

It is good to be perverse, especially in the Tate. And so, to begin a day of reflecting on ambience, where better to begin than Seth Kim Cohen's 2016 essay, 'Against Ambience'?

Kim-Cohen detects a growing convergence in the art world around the notion of ambience in a number of recent works and high profile exhibitions. Over and over, installations are being created which draw the spectator in, so they are no longer just a spectator, but become immersed into the world of the artwork. And often these works are using the medium of sound to achieve this.

Why is sound so central to this explosion of ambience? Perhaps because we have created a dualism between the visual on the one hand, and sound on the other. Kim-Cohen cites the work of Jonathan Sterne, who argues that the distinction between vision and sound draws on powerful assumptions and stereotypes echoing through the Western history of ideas: vision implies detachment, distance, a separation between the perceiver and the perceived; sound implies immersion, indistinction, the merger of the hearer and the heard. I look at you, over there; when I hear a sound, it resonates within me.

On this account, vision is associated with thinking and analysis. The word theory is etymologically derived from the Greek for a spectator. So it is perhaps not surprising that we are turning to art to free us from the burden of too much theory, too much spectating. We don't want to over analyse, to dissect and drain the life out of the world. We want to experience things. We want immediacy. Sound art offers us that: immersion, something theory cannot grasp.

But here we should pause, Kim-Cohen warns. We should not be too quick to abandon theory or concepts. They are the tools which keep us alert and critical. And we need them more than ever when we are being offered immersive experiences in the name of art. After all, immersion is a selling point of mass produced virtual and online games; of holiday, entertainment and retail experiences. Who is to say art galleries are any different? Could it be that immersion is not an antidote to the consumer society of the spectacle, but another manifestation of it - one even harder to escape once you are within it? Every old Brian Eno CD you cherish, every authentic whale song you download is a drop in the ocean of your narcissistic prison.

Let's retrace the steps which brought us to this point. Sound is given a set of qualities which distinguish it from vision. And those qualities give it an aura: of immediacy, presence - and of mystery. Sound evokes the ineffable. When it is freed from the straitjacket of words and concepts, sound leads us into a mystical experience.

This vision of sound - and I use that phrase deliberately - provokes many questions. For a start, why conflate all sound with ambient sound, or at least suggest that ambience is the ideal way to swim the currents of sound? Second, why equate ambience with what is immersive and immediate and blissful? And third, who benefits from the promise of escape, or mystical initiation offered by this version of sound art? How dull does it make our senses - and our theories?

For Kim-Cohen, then, we need to revive theory, a theory which refuses the idea that there is any immediate, mystical, ineffable truth in sound or anything else. A theory which recognises the impurity and contested nature of all art practices,

and the embodied, social and political stakes of art. Don't pretend, when you are blissing out to the ambient, that this experience is not constructed, motivated, a product of desire, fantasy and material relations.

I think that this is a necessary challenge to the ambient moment, if we can call it that. But it is not the end of the story. If we can adopt different ways of theorising sound, why can't the same be true of ambience? What if there were another ambience? Multiple ambiances? Who is to say that ambience should necessarily tend towards harmony, bliss, immediacy? After all, that has not been the case with how music or noise art in general has developed. If music can grate, provoke, interrogate and disrupt, then why not ambience? Think of the metaphor of immersion: being immersed need not be a simple, freeing, blissful experience or a fantasy of pure nature. We can be immersed into a struggle, a conflicted web of currents and counter-currents, held within an impure, polluted medium. Just try jumping in the Mersey if you don't believe me.

I'm reminded of the conclusion of Francois Bonnet's book *The Order of Sounds*, in which he argues against trying to identify an 'essence' of sound. Bonnet writes: 'Sound has no nature, sound is becoming. There is therefore no essence to be sought, but only interstices within which sound is unmarked or evades its mark. It is and always will be unattainable' (326). The nature of sound is not something that simply is, that we experience directly: it is a construct of multiple and disparate experiences, desires, beliefs and discourses. Sound depends on a trace, something to mark its passage as it continually appears and disappears. It establishes no nature.

Kim-Cohen might agree with much of this. But Bonnet still insists on something ineffable and ungraspable in the sonorous. This is not a mystical experience of truth, but the limit of what we can grasp and domesticate and control. So rather than ambience being our escape, perhaps ambience, done differently, escapes us; perhaps it disrupts our sense of who we are, of the human: because the human is an idea that is always constructed in opposition to its other – the nonhuman animal, the inhuman savage, the subhuman parasite, the alien technology. Perhaps a more troubling ambience can help this self-satisfied, earth-ravaging, colonial version of the human to come apart at the seams.

Bonnet insists particularly on the temporal nature of sound: it is not a thing but a becoming. This certainly connects with the ways music has been appropriated by a number of philosophers since the 19th century. Rather than focusing exclusively on harmony – music as an audible experience of the order of the cosmos – they direct us to the vanishing, modulating vortex of sound as an expression of the restless spirit, or unconscious, striving will. Thinkers such as Hegel and Schopenhauer might still dream of the release and reconciliation music provides, but they have let the sonic monsters loose. Ambience is often seen as an escape from the burden and fragility of time. What if it is more constructively helping us experience time otherwise: time in its insistence, sometimes glacial, sometimes skittish, but always a tension and a question which no human subject can master and resolve.

So ambience can be both immersive and disruptive; it can expose us to the limits of the human without making a fetish of nature; it can be ungraspable without simply hovering above with the mystical weight of authority. Ambience is made,

mediated, contested, errant. It spills over. It defies use and reinvestment. When it has been subjected to a discourse and its given meanings, something remains. As Bonnet writes, there is a distinction between the audible and the sonorous: 'The sonorous - savage, ineffable - is not wholly dissolved into the audible. It persists.' What strikes me here is not so much Bonnet's dubious romanticisation of savagery, but the idea of the persistence of the sonorous, its refusal to submit to the demands of hearing and sense. Is this another ambience, an alien sound: a resistance, a trace of anarchy?

So I look forward to today: to the theory and performance and listening which are intertwined. And to the impure but necessary noise which is the medium of this exchange. The theory of ambience and the ambience of theory.. I am looking forward to learning from those whose own immersion into this area is that much deeper - and complicated - than mine. But I am grateful also all of you who are here are part of generating this event and the ambience which carries it: as Kim-Cohen says, 'By being in it, you alter it'.

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Event webpage - [to be found at improvisers' networks online](#)