is no stable basis for a distinction between music and noise. That page focuses on the boundary between music and noise for the most part from a physical perspective. Shifting the emphasis to the receiver's side opens a new outlook on this distinction. Noise as Undesirable Sound. No complete overview. No new theory. Just a few rudimentary, rough remarks and questions to open a space in which the relationship between music and noise can be rethought, in which the boundary becomes less distinct, maybe even less relevant. Prolegomena. Four short exploratory reflections which bring us to John Cage whose compositions deconstruct the boundary between noise and music.

[2] Noise is the negative of musical sound. Noise is an undesirable sound around or during musical performances: the coughing and rustling during a concert, the interference of (antiquated) audio equipment, the scratches on a worn-out LP. Noise interrupts the things we want to hear. We experience sound as noise when it prohibits or hampers our contact with music. Generally, noise is a resonance that interferes with the transmission of a message in the process of emission; it is the term for a signal that disturbs the reception of a message. Sounds are noise when they disturb our concentration (or sleep), when they are physically harmful to us (high sound volume). On a biological or physical level, noise can be a source of pain. In *Noise*, Jacques Attali enumerates some consequences of excessive sound in the immediate environment: diminished intellectual capacity, accelerated respiration and heartbeat, hypertension, slowed digestion, neurosis, altered diction. The eardrum can be damaged, even destroyed, when the frequency of sound exceeds 20,000 hertz, or when its intensity exceeds 80 decibels (cf. Attali, p.27).

[3] Noise related to (high) sound volume. On a physical level the idea of undesirable sounds seems clear. Greater problems occur when we move to noise as a contextual phenomenon. Categorizing sound as noise, then, means assigning a status to it that is relative to established norms for permissible and proscribed (musical) sounds. Here, there is no stable basis for noise; it is bound to a context. A sound is experienced as undesirable - i.e., as noise - in a specific context, while the 'same' sound may be accepted as music in a different context. When I hear my neighbor's typewriter while I am listening to a CD of Bach's *Cello Suites*, I will think of it as disturbing. However, the sounds from the typewriter 'as such' do not have to be the cause of my discomfort. When I listen to Satie's *Parade*, I appreciate the typewriter sounds as musical sounds; they are part of the composition. Noise exists in relation to the context within which it is inscribed. Two things more emerge from this short example. First, 'unpitched sound' is not always noise; it can be a musical sound as well. The distinction between music and noise based on the difference between periodic and non-periodic vibrations does not hold. Second, noise seems to be synonymous with undesirable sounds here. When accepted (as music), the same sound is no longer noise. But is it possible to demarcate the border of these undesirable sounds? And can listeners to music, visitors to a concert, banish every undesirable sound? Would a soundproof room with the most advanced audio equipment

be an option? Perhaps, we might then be able to avoid undesirable sounds and background noise (unless we are diverted by the sounds of our body during very soft passages). But is it possible to avoid interference in the 'music itself'? Do the sounds of the bellows from an accordion, the breathing of singers, or the sounds of fingers sliding across the frets of a guitar belong to the music or should they be excluded? Indeed, is that at all possible? Some composers think of background noises made by musicians and instruments as an essential part of the composition. What about the humming and panting that is inextricably bound to the performances of such musicians as Glenn Gould, Keith Jarrett and Art Blakey? What about the applause, the enthusiastic hissing and shouting of the audience on live recordings? Stage sounds on live opera recordings? Movie soundtracks that (necessarily) include street sounds and dialogues? And what if background noises are part of the composition as is found in some works of John Cage (cf. [Cage and Noise](#)) and Luigi Nono (cf. [Silence and/in Music](#))?

[4] Many re-releases on CD's contain the following 'warning': 'The music on this Compact Disc was originally recorded on analog equipment, prior to modern noise reduction techniques. This Compact Disc preserves, as closely as possible, the sound of the original recording, but its high resolution also reveals limitations in the master tape, including noise and other distortions'. A standard phrase, perhaps illustrative of our current-day appreciation of sounds. Refinement of hi-fi equipment and recording techniques leads to a 'new' aesthetics that aims at the exclusion of errors, hesitations and other unwanted sounds. (The whole of these unwanted sounds could be summarized under the common denominator 'noise'.) Or, as Jacques Attali puts it: 'The absence of noise has become a criterion for enjoyment' (Attali, p.124).

[5] The world has unmistakably become louder since the Industrial Revolution. Our ears are exposed to a greater intensity of decibels. More noise on a physical level. However, a parallel development takes place concurrently: a 'musicalization of culture' as George Steiner calls it in his book *In Bluebeard's Castle*. The development of audio equipment and all kinds of reproduction methods has enabled us to avoid every undesired sound by covering it with a layer of music. (Or could this music in turn be experienced as undesirable sound?) No doubt, this musicalization, this omnipresence of music in our society, has its positive sides. Music at work, reportedly, even leads to an increase of economic productivity. I want briefly pay attention to two other consequences of this musicalization of culture. On one hand, many people have come to fear silence: even the supposed absence of sound is disturbing and needs to be suppressed under a carpet of sound. On the other hand, the omnipresence of music has markedly reduced our tolerance towards 'other' sounds, towards noise.

Is another relationship with noise conceivable? As one of many composers, John Cage has sought to open our ears to 'non-musical' sounds in his compositions. According to Cage, the qualification of sounds as non-musical or noise is not so much related to intrinsic sound properties as it is to our attitude towards sounds that we do not instantly consider to be musical. When we pay attention to sounds that we usually prefer to ignore - the same attention we reserve for musical sounds - we might experience these sounds as far less disturbing. Cage begins his text, *The Future of Music: Credo*, with: 'Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it,

we find it fascinating' (Cage, 1961, p.3). The more one realizes that the sounds in our environment are musical, the more music there is. Applied to the musical practice: 'A cough or a baby crying will not ruin a good piece of modern music' (Cage, 1961, p.161). When a sound becomes undesirable because it interrupts or hampers music, we may try to banish it. Cage, however, seems to drive at a change in our attitude towards noise in relation to music. Since it is virtually impossible to filter out each and every noise, why not try to relate to these sounds in another (a more positive?) way?

[6] Four brief thoughts on noise as undesirable sound. Four thoughts ending with a rethinking (maybe even a disruption) by John Cage - a rethinking or disruption he mainly articulates *in music* - of the boundary between music and noise. In [Cage and Noise](#), I enter at length into a possible deconstruction of the boundary between music and noise in Cage's compositions.

Noise as Undifferentiated Sound

[1] Noise as undifferentiated sound. This is the starting point: 'We might assume that it is possible to distinguish between musical sound and noise in acoustic terms: musical sound results from regular, periodic vibrations; noise results from non-periodic vibrations ... The distinction is based on the opposition between 'pure and simple sounds' on one hand and 'complex sounds' on the other' (Nattiez, p.45). Nattiez comments that the French language even employs an official physical definition of noise: noise is an erratic, intermittent or *statistically random* vibration. A sound has been considered as noise for a long time if its originating frequency was non-periodic and therefore of no determinate pitch. (Theodore Gracyk speaks of the doctrine that certain timbres are inappropriate for music making. He refers to the 19th century ideal of 'purity in articulation' where any richness of the contributing overtones was considered unwelcome noise (cf. Gracyk, p.114).) Non-periodic vibrations. Complex sounds. I call it noise as undifferentiated sound. As a starting point.

[2] Futurist Luigi Russolo was one of the first in the early 20th century to put the institutionalized division between music (Russolo mostly uses the term 'sounds' instead of 'music') and noises on the agenda. Russolo's essays on modern music all revolve around the main statement of his 1913 *L'Arte dei Rumori. Manifesto Futuriste* [The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto]: 'We must break out of this limited circle of sounds and conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds' (Russolo, p.25). His main and simple question: If music is sound, then why does not music employ all the varieties that sound has to offer? According to Russolo, the traditional division between music and noise is based on the notion that music is a succession of regular and periodic vibrations. Noise, in contrast, seems irregular and fragmentary. Russolo questions this sharp distinction between music and noise and provides two arguments to support his position. The first concerns duration. 'The production of a sound requires not only that a body vibrates regularly but also that these vibrations be rapid enough to make the sensation of the first vibration persist in the auditory nerve until the following vibration has arrived, so that the periodic vibrations blend to form a continuous musical sound. At least sixteen vibrations a second are needed for this. Now, if I succeed in producing a noise with this speed, I will get a sound made up of the totality of so many noises - or better, a noise whose successive repetitions will be sufficiently rapid to give a sensation of continuity like that of sound' (Russolo, p.37). Here, Russolo tries to overcome the idea that musical sounds are continuous while noise is discontinuous. He undermines the *sonorological* difference between music and noise with respect to duration. By doing so, he is effectively introducing noise into the musical realm. The emancipation of noise has assumed an acoustic legitimization where noise is understood as a special kind of musical sound. His second argument concerns timbre. Each sound is made up of a number of sounds (secondary vibrations, various harmonic sounds, overtones). Now Russolo states that

noise is produced when 'the secondary vibrations are more numerous than those that usually produce a sound' (Russolo, p.39). His conclusion: the difference between musical sounds and noise must be only gradual. 'The real and fundamental difference between sound and noise can be reduced to this alone: noise is generally much richer in harmonics than sound' (Russolo, p.39). And he immediately continues: 'But, since these harmonic sounds always accompany a pre-dominant fundamental tone, every noise has a pitch'. However, giving pitch to noises does not mean depriving them of all irregular movements and vibrations of time and intensity. It rather assigns a degree or pitch to the strongest and most prominent of these vibrations. Harmonics are generally understood as sounds above the fundamental tone. They are produced by other vibrations, faster and shorter, which exist along with the principal vibration. With musical sounds, the fundamental tone is the lowest tone. This is not necessarily the case with noise, where the 'fundamental' tone is rather the loudest tone. There may exist lower (but softer) tones. The tone that characterizes the pitch in noise could therefore be an overtone of a weaker, lower fundamental tone (cf. Russolo, p.27 and p.79).

Russolo goes one step further here than in his first argument where noise could still be considered a separate case, a special sound within the musical domain. This second argument turns the relation between noise and musical sounds around. Here, musical sound is regarded as a special kind of noise, a noise where the lowest tone is at once the fundamental tone. While this could also apply to noise, it is by no means essential. Music or musical sound thus becomes a special phenomenon within the domain of noise. Music is no longer the domain within which noise needs to secure its place. Rather, noise becomes the framework in which music takes up a special (and still privileged) place.

Arche-noise.

A futurist manifesto and other essays. Writings on music. Discursive expressions. However, Russolo's disruption and subversion (a deconstruction) of the boundary between music and noise is first of all manifested in his music. Unfortunately, the bulk of his work, in addition to musical instruments that he specially designed, was lost during the First World War. His ideas about a new music, a noise music, required a new method of notation as well as new instruments. In order to enrich the musical domain with new sounds, timbres and microtones, Russolo created the first musical synthesizers, the so-called *intonarumori*, or noise instruments that consisted of 'howlers', 'roarers', 'cracklers', 'gurglers', etc. His deconstruction of the relationship between music and noise articulates itself within music; it is a deconstruction *through* music.

[3] Noise as undifferentiated sound. The idea that musical sounds result from regular, periodic vibrations and noise from non-periodic vibrations has remained widespread until long after Russolo's death in 1947 (to date?). However, 20th century electro-acoustic research reveals that the spectrum of most musical sounds is non-periodic. This means that noise may well have the same acoustic structure as musical sounds (cf. Nattiez, p.45-6). Furthermore, there is a reciprocal relationship between volume and sound quality. Increasing the amplitude of a sound wave alters its characteristic pattern and thus its timbre. It exposes more overtones, both harmonic and non-harmonic; the sounds become more complex (cf. Gracyk, p.109). Musical sounds become noise (from 'simple' to 'complex' sounds) when the volume increases. The alleged opposition between music and noise based on physical differences becomes less clear; it becomes less of an opposition.

When we attempt to exclude noise from the realm of music on physical grounds, when we try to assess the essential difference between the two as accurately as possible, the difference dissolves and disappears. The boundary between music and noise becomes uncertain and undecidable. This also happens when we try to restrict ourselves to a single tone. The tone, or, rather, the sinusoidal tone, is the smallest musical unity to which all sounding phenomena can be retraced. However, we cannot perceive sinusoidal tones. Unavoidable, there are always overtones present due to the space in which the tone necessarily resounds, and because of the way our ear functions. (A tone constantly fluctuates; it continuously differs from itself. Therefore, in its vibrating quality, a tone is nothing but a changing quality, Derrida explains in *D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie*, p.18-26.)

In *Positionen*, Frank Hilberg distinguishes three problems where a physical distinction between musical sounds and noise is made. The first problem occurs with ultra short sounds. We hear tones or sounds that last too short as a click without a real pitch (i.e. noise), even where the sound structure is periodic and the sound spectrum is set up harmonically. A second problem arises when we talk about timbre, the basis upon which we are able to distinguish between instruments. It is precisely the non-stationary, discontinuous and aperiodic sound progression (noise) that determines the characteristics of an instrument. Or rather, it is the combined play of continuity and discontinuity that leads to a recognition of a specific instrument. The third problem is that every sound, be it a musical sound or noise, can be broken down into sinusoidal curves with the consequence that the distinction between musical sounds and noise can no longer be called qualitative; there is only a difference in degree (cf. Hilberg in Nauck, p.37).

[4] I stop here. No more examples although the list could be extended. The boundary based on a physical difference between music and noise is constantly transgressed. Each sound immediately proves to be pervaded by noise; noise is at all times a part of every musical sound. If noise is the outside and music the inside, we must conclude that the outside is always already on the inside. And this conclusion (which is not a conclusion in the conventional meaning of the word, not the final word, the definitive outcome) goes beyond the idea of the emancipation of noise, the extension of the concept of 'music' as an acceptance of sounds that were previously rejected as noise, beyond the idea that no sound can any longer be excluded from the domain of music. Noise was and is always already part of musical sounds. That's a difference between deconstruction and emancipation.

Silence and Death

[1] In various interviews and essays, Derrida recalls an inflammation of his middle ear that he suffered in his childhood, and he associates it with death. His mother prayed in despair to God as the dangerously ill boy laid in his bed. Derrida links his lurking deafness, paradoxically manifested in hearing too much noise, to the danger of dying (cf. Han, p.6-7). An impending silence (or too much noise? Noise and silence seem to play exchangeable roles), and an impending death are conspicuously linked together.

[2] In a soundproof room, John Cage finds that he cannot escape from the sounds in his body. This leads him to think that as long as we live we cannot experience absolute silence. There will only be silence in death. Since it is impossible for us to experience our own death, we cannot experience silence either. With his statement, 'Until we die there will be sounds', Cage explicitly links death to silence. Perhaps, we may understand silence, think silence, but the experience of absolute silence remains an aporia to us. Silence, like death, can be conceived of as the impossible crossing of a border. We arrive at a border we cannot cross, an aporia, an impossible passage; or rather, the experience of a non-passage, an experience other than that consisting of opposing an other concept. A relation to a non-opposable other, that is, an other that is no longer *its* other. We are engaged in a certain possibility of the impossible (cf. *Aporias*, p.12 ff). In *Aporias*, Derrida points to the impossible yet unavoidable experience that 'my death' can never be subject to an experience that would be properly mine, or that *I* would be able to account for. Cage arrives at a similar conclusion concerning silence. The *I* can never experience absolute silence.

Death and silence. Connected to each other through the same impossible experience.

[3] Silence can be understood in two ways. On one hand, there is *audible silence*, a silence that stays within the order of the audible; it remains constitutively hearable. This category contains what Cage calls 'unintended sounds'. ('Silence means the whole lot of sound; it is all of the sounds we don't intend'.) It also includes sounds that are almost impossible to perceive either because the source is too far away, or because their frequency is extremely high or low. A few examples. In 1976, Cage composed *Branches*, which makes use of amplified plant materials. Cage was interested in sounds from nature and had found that the spines of cacti, when touched and amplified, reverberate. Recent radiographic studies show that the universe is filled with a cacophony of sounds originating from sudden changes in the atomic structure of exploding gases. Additionally, pulsars also produce sounds. Music scientist Wilfried Krüger and nuclear physicist Jean E. Charon discovered harmonic relations (overtone sequences) on a microscopic level in the so-called quanta of atoms, in the spin of electrons, and in the structure of molecules. Photo-acoustic spectroscopy has enabled us to hear the sound of a rose when the blossom springs from the bud; it sounds like the drone of an organ, reminiscent of a Bach toccata. Indeed, even an old symbol of silence, the deep-sea, turns out to be full of sounds (cf. Berendt, 1990, p.43-62). All these are examples of the order of the audible in-audible. Even Dieter Schnebel's book, *MO-NO. Music to Read*, remains within this category of

audible silence. *MO-NO. Music to Read* contains many signs that appeal to our auditory senses enabling and inciting us to enter the domain of hearing-through-imagination (cf. [No \(-\) Music - D. Schnebel](#)). Contrarily, *absolute silence* refers to everything that falls outside the range of the audible. It has no structure of audibility; it is other than audible. This silence implies the silence in death, the silence of death, death as silence. ('Man fears the absence of sound as he fears the absence of life', says composer Murray Schafer.) Absolute silence *is* death; it is an aporia. Death is the experience of the non-passage and absolute silence brings us to a similar impossible passage, a similar aporia.

[4] Cage's thinking on silence remains within the order of the audible. To him, silence consists of ambient sounds, non-intended sounds. This is why he is able to think of silence as related to life instead of death. According to Cage in silence one hears the sounds of life. 'At my house, you hear the boat sounds, the traffic sounds, the neighbors quarreling, the children playing and screaming in the hall, and on top of it all the pedals of the piano squeak. There is no getting away from life' (Cage, 1961, p.135). Silence means the whole world of sounds. Life. Silence *is* life for Cage. Furthermore, this audible silence remains within the domain of duration. ('Silence cannot be heard in terms of pitch and harmony: it is heard in terms of time length'.) This silence is of a different order than the absolute silence that escapes life, and (with that) time. Death as silence, silence in death goes beyond duration: 'One always dies in an *untimely* way. The moment of death no longer belongs to its time', Derrida writes (*Aporias*, p.49, my italics). Absolute silence is not connected to time anymore; it is beyond time.

[5] Silence/sounds vs. absolute silence. Audibility vs. inaudibility. Life vs. death. Oppositions we cannot overcome. Borders we cannot cross. And the hierarchy is clear. Life and audibility are the privileged terms. Absolute silence and death are secondary, thought out of the primary terms. What always remains to be asked is how the essence of death is defined in terms of life, Heidegger explains in *Sein und Zeit* [Being and Time]. In *Aporias*, Derrida elaborates upon Heidegger's existential analysis of Dasein and death. He determines how death is subordinated to life in Heidegger. Derrida quotes Heidegger: 'Within the ontology of *Dasein*, which is *superordinate* to an ontology of life, the existential analysis of death is, in turn, *subordinate* to a characterization of *Dasein*'s basic state' (*Aporias*, p.29). A hierarchical order thus delimits the field, an order structured by an uncrossable edge, the edge between life and death, between here and there. Heidegger stresses that the existential analysis stands purely on this side. Derrida: 'It is on this side, on the side of Dasein and of its here, which is our here, that the oppositions between here and over there, this side and beyond, can be distinguished. In the same direction, one could say that it is by always starting from the idiomatic hereness of my language, my culture, and my belongings that I relate myself to the difference of the over there' (*Aporias*, p.52). Derrida's analysis of Heidegger: talking about death consists of privileging 'this side'. Life is conceived of as prior, a plenitude; death is the negation of this. Situated on the margin of the privileged term life, the subordinate term death designates an undesirable, dispensable deviation. Derrida, however, reverses this logic: 'Rather, it seems to me that one should say the opposite: it is the ordinary and underivable character of death, as well as the finitude of the temporality in which death is rooted, that decides and forces us to decide to start from here first, from this side here'

(*Aporias*, p.55). We are left with no other choice than to start from this side. The impossibility to start from yonder side implies that we are forced to relate to 'over there' from 'here'. It is death itself that imposes this necessity on us. Therefore, death is not subordinate to life in Derrida's view. Rather, life is secondary to death. It is the primordially of being-toward-death, being-until-death, or being-to-death that makes life secondary to death. (In some of his other works, Derrida calls attention to Freud who poses similar suggestions. Freud, too, observes that life is generally the positive term while death is its negation. Yet, Freud argues that man's death instinct is the most powerful life force. This death wish, manifested in a compulsion to repeat, makes the activity of life instincts a special case within the general economy of repetition and expenditure. Freud redelivers death to life, a striking reversal.)

After Derrida first reverses the hierarchical opposition of life and death, he then proceeds to disintegrate the opposition altogether. He effectively contravenes the assumption as though there would be two contrasting forces at work here. 'The theme of immortality [the death principle, MC] ... is not opposed to being-toward-death, it does not contradict it, it is not symmetrical with it, because it is conditioned by being-toward-death and confirms it at every moment' (*Aporias*, p.55-6). As death can only be thought from our being-to-death, so does the death principle always determine our being-in-life. Consequently, our aspiring for immortality is pervaded by our awareness of our impending death. It is precisely this one certainty, the certainty of our death, that fuels our desire for immortality.

[6] 'Until we die there will be sounds'. The link to sounds that determine and confirm our life as life is imposed on us by an unattainable absolute silence. It is precisely this unattainableness that forces us to engage in sounds. Therefore, we are always connected to the possibility of absolute silence through our connection with sounds. Music turns silence (death) into experience. To experience the aporia. We are always already on the other side of the here. As sounds and absolute silence mutually pervade and determine each other, the clear opposition sounds vs. silence disintegrates. Sounds and silence are not each other's opposite; they do not exclude each other. One is always pervaded by the other. 'And who will not recognize here the crossing of borders?' (*Aporias*, p.58).

Silence and/in Music

[1] It is clear that musicians know about silence in music. Empty bars or parts of bars occur in virtually every musical piece. Rests are an inseparable part of any composition. On a more modest and subtle level, silences mark the transition from one musical sentence to the next by way of *caesura*. Silence also demarcates the beginning and the end of a piece of music.

In musical theory, silence is not always referred to as the point where musical sounds actually cease to exist. Moments of silence are experienced during sustained *fermates*, extreme *pianissimo*'s, or when a complex harmony dissipates into a sparing use of the tone material. One becomes aware of silence in music that 'sound from afar', usually indicated by the instruction 'come da lontano'. (A great amount of music by Russian composer Alfred Schnittke opens and closes with scarcely audible sounds. His music resides between the not-yet-audible and the no-longer-audible. It seems as though his music is already there before the listener can hear it and continues to resound long after the listener has registered the last tones. Through this 'non-ceasing' music, which resounds beyond the limits of its audibility, silence acquires a different form of musical *Dasein*.)

[2] This brief and incomplete summary immediately shows the heterogeneity of silence. Silence and silence do not necessarily match. For that reason alone, silence deserves more attention. As Martin Zenck concludes in 'Dal niente - Vom Verlöschen der Musik' [On the Extinguishing of Music], however, the attention to silence is a peripheral moment in composition and music analysis. By no means is its status equal to sound (cf. Zenck, p.15). The pause in music, identified as an absence of sound, is the exception to the rule that has music designated as the center of the musical spectrum. Eduard Hanslick's famous definition of music as 'die tönend bewegte Form' ['form propelled by sound'] in no way indicates a music that is present in its absence, in non-sound. Sound and silence relate to each other as the essential versus the supplement, as the primary versus the secondary. It seems that not the *tritonus* (the augmented fourth), but rather silence is the true 'diabolus in musica' in Western music. Contrary to the *tritonus*, silence was never banned, but its *raison d'etre* has been thoroughly questioned up until the 20th century. Its function was mainly dramatic or rhetoric. Silence is subordinate to sound, and has for the longest time (still?) been regarded as something less significant.

[3] An example of how silence remains secondary to sound and music in the theory of music can be found in Thomas Clifton's essay 'The Poetics of Musical Silence'. 'To focus on the phenomenon of musical silence is analogous to deliberately studying the spaces between trees in a forest: somewhat perverse at first, until one realizes that these spaces contribute to the perceived character of the forest itself, and enable us to speak coherently of 'dense' growth or 'sparse' vegetation. In other words, silence is not nothing. It is not the null set. Silence is experienced both as meaningful and as *adhering* to the sounding position of the musical object' (Clifton, p.163, my italics). Clifton seems to focus our attention on the meaning of silence within music. In a certain sense, an emancipatory

move. Upon closer consideration, however, this reading loses significant cogency. Clifton leaves the traditional relationship between sound and silence intact. He continues to operate within the existing hierarchy where silence serves sound. Similar to the spaces between trees, silences that surround tones enable us to hear the sounds. 'The significance of silence is therefore contingent upon a sounding environment', Clifton continues (Clifton, p.163). Silence remains dependent on the world of sound because it is only there that it can acquire meaning. In a summary of the various ways in which silence can function, Clifton discusses 'examples of the way silence is used to express how the music is speaking' and 'the adherence of silence to the grammar of the musical statement' (cf. Clifton, p.173). In both cases, silence is clearly still in the service of sound. Clifton does try to convince his readers of the importance of silence within music, but this importance ultimately serves the sounds, the music. Silence is no longer empty, that is to say, without meaning, but its autonomy - i.e., its non-sound based value - is left unrecognized.

[4] At the start of the 20th century, the composers of the Second Viennese School, Arnold Schönberg, Anton Webern, and Alban Berg shared a similar outlook on silence. Still, signs of a changing attitude towards silence can be found here. Many compositions by Berg lack a clear closure; rather, they fade into a distance, a void, an infinitude. With that, Berg joins the tradition of many composers from the Romantic era who worked with sounds 'come da lontano', sounds that originate in the distance, thereby suggesting a certain infinity. Even when we no longer hear sounds, the music is still present. However, Berg still thinks of silence as a special and peripheral moment. It only becomes apparent in very special areas of his music, particularly towards closures. And can we maintain that Berg emancipates silence? Clifton rather describes the experience of Berg's fading tones as a sensation of resistance toward the moment when the music will reside only in recollection (cf. Clifton, p.175).

Is silence frightening? Does it make us think back longingly to the moments when it was filled with musical sounds?

[5] With Webern, too, sound remains the primary aspect of composing even though the presence of multiple rests within his works disperses the sound to a great extent. However, this does not seem to be the result of an intended use or a conscious emancipation of silence, but of the way in which the tone material is processed. Dedication to a previously chosen twelve-tone row implies that variation is primarily reserved for the rhythmic part. It is obvious that rests will then play a more important role (cf. Veselinovic-Hofman, p.4). Nevertheless, Webern's work definitely presents an emancipatory moment with regard to silence. In his *Variationen für Klavier, opus 27*, for example, he treats silence as sound: the performer is instructed to speed up during a rest before pausing. (I am referring to the third part of the composition, bars 43-45. An accelerando in bar 43 is maintained in the silent bar 44. The initial tempo is taken up again in bar 45 that begins with a rest.)

[6] A third example. Schönberg. Is silence structurally revalued in his *Sechs kleine Klavierstücke, Opus 19, no.2*? The piece begins with a rest. A rest after silence, after the silence that is outside the composition, after the solemn silence with which the piece is welcomed. (Below the score, Schönberg indeed asks for a long pause after each

movement, a pause that is not motivated by considerations of performing practice.) This rest is not an accidental phenomenon or a necessary respite, but an event deliberately considered in the framework of the composition (cf. Veselinovic-Hofman, p.3). The rests that alternate with the third g-b in the rhythmic motif from bar 1 (a pianissimo third on the border of audibility) form an essential part of the musical sentence. When the sounding third breaks the silence, and the silence in turn breaks the sound, the two engage in a mutual relation that knows no hierarchical distinction. Still, a problem remains. This line of reasoning can only be sustained as long as one knows the score. Veselinovic-Hofman rightfully points out that the first pause cannot immediately be recognized as a musical moment, a moment within the composition, through listening (cf. Veselinovic-Hofman, p.3). Even though the rest serves a structural function within the work, the listener who is not familiar with the score will most likely assume [Opus 19, no.2](#) starts with the first sounding third at the second beat of the first bar. (It seems that the listener only becomes aware of the importance and impact of silence - silence regarded as the absence of 'musical' sounds within a musical work - when these sounds are extremely delayed as in John Cage's composition [Waiting](#).) The opening rest in [Opus 19, no.2](#) becomes significant at the moment when sound occurs; therefore, according to Veselinovic-Hofman, silence remains supplementary to sound. The change that takes place in this piece, however - a change that is noticeable only when the score is studied (and possibly kept in memory during a subsequent listening) - is that the rest acts *essentially supplementary* with respect to its hierarchical relation to sound. The rest remains subordinate to the 'musical' sounds, but no longer functions as an amorphous, meaningless silence; the significance of the rest is the absence of sound (cf. Veselinovic-Hofman, p.4).

Silence remains supplementary to sound in [Opus 19, no.2](#). The rests in this composition by Schönberg signify the absence of sound. Although they are 'essentially supplementary', the hierarchical order remains intact. But can something else also be heard in this work? Is another *reading* possible? A cautious proposal. Schönberg makes us aware of the idea that music does not necessarily need to start with a tone or a sound, that there is silence before, after and in or during music, that silence is music. Is silence subordinate to sound within Schönberg's composition, or does sound require silence in order to manifest itself as sound? When the repeating thirds slowly and waveringly join a field of silence, they may very well signify a reversal of the hierarchically ordered system. The music defines itself by what it is not (silence, non-music). Sound becomes a special moment in the world of silence. As the white on a page is necessary for the words or notes on that page to appear, so silence is the precondition for sound. However, the white is not only the pureness of the blank page. It is also the space between the notes, the dimension within which lateral connections between notes take place (cf. [Cage, White, Mallarmé, Silence](#)). Analogously, it is only through silence that the difference between separate sounds can be experienced. Silence immediately resides within the musical domain. Music is always already permeated by silence. Music is also silence. Perhaps we just never (consciously) heard the silence in music.

[7] According to Zenck, the 20th century exhibits a radical change of the paradigm according to which theorists and composers appreciate the hierarchical relation between sound and silence. I am not concerned with passing final judgment on whether or not this

change takes place in [Opus 19, no.2](#), or whether Schönberg's composition is the first in which a reversal in the hierarchical relation between sound and silence possibly takes place. The extensive presence of rests and silence in his composition enables one to read [Opus 19, no.2](#) with this possible reversal in mind. First reading: sound above silence. Silence assumes its contours through sounds that outline its boundaries (make it sound). Something needs to sound in order to know that there is silence in between or around. Second reading: silence above sound. Analogous to the idea that in a material sense, it is the spaces between the words that make a text possible as a text, silence constitutes the condition for the musical sign. It is a space that provides a condition for music to spread, a *Da-sein* that promotes the development of sounds. 'What makes a wheel a wheel is the space between the spokes' (Lao-Tse).

Many 20th century composers have brought the long-lasting order in the hierarchy of sound and silence into question. A great deal of music is sufficiently ready to realize an inversion of this hierarchical position at the level of the compositional process. Two examples on this website. In [Cage and Silence](#), I expand this idea on the basis of a work by John Cage. And in [No \(-\) Music](#), several 'silent' works of German composer Dieter Schnebel are discussed. His *Nostalgie: Solo für 1 Dirigenten*, a silent solo for one conductor, opens up the visual, i.e. non-audible, potential of music. His book *MO-NO. Musik zum Lesen* [MO-NO. Music To Read] contains signs (drawings, texts, graphic scores) that incite the reader (listener?) to compose and to hear imaginary music, thereby opening the domain of the un-heard, the merely imagined-heard, the domain of inaudibility and silence, to the realm of music.

A third example is discussed below.

[8] More or less by coincidence, more or less at random, I will focus on a string quartet by Italian composer Luigi Nono entitled, *Fragmente - Stille, An Diotima*. This piece hovers between sound and silence. In other words, the sound is mediated by non-sound while the silence is mediated by sound. This enables a twofold reading: one that takes sound as the primary aspect of the work; the other starts from silence with sound as its supplementary component.

Fragmente - Stille, An Diotima consists of short fragments that are separated by long silences. Both the title and the score make one suspect that silence occurs where the music fades away during long fermates and pauses. (The tempi are indicated with extreme accuracy throughout the score. However, the fast tempo changes and the large number of silences immediately negate this metrical recording.) The silence spreads in between the fragments with the result that the composition becomes extremely discontinuous. It seems as though all these fragments are attempts to emerge from a no-longer-wholeness or not-yet-wholeness to something more substantial, something longer, an uninterrupted unity. The constantly appearing silences prohibit the sound islands from growing together to a greater whole.

However, by listening to the music and studying the score, one can hear and see something entirely different. The stability of the first interpretation is undermined. No longer assuming sound to be the primary aspect, but rather, starting from silence this work does not consist of bits of music whose continuity is constantly disrupted. When rest, quietness and silence become the norm and sounds make up the secondary element, this work actually proves to display another discontinuity. It is not so much the silence

that works its way between the sounding fragments; rather, the sounds break the ongoing silence. In other words, the less we hear the closer the music reaches the inaudible, and the more continuous the work becomes. This also emphatically shows in the often hesitating tones, tones without vibrato, or tones that are produced without a strong bow. The silence seems to pervade the sound here, becoming audible with the sound as a shadow or a specter. (To return to the primary attention to sounds for a moment: when the conventional sound of a string quartet appears, there is still something new to be heard: the quality of this sound to which normal perception has long become accustomed can again be experienced consciously in this context. No longer are the 'unusual' sounds in *Fragmente - Stille, An Diotima* deviations from the norm. Rather, the conventional bow techniques strike one as particularities within a multitude of sound options.) The silence generates the continuity that is at times interrupted by the sounds. With regard to the sound fragments, this could mean that we allow the fragments to remain as fragments without having them dissipate into a larger sounding unity (In an essay on Nono and Hölderlin, Peter Andraschke points out that '*Fragmente*' may also hint at the bits of text by Hölderlin that Nono uses. Wrenched from their 'original' context, they acquire a new openness in the domain of the silence. It is there that their heterogeneous character reveals itself without being adopted into a new meaningful construct, precisely because they are indeed not being adopted into a new, meaningful construct. Text and music are not unambiguously interrelated; they do not by any means 'read' or reflect each other. Hölderlin's text fragments are not recited nor sung. They are merely present as concealed fragments in the silence that is neither silent nor meaningless. They are just there, at the top of the pages, accompanying almost every bar number, inside the musical work, but at the same time on the outside. They are just there for the performers, but should not be taken as programmatic performance indications.) *Fragmente - Stille, An Diotima*. No sustained development. No ongoing increase nor decrease of suspense. No tension curve for the ear to be clearly observed. The title of the piece does not suggest some other, complete work. It does not forget the silence as its place of birth. It remains connected to that dimension throughout. However, this is not self-evident to Nono, nor does he consider it an easy task. Silence, to him, is intangible. It cannot be manipulated; it is what escapes his power. The composer has to allow a force that escapes his intentions and active contributions precisely in the space where he would want to be in charge: the world of the sounds.

Silence assumes a different quality in this second reading. It is no longer the temporal absence of sound. ('There is more sound volume in many silences than in a fortissimo from a Beethoven piece', Nono states.) Rather, it is an open space from which new sounds can emerge again and again. In this sense, silence can join the fragments. Until the next fragment, the listener has the opportunity to listen again to the sounds in his memory that have already faded. With that, the 'absence of sounds' becomes at least equally important as the sounds themselves. According to Nono, this space of silence is not amorphous. It can be experienced differently every time it is heard with a susceptible fantasy for dreamy spaces, for sudden ecstasies, for unspeakable thoughts, for quiet breathing and for the silence of timeless singing (cf. Nono's preface to the string quartet). Different sounds emerge from these constantly changing silences. However, it is silence - the 'absence of the sound' that is not a nothingness and that should not be thought of as an absence - that deserves attention for this very reason. All silences (in *Fragmente - Stille*,

An Diotima) are different and all are filled with their own meanings. They are there to be listened to (cf. Zenck, p.20-1. cf. Broers, p.302-5).

[9] The encounter with this process of listening, the encounter with silence, can be considered a principal idea of *Fragmente - Stille, An Diotima*. Music itself accomplishes the rearrangement or reversal of the initial conceptual hierarchy between sound and silence. A deconstructive strategy. Deconstruction at work within music.

Silence, Noise and Ethics

[1] In [Music, Deconstruction, and Ethics](#), I cite Lawrence Kramer's observation that music was connected to a 'logic of alterity' in previous centuries. Music represents the other, the irrational vs. reason and the rational, the female vs. the male, fragmentation vs. unity, etc. Music is synonymous with the subordinate, the secondary, the subversive, the supplementary, the marginal. Music as the other. When music as the other can bring us in contact with the other other, it is ethically charged.

[2] In *Noise*, Jacques Attali presents music as the opposite of the other. Music is a representation of the same, the self, the existing order, that which holds a dominant position. By taking this position, Attali, like Kramer, assigns an ethical-political function to music. Music disciplines and normalizes. It banishes subversive noise. It brings about order (differences) in a world that would otherwise be characterized by indifference and chaos. 'The code of music simulates the accepted rules of society' (Attali, p.29). Disciplining takes place in musical education that passes on existing conventions. It can be observed in the hierarchical organization of a (classical) orchestra that puts itself in the service of conductor and soloist. Attending a concert requires us to comply with a code of conduct. In short, music is a means of social control.

Technical developments have enabled musical disciplining to deeply penetrate our lives. Music is omnipresent. It has replaced natural background noise; it invades and even annuls the noise of machinery. Music has become a background noise to life. What is the effect, the result of this 'musicalization of culture' (George Steiner)? Attali removes any misunderstanding: music is a means of silencing people! The radio forbids any impulse one might have to sing. The volume drowns out conversation. Popular music in particular (in text and/or music) conjures up a harmonious life. (Specters of Adorno.) Silencing requires the total infiltration of music. 'One must then no longer look for the political role of music in what it conveys, in its melodies or discourses, but in its very existence. Power, in its invading, deafening presence, can be calm: people no longer talk to another ... Today, the repetitive machine has produced silence, the centralized political control of speech, and more generally, noise. Everywhere, power reduces the noise made by others and adds sound prevention to its arsenal. Listening becomes an essential means of surveillance and social control' (Attali, p.122).

[3] The omnipresence of music bans or prohibits subversive noises. It silences people. But it also makes silence impossible. Many thinkers on music deem silence disturbing and connected to speechlessness, impotence, an inward escape, and the refusal to assign meaning (cf. Schlünz in Nauck, p.31). Silence is 'what frightens us the minute we find it. Fear of the fact that nothing is happening, of emptiness, of a confrontation with oneself, of death and of life' (Schlünz in Nauck, p.32, my translation). According to Walter Zimmermann, the experience of listening to a piece of music that can be intellectually understood differs from the experience of listening to silence and noise (in music) in that the latter forces the listener to rely upon his own resources because a basis for any other possible orientation is missing. Zimmermann mentions the silent pieces as well as the

intense stratification and almost unidentifiable digressions in the music of John Cage as examples of music that has no univocal line that a listener can detect. The emptiness or chaos that the listener then experiences can leave him in absolute despair (cf. Zimmermann in Nauck, p.5). At the same time, however, Zimmermann and other authors make different associations with silence: carefulness, tolerance, and meditation (Schlunz), a space for reflection (Zenck), and inner concentration (Zimmermann). Perhaps, the musicalization of culture protects us against all sorts of negative experiences that silence may unleash in us. Apparently, however, it also deprives us of the opportunity to contemplate and to accept.

[4] How can one escape the imposition of silence through music?

Attali strongly advocates the practice of making music (just for) oneself, especially a music that can dissociate itself from existing rules, codes, and limitations. The silencing of people is prevented when they participate in the practice of music making and particularly a music making that requires their own creativity instead of repeating already existing compositions (cf. [Music and/as \(Dis\)Order](#) and [Teaching a Supplement](#)). Walter Zimmermann identifies another escape: 'silent music'. He refers to some works by John Cage as examples. According to Zimmermann, the sound of structured music that completely absorbs time and space produces passivity in the listener and disables him from hearing other sounds (random noise). John Cage's *4'33"*, three *tacet* movements totaling 4 minutes and 33 seconds, allows these sounds to (re-)enter the domain of music (in the form of silence) and instills an awareness into the listener's mind of already existing sounds. (Zimmermann thus talks about a noise-making music that leads to silence, and a silent music that permits noise.) He 'reads' Cage's music as an ethical-political battle against a music that leaves one passive and dependent, that obstructs thinking and offers no opportunity for reflection; in short, against a silencing of people. Cage, in speech and in practice, admits silence (and with that, noise: cf. [Cage and Silence](#)) as a trace of the other of music into the musical domain. Therefore, his music may be called 'pre-eminently political' (ethical perhaps?) (cf. Zimmermann in Nauck, p.4-5).

[5] Silence/noise as the other of music. How to think through the opening towards this other, the admission of the other of music within music? How to think through this form of hospitality? (According to Derrida, ethics coincides with the experience of hospitality.) Could we think of Cage's music as an example of an ethics of deconstruction in music? In [Music, Deconstruction, and Ethics](#), I state that recognition of the other opens the ethical dimension of deconstruction. 'To get ready for this coming of the other is what I call deconstruction', says Derrida in 'Psyche: Inventions of the Other' (Waters and Godzich, p.56). Deconstruction acknowledges traces of the other without absorbing, assimilating or reducing it to the order of the same, the order of the calculable and the familiar. Is Cage, by integrating noise and silence within music or the musical, reducing the other to the same? We arrive at a paradox. A 'double bind'. Cage can only focus attention on the other of music by admitting the other to the very domain of music. This is the precarious balance between recognition and appropriation of otherness: a full assimilation will deny the other while a full affirmation of the differences will preclude every contact with the other. Even if the other resides outside of music in the traditional sense (but it is

not at all clear that it does), it cannot dispense with the concept of music if we want to give attention to it. Noise and silence, while escaping the musical, can only be experienced through the musical. This is why Derrida does not wish to think of the invention of the other and the invention of the same as binary opposites. 'The invention of the other is not opposed to that of the same, it's difference beckons toward another coming about ... the invention of the entirely other, the one that allows the coming of a still unanticipatable alterity and for which no horizon of waiting as yet seems ready, in place, available' (Waters and Godzich, p.55). An unanticipatable alterity. Could we think of the random sounds that are allowed to enter *4'33"* and *Waiting*, that form an integral part of these compositions, as a receptivity to the advent of an unanticipatable alterity?

[6] Cage's music gives both silence and noise a voice by supplying them with a context. (They cannot exist without a context.) His work turns silence and noise into experience, into something we can come to, surrender to, lose ourselves in; it re-shapes our attitude towards silence and noise. Cage re-writes the cont(r)acts between music, silence and noise so that we can experience the relations between them differently and thus 'think' them otherwise. His work is ethical because it offers hospitality, hospitality to the stranger that does not speak the language of music, to a *hostis* called silence or noise. (In Latin, 'hostis' means both stranger and enemy but it can refer to 'host' or 'guest' as well.) But this hospitality cannot exist without borders, without a certain sovereignty. Cage (Cage's music) can offer hospitality because (his) music has a house of its own, its own domain, although its borders are undecidable, insecure, shifting. ('Deconstruction must neither reframe nor dream of the pure and simple absence of the frame', Derrida writes in *The Truth In Painting*.)

Perhaps music has become a *phantom name* for Cage. Remnants of the old concept of music live on, but its contours have faded; its meaning has changed. And right there, in that flexible, fluent environment, the other appears. Or rather, the concept of music changes *because* the other appears. Cage invites the other into the house of the same, the domain of music. His music is once more an 'invention of the other', an openness to the call of the other. ('To invent would then be to 'know' how to say 'come' and to answer the 'come' of the other', says Derrida in 'Psyche: Inventions of the Other'.) Through this, the music of Cage permanently disrupts our habits of listening. In its encounter with the accidental, the unmanageable, the unintended, his music keeps referring to what is and what remains intangible.

[7] Cage does not merely introduce new sounds or noises to the domain of music. His compositions demand attention to noises that are always already present in music, that reside and resonate in the margins of the music, but that have been disavowed or suppressed. Cage points us to the other *of* music *within* music. *4'33"* draws explicit attention to unintentional sounds that music can never exclude, and that are always already part of every composition. The other does not reside outside the same, but is an inextricable part of it. The *hostis* was always already inside the house of the host, the uncanny already part of the familiar. Noise as an inextricable part of music. This implies the possibility of a reversal of the relationship between noise and music. Cage's *Waiting* is an exemplary instance of this reversal. Where musical tones were once the norm, in *Waiting* they appear in a context that is dominated by random noises. Cage's written notes

seem to be deviations within an enormous diversity of possible sounds. This heterogeneity has no order in itself, but is revealed only by virtue of its break from the conventions of musical order, and therefore remains connected to it. It is the music, the musical frame, or perhaps the expectation of music that turns noise (and silence) into experience, into objects of attention. Context. Demarcation. No hospitality without exclusion.

[8] According to Derrida, the 'invention of the other' cannot be compared with a traditional notion of 'capacity to invent'. Contrary to the capacity to invent, the invention of the other withdraws from every plan or conceptualization. Any conceptual meaning should be abandoned as much as possible, or at least delayed. An encounter with the otherness of the other can only occur in a state of passivity or susceptibility. Cage recognizes and admires this susceptibility in the work of Morton Feldman, composer of many pieces that are extremely long and contain hushed volumes and slow tempos, that seem to arise hesitantly from a silent ground. 'He has changed the responsibility of the composer from making to accepting. To accept whatever comes, regardless of the consequences' (Cage, 1966, p.129).

No planning. Susceptibility. But does this mean no activity? Derrida says it is necessary to prepare for the coming of the other, which indicates a conscious and deliberate effort to arrive at this passivity. Response-ability. Inert passivity does not promote a relationship with the other. It leads instead to indifference. An active will to engage with whatever escapes any anticipating apperception is required to move into this susceptibility, a responsiveness and alertness to the possibilities that we randomly encounter, a combined play of improvisation and strategy. 'Letting the other come is not inertia open to anything whatever ... I still call it invention because one gets ready for it, one makes this step to let the other come, come in' (Derrida in Waters and Godzich, p.55-6).

Do Cage's unconditional acceptance and Derrida's active passivity drift apart here? Let's see what Cage has to say about the role of the listener with regard to *4'33"*. 'The performance ought to make clear to the listener that the hearing of the piece is his own action - that the music, so to speak, is his rather than the composer's' (Cage in Gena and Brent, p.22). With this comment, Cage gives more freedom to the listener, but also more responsibility. In its non-articulatedness *4'33"* provides the listener (and the performer as well) with the freedom to add value and meaning (or none at all!) to the piece. It is the responsibility (response-ability) of the listener to assign meaning and sense to this music. Even though it no longer has the same provocative effect it had back in 1951, *4'33"* still demands a willingness of the listener and prompts him to think and reflect. Additionally, it also has the virtue of installing a way of listening that does not allow for jumping to conclusions, but that demands a quiet and simple listening to sounds. Could this way of listening be described as a susceptibility to the other, passive in its dedication to the sounds that present themselves, and active in its alertness to and preparedness for a diversity of acoustic events?